

Biography

Rachel Bolle – Debessay received her PhD from King’s University, London. Her dissertation, ‘Dub poetry: A study beyond predefined interpretations’, written under the supervision of Paul Gilroy, examines artistic characteristics that have made dub poetry an innovative form. As it offers new frameworks to analyse the aesthetic of dub poetry, it also opens doors for studying other types of poetry influenced by and performed with music.

“Words that sound like a bass line: low frequencies and a poetic of musicality”

This presentation aims to represent the artistic potential of music in the writing of contemporary performed poetry. More precisely, I will argue that music and the low frequencies of the bass helped to develop a poetic language that I coined ‘a poetic of musicality’. Taking dub poetry as my starting point of discussion, I will argue that these low frequencies are used as a writing tool that keeps the poetry anchored in a musical environment even when/if the poem is performed without a musical accompaniment. The genre dub poetry, which refers to a type of Afro-Caribbean (originally Jamaican) and black British poetry, is characterised by its performance-based aspect and can be presented in different formats: it can be performed live or studio-recorded, with or without music; it can also appear without the performance, in a print version. In all these versions, music – and more specifically low frequencies - plays a predominant role in the development of this poetic of musicality. Moving forward in time, I will show how these low frequencies continue to inspire contemporary writing of poetry paired with music.

Indeed, the influence of dub poetry on contemporary poets that are culturally embedded with Afrodiasporic practices is undeniable. The work of Roger Robinson, for instance, shows a clear lineage with that poetic tradition. He is often described as part of the new generation of dub poets. I will discuss this artistic lineage by looking in the deep structure of sound and will argue for a shared poetic of musicality articulated on low frequencies.

I will extend these artistic connections by looking back at *Ellison’s Invisible Man* to argue that the presence of low frequencies represents a sonic space of recognition that resonates with transnational struggles from the black Atlantic. To the last line of Ellison’s book, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”, the dub poets responded with a voice that sounded like a “talking bass”. Today, this “talking bass” continues to shape performances of contemporary poetry in what I call a poetic of musicality.

This presentation participates in the wider study of bass culture where the politics of frequencies are analysed and identified from different perspectives. My discussion balances social and cultural significance, sonic and musical analysis, and literary study to uncover these politics of frequencies.