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Music and Literary Imagination: The Creative Impulse of Sonic Vibrations in Dub Poetry

> *When you go [to Aba Shanti I Sound System] the bass was* [sic!] *so loud that it would wash you and you feel like "oh, there's something that happened to me in there" and people talk about that kind of idea of bass by vibrational wash. So I found that quite interesting. I want to get into words.*
> (Robinson in Coll 2024)

In *The Great American Songbooks: Musical Texts, Modernism, and the Value of Popular Culture*, T. Austin Graham's observation indicates that "of all the arts, poetry and music may have the longest-standing and most intimate association with one another" (2013, 34). The sonic aspect of a recited poem frequently serves as the analytical foundation upon which this convergence is acknowledged. The sound of poetry suggests musical analogies that are discussed as the musicality of the poetry. Yet, in discussing these similarities, experts have historically been unable to agree on what musicality is, what its components are, and how it should be measured, as noted by Mary Louise Serafine (cf. 1988, 10). Her comments, originating in 1988, highlights a persistent challenge in the field. Since then, interdisciplinary research that traverses the boundaries of sound studies and musicology as well as performance and literary studies, examining the various interactions between music and poetry, has expanded significantly (cf. Moten 2003; Meta 2011; Mackey 2015; Reed 2021, to name just a few studies highly relevant in the context of this article). This chapter contributes to the extension of that interdisciplinary field.

Alongside offering theoretical tools to appreciate the literary imagination created by music, this chapter provides a novel analysis of such intermediality by examining the creative impulse provided by the bass. Using two dub poems by Linton Kwesi Johnson (hereafter LKJ) and Roger Robinson as case studies, I argue that bass functions as a significant element in shaping both their texts and the performances of those texts.

I will draw thematic comparisons with LKJ's poem "Street 66" (1980) to demonstrate how bass continues to animate and invigorate new poetics, as evidenced in Roger Robinson's more recent work "Wheel and Come Again" (2015). In my article "Low Frequencies and Poetic Innovation," I provided a detailed analysis of LKJ's poem in relation to music (cf. Bolle-Debessay 2022). By reading "Wheel and Come Again" in the echo of the analysis of "Street 66" proposed in this article, I

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aim to show that the creative impulse of bass is not an isolated phenomenon found solely in LKJ's poetic innovations. Instead, through its repetition across different poetic works, I argue that bass and its creative impulse should be recognized as an additional element in the established toolkit of Afro-diasporic aesthetics. I will use spectrograms to analyze Robinson's poem in its sonic environment.

Thinking Through Sound

My investigation of the creative power of the bass takes place in the Afro-diasporic context, more specifically in Jamaica and the West Indian Afro-diaspora. It aligns with the term known as Bass Culture and its musical practices deeply rooted in low frequencies, such as reggae but also ska, dub, jungle, drum and bass, garage, dubstep and grime. In this context, bass becomes "a musical signifier invested with the same types of resonance associated with 'swing' in jazz or 'clave' in Afro-Cuban music – a musical signifier of a Jamaican cultural ethos" (Veal 2007, 60). At the same time, I position dub poetry within literary traditions that critically and creatively engage with sound. My analysis operates in a "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) between texts, wherein "sound is used to signify between genres and across wide swaths of time" (Stoever 2016, 18).

Bass, low frequencies, and vibrations are terms that can be interpreted in various ways. In this essay, they are used interchangeably to refer to a sound with a particular kind of vibration. This includes sounds produced by bass instruments such as the bass guitar, double bass, and subwoofers in music systems. In the acoustic spectrum, the measure of which is frequencies, the number of oscillations or cycles per second of a sound wave (in Hertz), the sonic qualities referred to as bass occupy the lower end of the spectrum. Due to their longer wavelengths, low frequencies differ from higher frequencies in their capacity to travel further and penetrate physical barriers (such as bodies, floors, and walls) more easily. Under approximately 30 Hz, sound is felt by humans rather than heard. Here, I focus on the impact of low frequencies created by the sound of the bass to argue for a poetic inspired by the physical encounter with these sonic vibrations. In an interview, Roger Robinson addresses this physically immersive dimension: "also the idea of a sound bath. I don't know. Have you ever heard about sound baths? Sound baths [. . .] it's a kind of new age thing where they hit gongs and stuff like that. I actually feel that dub in a dancehall works in a similar way, it is like a sound bath, you know?" (Robinson in Bolle-Debessay 2024). I contend that the audio recording of the poem becomes a space where the central place of the

bass found in Jamaican sound systems is (re)presented by strategic signifying.[1] Digital sound is used to (re)produce the immersive dimension of this live sound system. There exists an interdependence between the recorded poem and the liveness of the event, whereby the centrality of low frequencies produced by a predominant bass is digitally (re)produced in the performed poem. Moreover, to evoke this live context, where bodily experience with bass vibrations is most palpable, poets choose a poetic language that brings the multisensory dimension of vibrations, low frequencies, and sound into the poem.

