

# Dub, Utopia and the Ruins of the Caribbean

Joe P. L. Davidson   
University of Cambridge

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## Abstract

The weathered stone, collapsed lintels and hollow roofs of the ruin have long evoked a sense of pathos, standing as monuments to the disastrous contours of history and the possibility of alternative futures. In this article, I ask: What is the meaning of the ruin in the postcolonial context of the Caribbean? There are few physical ruins in the Caribbean, resulting in a feeling of lack: the architectural landscape fails to speak to the catastrophes of slavery and colonialism. Dub, a subgenre of Jamaican reggae, responds to this sense of deprivation. The dub producers of the 1970s decomposed reggae songs, creating ruinous constructions where crucial elements of the original version are missing. Fragmented dub compositions act as icons of the traumatic history of the Caribbean and a utopian pique to the imagination, forcing the listener to fill in the gaps and imagine the world remade.

## Keywords

W.E.B. Du Bois, dub reggae, Édouard Glissant, postcolonialism, ruins, utopia, Derek Walcott

## The Broken Box

King Tubby, the legendary Jamaican producer who played a pivotal role in the development of the dub subgenre of reggae in the 1970s, was famed for a creative attitude to the equipment in his studio. The mixing boards, reverb boxes and delay machines that arrived at the door of the studio were seldom to Tubby's liking, their factory settings inadequate to the expansive sonic vision characteristic of his productions. As Mikey Dredd, a regular visitor to Tubby's studio during the golden age of dub, noted: 'He customize his Fisher reverb unit until the factory wouldn't recognize it; in fact, not much of his equipment stayed the way it was when it come out the factory' (quoted in Bradley, 2001: 320). However, Tubby's attitude to his apparatus of musical production went beyond customization and improvement; it also included abuse and

destruction. The reverb unit, which provided the key to the cavernous tone of Tubby's mixes, was formed through a process of wrecking, with Tubby known for 'lifting and dropping his spring reverb unit, producing a violent and clangorous sound that was particularly jarring when heard from the giant speakers of the sound system' (Veal, 2007: 75–6).

Tubby's doubled attitude to technology, involving both the careful reconstruction of factory-produced equipment and the violent corrosion of its material fabric, mirrors the musical innovations of dub as a genre. Dub pioneered the now common practice of the remix, taking fragments of pre-existing musical substance and bricolating them into a new version. The dub producers of the 1970s stripped reggae songs down to their most basic elements (the bass and drum) and, by applying various effects (namely, reverb and delay) and mixing in snippets of the original song (a morsel of a vocal, a flash of a guitar riff), created something novel. So, both the devices and the tapes that turned up in Tubby's studio were subject to aggression and concern, a ruthless disintegration of the original version combined with the meticulous assembly of a new artefact. Technology and song are pushed to breaking point, veering toward collapse before pulling back at the final moment.

The negative moment of Tubby's broken box, and his broken sonic productions, prompts some questions: Why the need to puncture the material unity of the reverb unit and decompose the musical wholeness of the reggae song? What was it that underpinned this violent act of breaking up? This could be explained purely in terms of the limitations of the technology in Tubby's hands. Without the digital production techniques that are now liberally deployed at the touch of a button, Tubby improvised, reworking the tools at his disposal to produce sounds that they were never designed to emit. Sonically speaking, the constant reworking of reggae originals can also be understood in hard-headed terms. The Jamaican music business in the 1970s was intensely competitive; record labels and sound systems distinguished themselves by the ability to acquire the freshest material for the lowest possible cost. Dub emerged out of this environment, its destructive methods offering a way of squeezing more records from an original song. Why only have one song when you could, after a process of stripping away a few elements and overlaying some effects, have three or four?

Such pragmatic explanations, however, leave something to be desired. Dub's penchant for the scrappy, 'to damage the semiotic integrity of even the most forgettable version sides', goes beyond the practical (Gilroy, 2003: 389). Its whole aesthetic is defined by the coming together of '*fragmentation* and *incompletion*', the mixes produced by Tubby and others oriented towards the creation of a *ruin* from the rich sonic fabric of reggae culture (Veal, 2007: 57; emphasis in original). Tim Maughan

(2019: 190), in his dub-infused science fiction novel *Infinite Detail*, captures this point:

[. . .] almost painfully slow synthetic beats, decades-old dub sirens soaked in reverb, her vocals turned into disjointed, contextless consonants echoing through simulations of antique tape-delay machines, pristine numbers being crunched to birth virtual crackle and dust. Sparse, minimal, stripped down. It wasn't the beats that mattered, she told him, but the spaces in between.

Dub is about the space between the beats; during the process of remixing, gaps are punctured by the producer in the original material. To dub is to create a ruin: a construction where parts are missing, crucial elements of the sonic structure lost. What happens, then, if we understand dub in terms of ruinology, those echoes of the past that have survived, in an untimely, sublime fashion, into the contemporary world?

