

**Contemporary English Oral Poetry by Black
Poets in Great Britain and South Africa:
A Comparison between
Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mzwakhe Mbuli**

**(Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master
of Arts, English, University of Cape Town)**

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Abstract

The general aims of this dissertation are: to study a form of literature traditionally disregarded by a text-bound academy; to argue that form is an important element in ideological analyses of the poetry under discussion; and, on the basis of this second aim, to argue for a comparative, rigorously critical approach to the poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli. Previous evaluations of Mbuli's poetry are characterised by acclaim which, the author contends, is only possible because of under-researched criticism, representing a general trend in South African literary culture. Compared to Linton Kwesi Johnson's work, for instance, Mbuli's poetry does not emerge as the innovative and progressive art - in both content and form - it is claimed to be. Mbuli and his critics are thus read as a case study of a general trend.

Johnson and Mbuli mainly perform their poetry with musical accompaniment and distribute it as sound-recording. This study's approach then differs from the approaches of general oral literature studies because influential writers on oral literature - specifically Walter J. Ong, Ruth Finnegan and Paul Zumthor - do not address the genre under investigation here. Nevertheless, their writings are explored in order to show why particularly Ong and Finnegan's approaches are inadequate. The author argues that using the orality of the poetry as an organising, theoretical principle is insufficient for the task at hand. On cue from Zumthor, this study suggests an approach through Cultural Studies and conceives of the subject matter as popular culture.

To this end, writings on popular culture are explored and a working definition of 'popular culture' is proffered. This definition emphasises the progressive politics of popular culture and distinguishes it from mass culture, where the latter - which, with the former, falls under the rubric of 'low culture' - is characterised by a dubious hegemonic project. The Marxist influence in Cultural Studies is then noted, particularly debates around the relationship between form and content whereby form gains importance as political signifier.

The histories of reggae and the Jamaican Creole are explored to provide concrete examples of the above relationship. On the basis of this, the author argues for analyses of form in ideological investigations of the poetry. Johnson's poetry is then analyzed and held to represent a good example of popular culture where a progressive political content is underwritten by formal aspects - such as language and music.

With Johnson as standard, the author examines the flaws in the arguments of Mbuli's critics and argues that the flaws represent a lack of knowledge - on the part of previous critics - of both the general field of oral literature and of the specific genre. Part of this project is then a redress of this critical shortcoming. Mbuli's poetry is then analyzed and, compared to Johnson's art, is shown to fail as popular art because formal aspects of his poetry contradict its ostensible progressive content.

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Note

Where authors are quoted, their words are reproduced verbatim. Stylistic and grammatical variations - such as American spellings of certain words and variations in matters of punctuation, for instance - thus appear in quotations and have not been altered.

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[P]ost-colonial literature and its study is essentially political in that its development and the theories which accompany this development radically question the apparent axioms upon which the whole discipline of English has been raised. Not only the canon of 'classical texts', the disruption of which by new, 'exotic' texts can be easily countered by a strategy of incorporation from the centre, but the very idea of English Literature as a study which occludes its own specific national, cultural, and political grounding and offers itself as a new system for the development of 'universal' human values, is exploded by the existence of the post-colonial literatures.

- Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989:196)

We live at a time when literacy itself has become so diluted that it can scarcely be invoked as an aesthetic criterion. The word as spoken or sung, together with the visual image of the speaker or singer, has meanwhile been regaining its hold through electrical engineering. A culture based upon the printed book, which has prevailed from the Renaissance until lately, has bequeathed us - along with its immeasurable riches - snobberies which ought to be cast aside.

- A.B. Lord, in Finnegan (1973:144)

Introduction

At the outset, it needs to be made explicit that the following dissertation has three broad political aims underlying its investigation of the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson (Great Britain) and Mzwakhe Mbuli (South Africa). Firstly, this dissertation seeks to address and acknowledge, through academic study, a form of literary production traditionally ignored by the academy (and especially the academe). In this regard, the specific subject matter of this study can be described, generally, as an explicitly political poetry, broadly progressive,¹ orally performed with musical accompaniment (but distinct from sung verse), and in the main distributed on audio cassette, phonograph records and compact discs. As contemporary oral art, the dub-poetry² of Johnson or Mbuli may for instance easily be consigned to either an anthropological curiosity or completely ignored because it may not fit into the value systems of text-based English studies. Furthermore, it may also be dismissed because of its existence beyond the parameters of the 'high-brow'.

Whether because of its oral nature or whether because of its explicit 'low-brow' characteristics, it is common knowledge that especially contemporary oral art such as the above suffers from general academic hostility or negligence. Even in the work of important writers on oral poetry and orality, like Walter J. Ong, Ruth Finnegan and Paul Zumthor, oral poetry remains a subject either of the (often distant) past or in a non-European language. Johnson, for instance, has been

producing poetry since the late 1970s but there remains an acute paucity of academic work on his poetry. This fact is difficult to reconcile with the by now general acceptance that the assumptions on which the concept of English Literature were (or are) based, are far from the purported universal criteria of taste and literary value. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin assert, post-colonial literatures have questioned and reconstituted the metropolitan assumptions underlying English studies (1989:4, 46, 181). It is thus ironic that dub-poetry, trenchantly shunning traditional literary assumptions, remains understudied even after those exclusionary assumptions have been widely challenged.

The negligence shown to oral art by traditionally text-bound academic institutions may be predicated on an orality/literacy opposition, the strict divide perhaps preventing traditional scholars from even imagining the existence of an oral poetry which is contemporary, in English, and found in industrialised, 'Western' societies. According to Ruth Finnegan, a primitive/cultured opposition coincides with such a split between the oral and the written (1973:112). For 'primitive' one can, of course, substitute any of a number of Romantic tropes such as irrational, unscientific and unsophisticated. These tropes eventually support each other: the oral is that, the argument goes, which comes from 'oral societies', 'oral' connoting not simply a mode of communication, but also a fixed political system and world-view. In other words, oral societies are seen, through the above dichotomous view, to be communal and tradition-bound because they are oral.

Furthermore, the oral may be thought to exist only in those societies at a

comfortable remove from industrialised societies. It is this dichotomy - which divides modes of communication along strict lines - that cannot account for the existence of Johnson's dub-poetry, poetry from a university graduate living in industrialised Britain. The convolutions and problems with a dichotomous theory of orality are discussed in the first chapter of this study.

Through the acknowledgment of an area of literary activity traditionally neglected by universities, this project thus situates itself politically because, simply put, it seeks to make visible that which has been ignored. In this regard, this study finds a cue in Finnegan who situates an interest in oral literatures in the 'common connection between a "left wing" or "progressive" stance and a concern with "popular culture" or "protest songs"' (1977:7). A second cue comes from her implicit appeals for studies which investigate contemporary, urban, oral art and, more importantly, for studies of 'particular instances of oral poetry in more depth' (1977:5, 275). This study is an investigation of an explicitly left-wing, contemporary and urban oral poetry.

The second political impetus to this project arises from the realisation that mere acknowledgement of the two poets' work may give in to an easy romanticisation of their work simply because the poetry appears politically progressive. As will become clear in especially Chapter 4, the criticism of Mbuli's poetry - by mostly South African critics - collapses into such romanticisation. Whereas text-bound perspectives may deny dub-poetry its scrutiny, Mbuli's critics attempt to first exempt him from academic scrutiny in order to acclaim him.

Furthermore, Mbuli's critics do so without an awareness of other poets who practise a similar art. Inevitably, their criticism leads to what has now become known as 'solidarity criticism'.³ Here, Kelwyn Sole's words are applicable to Mbuli's critics:

The existence or quality of a work of art, while wedded to socio-political factors, cannot be evaluated in a facile manner in terms of these factors and these factors only. Art cannot be evaluated directly against the artist's consciously held commitment, ideology or social position, or against his or her subject matter: and it is this latter critical tendency in South Africa which has led to the existence of the 'solidarity criticism' Sachs so rightly castigates. (1990:13)

This study seeks to redress the above. Specifically, it compares the work of Mbuli to that of Johnson to show that comparisons to poets from outside South Africa are fruitful and lead to critically insightful evaluations. This aspect of the study is political because it implicitly argues for a well-crafted political art.

A further implication is that a demand for quality and standards is not necessarily linked to conservative values. This project is political because, by redressing past criticism of Mbuli's poetry, it seeks to engage with a type of criticism which, the author believes, ultimately makes for a poorer South African art because of its unwillingness or inability to make formal, aesthetic demands on 'politically correct' writers. To some extent, this study is a critique of certain problematic tendencies in South African literary criticism as manifested in the general critical acclaim Mbuli's poetry enjoys.

Ultimately, the criticism of literature involves evaluation of some kind. This study seeks to set up and make the criteria of evaluation explicit. The third political aim of this study then involves the making explicit of evaluative criteria and it argues for a poetry that is politically progressive in both content and form. Here, a cue is taken from Walter Benjamin's ideas on artistic 'commitment'.⁴ This is linked to the second political aim of this project: Johnson is presented as standard because his poetry arguably represents a successful fusion of content and form. Because both Johnson and Mbuli are, ostensibly, politically progressive poets using a markedly similar genre, a comparative analysis of their work should yield interesting insights, especially in the light of the acclaim Mbuli enjoys. As will be argued later, one of the weaknesses in the criticism of Mbuli's work is an absence of comparative insight. Presumably, this is predicated by a belief in the uniqueness of South African society and its cultural forms. There appears to be, therefore, a critical reluctance to compare South African artists to foreign artists. Here, Karin Barber provides a cue: she argues that mass/popular cultural productions separated geographically and by diverse socio-economic contexts are normally closer to each other than to their respective, local traditions (1987b:107).

The three broad political aims of this project can thus be encapsulated as, firstly, the acknowledgement of previously ignored forms of cultural activity; secondly, the redress of a debilitating criticism; and, thirdly, the demand for progressive art to be progressive in both content and form. The study is divided into four main chapters, of which the following introductory summaries discuss

further aims and informing perspectives.

The first section, comprising of Chapters 1 and 2, lays the theoretical groundwork for the later analyses of Johnson and Mbuli's poetry. It incorporates a brief literature survey of theories of oral poetry and a discussion of debates around mass/popular culture. A discussion of Marxist perspectives on the relationship between politics and aesthetics follows, and links are drawn between socio-linguistic perspectives and Marxist debates around aesthetics and politics. All the above-mentioned discourses are used, together, in the analysis of the poetry. The divisions between separate areas of theory in this first section are thus to some extent arbitrary (Chapter 1 discusses oral poetry and mass/popular culture; Chapter 2 discusses aesthetics and politics).

At the same time, the separation is not entirely arbitrary. Firstly, the main theoretical areas are separated to aid discussion and to provide an overview of the theoretical background that informs the analysis of the poetry. Secondly, the aim in separating the given fields of theory is to provide a 'map' of the research towards this study; the aim thus being to provide a map - both chronological and cognitive, and even if oblique - of how the final reading of the poetry is arrived at.

This map is implicitly plotted along co-ordinates provided by specific aspects of dub-poetry. The most 'visible' and obvious characteristic of dub-poetry is that it is an oral poetry. While this study conceptually avoids absolute distinctions between print and oral literature - such a distinction is not the organising principle in deciding on theoretical frameworks - existing work on oral literature is consulted

for the insights it offers towards a consideration of dub-poetry. To this end, Chapter 1 is devoted to a discussion of the writings of Ong, Finnegan and Zumthor.

Ong's work is discussed mainly to draw attention to limitations in an influential school of thought in the field of oral literature. Subsequently, the critique of Ong's work helps to situate this study politically and methodologically. As will be shown, Ong's theories are highly dichotomous and insufficient as a basis for an analysis of dub-poetry, a genre that sits somewhere between the absolutely literate and the absolutely oral. In Chapter 4, Zoë Wicomb's use of Ong in an analysis of Mbuli's poetry provides an example of the methodological shortcomings inherent in Ong's views. The critique of Ong thus draws attention to certain pitfalls - political and methodological - which this study seeks to avoid.

Finnegan's work - in opposition to Ong's - provides this study with an important political and methodological orientation. Her writings are discussed for this reason. Whereas Ong theorises an oral literature which is radically different to print literature by virtue of the fact that it is oral, Finnegan considers a wide variety of genres contextually and draws parallels to conventions in print literature. Her importance lies in the emphasis she accords to the historical contexts of different forms of oral poetry and how oral poetry varies from context to context. However, her work is limited because it does not consider any genre resembling dub-poetry.

To a certain extent, the first part of Chapter 1 can be seen as a tentative revision of both Ong and Finnegan's work: this chapter draws attention to methodological shortcomings on Ong's part and to under-researched areas in

Finnegan's. Furthermore, Finnegan still concentrates on aspects of oral literature which are seen to distinguish it from print literature, even though she emphasises no essential difference between the two.⁵ While this study implicitly recognises the need to study oral art, it de-emphasises the orality of dub-poetry as a singularly distinguishing aspect to be concentrated on.

Chapter 1 thus provides a cautionary note to perspectives on oral literature which focus on the performance and reception of oral poetry. As will be argued, a reception-based study would be misguided because Johnson and Mbuli distribute their poetry mainly through electronic recording. Their respective audiences are thus highly atomised. Consequently, reception loses critical rigour and value as a tool for an analysis of dub-poetry since the audience is ostensibly similar, in its individuality, to that of print literature. Even considering the audience in the context of performance, a reception-based study will still be problematic. As argued later, the audience should not to be seen as an homogeneous entity. The subsequent fracturing of the audience, as will be argued, also challenges the critical value of reception-studies.

Zumthor's work, inspired by Finnegan's, supplements the lack in hers. His work addresses the question of a 'mediatized' oral poetry (poetry produced for electronic distribution) and suggests a further basis from which to approach it: mass/popular culture. However, while there is general and implicit agreement amongst writers that the terms 'mass culture' and 'popular culture' denote an area of culture clearly distinct from 'high culture', there is little agreement about the

political nature of this 'low culture' - whether it represents the opiate of an Adornian culture industry,⁶ or whether it unambiguously represents a form of progressive, resistance culture.⁷

This disagreement, one can argue, is partly due to a confusion of the two terms. Often, critics use 'mass culture' and 'popular culture' interchangeably and without distinguishing any nuances between the two terms. The second section of Chapter 1 explores this quagmire and attempts to arrive at a working definition of 'popular culture'. In this study, 'popular culture' is then defined primarily - but broadly - as low-cultural forms that are politically progressive, generally in opposition to conservative hegemonies,⁸ and in contradistinction to the ostensibly conservative project behind 'mass culture'.

It must be noted, however, that the terms 'popular culture' and 'mass culture' cannot be wholly separated: they often exist in dialectical tension with each other, containing elements of each other. Thus, Johnson's early recordings can be regarded as significantly mass cultural due to their economic dependence on the corporate record industry. At the same time, however, his poetry (early work included) is overwhelmingly popular and counter-hegemonic in its opposition to some of the dominant, conservative economic and political visions of specifically Thatcherite Britain.

The discussions around mass/popular culture in Chapter 1 explore work by authors associated with the Frankfurt School and the subsequent work from the British school of Cultural Studies. By virtue of this fact, Chapter 2 commences by

considering Marxist perspectives on relationships between aesthetics and politics.

This is so both because of the strong Marxist tradition from which most writing on mass/popular culture finds its impetus, and because of conceptual links between mass/popular cultural studies and the work from the Frankfurt School. These conceptual links are explored in more detail in the relevant chapter.

For the aims of this study, the most important idea from the Frankfurt School writings is that formal aspects of texts signify politically. Benjamin, loosely associated with the school, emerges with the clearest voice concerning the relationship between form and content. Central to the arguments of this study is the conditional tense in which he formulates this relationship: a work of art or literature is only progressive (he uses the term 'revolutionary') if that work is progressive in its formal aspects as well. Specifically, the formal aspects of art enhance the progressive politics if they overcome what Benjamin calls the traditional bourgeois separation between artist and audience.

Implicit in this is the fact that the formal aspects of art may thus either enhance or deflate its explicit political project. This relates to another technique of ideological analysis, that which seeks to uncover the 'Machereyan silences' in texts - what the text cannot or does not speak about.⁹ Based on this, it is argued that an ideological analysis should pay attention not only to the explicit content, but to the formal aspects of the poetry under discussion as well, and consider form as a Machereyan silence.

The notion that form has political meaning is linked to perspectives in socio-

linguistics which read political meanings in dialectal variations of a language. The second part of Chapter 2 is thus an extension of the first part, but focuses on socio-linguistic work. Language is discussed as an example of a formal aspect to be considered in an ideological analysis of dub-poetry. Specifically, the broad Jamaican Creole is discussed in this regard. Close to an understanding of the Jamaican Creole, the example of reggae is also investigated to show how form signifies politically and because music forms part of the analysis of formal aspects of the poetry under discussion. In short, the study investigates a popular art - popular now understood as primarily progressive and as opposed to a politically dubious mass culture - in order to determine the ways in which formal aspects influence the explicit political message.

Chapters 1 and 2 do not provide an historical survey of, for instance, general theories of oral poetry. The survey is rather conceptual and thematic - showing where writers correlate - and it concentrates on the theoretical ideas of use to this study. Furthermore, definitions of conceptual terms around which this study pivots are also discussed, but not in a chapter solely devoted to such definitions. Instead, terms are discussed and defined as they come up. For instance, differences between definitions of popular and mass culture are only discussed after a discussion of theories of oral literature introduces Zumthor's 'mediatized' poetry.

Chapters 3 and 4 are respectively devoted to analyses of Johnson and Mbuli's poetry. The analyses are conducted in terms of the parameters set out in the preceding chapters. Chapter 3 discusses the progressive nature of Johnson's

politics in its specificities so as to provide a resonant background against which formal aspects are read. Since the explicit content of his poetry situates him as counter-hegemonic in Thatcherite Britain, and since his poetic genre is not a high-cultural form, his poetry is considered as popular. His poetry is characterised by a left-wing political vision and, at the same time, formally and thematically close to a community largely excluded from the British economic and political mainstream. The formal aspects of music and language are subsequently considered in order to determine the extent to which they enhance both Johnson's political project and the form of his art as popular art.

One needs to remain cautious of absolutes and one cannot simply consider Johnson's poetry as popular culture in absolute opposition to mass culture. However, as will be argued, one can to a significant degree evaluate the extent to which his art leans towards the popular. His forms - music and language - are close to his intended, primary audience and go far in terms of Benjamin's formulation whereby 'committed' forms should decrease the distance between artist and audience. The forms of Johnson's poetry could be considered as amounting to acts of empowerment: together with the explicit content, they provide listeners with intelligible and applicable terms for making sense of their world. Ultimately, Johnson's poetry exhibits its particular commitment to the struggles of young, working-class, black Britons not only in its themes, but in its convincing deployment of language and music. In the terms of this study's theoretical orientation, Johnson's poetry is thus a good example of popular art.

Similarly as with Johnson's poetry, Chapter 4 interrogates Mbuli's art in terms of both its progressive politics and as a form of popular art. The formal structure of this chapter, however, deviates from that of the previous chapter. Firstly, the author differs from Mbuli's critics by contending that his poetry does not succeed as progressive art. For this reason, a summary of the themes of his work is not provided; this in order not to pre-emptively undermine his critics' views. As partly a redress of critical shortcomings on the part of Mbuli's critics, an initial reading of Mbuli's poetry is done in resonant synergy with his critics' readings in order to show that Mbuli's poetry fails as popular art because his forms - music and language - depreciate the perceived progressive political content.

This initial analysis is a simultaneous analysis of the flaws in Mbuli's critics' arguments. Simultaneous to contesting their views that Mbuli's poetry is progressive or radical, it interrogates the terms and arguments which Mbuli's critics employ. As will be argued, their appraisal of Mbuli's art is misguided because of a lack of knowledge of the field of oral literature studies in general and, more specifically, a lack of knowledge of the specific field of contemporary forms similar to Mbuli's art.

Ultimately, the formal aspects of Mbuli's art signal a general weakness in his art - this weakness can be seen as an 'artifice' or contrivance, since the poetry, in both content and form, remains unconvincing as popular art. This is then read as a symptom and a basis for a further analysis of his poetry. The second phase of the analysis considers Mbuli's poetry relatively independent from his previous critics'

views. Here it will be argued that it is ultimately his broadly populist vision - as for instance evinced in his alignment to the broad anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa in his close alliance with the former United Democratic Front (U.D.F.) - which makes for a poor, undirected art. This, the author believes, results in his art failing as popular art.

It must be stressed that this study is not concerned with arguments about the validity of explicit, progressive political art. Nor is it concerned with arguments setting 'political' and 'non-political' literature in easy opposition to each other in order to elevate the one above the other. Furthermore, it needs to be added, this project does not seek to set oral literature in easy opposition to printed literature. The point of contention, however, is that Mbuli's art perhaps fails as powerful progressive art because of a general vagueness of vision characteristic of populist discourse.

Concluding remarks to this study briefly review the overall aims of this study and sets the two poets' work within the parameters discussed in the first two chapters. To this end, inter-related arguments are drawn together and the two poets' work compared. Suggestions for further research are also made.

Chapter 1: Oral poetry and popular culture

Oral poetry

Present day theories about orality and oral literature can be divided into two broad camps, with Walter J. Ong and Ruth Finnegan as two important examples of the respective camps. Although their theories are both, in certain senses, predicated on the work of Milman Parry in the 1930s and that of his student Albert Lord's The Singer of Tales of 1960, Ong and Finnegan's ideas are widely divergent.¹

Ong's perspective on oral literature and orality in his book, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (1982), is best described as dichotomous. Apart from a simple division of the world into oral and literate societies, Ong distinguishes between societies with 'primary orality' and societies with 'secondary orality' (1982:3, 11). Societies of 'secondary orality' are literate societies which are becoming more and more dependent on oral media for the purposes of communication - in this case electronic media such as television and radio - but where the media still rely on print and writing for their 'existence and functioning' (1982:11).² However, it is especially with his views of societies with 'primary orality' where the problems in Ong's theory show themselves.

Ong does state that primary orality or the purely oral does not exist any more.³ However, he still implies an original oral society - with its accompanying implications of authenticity - as the beginnings of human societies in their evolution

to literacy and higher consciousness: 'Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness' (1982:175; emphases added). A perspective that posits a pure form of human behaviour (linguistic or otherwise) leaves itself open to problems such as absolutism and essentialism. Ong's case is not an exception.

Thus Ong can characterise literacy, on the one hand, as being 'abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory' (1982:8). Orality, on the other hand, is characterised by its close proximity to the 'human lifeworld' and therefore not abstract (1982:49).⁴ Orality is also non-analytic and non-subordinative (1982:37-38). Ong may not be wrong in drawing these conclusions from the particular forms of oral poetry he considers - the orality of ancient Greece appears to be the prototype for his and others' theories. However, problems arise when he assigns these characteristics, ahistorically, to orality in general, while ignoring enormous differences in types of orality.⁵ Thus Ong's essentialism: all oral societies exhibit an oral 'mindset' which he proceeds to categorise as the 'psychodynamics of orality' (1982:37-77). Orality and literacy are then essentially responsible for different 'mindsets'. Ong's reductionism emerges clearly: 'Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions ... are not occasional [in oral cultures]. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself' (1982:34; emphases added). Ong can draw these conclusions only by neglecting the complex mediations operating in different societies which exhibit different 'mindsets'. That is, it is not only different forms of human communication (vis-à-vis orality or literacy) that

mediate or form 'mindsets', but a host of factors including, for example, socio-economic and political issues.⁶

An absolutist dichotomy (oral versus literate with their respective 'mindsets') and the absence of contextually specific considerations of types of orality lead to a further dubious formulation on Ong's part. Because he sees a significant difference between oral and literate 'mindsets', he sees a transition from orality to literacy as an instantaneous event. Although, as mentioned earlier, he does acknowledge that oral societies in any 'pure' form do not exist (any more, to him), he still fails to consider the predominance of a mixture of modes of expression; that these modes - oral and printed - exist side by side.⁷ It is from within this dichotomy, but simultaneously contradicting his evolutionary approach, that Ong sees the transition from orality to literacy as instantaneous: '[I]t takes only a moderate degree of literacy to make a tremendous difference in thought processes' (1982:50).

Beth Daniell levels strong criticism against Ong, whom she caricatures as a 'Great Leap Theorist'. She identifies the dichotomy operating in Ong's theories and, referring to Ong's Orality and Literacy, criticises the 'most important opposition ... that oral folks use coordination, or parataxis, while literate folks use subordination, or hypotaxis' (1986:183). Quoting from ethnographic-linguistic research, Daniell provides examples whereby the parataxis/hypotaxis dichotomy is in fact inverted, thus disproving the 'great leap' notion whereby literacy allows for a drastic change in thought processes (1986:184-185).

More importantly, Daniell exposes the central essentialist assertion of Ong's

theory. Ong's dubious formulation which equates literacy with abstract thinking and whereby literacy brings about a 'great leap' in human cognition is only possible within that theory's dichotomous framework and its ignorance of socio-economic factors. Quoting examples from work done by Suzanne Scollon among the Northern Athabaskans in Canada and Alaska, Keith Basso among the Apache, and Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole with the Vai in Liberia, Daniell shows that the 'Great Leap Theory' cannot account for these oral cultures in terms of the theory's equation of literacy with abstraction. Ong's theory fails because it proffers Ancient Greece as the point of reference (through Havelock's work); it is therefore limited and evidence from other contemporary cultures contradict its assertions; and, it does not view orality contextually (1986:185-187). Thus Daniell can assert, referring to Scribner and Cole's work, that 'the cognitive skills commonly associated with literacy are skills learned, not from literacy itself, but rather from Western styles of schooling' (1986:187). Daniell's summation tellingly implicates Ong:

[The Great Leap theory's] seemingly inevitable dichotomy or continuum between literacy and orality simply fails to explain actual human discourse; ... its assumption that literacy per se causes abstract thinking is unsupported by recent field research; ... its emphasis on the cognitive level neglects crucial social and political issues involved in literacy. What emerges, it seems to me, is a theory not just flawed, but indeed riddled with ethnocentrism and used to justify the status quo.... For example, in his much-published paper 'Literacy and Orality in Our Times,' Ong views the academic problems of a student from an urban ghetto as the result of the 'residual orality' of the young man's home culture, not as the result of on-going political, economic, and racial discrimination in the United States. (1986:189)

Ong starts his section on the 'psychodynamics of orality' with an admission which acts as an implicit disclaimer: '[I]t is possible to generalise somewhat about the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures, that is, of oral cultures untouched by writing' (1982:31; emphases added). Notwithstanding his disclaimer, the implication that oral discourses carry these generalised characteristics, even if the discourses occur alongside and in contact with literacy, remains for him. To Ong, 'many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality' (1982:11; emphases added). One imagines that this is the case until the leap is made to 'pure' literacy.

Even were one to disregard the dubious politics underlying Ong's theory, it still fails to provide a framework through which to look at dub-poetry, a contemporary form that occurs in literate, industrialised, and ostensibly 'Western' societies. The strict dichotomy vis-à-vis orality and literacy projected by this theory precludes many types of contemporary oral literature from its vision. The dichotomy itself is founded on an analysis of mainly one type of orality, snugly fitting into the tropes that go together with the dichotomy: oral equals irrational, pre-industrial, and rural (if not primitive). Ong's homogenising gaze which categorises the characteristics of orality as being, amongst other things, non-analytic and conservative (1982:38-39, 41-42) can in no way incorporate, for instance, the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson. As will be shown, the epithets 'non-analytic' and 'conservative' simply do not apply to Johnson's art.

In terms of this study, Ong's theory and its shortcomings are important

only because they keep one attentive to his limitations. When considering dub-poetry, a simple, strict dichotomy falls short since the poetry inevitably involves a degree of syncretism (which sits uncomfortably with Ong's essentialist claims). Furthermore, especially Johnson's poetry hardly exhibits Ong's oral 'mindset', and it occurs in and as a response to specific socio-economic conditions associated with the typical literate society. In short, Ong's project cannot - or does not want to - deal with forms of contemporary oral poetry, practised as a mass/popular art and which transgress, so to speak, his absolutist boundaries.⁸

From as early as 1973, Finnegan's work anticipates Ong's theory and, in anticipation, critically engages with it. Her most important view, which occurs consistently throughout a number of her writings, is that there is no distinct division and differentiation between oral and written forms of literature; that there is no fundamental (and essential, one might add) difference between the oral and the written, in form nor in its accompanying 'mindset' (1973:112, 122, 134, 135).⁹ Her claim is possible because it is based on wide-ranging research of oral literatures in a variety of contexts and societies, especially as is evidenced in her book, Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context (1977).¹⁰ A number of important issues which stand in direct opposition to Ong's assertions emerge from Finnegan's writings.

To Finnegan, there is no one type of oral society nor a purely oral society. Given that there is no strict dichotomy between the oral and the written, even considering differences in terms of a continuum is problematic. Finnegan shows

that, on such a continuum, the oral extreme is normally considered as the 'non-literate, undifferentiated, tradition-bound' society (1974:53). This, however, is not the typical example of oral culture:

On the contrary the kind of situation in which there is some literacy and written literature but at the same time an absence of mass literacy, accompanied not surprisingly by circulation of literature in oral form, often with at least some interaction with written literature - this situation is probably much more common throughout the world today and perhaps also throughout many centuries of human history, than that of a pure oral setting. (1974:57)

This questions the validity of a general theory of orality and oral literature based on absolute and essentialist notions (such as Ong's), where a reductionist correlation is posited between oral literary forms and a vague, Romantic image of a pre-industrial society.¹¹ The forms of oral literature are quite variegated; characteristics such as performance, composition and means of distribution and transmission vary and are not all applicable to all types of oral literature; defining what counts as oral literature is therefore difficult; and, the similarities that do exist between oral and written literature make it difficult to account for oral literature in terms of its orality as opposed to written literature. All these thus militate against any one general theory of oral literature (Finnegan, 1977:passim).¹²

For example, Finnegan shows through a discussion of only one aspect of literary production, repetition (refrains, choruses and structural parallelism), not only how oral forms vary, but how the category 'repetition' is meaningless as a

defining and distinguishing concept in oral literature (1977:128-132). According to Finnegan, the oral-formulaic school (analyzing oral poetry purely in terms of formulae) sees repetition as the exclusive and definitive characteristic of oral poetry (1977:128). Ong, clearly in line with the oral-formulaic school, states:

Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track. Since redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than sparse linearity. Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing. (1982:40)¹³

To Ong, repetition is a sign which signifies a certain mindset: and this mindset needs repetition in order to function.

Finnegan, on the other hand, does not see repetition as an important basis for differentiating between oral and written literature since repetition is found in written literature as well (1977:130). Furthermore, she does not view repetition in strict, functionalist terms - it is not only or necessarily used to, in Ong's words, 'keep both speaker and listener surely on track'. On the contrary, Finnegan also recognizes the aesthetic use of repetition:

Repetition - whether as parallelism, or in phrases called 'formulae' - has great literary and aesthetic effect.... It may well be that repetition gives a peculiar pleasure and artistic effectiveness in oral poetry, but it is a common device of poetic expression. The 'aesthetics of regularity' can be found in all poetry, oral as well written. (1977:131)

Thus, a careful and contextual consideration of repetition - the most important category in the oral-formulaic attempt to define the orality of oral literature - shows the difficulty in defining oral literature in opposition to and distinct from written literature. By problematising the concept of repetition, one can see the futility in attempting a general, all-encompassing theory of orality.

By avoiding functionalist reductions, Finnegan furthermore avoids the essentialist formulations characteristic of Ong. Given the widely researched evidence offered in Finnegan's study, it is difficult to disagree with her when she says: 'The concept of repetition does not subsume all oral poetry in style or content - except in a sense so wide that the concept becomes meaningless - nor is it excluded in written poetry' (1977:131).¹⁴ Finnegan also draws attention to the overtones implied by a view which sees repetition as a distinguishing characteristic of oral art: primitive, childish and archaic (1977:131-132).

Finnegan furthermore rejects the notion of a 'primary' oral society. This is in consonance with her view that there is no clear-cut distinction between oral and written literature: 'The idea of pure and uncontaminated "oral culture" as the primary reference point for the discussion of oral poetry is a myth' (1977:24). She argues that some degree of interaction between the oral and the written, while being the most common contemporary setting for orality, has also occurred 'throughout many centuries of human history' and as far back as Classical Antiquity (1977:57, 166).¹⁵ But even if Classical Antiquity exhibits an interaction between the oral and the written, one still cannot use it as a 'primary reference point', in the way

that Havelock uses it (Daniell, 1986:183). Daniell argues that '[contemporary] non-literate, or oral, societies are constructed on values quite different from those underlying the ancient Greek society Havelock depicts' (1986:185-186).

Finnegan's primary value lies thus in providing a perspective on oral literature which sidesteps a narrow vision of it as an homogeneous field. Consequently, this perspective allows for the inclusion of types of oral poetry normally disregarded by academic study which, when it does engage with oral forms of literature, only finds oral poetry of a distant past acceptable as a discipline (Finnegan, 1977:5).¹⁶ To Finnegan, oral poetry is not only or 'just something of far away and long ago' (1977:4). In fact, she shows that there is a dire need for in-depth studies on specific types of oral poetries. She implicitly appeals for such studies: 'If this very preliminary introduction leads anyone on to study particular instances of oral poetry in more depth, ... then this book will have served its purpose' (1977:275). More specifically is her implicit plea for a study of contemporary and urban oral art (1977:5).