In *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and The Ecology of Fear* (2012), musicologist Steve Goodman emphasizes that bass demands more theoretical attention, as it is frequently equated with a buzzing confusion of sensation, thus being perceived as the enemy of clear auditory perception and, by implication, clear thought (2012, 81–84). However, for many artists, musicians, dancers, and listeners, vibratory immersion in the low frequencies of bass provides the most conducive environment for both bodily movements and movements of thought (cf. Goodman 2012, 79). This cultural aspect of the bass warrants recognition, as it informs us about influences, connections, and networks. Focusing on dub poetry, I further argue that the bass contributes to poetic creativity and artistic innovation.

Since Goodman pointed out the importance of the bass, more work has been conducted on the role and place of bass and its vibratory dimensions in cultural studies. Central to my analysis are the theoretical frameworks proposed in Nina Sun Eidsheim's *Sensing Sound* (2015), and Marcus Boon's *The Politics of Vibrations* (2022). Eidsheim's book introduces the concept of "sensing sound" to argue that sound is more than an auditory phenomenon; it is a vibrational event that creates a multisensory experience where touching, hearing, and seeing sound extend its significance beyond the auditory. I have already explained how sound can be felt. Moving to the relation between sound and vision, she states:

> [T]he collective inner ear that we have developed to listen to music is tied to the visual/sonic image or situation of statically facing the orchestra while seeing and hearing the instruments in front of us, with the sound moving between our left and right: a static spatial-relational dynamic in relation to sound. (Eidsheim 2015, 68)

I will argue that by thinking and writing through sound, poets use hearing references to sound and music, visual imagery alongside bodily sensations to engage

1 Sound systems, originally from Jamaica, are "mobile outfits playing recorded music in dancehalls or outdoor clearings, which emerged as a more viable economic alternative to the large dance bands that they rapidly replaced" (Veal 2007, 42).

the reader's imagination in the experience of the bass. While Eidsheim's study focuses primarily on singing and listening practices, my own exploration includes sound in its digitized forms – such as music played by DJs or sound engineers in Jamaican sound systems – where technology is employed to enhance bodily sensations. While the live musical event and its physical impact on the body (sensing sound) inspire the poet, I argue that the performance of the poem seeks to recreate the essence of a live sound system experience, with particular attention to the bass, its low frequencies, and its vibrations. I, therefore, apply her multisensory understanding of sound and its vibrational aspect to analyze how different senses shape the poetics and its audio-version. Through different strategies, both Robinson and LKJ use the recorded version of the poem where the bass, its low frequencies and its vibrations are emphasized and made explicit. I also draw on Boon's exploration of ontological vibrations in sound (cf. 2022). Boon frames music and its sonic vibrations as dynamic processes that act on and shape spaces and lives, both human and non-human. According to Boon, the transformative power of vibrations extends beyond their physical properties: it influences our ontological state, altering consciousness and reshaping both social and individual realities (2022, 138–140). He writes: "In elaborating on what it means to think of music as an action on/in a space, I explore what it means to think about 'a life' (Deleuze) as a topological entity, or, in Fred Moten's words, what it would mean to embrace a 'topological existence' through music" (Boon 2022, 11). By referencing Deleuze's concept of the topological entity and Moten's notion of topological existence, Boon suggests that in the ever-changing nature of life, which continually redefines itself through time and space, musical vibrations participate in shaping this fluid process. Musical vibrations impact our ontological being (Boon 2022, 47–48). I build on this framework by arguing that poets' encounter with sound and its vibrations experienced in the liveness of a musical event, such as a dance in a sound system, alters their state of being by influencing their creativity. In other words, the poetry itself would not exist if the poets had not had experiences of immersion in the sonic environment of sound system performances. Having been in those musical spaces becomes the transformative power behind the development of that poetic style. The sensory dimension is then translated into both the text and the recording of that text. Robinson explains the immersive dimension of sound systems and their effect:

> I'm kind of born from parties, you know? It's like literally . . . I think some of it I kind of . . . not freestyle. I kind of toast part of poems in parties [. . .] you know what I'm saying? I defi-

> nitely come from a DJ culture . . . So definitely, my poetry comes from that kind of toasting in tradition. (Robinson in Bolle-Debessay 2024)[2]