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that dub's fractured soundscapes help us to reconceptualize ruins, cultivating an understanding of the distinctive power of collapsed structures (whether physical or sonic) in the Caribbean context of slavery and colonialism. To make this argument, I begin in the first section by considering the place of ruins in the Caribbean. Whereas ruins are conceptualized by Georg Simmel and Hannah Arendt as the product of a dialectic of nature and culture, this dialectic has stalled in the Caribbean. As Derek Walcott and Édouard Glissant emphasize, there are few physical ruins in the Caribbean, leaving a sense of lack: the architectural landscape fails to speak to the catastrophes of slavery and colonialism. The practices of the dub producer respond to this, reactivating the dialectic of nature and culture. Returning to Tubby's broken box and Maughan's *Infinite Detail*, it is argued that the technological production of sonic ruins offers a consoling metaphorical spectacle missing in the ruin-deprived physical world. The second section, building on W.E.B. Du Bois's enigmatic reflections on ruins, turns to the positive, utopian undercurrent of this spectacle, suggesting that dub playfully intersects with the back to Africa motif of roots reggae to produce a looping movement between disappointment and hope. The ruins of dub portend, but do not present, an image of wholeness, holding together traumatic history and liberatory future in a single soundscape.

In my exploration of the imbrication of ruins and dub, I primarily use descriptions of dub's sonic practices. However, the dub methodology is a 'virus' that has spread far beyond the particular musical subgenre of dub reggae produced in Jamaica in the 1970s (Goodman, 2009: 159). In particular, dub-infused science fiction, such as Maughan's aforementioned *Infinite Detail*, is a particularly productive resource. Science fiction writers have been strangely drawn to dub (Sorensen, 2014; Chude-Sokei,

2016). The most famous example here is William Gibson's great cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984), which introduces dub music as the backdrop to an exploration of the imbrication of human and non-human. More recently, Nalo Hopkinson, in *Midnight Robber* (2000), suggests that dystopia is the dub version of utopia, fragmenting and ruining the latter. These science fiction texts are interpretations of dub that bring forth its affinity with worlds other than our own.

## **Ruins of the Caribbean: The Non-dialectic of Nature and Culture**

The tragedies of the past suffuse Black Atlantic culture. Artists and writers have addressed the continuum of catastrophes beginning with the Middle Passage, testing the conventional forms of the novel, play, painting and song against the pain and suffering of slavery and colonialism. Think, for instance, of the proliferation of neo-slave narratives in the United States since the 1960s, the best-known example being Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which take up the form of the Antebellum slave narrative and bring it into the post-Civil Rights struggles of the contemporary conjuncture (Rushdy, 1999). Or, consider Caribbean dramas focused on the Haitian Revolution, such as C.L.R. James's *Toussaint Louverture* (1934) and Aimé Césaire's *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), which rework the classic form of tragedy to attend to the specific contradictions of the leaders of the revolt against slavery (Glick, 2016). In the field of visual culture, as Cheryl Finley (2018) expertly traces, black artists have repeatedly returned to the *Description of a Slave Ship* (1789) image, reprising the famous two-dimensional print depicting the conditions on the slave ship *Brooks* to draw out the place of the Middle Passage in the contemporary world. And, from the sorrow songs of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to the reggae and hip hop of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), music has been central to this attempt to work through the past, providing a subterranean means of articulating the experience of slavery and its aftermath.

There is something uninhibited about the memory of slavery, it instils itself into multiple aesthetic forms, challenging and reforming them to express the distinctive historical desires of Black Atlantic writers and artists. One form that has been infused with the historical consciousness cultivated in Black Atlantic culture is the ruin, the distinctive coming together of temporality and destruction in collapsed structures resonating with the task of representing the legacy of the Middle Passage. To understand this claim, a few words about the aesthetic form of the ruin are required. As Georg Simmel (1958: 379) argues in his famous 1911 essay 'The Ruin', the ruined building prompts a feeling of 'cosmic tragedy' in the observer, with the pathos of the fragmented spectacle

grounded in the sense that ‘natural forces’ have become ‘master over the work of man’. In the movement between nature and culture, the artistic, spiritual and labouring capacity of humanity – everything that brought the building into existence in the first place – steadily come under the influence of nature, the corroding effects of wind and rain softening surfaces, punching holes, and kindling collapse. Forces that are alien to the original functioning of the building take over, such that the ruin is not the product of humanity alone but instead the conflict between ‘human purposiveness and the workings of non-conscious natural forces’ (Simmel, 1958: 380). The slow death of the original work of art, the disruption of the unity of the architectural form over time, is also the steady formation of a new aesthetic object formed through the mutual exchange of humanity and nature over a long duration. Hannah Arendt (2005: 74) puts this point well:

Just as a house which has been abandoned by men to its natural fate will slowly follow the course of ruin which somehow is inherent in all human work, so surely the world, fabricated by men and constituted according to human and not natural laws, will become again part of nature and will follow the law of ruin when man decides to become himself part of nature [. . .].

Arendt understands ruins as monuments to the catastrophes of the European experience that began with the mechanized horror of the First World War and concluded with the industrialized death of Auschwitz. To this end, Arendt invokes Walter Benjamin’s famous statement that the ‘angel of history [. . .] sees a single catastrophe which unremittingly piles ruins on ruins [*Trümmer auf Trümmer*] and hurls them at his feet’ (quoted in Arendt, 2005: 75).

