

Caribbean Writers
Between Orality & Writing

Les Auteurs caribéens
entre l'oralité et l'écriture

Edited by
Marlies Glaser & Marion Pausch



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listed under the correct genre – an indication that the editors have compiled data from secondary sources, without examining the books directly. The considerable number of spelling mistakes and errors of transcription are a source of irritation. The layout of the book does not make entries easy to consult; because they are not highlighted, headings are not clearly identifiable.

However, despite these shortcomings, the *Bibliography Of Women Writers From The Caribbean* is a long overdue and highly valuable research tool for scholars specializing in Caribbean as well as women's literature and criticism. It should serve as an excellent sourcebook, in that it not only collects data on living authors or authors whose work is still easily available, but has also endeavoured to recover "lost" women writers and their work.

Stefanie Gehrke (Frankfurt)

CHRISTIAN HABEKOST, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*. [Cross/Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English; 10]. (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1993). 262 pages, Hfl. 75.00, US\$ 44.00.

Verbal Riddim, the revised version of Christian Habekost's doctoral thesis (Mannheim 1991), is announced as

the first book-length study of dub poetry, [...] a controversial genre which has polarized responses, [...] and] a performance art with an intimate intertextual relation to the urban and folk cultures from which it emanates.

Habekost writes with first-hand knowledge and with expertise. Not only has he spoken to every one of the dub poets treated; he has also been able to build upon a large stock of interviews. Moreover, he was the editor (as early as 1986) of the first substantial anthology of dub poetry. He has since been influential in gaining these poets a wider audience in Germany by translating entire collections, by lecturing on them, and by organizing performance tours. Habekost, who has himself performed both in Germany and in Trinidad (where he now lives for part of each year), has even tried to establish the genre in the German language with a recently published collection of his own dub poetry.

Although in his study Habekost concentrates on dub poetry as written/performed by Jamaicans or by poets of Jamaican descent living in Britain or Canada, he locates these works in the wider context of a "riddim poetry" (6) that would include similar contemporary poems from Trinidad, Canada and South Africa, even if they build on different traditions as well. The characteristic feature of dub poetry – the attempt to fuse committed literature written/spoken from a "Black" stance with the rhythm of reggae music (as a distinct part of Black Jamaican culture) – leads Habekost to view this "verbal riddim" in another context, too. As a "musical performance art" (44), it is linked to phenomena of "musical talkover" (37), such as the "toasting" of Jamaican disc-jockeys in the 1970s or to musical styles such as "rap" or "raggamuffin," fashionable in North American or Caribbean dance-halls in the 1980s and '90s.

In his introduction to *Verbal Riddim* Habekost defines his subject and describes his methodological approach as a pluralistic one (the combination of the close reading of individual poems with socioliterary analysis). Although his is really the first book-length study of the phenomenon that has appeared, the author lists a small but surprising number of

preceding (yet still unpublished) theses. None of them apparently justifies an extensive review of research, though one would have wished to know a bit more about Julie Pearn's Ph.D. dissertation of 1985, especially as Habekost later on repeatedly quotes from it (5, 22, 68, 75, 97, 162, 185).

True to his methodological decision, Habekost balances close reading with a contextual approach, granting equal space to both considerations in the two main parts of his study. In Part I, he provides extensive background information on the historical development of dub poetry in Jamaica, England and Canada, and on the links between some of its practitioners. Due account is taken of the social, political and cultural situation in all three regions, as this has had a decisive influence on the poets' subject-matter: not only did this kind of committed poetry originate in the living conditions of people in the Caribbean and of emigrants to London or Toronto, but the poems also show reactions to change within these societies, to the decreasing influence of the Rastafarian ideology, and to the spectacular fall of Communist institutions on the threshold of the 1990s.

The aesthetic aspects of dub poetry are made the subject of the third and fourth chapters. Habekost traces the musical origins of "riddim" (59–63), defines it as a poetological concept, and describes the basic structural elements of a dub poem (91–98): the specific rhyming pattern, the use of alliteration, verbal repetition and onomatopoeia, and the composition of the poem as a series of minimal expressions (visible as brief lines of text in print). The connections between "verbal riddim" and reggae music (and the presentation of the latter by the DJs) are competently analysed. In this and in other instances, dub poetry is described as part of a larger African–Caribbean cultural tradition, a tradition apparent in the use made of creolized English as poetic language, in the poets' reference to the world-view and vocabulary of the Rastafarians, and in the essentially oral character of this poetry. One of the most striking features of *Verbal Riddim* is Habekost's consistent presentation of dub poetry as a form meant for the stage rather than for the page. Consequently (and thoroughly) he takes account of performance aspects in general as well as of individual styles, and discusses the media chosen.

