Dub is an act of deconstruction, where a reggae musician takes apart the key elements of a music track, and repositions them, transforming the original, enabling new ways of hearing and understanding. Dub is not neutral, it enriches music with political, spiritual and cultural influences, challenging the establishment.

*Jesus Dub is Robert Beckford’s* exploration of the dialogue between two central institutions in African Caribbean life: the church and the dancehall. Beckford shows how Dub, one of the central features of dancehall culture, can be mobilised as a framework for re-evaluating theology, taking apart doctrine and reconstructing it under the influence of a guiding theme. Engaging with the social and cultural heritage which informs Christian African Caribbean culture, including the influence of slavery, Revival Christianity and working class Jamaican life; Black theology; and music ranging from post-war Sound System to American Hip Hop, *Jesus Dub* is an exploration of how throughout history, music and faith have been transformed in response to racialised oppression. Finally, Beckford demonstrates that dub style appears in the teachings of Jesus, and that dub is a tool which can provide new ways of envisaging and practising spiritual gifts and financial giving, proposing a more inclusive theology for everyone.

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Jesus Dub

Theology, Music and Social Change

Robert Beckford
For my sisters
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Introduction

Sound clash: theology, culture and the Black Atlantic

African diasporan Christian traditions, particularly from the middle of the Twentieth Century, have a history of imitating musical styles from secular Black cultures. As a ‘child of the church’ I have experienced dozens of attempts by youthful musicians in church to sneak in rhythms and beats from reggae, R&B and jazz to accompany praise and worship songs. The aim is to embellish and contemporise church music. This process is reciprocal, as musical styles from hip-hop to reggae also take inspiration, if not literal guidance, from the music and culture of African diasporan Christianity. British R&B artist Estelle praises the church for teaching her to sing in her creative and culturally conscious debut single entitled ‘1980’. My interest lies in the importation of secular music traditions into African Caribbean Christianity. My intent is not to study the stylistic embellishment of Christian theology: I am not interested in ‘dressing up’ Christian culture; rather, I wish to challenge and change it. To this end, this examination is concerned with transformation, how Black popular culture, from the context of the church, provides an opportunity to re-think and re-work aspects of African Caribbean Christian thought and practice.

More precisely, the piece of Black culture that I want to make use of (integral to dancehall in the Caribbean and Britain) is dub, the instrumental version of reggae-dancehall music so central to the sound system performance. Dub is more than sound: it is the product of sophisticated signification and the raw material for a dynamic interplay between word, sound and power. The musical form of dub is the product of studio engineers who transform the original version of a record into an instrumental by remixing its key elements: the vocals, bass, horns, drums and treble guitar. In so doing, a new version or dub version is produced that carries the style and
ideological signature of the engineer or studio. Dub is therefore a hermeneutical act involving deconstructive/reconstructive activity. By the late 1960s in Jamaica, dub had become the raw material for improvised lyrics by DJs or ‘toasters’ and underwent several metamorphoses, including the development of dub poets in Jamaica and Britain. Dub poets applied the hermeneutical focus of the studio engineer to orality, developing new ways of producing and hearing words and language within the highly charged political environments of Jamaica and inner city Britain. At this point dub becomes word-sounds, a transformation of words so as to alter and adjust meaning. Word-sounds are not passive, but assertive statements that engage with social realities and power relationships. For instance, Jamaican-born dub poet, Linton Kwesi Johnson, produces poetry that speaks to the ideological battles being fought by Black people on the streets, in prisons and universities. This is the essence of word, sound and power.

In this project my intent is to expose and apply the technical and cultural dynamics of dubbing in order to facilitate a political dubbing of African Caribbean Christian thought. In short, this dialogue between the cultural production of dancehall and theology of the church hall is an attempt to dub Jesus and to find new ways of hearing the message of the Gospel. By way of introduction, I want to place this exploration within two contexts: the first within theology and culture; and the second within African diasporan scholarship.

Black theology and Black culture

This book is an investigation of theology and its relationship to culture. In talking about theology, I intend to utilise the understanding arising from Black liberation theologies of the Black Atlantic. Theology, as James H. Cone describes it, is:

... a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel which is Jesus Christ.