This present study is a study of a 'particular instance of oral poetry'. In opposition to Ong, this study thus takes its critical approach from Finnegan and Daniell: it neither takes a purely oral community or purely oral literature as an organising principle, and it seeks to avoid generalisations - about oral literature and poetry - that are drawn from **single** contexts. Furthermore, this study does not primarily aim to distinguish a particular form of oral poetry in terms of its differences or similarities to written poetry. Some attention, however, needs to be

paid to performance and audience because the performative elements of oral literature are often emphasized as an important element in any consideration of oral literature.

To Finnegan performance is the most important aspect distinguishing oral poetry from written poetry (1977:133). Zumthor places a similar high value on performance; it is

both an element of [oral poetry] and its principle constitutive element. Performance fully realizes and determines all the other formal elements that have no more than a virtual relationship to the performance. (1990:117; emphasis added)

Initially, it thus appears that one needs to look at the performance aspect of oral literature for any comprehensive account of an oral genre. However, a critical consideration of performance as a distinguishing characteristic of oral poetry is necessary for the purposes of this study. To concentrate solely on the performance of oral literature is bound, the author believes, to produce little of critical value.

Performance as a category for criticism is linked to reception-based theories of literature and this study's caution with performance is based on a critical consideration of reception. Robert Nixon argues that Reception Theory has opened the way to study literature as 'transactional' and that both oral and written literature can be approached with the Reception Theorists' emphasis on 'context, process, affect and performance' (1985:55-56). Thus Nixon, following Reception Theory's concentration on the 'dynamics of aesthetic production' and its insistence that

meaning is 'an event that occurs between the text and the reader' (1985:53, 54), is bound to concentrate on the performance of oral literature as the interface between art and audience which Reception Theory seeks to elucidate. While Reception Theory inaugurates a shift in critical focus by undermining the traditional notions of a stable text (Holub, 1984:148), its focus on reception seems misdirected.

If, in Reception Theory, 'meaning is constituted by the interaction between text and reader', and critical attention focuses on 'the act of reading as process' (Holub, 1984:148 & 84), studies that focus solely on the reception of literature - oral or printed - have to include studies of the audiences and readers of that literature. Two important, inter-related problems, which needs addressing, then occur with regards to the audience. Firstly, in the case of an untraceable audience,¹⁷ critics need to be cautious about the ways in which they construct implied audiences. Secondly, if a clearly defined audience does exist and can be delineated, critics need to be mindful of not assuming the voice of an audience, even if based on research. Care should furthermore be taken such that an existing audience is not thought of as an homogeneous entity.

Wolfgang Iser, an early Reception Theorist, presents an example of the first problem highlighted above. He ultimately posits a reader which 'approximates the ideal of an educated European' (Holub, 1984:99). The fundamental problem is that Iser parades what is ultimately his own reading of a text as reader-produced response to, and sociological criticism of, that text. In other words, an ideal reader

is constructed and the meaning of a work presented as its 'reception' by that reader, while that reader exists only as a critic's theoretical construct (or as the critic self).¹⁸ While readings are historical and no text is monolithic in its construction of meaning, no single critic or reader can open up the full play of meanings of a text. Nor can Iser, reading as an ideal, implied reader, provide the meaning of a work in its entire reception. Critical focus on the reception of art or literature needs to take into account the historical specificities of existing audiences with their own peculiar problematics. This leads to the second problem with studies focusing on reception.

If one is to analyze the ways in which an actual audience 'receives' oral literature (or print literature), one would have to conduct interviews so as not to assume the position and voice of the audience, even if one (as critic) shares historical commonalities with the said group. But while interviewing may appear viable, a sample group does not entirely prevent the critic from reducing the audience to an homogeneous entity. A smaller group of 'representatives' will still be read as the voices of the rest of the audience. Any audience is a group of diverse people and if historical-ideological criticism is the impetus behind studies of reception, every individual of that group's personal history will have to be drawn into the analysis.¹⁹ Terms such as gender, race, class and their inter-related intersections with, for instance, sociology, psychology and politics will have to be considered for every member of that audience. The logistics of such a study - in the case of performance concerts, for instance - make this virtually impossible.

Reception as a critical category subsequently loses rigour and becomes meaningless in that critics have to take as given that every individual perceives/receives the performance/recording differently. Critics therefore have to remain aware and accept that they play an inescapable, interpretive role in mediating the reception of a text.

The overall criticism of a Receptionist focus on performance is thus that one cannot, logistically or theoretically, arrive at a comprehensive account of audience response. Whether, on the one hand, one posits an imaginary audience or whether, on the other hand, one assumes the voice of an existing audience (even if through interviews with 'representatives' of an audience), an analysis based accordingly remains the critic's representation of an audience's responses. The analysis is not that of every member of the audience and cannot simply be seen as a study of a text's reception.

Given these problems, it is perhaps better to concentrate on the point of origin of the artist's work and consider the artist's informing principles. While one can acknowledge common historical experiences amongst the members of what both Johnson and Mbuli respectively constitute as, and perceive to be, their primary audiences, this study does not concentrate on how these audiences respond to the work. While Johnson intends his work for specifically second-generation, working-class, black youth in Britain, one cannot know how every single member of that group who does listen to his poetry responds to it. Furthermore, they are not the only people who listen to and enjoy his poetry.²⁰ Thus, this study rather considers

the audience insofar as the ways in which the respective poets attempt to constitute a primary audience and the impact these processes have on the art.

Performance as a critical category also remains outside the scope of this study. Performance becomes less useful because both Johnson and Mbuli distribute their works mainly by electronic sound-recording. Apart from during occasional 'live' performances, their respective audiences consist mainly of either an individual or a small group listening to the recordings at home or in a dance-hall where the performer is not physically present. In fact, with sound-recordings, each 'performance' is now an exact copy of an original studio performance (while it may slightly differ from the printed version). With no variation in the performance, and with their audience and reception atomised, performance and reception lose their import as critical categories for an investigation of a genre such as dub-poetry.

At this stage, a summary of the above arguments may serve as clarification. Ong's theory, it is argued, represents too narrow a perspective for fruitfully investigating oral poetry, specifically dub-poetry. Finnegan, on the other hand, while providing a more incorporative theory, still feels the need to concentrate on those aspects which makes for the orality of oral literature in terms of its differences from written literature, even though she emphasises no essential differences between the two. For the purposes of this study - seeking to investigate a contemporary, 'low-cultural' art - a possible way out of this is to look at the oral poetry in terms of mass/popular culture. Dub-poetry is, for instance, aware of itself as a form of art distinct from 'high art'.

technology through urbanisation and other cultural processes.²²

‘Predicated on industrialisation’, however, is a loaded phrase, having at its nexus a complex of social, political, cultural, economic and aesthetic factors and processes that cannot sufficiently be covered in a study of this length, let alone in one chapter. Suffice it to say that a poetic genre does not simply come into existence through only one factor. One could think of it in terms of a certain tradition of a genre or style upon which industrialisation has impinged, thus leading to transformations in the genre. The fact that a dub-poet only becomes a poet through dub-poetry, and therefore a poet ‘predicated on industrialisation’, does not mean that the poet has not been influenced by existing genres in poetry. Nor does it mean that the poet has had no access to a tradition of poetical genres with its significant features already well developed.

Consider an example. According to Isidore Okpehwo, certain types of (‘traditional’) African oral poetry have been using musical accompaniment for a long time (1988:10). If, hypothetically, a poet familiar with such a genre uses the idea of the genre (poetry performed with musical accompaniment), but with modern electronic equipment, one can hardly speak of the poetry as ‘predicated on industrialisation’. In a case such as this, industrialisation and technology could act upon an existing corpus of genres, already established, and transform it not necessarily so as to be completely different from the genre it came from, but neither so insignificantly as not to present one with a shift in focus. In other words, industrialisation and the technologising of certain poetical forms could be seen as

adding another significant dimension to the poetry, but not as bringing into existence a wholly new genre.

Zumthor opens the way to study 'mediatized' oral poetry by asserting its presence and validating it as a subject area for academic study. For Ong, and to some extent for Finnegan as well, oral poetry remains something at a comfortable geo-social or temporal remove. If it is not the orality of the Homeric tradition, it is the orality of 'traditional' societies, usually at a remove from Europe and in indigenous (non-European) languages, that is studied. Zumthor, however, does not only appeal for research into the specificities of different forms of contemporary oral poetry, but implicitly points to a way of looking at contemporary oral poetry, specifically, 'mediatized poetry'. Three points of insight from Zumthor, then, are important to the project of this dissertation.

Firstly, Zumthor draws attention to a range of explicit, and generally progressive, political agendas informing different types of contemporary oral poetics in various countries and socio-economic formations. These political genres occur in (nationally) various traditions:

Right after the Second World War and as independence movements matured, an oral poetry of political realities (based on local panegyric or invective traditions) went hand in hand with the progress of emancipation movements, and later electoral campaigns: in Tanzania, in Zambia, in Guinea, in Senegal, in Nigeria; in Kenya, during the Mau Mau insurrection; in the Republic of South Africa, refrains in the vernacular satirize police harassment. (Zumthor, 1990:75)

Implicitly avoiding essentialist formulations, Zumthor also shows that protest poetry²³ is not endemic to any one specific type of socio-economic setting; that it occurs throughout history and in various places. Zumthor traces the protest poem or song, as found today, back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, particularly to the Venice of that time. Its subsequent development is set in the context of industrialisation and urbanisation in Europe (1990:218).

Secondly thus, a 'mediatized poetry' is not a new phenomenon. Zumthor states: 'The invention of the phonograph, ..., led Apollinaire and some of the first Cubists to use this instrument in a creative way' (1990:130). Poets such as Apollinaire, Céline and Joyce exploited the potential of the phonograph to produce recorded readings as a means of publication. With this, Zumthor states, the 'authority of [voice] would emerge from recording rather than writing' (1990:130). Toward the mid-twentieth century, this form of distribution was firmly established:

In France the magazine-record OU would soon start publication; in Germany, Niklaus Einhorn was founding the S-Press Tonband, publishing reel-to-reel tapes and cassettes of poets such as Cage, Heidsteck, and McIow (...). In São Paulo, the Afro-Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso created a vocal drama in a marginally articulate language from a 'concrete' text by Augusto de Campos. In France and in Germany, since the 1950s, the old need to make language burst apart has been at work both on graphics and sounds of a poetry called spatial. In the United States in the 1970s, Talkings by Rothenberg and poems in the anthology Open Poetry reorallized the discourse of writing, situating the 'text' in the domain of coagulating vocal speech, where it is reclaimed by a radical dialogism (in the Bakhtinian sense of the word): that of an emergent language, in the energy of the event and the process that produced it there (...). (Zumthor, 1990:130-131)²⁴

A similar development occurred in early, black, urban communities of South Africa. According to David Coplan, the wide popularity, by the late 1920s, of the hand-wound gramophone (the 'Sophiatown Ma-Windham'), led to recordings of izibongo, a traditional, vernacular, oral poetry (1978:4).

The 'publication' of poetry through electronic recording is thus not a new phenomenon, neither has it been a fleeting one. What Zumthor is not aware of is dub-poetry, a genre conceptualised from the start as being produced for such 'mediatization'.²⁵ Instead of using older, established forms of poetry and simply making electronic recordings of readings, dub-poetry is self-consciously produced for an electronic media. In other words, technology is fused with the poetry. Instead of having a corpus of poetry on the one hand, and electronic media on the other, and then bringing them together, dub-poetry predicates itself in a fusion of poetry and mediat (to use Zumthor's term). In ways more significant than content, a dub-poet becomes a poet of the technological age.

Thirdly, it is particularly important that Zumthor reads a political meaning in the mere fact that some poetry is oral. In general, he sees the oral as a default space for the politically marginalised to voice themselves in. To him, 'oral poetry constitutes, for cultural groups, a field of experimentation, making mastery of the world possible' (1990:129). This has deeper political implications. 'If the dominant class hoards the techniques of writing', says Zumthor, 'all that which belongs to orality becomes virtually the object of repression, and the oral poets become, rightly or wrongly, the spokespersons of the oppressed' (1990:175). It is thus

almost inevitable that a group, barred from entry into mainstream society by being withheld from full literacy, will take recourse to an oral discourse to make 'mastery of the world possible'. Within the context of a politically induced illiteracy, recourse to the oral - even if for 'entertainment' and no matter how much one wants to depoliticise such a concept - automatically becomes politically significant.

Zumthor's statement needs further qualification though. He firstly makes the mistake of seeing all oral poetry as a 'weapon' of the oppressed, neglecting the fact that oral poetry, like any discursive practice, can be co-opted and used to further the hegemonic aims of a dominant class. One should rather see oral poetry as having the potential of a progressive protest form - a potential more easily realised than with written poetry. Zumthor's socio-economic context is then significant: wide-ranging illiteracy can be seen as the result of certain political practices enhancing the hegemonic aims of a dominant (literate) class. In the face of this, an oral poet with an explicit political agenda opposing that hegemony can then be considered as a 'spokesperson of the oppressed'.

An oral poet, however, is not a 'spokesperson of the oppressed' simply by virtue of being an oral poet. A poet's political agenda may play an important - even overriding - role in deciding on an oral or written medium. One could say, for instance, that if a poet's political agenda is in alliance with a group disallowed full entry into literacy, it would be politically more significant and compelling if that poet chose the oral medium. However - to qualify Zumthor's statement - one cannot assume that oral poetry necessarily implies progressive poetry. Furthermore,

one should not exclude printed poetry as a medium of protest - or run the risk of seeing these issues in exclusive and essentialist terms.

This shortcoming of Zumthor - not qualifying what he means by orality as the voice of the oppressed - points to another inconsistency. While he implicitly points towards forms of politically progressive oral poetry, he simultaneously draws 'mediatized orality' into the ambit of an Adornian culture industry. Zumthor neglects to critically consider either 'mass culture' or 'popular culture' as distinct concepts. Although he implicitly draws attention to oral poetry as mass/popular art, his study falls short since it does not consider the popular as a contested concept, nor does it provide a well-developed definition of the popular. That Zumthor has the popular in mind when he refers to the political uses to which oral poetry is put, is clear from the discussions above. However, he conflates the popular with mass culture and is not able to provide a space for studying 'mediatized poetry' as a popular art, beyond the fact that he legitimates and appeals for studies of oral art. A discussion of what is meant by 'popular culture' - how it is conflated with or differentiated from 'mass culture' - will thus prove useful in providing a perspective on a 'mediatized poetry' such as dub-poetry.

Alan Swingewood sees the differentiation between mass culture and popular culture in terms of a political attitude informing the observer's gaze. According to him, mass culture and popular culture refer to the same entity: the former phrase indicates a negative view of 'low culture' on the part of the critic, seeing it in terms of a decline of standards, with 'high culture' as the yardstick. The latter - popular

culture - indicates a positive and optimistic view, a 'progressive evolutionist approach' which does not idealise the past, but looks to the future (1977:94). It is my contention that there are significant differences between mass and popular culture, differences which are not solely dependent on one's perspective.

Swingewood tries to circumvent this distinction, as his 'oxymoron', 'mass-produced popular culture', indicates:

Women's romantic fiction, comics and other products of mass-produced popular culture, if analyzed solely from the point of view of consumption, are commodities whose function is one of entertainment, information and, more ambiguously, social control. (1977:113)

While he points to a feature which is normally ascribed to mass culture - 'social control' - his uncomplicated identification of it as 'mass-produced popular culture' ignores a complex process negotiated in the massification of popular culture. The mass production of popular art does not simply or necessarily turn it into mass culture.

Admittedly, one has to guard against seeing these two concepts in absolute terms, with mass culture on the one side and popular culture on the other. They do contain elements of each other and popular art forms are often financed and distributed by the same institutions as mass culture. However, there is little doubt that a primary rationale behind mass culture emanates from big business. Within this context, 'social control' seems to be the aim and feature of mass culture. For instance, Thomas Cushman shows that, with the diffusion of reggae in America and

its subsequent co-optation by big business, the music was turned into a commodity, routinised; and this process turned

the aesthetically articulated critique of modernity by underclass Jamaican blacks into a commodity which satisfied the standards of economic rationality of the culture industries which were part of the more general system of bureaucratic domination which the codes opposed in their original expression. (1991:37-38)

The present aim is to define the source (popular culture) and end product (mass culture) of such routinisation as two related but simultaneously distinct entities.²⁶

Firstly, Raymond Williams attempts to deal with the ambiguous meanings of the term 'mass' by looking at it in composition with other words. So, 'mass organizations' can belong to a political perspective (in Williams's words, 'an active revolutionary tradition') wholly opposite to the one informing 'mass psychology'.

Furthermore,

Mass society and massification (usually with strong reference to the mass media) are seen as modes of disarming or incorporating the working class, the proletariat, the masses: that is to say, they are new modes of alienation and control, which prevent and are designed to prevent the development of an authentic popular consciousness. (1976:158-163; double emphases added)

Following on from Williams, it is proposed that what Swingewood singles out as commodities of social control be termed 'mass culture', rather than 'mass-produced popular culture'.

At the same time, popular culture (not high culture, but also not mass culture) is not completely secure from co-optation by big business. One modality of 'popular' opens it up to the primary aims of big business corporations: the popular is seen as, amongst other things, appealing to a wide audience (Barbu, 1976:40).²⁷ For the purposes of business, this indicates favourable statistics and easily translates into profits. David Coplan's overview of the economic history of the 'Sophiatown Ma-Windham' provides a good example of how popular art is co-opted by big business, disarmed and massified (1978 and 1979:passim.).²⁸ With the help of Coplan's study, one can discern an important difference between mass culture and popular culture.

As Coplan shows in his discussion of the Sophiatown Ma-Windham, the entrance of white, big-business interests in black, working-class cultural production involved an implicit political agenda as well as a concomitant aesthetic one. Popular arts were thus co-opted with the result that they became depoliticised and were required to subscribe to the aesthetic dictates of the white producers (1978 and 1979:passim.). Even if the popular arts were not overtly political, Coplan discerns the political agenda of big business in the exclusive marketing of such 'non-political' forms: through the marketing of 'safe' popular arts, the big business simultaneously wins political capital with popular audiences and avoids confrontation with the State. Coplan thus states:

The White commercial interests who finance and supervise Black producers wish to sell the maximum amount of cultural goods, while

avoiding social or political controversy, to an African population simmering with frustration and discontent. (1979:10)

Coplan goes further to describe the process, and one can take it as an implicit definition of 'mass culture':

The urban South African situation, which has important American parallels, illustrates what happens when the means of production and distribution of expressive culture pass out of the community of origin and into the hands of interests antagonistic to, or at least separate from, the social development of that community. (1979:10)

However, popular artists can and do resist such co-optation. The important point, though, is that Coplan implicitly provides a view of popular culture which gives a significant weighting to political elements of the term. Although Coplan does not spell it out, it is clear that some of this political meaning of the popular is dependent on its source-community. Furthermore, one can infer that mass culture has, as its origin, mainly big business and the interests of capital behind it - Swingewood's 'social control'.

If the popular indicates its relationship with a particular community or group of people - as Coplan implies - it does not automatically follow that cultural products from that group are popular. While Iain Chambers sees the popular in a similar way - in relationship to a particular group of people - he hints at an additional meaning of the popular. He sees the popular as emergent from 'subordinate cultures, from the inventive edges of consensus, from the previously

ignored and suppressed' (1986:61). If the popular emanates from the 'edges of consensus', it automatically assumes a political character, whether overt or covert. It is this political 'tendency' that a number of writers have emphasised and which this study seeks to emphasise. This should not be regarded as a prescriptive move, but rather as a way of de-emphasising the statistical definition of the popular, as well as clearing its confusion with 'mass culture'.

This political 'tendency' is necessarily narrowly defined and in opposition to that of 'mass culture'. A number of writers have thus linked a general progressive politics to the popular. To Bertoldt Brecht, for instance, popular art is 'art for the broad masses of the people, for the many oppressed by the few' (1964:108). For Antonio Gramsci,

what distinguishes a popular song within the context of a nation and its culture is neither its artistic aspect nor its historical origin, but the way in which it conceives the world and life, in contrast with official society. (1985:195)²⁹

Andrew Ross has a less reductionist formulation, but nevertheless emphasises the political nature of popular art:

[W]hat counts for Gramsci is that the song is identified as popular because it contains a conception of the world that contrasts with what he calls the 'official' conception of the world at any one time, and is therefore identified as representing the people's conception of the world. But this conception of the world does not correspond directly to any group that could be identified as the 'people', no more than it corresponds to anything like a purely 'oppositional' point of view. In

short, we cannot attribute any purity of political expression to popular culture, although we can locate its power to identify ideas and desires that are relatively opposed, alongside those that are clearly complicit, to official culture. (1989:10)³⁰

What Ross shows is that there are no clear distinctions between mass and popular culture. This possibly also explains the confusion between mass culture and popular culture. Ross nevertheless distinguishes popular culture from mass culture (that which is 'clearly complicit' with official culture). Note too that he does not unproblematically ascribe the popular to a specific group of people. Not all art from the working-class is, for instance, automatically revolutionary or progressive. Furthermore, while there are clear indications of its political affinities, popular art is never univocal about those affinities. This can be linked to Chambers's idea that the popular springs from the 'edges of consensus' (read as meaning both marginalised by and in opposition to dominant discourses). One can expect the popular to be multi-vocal in its opposition to the univocality of official, conservative, establishment culture.

One may strain Chambers's metaphor further: if the popular emerges from the edges of consensus, it necessarily carries 'remnants' of those edges, it is necessarily 'frayed'. Reading a visual image into Chambers's metaphor leads one to consider the form of the popular. If the political content of the popular is to some extent dependent on its situation on the edges of consensus, this will also determine its forms. The official culture and politics that marginalise and thereby necessitate the popular, also predicates a form on the edges of consensus. An oral poetry, by

people disallowed, or allowed limited, access to literacy and other sources/ discourses of power, and in opposition to a dominant, literate hegemony, would be an example of such a popular art.

Barber identifies syncretism as an important feature of popular arts, existing in a 'kind of no-man's-land (sic.) between [indigenous-traditional and European forms], selecting and combining elements from each other for their own purpose' (1987a:12). She goes on to say:

The syncretism of their (the new urban mass) art, drawing as it did on both indigenous (hinterland) and imported (metropolitan) elements was therefore an expression and a negotiation of their real social position at the point of articulation of two worlds. (1987a:14)

In addition, the popular is marked by 'indefiniteness', 'fluidity and lack of boundaries' (1987a:19). What Barber is pointing to in popular art is an ambiguity or multi-valence (an 'articulation of two worlds'). Zumthor too hints at this in his reference to a characteristic Bakhtinian dialogism in 'mediatized' arts (1990:131). This lack of a monologic determinacy in popular culture, the author believes, is all-pervasive. In its contents and forms, in the affinities between these two categories, and in the sources it can potentially draw on, the indeterminacy of the popular shows through.

Barber tries overcoming this characteristic by introducing categories and subcategories to popular arts (1987a:7 and 24-27 respectively), subsequently 'opening the field' once again. At the same time, acknowledging the heterogeneity

of popular arts, she appeals for detailed studies of particular instances of popular art since '[w]e are not yet at the stage where we can talk confidently about the characteristic aesthetic features of African popular art as a whole' (1987a:43). One doubts whether the latter project is realisable. While different forms and examples of popular art, politically defined, may have broadly similar agendas, the ways in which they engage with the agendas may differ from example to example, due to differing historical and socio-economic contexts. This makes an aesthetic of popular arts 'on the whole' difficult to define.

Despite this heterogeneity, however, one broad, common formal characteristic emerges, loosely linked to the similarity of political agendas informing popular art. Barber refers to work done on British music-hall culture by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel and states that the popular is 'defined by the relationship between the performers and audience'. Specifically, '[t]he art of the music hall is to dissolve the distance between performer and crowd by establishing a relationship of intimacy and immediate response' (1987a:47).

Barber's formulation clearly echoes Benjamin's concept of the 'committed' artist. To Benjamin, the revolutionary artist is the one who, in addition to revolutionary themes, uses revolutionary forms:

If, then, ... the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency, we can now affirm more precisely that this literary tendency may consist in a progressive development of literary technique, or in a regressive one. (1973:88)

In addition to calling for revolutionising the 'artistic mode of production', Benjamin calls for a fusion of content and form. As Eagleton states, it 'is not just a question of pushing a revolutionary "message" through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves' (1976:62). Amongst other things, this could well be taken to mean the artistic form:

'Commitment' is more than just a matter of presenting correct political opinions in one's art; it reveals itself in how far the artist reconstructs the artistic forms at his (sic.) disposal, turning authors, readers and spectators into collaborators. (Eagleton, 1976:62)

In the context of Benjamin's work, 'commitment' would mean a faithfulness to a narrowly defined, Marxist-inspired, communist or socialist ethic. This study intends a broader meaning of 'commitment': while necessarily counter-hegemonic to dominant, conservative visions, 'commitment' can include a range of general, progressive politics, the specificities of which can vary according to differences of region, race, and gender, for example. In other words, 'committed art' would be art informed by its particular, historically dependent, progressive, counter-hegemonic struggle. This is thus a generalisation from Benjamin's concept of the 'committed artist'.

At the same time, one needs to shift the emphasis of Benjamin's demand. It is not a demand for revolutionary, 'politically correct' art per se; instead, it is a demand that art which proffers itself as 'politically correct', be subject to formal scrutiny and that its forms echo or enhance its explicit progressive agenda. One

could view this as a formal demand that progressive art places upon itself.

In general, Benjamin's formulation allows one to see a relationship between the content and form of artistic production. For the purposes of this study, it can be reformulated so that the forms which popular art uses or assumes must have some relation to its ideological project. As Barber observes, '[i]t is clear ... that musical form can speak as loudly as words in expressing social and political consciousness' (1987a:59; emphasis added).

If one understands the popular as having some form of conscientisation as its project, it is important for that conscientisation not to be patronising. In other words, such conscientisation should take place through the empowerment of the audience to make sense of the world in applicable and intelligent terms. In this regard, one can think of the dissolution of the barriers between artist and audience in popular art as attempts at such empowerment. By extension, and important for the aims of this study, the forms of popular artistic expression must at least approximate acts of empowerment.

Before concluding this chapter, a final point from Barber needs to be highlighted. She draws attention to the importance of Machereyan silences and how they can provide meanings which may otherwise go unnoticed (1987a:63-64, 68). Barber connects these gaps to an ambiguity which she reveals through a reading of a Nigerian television comedy series (1987a:68). Interestingly, Barber reserves her Machereyan reading for works with ostensibly State-hegemonic projects or works which 'appear most definite, closed, and impervious' (1987a:63). However, the

popular - noted by Barber for its ambiguity - is assumed to lack Machereyan silences and is not subjected to the same reading. It should be stressed, though, that the popular, because it does not 'appear most definite, closed, and impervious', should also be read in a similar way; that such a reading would prove fruitful. In other words, the ambiguities noted as characteristic to the popular does not mean that it too does not have Machereyan silences which can subvert its ideological project. The broadly progressive nature of the popular does thus not exempt it from a similar kind of ideological analysis.

In conclusion, a brief summary will serve to reiterate the direction of this study. Popular culture has been defined in broad political terms - distinguishing it from mass culture - as being generally counter-hegemonic to dominant, conservative ideologies and from the perspective of a marginalised or oppressed group. This can be either overt or covert since the political nature of popular culture lies in the fact that, coming from the 'edges of consensus', the mere expression of that voice assumes a political dimension. In modern, urban settings, its syncretism especially finds expression in its collision and collusion with mass culture and technology. Zumthor's 'mediatized poetry' is a case in point.

One of the aims of this study is to look at dub-poetry as an example of modern, urban, popular art. That this form of poetry is an example of popular art is clear: it is not considered to be 'high culture' and it is, generally, explicitly political and counter-hegemonic within a conservative, oppressive socio-economic context. Both Johnson and Mbuli are, for instance, seen as 'people's poets'. Furthermore,

dub-poetry is considered as popular because its emergence as an artistic form is closely tied to technology - Zumthor's 'mediatized poetry' - while it resists massification.³¹ In addition, it is an attempted voice of a silenced group.

Since this poetry is explicit about its political affinities, this study is particularly interested in the formal characteristics of the poetry, specifically as expressed in language and music, and how these collude with the explicit content of the poetry. Moreover, since form and content are closely related, this study seeks to uncover the meaning's underlying form, in the Machereyan silences of form and language. The relationship of artistic form to its meaning is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Aesthetics and politics

Language, for Bakhtin, is collective instrument, not a prisonhouse but an arena for struggle.

- Stam (1988:123)

The word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence.

- Vološinov (1986:13)

When Chirikure Chirikure, an oral poet from Zimbabwe, says: 'performances can go a long way in bridging the gap between the Poet and the intended audience' (1991:1), he is pointing towards an intricate web involving aesthetics, politics,¹ language and audience. Chirikure's formulation is furthermore reminiscent of Benjamin's notion of a 'committed form' which dissolves the traditional (bourgeois) boundary between artist and audience (Benjamin, 1973:86-88). Furthermore, it implicitly points to the manner in which the intended audience governs, in politically significant ways, the choice of the artistic form to be utilised by the poet. A similar point is reiterated by Eagleton (1976:62) and Barber (1987a:59). The following discussion will attempt to show the insistently inseparability of form, politics, language and audience - how they constantly inform and act upon each other.

One cannot emphasise these relationships enough. Indeed, so important and pervasive are they that any discussion of dub-poetry which ignores the connections between the above categories cannot claim to be a comprehensive description of the genre. This is so because the term 'dub-poetry' invokes a juncture of narratives and

histories about people, social identities, economics, politics, technology and language. However, as inseparable as these mentioned categories are, they need to be abstracted from their relationships for the aims of discussion. It is perhaps only in this unravelling that one can show the inter-connectedness of the constituent parts.

Firstly, therefore, the following discussion will briefly trace the history of mainly Marxist debates around the dialectical relationship between form and content, or what Martin Trump calls 'the content of the form' (1990:161). This will be followed by a discussion of the relationship of language to the debate around form and content, as this study is partly concerned with language as a formal aspect of literature. This chapter thus considers the ways in which dub-poetry, in terms of formal aspects, can be read or analyzed as a popular cultural form (remembering the political weighting ascribed to popular culture in the previous chapter). Ultimately, the concern is whether or not formal characteristics - primarily language, but also music - of the respective poets' work meet the political demands of their art.

Aesthetics and Politics

The relationship between aesthetics and politics has been remarked upon, with various degrees of assertion and various depths of delineation, by a large number of academics working in an equally various array of fields and theoretical

backgrounds.² The concept of this inter-connectedness, whether theorised or merely asserted, pervades thinking about cultural practices, whether these practices are imaged as literary texts or discursive practices in a Foucaultian sense.³ This way of thinking about cultural formations is mostly associated with academics working within a Marxist paradigm, especially the work that has emanated, since about the 1960s, from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham and academics associated with the centre.⁴

In the Marxist literary-critical paradigm, a sustained debate around the relationship between aesthetics and politics can be traced to the early- to middle-twentieth century. While Franz Mehring, a second-generation Marxist, sought to historicise aesthetic taste as early as the 1880s,⁵ and Béla Balázs addressed the problematic of form during the 1920s,⁶ it was not until the work of people like Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno and Lukács that theorizing around content and form took on the form of a sustained investigation. Maynard Solomon places this 'qualitative advance in Marxist aesthetic theory' in the 1930s (1973:xiii-xiv), while Eugene Lunn broadens the period to between the 1920s and 1950s with the work only becoming widely known during the 1950s (1982:4-5). Whatever the specificities - thematically and historically - of the various debates, and irrespective of whether there were similar debates happening elsewhere, these debates became more readily available, in part, to English-speaking critics only with the publication of Aesthetics and Politics in the 1970s.

By now, the debate between Lukács and Brecht is well-known. Lukács's

insistence on Realism as the only genre that could represent 'reality as it truly is' is strongly criticised by Brecht.⁷ Brecht's criticism of Lukács revolves around the semantic meaning or definition of the term 'realism'. In the process, Brecht wrests the term from its historically specific description of a particular novelistic form - that is, he uses a lower-case 'r' in 'realism' (Aesthetics and Politics, 81-82). In other words, Brecht returns 'realism' to the 'everyday', to its common meaning. While Brecht does not dispute Lukács's definition of nineteenth century Realism, he objects to Lukács offering it as a model of revolutionary poetics at the exclusion of the 'potential realist possibilities in modern art' (Lunn, 1982:86). Brecht's criticism of Lukács may be seen as fastidious and may pivot around the disingenuous semantic manipulation of the word 'realism', but it does draw attention to the historical and political nature of seemingly 'merely formal' literary criteria; in this specific instance, the criteria of Realism. More importantly for the aims of this thesis is Brecht's political ascription of form when he says:

[Realism], too, must first be cleansed before use, for it is an old concept, much used by many people for many ends....; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents. Even the realistic mode of writing, ..., bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details. (Aesthetics and Politics, 1977:81; emphases added)

A literary form is thus not a neutral, value-free vehicle, but is tied to specific political meanings.

Brecht, however, is not careful to explain what he means by forms not being

patents. Nor is he precise in showing or describing the processes by which form takes on political meanings; or rather how, precisely, form is imbricated as a political signifier. While his views thus open up the political significance of form as a contested terrain - an important debate - Brecht's formulations set a trend of cursory reference to the relationship between form and content.