My analysis also draws from Jennifer Lynn Stoever's book *The Sonic Color Line* (2016). There, she examines American culture to connect "sound with race [. . .], showing how listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of vision's alleged cultural dominance" (2016, 15). Stoever introduces the concept of the "sonic color line" to argue that racial differences are perceived and constructed not only through visual cues, but also through sound. She explains that listeners are trained to hear racialized sounds, demonstrating how sound, like visual cues, has been central in maintaining hierarchies and cultural norms (2016, 7). By examining how sound functions within its cultural context in relation to race, genre, and class, Stoever invites "scholars toward literary soundscapes as a subject of critical attention" (2016, 18). I share her emphasis on the centrality of sound in culture, and particularly in literary texts, as a space of critical investigation in the production and the reception of poetic traditions. Building on her work, I expand this approach to a transnational context, applying it to a Black literary tradition that transcends the U.S. context, namely dub poetry. With a Black Atlantic framework in mind, my analysis participates in "a much longer, broader, and blacker history of thinking and writing sound, enabling us to hear theorists, artists, writers, and thinkers silenced by institutional histories built on their very exclusion" (Stoever 2016, 18–19).

"Wheel and Come Again" (2015) – Roger Robinson

Roger Robinson, a recipient of the T. S. Eliot Prize, adopts various roles, including poet, writer, performer, educator, and mentor, as indicated on his website. He moved from Trinidad to the UK in his early years and has resided there since. In 2015, he released *Dis Side Ah Town* album of recorded poems that he introduced as dub poetry. On the official website of the label Jahtari, this album is described as evoking "the golden era of dub poetry, reminiscent of Prince Far I, Big Youth,

2 The term 'DJ' can refer to different actions. In Robinson's quote, DJ means the singing, toasting, chanting practice of Jamaican artists such as Big Youth, U-Roy, I-Roy, and Dillinger. It refers to the practice of the master of ceremonies (MC) and is the art of the rapper, the verbalist. In his poem "Wheel and Come Again", however, the DJ is the selector, the person who plays the song for a dance. For an in-depth analysis of Jamaican deejay culture in the UK, see Henry (2006).

and Linton Kwesi Johnson – a time when dub poetry made you dance in the club but also made you think on the way home" (Jahatari 2015, n.p.). This entire album is inspired by the 2011 London riots, with Robinson depicting various scenes from his personal experience of walking through Brixton and witnessing the unrest. The album follows a documentary-style narrative, guiding listeners through the neighborhood with rich descriptions, effectively transporting them into the streets of that neighborhood. The poem "Wheel and Come Again" (2015) was first performed as part of a theatre show called *Mixtape*, a collaborative piece with the writer Nick Makoha. The show was about immigration and survival in the UK and the poem was performed to illustrate parties and enjoyment in the immigration process and its survival strategies. The poem is now featured on the album. "Wheel and Come Again," the final poem on the album, continues this immersive narrative by focusing on a night at a sound system.

"Wheel and Come Again" has no printed version. It does not have an official video clip either. The poem exists solely in audio form. It is available on the album and streaming platforms. An audio clip on Roger Robinson's Facebook page features added subtitles, allowing the audience to read and listen to the poem simultaneously. The written text, however, does not have the status of a visually structured printed version with line breaks, punctuation, or typography. It is an unofficial transcript of the recorded words that helps the listening and the understanding of the poem. I will refer to this transcript for quotations in the following analysis as it is easily accessible on Robinson's Facebook page.

Recited over a richly textured, dub-heavy soundtrack produced by Disrupts, the poem plunges the listener into the experience of a sound system event. The title itself refers to a key practice within sound system culture. The rewind, also known as "pull up," is the moment when a song is stopped and returned to the beginning to be replayed at the crowd's demand during a particularly impactful moment. The rewind is an essential aspect of DJ practice, acting as a means of communication between the DJ, also known as the selector, and the audience. When experienced live, the rewind can disrupt the linear flow of time, allowing the crowd to relive a moment as many times as they desire. The rewind is, therefore, strongly associated with the liveness of the musical event. Drawing inspiration from the dancehall, Robinson constructs a dynamic call-and-response interaction between the selector and the crowd. In the poem, this is expressed in the repeated refrain that echoes the audience's demand for a rewind. "DJ wheel and come again | Make the bass line glide 'pon the drum again | Make we rock till the morning sun again" (Robinson 2015) is repeated several times throughout the recording. The title also references Kwame Dawes' anthology *Wheel and Come Again: An Anthology of Reggae Poetry* (1998), further cementing the poem's deep-

rooted connection to the music played at a sound system party and affirming ties with literary texts in the intermediality between music and poetry.