On this basis, a few more general comments about the aesthetics of ruins can be made. With a nod to Roland Barthes’s (1989) famous reality effect, it is possible to talk about the *ruin effect*. As Arendt’s comment on perceiving society as a ruin suggests, care should be taken not to elide the figure of the ruin with collapsed architectural structures alone. Instead, any structure that contains gaps and absences punctured by time functions as a ruin, soliciting the ruin effect by evoking the same pathos of feeling identified by Simmel in the case of the decrepit building. Moreover, the ruin is an essentially temporal figure, the dialectic of nature and culture prompting a sense of time passing, the voids in the ruined structure standing for the processes of degradation and decay over the course of a long period. The ruin effect elicits a comprehension of history in the observer, a feeling for the processes and tendencies that linger from the past into the present. A spectacle that combines the positive and negative moments of history, a ruin is a ‘site of life from which life has departed’ (Simmel, 1958: 384–5). In gazing

on the ruin, we become aware of both the great productivity of the past, the human achievement that brought the original structure into being, and its moments of destruction, the times of annihilation when that achievement is steadily degraded, becoming a mere shell of its former self.

The coming together of history and disaster in the ruin makes it a particularly apt icon for responding to the Black Atlantic past. It should not surprise us that ruins feature in the work of some of the major Caribbean writers of the postcolonial period (see Yountae, 2017; Drabinski, 2019). For instance, Césaire (2001: 42) uses the metaphor of the ruin to describe the destructive processes of colonialism: 'I see clearly the civilizations, condemned to perish at a future date, into which [colonialism] has introduced a principle of ruin [*un principe de ruine*]: the South Sea Islands, Nigeria, Nyasaland.' The genocide of peoples, the mass transportation of enslaved Africans, the destruction of cultures: all the forces that have defined the world since 1492 partake in the sense of an ending that envelops the observer as they gaze on the ruin. Ruination, then, is the operational principle of colonization, its result being the 'dehumanising of the most civilized man' (Césaire, 2001: 41). In the colonial world, ruination is defined by the buffeting and corrosion of the achievements of humanity, with the dehumanizing forces of colonialism playing the role of wind, rain and snow in the context of the physical ruin. Colonialism reduces culture to nature, progressively grounding down the human element.

Yet, a tension emerges here. A distinction should be made between *ruination*, on the one hand, and *ruins*, on the other; the two do not seamlessly align together. Ann Laura Stoler (2013), in her landmark piece on the ruins of imperialism, stresses that there is an affinity and a difference between the ruin, a building that has lost its original function, and ruination, the active destruction of past achievements and the curtailment of future hopes. The experience of colonialism, as Césaire emphasizes, is one of ruination, representing a '*political project* that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that accumulate in specific places' (Stoler, 2013: 11; emphasis in original). At the same time, the processes of ruination do not necessarily produce the ruin effect, or manifestations of the hurt of the colonial process. The dynamic exchange between nature and culture at the basis of ruins is, in the colonial world, reduced to destruction alone: ruination supersedes ruins, with the process of colonialism metamorphizing the dynamic interchange between nature and culture to a negative process of devastation. In the Caribbean, the dialectic of nature and culture at the heart of the formation of ruins has stalled, the landscape deprived of physical signs of the catastrophic events of the past.

Derek Walcott (1998: 44), the great Saint Lucian poet and essayist, captures this feeling, emphasizing the scarcity of visual metaphors of the Caribbean's historical experience:

The epic-minded poet looks around these islands and finds no ruins, and because all epic is based on the visible presence of ruins, wind-bitten or sea-bitten, the poet celebrates what little there is, the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, chains, and the crusted amphora of cutthroats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, not as masochism [...].

The Indigenous peoples of the islands have been decimated, with signs of their existence in the Caribbean removed from the physical landscape, while the crossing from Africa to the Caribbean has swallowed up evidence of the past, such that the continuity of history is ruptured by the Middle Passage. If the 'sigh of History rises over ruins', there is something missing in the Caribbean world; a feeling that the landscape lacks the marks needed to comprehend the ravages of the past (Walcott, 1998: 68). The people of the Caribbean cannot, as Arendt suggests, meditate on ruins as a means of coming to terms with the catastrophic failures visited upon them.

Now, as Édouard Glissant (1989: 61) stresses, we should not mistake the absence of ruins to mean that the people of the Caribbean have 'no history', as European philosophers of history – the emblematic example being Hegel – have long suggested of non-white people. Instead, the non-dialectic of nature and culture testifies to the fact that:

the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call its nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture). (Glissant, 1989: 61)

The discontinuum of Caribbean history, as exemplified by the sense of disjuncture between nature and culture, undercuts the formation of ruins, with the gradual reforming of culture by nature replaced by a temporal movement that is far more abrupt and sudden, the slow process of ruin-formation disrupted by the blow of colonialism. In Glissant's (1989: 61–2) words: 'Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment [...] but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces.' The rootedness to the physicality of the Caribbean is thus missing; it is not a space that has been formed and reformed through the interaction of nature and

culture, but rather something abstract and alien. The Middle Passage, in particular, forecloses the possibility of the development of ruins; it is an ‘abyss’ that swallows up continuity, indicating ‘a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green’ (Glissant, 1993: 6). The balls and chains corroding at the bottom of the Atlantic – like the rotting sugar factories and rusted cannons talked of by Walcott – are the closest that the Caribbean gets to the ruin effect: nature reforms the manacles used to enslave Africans, but in a way hidden to the population on the land. As John E. Drabinski (2019: 52) notes, Glissant’s ‘sense of ruin’ is not about loss per se but the ‘loss of loss’, or the absence of signs of what has been taken by slavery and colonialism.