Peter Horn, for instance, in a talk insisting on the need for political poetry, implicitly asserts this relationship when he says:

Legitimacy is lent to the system not only by the content of the speeches of the powerful, but by the very structure of the language which makes the present system appear to be 'natural' and the speech of the powerful the only way one can reasonably speak. In this sense politics has to do with the way how we follow on from one sentence to the next. (1992:2; emphases added)

Elsewhere, however, Horn patently ignores the Brechtian claim that 'literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents' and acclaims Mbuli's use of poetic forms that come from African revivalist church rituals and traditional praise poetry. In Horn's view of Mbuli, the poetic forms are implicitly seen as ahistorical: they unproblematically transcend their historical contexts. Mbuli's poetic forms, says Horn, 'carry a message which - ... - is neither revivalist nor traditional' (1991:4-5). Admittedly, his insistence on the politics of form comes later than his acclamation of Mbuli, but the latter effectively dismisses Horn's own assertion of the fundamental and reciprocal relationship between form and content. At the opportunity of analyzing the confluence of form and content, Horn fails to detail the

ways in which Mbuli, through appropriation of forms, supposedly transcends revivalist and traditional connotations.

Benjamin, following on from Brecht (Lunn, 1982:277), is one of the early Marxists to theorise the relationship between form and content to a significant extent. When Benjamin poses the question as to what a work of art's position is within the relations of production, he is implicitly asking questions about its forms or its formal aspects. Benjamin specifically focuses on literary form as the product of an individual author; as part of, but still distinct from, the larger sociological issues (such as publication and distribution) of literary production: 'This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary technique' (1973:87).

Discussing Benjamin, Eagleton identifies three aspects of form: form is historically determined, it is (subsequently) inscribed in ideology and form 'embodies a specific set of relations between author and audience' (1976:26). It is in terms of this 'specific set of relations' that Benjamin defines the revolutionary artist. To him, the revolutionary artist 'creates new social relations between artist and audience' (Eagleton, 1976:61).

Benjamin's putative revolutionary artist does not express a revolutionary theme in content only, but also in terms of form (1973:88). It is in terms of or through form that 'authors, readers and spectators [are turned] into collaborators' (Eagleton, 1976:62). Commitment to a progressive politics is thus, to once again quote Eagleton, 'not just a question of pushing a revolutionary "message" through

existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves' (1976:62).

One can abstract a generalisation from Benjamin's argument. If 'revolutionary theme' is substituted by 'content', then the terms of the argument change: content then makes specific demands on form, these demands being dependent on the specificities of the content and relative to socio-literary contexts. From this generalisation one can thus work back and look at specific texts in terms of this relationship between content and form: in short, one can see to what extent the form of a text amplifies or deflates the explicit content.

Central to this argument is the idea that a revolutionary theme demands a revolutionary form and that a revolutionary form demands a kind of democratisation of the author-audience relationship, in such a way that audiences become co-producers in the production of meaning. Here, one has to guard against thinking of 'co-producers' in any absolute sense, since the audience cannot be figured as an homogeneous entity which will necessarily interact with the author or text to produce meaning. Even with oral performance, the members of an audience are individuals and, while some may verbally respond to the performance and potentially alter what a performer might have intended, others may not.⁸ 'Co-production' should thus be read metaphorically and as a matter of degree; while no text or meaning is absolutely produced by the reader or audience, there are senses in which author and audience move towards each other as co-producers. The extent to which a listener is empowered by an oral performance, for instance, can be read as such co-production, especially with politically progressive literature which seeks

to address the problems of disempowered communities. Thus to Benjamin, a revolutionary form (remembering here that 'revolutionary' has to be qualified in relation to specific historical and social contexts) dissolves the traditional, bourgeois distinction and separation between author and audience. At the least, it narrows the gap between them (Benjamin, 1973:90).

The terms of Benjamin's argument, however, remain deterministic, invaluable as his contribution to the debate is. He mainly fails to show a reciprocal relationship between form and content; instead, he suggests a pre-existent meaning which merely needs a vehicular, revolutionary form. This is only a slight variation of what Brecht means when he warns against the unproblematic use of traditional forms, simply supplying them with a revolutionary content. One needs to thus problematise the relationship between form and content sufficiently in order to show their reciprocal inter-dependence. While for ease of discussion one may talk about the 'meaning of form' or the 'meaning of the content', it is important to remember that meaning is produced, simultaneously, through both the form and content. So imbricated are the two terms - form and content - that, it can be argued, they mutually underwrite each other.

Discussing historical narrative, Hayden White problematises the relationship between content and form sufficiently to show their complicity in an ideological project (1984).⁹ To White, narrative is 'an apparatus for the production of meaning' and not simply 'a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent'. The "content" of the discourse consists as much of its form as

it does of whatever information might be extracted from a reading of it' (1984:19).¹⁰ Furthermore, no sequence of events are, according to White, intrinsically tragic or comic, but it is the 'choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning' (1984:20).

In an earlier essay, White traces the development of historical writing to show that the forms of the writing were predicated on certain worldviews or ideologies (1980:5-27). To White, form is both predicated by a 'reality' and gives meaning to that 'reality'. By extension, the ideological nature of form is magnified since form is historically determined and determining. If one incorporates content into this dynamic, form, together with content, is constituted by and simultaneously constitutes a reality which it professes to only describe. Although White refers specifically to the forms of historical narrative, a generalisation from his argument can be made: form is not only political in terms of whether it is in concord with the content of a text or discursive practice, but it is or can be, on its own, a political signifier, being borne by and bearing a particular reality.

One has to be careful, however, and not image any of these relationships in deterministic ways. White, for instance, exhibits a disregard for human agency. He does not consider that form, since it enters the realm of ideology, enters a realm consisting of human contestation. In other words, White ignores the fact that form is a site where ideological contestation manifests itself. His formulation, whereby form effectively 'imposes' meaning, is thus unsatisfactory and disallows for contestation to take place within the realm of form, dependent on specific social

contexts. Furthermore, White's view does not allow for form, being in a one-to-one relationship with reality and meaning in his formulation, to be itself an agent or an agitator of contestation.

Form, for instance, becomes such an agent through the ways in which it can and does subvert the explicit ideological projects of a text. What this augurs for the 'ideological message' of a text - and not the explicit content only - is that any ideological message is produced (to reiterate this point) dialectically by form and content.

The importance of considering formal aspects of literary production in an ideological analysis becomes greater when one considers it in relation to a reading of Machereyan silences. Janet Wolff ties such a reading of Machereyan silences to the form of works of art, an important point for the purposes of this study. To her, form is important and it is:

necessary to look beyond [art's] explicit, or implicit, political content, and to investigate its particular use of aesthetic conventions, and its position in relation to other works of art This enables us to recognise the ways in which certain things - ideas, values, events - are not contained in the text. The conventions of literary and artistic production may disallow certain statements. Exposing these limitations in the texts ... is an important part of revealing the ideology which lies behind the text and speaks through it. (1981:60)

Wolff thus suggests that the critic look not only to the Machereyan silences in the content, but also at the formal silences of a text or work of art; the gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions generated by formal aspects of art.

Once the analysis of form can be linked to include a reading of Machereyan silences, the importance of looking at form in any ideological analysis of cultural production becomes exigent. In this regard, it is interesting to note a trend in ideological analyses based on a reading of Machereyan silences. As mentioned earlier (pp.46-47 above), a gap emerges in exactly such critical projects which seek to read texts in terms of their silences: there is a tendency to only read texts with ostensibly conservative, establishment agendas complicit with conservative State-hegemony; this to show how silences subvert and open contestable space within those texts.

For instance, Barber analyzes a Nigerian television comedy series, Ile-iwosun, as an example of a reading of Machereyan silences (1987a:68). A text which does not posit itself as progressive is thus read to reveal the spaces where resistance to the perceived conservatism of the text can be placed; or, where the perceived conservatism is subverted by the text itself. To this author's knowledge, it is seldom that this analytic technique is applied to art of a conspicuous progressive nature. Hardly any critics from broadly progressive backgrounds have applied symptomatic readings to texts that present themselves as politically progressive, in order to reveal possible gaps that may subvert an explicit progressive project.

Martin Trump recognizes this gap regarding critics' silence about silences in some ostensibly progressive South African literature. While expressing the importance and relevance of 'the content of form' (1990:161), he says:

In looking closely at the nature of the counterhegemonic discourse given representation through the fiction, we need to bear in mind that, as the hegemonic discourse can be deconstructed and problematized, so too the counterhegemonic discourse itself is not immune from this kind of analysis. (1990:163; emphases added)

Trump is then interested in the ways in which 'black fiction can be de-mythologized' (1990:163; emphases added). Referring to examples from black South African fiction of the late 1960s to the early mid-1980s, Trump is concerned with the ways in which the fiction, as counter-hegemonic discourses in South Africa, creates mythologies that counter the racist mythologies of the apartheid-hegemony. Since for him this 'mythologizing process itself is critically bound up with the political transformations implicit in the counterhegemonic discourse' (1990:163), it becomes politically important to reveal silences that detract from the apparent progressive bent of these discourses. It is thus not the myth per se that Trump seeks to critique, but the process of its construction and what that process of construction does not reveal.

Trump notes two examples in this regard. Firstly, he mentions the way in which mostly petit-bourgeois writers unproblematically identified with a black working-class (1990:165). The problem here is that writers simply assumed the

voice of a community equally unproblematically homogenised as ‘oppressed people’. Secondly, there is the almost total silence in the literature about conflicts and divergences amongst and between the different groups in opposition to apartheid.¹¹ The process by which an anti-apartheid myth is constructed is thus silent about a range of differences - notably along class and ideological lines. While the need for such a counter-myth is important, the projection of a unitary, homogeneous opposition to apartheid can easily lead to exclusionary visions whereby anyone who does not fit the ethos of the favoured vision may be easily and simplistically accused of supporting the apartheid myth.

Trump identifies these ideological gaps not only in the literature, but in its criticism as well - this is implicit when he refers to the ‘need to bear in mind that ... counterhegemonic discourse itself is not immune from this kind of analysis’ (1990:163; emphasis added). Although he does not mainly look at formal aspects of the literature, he does mention the relationship between form and content. This study thus finds a cue in three ideas from Trump. Firstly, like Trump, it is interested in (Machereyan) silences. Secondly, it is interested in those silences enshrined in formal aspects. Thirdly, it is interested to see how such silences contradict, specifically with the poetry of Mbuli, an ostensibly progressive political project.

Before looking at a concrete example of the relationship between form and content, a brief summary of the above discussion is necessary. It has been argued that the relationship between form and content together produce meaning - the

explicit content of a text is not the 'whole' meaning, but the whole is produced by the content in conjunction with the form of the text.¹² The form is not a free-floating entity; it is not an empty, value free receptacle, which gains value through it being filled with a content. Form has its own, relatively autonomous, historical determinants. But, folding back upon itself, form gives meaning to those determinants as well. Simultaneously, form is not absolutely autonomous; it is, on the contrary, determined while being determining. Being a site of ideological contestation, form and its political meaning are not uni-vocal or fixed, but a locus of struggle. While it carries its own ideological meanings, those meanings can be contested or, in Brecht's terms, form can be expropriated and, to add to this, appropriated. Form has its own limitations which can work against the ostensible ideological project of a text, whether those texts are official and conservative, or counter to a conservative hegemony. The following section examines the ways in which, in the light of the above discussion, language and music can be read as examples of the form-content relationship.

Language, Reggae and Politics

Working in the late 1920s, and perhaps inaugurating a development in theories about language and politics parallel with the aesthetic-politics debate, the linguistic philosopher, Valentin Vološinov, sees himself as the first Marxist working in that field of philosophy (1986:xv). As is now well-known and generally accepted,

Vološinov's work is closely associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In his quest for historicism, it is Bakhtin who rejects the Saussurean division of language into langue and parole¹³ (Stam, 1988:119), a division which is necessary for Saussure's focus on the synchronic (ahistorical) analysis of language.¹⁴

Bakhtin's project is to return to linguistic study its diachronic element, an historical awareness:

When one analyzes an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addressivity and the influence of the anticipated response, dialogical echoes from others' preceding utterances, faint traces of changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within - all these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language. All these phenomena are connected with the whole of the utterance, and when this whole escapes the field of vision of the analyst they cease to exist for him [*sic.*]. Herein lies one of the reasons for that narrowness of traditional stylistics we commented upon above. (1986:99-100)¹⁵

Implicitly criticising synchronic linguistic studies, Bakhtin also alludes to the historical, and therefore ideological, nature of the sign (langue) and its utterance (parole). His criticism of traditional synchronic analysis is couched in the very terms of synchronic analysis, thereby adding a sharp irony to the ahistoricism of synchronic study; using the very register of traditional linguistics to point to its lacunae, Bakhtin's criticism is strongly convincing:

There can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance. The speaker's evaluative attitude toward the subject of his [*sic.*] speech (regardless of what his subject may be) also determines the choice of

lexical, grammatical, and compositional means of the utterance. The individual style of the utterance is determined primarily by its expressive aspect. (1986:84)¹⁶

Not only does Bakhtin return history to linguistics, but he also echoes some of the terms of the aesthetics-politics debate: the form of the utterance is dependent on or influenced by the perceived attitudes of an intended audience.

Vološinov arrives at a similar, though less detailed, formulation of language and its relationship to ideology, although from a different starting point: 'Everything ideological possesses meaning: it represents, depicts.... In other words, it is a sign. Without signs there is no ideology' (1986:9). In contrast to the idea that signs are ideological, Vološinov's formulation reads that ideology needs signs to express it. Thought of in a linear fashion, Vološinov seems to posit an ideology pre-existent to the sign. However, there need be no contradiction between Vološinov's formulation and that which posits the sign as the origin of ideology, since there is a more important meaning in both Bakhtin and Vološinov's formulations.

Both their ideas point to the fundamental inseparability of sign and ideology: 'The theme of an ideological sign and the form of an ideological sign are inextricably bound together and are separable only in the abstract' and 'the themes and forms of ideological creativity emerge from the same matrix and are in essence two sides of the same thing' (Vološinov, 1986:22, 23). Thus he can assert that '[t]he word is the ideological phenomenon par excellence' (1986:13).

There is a similarity between the general form-content dynamic in art (as

outlined in the first section to this chapter) and how, to Vološinov, the word produces ideologically. In his terms, meaning in language is produced simultaneously by form and content. In the discussion on form and content one can formulate, in the terms of that specific debate, a simple equation: form (of the sign/word/text) + content (of sign/word/text) = meaning (of sign/word/text). What is said in language, then, depends as much upon the form as on the content; it depends as much upon how something is said as on what is being said semantically. If the word is the ultimate ideological phenomenon, it is both the form and the theme of the word/language that produces ideologically.

Thinking about language in terms of a form-content relationship has pervaded work not only in cultural studies, but also in linguistics and, more specifically, socio-linguistics - the analysis of language in its historical and social context. Socio-linguists now generally accept the importance of this relationship and its political implications. A widely covered area in this field is the socio-linguistic study of the Caribbean in general and Jamaica in particular. Although the studies are in most cases general investigations in socio-linguistics and not particularly about the form-content relationship, most writers at least mention the relationship between the form of language and its meaning, where 'meaning' is broadly defined and incorporates notions of politics and ideology.¹⁷ The nature of this relationship has, however, been thought of in different ways.

Kachru, for instance, sees the relationship between language and ideology in essentialist and ahistorical terms. Talking about the acquisition of English by

speakers of other languages, Kachru states that English has a related thought pattern which he identifies as Platonic-Aristotelian; the acquisition of English would then involve a mastering of its logical system (1983:326). His essentialism is reminiscent of Ong's in the latter's distinction between oral and literate mindsets and which has been criticised by Daniell for its negligence of studying orality contextually (see pp.17-18 above). Kachru's equation of English with Platonic-Aristotelian logic, especially, seems to suggest a non-contextual, ahistorical approach to the relationship between language and ideology. A contextual approach would reveal the relationship between language and ideology as perhaps more associative and not in terms of an inherent essence, as Kachru's concept seems to suggest.

Referring to the Creole-English¹⁸ dialect they call 'London Jamaican', R.B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller point out: 'There is ... some truth in the concept of associated language, but it is not a necessary part of ethnic or "racial" identity' (1985:238). While one can thus associate certain 'identities' with a language - in Kachru's view, for instance, Platonic-Aristotelian with many English speakers - it does not follow that a language can be equated with such an 'identity'. Acquiring a language does not necessarily lead to the acquisition of a 'thought-pattern'. It is furthermore strongly debatable as to whether one can isolate a 'thought-pattern', let alone draw decisive connections between it and an accompanying language.

The non-essentialist nature of language is clearly evident in the case of 'London Jamaican' as a signifier of opposition to a conservative, British

establishment. Precisely because of an associative signification, groups who find themselves on the margins of British society, irrespective of 'ethnic identity' - Greek, Turkish, Asian and white, working-class youth alike - employ 'London Jamaican' as a symbol of resistance and group solidarity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985:246).¹⁹ Note that it is due to the dialect's signification as oppositional that this happens, signification being an historical ascription of meaning. There is thus nothing inherent or essential in a language which signifies its ideological matrix or its ideological permutations, but it is rather through its use and the historical problematic in which it is situated which invoke its ideological resonances.

This study's insistence that language is inevitably ideological is based on the fact that language is always discourse - it finds its meaning in use. It is the specific use language is put to that resounds with its ideological underpinnings and implications. If a language can be seen as always weighted by ideology, it is because the language has a history. 'London Jamaican' would thus have an oppositional ideology inscribed into it by the history of its development - from slave society, where its incomprehensibility to the slave-master was of immediate strategic necessity, to late twentieth-century, urban use in London, where it signifies subversion, and solidarity in that opposition, on the outskirts of the master's metropolis.

It is not suggested that there is absolutely no link between 'systems of logic' and languages. However, one has to remain cautious in seeing such a relationship

in purely essential terms which disregard the contexts in which languages are employed and deployed. To consider language synchronically is to neglect the ideological nature of language. By extension, it can be said that synchronic approaches deny ideological struggles - which inevitably occur in all contexts - from pervading language.

The argument thus far may seem contradictory: the fundamental inseparability between language and ideology has been asserted, while a simultaneous caution about language and essential 'thought patterns' has been proffered. A way out of this apparent contradiction is to see the relationship between the two terms - language and ideology - as locked in a reciprocal, relational dynamic. Neither term is a given, fixed origin of the other, but each always already 'producing' the other. If the structure of language is ideological, it is because it has 'found' its ideological determinations through use - it is through use that language is ideological.²⁰ By extension, whatever ideological use language is put to may alter the language.

One of the best examples of how language and its ideology can be struggled over is the way in which the Jamaican Creole²¹ has been infused by a Rastafarian vision²² appropriating and changing the language which, long ago, was the language of the colonial master.²³ Through this, the Jamaican Creole in particular has been imbued with an even greater political signification. Previously, the language signified politically merely by its existence. Depending on the viewpoint of the listener, its use could either relegate the speaker to the lower- and under-

class margins of Jamaican society or invoke a group solidarity within those margins. Rastafarians set out to consciously change the Jamaican Creole by infusing its grammatical structures and vocabulary with their ideology of opposition and condemnation of mainly white, capitalist society. This overt politicisation of language, however, precedes the advent of Rastafarianism and is found in the history of the Jamaican Creole, both in the Caribbean and in its transplantation to Britain.

The development of the Jamaican Creole was predicated on the linguistic needs of a slave society where the slave did not speak the language of the master. Inevitably, a pidgin developed, the existence of which reflected the relations of dominance and submission in such a slave society. The slave community, however, did not simply accept this language of dominance. While the economic form of the society and its logic may have demanded an absolutely passive slave community merely accepting its subjection, the slave community responded with resilience and creativity. As Simon Jones states:

The view that African-derived forms were completely eliminated or abandoned in the Caribbean context is particularly difficult to sustain given the available historical evidence, evidence which suggests that the slaves and their descendants were by no means the 'passive' victims of slavery, nor the mere 'recipients' of European culture. (1988:xxvii)

Linguistically, the slaves developed an argot - out of an oppressive necessity - which signalled their opposition and resistance to domination not only in the content

of the argot, but also in its form:

The pidgins spoken by the earliest [Afro-Caribbean] slaves were progressively expanded over the course of two or three generations into a comprehensive creole vernacular or patois with its own characteristic, African inflected vocabulary, syntax and grammatical structure (Jones, 1988:6),

and:

[T]hrough the use of ridicule, subterfuge, inversion and allusion in communication, and a reliance on intonation, rhythm, contextual definitions of words and non-verbal paralinguistic features to convey meaning, the dominant white values and racist caste definitions that were built into the slave system were challenged, broken down and reconstituted in a black context Initially forged as a language of resistance under conditions of racial domination, Jamaican creole emerged as the inherited speech of the black peasantry and working class in the post-slavery period. (Jones, 1988:7-8)

From the parody of the master's language thus emerged a resistance to the master's language. The mere use of it would then also signal a subversive laughter in the direction of the master, as it continues to do today in Britain where groups other than Jamaican descendants employ and deploy the Jamaican Creole.

Moreover, it is in the form that a substantial degree of struggle and subsequent subversion are located - it is in 'inversion', 'rhythm' and 'intonation' that resistance takes place. The conscious choice of Jamaican Creole would then connote a conscious political choice and in Britain, especially, this remains the case:

For many young blacks, 'patois' became the language and symbol of opposition, used selfconsciously, and in preference to standard English, as an expression of cultural strength and a code of solidarity both inside and outside the school context. (Jones, 1988:41)

It is interesting to note that the linguistic and educational 'problems' associated with children of West Indian descent in British schools are due more to strictly political processes, and not purely linguistic issues. The pupil's conscious resistance, enshrined in the choice and persistence of Jamaican Creole, is often seen as a linguistic deficiency. The preference for the Jamaican Creole, instead, signals the youth's dissatisfaction with the political processes of white, mainstream and capitalist British society and education, rather than it being a linguistic 'defect' on their part.²⁴

It is within such a linguistic history, already explicitly political, that the Rastafarian linguistic struggle situates itself. Not only is the content (for example, vocabulary) of language in the Rastafarian example changed, but the form also immediately expresses a political proclivity, especially through pronunciation. Examples of this abound and one of the ways in which change is invoked is to have the semantic-phonological meaning cohere with the total meaning of the word. Roberts provides an example: 'The word oppress is changed to downpress because op- is phonetically the same as up and so inconsistent with the meaning of the word' (1988:40). In the Rastafarian lexicon, then, 'oppress' would be a non-word since the prefix 'op-' ('up') contradicts the sense of experience associated with the word.²⁵ Another interesting change is that of the first person pronoun. The

common construction in Dread Talk is 'I and I' which, as Allsopp points out, is simultaneously a signifier for spiritual unity with the self and an expression of solidarity with the social and spiritual collectivity that makes up the individual Rastafarian (1980:102).²⁶

The spread of Rastafarianism, whether in the guise of a closely followed religious-political vision or in the exterior modes of dress and hairstyle, and the concomitant spread of Dread Talk as an identification with oppositional Rastafarian politics, are closely related to the spread of reggae music (Jones, 1988:passim).²⁷ This brings one close to conclusion, since a discussion of the history of reggae will provide one with one of the most explicit examples of the political significance of form in cultural production, and will add insight into the political value of the Jamaican Creole. At the same time, and close to the purposes of this study, Rastafarianism and reggae provide an example of how concepts of popular culture, its forms and its politics interconnect and find resonance in this interconnectedness. The relationship between reggae music's political affiliations and Rastafarianism has already been alluded to. What remains to be shown, is how cultural production, through formal characteristics like language, expresses a political vision and at the same time defines its audience; by extension, how, dependent on the constitution of the audience, such cultural production thereby defines itself as popular.²⁸ The formal aspects of such cultural production thus play a significant role in deciding its ultimate political affinities. This should find reverberation with the definition of the popular, proffered earlier, and provide a basis for a reading of an aspect of

formal Machereyan silences.

Within the pre-Rastafarian development of reggae, one already finds examples whereby form resounds with political meaning. Jones traces the history of Jamaica's first 'national popular music and dance form' back to 'mento'. Mento's musical form, with a syncopated rhythm, was close to that of Trinidadian calypso, with both being a 'topical song genre of protest, ridicule and gossip and continued firmly in the African musical tradition of satire and social criticism'. It made use of the characteristic of music 'as one of the most effective vehicles of political protest and organisation' (Jones, 1988:16). Hebdige goes back further and traces the reggae tradition to the 'burra', an African form of song retained during slavery, and which came to be seen as an 'open celebration of criminality' (1977:142-143). Whatever the actual point of origin, whether burra or mento, the fact remains that these historical traces firmly situate the reggae tradition within a history of explicit political and social criticism. Furthermore, it is in the formal, stylistic developments of the reggae tradition, especially since the 1940s, that one can discern in the shifts in style the ways in which formal aspects signify politically.

Jones, for instance, reads the up-tempo vibrancy in 'ska', the dominant musical form of the 1960s and a precursor to reggae, as an expression of post-independence optimism. With the first Jamaican general election in 1966, social unrest peaked as frustration at continued deprivation under the pervasive remnants of colonial oppression eventually found an outlet, despite the hopes engendered by independence. During this period, ska changed to 'rocksteady', a slower, sombre

and introspective form of the music, foreshadowing and commenting on the socio-political climate in Jamaica. This happened in terms of form.²⁹ As Jones puts it: 'The changing social and economic climate of Jamaican society in this period was mirrored in the corresponding shifts in style, form and lyrical content of Jamaican popular music' (1988:22).³⁰

From the 1970s onwards, the radicalism of Rastafarianism - radical in the context of its parent society - intersected with reggae and added to the tradition of that popular music, a tradition which was already significantly political in its social awareness and criticism. Under the influence of Rastafarianism, Jones says, 'the protest element that had become such a characteristic feature of Jamaican music became more articulate and thoughtful' (1988:23). It is to this period that one can trace the historical developments from which dub-poetry starts taking shape, with both its means of distribution and its formal aspects acting as political signifiers. At once embroiled with and parallel to the development of reggae, the forming and subsequent developing processes of dub-poetry are also unmistakably situated within the dynamic of a form-politics relationship. Along with this, and similarly entangled, is the main form of musical distribution in Jamaica known as the 'soundsystem' - an important element in the development of dub-music and dub-poetry. Dub-poetry, as form and in terms of the politics of that form, is thus best understood within the historical frameworks of both the soundsystem and dub-music.

'Dub-music', or the 'dub-version', originally referred to the instrumental and

re-engineered version of a reggae song, sometimes containing fragments of lyrics, and normally on the B-side of the designated seven-single.³¹ In its formal characteristics, dub-music - like ska and rocksteady - is also seen to have 'expressive and semantic power' (Jones, 1988:25). Dub-versions became popular with 'soundsystems', elaborate, high-fidelity musical systems which were used by various studios to promote their products on street-corners.³² On the level of distribution, the soundsystem is itself an example of how formal aspects of culture and the production of meaning, outside of the confines of narrowly defined lingual or textual facets, signify politically. In Jamaica, the political value of the soundsystem derives from the fact that it provides a form of collective entertainment to Jamaica's urban poor, at no cost. Admittedly, it developed as a marketing ploy on the side of record producers. However, given the fact that most of its audience cannot afford the advertised commodity, let alone the equipment to enjoy it with, the street-corner soundsystem provides free entertainment. A form of cultural production with a commercial logic as its origin, the soundsystem however can now be seen as a form of popular culture.

The soundsystem's political nature emerged more clearly with its importation into Britain. The institution of the soundsystem was brought to Britain with Jamaican immigration and transformed into the 'bluesdance', an informal nightclub, normally held in halls and youth centres, and at which the music that was played was, not surprisingly, reggae.³³ It is the reggae bluesdance, merely by virtue of its existence, that was read as subversive by a conservative British establishment.

This perception, together with the inter-related processes of public paranoia (read xenophobia) and subsequent legislation, allowed the British metropolitan police force with justifications for raiding bluesdances carte blanche. If the 'recreational function of the sound system was of particular importance in the British context as a refuge from a hostile and isolating white society' (Jones, 1988:35), police raids on them were definitely considered as a raid on black, working-class identity, and an invasion thereof. Powerful confrontations and violent eruptions between black youth and police were thus not far removed from the hub of cultural activity located around the soundsystem.

The by now infamous Notting Hill Gate riots of 1976 can perhaps be traced to a process similar to the above in that the source of the riots and their political ramifications were, in convincing ways, predicated on the soundsystem. Jones shows that

the introduction of reggae and sound systems in 1976 into a traditionally local, calypso-based event, dramatically increased its political content and cultural appeal. (1988:45)

Its appeal is clear from the fact that attendance at the Notting Hill Gate Carnival of 1976 showed a 500% increment over that of the previous year. In response, the British government increased the police presence at the carnival by 25 000% in 1976 (Jones, 1988:45).³⁴

It is to such a technical form - the soundsystem with a high potential for

powerful political symbolism and practice - to which the development of dub-poetry can be traced. Predicated by the soundsystem in Jamaica, the use of dub-music inaugurates 'toasting', an improvised, seemingly nonsensical, verbal embellishment to the dub-version, performed by the soundsystem operator. The soundsystem operator became known as the 'toaster', the label most probably coming from 'toastmaster'. It is with dub-music and toasting that the finely honed relationship between the rhythms of Jamaican Creole speech patterns and reggae is evident.³⁵ Referring to Big Youth (Manley Augustus Buchanan), a popular toaster during the 1970s in Jamaica, Jones says:

Through the use of heavy unrestrained patois, [Big Youth's] toasting synchronised linguistic and musical patterns at a level which often transcended specific verbal meanings, conveying an overall mood of dread and foreboding; for, like dub, this form of toasting was an attempt to extend communication beyond words. (1988:28)

To Jones, thus, 'musical expression and speech forms are intimately related' and 'the same rhythmic sensibility that permeates Jamaican creole speech-patterns is also to be found throughout the island's musical culture' (1988:29, 11).

Dub-poetry is clearly traceable to toasting and, on comparison, the two styles show an obvious similarity: both are forms of poetry performed to the accompaniment of broad-based reggae and distinct from reggae song. However, dub-poetry is a formalised version of toasting; the focus shifts from the improvisation and composition-in-performance of toasting to careful composition

before performance. The important point though is that, as a development from toasting and in the geographical and historical specificity of Jamaica, dub-poetry is firmly situated in a progressive, popular tradition. To talk about dub-poetry is thus to refer to a genre embedded in a complex of traditions where formal aspects - from the developments of reggae and dub-music, to toasting and its distribution, to the use of language - augment and simultaneously make up the politics of that tradition. As a music mainly created and enjoyed by the urban poor in Jamaica - what Thomas Cushman calls a 'restricted code which articulated the existential experience and revolutionary aspirations of lower class, Jamaican blacks' (1991:30) - reggae emerges as a good example of what is meant by the definition of popular culture employed by this study; that, in both content and form, it is generally politically progressive.

Despite the fact that reggae has been rapidly commercialised and massified in especially the United States of America since the early 1970s, 'transform[ing] the potential meaning of this revolutionary cultural code' (Cushman, 1991:36), its history in especially Jamaica, but also Britain, maintains its politically progressive bent. Indeed, if thought of in terms of a continuum, mass/popular productions are never clearly mass or popular culture. As Reebee Garofalo suggests, the political nature of such productions - whether popular or co-opted - should be seen as a matter of degree and dependent on various elements such as the relationship between artist and audience, artist and music, and artist and big business; the measure of co-optation or otherwise is then 'always relative and the emphasis is on

the complex interaction of the various "arenas of struggle" (1987:84). While clearly dependent on and different for each artist, one can still safely state the popular value of the reggae tradition in general, despite its massification in America or elsewhere.

Thus, largely produced and consumed by the Jamaican under-classes, the history of reggae is one where the artefact is popular in both form and content; the history of reggae resonates with the political signification of formal aspects. In terms of this study's definition of the popular, dub-poetry is thus found on a history where the political value of cultural production derived as much from form as from content. Dub-poetry in general is thus popular - broadly progressive - exactly because the forms in which it is proffered have affinities to that specific political agenda.

Finally, if reggae, considered as popular culture by Jones, comes to be the form that symbolises black opposition to mainstream Jamaica of the 1970s (1988:passim.), then the form of the language intertwined with that music becomes that self-same symbol. Furthermore, Jones's analysis points to the fact that language, as an aspect of form in verbal art, can be seen to signify politically. In fact, the use of the Jamaican Creole creates and defines its audience while at the same time 'identifying' with the audience it speaks to and about. This is close to our definition of the popular. That is, an art form which posits itself as popular, should show this commitment in both content and form. This seems to be the case with reggae where the use of initially the Jamaican Creole, and now a

broad Caribbean Creole based on the Jamaican Creole, is an 'act of identity'. Dub-poetry continues this tradition where some of the poets - like Linton Kwesi Johnson - are university graduates and presumably fluent in Standard English. Their use of a Caribbean Creole is an obvious political gesture (McCrum et al., 1992:344-345).