Although the poem's exclusive audio format may simply be due to "random chance" as Robinson puts it (in Bolle-Debessay 2024), this mode of transmission reinforces the heritage of DJs' performances in the early years of dub poetry. DJs would improvise over deconstructed reggae tracks created by sound engineers. As LKJ notes in his article "Jamaican Rebel Music" (1976), dub poetry evolved from the performative traditions of Jamaican DJs in the 1950s. Taking inspiration from these "dub lyricists," he explains:

> The dub lyricist is the DJ turned poet. He intones his lyrics rather than sings them. Dub lyricism is a new form of (oral) music poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases onto the rhythm background of a popular song. Dub lyricists include poets like Big Youth, I Roy, U Roy, Dillinger, Shorty the President, Prince Jazzbo, and others. (Johnson 1976, 398)

The fact that "Wheel and Come Again" circulates in audio format repeats this tradition, where the lyricist's voice is received "off the page," much like live and improvised DJ performances. Although Robinson's poem was produced in a studio, its reference to the cultural practice of the rewind evokes the energetic spontaneity between the crowds and the DJ found in a live event.[3] To analyze "Wheel and Come Again" in its sonic environment, I use a spectrogram as it captures the rich texture introduced by digital sound production and technology. With visual representation of sound frequencies, temporal dynamics, and interactions between sonic elements, the spectrogram is a practical tool to explore different strategies to bring into the recording of the poem the centrality of bass.

Grounding the Audio Recording: Bass-Driven Aesthetic

Figure 1 is a representation of the first recorded minute of "Wheel and Come Again". Time is depicted on the X-axis and frequency (measured in cycles per second, Hz) on the Y-axis. It utilizes color-coded frequencies to enhance legibility: brighter colors correspond to a higher amplitude (volume, measured in decibels) at a given frequency. The bass occupies frequencies between 20 Hz and 250 Hz, with deeper bass (sub-bass) found in the 20 Hz to 60 Hz range. The

3 As mentioned, the term DJ in the poem refers to the person who selects and plays records at a party rather than the one who sings and improvises over a musical track.

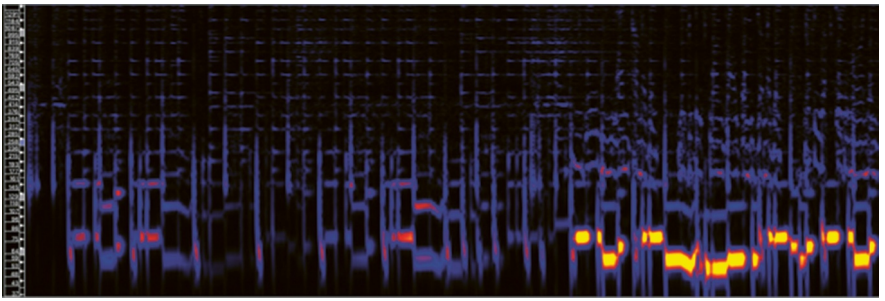

Fig. 1: "Wheel and Come Again" (0:00–0:07). Spectrogram created in Sonic Visualizer.

clearest and strongest bands are located between 60 Hz and 250 Hz. This shows the predominant presence of bass frequencies. The spectrogram depicts these bands in bright yellow-orange hues, which are the most prominent feature of the visualization, confirming the predominant role of the bass. There is little dynamic fluctuation, as the yellow-orange bands remain consistent throughout the poem. These frequencies are stable and repetitive. They indicate steady melodic and rhythmic movement throughout the recording. This steadiness reflects how the bass functions as the pulse, the heartbeat of a sound system. Just like a walking bass, it drives the performance and forms the essential foundation upon which the entire soundscape is constructed. The steadiness of the bass grounds the poem's recording in the deep structure of sound. The sub-bass appears faint. This suggests that it is difficult to distinguish it audibly although it is present in the fabric of the work. Played on an appropriate medium such as large speaker boxes, this sub-bass would be felt rather than heard. On a general level, the poem exhibits a rich sonic texture, demonstrated by the extended range of harmonics which contributes to its density.[4] The digitalization of the poem's sonic texture visually re-creates the immersive quality of a sound system. Indeed, enhanced by the layering of sonic elements that digital technology enables, this digital rendition brings the listening experience closer to the immersive dimension of a live sound system. It employs media transposition to evoke the live event within the poem.

The immersive dimension of low-frequency evoked in Robinson's poem is similarly evident in LKJ's poem "Street 66". This poem first appeared in LKJ's poetry collection *Dread Beat and Blood*, published in 1975. "Street 66" was later republished in 2002 in the retrospective collection *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, where

4 The term harmonic refers to the additional high-frequency tones generated simultaneously during the production of sound (i.e. the fundamental frequency).

it is categorized within the "Seventies Verse" section. This classification aligns with LKJ's early artistic phase, which includes poems such as "Bass Culture", "Reggae Sounds", "Five Nights of Bleeding," and the lesser-known "Klassikal Dub". The poems from this period, including "Street 66", are deeply interwoven with reggae music, reflecting a strong sense of intermediality. However, while poems such as "Bass Culture" and "Reggae Sounds" engage in a broader form of intertextuality by discussing the lived experiences associated with reggae music at that time, "Street 66" is distinct in its focus on the specificities of a local blues dance within London's cultural landscape. This localized engagement parallels the environmental specificity described in Robinson's poem.