Where do the reflections of these three Caribbean writers – Césaire, Walcott and Glissant – leave us? The Caribbean has been subject to *ruination* but lacks the *ruins* to attest to the experience of suffering, with its potential ruins lost in the crossing of the Atlantic. The disproportion between ruins and ruination prompts a desire for the former; the sense that broken wholes are needed to comprehend and do justice to the experience of history. Ruins do not simply come about via the dialectic of nature and culture but, instead, they must be created. In a world where ruins have been denied, follies become the order of the day. Glissant (1989: 65), in his description of the task of the Caribbean writer, highlights this need for productivity:

Because the Caribbean notion of time was fixed in the void of an imposed nonhistory, the writer must contribute to reconstituting its tormented chronology: that is, to reveal the creative energy of a dialectic reestablished between nature and culture in the Caribbean.

Glissant’s comment suggests that broken aesthetic forms are key to producing the ruin effect in the context of the Caribbean. The Caribbean creative enacts the process of the formation of ruins, producing fragmented forms that recall weathered stones, collapsed lintels and hollow roofs.

At this juncture, we can return to Tubby’s broken box, the ‘cracked technology’ through which he created his mixes (Kelly, 2009: 33). The tensions in the category of the ruin in the Caribbean are evident in Tubby’s attitude to his technology. The ruin effect is not simply something that is there, which can be taken for granted as a sign of the disasters of the past, but instead must be created, the act of smashing the box on the floor to produce a fragmented entity mimicking and accelerating the slow processes of corrosion characteristic of the physical ruin. Yet, there is something more at stake in Tubby’s broken box for our reflection on the Caribbean ruin. The fact that the reverb box is a piece of technology, a machine that artificially creates an echo on an audio recording, is relevant to the question of dub’s ruinology. It should first be

emphasized that theorists loosely affiliated with Afrofuturism have long understood dub as an example of the fertile relationship between blackness and technology (Corbett, 1994; Eshun, 1998; Chude-Sokei, 2016). Once the mixing deck becomes an instrument – in fact, *the* instrument – black music defies the white hope that it will represent the primal, authentic origins of humanity. Instead, dub expresses an impulse to transcend the boundaries of the human, demanding a ‘symbiosis that externalizes the mind, drastically reconfiguring the human producer into a machine being, an audio cyborg’ (Eshun, 1998: 63). As Tubbys’s fellow dub pioneer Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry put it: ‘Then I put my mind into the machine by sending it through the controls and the knobs or into the jack panel’ (quoted in Toop, 1995: 113). Tubbys’s conflictual embrace of technology, embodied in his decomposition and reconstruction of the reverb box, is a prime example of the black people’s domestication of devices that were never designed for them. Dub relies on the work of retooling and reworking the coordinates of the machine to enable it to express the distinctive desires and hopes of the African diaspora.

Importantly, dub’s machinic disposition mediates between nature and culture, ruin and ruination. The dub producer’s decompositional practices, the stripping down and taking apart of the original reggae song, are only possible by virtue of technological interfaces, which cease to be a mere ‘vanishing mediator’ between performer and listener and are put centre stage in the creation of the musical artefact (Sterne, 2003: 225). The first step of a dub production is to ‘[b]reak a vase’, or the fragmentation of the original song into its constituent elements (Walcott, 1998: 69). The mixing deck is crucial to this process; the elements of the original sonic construction are revealed only once it is fed through a machine. The multitrack mixer, on the one hand, brings together the drums, bass, vocals, and instrumentation, allowing the producer to line up the elements into a coherent whole. On the other hand, the deck is a virtual instrument of separation, offering the technological conditions of possibility for breakdown and destruction, allowing the producer to disjoin each element from the others. Dub, via the process of the removal of a few tracks in the mix, fragments the song. After the work of the dub producer, all that is left are the ‘skeletal remains of gutted pop songs’, the faint trace of the original whole in the looping bass and drums and in the brief flashes of vocals and guitar (Veal, 2007: 196). The power of dub is in the ‘space between the beats’; its force resides in what is left out, or the sense that there are sonic elements that should be there, the feeling that we are being denied something (Maughan, 2019: 237).

Dub uses technology to produce the ruin effect, such that the final mix evokes wholeness but does not reach it. The original song, once put through the wringer of the mixing board, is caught between a longing for the return to completeness and a reverence for a structure battered by machinic elements. The dub producer’s tools – the deck, the effects boxes,

and so on – effect a dialectic of nature and culture; the final mix is a simulacrum of the process of weathering that produces the physical ruin. Although the listener is aware of the intentional nature of the composition, that the producer has deliberately punched holes in the original song, there is also a sense that what has happened is natural. It is almost as if the tapes have been left in a basement, then rediscovered many years later, corroded but just about listenable. The materiality of dub production is important here. Working on analogue tapes, each new mix of the original song – and producers such as Tubby often mixed the same song a dozen times or more – resulted in a reduction in the audio quality of the tape; new snaps and hisses are introduced, the original sound becoming clouded by the static of the tape. The ‘data flow’ becomes ‘permanently damaged by the mark’; the degraded tapes are ‘filled with noise’, each imperfection on the material attesting to the tortures it has been subject to (Kelly, 2009: 34–5).