From the discussion above, it should be clear that an art form's definition as 'popular' hinges on both its political content and its form, both of which are ultimately dependent on its intended audience. If the intended audience of an art form is one practically excluded from paths to power such as education and literacy - as is the case with reggae and dub-poetry with its West Indian and West Indian descendants as primary intended audience - then it being popular is as much dependent on its forms as on its mere expression of that solidarity in content. Dub-poetry, an oral poetry in Caribbean Creole, the language of its audience, is such an art. Furthermore, and important to this project, if the form is politically significant, one can see that close attention to formal aspects such as language can lead to important symptomatic analyses of the art, in this case the popular art of contemporary English oral poetry by black poets. This study is interested in the ways in which a reading of the Machereyan silences found in form (here language and music) can either enhance or deflate a text's explicit ideological project, or how attention to language can lead into further insights into the overall ideology of the texts to be studied. The second half of this dissertation is dedicated to this project.

Chapter 3: 'Dread¹ Inna Ingran': The dub-poetry of

Linton Kwesi Johnson

A biographical introduction to Linton Kwesi Johnson's early years provides a basis from which to read his work, since it sets a framework which shows how, through political processes, he came to writing and poetry.² Johnson (popularly known as L.K.J.) was born in 1952 in Jamaica and emigrated to England in 1963. He was schooled in London, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of London in 1973, and became a founding member and arts editor of Race Today, a magazine with a radical, black-separatist political orientation.³ His honours and awards include a C. Day-Lewis fellowship as writer-in-residence in Lambeth, London (1977), a fellowship to the University of Warwick (1985), honorary fellowship to Wolverhampton Polytechnic (1987) and an award for poetry and music at the XIII Premio Internazionale Ultimo Novecento, Pisa (1990).

During the early 1970s, Johnson joined the Black Panther Youth League, a militant, black-nationalist grouping inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States of America of the late 1960s.⁴ The political and cultural involvement this provided led to Johnson's attempts at writing poetry. Through its connections to Black Power movements in America, the cultural orientation of the Black Panther Youth League also allowed access to the literature emanating from the American movements. It was then that Johnson started reciting his poetry in public. As early as 1973 he was performing his poetry to musical accompaniment at the

Keskidee Arts Centre in London, of which he was library resource and education officer. His early biography thus shows a well-defined political trajectory, and it is his involvement in this radical brand of political activity that mostly influences his work.

Since the 1970s, Johnson has produced a sizeable amount of creative work. His books are: Voices of the Living and the Dead (1974; includes a play), Dread Beat and Blood (1975), Inglan is a Bitch (1980), and Tings an Times (1991). His sound-recordings include: Poet and the Roots (1977), Dread Beat an' Blood (1978), Forces of Victory (1979), Bass Culture (1980), Making History (1984), In Concert with the Dub Band (1985) and Tings an' Times (1991). In 1983, Johnson appeared as a guest to a poetry performance hosted by Louise Bennett who is generally considered as the first poet committed to using the Jamaican vernacular dialects in her poetry and the forerunner of the dub-poets of today (Burnett, 1986:xxxix-xl; Howe, 1984LP).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s Johnson had come to be seen as a leading voice of an oppressed minority in Britain, namely the black, working-class British community, mostly of West Indian descent. He is hailed as one who 'has put his talents at the service of the black working class from which he comes' (Rugg, 1979:44) and as a 'representative voice of a black community that lives in a belligerent world' (Dhondy, 1980:4). His importance and preeminence as a dub-poet can hardly be denied, his work now spanning more than a decade. As Anthony

Stocks remarks:

Linton Kwesi Johnson is the most prominent figure among a number of young black British poets who have drawn upon the linguistic and musical resources of their West Indian heritage to create a poetry that is at once politically radical and rhythmically compelling.... [His early work] already displays both the passionate political commitment and the rhythmical drive that characterizes his poetry:... (1991:480)

This dissertation seeks to interrogate this 'passionate political commitment' in its resonances within the theoretical parameters established in the previous two chapters of this study. That is, Johnson's oral poetry is to be considered as popular art. It is this author's contention that Johnson's poetry is a popular art form in more ways than simply the themes he deals with. Through an investigation of content and form, it will be argued that his poetry is always conceptualised from the viewpoint of the margins of white, capitalist and conservative hegemony in Britain and in progressive opposition to that hegemony; his poetry is, from inception to delivery, conceived as popular.⁵ Under the aegis of form, both music⁶ and language will be considered in the analysis of Johnson's poetry. It must be remembered that categories of analysis - theme, music, language, commitment - are only separated to aid academic discussion and that they are ultimately imbricated with each other.

This imbrication could perhaps be unified and symbolised in Johnson's intended audience - those he speaks about and to - the black working-class in Britain in the main. It is also this imbrication, it will be shown, that makes for a definition of commitment as a multi-faceted, complex web and an imbrication

which strongly marks Johnson's poetry as committed art. For this, one needs to first consider the themes of Johnson's art.

Here, the general, and sometimes the more specific, themes of Johnson's recorded poetry, distributed on vinyl record, cassette tape and compact disc need to be discussed. It is in this form, recorded with musical accompaniment, that the poetry is generally perceived to reach its widest audience (Burnett, 1986:xli; Kindermann, 1984:105; Stocks, 1991:481). This will mostly be a thematic summary⁷ and will not, for a large part, provide extensive and close thematic analysis of all the poems. Nor does this section set out to dispute other commentaries on Johnson's work. To a large extent, the general political content of Johnson's work is taken as read. However, the following discussion will provide a summary of the touchstones of his progressive politics and will contextualise it within the broader framework of British society.

'Brothers and sisters rocking ...'

With his first collection, Dread Beat an' Blood (1978LP),⁸ Johnson calls attention to and asserts, in a defiant and confrontational manner, the presence of black West Indians in Britain. Before one encounters any of the poems, the album-sleeve hints at this theme: a drawing by Una Howe shows two black figures in violent confrontation with a squad of bobbies. All the figures are drawn in black against a background of red, white and blue, the colours of the Union Jack.

The first poem, 'Dread beat an blood', evokes the smoky crowdedness of a dance-hall and portrays a situation where tension soon erupts into violence. This theme is explored with more detail in the immediately following poem, 'Five nights of bleeding'. 'Five nights of bleeding' traces events over five nights where, on each night, incidents of violence occur among black youth. Johnson sees these as 'negative responses, on the part of young blacks, to the kind of oppression we experience in British society' (1985LP).⁹ While acknowledging the militancy among the youth and having a sympathetic understanding of it within the framework of race politics in Britain, Johnson is concerned about the youth channelling that energy inwards into a communal, self-destructive process; what he, in another poem, calls 'f[r]atricide' ('Doun de road', 1975:22-23).¹⁰ In Johnson's view, these responses are not targeted at their causes, namely racist practices in Britain. In 'Five nights of bleeding', for instance, Johnson regrets and denounces the youth's fighting amongst each other as 'madness ... madness ... war', a characteristic 'negative response'. When, in the same poem, the violence is directed at police officers, representatives of white, State power, Johnson's analysis is more favourable toward the youth: he categorises it as 'righteous righteous war' (1975:15-17).¹¹

More importantly, however, is the fact that these poems are simultaneously, through the evocation of bluesdance culture, an assertion of a particular identity. Playing mainly reggae and catering for black youth, the bluesdance becomes a space for the simultaneous constitution and assertion of an identity, with close ties

between the sounds of reggae and notions of what constitutes black British culture. As a crucible of identity formation and identity avowal, an attack on the bluesdance/soundsystem is read as a virtual attack on the black community (Hebdige, 1979:38; Jones, 1988:33-39). Since the mere existence of the bluesdance is read as subversive by British authorities, the police, through legislation, have been allowed carte blanche in raiding them (Jones, 1988:33-36). In this context, Johnson's mere representation of the bluesdance recognizes it as valuable to black cultural and political life; consequently, the mere representation establishes and asserts the identity tied so closely to the bluesdance - and it does so defiantly.

On the third night in 'Five nights of bleeding,' a bluesdance is indeed raided by 'babylonian tyrants'¹² who:

pounced on the brothers who were bold;
 so with a flick
 of the wrist,
 a jab and a stab,
 the song of blades was sounded,
 the bile of oppression was vomited,
 and two policemen wounded.
 righteous righteous war. (1975:16)

Johnson's defiant assertion of that cultural space is emphasised by the line 'righteous righteous war', a variation on a refrain which throughout the other five stanzas reads 'madness madness war'. His performance of it adds weight to his judgement on the rebels' action in that this particular line is chanted out much louder than the other refrains which are sounded in a lower tone. Thus, within the

general criticism of moments of negativity where misdirected anger leads to 'f[r]atricide', Johnson nevertheless finds occasion to support certain actions, especially since these actions are tied to the avowal of a cultural and political space of and for black Britons.

If, as Hebdige insists, reggae is read by authorities as 'an alien essence, a foreign body which implicitly threatened mainstream British culture from within' (1979:64), Johnson's trenchant celebration of a cultural practice closely associated with reggae - in fact, founded on reggae - becomes more defiant. In 'Five nights of Bleeding', Johnson is caught between the need to celebrate the militancy of the youth and the need to criticise them when the militancy is turned against the black community itself. Part of Johnson's defiant stance then derives from straddling this tension: he celebrates the stabbing of the police officers, an action which would otherwise fall under the rubric of criminality or the 'negative responses' which he himself pathologises as 'madness war'. Johnson's criticism is thus mostly self-criticism, directed inwards, while the defense of the cultural space is an assertion outwards, as is the album-sleeve. The sleeve, indeed, flaunts this assertion. Furthermore, 'Dread beat and blood' and 'Five nights of bleeding' introduce another theme that will occupy Johnson later on: the associations between reggae and the experiences of especially second-generation, black youth.¹³ The experiences portrayed in 'Dread beat an' blood' and 'Five nights of bleeding' are closely tied to reggae and would be explored again with Bass Culture (1981LP).

The following poem from Dread Beat an' Blood, 'Doun di road', moves

were mobilised in protest demonstrations. His release speedily followed a week of demonstrations and Johnson considers 'Man free' as 'a few simple lines' in celebration of Howe's release (1985LP). Both 'It dread inna Ingran' and 'Man free' are strident, simple and use slogans unashamedly, fully aware of their immediate political use. Simultaneously, 'It dread inna Ingran' reiterates the general theme of a black presence in Britain and the assertion thereof:

far noh mattah wat dey say,
 come wat may,
 we are here to stay
 inna Ingran,
 inna disya time yah ... (1980:14-15)

The collection ends with a rhetorically titled poem, 'All wi doin is defendin', the poems now having moved from the simple assertion of an identity - even if it is through self-criticism - to open confrontation in poetic and real terms:

sen fe de riot squad,
 quick!
 cause wi runnin wild
 bitta like bile;
 blood will guide
 their way;
 an I say,
 all wi doin
 is defendin;... (1975:26-27)

Note the way in which the rhetoric of the title, 'All wi doin is defendin', suggests

worse things to come, since the violence described is simple defence, and not full retaliation.

Johnson's second collection, Forces of Victory (1979LP), continues to explore nodal experiences in the life of black youth, and dramatizes scenarios in order to make them more compelling, detailed and realistic. Through concentrating on the specificities of certain experiences or incidents, he steers clear of vague generalisations and the temptation to merely sloganise. Two poems that stand out in this regard are 'Want fi goh rave' and 'Sonny's lettah (anti-sus poem)'.

In 'Want fi goh rave' the poet relates, in a gentle, anecdotal manner, himself walking and coming across various characters who, despite economic deprivation, still have the desire to enjoy life, to have a 'rave' (see Appendix A, p.218ff). The poet's narration presents a dialogue which allows the characters to speak, thereby dramatising the experiences:

I woz
 Waakin doun di road
 yet annadah day
 w'en Ah hear annadah yout-man say

him seh:
 mi haffi pick a packit
 tek a wallit fram a jackit
 mi haffi dhu it real crabit
 an' if a lackit mi haffi pap it
 an' if a safe mi haffi crack it
 ar chap it wid mi hatchit

but
 mi haffi mek a raze
 kaw mi come af age
 an mi want fi goh rave. (1980:13)

‘Sonny’s lettah’ (see Appendix A, p.219ff) presents another dramatisation of a largely common experience for many black youth in Britain: ‘sus’ victimisation, the often racist police harassment that accompanies the Suspected Persons Act in Britain (Cohen, 1980:74; Hebdige, 1979:36; Robbi, 1989:30).¹⁶ The poem is in the form of a letter, written in prison by Sonny. It narrates the incident that led to his and Jim’s arrest under the Act.¹⁷ In performance, its tone is melancholy and even verges on the monotone, suggesting the everyday nature and the dehumanising aspect of the experience. The melancholy also points to Sonny’s resignation to his fate, even though at the end he appeals to his mother not to get ‘depres’/an’ downhearted’ (1980:9). The power of the poem lies also in its evocation of detail and the specificity of the experience: the alienating, working-class experience of urban routine and the threat of police harassment. In other words, Johnson does not say ‘We suffer under the Suspected Persons Act’, but dramatises it, turning it into a specific event which has general echoes for black youth in Britain. The cultural signposts - black (signalled linguistically), working-class, urban - are all present:

It woz di miggles of di rush howah
 wen everybody jus’ a hus’le an’ a bus’le
 fi goh home fi dem evenin’ showah;
 mi an’ Jim stan-up
 waitin’ pan a bus,

nat causin' no fus',
 wen all an a sudden
 a police van pull-up. (1980:7)

A fight ensues when Jim resists arrest, Sonny helps him and inadvertently kills a police officer, and soon:

more policeman come dung
 an' beat mi to di grung;
 dem charge Jim fi sus;
 dem charge mi fi murdah. (1980:9)

Other poems in this collection continue the themes of the above two poems and treat various aspects of black, working-class life in Britain. 'It noh funny' is an anthem both celebrating the unfettered behaviour of black youth in their day-to-day activities and implicitly criticising the older, parent generation's disapproval of them. 'Independent intavenshan', as Johnson explains, 'simply says no to those political forces who're trying to suck the independent black movement into their midst' (1985LP; see Appendix A, p.221ff). This particular poem furnishes one with a clearer sense of Johnson's radical politics: through the exclusion of various left-liberal organisations in Britain, the poem implicitly celebrates a politics relatively more radical than that of the groups it excludes:

mek dem gwaan
 now it calm
 far in di en' is wi who haffi ride di staam

di SWP can't set wi free
 di IMG can't dhu it fi wi
 di Communist Pawty, cho, dem too awty-fawty
 an' di laybahrites dem naw goh fite fi wi rites ...

di CRE can't set wi free
 di TUC can't dhu it fi wi
 di Liberal Pawty dem is nat very hawty
 an' di Tory Pawty a noh fi wi pawty ... (1980:18-19)

'Fite dem back' is a trenchant call to blacks to counter fascist and racist attacks by neo-nazi gangs, these attacks being a common occurrence.¹⁸ 'Reality poem' levels criticism against those in the black community, especially Rastafarians, who indulge in mysticism and religion and who, in so doing, avoid actual social and political issues. 'Forces of victory' celebrates the victory of 'pro-carnivalist forces over those forces in the political arena in London who were trying to ban the carnival from the streets of Notting Hill' (Johnson, 1985LP).¹⁹ 'Time come' sounds a foreboding warning to oppressive forces, the warning springing from personal anger, on Johnson's part, as a harassed member of the Black Panther Youth League, and thus as a symbolic expression of the black community's anger:

when you pick pan de Panthers
 I did warn yu
 when yu jack mi up gainst the wall
 ha didnt bawl,
 but I did warn yu.

now yu si fire burning in mi eye,
 smell badness pan mi breat

feel vialence, vialence,
 burstin outta mi;
 look out!

it too late now:
 I did warn yu. (1975:25; see Appendix A, p.222ff)

In retrospect, these words - as with 'All wi doin' is defendin' - take on a prophetic quality as riots, starting in Railton Road,²⁰ Brixton in April, erupted across major cities in Britain in 1981 (Chambers, 1986:58; Howe, 1984LP).

With Bass Culture (1981LP), Johnson explores the correlations between his manifest political themes and reggae more explicitly than with Dread Beat an' Blood, thus the title of the collection. The three important poems to this theme are 'Bass culture', 'Reggae sounds' and 'Street 66'. The links between the three poems, between the poems and Johnson's general political themes, and his situation within a musical tradition that is predicated on the need for political and cultural expression - the reggae tradition - are among the most coherently articulated and clearly defined relationships in his work.

In Bass Culture Johnson thus sets out to explore not only the links between reggae and black experiences, but also the manner in which the form itself signifies politically.²¹ The ways in which changes in the form of reggae - from ska to rocksteady - can be read against political changes and the ways in which the forms of reggae - without explicit reference to politics - connote a political stance have already been discussed.²² Thus Johnson thematises the political significance of the form 'reggae' in 'Bass culture': the music that is 'muzik of blood' is also 'de

cultural wave a dread people deal' (see Appendix A, p.224ff). It is:

bitta cause a blues,
 cause a maggot suffering,
 cause a blood klaat pressure,
 yet still breedin love
 far more mellow
 than the sound of shapes
chanting loudly. (1975:59; emphases added)

Johnson clearly knows the history of reggae: he dedicates 'Bass culture' to Big Youth, one of the toasters he admires and, towards the end of the poem, he hopes for more change in reggae. This can be read as a wish-projection: a change in the form of the music would imply a preceding change in its political contexts, similar to the ways in which ska and rocksteady paralleled political developments in Jamaica:

for the time is nigh
 when passion gather high
 an the beat jus lash
 when the wall mus smash
 and the beat will shiff
as the culture allta
when oppression scatta. (1975:59; emphases added)

'Reggae sounds' explores this theme on a more technical level. As Johnson introduces each instrument that comprises a basic reggae ensemble, the particular instrument is sounded until all the instruments together are commanded to 'team-up

... for a deep down searching' and to:

dig down to the root of the pain;
shape it into violence for the people,
they will know what to do, they will do it. (1975:56)

From the above it is clear that Johnson considers the rhythms of reggae indistinguishable from the experiences of black West Indians in Britain where the history of reggae itself is tied closely to political and economic histories in Jamaica. To him thus, 'bass history is a moving/is a hurting black story' ('Reggae sounds').

However, Johnson does not only see this fusion of histories as an internal, essentialising gesture. With 'Street 66' (see Appendix A, p.226ff), he turns from the general, analytic perspective of 'Bass culture' and 'Reggae sounds' to dramatise a situation whereby, through association, reggae is seen to need defending against police harassment. The poem narrates a scene at a bluesdance at which the sound of reggae creates an atmosphere of 'righteous feelings'. One character, Western, intimates that the police would do better not to raid the bluesdance. The dance is (inevitably) raided and the poem terminates on an open-ended statement of confrontation when Western invites the police officer inside: "'step rite in an tek some licks'" (1975:20).

Of course it is not reggae per se that needs defending but, as a symbol of history and identity, the defense of reggae and its associated practices is a symbolic defense of the West Indian identity. One only needs to recall Hebdige's view that

reggae is seen as a cancerous tumour within British society (1979:64) to understand the full resonances of the poem. In 'Street 66' the speaker mentions being caught up in the music and realising that he had to carry the consequences: 'had to do and ride de rock'. He continues:

outta dis rock
shall come
a greener riddim (rhythm)
even more dread
dan what
de breeze of glory bread. (1975:19)

Considering that 'glory bread' refers to marijuana (specifically the smell - 'breeze' - of marijuana), and the connotations of 'dread',²³ the speaker here appropriates the terms whereby he²⁴ is turned into a cultural 'other' in Britain. In the poem, the 'dread' associated with 'de breeze of glory bread' is nothing compared to the 'dread' from the music. The 'dread' that other people associate with reggae and marijuana smoke - that are for other people signs of otherness - becomes for the speaker terms of identity and sustenance: 'a greenna riddim'. At the same time, 'a greenna riddim' is always already, 'more dread'. Its mere existence makes it 'more dread' because it is in the bluesdance, already 'dread', where it becomes 'more dread'.

The other poems of note on Bass Culture are 'Reggae fi Peach', a lament in memory of Blair Peach, an anti-racist activist killed by police in South Hall, April 1979, during a demonstration protesting against National Front activities (see

Campbell, 1980b:86); 'Di black petty-booshwah', a ditty indicting blacks who 'seek promoshan/af di backs af blacks' (Johnson, 1980:30); and 'Inglan is a bitch', considered by Farrukh Dhondy as 'the first working class hymn of the black community' (1980:5). Indeed, 'Inglan is a bitch' traces the woes of a worker who comes to Britain, no doubt following the 1948 Nationality Act and the recruiting campaigns of London Transport and British Hotels (see Appendix A, p.227ff):

w'en mi jus' come to Landan toun
 mi use to work pan di andahgroun
 but workin' pan di andahgroun
 y'u don't get fi know your way aroun' ...

mi get a lickle job in a big 'otell
 an awftah a while, mi woz doin' quite well
 dem staat mi aaf as a dish-washah
 but w'en mi tek a stack, mi noh tun clack-watchah! (1980:26)²⁵

After Bass Culture, Johnson consciously went into a recording hiatus and involved himself in various cultural projects, including researching and producing a radio documentary on reggae music for the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.). He published his next collection of recorded poetry, Making History, in 1984. As the title suggests, the collection traces various significant moments in the history of the black, British working-class during the early 1980s. In addition, the collection also concerns itself with issues such as nuclear arms proliferation, the cold war and the situation of the working-class internationally during the same period. The album-sleeve is an example of how Johnson seems to subvert the

distinction between the (high cultural) written word and the (low cultural) spoken word. The sleeve, showing a hand clasping a history book, suggests that history, normally perceived as a 'dead', academic subject supposedly only found in books, can be found both in his oral poetry and, as his themes will portray, within the black community. Through yoking the commonly experienced incidents, which some of his poems speak of here, under the rubric of history, Johnson immediately gives value to what would otherwise be considered mere everyday experiences. Thus, the everyday experiences of working-class, black Britons - or rather, the traumas of racist oppression and violence having become routinised and 'normal' - are given significance by terming it 'history' and, therefore, signifying the black, working-class community as actors in their own history. Of immediate historical significance to his home community - both geographically (urban Britain) and socially (black, mainly working-class) - are 'Di great insohreckshan' (insurrection), 'Making history' and 'New Craas massahkah' (New Cross Massacre). Once again, it is Johnson's ability to focus on what Stocks terms the 'specificity of historical events' (1991:480) that makes for a qualitative art.

'New Craas massahkah' deals with the immediate effects and aftermath of a suspected, racially motivated, arson attack during which fourteen party-going black teenagers died in New Cross Street, Deptford In January 1981.²⁶ By concentrating on the specificities of the situation - the deaths and their consequences, against the backdrop of the teenage party - the poem moves from an up-tempo description of the party and outbreak of the fire as an introduction, to the

sombre and quietly angry meditation upon the aftermath. The refrain that is used to describe both the party atmosphere and the chaos of the fire, done with musical accompaniment, thus evokes the party mood and the panic when the fire breaks out. The gravity of the event, the realisation that the attack is totally arbitrary, the anger of 'black Britain', the police inaction and de-emphasisation of racial motives, and the mainstream press cover-up, are all related in a melancholic monotone, without musical accompaniment. The poem ends with an angry accusation, followed by a slightly speeded up refrain.

'Making history' and 'Di great insohreckshan' are celebrations of the insurrections that spread all over Britain during especially 1981, the latter poem specifically about the Brixton riots of that year. Moving away from national events, 'Di eagle an' di bear', 'Wat about di workin' claas?' and 'Reggae fi Radni' (Rodney) attempts to place the home events in an international frame. 'Wat about di workin' claas' draws parallels between racial oppression in England and the plight of Polish workers, by drawing lines from New Cross to Gdansk, from 'mistah racist' to 'comred chairman', from 'Inglan to Poelan' (Johnson, 1991:37). 'Reggae fi Radni' is dedicated to Walter Rodney, the radical Guyanan academic and activist assassinated in 1980 (Davis, 1983:101-102).²⁷ This poem signals Johnson's turn towards the Caribbean, followed by a further investigation of international historical connections in 'Reggae fi dada', a requiem to his father.

'Reggae fi dada' presents Johnson at his most personal, not in the sense in which his political poetry reflects his personal involvement in politics, but rather in

the way in which politics impinges on the acutely personal (see Appendix A, p.229ff). It is perhaps also the best example of his versatility in not only evoking sadness and frustration, but in recreating the urban landscapes against the background of which those emotions are explored. The poem describes his trip to Jamaica after the news of his father's death (June 1982) and provides him with an opportunity to reflect on the failure of Jamaica's independence, the internecine violence that has for long accompanied Jamaican electoral politics and that has spread into broader society,²⁸ and the general despair of the under-classes in neo-colonial Jamaica, 'where di present is haunted by di paas'.

As opposed to a jet-set tourist view of sunny Jamaica, Johnson presents us with a view of the under-class. Some of the descriptions are delivered at high tempo and the images flit past one, suggesting a similar bird's eye view to the tourist's, but with a different ideological perspective:

mi nevvah have noh time
 wen mi reach
 fi si noh sunny beach
 wen mi reach
 jus people a live in shack
 people livin back-to-back
 mongst cackroach an rat
 mongst dirt an dizeez
 subjek to terrorist attack
 political intrigue
 kanstant grief
 an noh sign af relief ...

an wen mi reach mi sunny isle
 it woz di same ole style
 di money well dry

di bullits dem a fly
 plenty innocent a die
 many rivahs run dry
 ganja planes flyin high
 di poor man im a try
 yu tink a lickle try im try
 holdin awn bye an bye
 wen a dallah cant buy
 a lickle dinnah fi a fly. (1991:34-36)

Compared to the delivery of the other stanzas in the poem, these two are delivered at a considerable speed, and adds to the frenetic nature of the poet's perceptions and the frantic nature of the visions.

It is against this background that Johnson meditates upon his father's death and this backdrop becomes the context in which he subsequently situates his father's death. Johnson comes from a peasant, subsistence-farming background (Johnson, 1982:163) and his father's positioning as an under-class citizen of Jamaica provides Johnson with the causal connections between economic deprivation in Jamaica and his father's death. When turning to his father's death, the poem's tempo slows down drastically and the tone is deeply melancholic. The connections between his father's death, on the one hand, and poverty and economic determinants, on the other, are drawn in the idiom of typical working-class leisure in Jamaica:

mi know yu try dada
 yu fite a good fite
 but di dice dem did loaded
 an di card pack fix
 yet still yu reach fifty-six
 before yu lose yu leg wicket.

Johnson's latest production, Tings an' Times, coming seven years after Making History, presents a new departure for his politics. The poems are generally more introspective and do not carry the defiance and anger of a large amount of his previous work. As such, the poetry is more analytic and dwells on what Johnson perceives to be an unfinished black revolution in Britain. He sees this as mainly due to an intellectual stagnation resulting from minute comforts gained by socially mobile blacks on entering British mainstream society. In this sense, it offers a retrospect on poems such as 'Di black petty booshwah' and simultaneously confers a prophetic quality onto that earlier poem. Two poems central to this are 'Mi revalueshanary fren' and 'Tings an' times'.

Stylistically, 'Mi revalueshanary fren' is reminiscent of poems such as 'Sonny's lettah', 'Want fi goh rave' and 'Street 66' in that it dramatises a dialogue between people (see Appendix A, p.231ff). This time, it is a revolutionary intellectual, painted in ironic terms, having a conversation with a friend. Despite all the prods and appeals for intellectual discussion analyzing, amongst other things, the dissolution of the Soviet state, all the revolutionary friend can manage is a repetitive, formulaic answer, rattling off the names of eastern bloc rulers who 'ad to go' (1991:57-59). The speaker persists: 'well mi nevah did satisfy wid wat mi fren mek reply/an fi get a deepa meanin in di reaznin/mih seh to him', and launches into questions about Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika. The revolutionary friend's reply is, not surprisingly, the same formulaic answer. The intellectual pursuits of the speaker are cut short when time runs out and he has to leave. For the sake of

compromise, he agrees with his revolutionary friend, 'in spite a [his] lack af andahstandin', and delivers the same refrain of revolutionary rhetoric devoid of meaning. This poem hints at self-criticism and is also a warning against falling into a trap and being subsumed by easy rhetoric.

'Tings an' times' is a more detailed reflection on a failed revolution, portraying a character washed up on a beach, reminiscing about 'dem despahrated days af defiance/wen young rebels did a fite gense oppreshan/wen young rebels did a fling fiah-bam' (1991:52-56; see Appendix A, p.233ff). Against this historical background, the character considers how these rebels, grown old, have become paralysed, middle-class intellectuals:

wan an two a fite di struggle in dem hed
lead de leadahless inna dem head
win di revalueshan in dem hed
all a tun prime ministah in dem hed.

Furthermore, there is an implicit appeal to remember that the middle-class structure of which these one-time rebels have now become part, has a history against which they themselves have reacted. It is an appeal not to get caught inside an amnesiac, middle-class media-gloss:

now dat wi gat wi council flat
an wi dis an wi dat
wi collah tee vee an all di mod con
now dat wi create some space
an nuff a wi own a lickie place

now dat wi gat we mp an wi black jp
 blacks pan di radio
 blacks pan tee vee
 wi si an wi laad an wi mbe
 a figat wi figat ar a it dat.

‘Tings an’ times’ can also be seen as a more detailed exploration of the theme of ‘Di black petty-booshwah’.

From the above discussion one can now consider the general themes in Johnson’s work: clearly, his themes are explicitly political and situated safely on the left, if not the far left. But it is within the specificity of his broadly progressive politics that one finds the thematic significance of his work. Throughout his work, apart from his latest collection, the political themes he deals with are narrowed down to those that have particular relevance to the black, working-class community (mainly West Indian) in Britain and, more particularly, the second generation of blacks there. This is the case whether the relevance is drawn directly, as his poems about everyday black life in Britain do, or whether he tries to place a local community’s struggles within the context of a broader, international context, as in ‘Di eagle and the bear’. Although Johnson cannot now be considered working-class, his early involvement with the Black Panther Youth League suggests an affinity between him and second-generation, black, working-class youth during the 1970s. It furthermore explains his desire to address the immediate political problems of that generation. That he turns to dub-poetry and that his poetry expresses thematic concerns directly related to the experiences of the black, British working-class of

his generation mean that he has this group as his primary, intended audience. It is difficult, for instance, to read 'Five nights of bleeding' - even if it was in Standard English - as an attempt to show white, middle-class audiences that blacks suffer but that they also indulge in 'black-on-black' violence.

Thematically thus, Johnson's work can be said to be committed to the black, working-class youth of the 1970s and their social and political concerns - or, at least, that Johnson is committed to addressing those concerns. In addition, his work is committed not only in that it speaks about them, but in the sense that it also speaks from their perspective, given his early social and class proximity to them. His criticism of misdirected anger amongst youth (as in 'Five nights of bleeding') does not come from the outside but from the inside; his criticism is not denunciatory since it insists on valuing the youth's recreational spaces and activities. At the same time, by representing day-to-day activities that include the recreational, Johnson values the everyday in their lives. This is political in two ways. Firstly, the mere representation is a political act in that it acknowledges a lifestyle and its problems largely ignored by official and white Britain. The majority of black Britons effectively either silenced or vilified by, and outside of, that country's political and economic processes,²⁹ their lives are represented and made to signify by Johnson. Secondly, Johnson shows how the everyday for working-class, black Britons is always, in more than intellectual terms, political, as in 'Sonny's lettah'. The question that now needs answering is: how does Johnson carry that commitment through in the forms of his art?

'The sound of shapes chanting loudly'

If Johnson's poetry is primarily about life as a second-generation black in Britain, it is also primarily for them: Johnson intends that group as the primary target audience, as a number of commentators on his work have pointed out.³⁰ Two potential problems emerge here which need clarification though. Firstly, the fact that Johnson's work has found an audience beyond the boundaries of second-generation, black, working-class youth in Britain (see Chapter 1, note 20), does not mean that Johnson's work overlooks the specific concerns of his local, fellow community. One can safely state that the intended, or more accurately, the intended primary audience as at least perceived by Johnson, consists of working-class, second-generation blacks in Britain. As Johnson himself states, referring to 'Bass culture' and 'Reggae sounds': 'I'm trying to understand the relationship between experience that goes into the music, into reggae music, what implication that has for the listener when he [sic.] hears his own experience on record' (in Partridge, 1985LP). '[T]he listener' here implies, given the history of reggae in Britain, someone from second-generation, black, working-class youth in that country. So, it is the experience of that listener which goes into the art and the work is intended for that listener.

Secondly, one has to guard against thinking of this primary audience as an homogeneous group, a mistake that Johnson falls foul of (see pp.25-29 above). Although he refers to a singular 'listener', it is clear that he is talking about his

intended audience. The perceived homogeneity of that audience is then reflected in the singular 'listener'. Furthermore, Johnson is both talking about reception and constituting his primary audience. While being mindful of the problems in assuming the audience as homogeneous, one has to admit that there are certain common historical experiences which a group can share. This is especially the case in terms of oppressive structures and societies which do oppress people as groups because of perceived commonalities, as in racial stereotyping. If there were no commonalities in historical experience, collective organisation and mobilisation would be impossible.³¹

If, as has been asserted, reggae and the cultural institutions surrounding it are important to second-generation, black Britons, and if Johnson speaks about and to that group, two primary points emerge. Firstly, it is important that he speaks about the common, nodal experiences of that group; this would be a commitment to that group as has been shown with poems such as 'Five nights of bleeding', 'Want fi goh rave' and 'Bass culture'. Secondly, it is important that he speaks to that group in a form with which they identify, or at least, with which they are perceived to identify.