In 1980, LKJ recorded "Street 66" with a band for his album *Bass Culture*, released on Island Records. My analysis of the poem uses this audio recording and the publication in *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975). In term of sonic texture, "Street 66" has a lighter sonic texture, which allows for a clearer differentiation between sonic elements: the bass, the drums and percussion, the keyboard, the flugelhorn, the guitar, the harmonica, and the horns. The poem is accompanied by musicians. It does not use digital sound. The thinner horizontal strands in the lower range indicate a less dominant role of the bass in shaping the poem's sonic density. There are fewer yellow-orange hues, indicative of lower intensity in the frequencies used. Despite the lighter texture, the bass remains significant, especially when compared to the higher range of the spectrum, where sporadic reddish dots and darker blue spots suggest less emphasis on higher frequencies. In figure 2, the lower part of the spectrogram shows red-purple bands that translate sustained low-frequency sounds:

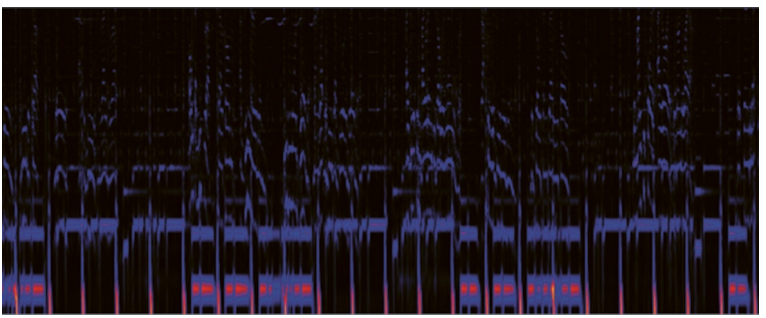

Fig. 2: "Street 66" (0:18–0:28). Spectrogram created in Sonic Visualizer.

In both poems, the poet's voice occupies a distinctive position above the sonic texture. It is heard clearly. It functions as both the vehicle for transmitting the text and an additional acoustic element within the overall soundscape. Compared to

other manifestations of Robinson's voice on the same album, "Wheel and Come Again" features a deep, steady tone.

This low baritone voice is not an arbitrary aesthetic choice. In a conversation with John Doran recorded by the Quietus podcast series, Robinson explains that for him dub poetry invokes the presence of a "nearly preacher, god-like voice" (Doran 2017). He notes that to achieve this effect, he intentionally uses a deep voice, as heard in this particular poem.[5] Jamaican toasters like Prince Far I, a major influence on dub poets, used a conversational tone imbued with a preaching, sermonic quality. His album *Psalms for I* (1976) reflects this desire to preach and teach the Rastafarian faith. Similarly, in dub poetry performances, where the poet "dub[s] out some unconsciousness, and dub[s] in some consciousness" as Oku Onuora says (in Doumerc 2017, 3), the listener can discern a communal preacherly voice emerging from low frequencies.

LKJ, a pioneer in that tradition, is also recognizable for his low-tone voice. In an interview for the Bass Culture project, he said:

> I wanted to write reggae poetry because, for me, the bass guitar sounded as though it was speaking. Like it was a talking bass. So, I wanted to write words that sounded like a bass line. I wanted my meter to be the meter of the bass line and the speech, the actual vocalizing of the words, to be like the reggae bass line. [. . .] Then the importance of the bass, once vocalized in the word (whether spoken or written), is also translated in the way the poem is recorded. Not just how it is put into music, but how the recorded sound brings the right type of bass. (LKJ in Melville 2021)[6]

In my previous analysis of LKJ's poetry already mentioned, I unpacked this "talking bass" using classical notation, I demonstrated how the poet's voice interacts with the bass at the beat and the bar level. Whether following or diverging from the bass's rhythmic and melodic patterns, the poet's voice becomes another medium through which the bass is evoked. I argue that this is a poetic strategy to reinforce the presence of low frequencies in the performance of the poem (cf. Bolle-Debessay 2022).

In Roger Robinson's poem, the voice is similarly used to reinforce the presence of the bass. In addition to intentionally using a deep baritone voice full of grain, the interaction between the bass and voice is thoughtfully crafted. For in-

5 In "Can a Dub Poet be a Woman?" (1990), Jean Binta Breeze, an influential figure in dub poetry, provides insightful reflections on the male-dominated nature of this tradition. Her commentary underscores how defining elements of dub poetry, particularly the association with a low baritone voice and revolutionary words, are often aligned with masculine characteristics (cf. Breeze 1990, 48). Breeze's observations reveal the complex gendered dimensions inherent in dub poetry.