For Cone, the content of Christian theology is liberation and as such theological expression must detail how God works in the world to free oppressed peoples, wherever they are found, from bondage. The Bible is the foundation on which Cone’s argument is based. Both
Hebrew and Greek Scriptures identify a God of liberation who acts in the world on behalf of the oppressed. The high point of God’s action is the revelation of God in Jesus, and his liberating activity was witnessed in his work amongst the poor, outcast and needy. As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez informs us, concern for the dispossessed and marginalised arises out of the recognition of the nature of God (a ‘preferential option’ for the oppressed) and is divorced from any attempt to romanticise poverty or marginality. Instead, this statement points to who God is; God’s preferential option for the poor tells of God’s love. Within this schema theology cannot be separated from context – the life and experience of people. So, the study of theology is never disconnected from an exploration of social context, material conditions or political relationships. Theology has historically been considered with reference to a variety of sources, including scripture, tradition, experience and culture. While respecting the relevance of all other sources, this exploration is primarily interested in culture.

Raymond Williams provides us with a useful way of understanding the evolution of the concept of ‘culture’. He begins by identifying that the notion of ‘culture’ has undergone several transformations in meaning and is in no way a stable or static concept. The word was originally a way of describing the farming of land – that is, cultivation. But in recent years it has taken on additional meanings. It is, for instance, the product of a programme of improved behaviour and learning – that is, a process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development. Also, some people view culture as inherited values, attitudes and ways of understanding. According to this perspective, culture is therefore the possession of a particular ethnic group or class of people. Hence the ubiquitous use of the phrase ‘Black culture’ to register the cultures of African and African Caribbean people in Britain.

Cultural traditions are not static but dynamic, and Williams captures these activities in the concept of ‘structures of feeling’. These express the characteristic of the cultural forms that emerge from particular locations within each generation. These cultural products enable people to make sense of their lives, articulate identity and contest structural conditions that they nonetheless reproduce. What this means in practice is that culture is constantly changing, on the move and difficult to ‘police’. But dynamic culture does not exclude the retention of core elements that are reworked and transformed over time. African American cultural activist Amiri
Baraka, in order to express the lived tension between Black cultural pasts (Africa) and presents (African diasporan), coined the concept of ‘changing-same’. While I side with Baraka’s theory of culture, it is important to note that not everyone is willing to privilege an African origin of Black culture. Post-modern perspectives on Black culture, for instance, stress its plurality. These anti-essentialist (pluralist) perspectives argue that the history of rupture, and subsequent displacement of African people, has resulted in constant rearticulations of culture as a result of collision and dialogue with other cultural traditions.12

Central to this study is the view of culture as a system of communication (signification) that informs, challenges and reproduces a social order.13 Here cultural production is related to economic and political practices and processes and cannot be examined outside of power relationships. Put simply, in this investigation, culture is understood as process, something we create; it is part of our everyday lives, with values and moralities expressed in and through it, and cannot be explored outside of relationships of power. What is important to note here is that cultural forms are part of a process of repression and challenge, and culture represents a site of struggle that is constantly negotiated. As Stuart Hall explains, the competition for cultural hegemony is never completely won but always ‘shifting the balance of power in relation to culture’.14

Culture gives meaning to theology and both are concerned with how meaning is created, challenged and reproduced – both signify. So what distinguishes the theological task? It is helpful to think of the theological task as being related to another belief system within a social order. In the case of Christian theology it is the ‘Kingdom of God’. This refers to a belief in divine activity that is both imminent and transcendent. The former – divine activity in the present – is motivated by the latter – the future hope. Consequently, theological signification is not an end in itself but is explicitly religious.15

I am interested in how theology, as the quest for liberation, can be enhanced and transformed through an encounter with cultural systems and practices – more precisely, the dialogue between the theology fermented in the African Caribbean church hall and specific cultures located in the leisure space of the dancehall. This encounter is rhizomorphic – particular connections are made in order to provide a new way of understanding the theological task. In order to explain how these new connections are made, it is useful to draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari.
In *A Thousand Plateaus*, these scholars embark on a ground-breaking analysis of social phenomena and offer new alternatives for philosophical and cultural thought to galvanise radical perspectives based on what they term ‘nomadic thought’. In considering ‘nomadology’ it is necessary to reject a root-and-tree image of the world – the classical approach based on historical relationships operating in logical sequence – in favour of a rootless wandering.