The first observation in this regard is that Johnson's art is an oral art. Given his own perceptions of illiteracy and a low reading culture in the British black community,³² it is obvious that being committed to that community - speaking to and about them - means using an accessible, oral art. The second observation, closely tied to the former, is that it is an oral art distributed in the main with a

broad reggae accompaniment.³³ As an example consider again what Johnson intends to do with 'Bass culture' and 'Reggae sounds': presenting his audience with their own experiences and thus representing them to themselves. A considerable part of that 'experience' is connected to reggae, a musical form. The impact of rendering those experiences in the form associated with the experiences, or the form that in many aspects form the basis of those experiences (bluesdances, for instance), thus becomes greater.

The use of reggae, however, is a political gesture in another way, since Johnson uses a broadly-based reggae accompaniment to poems which do not specifically deal with bluesdance experiences. It is political because Johnson situates his poetry in a musical tradition which is familiar to and enjoyed by his intended audience, and which has a resonant political history. This positioning signals, for the audience, Johnson's appreciation of their common cultural traditions. Furthermore, it is a tradition in which musical form has always signified politically. From burra as 'open celebration of criminality' (Hebdige, 1977:143), to ska with its initial, post-independence optimism and rocksteady with its disenchantment, reggae shows a history in which a political stance - celebratory or resistant - was and is inscribed in form. Since he knows the history of reggae well, Johnson consciously situates himself firmly in this tradition (1982:163).

With this in mind, one can again consider the intended primary audience and see how Johnson's use of reggae gathers more political weight. If second-generation, black youth in Britain found a refuge in reggae, it was (and is) because

of attempts to respond to oppression and discrimination in Britain by forging a homogenised 'Caribbean identity', based on references to a Jamaican identity, and including a broadly-based Jamaican dialect and Rastafarian styles and language (see Chapter 2, notes 21 and 22). In fact, the spread and popularity of reggae itself can be attributed to this oppositional need (Jones, 1988:39, 43). Reggae - the form alone - once again already addresses a political need.

Johnson's historical perspective, however, inveighs against an acceptance of reggae and Rastafarianism as essentialist black discourses, as the discourses which capture an essentialist 'black experience'. In 'Reality poem', Johnson says:

w'en wi can't face reality
 wi leggo wi clarity
 some latch aan to vanity
 some hol' insanity
 some get vision
 start preach relijan
 but dem can' mek decishan
 w'en it come to wi fite
 dem can't mek decishan
 w'en it comes to wi rites. (1980:24; see Appendix A, p.237)

This poem is partly a criticism of Rastafarianism and, while Johnson's poetry seeks to connect with the experiences of black youth in Britain, he is not reticent to criticise them. In Rastafarianism he sees the classical opiate of the masses:

[P]eople are looking for ways of escaping, whether it be through Jah Rastafari - going back to Africa - through Pentecostal churches, through alcohol, through drugs or whatever ... ['Reality poem']

simply makes a plea for people not to seek ways of escaping from reality, but to confront realities face-on and try and transform them. (1982:164)

He sees the spread of Rastafarianism amongst youth in Britain as directly linked to the popularity of reggae and that 'Rasta has become the ideology of reggae music. It's very misleading' (1982:164). Part of Johnson's project is thus to de-mysticise particular notions of culture and the history of reggae as an aspect of that culture. He bemoans the ahistoricism in the British youth's identification with Rastafarianism (1982:164),³⁴ warns against 'trying to ape what is being done in Jamaica musically' (1982:163) and is adamant about asserting his black, British identity (Burnett, 1986:xlii). In other words, he is concerned with the ways in which Rastafarianism is appropriated as a timeless, black experience by British youth.

All these point to Johnson's attempts to historicise his art in a broadly materialist way. Historicising reggae is thus done through historicising its themes, as in 'Reality poem'. And - to evoke the seemingly tautological - part of historicising the themes is tied up with thematising reggae, the form; making reggae itself one of his themes historicises it because Johnson considers the music in the historical context of Britain. In 'Five nights of bleeding', for example, 'reggae' (as theme) is historicised by de-emphasising its Jamaican origin and placing it within the context of the bluesdance in Britain at a particular time.

Using reggae is also a way of finding an acceptable form with which to

criticise so that the criticism does not appear to be from the outside, similar to the way in which the content of a poem like 'Five nights of bleeding' can hardly be seen as criticism from an outsider. This would then be the formal equivalent of exploring the experiences of second-generation, black youth in Britain in such a manner as not to devalue those experiences - on the contrary, to actually place a value on it. The quality with which Johnson can explore experiences thematically comes from his 'insider's' social position, a position also inscribed in his use of reggae.

At the same time it is necessary to remember that Johnson is not a musician, but considers himself a poet, first and foremost (Denselow, 1989:143; Johnson, 1982:164; Partridge, 1985LP). However, the fact that he writes his poetry before he conceives of its musical accompaniment, does not mean that the musical accompaniment is a contrived imposition. Johnson's art exhibits a well-crafted, formal relationship between the poetry and the musical accompaniment, which also has political ramifications.

The deliveries of 'New Craas massahkah' and especially 'Five nights of bleeding' on In Concert with the Dub Band (1985LP) are of a highly rhythmical quality even though they are delivered without musical accompaniment. This points to an inherent rhythmical sense in Johnson's poetry, a rhythmical sense that is traced to reggae influences (Denselow, 1989:143; Dread Fred, 1979:70; Hay, 1978:142). Johnson states that, due to his interest in reggae since 1972 (1982:163), whenever he composes or writes his poetry, it follows the rhythms of a reggae bass

(Johnson, 1982:163; Partridge, 1985LP). Johnson also images his first four collections of recorded poetry as having been an 'apprenticeship' during which he tried 'to fuse the reggae rhythm into [his] poetry' (1985LP).

This is essentially what Oku Onuora (another dub-poet, formerly Orlando Wong) defines dub-poetry to be:

[It] is not merely putting a piece of poem pon [*sic.*] a reggae rhythm; it is a poem that has a built-in reggae rhythm - hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem. (in Morris, 1983:150)

One will have to add here that dub-poetry is neither - given the example of Johnson's work - the imposition of a reggae rhythm onto poetry. Simultaneously, there is no easy, implicit and automatic relationship between the two - reggae and poetry - as Onuora suggests. Morris traces the rhythmical quality of dub-poetry not only to reggae, but also to Jamaican speech (implying dialect speech). He quotes from Johnson's 'Five nights of bleeding' to illustrate an underlying reggae rhythm:

night number one was in BRIXTON
SOFRANO B sound system
was a beating out a rhythm with a fire,
coming down his reggae-reggae-wire. (Morris, 1983:151)

It is difficult, though, to detect a reggae rhythm in this poem if, firstly, one has not heard the poem performed by the poet, and secondly, if one is not aware of the

intonations and inflections of a broad Jamaican Creole.³⁵ In other words, one has to know the broad Jamaican Creole before one can appreciate the rhythmic inflections of Johnson's work in print; normally, this means being a person from a West Indian background. Johnson's choice of the Jamaican Creole therefore implies the automatic constitution of his intended audience. Here one has the final example of how Johnson, through formal aspects, tries to connect his poetry to his broad political agenda. If he sets out to empower second-generation, black youth in Britain, the formal aspects of Johnson's poetry, such as music and language, address that audience in no uncertain terms.

Considering Johnson's skilful use of internal rhymes and rhythms within the framework of Jamaican linguistic and musical traditions, the fusion of formal aspects and thematic concerns emerge into a sharp relief, as the refrain in 'New Craas massahkah' attests:

first di comin
an di goin
in an out af di pawty

di dubbin
an di rubbin
an di rackin to di riddim

di dancin
an di scankin
an di pawty really swingin

den di crash
an di bang
an di flames staat fi trang

di heat
 an di smoke
 an di people staat fi choke

di screamin
 an di cryin
 an di diein in di fiyah. (1991:38; see Appendix A, p.239ff)

It is however only when the listener or the reader is aware of the rhythmical qualities of Jamaican speech and music traditions that the relief stands out. In this way, by employing certain traditions, Johnson consciously targets a specific, clearly-defined group of people; and it is to them that the fusion of formal and thematic concerns, and of music and speech, speak loudly. Thus, while one can agree with Onuora and Morris, one needs to understand the impact of the relationships between dub-poetry, Jamaican Creole and reggae on an audience contextually: the power of the poetry is most when the listener/reader is historically close to the traditions as, for example, second-generation, black Britons are.

If, then, Johnson seeks to define or constitute an audience through music, he does this equally through the use of the Jamaican Creole. Although the Jamaican Creole and reggae music are considered rhythmically similar, one needs to be cautious and not see the two as one-to-one reflections of each other. The rhythmic commonalities are more part of an associative relationship, in a dialectic of influence, rather than simply the one being a reflection of the other. Once one is attentive to this, one can still consider the importance of language - specifically the broad Jamaican Creole - in Johnson's work, and as such against the backdrop of the

history and politics of that language in Britain.

It must be remembered that a broad Jamaican Creole becomes important to second-generation, black youth in their attempts to foster a general Caribbean identity. But just as Johnson's use of musical accompaniment is not simply 'putting a piece of poem pon a reggae rhythm', his use of a broad Jamaican Creole is not an unproblematic, 'instinctual' turn. His use of a broad Jamaican Creole is not, as Partridge suggests, by default, implying an unmeditated, natural form which was there all the time:

From the outset his poetry was revolutionary - not only in the radical, disaffected messages it contained and its stark grass roots realism, but in the forms it used. With no literary precedents to fall back on, Linton was forced to innovate form and language to fit the demands of his subject matter. (1985LP)

Johnson's innovation, firstly, is not as dramatic as Partridge suggests and there are literary precedents like Louise Bennett and the dub-toasters whose influence Johnson has admitted.³⁶

Secondly, Johnson can hardly be seen to have been 'forced' to turn to Jamaican Creole by default. If he was forced, it would be by political determinants and in a meditated fashion. As Johnson states:

A time came in the writing of my poetry where I couldn't properly express what I wanted to express within the English language. 'Cause one wanted to talk about the Caribbean or the black experience in Britain and it was only natural for me to do so in the everyday

language of the people. (1982:163)

This suggests a conscious decision. Johnson, as a university graduate, would and does have access to Standard English. Stocks, for instance, mentions that his first volume of poetry, Voices of the Living and the Dead, is written in Standard English (1991:480). It can moreover be argued that there is nothing essential in any dialect that makes it an inherently better medium for expressing a certain experience - any 'authenticity' language may have is an essentialist ascription by the critic, unless historically understood and delineated. As McCrum et al. state, the turning away from Standard English is a conscious choice on the part of dub-poets (1992:344). It is also a process ('A time came' in Johnson's words) which suggests a political gesture.

This political gesture in Johnson's work intimates a coming to terms with his intended audience. If nothing marks a dialect as inherently authentic, he could easily communicate 'the black experience' in any dialect that he has access to. The use of Jamaican Creole, however, both constitutes his audience and values their experiences in the form of that audience's perceptions, in their language. Both of these are political gestures and they are only 'natural' in the context of what Johnson perceives his intended audience to be - that is, in terms of an historical context.

In addition, if it is not simply natural (with its implication of being instantaneous), it is a process with its own dynamics of change. It has already been

mentioned that Johnson's first publication was in Standard English. The switch to a broad Jamaican Creole on his recorded productions is also not instantaneous but shows a process of change from a surface, sporadic use of Jamaican Creole to a more entrenched, consistent and deliberate use of it. This process is discernible not only in an overview of his oeuvre, but can be detected in the evolution from one recording to the next, between poems on one collection and as far as between stanzas of the same poem.

The two poems this author considers important to Johnson's political project because they deal with bluesdance culture are, for instance, broadly standard in their grammar.³⁷ Dialectal variation depends mainly on the vocabulary - with scattered bits of Jamaican or Rastafarian words - and Johnson's own delivery, where a Jamaican phonology comes into play. Consider a stanza from 'Five nights of bleeding'. The printed version reads:

night number one was in BRIXTON
 SOFRANO B sound system
 was a beating out a rhythm with a fire,
 coming down his reggae-reggae wire;
 it was a sound shaking down your spinal column,
 a bad music tearing up your flesh;
 and the rebels them start a fighting,
 the yout them jus turn wild.
 it's war amongst the rebels:
 madness ... madness ... war. (1975:15)

The obvious markers of a group-specific vocabulary are 'sound system', 'wire' (for 'sound system'), and perhaps 'reggae' and 'yout'. Otherwise, the printed version

shows very little dialectal variation. A few words are represented as phonetic spellings: 'doun', 'yout' and 'jus'. Any grammatical variation from Standard English can easily be ascribed to poetic license and an attempt by Johnson to provide and enhance rhythm: 'was a beating out a rhythm with a fire/comin doun his reggae-reggae wire' (emphases added). However, this example can be seen as a compromise between Standard English and Jamaican Creole: 'was beating' plus 'a beat', respectively. The repetition of 'reggae' could also be seen as a Jamaicanism.

It is, however, in the poem's oral rendition that especially a Jamaican phonology becomes clear. 'Rhythm' becomes 'riddim' (pronounced as [rədəm] or [rɪdəm]);³⁸ 'fire' becomes 'fiyah' ([faijə] or [faij ʌ], instead of standard [faɪə]) and, similarly, 'wire' becomes 'wiyah';³⁹ 'them' ([θem]) is pronounced 'dem' ([dɛm]);⁴⁰ the second syllable of 'amongst' is pronounced as the vowel in 'long'; and 'madness' becomes 'mudness' ([m ʌ dnðs], the initial vowel drawn out).

The two unambiguously Jamaican grammatical constructions in this poem are the omission of the apostrophe-s to indicate possession ('SOFRANO B sound system') and two features in the line 'the yout them jus turn wild'. Here, 'them' acts as a marker of plurality for 'yout', and the tense of the verb is present, though it should be past tense. Since the tense, however, has been previously marked ('night number one was'), the context of the verb would thus prevent an ambiguous tense. To a large extent, though, this poem's grammatical constructions remain Standard English.

Within the same collection of poems, one finds poems like 'Come wi goh

dung deh' ('Come we go down there'), where not only pronunciation, but also a Jamaican Creole grammar comes strongly to the fore. The printed representations of these poems provide stronger phonetic approximations, for example:

Maggi Tatcha on di go
wid a racist show
but a she haffi go ('It dread inna Ingran', 1980:14);

and,

de people demma fite
fe stay alive dung deh
de people demma fite
fe dem life dung deh. ('Come we goh dung deh', 1975:49)⁴¹

In both cases, the word 'fe/fi' (for) substitutes the Standard English infinitive construction 'to ...': 'she haffi go' and 'fite fe stay alive'.

It would take a full linguistic and phonetic study to demarcate the full extent of Johnson's use of Jamaican Creole and the fluctuations in his use of it. A suggested area of research would be to look at how the depth of the Jamaican Creole grammar changes dependent on the specific theme of a poem. So for instance, after Forces of Victory which marks a more decided use of the Jamaican Creole, Johnson once again fluctuates or 'compromises' between Standard English and the Jamaican Creole on Bass Culture, where 'Two sides of silence' is completely standard (it is not, particularly, a dub-poem) and where poems like

'Bass culture' and 'Reggae sounds' sit somewhere between the two dialects.

Whatever the case, Forces of Victory presents a more consistent use of the Jamaican Creole. Constructions from the Jamaican Creole are various and a few examples will suffice. They are: 'mi sarry fi tell y'u seh/poor lickle Jim get arres' ('Sonny's lettah', 1980:7; emphases added), where 'seh' is a substitute for the relative pronoun 'that',⁴² and the tense of the verb is not marked by inflection ('get arres'), with 'get' itself a substitute for 'was', the Jamaican Creole generally not having a passive voice construction; the Standard English construction 'pulled up' is turned into a Jamaicanism, 'a police van pull-up', similar to 'stan-up' ('Sonny's lettah');⁴³ a double negative: 'nat causin' no fuss' ('Sonny's lettah') and 'mi naw wok fi noh pittance' (Want fi goh rave', 1980:12); and, the omission of copulas: 'an it noh funny' ('It noh funny', 1980:10).

Throughout Johnson's work, there is thus a marked use of the Jamaican Creole, both in grammar and phonology. It is unlikely that all of the grammatical variations are due simply to what is generally considered poetic license, with the poet being concerned with formal considerations when making these changes. There can be little doubt that formal considerations like rhythm and rhyme do come into play and certain grammatical 'deviations' could be employed to overcome strictly formal obstacles. However, this is not always the case. Consider for instance the

following two lines:

we're di forces of vict'ry
an' wi comin' rite through. ('Forces of victory', 1980:22).

In the first line there is a copula (are), while the second line lacks one. Since the pronoun is contracted with the copula in the first line, making it one syllable long, it would make no rhythmical difference whether the copula was used or not. The absence of the copula in the second line quoted above is thus not due to a strictly formal (metrical) reason but can be ascribed to Jamaican Creole. The fluctuation of the use of the creole subsequently points to such use as process - as deliberate attempt - and not as an automatic, instantaneous turn. What this further points to is Johnson's awareness of grammar as much more than a formal structure, more than a form. Johnson is making a conscious attempt to use not only the phonology, but also the grammatical system of the Jamaican Creole. It is conscious, and not natural as he suggests, because although it becomes more marked especially after Forces of Victory, it is not entirely consistent but fluctuates along Johnson's own code-switching continuum. If there was any essential authenticity to the dialect and if there was a one-to-one relationship between a 'British-West-Indian experience' and Jamaican Creole, one would expect the language employed to be the 'authentic' language, instantaneously and consistently.

The argument is thus that the increased use of the creole signals a conscious attempt at garnering the political capital behind that language. If Johnson's use of it

was natural and automatic, and if language 'authentically' expresses an experience, one would not expect to find the fluctuations in its use. With his last sound-recording to date, the language is consistently a broad Jamaican Creole, with its own suggestions even of being an invented creole on Johnson's part. Both typographically and in his oral renditions of Tings an' Times, the language shifts to the extreme end of the creole continuum, with a significant loss in intelligibility to people not literate in the creole. Politically read, this parallels Johnson's themes in his latest work: if the poems are generally about a failed or unfinished black revolution in Britain, the acuity of Johnson's use of a broad Jamaican Creole unambiguously points to the target audience. A sense, also, of desperation emerges from the use of the creole, pointing perhaps to a desperate attempt on Johnson's part - parallel to the general despair of the poems - to reach as widely a West Indian audience as possible, with scant regard for listeners falling outside the linguistic, and therefore political, parameters of black Britain.

The overall important point, however, is that through these attempts Johnson makes important political gestures which include considerations of his perceived, primary audience. In the broadest terms, Johnson's political agenda involves giving a representative voice to a certain, historically conceived group of people, a main part of the agenda being to value their everyday experiences through their representation in art and to present this group to themselves. At the same time, because he is historically clear about whom he intends as his primary audience, he presents this group in the forms that are familiar to them, the forms themselves part

of his themes. Johnson's art is thus committed in complex and convincing ways: the decision of who to represent having been made, the themes determine the forms and sometimes the forms determine the themes. That this is not as 'logical' or 'natural', but a conscious decision on the part of Johnson, has been shown.

One now needs to put it in a concrete form within the theoretical parameters of the study. The group that Johnson sets out to represent to themselves is, firstly, a group from which he comes and, secondly, a racially and economically marginal group - in the main, second-generation, black, working-class youth in Britain. That Johnson's manifest politics is progressive and involves this group is clear from his biography and from the general themes of his work. Within the political definition of the 'popular' advanced in this study, Johnson's themes are generally popular and metaphorically 'by the people for the people', or committed to a progressive politics that addresses his intended audience. But a committed art form, the author has argued, should not only be committed in its themes (the 'tendency' art of Proletkult, for instance), but should show this commitment in its forms. Johnson's art, the author believes, shows this.

Because he is clear about whom his intended audience is, Johnson addresses them and represents them to themselves in a form that is committed - 'belongs' - to that audience. He is aware of a low literacy rate amongst this group and represents them to themselves in an oral art form. Historically, this group also attempts to forge a common identity around reggae and a general, broad Jamaican Creole. Johnson then represents his poetry in these forms and imbricates various facets of

his commitment with each other, to the extent that the forms and the themes become indistinguishable from each other, both determining and determined by each other. An experience closely associated with reggae - the bluesdance - becomes a theme and this very theme is performed with a broad reggae accompaniment.

There is, however, a problem with regards to Johnson's use of reggae which needs resolving. His early recordings (until Making History) were produced and distributed by major, big-business record labels (Virgin Records and Island Records) and while one can understand an artist's need to reach a wider audience through wider, established distribution networks, the demands of big business can normally augur ill for any popular art. Big business, which one can safely place on the side of capitalist-state hegemony, easily appropriates and co-opts the oppositional, partly in the name of profits, and also as part of an hegemonic project (see Chapter 1, note 28). Inevitably, this involves an aesthetic-political co-optation and a planing of the 'rough' political edges, reproducing a sanitised commercial form where there is a discernible correspondence between commercialisation and co-optation (Garofalo, 1987:78, 79).

Commercial success, Garofalo insists, does not mean a lack of artistic quality however, nor does it imply massification; commercial success does not 'preclude an artist from contributing to a culture of resistance' (1987:84). She mentions the relationship between an artist and the record company as one of the areas by which one can judge an artist's co-optation (1987:84).⁴⁴ The degree to which an artist can resist big-business demands to deliver 'commercially satisfactory' products can

then be read as a measure of resistance to such co-optation. The fact that Johnson was offered a generous recording contract by Island Records (Howe, 1984LP) is a measure of his commercial success. After the release of Bass Culture, however, he went into a hiatus and decided not to 'contrive new material simply to meet recording deadlines' (Howe, 1984LP). This resistance was further concretised when Johnson established his own record label, LKJ Records,⁴⁵ as a move to resist aesthetic and political co-optation (Johnson, 1982:164). It was also a political gesture in another way:

I aim to show by example what it is possible for artists to do by their own efforts, however small the impact I hope it will reach the stage where it is self sufficient Then I may be able to give a lot of young artists the opportunity to make at least one record for themselves. (Johnson, 1982:164)

In Concert with the Dub Band (1985LP) was subsequently released by LKJ Records in conjunction with Rough Trade, an independent label. Tings an' Times (1991LP), too, was released in conjunction with Stern's Records, another independent label.

The entire interplay of world markets, commercialisation, artistic commitment or co-optation, however, would require an in-depth economic study to trace to the full the implications of economic success for an artist's commitment. This chapter has attempted to highlight only a few of the factors that come into play when one considers cultural production in an ideological analysis. Through the example of Johnson's work one can thus see to what extent political commitment

stretches - it involves not only 'politically correct' themes, but demands the same commitment as far as the forms are concerned. Within the complex interplay between themes, forms and economic determinants, it is the author's belief that Johnson's poetry presents one with an art of a relatively high degree of progressive political commitment. Furthermore, while any analysis of art cannot be entirely objective, this analysis does not rest on a confrontation between the author's own explicit political demands and Johnson's work. Instead, this analysis has sought to determine the ways in which Johnson's art, in some of its formal aspects, respond to its own political demands.

Chapter 4: The performance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli

[I]t is an act of love of the [Black literary] tradition - ... - to bring to bear upon it honesty, insight, and scepticism, as well as praise, enthusiasm, and dedication;... It is merely a mode of critical masturbation to praise a black text simple because it is somehow 'black,' and it is irresponsible to act as if we are not all fellow citizens of literature for whom developments in other sections of the republic of letters have no bearing or relevance.

- Gates (1987:347)

Mzwakhe Mbuli was born in Sophiatown in 1959. Soon after, his parents moved to Meadowlands, Soweto, where Mbuli subsequently grew up.¹ Seven years younger than Johnson, Mbuli's life and rise to artistic status nevertheless run along lines parallel to Johnson's, despite differences of geography and respective socio-economic contexts. One difference, though, is that Mbuli never had the fortune to attend tertiary educational institutions, unlike Johnson who grew up in a society with a degree of compulsory, mass education. Mbuli does not provide personal reasons for this but one can presume it to fit into wider patterns of South African racial schooling. He does, however, pride himself on being 'a qualified graduate from the university of wisdom' (Mbuli, 1989a:15).²

As a child, Mbuli was exposed to black cultural activities in migrant labourers' hostels in Soweto, which he visited with his father, a mbube singer (traditional choral singing).³ Of the arts he was exposed to (and presumably influenced by), he cites mbube singing, 'traditional dancing' and traditional praise poetry.⁴ Like Johnson, Mbuli became involved in extra-parliamentary,

oppositional politics during the 1970s, although later in that decade and less directly than Johnson. Indirectly related to the political situation in Soweto during 1976, he joined a student music band 'to keep the fires burning' (Mbuli, 1990:20). In 1977, this group focused on the performing arts and found itself a name as a gesture against ethnic division: they named themselves Khuvhangano, Venda for 'unity' or 'solidarity' (Mbuli, 1990:23).

In 1981, at an all night vigil for slain Mashwabada Mayathula, a Soweto activist, Mbuli first recited his oral poetry. Soon he was requested to perform poetry at political meetings, rallies, funerals and concerts in South Africa. His career as political poet brought him into organisational prominence and in 1985 he was elected Transvaal media officer for the United Democratic Front (U.D.F.).⁵ In this capacity, he was influential in establishing the U.D.F.'s Cultural Desk in 1986 and formulating policy around the Cultural Boycott - the boycott being instituted, alongside existing economic sanctions, to isolate South Africa culturally. Mbuli eventually became the spokesperson/head of the Cultural Desk, a portfolio which he managed in such a way as to fall into disfavour amongst a number of South African cultural commentators. Increasingly, the Cultural Desk and Mbuli were seen as unaccountable and authoritarian (The New Nation, 18-24 January 1991:8),⁶ and the Desk closed by mid-1991 (The New Nation, 7-13 June 1991:23).⁷

Despite this apparent unpopularity, Mbuli rapidly rose to prominence and his oeuvre includes the sound-recordings Change is Pain (1986LP) and Unbroken Spirit

(1989LP), and a collection of poetry, Before Dawn (1989b).⁸ Already harassed and detained on numerous occasions by the South African Police since 1976, his first sound-recording, Change is Pain, was banned for its apparent revolutionary sentiments⁹ and only unbanned in 1990. Despite the banning and lack of radio and television exposure, Change is Pain and his second recording, Unbroken Spirit, have each sold more than 25 000 copies. By late 1989, his book, Before Dawn (first published in that year), had sold more than 5 000 copies, an impressive number for a book of poetry in South Africa.

Since 1987, the German Confederate of Trade Unions had been inviting him to Germany but the South African government continuously refused Mbuli a passport. This, the banning of his work, six months' detention in 1988 under the Internal Security Act, continued harassment by South African security forces (including alleged hand-grenade attacks on his house), and his and his wife's arrest in March 1989 and subsequent trial under the Arms and Ammunitions Act (the trial lasting until February 1991), focused international attention on him. In 1989 several embassies in South Africa supported a concert in solidarity with Mbuli; they appealed to the South African government to allow him to travel. In 1990 the State eventually granted Mbuli a passport and he toured Canada, Europe and Japan, performing poetry and participating in literary-cultural seminars and conferences. Mbuli is now an international success with frequent international tours where, reportedly, critics are unanimous in their praise for him. He has recently been commissioned by the B.B.C. to compose a poem which 'reflects the story of

apartheid in South Africa' (Makhaya, 1990:12).

Mbuli thus enjoys an enormous amount of prominence, nationally and internationally. He is hailed as South Africa's 'people's poet' and, as the B.B.C. commission indicates, seen as a representative voice of this country's oppressed majority. Numerous critics accordingly regard - in various ways - Mbuli's poetry as politically progressive. Kirsten Holst Petersen, for instance, states that the aim of 'Mzwakhe's political rhetoric ... [is] to strengthen the popular will to resist ... apartheid' (1991a:vii) and sees him as a symbol of that resistance (in Mbuli, 1991:67). Zoë Wicomb sees his poetry as countering the misinformation and censorship of the apartheid regime (1990:19).¹⁰ The apartheid South African State's banning of Change is Pain can be seen to furthermore enhance and secure Mbuli's position on the side of the left or, at least, on the side of a broad anti-apartheid movement. This designation, the author wishes to contend, does not automatically confer progressive status onto Mbuli's art. It seems, instead, that the banning expresses more the paranoia of a government fuelled by its total-onslaught discourse and consecutive states of emergency than it does about the functional power of literature.¹¹ Neither does the banning therefore necessarily indicate a progressive politics behind Mbuli's work. It is this author's contention, exactly, that Mbuli's art fails as progressive art and that the progressiveness or radicalness of Mbuli's art is an unfounded ascription on the part of most of his critics.

As with Johnson's poetry, Mbuli's poetry is to be interrogated in terms of its progressive politics and as a form of popular art as defined and discussed in

previous chapters. Although the overall approach to Mbuli's oeuvre is similar, the formal sequence of the discussion necessarily deviates from that of the analysis of Johnson's poetry. While the discussion in the previous chapter is in general agreement with Johnson's critics, the following discussion disagrees with Mbuli's critics; this author contends that Mbuli's poetry does not succeed, thematically and formally, as a popular, progressive art form. Since content and form are closely linked, it is difficult to read the content as progressive while being acutely aware of the forms contradicting the progressive politics apparent in Mbuli's words; it is therefore difficult to provide a general summary of Mbuli's work and from there on analyze the formal aspects of his poetry.

Since the first part of the analysis of Mbuli's work considers critics' acclaim for his progressive politics, it does not provide a map of his work; this to avoid a pre-emptive undermining of the poetry where the author's understanding of Mbuli's poetry is contrary to that of his critics. This first stage thus implicitly criticizes Mbuli's critics, by firstly accepting their reading that the content of his poetry is progressive and by subsequently arguing that the poetry does not fulfil the formal demands of that progressive project. The second stage goes beyond the critics' readings and is an ultimate critique of Mbuli's poetry on the grounds of a failed political vision. This critique is relatively independent of his critics' analyses but does critically reflect back on their readings. Simply put, Mbuli's poetry fails as popular art because of its political vision, a vision his critics generally regard as progressive or radical.

The discussion of Mbuli's work thus varies from the previous chapter in the following way. Firstly, the progressive content of Mbuli's poetry is initially taken as read; critical pronouncements on his work are then considered symptomatically. While reference is made to some of his poems during this discussion, a general summary is not provided. Secondly, an analysis of formal aspects - music and language - in Mbuli's poetry follows, to show how critics misread his poetry. Thirdly, the conclusions from the formal analysis is set in a reflective dialogue with the content of the poetry to show how silences thrown into relief by a reading of form are echoed in the content.

The state of criticism: 'Soothed by the perfumed rhetoric
of priests'¹²

The criticism on Mbuli reveals various silences which, the author believes, are both historical and structural in most criticism of black South African literature. An analysis of the criticism on Mbuli provides concrete examples of the problems and misreading that result from a criticism that appears weak, under-researched and ultimately debilitating because of an evidently occlusive search for a unitary, South African, 'national identity'.¹³ These structural weaknesses, it will be shown, lead to vague (and incorrect) critical conclusions; specifically, a critical project predicated uncritically on a general political vision ultimately damages that vision and results in spurious claims about artistic merit.

Here, the overall concern is to redress critical silences - situated within a broader context of black South African literary activity - by reading Mbuli comparatively with Johnson and as a specific case.¹⁴ It needs to be understood that this is not a dismissal of progressive and radical art per se; nor is it an uncritical dismissal of progressive South African art. It is an attempt to show, through a rigorous critical approach, that one can evaluate political art with regards to both its formal qualities and its connected politics.

Writing a decade ago, Sole identifies several problem areas in both black South African literature and the criticism thereof - specifically concerning literature written under the rubric of Black Consciousness.¹⁵ Some of the shortcomings he identifies in the criticism are: an easy recourse to (the African/South African) context of the literature while avoiding critically reading the text at hand (1983:54); a racial essentialism which precludes the literature from analysis since 'only blacks [and any black person?] can write successfully about blacks' (1983:54; parenthesis added) and the subsequent, uncritical and populist¹⁶ deployment by writers of epithets like 'the voice of the black people' (1983:66);¹⁷ critics' lack of knowledge about their fields (1983:55); and, how criticism is inhibited by 'simplistic assertions as to how the writer fits into, and responds to, the surrounding world' (1983:57).¹⁸ Ultimately, Sole traces these problems to an essentialist, Black Consciousness quest for a national South African culture with its subsequent recourse to the uniqueness of the (black) South African experience.

Without indulging in the intricacies of the processes involved,¹⁹ the

implications of such a recourse to a national uniqueness are obvious. It generally precludes the text from criticism because it assumes a natural equivalence between a (South African) black experience, the black writer and black literature. Simply put, literature by black South Africans is seen as necessarily about an 'authentic', unique, black experience and to criticise the literature equals devaluing that experience. In addition, it precludes the text from comparative analysis because of its recourse to the obviousness of the text's national origins. This, on its turn, leads to a subsequent critical silence. Everything and anything indigenous and (South) African may then be uncritically acclaimed as part of a political project because it is seen as the (re-)assertion of a suppressed national identity. The text is thus read in the context only of a national (sometimes pan-African) tradition and any extra-national perspectives and insights are discarded because of a supposed 'alienness'.