6 The quoted text is from an unpublished transcript, used with permission.

stance, toward the end of Robinson's poem, the bass "drops." This bass drop technique is a common practice in Jamaican sound systems, where the bass is temporarily removed from a track by adjusting a mixer knob. This creates a stripped-down sound, often thin and bare, especially as bass frequencies are amplified to extreme levels during the event. The intention behind this practice is to reintroduce the bass at a point of heightened tension, typically just before a verse begins. During this break, the deejay adds to the sense of anticipation by toasting, or chatting/talking, over the track. This technique is designed to make the eventual return of the full song – complete with bass – all the more impactful. Although primarily a live performance method, bass drops have been incorporated into studio recordings since the late 1960s (cf. Veal 2007, 45–94). When the bass drops, Robinson mirrors this action vocally by going silent until the bass resumes:

> Mister DJ no we no go
> till the heat of the morning sun
> *(drop bass and voice)*
> DJ Wheel and come again
> Make the bass line glide 'pon the drum again
> Make we rock till the morning sun again *(3x refrain)*
> (Robinson 2015)

This parallel movement reinforces the strong connection between the two sonic elements of voice and bass. This moment occurs near the poem's conclusion, just before the refrain re-emerges to close the piece. In the narrative structure of the poem, this also occurs at a climax point: the crowd has been dancing all night and will continue to do so until the morning sun comes up. The dance is at its highest energy point, and no one is ready to go home. Much like in live performances, this technique creates a climactic moment before the final refrain. Similar to the use of the rewind, the dropping of the bass, accompanied by the stopping of the voice, is a deliberate strategy to bring the liveness of a dance into the recorded performance. In figure 3, the spectrogram visualizes these parallel movements of bass and voice, rendering their interaction visible.

In the denser sonic texture of "Wheel and Come Again," the voice is integrated into the soundscape. It becomes an additional element to add to the sonic density. Subtle sonic effects, such as echoes, delays, reverbs, are layered onto the poet's voice throughout the recording. For instance, in the lyrics, when "the speaker box [is] pumping loud" (Robinson 2025, 1:12), the word "loud" has stronger echoes, not only enhancing the reference to sound effects experienced in a dance (the echoes *per se*) but also densifying the sonic texture of the poem. Similar effects are added to the words "sweat," "regret," "forget" in the following passage:

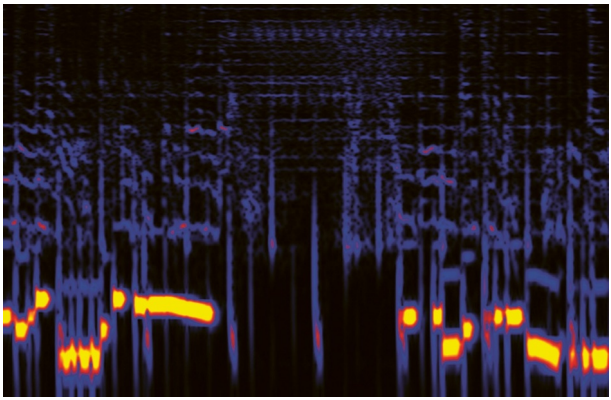

Fig. 3: "Wheel and Come Again" (2:15–2:18). Spectrogram created in Sonic Visualizer.

> consoling me with sweat
> and we dancing past regret
> little trouble on me mind
> make we hug up and wine
> and in time I will soon forget
> (Robinson 2015)

In the three words mentioned above, the last syllables are echoed. Again, this digital and technological manipulation of the voice adds to the sonic texture, bringing an immersive sonic atmosphere to the performance. As opposed to LKJ's performance where the voice is not defamiliarized by any effects, echoes and delays blur Robinson's words, creating a murkier delivery that mimics, here again, the essence of a live event found in the performances of dub-lyricists in the dancehall.[7]

"Sensing" the Bass: Embodied Poetics

I have already discussed how sound is not only merely heard but also experienced through different senses. In order to fully experience these senses, one must be physically present in the musical event. In a night in a sound system, it is undeniable that the loud bass impacts the body when standing close to large speaker boxes. In devices like computers or smartphones, where sound is com-

7 This recording of a live appearance of the dub lyricist I Roy, for instance, depicts a voice with defamiliarized effects: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIfWb1n8-ro.

pressed and bass frequencies are flattened, the physicality of the bass can only be imagined. In the absence of this live experience, I argue for the development of a poetic language that activates our senses to bring into the poetics the sonic presence of the bass, its low frequencies and its vibrations. The poets find a language to "sense" sound. Here again, I propose to read Robinson's poem in counterpoint to LKJ's to see how this poetic of "sensing" is recycled, creating a web of filiation between their poems.