Maughan’s *Infinite Detail* brings this element of dub to the fore. The dystopia is set in the near future where the internet has ceased to function and all digital data, including music, has been lost. The novel focuses, in part, on a dub producer called Tyrone in Bristol, a city famous for its dub-influenced music scene (Sullivan, 2014). Tyrone’s world is one of enforced technostalgia, a global digital detox resulting from the collapse of the internet (Taylor, 2001). Consequently, he searches through the city for records, cassettes, and CDs – all the ‘urban hymns given a physical form before the great shift to digital, and hence the last new music to survive the crash’ – that can be combined to create something new (Maughan, 2019: 160). These ‘relics, these scratched and battered discs’ have survived the test of time, but not in an unscathed fashion; they are ‘archaeological echoes of a lost era’, valuable sonic nuggets wrapped up in a degraded material form (Maughan, 2019: 160). Tyrone’s productions are marked by the age of the material he is using; the oldness of the music is evident in its scratches and hisses. As Friedrich Kittler (1999) argues, all mechanisms of recording music from the phonograph onward store time, but they do so imperfectly; there are leaks in the unit, leading to the steady degradation of the sonic world captured. The dub producer, Maughan implies, reenergizes the dialectic of nature and culture by evoking the sense of time passing; the weathered tapes that provide the foundation of dub are prematurely aged, their constant reworking producing a feeling that nature ‘has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression’ (Simmel, 1958: 381).

In *Infinite Detail*, the music is physically tainted by the vagaries of time. The precarious musical structures created by Tyrone stand as monuments to the disruptions of history, with the radical break introduced by the collapse of the internet written into the substance of the tracks themselves. Dub, even without these science fictional imaginations of the future, does something similar, its constant reworkings of old

reggae songs producing a sense of time passing. The tools of Tubby become a means of accelerating the movement of time, but with a distinctive aim: to produce a sense of deterioration. Dub is a decayed and frayed form that is the product of the inorganic processes of the machine but mimics the slow weathering processes of the natural world. The fragmented compositions of dub create a cyborg ruin, in which the machinic and the natural melt into one another; the apparatus of the producer marks the original temporally, both sonically (constant remixing creating a sense of change and development) and materially (through the degradation of the tape). In restaging the dialectic of nature and culture, dub generates a ruin for the Caribbean, the machine enabling a process of speeding up to produce sonic structures that can compensate for the absence of ruins in the landscape.

### Dubtopian Ruins

Dub music focuses on the formation of ruins, with the decomposition of reggae songs addressing the imbalance between the intense experience of ruination and the absence of physical ruins in the Caribbean. All of this, however, raises a question: What of the generative, productive aspect of dub, the fact that it not only breaks the vase but also ‘reassembles the fragments’ into a new form (Walcott, 1998: 69)? The technological manipulation of reggae songs by Tubby and other dub producers was a creative act, focused on forming aesthetic wholes from sonic material scavenged from the original versions. As Maughan (2019: 190, emphasis added) states, dub is ‘new material’, the moment of decomposition followed by an act of recomposition, its novelty dependent on the coming together of destruction and production. Given this, what does the positive moment of dub do? Why did Tubby, alongside the destruction of the songs that arrived in his studio, rescue and retain valuable sonic pieces, carefully and delicately reforming the reggae song into a new version? And, how does all of this relate to the ruin effect, the hallmark of which is the coming together of destruction and temporality?

To respond to these questions, we can begin by turning to one of the great texts of the Black Atlantic: Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book, as Alexander Weheliye (2005: 102) notes, ‘reverberates dialogically with one of the most significant Afro-diasporic aesthetic achievements of the last fifty years: dub reggae’. Think of the way in which Du Bois draws on the tradition of sorrow songs in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Each chapter is headed with a snippet of a song from the African-American spiritual tradition, its meaning both evoked and altered by virtue of its position in the theoretical mix. Such ‘sonic hauntology’ is not, however, confined to the fragments of song that cut across the text (Weheliye, 2005: 104). At the heart of *The Souls of Black Folk* is an essay, titled ‘Of the Meaning of Progress’, that is centred on the figure of the ruin. In this chapter,

Du Bois reflects on his time teaching in a poor black village in the hills of Tennessee. Du Bois's first visit to the village prompts a sense of hopefulness, the talent of his pupils indicating the possibility for progress. Yet, when Du Bois revisits the village a decade later, this hope has been crushed: his former pupils are indebted, imprisoned or dead, with their potential remaining unfulfilled. The fact that Du Bois's old schoolhouse is in ruins symbolizes this feeling of a lost future:

My log schoolhouse was gone. In its place stood Progress; and Progress, I understand, is necessarily ugly. The crazy foundation stones still marked the former site of my poor little cabin [...]. Some of the window-glass was broken, and part of an old iron stove lay mournfully under the house. (Du Bois, 1903: 70)

The confrontation with the ruin of the schoolhouse is a doubled experience for Du Bois, containing *both* destruction and construction. On the one hand, there is a melancholic tone to his observations, a feeling that something of profound importance – namely, the brighter future hoped for by the black folk of the village – has been lost with the collapse of the schoolhouse. On the other hand, the fragments of the schoolhouse still contain a kernel of this original hopefulness: insofar that the desires that circulated in the schoolhouse have not been realized, they maintain a hold on the future.

