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Duppy Conquerors, Rolling Calves and Flights to Zion

by Julian Henriques

In Jamaica, a duppy is a spirit or ghost of a dead person. They are undead, but unlike their cousins the zombies from the nearby Caribbean island of Haiti, they maintain individual agency. Duppies usually take human form, though their feet are said to point backwards, in order to confuse anyone trying to track their footprints. They come out at night and are said to congregate under cottonwood trees. In Bob Marley's *Duppy Conqueror* the proverbial hero fights back against these ghosts – of his vanquished enemies perhaps? – and “bullbucka” (bullies). “Yes mi friend, me der ‘pon street again... So if you a bullbucka, let me tell you this/ I'm a duppy conqueror, conqueror...”¹ Not surprisingly the duppy has also been a popular figure in novels and poems as well as song.²

The mingling of the spirit world and the human world enriches us immeasurably. It allows the past to be alive not dead to us, as with the deadweight of technology with which Western culture burdens itself. But such (digital) technologies have also contributed to the intermingling by making instantly available, the entire history of recorded music. By flattening out and de-historicising the past it has all become equally present. This appears to have wetted an appetite for the ancestors. This new-found love for the past also includes retro analogue synths and other instruments and media, such as cassette tape and vinyl records.³

Duppies are liminal figures caught “betwixt and between” worlds, intertwining future and past, living and undead. “The future is always here in the past” as Amari Baraka puts it.⁴ The dead are always here amongst us the living. This is the case for innumerable cultures, though not in that of the dominant Western materialist one, with the exception, perhaps, of the Gothic tradition. The particular past-to-be-future discussed in Jamaica is that of the ancestors of West African tradition, as they express themselves in the folkloric beliefs and proverbs, as with for example, “Ev’ry cave-‘ole ‘av’ ‘im own duppy (Every cave has its own ghosts) or every family or person have/ has their own problems.”⁵

A rolling calf is not a duppy in human form but a raging bull with fiery eyes and flames flaring from its nostrils.⁶ These animals are also credited with a distinctive and equally terrifying sonic signature – the clanking of chains dragged from around its neck and the bellowing noise they make, causing them to also be known as roaring calves. I might have heard one myself. There lies a particular country graveyard, typically without a church, in a lush green valley in the Portland foothills of Jamaica's Blue Mountains, near a village that

goes by the name of Nonesuch. One night I heard such a sound, or maybe an unsound – or a donkey’s braying carried by the wind mixed with the tune from a sound system playing out from across the next valley.

On another occasion, to the tune of tree frogs, over supper, I was told by a palliative care doctor, that it was commonplace for patients to know exactly the hour of their death, often with a sense of calmness and acceptance. This came, the doctor said, once the patient had been visited by a spirit or duppy of someone already departed, welcoming them to the afterlife. One patient described in exact detail, the character and clothes the duppy was wearing. This turned out to be no one they had ever met, but the occupant of her same hospital bed, who had died some two weeks previously.

But the undead can also threaten the living. Duppies are troubled spirits, malicious souls, who do not rest in peace at all and are feared as objects of *dread*.⁷ They are said to cause accidents, make you loose money or love, and can even attack with a weapon; hence the need to conquer them. For Early B’s *Ghostbusters* album cover, the influential but little recognised Jamaican graphic artist Wilfred Limonious captures this well-known trope perfectly.⁸ According to Jamaican folklore, to prevent the undead rising up, they have to be buried in the proper manner. The body has to be “planted down” in the coffin by “throwing a shovel full of parched peas into the grave. So long as they do not grow, the duppy cannot escape,” as one account has it. “A shrub planted in the grave upside down, that is roots out, is also efficacious.”⁹

Duppies don’t so much lie between the living and the dead, but *fly* between these two worlds. “One bright morning when my work is over, Man will fly away home...” in the words of the traditional Revivalist song. The flight-path for these spirits to escape the downpression of Babylon is set for motherland of Zion, “I say fly away home to Zion...” as Marley sings in *Rastaman Chant*, or in *Duppy Conqueror*, “Don’t try to cut me off on this bridge now/ I’ve got to reach Mt. Zion.”¹⁰ Traditionally what prevents take off for Zion is the weighing down of the body caused by eating salt. Salted fish and meat were part of the plantation-owners’ diet for their slaves.¹¹

These flying ghosts have had considerable influence, not least in helping us understand how and why the island of Jamaica could have become the musical and spiritual powerhouse that is has, since the middle of the last century. Alexander Bedward (1859–1930) founded the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church, in August Town.¹² Bedward convinced his followers that

rather than die a normal death he would fly directly up to heaven as the Biblical prophets had been said to do.