In "Wheel and Come Again," words or expressions with musical allusion are an obvious strategy to establish an immediate connection between the poem and its musical inspiration: "bass line," "drum," "snare snap," "riddim," "rhythm rocksteady," "the groove". "Snare snap like shots in the dancehall" (Robinson 2015) is another line where musical vocabulary is used. Here, the sharpness of the snare drum is likened to the percussive impact of a gunshot, capturing the rhythm's dynamic of the drum and bass. The monosyllabic words such as "snare," "snap," and "shot" create vivid sonic images, also mimicking the percussive nature of the drum and bass, placing the listener within the soundscape of the dancehall. Through meticulous descriptions of the environment, the poem conveys the atmosphere of a night during a sound system. The dancehall sound scape is evoked through a combination of visual, kinesthetic, and tactile imagery. The DJ spins records while the crowd dances through the night:

> And the speaker box pumping loud
> 'Cause the riddim just a catch this crowd
> And they swaying to the rhythm rocksteady
> and no one ready to go home
> (Robinson 2015)

The poem visualizes people dancing. It depicts a dark, dimly lit atmosphere – "half-light" – where fleeting moments are illuminated by brief flashes: the contours of a waistline, a "gleaming silhouette of a neckline," or the "glint of a gold-toothed smile" (Robinson 2015) that momentarily brightens the scene. These brief visual cues transport the listener into a nightclub setting. This evocation is activated through the audience's memories of being in a sound system or, more generally, in a club environment. By imagining the space, we imagine its sound.

References to physical sensations experienced in those live moments are similarly used to create this multi-sensory poetic. The phrases "she turning front to face me," "stuck on my waistline," "they swaying to the rhythm rocksteady," and words such as "sweat," (Robinson 2015) evoke the press of bodies on the dancefloor in an atmosphere charged with heat and touch. This corporeality is vividly portrayed through images of body movements, and more particularly dance. There is a kinesthetic response to sound. Bodies move "slow and low to the

rhythm of the bass line flow". Descriptions like "waistline grinning winning," "gleaming silhouette of a neckline," and "pretty little daughter stuck on my waistline rolling" (Robinson 2015) invoke a sense of sensuality and intimate bodies moving together to the pulse of the bass. The bass, pulsing from below, from the low frequencies of the sonic spectrum, resonates through the body like a heartbeat. The bass is also described as something physical: "A bass pulse of the heart". The encounter with the bass line transcends mere enjoyment; it has metaphysical qualities. Robinson explains:

> [W]hat bass could do was wild, even [played] for a minute, it could actually make you forget what you're thinking about [. . .] the raw power of something [. . .] in reggae tradition, the bass is like a heartbeat, but it also resonates. I actually believe that people use those particular frequencies of bass because it [is] quite trauma purging, you know what I'm saying? (Robinson in Bolle-Debessay 2024)

His comment aligns with Boon's notion of the transformative power of sonic vibrations on an ontological level. Boon uses the term "target states" to refer to a matrix point in the reception of sound that changes your state of mind and being (2022, 139). Using the example of jazz, he explains:

> It's pretty obvious that jazz's challenge to classical music was precisely this, that is, it's a music organized around target states, particular kinds of pleasure, jouissance, and "agapic praxes of community", which are not necessarily discursively articulated or formalized, but which, for those involved, are carefully assembled, realized, and collectively shared. (Boon 2022, 139–140)

From the poem, we understand that the heavy bass played brings the audience to a target state. There is a psychological dimension in how the bass and its vibrations are received. The poem describes the bass as a source of relief.[8] Amid life's hardships – low-wage jobs, high rents, and challenging workdays in a society shaped by imperial and colonial histories – dancing to the bass line offers a form of escape. The crowd is "dancing past regret", and no one wants to go home. There is a collective "we" that experiences the healing effect of "bass line ther-

8 A plethora of literature explores the psychological effects of vibrations. For instance, Goodman, in *Sonic Warfare* (2012), investigates how vibrations have been used as a tool of warfare, emphasizing their capacity to incite terror and exert control over populations. He examines how sound waves, especially low-frequency vibrations, can be weaponized to disturb and manipulate the human psyche (cf. 2012, xiii–xx). In contrast, Henriques offers a different perspective in *Sonic Bodies* (2011). In the context of Jamaican sound systems, he emphasizes how the deep, resonant frequencies of the bass create a shared, embodied experience that connects people through music, fostering a sense of collective empowerment and emotional release (cf. 2011, Ch. 8). These contrasting views demonstrate various capacities of vibrations to bring different target states, depending on their context and use.