In opposition, and continuing with the illustration from plant life, Deleuze and Guattari propose a radical system based on the development of the root tip. Where it is cut off ‘an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts on to it and undergoes a flourishing development’.\(^\text{16}\) This system they term a ‘rhizome’:

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point . . . it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-signs states . . . It has neither a beginning or end, but always a middle from which it grows.\(^\text{17}\)

Rhizomes assume very different forms but have several common characteristics. Any point of the rhizome can be connected to any other. In contrast, a root plots a point and fixes an order. Rhizomes are multiple, ceasing to have a relationship with just one subject. As such they have no points or positions such as those found in a tree or root structure. Instead there are only lines.\(^\text{18}\) Unlike roots that separate into segments and break, rhizomes rupture or shatter at any given point but will start up again at their old or new point, representing a process of ‘de-territorialisation’ and ‘re-territorialisation’. Rhizomes as a form of ‘nomadology’ offer a way of talking about the inter-being between theology and culture; they identify places where political and cultural connections can take place through the creation of a ‘throng of dialects, patois, slangs and specialized languages’.\(^\text{19}\) In relation to theology and culture, the aim of this connection is to provide a new theological vocabulary that facilitates an environment where all human life can thrive and develop.

A meaningful discussion on dancehall from the location of the church hall is not an easy or uncontroversial task in the UK context, as African Caribbean Christianity has a troubled relationship with popular culture. The African Caribbean faith tradition in which I was raised, like so many other Christian traditions of West Indian migrants in Britain in the post-war period, held a negative view of popular culture. The polemic was shaped by the impact on Caribbean Christianity by conservative European
and Euro-American missionaries of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Missionaries made a sharp distinction between the things of the ‘church’ and the ‘world’. Popular music fell into the latter category and the church discouraged the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. However, the recipients of this missionary practice were not completely convinced by their White spiritual masters and guardians. Their suspicion came, in part, from a holistic view of life embedded in the African cultures taken to the New World by slaves. Hence, while retaining a veneer of suspicion towards popular culture, African Caribbean Christians selectively appropriated aspects deemed central to enhancing worship and augmenting evangelism. As gospel music DJ and PhD student Dulcie Mackenzie suggests, African Caribbean ‘Christian music’ from the 1960s has consistently copied genres from the secular world as far-ranging as reggae and country music. What I am suggesting here is that a complex negotiation of popular culture persists in African Caribbean Christianity in Britain. While retaining a stinging critique towards a perceived materialism, profanity and sexual laxity, the church is still willing to copy styles, forms and traditions that embellish the worship and presentation of Jesus Christ. Using a concept appropriated from dancehall culture by Jamaican academic Carolyn Cooper, we may call this place of negotiation a border clash or a warring zone. This refers to a social location or cultural context where competition occurs for influence, meaning and power.

**African diasporan theological cultural criticism**

Located in the UK context, this exploration of theology and culture has Black Atlantic sensibilities. My work represents a diasporan perspective on theology and culture, and is part of a wider body of scholarship in this field. After all, as Paul Gilroy demonstrates, there is a long tradition of cultural and intellectual exchange between diasporan Africans in Europe, the Caribbean and North America. What was once a golden triangle for European economic exchange and slave trading has become a communication network for the descendants of slaves. Taking a lead from African American ethicist Victor Anderson and his reading of Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘genealogy’, I want to map the lines and influence of ideas that inform this study.

I was inspired to view Black expressive culture in general and Black music in particular as a resource for theology through reading
James Cone’s analysis of the spirituals in *The Spiritual and the Blues*. In this seminal study Cone, the patriarch of Black political theology, explores the encoding of socio-political and liberationist themes in classic ‘negro spirituals’ of North America. He continues by contrasting the spirituals with their secular counterpart, the blues. The blues is a ‘secular spiritual’ sharing a double-consciousness (spiritual/social) also found in the ‘negro spirituals’. Both genres articulate in their own way the Black struggle for freedom and justice in America and are not in opposition but a unity. Theoretically, Cone introduces the liberation motif as an ethic for cultural criticism and demonstrates one approach to cultural criticism, informed by Black political theology.

Cone’s engagement with Black culture has been expanded in recent years through the work of second-generation Black theologians such as Anthony Pinn and Victor Anderson. Pinn, working from a Black humanist perspective, studies existential questions posed by late Twentieth Century popular culture (hip-hop) – in particular, what it means to be fully human. This quest for meaning, or what Pinn terms ‘nitty-gritty hermeneutics’, reveals how music cultures provide a framework for evaluating what is wholesome and valuable outside of a traditional Christian religious expression. Another important contribution to this discussion emerges in the work of Victor Anderson. He has deconstructed the construct of Blackness at work in Cone’s canon. In opposition to what he perceives to be a limiting homogeneous ‘ontological Blackness’ Anderson posits a post-modern Blackness. Here complex Black existences necessitate a theological reflection on Black culture that takes seriously the varied expressions of identity cut across axes of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. In sum, a Black theological cultural critic must engage with Black multiplicity and plurality in the study of religious expression and cultural agency.