At the appointed time, as is said, Bedward climbed up into an ackee tree, in some versions, or tall building, to be born aloft. But, as Prince Far I's lyric rather bluntly puts it in *Bedward the Flying Preacher*, "Guess what happen? Bedward jump off the building top and break his neck." Bedward was arrested, imprisoned before being carted off to a mental hospital where he died.¹³ Nevertheless Bedwardism in the early years of the last century was one of the major antecedents for Rastafarianism, via Marcus Garvey and Leonard Howells. Together with Paul Bogle, leader of the 1865 Morant Bay slave rebellion, these figures inspired reggae music and lyrics that for over half a century, have rallied those striving for "betterment" the world over.

We can also speculate that it is this same aeronautical theme that can be identified as the major trope of Afrofuturism, where it became famously astronautical and the motherland was re-engineered as the *mothership*. Furthermore, the idea of flying between continents, extends not only to interplanetary and intergalactic outer space, but also to the doubling *inner* space of dub music.¹⁴ Burning Spear's *Garvey's Ghost* to name but one album, is alive with the echoic hauntings of the undead, tales and tails of sounds past.¹⁵

Image credit:

***Ghost Busters* LP by Early B (Black Solidarity, 1985). Image courtesy One Love Books, © Black Solidarity/Wilfred Limonious Estate**

¹ On Bob Marley's *Burning*, Tuff Gong/Island, ASIN: B000001FXP (1973).

² From the classic ghost story Herbert G de Lisser, *The White Witch of Rose Hall*, London: Macmillan Caribbean to Dennis, Ferdinand (1998) *Duppy Conqueror* (London: Flamingo, 1929/ 2007).

³ This is literally the case, with for example, the 2016 Mercury Award-winning young saxophonist and band leader Shabaka Hutchins in all his combos – Sons of Kemet (Kemet being the name for ancient Egypt), Comet is Coming, *Channel the Spirits* and as Shabaka and the Ancestors, *Wisdom of the Elders*. Shabaka Hutchins as Comet is Coming, *Channel the Spirits* (2016), The Leaf Label, ASIN: B01BCWS5A6, as Songs of Kemet, *Burn* (2016) Republic of Music, ASIN: B00D01CG58 and *Lest We Forget* (2016), Republic of Music, ASIN: B0113KSRE6, and as Shabaka and the Ancestors, *Wisdom of the Elders*, Brownswood Recordings, ASIN: B01IHEDQ5G (2016).

⁴ Amiri Baraka, "Jazzmen: Diz & Sun Ra," *African American Review* 29.2 (1995): 255

⁵ Watson, G Llewellyn *Jamaica Sayings with Notes on Folklore, Aesthetics and Social Control* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991) 189.

⁶ There are also other kinds of duppy such as "long-bubby [breasted] Susan," "whooping boy" riding "three foot horse" and "Old Hige," see Anon, (1904) *Folklore of the Negroes of Jamaica*, *Folklore*, Vol 15, no 1 (March 25, 1907) 87 - 94.

⁷ Dread as in Jamaican lings, see Julian Henriques, *Dread Bodies: Doubles, Echoes and the Skins of Sound*, *Small Axe* (44), 2014: 191-201.

⁸ Christopher Bateman, *In Fine Style: The Dancehall Art of Wilfred Limonious* (London: One Love Books, 2016).

⁹ MacEdward Leach, *Jamaican Duppy Lore*, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 74, No. 293 (Jul. - Sep., 1961) 207-215, 211.

¹⁰ Rastaman Chant, also on Bob Marley's *Burning Tuff Gong/Island*, ASIN: B000001FXP (1973). The Zionites and their dub music have a similar quasi-redemptive for the protagonist Case in William Gibson's classic cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*. See an excellent account of this in Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015) 148 -165.

¹¹ This troupe of salt preventing the spirit's flight back to Africa is also taken up in Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*, Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

¹² See Kai Miller's novel *Augustown* (London: Weidefield and Nicholson, 2016). The actual August Town community, dubbed New Jerusalem by the Bedwardites, abuts the University of the West Indies, Mona campus and has long been the location of Sizzla Kolanji's HQ, appropriately named *Judgement Yard*.

¹³ Prince Far I, Singers & Players, *Staggering Heights* On-U Sound, ASIN: B00004RJ33 (1983).

¹⁴ Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*, (London: Continuum 2011).

¹⁵ Burning Spear, *Garvey's Ghost* Island Records, ASIN: B005GS3HAG (1976)