apy," a communal recognition of the vibrations felt in the dancehall. The tension between the oppressive "dark damp grief" of the club atmosphere described in the poem and the relief offered by the bass line underscores the contrast between life's struggles and the temporary liberation found in music. The dancefloor, in this context, becomes a space of fleeting joy or solace from the weight of everyday life. In *Sonic Bodies* (2011), Henriques describes Jamaican sound systems as carefully organized sonic spaces where vibrations are deliberately curated and collectively experienced. These vibrations cultivate distinct "ways of knowing" unique to sound system culture and the individuals involved in this sonic environment share a mode of "think[ing] through vibrations" (Henriques 2011, 122). The poem reflects this dynamic by conveying a shared emotional experience of how to engage with and feel the bass. It highlights a communal understanding of the affective power of the bass:

> Cause the riddim just a catch this crowd
> And they swaying to the rhythm rocksteady
> and no one ready to go home
> from this late-night bass line therapy
> in a club of dark damp grief
> but a bass line brings relief
> (Robinson 2015)

LKJ's poem similarly opens by transporting the audience into a reggae scene at a blues dance. The poet captures the sense of the event by specifying the time, "six-a-clack," and describing the setting: "de room woz dark-dusk howlin softly" (LKJ 1980). Words such as "soun," "muzik," "dance," "riddim," and "beat" are also straightforward references which evoke a musical scene, drawn from a lexical field that triggers an auditory response. Their presence in the poem creates a music that is heard. The reader experiences the dance through the eyes of an unnamed character. The shift from the singular "I" – "I felt de sting" – to the collective "wi" in "how wi move" connects the personal perspective of the character to the communal experience of those present at the dance. Music plays, and people are "feelin I-ry," dancing and smoking (LKJ 1980). A sense of déjà vu pervades the poem, as the narrator is already familiar with the bodily encounter with the music: "cause when de muzik met I taps, I felt de sting, knew de shock". There is a familiar bodily impact. The sound of reggae, specifically referencing the Mity poet I-Roy, is evoked. The vibrant colors of the Rastafarian flag, red, green and gold, aligns the poem with the Afrocentric consciousness found at the heart of reggae. The visual imagery that these three symbolic colors bring is accompanied by a particular soundscape. In the third stanza, the sensory impact of sound continues to shape the poetics. The phrase "vibratin violence" refers to the music's

low frequencies, as felt in I-Roy's song. This vibration, mentioned above as a received "shock," moves the body into dance: "vibratin violence is how wi move rockin wid green riddim" (LKJ 1980). Here, the pleasure derived from these intense vibrations aligns with an aesthetic appreciation of sound's impact on the body in Bass Culture. In the poem, the vibrations' intensity, while potentially painful, also brings aural and physical pleasure: "no man would dance but leap an shake dat shock thru feelin ripe" (LKJ 1980) The pleasure found in the reception of these violent vibrations enters a frame of interpretation where the impact of sound on bodies is recognized as an aesthetic value. Feeling the music is a sign of fine-tuned bass in the speakers, which demonstrates the dance's quality. As Hitchins explains in his insightful book on Jamaican sound *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music* (2014), low frequencies are an undeniable aspect of the recording process, which are then translated into a form of experience in the sound system: a "'good' sound-reproduction system should be capable of producing bass that can be physically felt as well as heard" (2014, 83). The target state of joy and pleasure is reached when the sound is felt. The poem similarly evokes this target state. This multisensory poetics, by no means accidental, is designed to bring the heavy bass into the poem.

Conclusion

This analysis opens new pathways for understanding the intermedial relationship between music and poetry, particularly through the lens of bass frequencies in dub poetry. By examining the creative role of bass in shaping the performative and the textual dimension of Roger Robinson's poem "Wheel and Come Again," this chapter engaged deeply with the sonic dimensions of cultural production. The detailed analysis of the audio version of the poem employed spectrograms to offer a visual representation of sonic aesthetics to show how the immersive nature of sound systems is digitally (re)produced in the recordings. In the absence of a live performance where the bass takes on a central organizing role, the audio version of the poem uses different sonic strategies to (re)present bass frequencies and its essential function in sound systems. The analysis also examined a poetic language inspired by music, expanding the concept of intermediality beyond the purely auditory. The multi-sensory dimension of sound fosters a poetics that elicits tactile, kinesthetic, and visual responses that evokes the experience of being in a live sound system. Dub poetry's engagement with sound is rooted in the cultural context of Bass Culture, where low frequencies become a vehicle for expression and even metaphysical experience. By bringing thematic comparisons with Lin-

ton Kwesi Johnson's poem "Street 66," this chapter highlighted a literary practice where sonic vibrations have shaped and continue to sustain Black literary traditions. It demonstrated how bass notes serve as a critical space for anchoring literary practices within a Black diasporic framework. In doing so, it emphasized the necessity of considering sound not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a powerful force in the creation, reception and interpretation of poetry.

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