With Du Bois's reflection on the old schoolhouse, we can begin to see the power and significance of the ruin in the context of the Black Atlantic. Insofar that the 'ruin is always a ruin of something', it calls us back to the original construction, summoning up 'a time that no longer occurs, a time when the building functioned according to human intention' (Viney, 2014: 129). The old schoolhouse engages the faculty of the imagination, Du Bois working to reconstruct the building, putting in the missing pieces and removing the evidence of the damage done by time. Du Bois's account adds an element of ambivalence to the temporal consciousness of the schoolhouse, imbuing the ruin effect with a utopian undercurrent. For Du Bois, the ruin of the schoolhouse holds the 'promise of an alternative future', its power predicated on the fact that it stirs up a liberated world where the dreams of his pupils are fully realized, where all is whole and harmonious (Huyssen, 2006: 8). Consequently, the act of holding fast to one's ruins has a restorative and a radical value; it promises a fragile form of renewal. Through the confrontation between possible tomorrows contained in the ruin and the degraded contours of today, a critical estrangement is produced.

The detour through Du Bois's enigmatic account of the power of ruins in the African-American experience offers a clue to the positive drive underlying dub productions. What should first be emphasized here is

that, like the ‘unconscious moral heroism’ of Du Bois’s (1903: 62) students when he first visited the village in Tennessee, dub was enlivened by a utopian impulse. Reggae in the 1970s was intensely political, both in terms of its close connection to Prime Minister Michael Manley’s democratic socialist agenda and, more profoundly, to the Rastafarian-infused desire to return to Africa. The name of this moment of Jamaican music, roots reggae, indicates this: it was about reclaiming the African heritage of black music, both rhythmically and lyrically. Of course, reggae has a complex genealogy, emerging from a fusion of Caribbean forms, such as mento and calypso, and African-American genres, namely rhythm and blues, from the 1950s onwards (Bradley, 2001). However, the 1970s was marked by a concerted attempt to revive specifically African musical forms. Emblematic of reggae in this moment is African-infused drum patterns overlaid with vocals expressing a yearning to cross the Atlantic and return home. Roots reggae, as Lloyd Bradley (2001: 198) explains, ‘draws a line – a thick black line – straight back to Africa’. It should be stressed here that the desire to return to Africa was not, for the most part, about the continent as it actually existed, either in the 1970s or at any point in history. Africa was, instead, a ‘motivating symbol, imagined origin, and semantic center’, a world of harmony free of the continuum of suffering and violence that began with the Middle Passage (Chude-Sokei, 2011: 79). Reggae artists reconstituted and renewed African practices and traditions, which acted as hopeful signs of black possibility. The figure of return concatenated with a desire to open new horizons of expectation, such that roots reggae produced ‘a third, utopian space [...] in which the wrongs and hurt of Babylonian existence could be systematically undone and white supremacy overthrown in the name of higher human freedoms’ (Gilroy, 2003: 390).

Insofar as the primary material of dub was roots reggae, the utopian space of Africa is immanently contained in the dub mix. Alternatively put, dub only succeeds in producing the ruin effect because it contains something positive; that the original structure of feeling that powered roots reggae is manipulated but not destroyed. At the same time, the desire for Africa in dub is made fragile; it is always liable to failure because utopia is denied by the catastrophic contours of history. The dub producer decomposes the ideal space of Africa, breaking up the African-infused rhythms with delay and echo, splicing up the liberatory lyrics and denuding them of their full meaning, but also recomposes it, rearranging the elements of the original to hold together the desire for return and an account of the continuum of catastrophes. In particular, the use of echo by dub producers resonates with the ruinous movement between utopia and disaster, the positive and the negative. The soaking of the original reggae song in echo-effects, as Mickey Vallee (2017: 109) notes of echo more generally, draws out ‘multiple and simultaneous layers of history’, bringing to the fore the brokenness of Caribbean

history *and* invoking the liberatory desire for Africa in insistent, repetitive terms.

Take, for example, King Tubby's 'Brother Marcus Dub', a new version of a track from Johnny Clarke's album *Rockers Time Now* (1976) called 'Them Never Love Poor Marcus'. In Clarke's version – which is itself a cover of a Mighty Diamonds song – the achievements of Marcus Garvey, the famed Jamaican leader of a movement to return the people of the African diaspora to their countries of origin, are praised. The Garveyite movement, Clarke tells us, was betrayed by more timid political forces but also reassures the listener that it will be avenged: 'And they didn't know, there'd be times like this.' The desire to return to Africa, the Garveyite feeling of liberation, has returned; the old dream will be fulfilled. As Michael Veal (2007: 116) comments, Tubby's 'Brother Marcus Dub' reinforces the original demand for 'divine retribution', dropping out the instrumentation at various points to leave Clarke's voice alone. At the same time, the reverb and delay used by Tubby distorts Clarke's voice, his once forceful demands fading into a wavering morass of syllables. The mix thus simultaneously restates the dreams of the Garveyite movement, putting the political demands of the original centre stage, and blurs Clarke's celebration of Garvey, the overlaying of aural effects and the classic clanging of the reverb unit dominating the political lyrics. Tubby reassembles 'Them Never Love Poor Marcus' to speak to the positive and negative, the third space of Africa accentuated and undermined.