This silence often leads to aesthetic claims which are either ill-informed or misguided. Mafika Gwala, for instance, hails Mbuli as an innovator (1988:89), with Gwala failing to refer to a long tradition of this genre - oral performance with musical accompaniment - a tradition with specific precedents in both South Africa and elsewhere.²⁰ Gwala thus claims an innovation on Mbuli's part without corroborating it through a comparison to past precedents. The point of controversy is thus Gwala, as critic, asserting a claim without qualifying it. Specifically, this author wishes to contend, Gwala is able to claim Mbuli's innovation exactly because of the absence of any comparative insight.

Implicitly, Peter Horn also sees Mbuli as an innovator, despite situating

Mbuli, formally, within older traditions:

Mbuli relies heavily on all the techniques of a rhetoric, which derives on the one hand from the African evangelical and revivalist churches, and on the other hand from the traditional imbongi, but to carry a message which - at least superficially - is neither revivalist nor traditional. (1991:4-5)

It is only in relation to a national tradition of revivalist evangelism and praise poetry that Mbuli's work appears new, 'neither revivalist nor traditional'. His poetry, it can be argued, is technically much closer to Jamaican dub-poetry than to praise poetry. As such, it lacks the innovation Horn attempts to ascribe to it and Horn's critical inadequacy is due to a lack of knowledge of the genre. Specifically, the claimed innovation is possible because Horn situates Mbuli only inside a national tradition. The basis for comparison and for measuring the claimed innovation is thus narrow and limiting.

In opposition to this, it could be argued, a more critical evaluation of an artist's innovation, especially where popular cultural production is concerned, can be derived by broader (geographical) comparison. As Karin Barber argues, popular cultural productions separated geographically and by diverse socio-economic contexts are normally closer to each other in form, content and presentation, 'making them more like each other than they are like the "traditional" or "elite" arts of their own culture' (1987b:107). When one thus considers the fact that Johnson started practising a markedly similar art in the late 1970s, it is difficult to

claim Mbuli's use of the genre as innovation. The genre has been developed earlier and not only in other countries, but in South Africa as well.

Mbuli's poetry is ostensibly much closer to that of Johnson's than to, say, African revivalist churches or the izibongo tradition. Both Johnson and Mbuli use electronically produced music to back their poetry and both music forms have similar predication traditions.²¹ With this kind of musical backing and the form of its publication, the poetry is conceptualised primarily to be distributed by sound-recording, and not mainly for political rallies, concerts, church congregations and tribal chiefs. The emphasis here is not on the kinds of events at which Mbuli does perform, but rather the prime mode of distribution. While Mbuli might have been influenced by the izibongo tradition, the dynamics of production and distribution and the style of poetry is much closer to dub-poetry. A comparison with that genre is thus critically more justified and will be more illuminating than a geo-politically bound comparison.

Gwala and Horn's critical shortcomings - a closure from outside comparisons, whatever the reasons - are more acute when one considers that they appear a number of years after Sole's complaint. But this brings one to a central problem in South African literary criticism. While identifying the problems in the field, Sole also mentions that the problems occur as a repetition of previous problems. The specificities of the problems may differ, but they remain as structural traces. In the early 1980s, for instance, materialist critics were still using Black Consciousness forms of thought while simply changing the content of the

categories:

[O]ne sees many of the populist generalisations and preconceptions of previous literary thought repeated. The phrases 'the people' or 'the struggling masses' are substituted for 'blacks' or 'black people', but the level of generality in some cases remains much the same. (Sole, 1983:67)

The criticism on Mbuli comes, this author believes, as another repetition of modes of thought in South African literary criticism and, frustratingly so, a decade after Sole's criticism.

With the criticism on Mbuli there is an attempt to, paradoxically, preclude it from criticism in general. This is done in a number of ways. Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, in his preface to Mbuli's volume of poetry, asserts that Mbuli's work has no literary pretensions and 'may not rank as one of the best literary works in the world of literature' (in Mbuli, 1989b:3). The implication is obvious: Mbuli's work is not supposed to be evaluated by comparison to such literary works. Paradoxically, Mkhathshwa cites Albert Camus, a 'literary' figure, so as to lend credence to his own assertions of Mbuli's status as rebel. As long as support for Mbuli can thus be garnered from an other, 'literary' world, Mkhathshwa is comfortable with using it.

Marlene van Niekerk, almost apologetically, states that Mbuli's poetry does not satisfy 'white academic standards', but - a white academic herself - nevertheless reviews his work (1989:15).²² More problematically, reviewing Ari Sitas's

Tropical Scars in the same piece, she states that with Sitas's work one can, 'with justification, [be] stricter, because here evidently is a poet who knows and controls the Western metaphor-tradition well' (1989:15; own translation). She goes on to say that Sitas's poetry has 'more poetical detail, concreteness, irony and biting humour' than Mbuli's (1989:15; own translation).²³

The contradictions and problems in Van Niekerk's critical approach are obvious. Firstly, her critical relativism is loaded with a patronising attitude towards Mbuli's work. Secondly, one has to query to what extent she can shed her 'white academic standards' in order to evaluate Mbuli's work in any case. Van Niekerk, indeed, goes on to review Mbuli's work in a register and vocabulary markedly academic, showing that one cannot simply discard these standards as if they were robes. The criticism here is about the validity of doing so, because Van Niekerk's methodological relativism verges on a paternalism similar to the romantic view of the working-class Sole sharply criticises in some intellectuals (1991:85).

Furthermore, the criticism against Van Niekerk is not in support of a universalist, 'objective' critical paradigm: the concerns and forms of Sitas's poetry do differ from that of Mbuli's, and will need different approaches. Van Niekerk, however, asserts a difference in order to firstly exempt Mbuli from critical consideration, but nevertheless compares the two poets. Eventually, her criticism collapses in on itself because of this. Simply put, she asserts that one cannot consider Mbuli's poetry in terms of the standards she immediately goes on to employ in her comparison. In addition, the terms she uses to show how Sitas's

poetry differs from Mbuli's do not suggest the supposedly different approaches the two poets respectively command. As categories for a critical comparison, the terms Van Niekerk uses provide no insight in terms of differentiation between the genres the two poets respectively employ.

Consider in comparison, for instance, Johnson's 'Reggae fi dada' (1991:34-36) and Mbuli's 'I have travelled' (1989b:28).²⁴ Both poems narrate the speakers' travels and their impressions of places visited. Mbuli, in an attempt to include too much, ends up merely listing the names of places and a few recognizable icons of apartheid:

In Qwa-qwa I found no one;
In Lebowa I was unfortunate;
In Transkei I talked about Pass Laws;
Transkei Citizenship-card was the answer;
In Bophuthatswana I talked about democratic and
social rights;
Sun City was the answer.

In kwa-Venda I talked about people's security;
The building of Thohoyandou police station was the
answer;
In Ciskei I talked about trade unionism;
The banning of SAAWU (South African Allied Workers
Union) was the answer;
In kwa-Zulu I talked about people's army;
Tribal factions and intimidation was the answer...

Here, Mbuli employs easily identifiable symbols of apartheid-capitalism, in uncomplicated opposition to an ill-defined ‘revolutionary’ ideal, so that the political ironies become easily recognizable and predictable. The invocation of a

'revolutionary' ideal - though ill-defined - is clear because of Mbuli's references to signposts specifically familiar as targets ('Pass Laws') or ideals ('democratic and social rights') of a broad anti-apartheid struggle.

Similarly, the Sun City metaphor is clichéd and, as David Attwell suggests in his discussion of debates on the use of realism by black South African authors, the only demand it places on the reader/listener is 'the faculty of recognition' (1990:97).²⁵ Indeed, at the first utterance of the poem, the reader's recognition is demanded: the poem names a 'homeland', thus opening the trope for the predictable series of indictments of apartheid's homeland policy. There is, for instance, no attempt to describe the ways in which Sun City contradicts or frustrates a discourse on 'democratic and social rights'. The grammatical construction of the poem echoes this thematic sparsity. The series of lines with grammatical co-ordination testifies to Mbuli's naive oppositions and uncomplicated political ironies: 'In Transkei I talked about Pass Laws [but] Transkei Citizen-card was the answer'.

Johnson, on the other hand, uses selected detail to describe the political ironies of post-independence Jamaica in a tangible way that goes beyond the rhetorical slogan. That he does not name the island is significant in that it does not elicit the reader's immediate vouchsafing and response to the political theme. In fact, the poem starts out as the requiem to 'dada' the title suggests it is. While the images he uses are not entirely new, Johnson avoids naive moral assertions by

simply juxtaposing a series of images:

an wen mi reach mi sunny isle
 it woz di same ole style
 di money well dry
 di bullits dem a fly
 plenty innocent a die
 many rivahs run dry
 ganja planes flying high
 di poor man im a try
 yu tink a lickle try im try
 holdin awn bye an bye
 wen a dallah cyaan buy
 a lickle dinnah fi a fly. (1991:34-36)

Note the way in which irony is presented. As an introduction to the description, Johnson provides the recognizable tourist image of a 'sunny isle' in order to subvert it. The subversion, however, is not done by crude opposition. While the subsequent images contradict the image of the 'sunny isle', they are not founded on a grammar of simplistic moral opposition. The list of images (excepting the last two lines) are all co-ordinate to 'it woz di same ole style', while the first line is a subordinate clause, an adverbial of time modifying the co-ordinate clauses. The grammar thus parallels the oblique construction of the irony: the reference to 'sunny isle' is subordinated and the island's tourist image is thus overwhelmed by the aggregated problems which provide a wider, more insightful context. The verbal wit of the last two lines then clinches the political irony: the tourist image is of no use when, in addition to all the problems listed, the revenue is deflated. In grammatical terms, the subordinate clause, which is to serve as temporal modifier to the main clauses,

is instead modified by the co-ordinated main clauses. Translated thematically, the image of a sunny island, instead of influencing the reader/listener's perspective of the island, is itself overwhelmed by the images of poverty, thereby subverting the expectations of a tourist image of Jamaica.

Van Niekerk's evaluation of Mbuli falls short on two inter-related points. Firstly, she exhibits a patronising relativism by claiming that her critical terms describing Sitas's poetry - poetical detail, concreteness, irony, humour - do not apply to Mbuli. Implicitly, she proffers the differences in genre between the two poets as logic for this. Secondly, as shown above, Van Niekerk's terms are applicable in describing Johnson's poetry, a genre markedly closer to Mbuli's than to Sitas's. The fact that Mbuli's poetry does not satisfy the demands of Van Niekerk's critical or aesthetic terms does not automatically point to a lack on the part of supposed 'white academic standards'. Nor does Mbuli's failure of Van Niekerk's critical terms point to characteristics of the genre Mbuli employs. It is ultimately the lack of knowledge of Mbuli's genre that lies at the base of Van Niekerk's critical floundering, both in her logic and the subsequent exemption of Mbuli from those terms.

Van Niekerk is correct when she implies the lack of detail and concreteness in Mbuli's poetry, but such lack is not because of Mbuli's genre, nor does the lack point to supposed inadequacies in paradigms of criticism. What emerges from this is a disquieting failure in dealing with Mbuli's poetry, couched in what can be termed an oxymoron: apologetic-praise. In Van Niekerk's case, she apologises for

the poetry not meeting certain standards, then paradoxically praises the poetry, using the register of those 'standards', even if to show how the poetry disregards them.

Karen Press (1990b:49-51) is caught in thought processes similar to Van Niekerk's, though Press's are more sophisticated. The first sentence of her review of Mbuli's poetry sounds the alarm because it constructs a binary opposition hinting at a moral position in favour of Mbuli: 'In this era of doubt and deconstruction, rhetoric has been disqualified as an art' (1990b:49). Here, 'deconstruction' pejoratively marks academic discourse. Since 'rhetoric has been disqualified as art', 'art' resides on the same level as 'deconstruction', rhetoric having been subordinated during the ascendancy of 'deconstruction'. Simply put, at a time when 'deconstruction' rules, 'rhetoric' falls outside the domain of 'art'. 'Rhetoric' is subordinate to 'art' and, presumably, to and because of 'deconstruction', or academic discourse. Press's passive verb erases the agent of this action, leaving the agency open to interpretation; but since the action happens during the ascendancy of an academic discourse, the agent reappears in the temporal phrase '[i]n this era of doubt and deconstruction'. Given the lack of explicit agency in Press's statement, it is not only the academic discourse that subordinates rhetoric to art, but Press's simultaneous will for that discourse to do so. This, presumably, is done to exempt 'rhetoric' from academic analysis, generally, and to exempt Press from bringing such analysis to bear on Mbuli, specifically. In a sense, Press creates a battle between academic discourse as villainous super-power and rhetoric as

underdog.

Since her article is titled as a review of Mbuli's poetry, there is little doubt as to which side Mbuli's poetry falls on: rhetoric, now shown to have been exiled by academic discourse. Simultaneously, this exile is fortunate because, implicitly, academic discourse sparer rhetoric from scrutiny by ostracising and ignoring it. Press then provides reasons for this ostracism: suspicion of the analytic capabilities (or more accurately, lack thereof) of rhetoric, its political motives ('with their own purpose'), and its crude directness. While she criticises this ostracism by herself deploying a series of rhetorical questions, she admits to the problems of rhetoric; in fact, she compares it - rhetoric in general - to 'that other, old rhetoric,... - the rhetoric of Cliff Saunders, Network, Volksfeeste' (1990b:49).

Talking about rhetoric in general, about the form rhetoric, Press both criticises and agrees to the subordination of rhetoric.²⁶ Arguably, this discomfiture and wavering involve a refusal. Although Press is talking about rhetoric as a general form, she is ultimately preparing to talk about Mbuli's poetry and seducing her reader into support of a refusal to read Mbuli's poetry through the spectacles of academic discourse. Thus, she bemoans and criticises the banishment of rhetoric (or apologises for Mbuli's art being rhetoric) but admits the validity of this consignment because rhetoric submits the reader/listener to its lies, like the rhetoric of the apartheid establishment: 'We assume that rhetoric is, by definition, a betrayal of truth' (1990b:49). The refusal is evident in the fact that, aware of the negative connotations of the form rhetoric, Press goes on to assert the difference

between Mbuli's rhetoric from that form in general. In Press's argument, rhetoric in general is to be distrusted - because of the characteristics of the form - unless it exhibits an agreeable content. This second step comes abruptly: 'But a different rhetoric is present in much of the new culture of liberation' (1990b:49; emphasis added).

The contradictions of Press's arguments are clearer when one considers that she reads meaning into the form rhetoric, in general, then goes on to say that Mbuli's rhetoric is different from other rhetoric. She refuses to critically read the form of Mbuli's poetry, even though she couches her review in a list of formal aspects (and, the reader should note, in academic vocabulary). This returns one to one of the general arguments of this present study: critical acclaim of Mbuli's poetry is off the mark because it does not pay attention to formal aspects of his work. To borrow Sole's terms of argument, past criticism of Mbuli's poetry does not pay attention to the text but revels in its lip service to the context of the text so as to elevate it from textual criticism. Perhaps one can also read this as an inability on the critic's part. In the event of such an actual critical failure - where a critic is unable to engage in textual criticism - the recourse to sociological discussions of context possibly signifies a process whereby the critic avoids textual criticism. The critical attention this study suggests as redress then demands a knowledge of the genre and of other practitioners in the field, especially where lack of such knowledge has already been identified by Sole as a chief problem in the criticism of black South African literature.

Consider briefly, for instance, Press's rhetorical question which is meant to criticise rhetoric's submission to art: 'Why? Because nothing that can be bellowed in a soccer stadium can be capable of addressing intimate complexities (as art is supposed to do)?' (1990b:49). One knows that Press is not talking about rhetoric in general; she is, ultimately, preparing to read, listen to and evaluate Mbuli's work, an oral poetry. Through her manoeuvre she herself has consigned Mbuli's work to be considered as rhetoric, and not as oral poetry. For Press to consider it as oral poetry would, amongst other things, demand a more critical consideration of the form of that specific genre, and a consideration of it in comparison to other practitioners in the field, such as Johnson. In her rhetorical questions, Press implies that the 'rhetoric' (here, as has been argued, referring to Mbuli's poetry) is considered subordinate to art - less respectful than art - because academic discourse demands that art addresses 'intimate complexities'. In Press's argument, the reader is thus prepared for such rhetoric. By demonising academic discourse for its supposed elevation of complexities, Press commissions the reader's support in not condemning Mbuli's poetry for its lack of complexities. Following through on her logic, the reader should expect a lack of 'intimate complexities' in Mbuli's poetry, but not see it as an inability on his part. It is rather that academic discourse has led one to revere 'intimate complexities' found in 'art' and to deride the lack thereof in 'rhetoric' (read 'Mbuli's oral poetry').

Press's view of Mbuli also rests on his poetry's confirmation of ill-informed expectations, on Press's part, concerning oral poetry. Basing criticism on fixed (and

negatively defined) expectations of what oral poetry should be and then acclaiming the poetry because it confirms those expectations is circular, exposes a lack of knowledge about the field and implicitly denies the existence of oral poetry which does not satisfy such expectations. In addition, the inability to address 'intimate complexities' has little to do with the characteristics of the genre.

A simple comparison with Johnson, who often performs his poetry to large audiences, will show the depth of feeling he can evoke in a single poem. To use a previous example, 'Reggae fi dada' moves from personal feelings of loss and sadness at the death of the speaker's father to a sadness that moves to a broader political disillusion at the island's ecological and political dissolution; and from disorientation through the juxtaposed images of post-independence Jamaica back to the personal sadness that is finally situated inside the broader political context. Similarly, 'New Craas massahkah' (1991:38-42) describes the initial joviality at a teenage party and the panic that breaks loose as a fire erupts, both these feelings encapsulated by the rhythm of Johnson's delivery (pp.99-100 above). The poem then analyzes the aftermath by powerfully evoking the community's feelings of shock, anger, confusion, melancholy, fear and uncertainty. Similarly, the complex analysis and feelings of disillusion, despair and boredom that Johnson evokes in 'Tings an' times' can hardly be disputed (1991:52-56; see pp.104-105 above). By implying that one should not expect 'intimate complexities' from Mbuli's poetry because it is rhetoric - an oral poetry 'bellowed in a soccer stadium' - Press exhibits a lack of knowledge about the field of this form of oral poetry. Similar in

form to Mbuli's poetry, Johnson's work does exhibit the 'intimate complexities' Press claims the genre is incapable of.

Zoë Wicomb falls into similar traps but along a different route. She uncritically summons up Ong's categories and applies it to Mbuli's poetry: the poems are thus 'successful speech-events' when they employ 'formulaic expressions, directness, repetition, restating of the known and choruses' (1990:19). When Ong's categories prove insufficient, instead of critically reflecting back on the theoretical perspective she uses, Wicomb succumbs to conjecture. She quotes from a Mbuli poem:

This is the voice of anger;
Concomitantly embedded in the emotions of man;
Like roots entrenched in the grounds of gravity...
(*'The voice of anger'*, Mbuli, 1989b:46)

and notes the subordinated clauses. Wicomb's conjectural response, based on Ong's perspective, effectively refuses the existence of grammatical subordination in oral poetry: 'Perhaps this poem was not written for performance' (1990:19). This conclusion shows an inability on Wicomb's part to question the theoretical perspective when such theory cannot account for an actual phenomenon. Unaware of both the variety in oral poetry and of debates in theoretical orientations concerning oral literature, Wicomb falters because, in short, her expectations are overshot. As Daniell suggests of Ong's theories, Wicomb's reliance on Ong leads her to 'simply [fail] to explain actual human discourse' (Daniell, 1986:189).

Hampered by a theoretical perspective deeply insufficient and confronted by examples of poetry which do not fit snugly into Ong's categories, Wicomb's conclusions are highly illogical and dubious.

An awareness of the field thus provides one with a critical, comparative perspective which avoids hasty, uncritical acclaim that can eventually become patronising of a poet. Awareness of theoretical debates within the field of oral literature, for instance, prevents one from hiding the supposed shortcomings of a genre or a poet behind a singular, homogeneous labelling of oral poetry, whatever one's reason is for doing so. Finally, knowledge of the field prevents one from collapsing into a tortuous logic which is at the very best laughable, but at the worst disturbing, as is the case with Kirsten Holst Petersen.

Petersen's utterances on both Mbuli and, more generally, the political literature of the broad anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (1991a and 1991b) reveal the populist formations which Van Niekerk and Press's arguments, although not expressly verbalised, can easily give into. Petersen firstly suggests the need for 'a different set of critical tools and standards' to deal with Mbuli's poetry. These include 'the event, the audience, the purpose, the aesthetics of a mass rally rather than that of poetic diction, the cliché's capability of carrying meaning in certain situations etc.' (1991a:iv).²⁷ Note that the list represents what Sole criticises as 'at least lip service to the social, political and historical surroundings of the literature rather than gazing fixedly at discrete texts' (1983:54). Paying attention to these items deflects attention from the text or the poetry and opens the ground for a

populist and patronising approval. By singling out these items - so as to present them alone as the terms of investigation - is fruitless because they preclude comparative analyses. These categories are presented in supposed opposition to 'traditional methods of literary criticism' which, one can safely presume, is meant to signify criticism of printed literature or what has come to be known as 'Western standards'. The gesture is circular. Categories are provided to show how oral literature differs from print literature and why one needs a different theoretical approach. The circle is completed when the oral literature is acclaimed for its difference from print literature in terms of the expectations set up in the first move.

Apart from that, Mbuli's poetry is, as has been argued, not produced primarily for 'mass rallies': the 'event' of performance is mainly the recording studio. The categories 'event' and 'mass rally' thus become less useful than Petersen admits. Moreover, the terms 'audience' and 'purpose' cannot be used to indicate an approach different, in the main, from an approach to printed literature. They become less useful for dealing with Mbuli's poetry as a 'different' literature because these categories are also applicable to printed literature.²⁸

Petersen's logic finally reveals its contradictions when, after stating that Mbuli's poetry, when read, does not satisfy the demands of 'traditional methods of literary criticism', she claims: 'Perhaps certain types of lifestyles do not lend themselves to literary contemplation or stylistic innovations' (1991a:iv, v).²⁹ Admittedly, she is here referring specifically to prison writing, but this statement does follow soon after her implied disclaimer that Mbuli's poetry should not be

considered by using 'traditional methods of literary criticism'. Using emotive references, Petersen elevates experience in much the same way as the racially essentialist formulation which provides that 'only blacks can write successfully about blacks' (Sole, 1983:54). Thus she 'apologises' for Mbuli's poetry not being literary, then elevates it because its lack of literariness supposedly comes from experiences one can obviously not devalue (mass funerals and prison torture). The implication is obvious: since Mbuli knows these experiences (he has suffered detention and alleged torture, and he has performed poetry at mass funerals), he must necessarily write successfully about it.

Overall, it is clear that Mbuli's critics are caught in various critical compromises. Whether there is a specific political gesture behind this, in the sense of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's 'national self realisation in critical assessments' (1989:17), is not clear. And whether these assessments might lead to the 'nationalist myth' Ashcroft et al. warn against, is not clearly evident.³⁰ That they do lead to a myth of sorts is partly what this project seeks to show.

Mbuli's critics show a disturbing inability to deal with his poetry in a rigorously critical way. This is partly due to their lack of knowledge of the genre and partly due to a reluctance to look outside the immediate context of Mbuli's poetry. The two points may be connected: unaware of other practitioners of this form of oral poetry, the critics are unable to critically consider Mbuli's art. In opposition to this, a comparative approach can lead one to consider in detail, and critically, some of the formal aspects of Mbuli's art alongside that of Johnson's.

Analyzing formal aspects, one may argue, avoids over-hasty political sanctioning because a symptomatic reading of formal characteristics can show the ways in which the ostensible content of texts are either supported or contradicted by formal aspects. The next part of this chapter attempts to show that, even if one accepts the critics' assertion of Mbuli's radical politics, the relationship between a supposedly progressive content and the formal categories of music and language belies the progressive politics. The nature of this relationship will be explored so as to reconsider Mbuli's art as politically popular.

'Admire me I am the beats...'

The form of music which Mbuli mostly uses as accompaniment to his poetry is broadly known as mbaqanga, although he uses a broader township jazz (sometimes called Afro-jazz, itself closely related to mbaqanga) as accompaniment to a few poems (e.g. 'The day shall dawn' [1986LP], 'Crocodiles', and 'Achimurenga' [1989LP]). In a few instances, poems are also backed by a broad, reggae-influenced sound, like 'Triple m' (1986LP) and 'Ngizwa ingoma' (1989LP). In general, though, the musical accompaniment is in the main mbaqanga.

The development of mbaqanga stretches back to the late 1930s and comes from what is generally considered South Africa's first working-class, urban music, namely marabi.³¹ Marabi developed during the 1920s as a syncretism of various styles of music from a diverse range of sources from both traditional, indigenous

forms and 'Western-derived popular music' (Ballantine, 1987:2).³² In this regard, for instance, Jonathan Drury notes elements of Cape klopse music (itself derived from nineteenth-century American minstrelsy), American ragtime, brass band, and Portuguese guitar (1985:28, note 145). The syncretic character of marabi can be ascribed to the advent and subsequent increase in black urbanisation - following the diamond boom in Kimberley and the later gold boom on the Witwatersrand - whereby various local, rural cultural traditions came into contact with each other and with urban forms. Cradled in primarily the shebeen culture, marabi marked not only a musical style, but both a social situation and a cultural vision (Rörich, 1989:83). This, the fact that marabi culture threatened the newfound middle-class sensibilities of a rising black elite (Ballantine, 1987:3),³³ and perhaps the fact that urban performing arts were often seen as a disintegration of 'tribal' traditions (Erlmann, 1991:2), made for it being scorned and vilified by the black, professional- and middle-classes.³⁴

Despite marabi culture causing discomfort with the middle-classes, by the 1930s the majority of marabi music performers were middle-class (Ballantine, 1987:3). With increasing exposure to mainly American films and records, the marabi bands started playing swing and were soon playing to mostly white audiences in white areas. Following the implementation of the Pass Laws and the ensuing repression in the 1940s however, these black performers were prevented from playing in the white areas and returned to play in the townships. By then heavily influenced by swing, the bands did not revert to marabi, but changed

accordingly to the demands of black audiences while retaining elements of marabi and swing. Thus they started to play what was to be called mbaqanga and township jazz (Ballantine, 1987:3-4). The new elements included Zulu styles of acoustic solo guitar, kwela,³⁵ African melody, and Sotho and Zulu concertina traditions, while the music was now mainly performed on electric instruments.

This new music proved to be popular and contained elements of social commentary and protest, commenting on the behaviour of policemen, gangsterism, prostitution and poverty. During the anti-pass campaigns of the 1950s, it was readily adapted to the themes and protests of the day (Coplan, 1985:165). The form of the music became politically significant, as its name, mbaqanga, suggests. It is Zulu for steamed maize bread. The term thus came to signify the political and economic import of the form in two ways: it was the source of collective, psychological sustenance of a community and, more literally, it was a source of income for its musicians (Coplan, 1985:161).

But mbaqanga was not a form without ambiguity. Following its commercialised recording and massification in the mid 1950s, it suffered scorn and vilification in two ways, suggesting its ambiguity and its uneasy straddling of the mass/popular culture divide. Firstly, it was popular amongst especially working-class audiences and, according to Sipho Mabuse's analysis, invoked a possible middle-class distaste, similar to the scorn levelled at marabi. Talking about his music group 'Harari', he says: '[A]s a high school band - a middle class band - we were not playing mbaqanga, and at that time people were only into mbaqanga' (in

Andersson, 1981:156; emphases added). Secondly, while it was possibly scorned by middle-class sensibilities, mbaqanga was also dismissed for being a commercialised form. This followed its massification and the radio time it enjoyed as a sanitised musical form; it came to be known, derogatorily, as msakazo, meaning 'broadcast'.³⁶

This provides an example of how popular cultural formations, when taken out of the hands of their original producers by big business, become massified. Its 'sanitary' form has little to do with any intrinsic qualities, or lack thereof, in the style mbaqanga itself.³⁷ Mbaqanga does not contain msakazo as a nucleus, something intrinsic, which lends itself to msakazo, there to be mined by the record companies. Instead, the commercialisation of mbaqanga is a process whereby the music is made to be msakazo. As Coplan states:

Even if singers, dancers and musicians present themselves at the studio as a unit, they are most often regrouped according to the (studio) producer's concepts of sound, style and presentation. New groups are given copies of recent mbaqanga hits to imitate, and rehearse for a year before they can go on tour. (1985:185)

One can thus not dismiss mbaqanga simply because record companies had produced a sanitised form of it in msakazo.

The history of mbaqanga is similar to that of reggae in that it, following in the tradition of marabi, involved the cultural responses of an emerging urban proletariat to its new surroundings. In the same way, ska and rocksteady, the two

main forms of reggae, developed from burra and mento, the earliest forms of urban, proletarian music in Jamaica. Mbaqanga's capacity for social and political comment, and the early shifts from marabi-swing to mbaqanga as formal responses to political changes are not very dissimilar to those of ska and rocksteady. Mbuli's use of mbaqanga thus takes recourse to a musical tradition replete with political significance; in fact, a tradition which itself is a terrain of contestation, given the popular-mass cultural ambiguity of mbaqanga.

Mbuli's situation within that tradition, however, is problematic and veers, in this author's opinion, from its popular aesthetic towards a mass-cultural aesthetic. Unlike Johnson, who knows the tradition he uses well, Mbuli's approach to his musical tradition intimates an uncritical approach which, given the ambiguity of mbaqanga, raises further suspicions. Firstly, Mbuli believes that the music he uses is universal, thereby depoliticising and dehistoricising his medium (1991:68). In his belief in himself as innovator, he claims the music as his own: 'When you listen to my music, it is not somebody else's music, it is original These things come from my head, the mind, the words spring up from everywhere' (1991:68). Interestingly, as far as musical influence concerns us, Mbuli contradicts himself soon after when he admits his use of reggae. Claiming an essentialist African origin for his music - 'I come from Africa, so my style, ..., is African.... It is in my blood' (1991:68) - he unconsciously voices it in words not far from a well known reggae song: 'as long as you are from Africa, you are an African' (1991:68).³⁸

This uncomplicated relationship between Mbuli as African and therefore his

music as African is best encapsulated in another essentialist remark by Mbuli: 'I am, therefore I belong' (in O'Hara, 1988:6). By taking recourse to this argument, Mbuli thus projects his relationship with mbaqanga as, ostensibly, natural and indisputable. This notion is found in one of his poems, 'The drum beats':

Admire me I am the beats;
From the conga drums of Thabazimbi;...

Admire me I am the beats from the drums of Tanzania;
Arousing the deeper thirst of freedom;...

I am the drum beat of change in Africa;
Deafening the ears like the winds of change;... (1989b:19-20)

Here, Mbuli projects an uncomplicated, resistant pan-Africanism bolstered by an African drum/music. The racially essential notions are clear: music, person and politics are all rooted in the same Africa and are ultimately on the same level, therefore easily interchangeable and indisputable.

Johnson, who is critically interested in the history of reggae and in exploring experiences surrounding reggae in Britain, historicises the form and interacts with his musical form in a powerful and interesting way. Mbuli, approaching his music in a facile manner through essentialisms, is unable to convincingly connect his poetry to his music. Consider Mbuli's oral rendition of 'The drum beats' (1986LP) in relation to Johnson's 'Reggae sounds' (1981LP; see pp.95-96 above). The general theme of 'The drum beats' is a pan-African view of the connections between music ('drums') and resistance politics; similarly, 'Reggae sounds'

thematise the connections between reggae and resistance.

The Johnson poem names the instruments of a basic reggae ensemble and as each instrument enters the score, they eventually join each other and produce the reggae which the poem thematises. The poem thus becomes a demonstration, one can say, of reggae. Significantly, the delivery of the poem closely follows the rhythms of the musical backing so that the poem 'becomes' the theme, the rhythmic sense of the poem's delivery going far to support - to show - what is being said. Mbuli's poem, in simple terms, says without showing. The musical backing is heavily percussive mbaqanga, the drums thus emphasising the theme. However, Mbuli's oral delivery of the poem is in a monotonous, declamatory rhythm and such that it does not match the rhythm of the musical backing. There is merely a linear rise in intonation and a slightly increased amplitude of voice towards the end. In other words, the poem does not rhythmically demonstrate its theme in the way that the Johnson poem does.

The oral rendition of 'The drum beats' is representative of Mbuli's poetry in general in that, irrespective of the specific musical backing used - whether mbaqanga, township jazz or reggae - he delivers his poems in the same monotone and declamatory rhythm. One cannot suggest that Mbuli's poetry should have a reggae rhythm: he is, after all, using a different musical tradition as main backing. However, the criticism is that Mbuli's poetry does not creatively and usefully exploit the rhythmical complexities of mbaqanga.³⁹ This puts paid to critics' views that Mbuli's poetry is highly rhythmical. Jeremy Cronin, for instance, states:

‘[Mbuli] performs at speed, with a heavily syncopated intonation’ (1990:298).