Whilst Black theology has provided the necessary inspiration for theological engagement with culture, the work of Black British cultural studies provides a contextual theoretical frame for understanding ‘culture’. These studies have their origins in the work of a collection of scholars in university departments in the 1970s. The founding academic is Stuart Hall. Influenced by neo-Marxist theory, Hall and the emerging discipline of critical race studies produced new ways of exploring the relationship between material culture, capital formation and post-colonial Britain. Of particular interest here is the notion of ‘resistance’ and the dangers of a narrow and
fixed or essentialist reasoning. Paul Gilroy provided important insights into these two themes. As a leading protagonist within the Black British cultural studies collective, Gilroy sought to challenge racialised discourses by identifying the oppositional dimensions of Black expressive cultures. In some instances, expressive culture is *politicised* so as to offer sites of resistance to State oppression and ‘common sense racisms’ – when racist ideology is accepted and believed. Gilroy has also consistently critiqued Black essentialism. By lifting the ideological veil of cultural nationalism, he has identified escapist and a-historical tendencies within fixed and static notions of Blackness in Afrocentric scholarship. He nurtures a new task: to seek out and celebrate the political offerings within the diverse and hybrid Black identities and cultures.

However, it is useful to balance Gilroy’s critique with a political argument from Michael Eric Dyson. This author has engaged in a sophisticated and critical exploration of the complex social, political and theological meanings within contemporary music cultures in North America. Like Gilroy, Dyson deploys a critical gaze on Black popular culture through a critical approach he terms ‘enabling solidarity’. This urges scholars to be aware of diverse meanings, identities and contexts in order to be open to a wider range of forces that affect and shape Black culture. However, Dyson’s post-modern Blackness does not exclude a strategic essentialism – the times when it is necessary to analyse and fight on the basis of communal interests and more fixed notions of identity and culture. As post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak puts it, we can’t escape essentialising so it is best to act strategically, looking at ‘essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique’. In *Race Rules* Dyson chastises scholars who celebrate Black diversity at the expense of a political unity. In other words, Dyson demands what Asian British cultural theorist Kenan Malik terms the need for analysis that holds in tension the right to be different (anti-essentialism) and the struggle to be equal (racial justice).

Finally, my approach to theology and cultural criticism has been informed by Black Atlantic womanist scholarship. It was Alice Walker who first used the term ‘womanist’ to describe Black women’s experience in America. However, my introduction to womanism – that is, the theorising of Black women’s experience – came from engaging with the work of bell hooks. Hooks has refined a cultural criticism with a commitment to exploring race, class and gender
analysis to reaffirm the inextricable link between difference and justice in the lives of Black women.  

African American theologian Jacquelyn Grant applied womanist principles to Black theology. She explores how the lives and experiences of Black women in the church facing the triple jeopardy of race, class and gender oppression, inform the theological perspective. Focusing on Christology – that is, who Jesus Christ is in the world today – Grant constructs a ‘womanist Jesus’ concerned with equalising, co-suffering and co-working with Black women.

The distilling of Black women’s experience into a meaningful social theory appears in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. By foregrounding ‘experience as the criterion of meaning’, ‘the role of dialogue’ and ‘an ethic of caring’ Collins’ Black feminist epistemology provides a framework for a counter-hegemonic epistemology – a counter-historical and counter-cultural approach to collating and evaluating what is meaningful for Black women. In short, hooks, Grant and Collins not only demonstrate that ‘gender matters’ in cultural criticism, but they also construct womanist ways of knowing that must be taken seriously in cultural studies and religious reflections in ‘White supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal’ societies.

Jamaican cultural critic Carolyn Cooper applies these womanist themes in a meaningful way to the study of reggae-dancehall culture. Of particular importance is Cooper’s analysis of metaphor, orality and gender in the Jamaican context. She details the unique role of expressive cultures as a playground for gender struggle, the contestation of masculinity and biblical imagery and language. Given the influence of Caribbean cultures on Black Atlantic musical forms, Cooper’s exploration of Jamaican popular culture is an important tool for assessing the migratory or outernational influence of Jamaican culture on its diaspora in Britain and America.

In summary, Black Atlantic theological and cultural analysis provides a meaningful context for doing theology in response to popular culture. The liberation ethic in Black theology can be mobilised as the norm through which culture is explored, including religious cultures inside religious institutions. However, it is important to enable Black cultural traditions to ‘speak for themselves’ and express the existential realities imbedded within them. Cultural traditions are not neutral: they contest economic and political realities. Further, Black cultural traditions are diverse and hybrid, and by celebrating diversity we do not neglect the quest for justice articulated in and through culture. In addition, any meaningful