Dub's deconstruction of roots reggae's utopia induces the same dialectic of hope and disappointment as Du Bois's image of the ruined schoolhouse. The advancement of a people who have experienced the Middle Passage, slavery and colonialism is not linear, but instead marked by catastrophic failures, painful repetitions, and dead ends. Du Bois's pupils' moral heroism is necessary but it requires a proviso; a moment of warning that speaks to the disappointments of the past. Similarly, roots reggae's utopianization of Africa, while working to stimulate the desire for liberation, risks becoming a false hope if it is defined by positivity alone; the negative sneaks in, the desire to return to the tragedies of the past cannot be repressed. Dub does not destroy the utopian positivity associated with roots reggae; there is no rejection of the desire to return to Africa. Instead, via the ruin effect, it constructs a looping movement between catastrophe and liberation, attesting to both the failures of the past and eliciting the possibility of another future. The strange coming together of a sense of tragedy and a feeling of liberation generates what Joseph R. Winters (2016: 16) calls – partly based on a reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* – 'melancholic hope', the idea that 'a better, less pernicious world depends partly on our heightened capacity to remember, contemplate, and be unsettled by race-inflected violence and suffering'. The desire to return to Africa is thus rerouted by dub

through the past, with the ruined soundscapes of the dub production summoning hope and disappointment simultaneously, such that dub seeks to break the straight line across the Atlantic.

At this point we can turn to a second dub-infused science fiction novel: Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000). The novel follows the travails of a young girl named Tan-Tan in her journey to adulthood on a planet colonized by the people of the Caribbean. The new settlement, which is called Toussaint, engages with the utopian sensibility of roots reggae. For the inhabitants of Toussaint, the second passage from earth to space is positioned as a reversal of the first passage from Africa to the Caribbean, with the former movement connoting the freedom of the peoples of the Caribbean as the latter movement connoted their enslavement. As Tan-Tan is informed, the catastrophe of the Middle Passage is cancelled by the escape into space:

Long time, that hat woulda be make in the shape of a sea ship, not a rocket ship, and them black people inside woulda been lying pack-up head to toe in they own shit, with chains round them ankles. Let the child remember how black people make this crossing as free people this time. (Hopkinson, 2000: 21)

The people of the Caribbean, in escaping earth to establish a utopian world in the stars, have decisively triumphed over the horrors of slavery and colonialism. This is reflected by the memorial culture of Toussaint, which almost entirely elides the sufferings of the African diaspora and instead focuses on acts of resistance. The planet is named after Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, the ships that the settlers arrived on are called the Black Star Line II in honour of Marcus Garvey's movement, and statues of Nanny of the Maroons and Zumbi, leaders of slave resistance in Jamaica and Brazil respectively, have been erected. These memorials mimic memory practices in the Caribbean. From the 1960s, newly independent states in the Caribbean began to challenge an older narrative of white benevolence and African submissiveness, instead focusing on the commemoration of leaders of revolts and revolutions (Araujo, 2014). For instance, in Jamaica's Heroes Park, the monument to the Rt. Excellent Marcus Garvey was constructed in 1964 and the monument to the Rt. Excellent Nanny of the Windward Maroons was unveiled in 1999. The memorials in the Caribbean draw on the same pantheon of figures that feature in the speculative Toussaint, both actually existing states and the alternative futural world embracing the 'iconography of the heroic leader' (Brown, 2002: 111).

The memory culture of Toussaint, with its emphasis on reversing the Middle Passage and celebrating the triumphs of the African diaspora, pushes the gaze away from the catastrophes of history. As Saidiya

Hartman (2002: 768) notes, the idea that the enforced movement across the Atlantic can be rewound risks insinuating ‘that the derangements of the slave trade can be repaired’. It fails to scratch out the Middle Passage; return offers only premature reconciliation. *Midnight Robber* responds to these concerns. Hopkinson is careful to demonstrate that the first passage has not been entirely expunged; the legacies of slavery and colonialism continue to haunt Toussaint. This becomes clear when, after Tan-Tan’s father Antonio commits a murder, they are both exiled to the shadowy second world of New Half-Way Tree. Significantly, the latter dystopian world is understood in terms of dub:

But where Toussaint civilized, New Half-Way Tree does be rough. [...] You know the way a shadow is a dark version of the real thing, the dub side? Well, New Half-Way Tree is a dub version of Toussaint, hanging like a ripe maami apple in one fold of a dimension veil. (Hopkinson, 2000: 2)