While Cronin mentions Johnson and Jamaican performance poetry as influences on Mbuli (1990:298 and 306, note 3), he does not compare Johnson’s rhythmical delivery to that of Mbuli’s.⁴⁰

Themba Mhambi describes Mbuli’s ‘Behind the bars’, from Change is Pain (1986LP), as ‘captur[ing] the psyche of a person behind bars - the racing thoughts, the initial fear, the doubts, ...’ (1989:23). Thematically, the poem attempts to do so, but formally it fails to ‘capture the ... racing thoughts, the initial fear’. While the musical backing is itself an up-tempo mbaqanga, Mbuli’s monotone delivery fails to convey in any convincing manner the anxieties suffered by a detainee. Contrary to Mhambi’s claims, the listener does not get a sense of ‘racing thoughts’ when listening to the poem.⁴¹

Mbuli’s inability to sensitively engage with the musical backing he uses points to another, more political problem. One cannot disagree more with Gwala when he insists that:

In [Mbuli’s] mode of outburst, accompanied by vibrant music, the poet expresses his feelings and thoughts of what it is to be black and to be participating in the national struggle for freedom. The sincerity of the poet’s thoughts and feelings is so compelling that the listener is persuaded to share in these thoughts and feelings. (1988:89)

Significantly, Gwala places the reference to music in parenthesis. Through this bracketed, subordinated clause, Gwala may unconsciously be pointing to the

strained, forcibly yoked nature of Mbuli's fusion of poetry and music: 'In [Mbuli's] mode of outburst, accompanied by vibrant music, the poet expresses his feelings and thoughts ...' (emphases added). If one considers the uneasy relationship between the form of the poetry and the form of the music, with Mbuli's monotonous, declamatory delivery merely a superimposition on the rhythms of the music, that relationship emerges as contrived. It is thus not enough, in critical endeavours such as the above, that one accepts Mbuli's sincere intentions, or his desire to talk about dehumanising experiences. It is not enough to have recourse to an easy equation where the fact that Mbuli has suffered, say detention, necessarily gives his poetic endeavours credence or automatic sincerity. That the intended sincerity is not persuasively conveyed in the poetry is the point of contestation.

This contrivance becomes clearer when one considers Mbuli's own relationship and attitude towards music. Asked what kind of music he himself likes, he lists various African musicians from outside of South Africa, then adds: 'I like their music even if I don't understand the lyrics' (1989a:16). In other words, one can enjoy music without paying attention to the lyrics. This is not disputed, but it is suggested that a similar, easy separation of poetry and music, and of content and form, operates in Mbuli's overall performance so that the music either draws attention away from the content of the poetry, or makes up for the lack of rhythm in the poetry. Interestingly, Mbuli's public performances operate on the level of spectacle. Unlike Johnson who stands still on stage so as to focus attention on the words of the poems (Morris, 1983:153), Mbuli's recitals are characterised by

theatrical actions (Mbuli, 1986a:23, Van Niekerk, 1989:15).

This uncomplicated and uncritical approach to the music, without for instance considering the history of mbaqanga and without trying to use it creatively as a form, suggests the use of mbaqanga not as an aesthetico-political form, but an economically viable form, mbaqanga being widely enjoyed amongst township youth. Unable to creatively thematise and historicise his musical form in the way that Johnson does, Mbuli's use of music is unconvincing and perhaps points to him leaning towards mass culture. Assuming that Mbuli's work is (politically) as popular as critics suggest, he remains unable to repossess mbaqanga as popular form, both in the themes and formal characteristics of his poetry. In Mbuli's work, mbaqanga remains ambiguously straddling the popular-mass culture continuum. Perhaps, however, this ambiguity is resolved when one considers that Mbuli left Shifty Records - a small, independent and broadly progressive company - 'in search of the Big Record Deal' (Sony, 1991:118).

While one cannot deny the artist's need to reach a wider audience through established, wide distribution networks, the move to a bigger record company becomes politically significant when one considers the fact that it is now difficult to find Mbuli's latest recording in South Africa - more difficult even than when Shifty Records distributed the recordings by mostly informal means. His latest work, Resistance is Defence is produced by an international business situated in London and, if available, would make it financially unavailable to most of Mbuli's audience, namely black, township youth.⁴²

This critique of his use of music, however, does not sufficiently show the manner in which Mbuli's formal categories contradict his 'progressive politics' ascribed by his critics. What the critique does show is a level of contrivance and force which should raise a critic's suspicions and which should lead to further critical consideration. In other words, Mbuli's musical superimposition can now be read as a symptom that stands in relation to the content of his poetry. To reveal the acuteness of this symptom, one needs to consider it in relation to a symptomatic reading of another formal aspect, namely Mbuli's use of language.

Shakespeare's silences in search of the people⁴³

As the epithet 'people's poet' indicates, Mbuli's audience is ostensibly 'the people' and his poetry is, according to his critics, progressive and committed to 'the people'. Inevitably, 'the people' is never defined as more than a populist symbol, and exists as a trace of earlier, Black Consciousness thinking. As Kistner points out, the constituency of that category changes 'from "the black man" to "the people" to "the people under the leadership of the working class"' (1989:309). For the purposes of initial analyses, one can assume 'the people' to refer to the oppressed, black majority of South Africa and, in terms of this assumption, consider Mbuli's poetry as 'popular'. That is, Mbuli's poetry (of 'the people') is committed, manifestly and according to his critics, to that group. Of that group, however, Mbuli's main audience consists of township youth - African and, one can

safely assume, from a working-class background. As will be argued, when one considers Mbuli's use of language, his claimed commitment to this group can be questioned. This will subsequently shed critical light on the constitution of 'the people' as both audience and political entity. While very little work has been done towards codifying South African Black English,⁴⁴ a few studies provide useful pointers for the discussion of Mbuli's language.

The first important point is the high degree of illiteracy amongst Africans, with figures according to age ranging between 30% for groups aged between 15 to 19 years, and 60% for those aged between 20 to 24 years (Wilson and Ramphela, 1989:139). These figures refer mainly to South Africa's rural poor, but in 1983 Lanham asserted that to most urban African youth, 'English is not to any degree the language of the street and is not heard in the home' (1983:333). While Wilson and Ramphela's figures are more than a decade old, the magnitude of South Africa's illiteracy problem and, by 1993, no significant changes in educational provision for African students suggest that the figures for illiteracy among African youth remain significantly high.

With these figures on illiteracy as background, one sees both how evasive the constituency 'the people' is - if 'the people' are Mbuli's audience - and how Mbuli's language fails his manifest commitment to 'the people'. If Mbuli's audiences are mainly township youth from working-class backgrounds, his commitment to them becomes questionable, considering his use of mainly English against the backdrop of illiteracy. Furthermore, one needs to ponder as to who 'the

people' then refers to; whether it refers, in Mbuli's case, to those literate in English and therefore a fraction of South Africa's oppressed, or whether it refers to the vast majority illiterate in English and therefore beyond the reach of most of Mbuli's poetry. With this in mind, one can see how difficult it is to simply assign the appellation of 'people's poet' to Mbuli; and this by only more critically considering what 'the people' refers to.

This is an initial criticism and one cannot assume, because of statistical evidence, that the youth who do constitute his audiences, do not understand English. However, it does suggest that the terms employed by critics to ascribe progressive status to Mbuli's poetry - the epithet 'people's poet' for instance - needs further critical consideration. Without a critical analysis of the term, it is easy to use it indiscriminately and elusively and it is then easy for critics and artists to, in Kistner's argument, 'establish their legitimacy as artists "of the people" and "for the people"' (1989:309); in other words, it becomes easy for the artist, by taking recourse to the rubric 'the people', to be seen as popular or revolutionary. This happens exactly because of what Kistner sees as the 'general equivalence ... assumed between "culture of the oppressed", "national culture", "resistance culture" and "revolutionary culture"' (1989:310).

One can also not criticise Mbuli simply for using English - ultimately, the choice of language remains with the artist. But given the demographics of South Africa and its educational history, the language Mbuli uses can, on close analysis, show silences which questions previous critics' assertions of the efficacy of his

progressive politics. Once again, one needs to first accept the assumption that his work is politically progressive, with the further concomitant assumption that this political bent is encapsulated in his use of English. In other words, the English Mbuli uses should reflect his commitment to 'the people'. As Gwala states:

[I]n the hands of non-native speakers, the adaptation and reapplication of English cannot be controlled or regulated by those who regard English as their mother tongue. Once this is understood, the possibility of English assuming new dimensions becomes an actuality.

In this regard, Mzwakhe Mbuli is one of those poets, ..., who has developed his own style of oral poetry through the medium of English. (1988:89)

Within the above assumptions, one can thus look at Mbuli's language to see in what way it represents a move away from standard, establishment forms and in which ways he has adapted English.

Overall - and the most visible sign - is Mbuli's pronunciation, which falls into broad pronunciation patterns of South African Black English.⁴⁵ Examples abound and include: an aspirated neutral vowel inserted where the word ends on a plosive, e.g. 'Cape' is pronounced [keɪpə] and 'at' is pronounced [ɑtə], the initial vowel of 'at' here rhyming with 'bard', but chopped;⁴⁶ flattening of the [æ]-sound so that 'am' is pronounced [ɛm], rhyming with 'bed'; and, Received Pronunciation neutral vowel changed to [i:] (to rhyme with bee) as in [dɪ:səpiərəns] (disappearance) and [prɪ:zən] (prison). Note too the use of chopped [ɑ:] (the chopped vowel from 'bard') in the second and last syllables of 'disappearance'. The

'r' sound is also pronounced and 'rolled' as in Afrikaans.

However, Mbuli's grammar is consistently Standard English even though he has complained that publishers rejected his work because his language is 'ungrammatical' (in Meintjies, 1989:15).⁴⁷ His grammar does not exhibit any of the salient syntactic characteristics, such as neologisms, the topic formation with repetition of subject pronoun,⁴⁸ and the use of stative verbs with progressive ending,⁴⁹ that Mesthrie and McCormick ascribe to an emerging South African Black English.

This author does not advocate that Mbuli should necessarily change his dialect. Nor is his use of Standard English grammar in itself being criticised. The criticism is rather that, given Mbuli's progressive agenda, the use of Standard English grammar becomes problematic and, to be formally committed, Mbuli should reconsider his approach to language. The radical adaptation of English that Mbuli supposedly effected remains, if not non-existent, superficial, much in the same way that he superimposes music onto his oral rendition of the poetry. Significantly, he uses numerous nominalisations and latinate words, in cases where they do not necessarily fit or where they are meaningless, as in 'Now is the time':

Now is the time;
To disentangle vilification;
That afflicts the planet of humanity apart ...

Now is the time;
to edify authentic action. (1989b:15, 16; emphases added)

This, as Benjamin Magura says, is a trend towards lexical ornamentation and 'flowery language' amongst acrolect and mesolect speakers of South African Black English in order to 'show off' their education; 'what Africans call "big" words to show education and erudite style' (1985:252-253). In other words, Mbuli's use of English - although along common patterns in black speech - suggests a contrivance which hides a different silence.

Not paying attention to the complexities of actual Black speech - its interaction with, for instance, tsotsi-taal which is popular among township youth (Thoka, 1986:19) - Mbuli reveals a facile approach to his art and avoids an important psycho-social 'act of identity'. It is not suggested that Mbuli adds items from a list of 'politically correct' vocabularies and syntax - his poems already contain slogans. Rather, the criticism is that his uncritical use of language reflects a deeper political problem in that he does not qualitatively and politically constitute his audience through his forms. Through vague notions of 'the people', perhaps, Mbuli's art lacks direction and the contrivance of his forms supports this argument.

That his poetry is oral has little to do with a political project. Asked why he chose oral poetry above written poetry, he answers in a predictably essentialist way: 'It is an African poetic tradition, so it means that the roots of that poetry have always been oral, even if people can read' (1991:68). It is this vague generalisation which disallows Mbuli from constituting a concretely identifiable audience with clearly definable linguistic patterns through which to lend formal credence to his art.

Even if one assumes Mbuli's art to be progressive, one finds difficulty in deciding what or who it is committed to. The epithet 'the people' makes it no simpler because of the vagueness of that term. If it is committed to 'the people', one needs to be clear on who 'the people' and their languages are. Accepting that his audiences are mainly black, working-class youth, Mbuli's language reveals an ignorance of their linguistic formations. Despite Lanham's claims that South African Black English speakers cannot discriminate between varieties of English and their social meanings, and that they do not flaunt Black English speech dialects as symbols of identity and solidarity (1983:347), Mesthrie suggests that from evidence of recent, ongoing research, this is not the case. Black youth readily identify differences in black speech patterns and base social evaluations of the speaker on them.⁵⁰ Different socio-linguistic groups among black speakers of English do thus exist, but Mbuli fails to deal with this in order to make his manifest progressive art formally progressive as well.

It must be remembered that the above analysis is based on the assumption of Mbuli's critics that his art is politically progressive. It has been shown that, even if one accepts 'the people' as the group to which Mbuli commits his art, his art is, formally, non-realised as progressive in that regard. His contrivance in terms of the use of music and the ignorance of actual linguistic patterns - patterns beyond that of pronunciation - can only signal a disregard for the actual experiences of the people he is supposedly committed to.

When one sets these formal contradictions to resonate with the contents of

Mbuli's poetry, form and content reflect each other and amplify the contrivances in the content of Mbuli's art itself. His disregard of the linguistic patterns of Black English, for instance, shows a disregard for detail. Unlike Johnson, who concentrates on everyday experiences of black, working-class youth in Britain and who realises those themes in the language of that group, making it more felt and supporting his manifest agenda, Mbuli, having no clearly-defined intended audience or subject matter apart from a nebulous formulation in 'the people', does not concentrate on any everyday experience in detail. In simple terms, instead of showing how people suffer under apartheid - as Johnson dramatises either police victimisation in 'Sonny's lettah', or youth who resort to crime in order to enjoy themselves in 'Want fi goh rave' - Mbuli declaims that people suffer under apartheid. The only variations throughout the work are the different icons of apartheid - homelands, detention, pass laws, Bantu Education and forced removals. Mbuli's generalisations - which critics do apologise for - allows him to avoid a critical thinking through of his language use and allows him to take an easy recourse to his experience without having to heed any artistic or aesthetic demands. And here aesthetics should be taken to signify in its political sense - that the forms of progressive art should carry the politics through into its forms.

Even where Mbuli uses specific events as subject matter, he easily slips into declamatory generalisations and naive moralisation. In 'What a shame', for instance, he sets out to describe the deportation of Joseph Chintsongo who has lived in South Africa for more than thirty years. Instead of showing (dramatising) the

professed inhumanity, Mbuli declaims:

For the father to lose a family;
To lose friends and neighbours in Africa;
Showing inhumanity to man. (1989b:9; emphases added)

His analyses of colonialism in the same poem is disturbingly facile and uncomplicated:

Since Europe was small;
They preferred Africa;
They left Europe unchased;
And came to settle in Africa uninvited. (1989b:9-10)

Ease, then, seems to be the operative term in the processes at work in not only Mbuli's art, but also in his reception by his critics. The same ease with which Mbuli can imply the value of his art by taking recourse to his experience is operative in the unproblematic way he superimposes music onto his oral performance. Similarly, the ease is found in the avoidance of forging creative and appropriate linguistic forms to support his art. And similarly, his poetry uses uncomplicated formulations and solutions:

I have been to Oshakati and Ovamboland;
Pains and tears was their story;
Nevertheless modern socialism shall blunt the blade
of evil.
(‘Change is pain’, 1989b:26)

Mbuli's contrivances furthermore appear in the way in which he provides political or literary authority to his poetry by a simple and disjunctive inclusion of references to 'politically correct' signposts. In 'Crocodiles', after a series of crude oppositions between freedom and slavery, joy and pain, and daffodils and blood,

How hard and tormenting it is;
 To write about slavery and not freedom;
 How hard and tormenting it is;
 To write about pain and not joy;
 When shall I write about daffodils?
 How can I write about the beauty of nature?
 When the ground is daily soaked;
 With the blood of the innocent,⁵¹

Mbuli states:

Nevertheless Agostino Neto the late Poet-President;
 Used both the pen and the machine;
 To achieve the liberation of Angola. (1989b:39)

The poem exhibits, too, the credulous and facile myth that, once apartheid oppression ceases, one will be free to write about daffodils, an argument that separates aesthetics and politics too simplistically. Note, too, how 'freedom' is necessarily opposed to 'slavery' as an instantaneous, overarching vision, a big positive only - but easily - to be arrived at when the big negative of 'slavery' disappears. Mbuli provides no acute and convincing sense of struggle where freedoms are won in a real sense, also, in small, everyday struggles and as

elemental examples of a bigger struggle. Johnson, on the other hand, shows how moments of freedom and victory are also won in the small, everyday 'struggles' - even if criminal - of unemployed youth when they find ways to 'goh rave' ('Want fi goh rave'; see p.90 above). Once again, Mbuli declaims that his poetry is about struggle, expecting the reader/listener to accept his claim; Johnson presents an image without forcing the reader/listener's interpretation. If, for instance, the two poems are about frustration, Mbuli declaims that frustration while Johnson portrays the frustration. The resolution of frustration in Mbuli's poem then comes as a naive and abstract solution, as in the reference to Neto which claims poetry's functionalism. In 'Want fi goh rave', Johnson shows a resolution (to a specific frustration) not as a general struggle against an abstract oppression, but as a particular criminal activity. The point is not that slavery, in whatever guise, should not be struggled against; neither is this criticism an implicit veneration of criminal activity. The point of argument is rather that Mbuli's generalised reference to slavery does not portray a tangible, convincing image of struggle, whereas Johnson, concentrating on specific examples, does.

In 'Accused', Mbuli uses this disjunctive, but easy, recourse to political-literary authority again. The poem in the main and as the title suggests deals with the speaker being accused 'by those who differ with me' (1989b:33). The speaker is accused for having 'stood against those who caged my people', 'those' presumably referring to the accusers (1989b:33). The poem is not clear on what form this resistance takes until the last line which jarringly states: 'This is my poem signed

by the blood of Amilcar Cabral' (1989B:34).

If ease is the operative term, the author believes that the weaknesses of Mbuli's poetry may have roots in his broad political vision. Apart from the fact that his work fails to formally and (consequently) thematically realise the progressive politics accorded to him by critics, the failure ultimately stems, it can be argued, from the guise which Mbuli's overall political vision assumes. His 'revolutionary' poetry fails both in terms of and because of his broad political vision. With Mbuli falling safely inside the national democratic struggle - through involvement in the U.D.F., for example - one can better understand his series of easy recourses. The incorporative nature of the U.D.F.'s national democratic struggle, with its slogans hinging around some notion of 'the people', is unable to account for significant differences - like class - amongst various oppressed groups in South Africa.⁵² The U.D.F.'s need to forge a cross-class alliance that glosses class differences is paralleled in Mbuli's lack of a clear cut audience constituted by language.

While one cannot suggest that developing a class-analysis of society will make Mbuli a better poet, one can consider that the absence of a clearly defined group - along, say, class lines - to whom Mbuli could commit his art, leaves him unable to imagine actual, everyday experiences and to render them in appropriate form. The incorporative nature of populism demands the deployment of symbolism with which a wide sector of an oppressed population can identify, and perhaps precludes a class-specific vision. The ambiguities of such a vision is then found in the ambiguities with which Mbuli employs mbaqanga, leaning, as has been argued,

strongly in the direction of mass culture and subverting notions of him as progressive, popular artist. The easy solutions in Mbuli's poetry - the crude opposition between blood and daffodils, for instance, implying that after apartheid one can indulge in writing about daffodils - are very close to arguments which Sole criticises for their lack of class-analysis and which employ 'rhetoric of a classless modern South Africa, in which equality and liberty would be guaranteed if it were not for apartheid' (in Kistner, 1991:309).

Finally, critics should not give in to the same ease. Sympathetic criticism of progressive art is more than merely finding and collating the right slogans and more than simply ascribing the appropriate appellation or epithet. It has been shown above that, even if one is sympathetic to Mbuli's political vision and even if that vision is manifest in the content of his poetry, formal aspects of his work belie and contradict that progressive agenda. Critics should thus pay more attention to formal aspects since form plays a vital part in how and what texts say or do not say. Neither is a token comparison in order to lend status enough - merely stating that Mbuli's art is similar or compares to Johnson's does not serve the purpose of rigorous criticism. The critic should point out in which way it compares or does not.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical steps of the first two chapters need to be retraced. Although this study realises a need to study oral art forms, it is not organised, theoretically, around the fact that the poetry is oral. Nevertheless, writings on orality and oral literature have been explored for any insight they could offer. Furthermore, the importance of discussing Ong, Finnegan and Zumthor lay in their providing a conceptual and political framework for this study, even if arrived at mainly through the repudiation of Ong's perspective. The discussion of their works thus served as a literature survey, drawing attention to important debates and limitations within the field of oral literature.

Ong, Finnegan and Zumthor's works, respectively and in different ways, do not provide a comprehensive enough theoretical framework for dealing with an oral poetry that is popular, 'popular' having been defined as primarily a political term, specifically connoting broadly progressive politics and in contradistinction to mass culture. Ong's work as a general theory for orality falls short - due to its essentialising nature - in that it cannot (or does not want to) deal with contemporary oral poetic forms found in highly literate societies. Finnegan and Zumthor, though they both assert the variety of oral poetic forms and its contexts, also set out to provide general, overarching theories of oral poetry. Finnegan is at pains to delineate the characteristics of oral poetry, partly to define 'orality' and partly to

provide the technical terms with which to deal with oral poetry. Since this study does not particularly focus on the limiting discussion of why an obvious oral form is oral, Finnegan's approaches too are inadequate for the task at hand. She does, however, appeal for detailed studies of contemporary oral poetries and a concentration on one particular form (at a time). This study takes its cue from this appeal.

Zumthor makes a similar appeal and suggests a possible approach to contemporary, urban and mediatized oral forms. He claims that modern, urban, mediatized oral poetry is, generally, broadly progressive and explicit about its political affinities. Zumthor thus provides a basis for an interface between particular types of oral poetry and definitions of the popular which stress its progressive politics. The emphasis thus shifted from the purely oral to forms of oral poetry which can be seen as popular art (politically defined) or, rather, a popular art that happens to be oral.

An investigation of the debates around the term 'popular' and its political significance led to a consideration of Marxist debates on the dialectic between content and form, particularly the debate emanating from the Frankfurt School and its associates. It is argued that form is politically significant and that any ideological analysis of cultural production needs to consider the forms of that production. Of primary interest is the conditional tense in which Walter Benjamin couches his notion of commitment: art which posits itself as committed (progressive) should show this commitment in its forms as well, and both content and form should allow

for a 'dissolution' of barriers between artist and audience.

If the popular is primarily conceived of as politically progressive, Benjamin's notion of a committed art becomes patently applicable to such art. The formal aspects of dub-poetry considered in this study are music and language because the histories of reggae and the creole used by Johnson (especially, but also the history of mbaqanga used by Mbuli) exhibit visible trends in its 'politics of form'. The way shifts in the formal arrangements of mbaqanga and reggae are responses to respective historical situations is an example of this.

In terms of the above, Johnson's art presents one with a strong case for a successful popular art. In his themes, and in the language and music he uses; his art can be considered as convincingly popular: it is politically progressive, it is about an oppressed group, from their viewpoint, and in opposition to official, British society. More importantly, it is executed in forms historically associated with his intended audience. The music and language of Johnson's art are thus close to the group of people he is politically concerned about and, in crucial ways, his poetry amounts to Benjamin's idea of overcoming the boundaries between artist and audience. Without resorting to general and vague populist symbolism, Johnson's art, it has been argued, amounts to effective empowerment of his primary, intended audience: he provides them with thoughtful and critical analyses and dramatisations of their subject positioning within a racist and economically oppressive British society.

Using Johnson as a standard of successful popular art, it has been argued that

Mbuli's art fails as such, despite the general view by critics that his art is progressive and popular (this in the appellation of 'people's poet'). Compared to Johnson's poetry, it would have been easy to simply dismiss Mbuli's poetry on the basis that it is consistently replete with slogans and vague, facile, political generalisations. Such an easy dismissal would, however, have been misguided and it would not have been any different from a traditional academic perspective which denies 'low culture' a rightful place as human discourse and academic subject. While it is this author's contention that Mbuli's art is a failed art, the process of evaluation has not been by uncomplicated dismissal.

An initial analysis of Mbuli's poetry indeed considered it in terms of previous critics' perception of it as progressive and popular art. Instead of simply dismissing Mbuli's art, a critical comparison to Johnson's art - thematically and formally similar to Mbuli's - has been argued for. At the same time, thus, this study avoids an uncritical appraisal such as Mbuli's previous critics engage in.

If Johnson's art is a successful popular art, Mbuli's fails as popular art. Even were one to accept his content as progressive and therefore the poetry as popular, his use of mbaqanga and English raises one's suspicions of his art's claim to popular status. It has been argued, for instance, that Mbuli is unable to convincingly engage with and creatively employ mbaqanga as a politically supportive musical form; his use of it is marked by contrivance and suggests an ill-informed view of the music and its history. It furthermore hints, perhaps, at primarily economic determinants behind his choice of musical accompaniment -

mbaqanga being a widely enjoyed music - situating Mbuli more on the side of mass culture than popular culture.

Similarly, Mbuli's use of English raises questions as to who, firstly, 'the people' are and, secondly, how one can subsequently define his status as popular artist. Given the history of black education under apartheid, most of the oppressed majority of South Africa are illiterate in English. If 'the people' fall in the above category, it is difficult to understand Mbuli's art as 'for the people'. If Mbuli's art is politically popular, one is allowed to expect it to then speak to this group in forms close and intelligible to them. Instead of overcoming Benjamin's 'traditional bourgeois' boundaries between artist and audience, Mbuli however simply creates another boundary.

If, on the other hand, 'the people' are the small group of township youth speaking South African Black English and who mainly form his actual audience, Mbuli's use of a broad, Standard English grammar remains puzzling. This once again raises the question as to who exactly 'the people' are for whom Mbuli is the poet since his forms - music and language - fail to underpin his supposed progressive agenda in any convincing way.

The confusion around Mbuli's positioning as a poet 'for the people' shows how easy it is to wrongly apportion legitimacy when the term 'the people' is not thought of critically and not defined contextually. His critics' use of the appellation 'peoples' poet' then points to flaws in their critical work - especially their uncritical valorisation of Mbuli. Since this study is a simultaneous redress of critical flaws in

Mbuli's previous critics, it argues for a criticism that does not shy away from comparison to poets practising similar art forms elsewhere.

The problems identified in Mbuli's critics could possibly be representative of persistent trends in (especially) South African critics's work on South African literature since, it has been argued, the problems occur as repetitions of previous problems identified by Sole a decade ago. To a large extent, Mbuli's critics appear either reluctant or unable to compare his poetry to other, similar examples. Lack of knowledge of a specific field - while the critic proceeds to write about it - appears to be the case with Mbuli's critics. A suggestion for further research would be an investigation of the extent to which these critical inadequacies still pervade South African literary culture. Ultimately, this author believes, poor criticism plays an influential role in fostering poor art.

As a general reading of silences, this study needs to be aware of its own silences. Since one of the main aims is to redress critical shortcomings concerning Mbuli's critics, Johnson's art is used as a standard in view of such a critical comparison. However, since the comparison is based on selected criteria, Johnson is not to be exempted from criticism either. Due to the specific aims of this dissertation, though, further critical investigation of Johnson's poetry lies beyond its scope. Further research into Johnson's use of the Jamaican Creole might prove useful. A full linguistic and phonetic study of the fluctuations in Johnson's use of the creole may reveal whether or not his use of that dialect is not itself a contrivance. On his latest collection, Tings an' Times, there is a sense of

desperation in Johnson's use of an extreme creole, with a significant loss in inter-dialectal intelligibility. This suggests the use of a creole largely 'invented' by Johnson.

Within the parameters of its general aims, this study also considers the two poets mainly in terms of the political demands the themes of their own work, respectively, place on the formal aspects of their art. In this regard, little critical evaluation of especially Johnson's political vision was provided. In both poets' work, however, gender politics is, for instance, a 'loud' silence. While one cannot expect progressive art to incorporate all aspects of society and all manner of political issues, the general absence of women and issues around gender politics raises a question about the intended, primary audience of both poets. If, within each poet's respective social context, they can be called 'peoples' poets', one needs to carefully consider who 'the people' are and whether their themes and forms are 'for the people' as far as women too are concerned. Further research into women's positioning in the histories of reggae and bluesdances would, for instance, be a fruitful project. All indications are that women are generally either absent or relatively invisible at bluesdances. Demarcating this influence on notions of the popular and popular culture could be another fruitful area for research.

Notes

Introduction

1. 'Progressive' is here defined as broadly left-wing; that is, that which opposes recognizably conservative and reactionary discourses and processes. 'Progressive' is defined broadly so as to incorporate the ostensible political visions of the poetry of both Johnson and Mbuli. Despite sharp differences between the two poets' respective historical contexts and political stances, they both can be seen as progressive in, for example, their opposition to their respective societies' racism. More detailed discussion of each poet's political leanings are provided in following, relevant chapters.

Please note that, unless indicated to the contrary, future references to 'Johnson' - bibliographical and otherwise - are to Linton Kwesi Johnson.

2. 'Dub-poetry' is conceptualised, written or composed by the poet with the view of performing it with musical accompaniment. While the poetry can be - and sometimes is - performed without musical accompaniment, Johnson and Mbuli distribute their poetry in the main as musical sound-recordings. To some extent, this genre is predicated on urbanisation and a concomitant availability of music technology. The term 'dub-poetry' has historical and geographical specificity: it refers to a style of poetry performed to the accompaniment of reggae, with both musical and poetic traditions strongly rooted in Jamaica. However, the term can incorporate the performance poetry of Mbuli since the genres are markedly similar (Detailed discussions of reggae and dub-poetry are provided in Chapters 2 and 3).

At the same time, the difference between dub-poetry, on the one hand, and what is generally considered as 'pop-music' and 'rap-music', on the other hand, needs to be stressed. Dub-poetry is distinct from song: that is, it is not sung verse; and, while dub-poetry is similar to rap-music in its performance aspect, it is formally (and often thematically) distinct from rap-music due to different musical traditions and social contexts. Rap-music is a form of rapid rhyming done to the rhythm of music. Its origins are especially associated with black, working-class youth from the ghettos of urban America, specifically New York City's Harlem and South Bronx (Keyes, 1984:143).

3. The term 'solidarity criticism' is from Sachs (1990:20).

4. See Benjamin (1973) in toto.

5. This, however, should be viewed within its historical context. Finnegan's Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context was written towards the late 1970s, which may suggest that she still felt the need to justify such a study - to

text-bound academia - in terms of showing the worthiness of oral literature vis-à-vis its similarities to written literature. Her comparative approach may also be due to an attempt to provide an anti-essentialist theory of oral literature.

6. Adorno sees a 'totally administered' society in the America of the 1930s, where mass/popular culture reduces audiences 'to mere consumers of cultural commodities'. Furthermore, '[p]assivity or totally manipulated and controlled response is the aim, ..., and Adorno believes the aim is usually achieved' (Arato and Gebhardt, 1990:216).

See also Adorno (1990) and Adorno and Horkheimer (1993).

7. Fiske, for instance, sees popular culture in every act of commodity consumption and as progressive appropriation of commodities. He does, in some way, distinguish politically between what the culture industry produces and intends with the product, on the one hand, and the consumption of that same product, on the other hand. However, Fiske believes that 'mass culture' does not exist since the consumption of the culture industry's commodity automatically turns it into popular culture: 'Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interest of the dominant' (1989a:2).

Fiske chooses to ignore the fact that 'resources that ... serve the economic interest of the dominant' do exist as something more than the rhetorical use he puts it to, and that it does not simply become popular at the moment of consumption. Furthermore, Fiske does not delineate what he means by 'subordinated peoples'; the term, instead, remains vague and without historical precision. His definition of popular culture rests simply on the fact that it is something widely consumed; he does not, for instance, state in which way people consume or re-make resources 'in their own interests', or whether those interests are progressive or conservative. See Fiske (1989a:passim. and 1989b:passim.).

Wallace, in contrast, believes that the consumption of mass culture can and does involve 'buying ... racism, sexism, American chauvinism' and that it does not automatically turn these products into popular culture. These are all products of a mass culture which she sees emanating from 'a heartless capitalist economy of global exploitation' (1990:111).

8. 'Hegemony' should be understood, in its Gramscian sense, as the general organisation of consent, dependent on social and historical contexts and irrespective of either conservative or progressive intent. See Roger Simon (1985:21-24)

9. As Macherey suggests:

The latent is an intermediate means: this does not amount to pushing it into the background; it simply means that the latent is another meaning which ultimately and miraculously dispels the first (manifest)

meaning. Thus, we can see that meaning is in the relation between the implicit and the explicit, not on the one or the other side of the fence:.... (1978:86-87)

Chapter 1

1. The theory of oral literature developed by Parry and Lord is also known as the 'oral formulaic theory' (Opland, 1981:1). Ong and Finnegan's work frequently pay homage - whether supportive or critical - to the work of the above two scholars. See Zumthor for the links between Finnegan and Lord (1990:3).

As will be argued, Ong's work is typified by what Opland identifies as a chief characteristic of Lord's oral-formulaic theory: 'a rigid dichotomy between oral and written productions' (1981:14). See Vail and White for a history of what they call 'the invention of "oral man"' and the influences both on and following from the Parry-Lord school (1991:1-39). In this history, they trace the distinct similarities in the work of Parry, Lord, Ong, Marshall McLuhan (Ong's doctoral supervisor), Jack Goody and Eric Havelock back to nineteenth century ethnology and its project in legitimating racism and slavery.