The changing appearance and effect of a dub poem when presented before an audience, in recorded form (either as a single/LP/MC or as a video), or in print, are factors which are carefully considered in the analyses and interpretations that make up Part II of the book. Habekost selects examples from the works of such well-known practitioners as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Oku Onuora, Mutabaruka, Benjamin Zephaniah, Michael Smith and Lillian Allen. He provides information about the production of and response to these poems and analyses their textual strategies, showing all his skills in poetry explication. The ten poems he discusses at length (and the various others that he analyses summarily) are intended as paradigmatic for a greater number of poems devoted to specific human experiences or to the struggle for social and political change. In chapters 5 to 8, poems from the early years (mainly from the period 1977–82) have been selected which deal with "the ghetto experience" (ch. 5) or were written explicitly for political campaigns (ch. 7), whereas others come as prophecies of another, and better, life than that in "Babylon" (ch. 8).

Later chapters are concerned either with the hypocrisies that arose when this poetry of protest became radical-chic, or with the blind spots or distortions in its political outlook: one chapter is devoted to "women's dub poetry" of the mid-1980s, thus adding a feminist perspective; another deals with reactions from the early 1990s (!) to the radically decreasing prestige of visions of social revolution after the downfall of the Communist regimes. The

topicality of this kind of poetry is underlined, and the author has obviously endeavoured to update his original thesis by references to poems performed or recorded even as late as 1993.

In his study, Christian Habekost has successfully overcome the fundamental problems encountered by anyone who tries to write on a literary corpus that is both contemporary and meant to be listened to rather than read. *Verbal Riddim* is rounded off with an extensive "Discography and Primary Bibliography" that lists relevant works, in all modes of publication, up to 1993. Compared with its counterpart in Habekost's earlier anthology, *Verbal Riddim* presents a revised canon: nearly all the poets added to the second edition of the anthology (1987) have been "dubbed out" again, whereas Canadian dub poets in particular appear for the first time and even poets not treated in the text are included. This is certainly an indispensable tool for the fascinated lay reader as well as for researchers in the future. Scholars will profit, too, from the numerous interviews that Habekost has conducted over the years, excerpts from which add to the material basis of his study.

It is indeed hard (and unnecessary) to find fault with Habekost's book, which is the result of at least a decade of concern with the subject. For a scholar and an extra-mural promoter as deeply committed to the cause, he is astonishingly capable of taking a step back, of seeing the poetry in its wider contexts. Added to this, he does not refrain from pointing out qualitative differences among the poets, and he takes account of criticism averse to the genre as a whole (arguments which he tries to counter, of course). Yet though he gives room to both, Habekost clearly favours that group of practitioners which "unequivocally supported and promoted the term 'dub poetry'" (44), and he is at times rather critical of another group (made up of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka and Jean "Binta" Breeze) which rejected the label (see, for instance, pp. 18, 29, 45–46, 215–17). As Jean Breeze has meanwhile publicly distanced herself from dub poetry proper, it is of course problematic to include her (as Habekost had done earlier in his anthology). But as her poetry, then and now, has shown all the features Habekost describes as characteristic of "verbal riddim," she would have merited more than just a passing analysis (202) – especially as the author includes other examples of "riddim poetry" (the "rapso" poems of Brother Resistance) which are not indebted to Jamaican reggae music but stem from a different tradition, that of the Trinidad calypso. (Here, Habekost once again transcends the limits of the 1986 anthology, this time to broaden the perspective.)

If Habekost's handsomely produced and yet affordable study should appear in the second edition it deserves, a few minor points should be seen to: the studies of Bone, Bones, Walters and Roberts (mentioned on pp. 10, 52 and 83) should be added to the bibliography, the variant reading of "Me Cyaan Believe It" in Faristzaddi's *itations of jamaica* of 1982 (which is listed) should be mentioned in the text, and readers would certainly profit from an index to the book.

The future will show whether dub poetry, which was less visible in the second half of the 1980s in Britain (a fact that is mirrored in Habekost's selection of poems), is more than a significant yet transient phenomenon. Habekost himself stresses the point that dub poetry up to now has been the sum of the works of a few popular individual practitioners rather than the conscious endeavour of a proper "movement" (48–49, 238–40). Either way, Habekost's *Verbal Riddim*, as it stands, will account for the development of a characteristic part of Caribbean poetry up to the early 1990s. As a study of another aspect of oral culture in the Caribbean, *Verbal Riddim* ranks with Errol Hill's and Keith Warner's "classic" studies of carnival and calypso in Trinidad, and it makes an important contribution to the history of reggae and Rastafarian culture. Habekost's performance deserves a large audience indeed.

Helge Nowak (Düsseldorf)