Hopkinson’s reference to dub – a musical intertext that, as Leif Sorensen (2014) traces, cuts across her corpus as a whole – resonates with the doubled movement of Tubby’s ‘Brother Marcus Dub’. Like Tubby’s detouring of liberation, New Half-Way Tree disturbs the positive utopia of Toussaint, calling it back to the catastrophic contours of Caribbean history. For example, in the dub version of Toussaint, Tan-Tan encounters the tin box method of torture common to slave plantations across the Black Atlantic world, indentured labourers unable to leave their masters, scarcity and backbreaking labour, and an oppressed Indigenous population considered ontologically inferior to the new arrivals.<sup>1</sup> Most profoundly, like the enslaved people brought from Africa to the Caribbean, there is no return from New Half-Way Tree to Toussaint. The presence of hard labour, racial violence and intense alienation means that Tan-Tan, on moving from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree, is ‘being taken away from home like the long time ago Africans’ (Hopkinson, 2000: 74).

Tan-Tan’s exile in New Half-Way Tree reveals that the legacies of colonialism and slavery retain an untimely hold on the quasi-utopian world of Toussaint and its shadowy mirror New Half-Way Tree. However, Hopkinson does not establish a circular understanding of history; the oppressions of the past are not simply repeated in a new form. At the close of the novel, Tan-Tan gives birth to a son, who she decides to call Tubman after the great 19th-century American slave abolitionist Harriet Tubman, who was famed for escaping slavery and then returning to the South countless times to help other enslaved people reach the North. Tubman, both Hopkinson’s character and the real historical figure, is ‘the human bridge from slavery to freedom’, trafficking between the two states, mediating between the good and the bad, and bringing

together the catastrophic past and the liberated future (Hopkinson, 2000: 329). The decision to name her son Tubman decomposes and recomposes the triumphalist memorial practices on Toussaint, acknowledging the need for icons of resistance but also imbuing them with a feeling for the pain of the past. As a product of both destruction and construction, Tubman produces the ruin effect, holding together the positive and negative in one figure and gesturing towards the infinite and unfinished movement between slavery and liberation.

There is, in this sense, an affinity between *Midnight Robber* and Tubby's broken reverb unit with which we began: both combine the careful work of construction with acts of destruction. If, in Fredric Jameson's (2005: 34) words, 'we need to grasp the Utopian operation in terms of home mechanics, inventions and hobbies, returning it to that dimension of puttering', or the piecing together of a new world from the fragmented semiotic elements floating around us, then the dub producer emerges as a privileged subject of utopia. Tubby's breaking up of the reverb unit in his home studio offered the basis for reconstruction, just as Hopkinson's smashing of Toussaint against New Half-Way Tree opens up the potential for an authentic reconciliation. The 'rubble' of the world, whether in Tubby's studio or Hopkinson's science fictional imaginary, becomes 'the loosened building blocks (both semantic and material) out of which a new order can be constructed', with the dub producer akin to 'the collector, the ragpicker and the detective' of Benjamin's arcades (Buck-Morss, 1989: 212). All have an eye for the entwinement of the tragic and the hopeful in the ruin, a sense of the failures of the past and possibilities for the future.

The dub desire for rubble was evident in one of the iconic events of the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement: the toppling of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in the city of Bristol in June 2020. It is no accident that this iconoclastic action occurred in Bristol. The city's wealth is founded on the Atlantic slave trade, figures such as Colston making immense fortunes from the exploitation of enslaved African labour. Furthermore, as noted above, Bristol is home to a vibrant dub-influenced music culture, the sound systems established by Caribbean migrants in the post-war period morphing into the globally renowned trip hop scene by the 1990s. In Maughan's (2019: 158) words, 'it's all about that Bristol sound, staccato vocal chop-ups, reggae pulses, ancient drums dug up from the depths of lost musical history'. Perhaps, then, the decomposition of the Colston statue in the waters of the Bristol Channel, the desire to see it become green like the balls and chains of Glissant's account, is a manifestation of the Bristol sound. The fragmentary movement of the dub aesthetic resonates with the empty plinth that now stands in the city, a 'counter-monument' of absences infinitely more appropriate to the traumas of Black Atlantic history than the celebratory embrace of a slave trader (Young, 1992: 277). Like the ruinous listening

experience in dub, the plinth calls to be occupied, whether by a statue of Jen Reid, a Black Lives Matter activist, that appeared for a few days in July 2020, or by something else entirely. The dub movement between destruction and construction opens the space for hope, the gaps punctured in the original mix establishing new paths for the future.

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### ORCID iD

Joe P.L. Davidson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1800-3771>

### Note

1. While *Midnight Robber* foregrounds the legacies of the Middle Passage in its dub account of history, the spectre of the genocide of Indigenous peoples haunts the text. In particular, Tan-Tan's sojourn in New Half-Way Tree is punctuated by moments of cooperation with Indigenous groups, the text reprising and retooling the 'Maroon-Amerindian fusions' of Caribbean history (Dillon, 2007: 29).

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**Joe P.L. Davidson** is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Cambridge. His thesis is focused on the relationship between temporality and utopia. It utilizes a range of utopian texts – from William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* to contemporary science fiction film and popular music – to develop a critical social theoretical account of the crisis of the future. His work has been published in *Continuum*, *Current Sociology*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Theory*, *Television & New Media*, and *The Sociological Review*.