2. Ong's ideas connect with McLuhan's 'global village': '[S]econdary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture - McLuhan's "global village"' (1982:136). Elsewhere, Enzensberger attacks McLuhan as a 'charlatan' and as a 'new Rousseau - like all copies, only a pale version of the old - he preaches the gospel of the new primitive man who, naturally on a higher level, must return to prehistoric tribal existence in the "global village"' (1974:118). Ong's vision, too, produces Romantic images of oral cultures, images based solely on the criteria of mode of communication. See also Finnegan for a discussion and critique of McLuhan (1977:254-260).

3. 'Today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists ...' (Ong, 1982:11; emphasis added). However, this still implies that Ong's approach is informed by the idea that, at some stage in the past, a 'pure' oral society did exist, with its Edenic, Romantic suggestions of communality, organicism, intuition, harmony and spontaneity. That a posited pure oral culture serves as an informing principle to Ong is also implicit in the rigid division of the world into oral and literate mindsets with a corresponding 'cognitive distance between literate persons and oral persons' (Daniell, 1986:182).

The present critique is thus firstly theoretical and against Ong's informing philosophy - even if this philosophy is only implicit - because it is the basis from which he views his subject matter that leads to problematic formulations. Secondly, and empirically, linguistic and anthropological work have radically questioned the pivotal dichotomy of Ong's theory (Daniell, 1986:184). Daniell's critique of Ong is discussed in more detail, following the present summary.

4. To Ong, orality employs concepts in 'situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld' (1982:49; emphases added) and,

an oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorisation, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought. (1982:55)

5. As Vail and White state, referring to the oral formulaic school: 'What began as a hypothesis about the making of Homeric verse has come, since the 1960s, to be applied, first, to all oral poetry, ..., and, second, to all oral literature' (1991:26).

See Daniell on the basis of Ong's theories or, rather, the basis of the 'Great Leap Theory', with the 'prototype of an oral culture ... Eric Havelock's description of orality in ancient Greece' (1986:183). Daniell refers to the work of Ong, Havelock and Goody as the 'Great Leap Theory', of whom she considers Ong the most important.

6. Ong's ignorance of socio-economic aspects of societies in relation to orality and literacy leads him to such loaded formulations as the following:

[W]ithout writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials.... In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy ... is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. (1982:14-15)

Ong's failure to connect his theory to broader socio-economic issues blinds him to the possibility that it is not only a lack of literacy that makes a 'vast complex of powers forever inaccessible', but that a host of factors engenders (or forces?) this inaccessibility. In addition, the very lack of literacy may be a sign of inaccessibility to power itself. In other words, it is not simply the lack of literacy that denies access to power, but also the inaccessibility to power which engenders a lack of literacy.

See also Daniell: '[I]t is precisely social conditions that determine what counts as literacy, who has access to literacy, and what uses and functions literacy can be put to' (1986:188).

7. Ong's orality/literacy dichotomy, together with its absolutist formulations, opens

itself to another criticism. As Finnegan suggests, the dichotomy normally goes together with a primitive/cultured dichotomy (1973:112). For 'orality' and 'primitive' one can then substitute all the tropes characteristically projected onto the noble savage of European Romantic discourse. Finnegan, for instance, points out how a dichotomous view of oral societies results in them being seen as uniform, communal, unselfconscious and spontaneous (1973:124; 1974:54; 1977:passim.; and 1982:9). Ong exhibits such a romanticisation of oral societies and sees in his 'secondary orality' a return to the Romantic idyll: 'This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas' (1982:136). See note 2, immediately above.

8. This is not to proscribe Ong's study. However, given that he posits a general theory of orality, the limitations of it reflect the limited research and fields covered, disallowing Ong to arrive at a more comprehensive view.

Perhaps one should also question the validity of a comparative approach to orality and literacy which seeks to elevate the one above the other. This present study, for instance, is not concerned with trying to show that orality is more 'progressive' or 'democratic', or better than literacy in any other way. It merely seeks to redress an imbalance and study an often-ignored oral literature.

9. See also Finnegan (1974:64; 1977:passim.; and 1978:2).

10. The thrust of Finnegan's study could also be attributed to the politics underwriting her project. One of the early observations in her book is that a study of oral literatures is closely associated with a leftist political tendency (1977:7). In contrast, for instance, is the conservative political agenda identifiable in the ethnocentrism of the 'Great Leap Theories' (Daniell, 1986:189).

11. Significantly, Finnegan states:

This capacity of literature to be used in a wide variety of human situations, historical periods and geographical settings makes it difficult to envisage any very generalised theory about the relationship between type of society and type of literature. (1977:261)

12. Zumthor can account for variety by merely considering, as an example, the fact that an oral poem can be composed, set to music and performed by the same person, by another or more, individually or collectively, and thus how the 'diversity of possible combinations largely accounts for the extreme variety apparent in oral poetry' (1990:167).

13. The flaws in Ong's formulations are clear. Firstly, oral thought and speech are characterised by redundancy - here Ong not only draws an essentialist connection

between speech and thought, but sees redundancy as one of the aspects of orality; secondly, his Romanticism: redundancy is natural to oral speech and thought; and thirdly, writing is seen as a technology, occasioning analytic thought, as opposed to the pre-technology of orality. Furthermore, repetition leads to a conservative 'mindset':

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. (1982:41)

The implications are clear: oral societies, because they have not experienced the analytic enlightenment predicated by writing and because they are naturally redundant in speech and thought, are not only conservative and stupid, but must be kept illiterate so that their 'precious' knowledge, arduously transmitted through the ages, does not go lost. One can now better understand Daniell's accusation of the 'Great Leap theory' as 'riddled with ethnocentrism and used to justify the status quo' (1986:189). See also Finnegan (1977:131).

14. 'In the most widely held opinion', says Zumthor,

of ethnologists (and the rare poeticsians familiar with their works), the constant and perhaps universally definitive feature of oral poetry is the recurrence of diverse textual elements: 'formulas' as Parry and Lord use the term, and more generally, every type of repetition or parallelism. None of these techniques, certainly, is the exclusive property of oral poetry: Jakobson saw in them the basis of all poetic language;.... (1990:110-111)

15. See also Zumthor (1990:25).

16. Zumthor, too, bemoans the fact that literary scholars still ignore oral poetry which pervades most present societies (1990:4).

17. This is perhaps best understood through a rhetorical question: How does the critic know that the audience - implied or under scrutiny - represents the entire audience of a text? In other words, the critic cannot assume that the audience - either implied or investigated - is the only (or entire) audience of a specific text; the critic cannot assume that that audience represents the entire demographic profile of a text's audience/s.

18. See Ray:

[Iser] begins with an imagistic version of the phenomenon that interests him, but rapidly abandons it when faced with the difficulty of founding a critical practice. Like Ingarden, he needs access to his object. But since the object in his case is the reader, not the work, and since the text, not the concretization, is available to his scrutiny, he must assign that text all of the referential force Ingarden grants the reconstruction. (1984:52)

19. '[M]ost people respond to art as individuals, even if they are part of a crowd at a music concert or listening to a performance poet' (Sole, 1990:10). Franz Mehring, a second-generation Marxist writing during the late 1890s, states:

[N]ot even on the same level of culture are there as many as two individuals whose aesthetic feelings coincide with the regularity of two clocks. As a social being, each individual is a product of factors of environment which cross one another and blend interminably, and which determine his [*sic.*] perceptions in incalculably diverse ways. (in Solomon, 1973:103-104).

20. To the author's knowledge, his recordings indeed appeared, for instance, to be popular amongst surfing youth in Cape Town - a predominantly white and middle-class group - during the early to middle-late 1980s.

21. Important as he is for the purposes of this study, Zumthor's work is not exempt from criticism. Throughout, he often reveals mystically essentialist notions not far removed from Ong's. However euphemistically expressed, Africa is still a heart of darkness to Zumthor:

[Dance] exposes what is elsewhere occulted; reveals the repressed; makes latent eroticism burst forth. The traditional dances of Africa - still grafted on the movement of the first word, memory of a cosmogonic libido anterior to the desires with which it is filled - impudently testify to it. (1990:159; emphases added)

Africa is furthermore described using mass media images of exotic and 'happy coloured folk':

[A] group in Brazzaville, deliberately mixing traditional costumes and three-piece suits, but always barefoot, blends its voice with those of a public suddenly incited to stand on tables and benches, vibrating with the broken song that speaks to it about the land, the mother, African unity, another hopeful celebration. It is here that the villagers in the

brush welcome its echoes, return them in their own way, unleashed bazaars in the humid equatorial night, where the life of the neighbourhood of the people is recounted in songs, war cries, in strident drumming by maracas and clinking bottles. (1990:214-215)

22. The history of dub-poetry is explored in later chapters.

23. 'Protest' is here intended to mean in its broadest sense, as used by Zumthor; thus, poetry used for social protest, normally (but not necessarily) broadly progressive in its politics.

24. Although industrialisation provides 'mediatized poetry' with the electronic media through which to distribute it, musical accompaniment to oral poetry has a long tradition. Just as music has long been an integral part of certain types of oral poetry in various places in Africa (Okpewho, 1988:10), musical accompaniment to poetry in other places is not a new phenomenon:

Many composers since the Renaissance have put texts of poetwriters to music. But this custom, in the 1950s and 1960s, was renewed along the aesthetic and social lines of the cabaret song: Aragon's poems sung by Catherine Sauvage, or Verlaine's Gaspard Hauser done by Moustaki. More recently, Angelo Branduardi, a strong peasant 'rocker', based his first songs on the texts of Essene and Neruda, seizing on this poetry as raw material for music, spectacle, incapable of living otherwise. (Zumthor, 1990:147)

25. Zumthor's book was originally published, in French, in the early 1980s, when dub-poetry was still a fairly unknown phenomenon. Zumthor, though, is cautious not to let his historical position limit his perspective. He leaves his thoughts (almost prophetically) open: 'A movement - whose scope and long-term implications are still not yet fully comprehended - was taking shape' (1990:130; emphases added).

26. As Wallace suggests:

By 'popular culture' I mean that culture which still comes from 'the people', from the bottom up ... [P]opular culture is now deeply influenced by mass cultural appropriations of its formal qualities ... While the intricacy of the process makes popular culture virtually indistinguishable from mass culture, we can, nevertheless, identify the occurrence of the popular cultural by the ruptures it creates:.... (1990:112)

27. See also Brecht (1964:108) and Craig (1976:129).

28. Garofalo refers to a study done by Charlie Gillett in 1970:

Gillett was the first to argue that the dynamics of the recording industry could be understood in terms of 'major' record labels (i.e. companies which owned their own distribution) versus 'independent' labels (i.e. companies which contracted out this service). In Gillett's study, the independents are generally credited with the innovations associated with progressive cultural movement. The majors by contrast are seen either as backwardly resisting such change or as simply incorporating more palatable versions of it into the dominant culture. (1987:78; double emphases added)

Frith attributes easy co-optation partly to a middle-class desire to enjoy proletarian forms of leisure in a sanitised form, and partly to a symbiotic relationship between popular and mass culture (1991:108-109). Sinfield, on the other hand, attributes massification (co-optation) to a capitalist mode of production and says that culture 'of all kinds, increasingly, is designed and packaged for a market slot' (1989:177). Shusterman provides an interesting example in rap-music where the entrance of big business resulted in an extremely sanitised form of the music during the early 1980s (1991:616). See furthermore Gugelberger (1991:519), Kipnis (1986:13), Randall (1991:534) and Walker (1987:117).

The obverse of massification is also possible or is seen as desirable by progressive theorists. As Enzensberger enthuses:

[E]very use of the media presupposes manipulation. the most elementary processes in media production, from the choice of the medium itself to shooting, cutting, synchronization, dubbing, right up to distribution, are all operations carried out on the raw material. There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming, or broadcasting. The question is therefore not whether the media are manipulated, but who manipulates them. A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear;... it must make everyone a manipulator. (1974:104)

Enzensberger can be faulted for his view of the media as value-free vehicles. He can nevertheless be credited for seeking to engage with the fact that these media exist, in opposition to other Left critics dismissive of the culture industry. Implicit in his critical approach is the idea of a symbiotic relationship which, on one level, allows one to think through the mass/popular complex. In Enzensberger's terms, the revolutionary appropriation of mass media would make it popular; thus the opposite of big business co-optation of the popular. It must be remembered, in thinking of the mass/popular complex, that neither pre-exists in relation to the other, but that both exist in a tension and continuum. Confusion around the political implications and the easily interchangeable use of 'mass culture' and 'popular

culture' can partly be ascribed to this lack of clear-cut boundaries.

29. Barbu, discussing Gramsci, defines popular art as a 'resistance against the hegemonic rule of an established (middle-class) culture' (1976:67).

30. Note also that neither Brecht, Gramsci, Barbu nor Ross define the popular as essentially predicated by an urban and industrial society. Unofficial voices, from the 'edges of consensus', are thus not the preserve of urban, industrial societies. Barber admits to not 'suggest[ing] that pre-colonial traditional culture was monolithically conservative' but that 'there are indications of an unofficial, subversive strand' (1987a:18).

31. Before Johnson started his own recording label in the early 1980s (Johnson, 1982:164), producing his later recordings with this label, he resisted Island Records' contractual demands to produce a recording every year, thus avoiding an extreme commodification. Although one cannot pinpoint the divide between an artist's political independence and his or her commodification/massification, one can gauge an artist's co-optation - as a matter of degree - by the relationship between artist and record company (Garofalo, 1987:84). Johnson's view towards big record companies is clear when he says that '[record companies] attempt to evolve a vocabulary of exotic otherness to break into the mass market and thus titillate the palates of the white middle class turkeys with images of the exotic and the erotic' (in Back, 1988:143).

Mbuli first recorded with a small, independent recording label, Shifty Records, itself anti-establishment with its political stance neatly epitomised in its name. During the late 1970s, South African Government regulations forbade a music group from Lesotho, because of the group's public opposition to the South African State, to record in this country. The newly formed record company temporarily 'shifted their equipment to Lesotho in a caravan - hence the name' (South, August 15-21, 1991). By 'shifting' to Lesotho, the record company thus expressed their own commitment to overcome politically-inspired, South African governmental strictures.

Chapter 2

1. The terms 'aesthetics' and 'politics' are used in their broadest senses. 'Aesthetics' would, for instance, include concepts such as 'form' and 'genre' and is used as a labelling device beyond the Aestheticism of the late 1800s (see Eagleton, 1983:20-21). Similarly, 'politics' would include concepts such as 'ideology' and 'meaning'. Admittedly, the interchangeable way in which these concepts are used here and in the following discussions can be contested. Such contestation, however, lies beyond the immediate scope of this thesis.

2. This in the sense that aesthetics, or form, to a large extent determines, deflates or enhances the explicit political content of art. This is best understood if thought of dialectically with neither content nor form pre-existing the other; thus, any 'meaning' of a text as the synthesis of content and form.

3. '[D]iscourses ... [are] ... practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault in Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990:9).

4. See Easthope on the Marxist roots of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (1991:72). As mentioned, a number of writers refer to the relationship between form and politics, whether implicitly or explicitly, whether merely as an aside or as an important area in the analysis of cultural forms, and from a variety of theoretical-ideological backgrounds. See for instance Antony D. Edwards (1976:4), Ellis (1980:192), Gee (1990: xix, 131), Hasan (1984:105), Jones (1990:64) and Punter (1986:252). The list is not exhaustive. Many writers in the field of socio-linguistics also acknowledge the relationship between form (of language) and ideological content. This is discussed in the second part of this chapter.

The notion of a relationship between aesthetics and politics also finds its way into the writing of South African critics on South African literature, specifically, and others writing on African literature, generally. See Sole and Koch (1990:213) and Trump (1990:170-171). See Barber (1987a:59 and 1987b:107) and Dorsey (1988:28, 36) in the field of African literature.

A recent work where a specific example of contemporary cultural production is rigorously looked at in terms of the relationship between form and content, is Whiteley's The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the counter-culture (1992). By using technical musicological analysis, Whiteley is able to show to what extent musical form does signify. This signification is not simply by default because of the difference of style between 'progressive rock' and mainstream music, but inscribed in the very musical structures of 'progressive rock' (see especially pp.6-38). 'Progressive rock' is not an homogeneous entity which only signifies politically due to its difference from the mainstream; the political meanings are not only read by their opposition to mainstream music, but the various, independent formal aspects of different musicians are analyzed for their 'social and cultural meanings' (Whiteley, 1992:3).

5. Mehring does this through a critique of Kant's aesthetics. See Solomon (1973:4 & 100) and Mehring in Solomon (1973:106).

6. See Solomon (1973:8) and Balázs in Solomon (1973:284-288).

7. Lukács himself does not use a capital 'r', but his reference to nineteenth-century Realist authors renders his realism as Realism, as opposed to Brecht's realism which has a wider, incorporative meaning (see Lukács in Aesthetics and Politics,

1977:28-59, and Brecht in same, 68-85).

8. Simultaneously, at the moment of a performative utterance, one cannot know what the performer had intended before the utterance, unless performed from script; by extension, one cannot know precisely how the audience influences that specific utterance. At the moment of that utterance, there is only one such event and no co-existent, original utterance against which a variation can be judged. In other words, the 'original' (the potential utterance supposedly unaltered by the audience) exists only as an intention in the poet's mind, and not as an existing oral-event which can be analyzed and used as a yardstick.

9. This is a thesis specific to a particular type of discursive practise, namely historical narrative. The light it sheds on the relationship between form and content serves to be valuable for my discussion, however.

10. See Crehan (1986:1-25) who uses a similar formulation - 'the message is the entire text' - by which to show how form deflates the professed socialist vision of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood.

11. '[O]ne could infer that it is related to that powerful urge to idealize a popular, unitary front of resistance in South Africa' (Trump, 1990:180).

12. It is not intended that 'whole' imply an idealist notion; that is, that a 'whole meaning' can be found at all. What is meant with 'whole' is that whatever meaning is to be discerned from a text, subject to social and historical contexts of text and reader, is a dialectical production of the form and content.

13. Language system and language act, respectively.

14. See Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990:7), Bennett (1990:274-275) and Lodge (1990:21) on the Saussurean project, now also associated with or identified as 'traditional linguistics'.

15. It is exactly this 'sentence as a unit of language' that is the primary object of synchronic analysis in Saussurean linguistics (Lodge, 1990:21). Lodge points out the fact that Bakhtin calls for a linguistics of 'language in use, recognizing that this entailed taking into account the non-linguistic components of any speech act' (1990:89).

Interestingly, Wittgenstein, in the 1930s, was also working towards a diachronic understanding of language: '[W]hat must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial, with properties different from all mere signs. But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use' (1987:4).

16. Also:

An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his [sic.] addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. (Bakhtin, 1986:95)

Here and in the previous quote, note that the very terms and concepts focused on by synchronic study - 'lexical, grammatical, and compositional means of the utterance' and 'style of the utterance' - are always influenced by an 'evaluative attitude' towards an 'addressee'.

17. See for instance Allsopp (1980:102), Gee (1990:xx, 73, 131), Hebdige (1977:136, 147), Jones (1988:7), Kachru (1983:326, 341), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:245-246), Roberts (1988:143) and Todd (1984:233, 241). It is interesting to note that the majority of the studies listed above are closely related to educational research in Britain and specifically about what is perceived as the 'problems' that West Indian and Asian children have or encounter in British schools.

The Caribbean is not the only area of socio-linguistic study where an explicit relationship between language and politics is theorised, nor is the identification of such a relationship necessarily tied to the socio-linguistic study of a particular area. See Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990:12), John Edwards (1985:111), Hasan (1984:105), Heller (1982:109), Nwoga (1973:27), O'Barr (1976:7), Ochs (1986:3, 6-7), Rubin (1976:391) and Trump (1990:170).

18. It is true that the socio-linguistic terms 'creole' and 'pidgin' have an unsavoury, derogatory historical connotation to them - a creole or pidgin, in this derogatory lexicon, would imply inferior or second-rate languages. This study uses the terms in their theoretical, socio-linguistic context. A 'pidgin' would be any language which develops as a lingua franca without it being a mother-tongue or native language to anyone. Historically, this has been the case in mostly colonial situations where the language would be used as the language of slave-master relationships; where the existence of a pidgin would most certainly signify the existence of a slave society and where the pidgin would be a colonial necessity and a language of dominance. A pidgin becomes a 'creole' when the following generation learns the pidgin as a mother tongue. For definitions of 'pidgin' and 'creole' see Anthony D. Edwards (1976:42), John Edwards (1985:35) and Todd (1984:3-4).

This study employs the terms 'pidgin' and 'creole' because a part of its argument involves the social, political and economic marginalisation of such languages and the political respect this study seeks to ascribe to them. Part of this project is thus the reclaiming of the terms and showing their political significance.

Within socio-linguistics, the terms have been rescued from their dismissive and racist connotations. See Anthony D. Edwards (1976:42), Roberts (1988:14) and Todd (1984:239). In socio-linguistic circles it is generally accepted that a standard dialect of a language becomes the standard mainly due to extra-linguistic factors, of which the political and economic power associated with the group that speaks a specific dialectal variation of a language perhaps count as the most important factors in the historical determining of what the standard dialect will be. A dialect thus does not become the standard because of any intrinsic qualities. In fact, languages, or a dialect of a language rather, does not have intrinsic aesthetic or other qualities that would make it a 'natural choice' for the standard - such an idea would, in any case, be essentialist. It is rather, as Gee states, 'an accident of history as to which dialect is taken to be the standard ...' (1990:13).

19. Kachru's essentialism is thus exposed and simultaneously invalidated by the fact that people from other linguistic backgrounds (therefore 'other logic patterns', in Kachru's argument) readily and voluntarily take up another language, despite the interference which would result (in Kachru's terms) between structures of thought and logic supposedly inherent in different languages.

20. After Bakhtin, it is indeed difficult to think of language 'outside of its use'. One has to admit the obvious: language only exists in its use and that use exists only in social relations.

21. The phrases 'Jamaican Creole' and 'Caribbean Creole' are used to refer to both the Jamaican Creole spoken in Jamaica and to its variant in Britain. Ostensibly, while there is a wide diversity of English creoles used in the Caribbean, some amount of homogenisation has taken place, especially with the spread of the Jamaican Creole to other parts of the West Indies. Roberts lists the spread of reggae music, Jamaican emigration to other islands, West Indian immigration into Jamaica and the marijuana trade as some of the factors responsible for the dominance of the Jamaican Creole within the West Indies (1988:43). See also Campbell on the spread of Rastafarianism in the Caribbean (1980a:43-61).

In Britain (mainly Birmingham and London), the dominance of Jamaican Creole over other West Indian creoles can be traced to large scale Jamaican immigration into Britain during the 1950s and 1960s, due to (especially) London Transport and National Health Service recruitment campaigns (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985:76; Todd, 1984:216). Jones sees the homogenisation of a 'Caribbean identity' and the adoption of a 'generalised form of Jamaican-based creole language' by black youth in Britain as an indirect response to the combination of institutional racism, economic deprivation and police brutality suffered by West Indians in Britain (1988:41). Thus, there is a move towards a broad West Indian identity in Britain rather than an individual, island-based one (Alleyne, 1988:73). It is from this political nexus that reggae music assumes the voice of a marginalised audience. The audience, on its turn, starts to identify

broadly with reggae, assuming the styles, dress, and language of a movement historically located in Jamaica. This is another important factor in the dominance of the Jamaican Creole. See Jones (1988) for a history of reggae, from its origins in Jamaica to its spread to and co-development in Britain.

22. Rastafarianism is a pan-African, messianic-millenarian cult, based loosely on the various teachings of Marcus Garvey and the Old Testament and which, as a movement, has its origins in the 1930s in Jamaica. Barrett compares it to other such cults as similarly being a reaction to the 'grinding poverty experienced by the peasant class' (1977:110). Its biggest popularity in Jamaica is amongst the lower classes, although Rastafarianism rose in popularity amongst middle-class youth during the 1970s as it became closely associated with reggae. Some of the central tenets of Rastafarianism are the belief in Haile Selassie I as God incarnate and messiah; Ethiopia, specifically, and Africa, generally, as the biblical, promised land; and people of African descent as the chosen race to be ultimately repatriated to the promised land.

Barrett's The Rastafarians: The Dreadlocks of Jamaica (1977) remains one of the most detailed discussions of the cult. Jones (1988) too provides a readable account of the history of Rastafarianism. See also Alleyne (1988), Augier, Nettleford and Smith (1967a & 1967b), Brodber (1985), Campbell (1980a), Forsythe (1980), Hebdige (1977:138ff), Kritzing (1971) and Pollard (1980).

23. See Allsopp (1980:102), Hebdige (1977:142, 146, 147), Jones (1988:passim.), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:155), McCrum, Cran and MacNeil (1992:340-341), Roberts (1988:5, 40-42) and Todd (1984:241).

24. On the issue of language and socio-political identity, and the Jamaican Creole as symbol of resistance, see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:48), Hebdige (1977:136), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:155) and Roberts (1988:143).

25. See also Allsopp (1980:102).

26. Examples of how Rastafarians have changed language to fit their political vision, resulting in 'Dread Talk', abound and can be found in most books on Jamaican Creole (apart from books like Cassidy's Jamaica Talk [1961] which was written before Rastafarianism's spread). For further examples see Pollard (1980:passim.) and Roberts (1988:36-44).

27. See also Hebdige (1977:passim.), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985:155, 245), Roberts (1988:37, 43) and Todd (1984:241).

28. Jones's book, Black Culture, White Youth (1988), already extensively quoted above, appears the most comprehensive study of reggae music. The following discussion concentrates on Jones's account of reggae, although general information

has also been gleaned from other sources. Since the discussion is partly based on general information widely known and found in a number of accounts, sources are only cited in the main text when authors are directly quoted.

For extensive information about the history of reggae, see Jones (1988), Davis and Simon (1982) and Waters (1985). Information has also variously been culled from the following: Alleyne (1988), Back (1988), Brodber (1985), Cushman (1991) and Pryce (1985).

29. Rocksteady also became known as 'one drop': '[T]he off-beat quality of Jamaican music was further accentuated by the drummer playing together on both snare and bass drums on the third beat of the bar in a style known as "one drop"' (Jones, 1988:23; emphasis added). This form of music is given socio-political meaning, for instance, by Bob Marley in a self-reflexive song, 'One drop':

Feel it in the one drop
and we still find time to rap,
we're making the one stop
the generation gap.

So feel this drum beat
as it meets within
playing a rhythm
resisting against the system ...
(1979LP; own transcription)

Thus, apart from self-referentially denoting the style of his music, Marley connects the style of his music to a whole political discourse. It is 'this drum beat', the 'one drop', the 'rhythm', that is 'resisting against the system'. Within the form of the music, thus, resistance is located.

30. See also V.K. Edwards (1979:56) and Johnson (1976:398, 401).

31. The seven-inch diameter disk on which mass/popular music was pressed, normally containing one song on each side and economically viable to the consumer, before the increase in popularity of the long-playing album and, later, the compact disc. In some countries, the seven single remains popular.

32. In its purely technical terms - that is, as a sophisticated, high-fidelity stereo - the soundsystem is reputed to have originated in the United States of America and been brought to Jamaica by Clement Dodd, an important reggae sound engineer and record producer of Kingston, who spent time in America working as a cane cutter (Brodner, 1985:66, note 43).

33. Although not clear from research, indications exist that the bluesdance is, at the

same time, also a transformation of white, working-class dance-hall culture in Britain.

34. See also Pryce (1985) on the Notting Hill Gate Carnival of 1976 and, for the political value of soundsystems in Britain as late as 1988, see Back: 'For many young black Britons living in London today, the reggae played by soundsystems in dance-halls is inextricably related to coping with life in a white society' (1988:141).

For a comprehensive account of the British State's turn to crude conservatism, the rise in both official and unofficial white racism, and a simultaneous rise in militancy among black youth during the 1970s, see Hall et al. (1981).

35. On the distinct similarity between the rhythms of reggae and that of the spoken Jamaican Creole, see Denselow (1989:143), Hay (1978:142) and Morris (1983:150).

Chapter 3

1. Amongst other things, 'dread' means a 'person with dreadlocks' (a Rastafarian); 'a serious idea or thing'; 'a dangerous situation or person' (Davis and Simon, 1982:69). 'Dread Beat', in Johnson's Dread Beat and Blood (1975), refers to both reggae and the dread associated with the cultural institutions surrounding reggae, discussed in detail in this chapter.

2. This introductory section relies heavily on Contemporary Poets (1991:480), Davis and Simon (1982:191), Johnson (1991:64) and Partridge (1985LP). See also Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature (1989:638, 424).

3. Quoting Stuart Hall, Pryce writes that Race Today ideology - a 'problematic theoretical and strategic appraisal of black politics' in its combination of class and social analysis which saw the class struggle as multi-dimensional - was in line with

'the autonomy of class resistance and its necessary separateness now', and that this characterises it as a 'Gramscian party in a sense', although 'It's not an organized party, but it has a formative and educative relationship to the black community'. (Pryce, 1985:44)

While grounded in class-analysis thus, the black-separatist ideology of Race Today sought to add further terms of social relations - of which race was an over-determining factor - to an otherwise one-dimensional class-analysis. Hall et al. also plot the leftist influences on the politics of Race Today to C.L.R. James, 'the most seminal and influential Caribbean Marxist to date' (1981:370).

The Race Today collective, spearheaded by editor Darcus Howe and with its

'long track record of providing militant leadership and organisation for the black community', took over the organisational leadership of the Notting Hill Gate Carnival following the riots of 1976 (Pryce, 1985:44).

4. The second-generation are those born in Britain during the 1950s, as opposed to the first, parent-generation which immigrated into Britain en masse, starting during especially the 1940s. 'Second-generation blacks' is meant to refer to both those born and growing up in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s and those who immigrated to Britain at an early age during the same period, who can, for all intents and purposes, be considered as second-generation, black Britons. Johnson belongs to the latter group of second-generation blacks.

In the 1970s, second-generation blacks in Britain rejected their parents' quietist tolerance of oppression in Britain and turned to militancy. For inspiration, they looked to the Black Power movement in America (Hall, et al., 1981:355-356).

5. This is not to imply that art is popular (politically progressive) merely by virtue of its source community's positioning as economically and politically marginal (unofficial, non-establishment), or merely by virtue of the fact that its subject matter concerns a marginal community. This dissertation defines the popular as partly that which comes from a socio-economically deprived and oppressed community, simultaneously containing a discernible progressive politics in the interests of the said community.

6. The discussion of music will be done without technical-musicological considerations, but in a broad, cultural studies approach. Traditional or classical musicology has so far still ignored popular and mass cultural music productions as valid areas of study; traditional musicology thus lacks theoretical perspectives and terminology with which to describe such music. In fact, traditional musicology is predicated on a methodology developed alongside a specific Western musical form ('high cultural' and highly text-based) and the methodology is technically unable to deal with music that lies outside of that domain, like most forms of popular music today. Traditional musicological methodology cannot, for instance, describe music forms that do not strictly adhere to or is not primarily based on textual notation. See Middleton (1981:5), Frith and Goodwin (1990:1) and McClary and Walser (1990:277-292).

Whiteley's book, The Space Between the Notes (1992), might well be the first sustained encounter between traditional musicology and a popular music form. Unfortunately for the purposes of this study, her book deals strictly with a certain form of rock music, narrowly defined and limited to the 1960s.

7. Although partly the author's interpretations, this section also relies on information from various sources. Unless an author is directly quoted, references are not cited in the main text. The sources are: Dhondy (1979 and 1980), Dread Fred (1979), Ellison (1985), Freedman (1980), Hay (1978), Howe (1984LP),

Johnson (1982; 1985LP), Kostakis (1986), La Rose and La Rose (1978), Mandel (1984), Morris (1983), Partridge (1985LP), Robbi (1989), Salkey (1975:7-9) and Stocks (1991).

In most cases, the above-cited commentaries are brief summaries of poems, simply providing a framework within which my own discussion is placed. These commentaries only cover Johnson's work up to 1985 and do not include Johnson's latest work, Tings an' Times (1991LP), interpretations of which are entirely this author's.

8. Dread Beat an' Blood is Johnson's first full-length recording, while Poet and the Roots (1977) only features two poems and two pieces of dub-music.

9. References to Johnson (1985LP) are in the main to his brief explanatory introductions to his poems on this recording. It is a 'live performance' of a selection of work from Dread Beat an' Blood, Forces of Victory, Bass Culture, and Making History.

10. In 'Doun de road' ('Down the road'), Johnson bemoans this misuse of militant energy:

so in the heat
of the anguish
you jus turn:
turn on your brother
an yu lick him
an yu lash him
an stab him
an kill him

and the violence damming up inside...

patricide is only the first phase,
with brother fighting brother stabbing brother:
them jus killing off them one another,
but when you see your brother blood jus flow;
futile fighting; then you know
that the first phase must come to an end
and time for the second phase to show. (1975:22-23; emphases added)

Note that all of Johnson's recorded poetry is available in printed form in Dread Beat and Blood (1975), Inglan is a Bitch (1980) and Tings an Times (1991). Although the sound-recordings of the poems are analyzed, quotations are from the printed versions for ease of reproduction. Where a phonetic spelling is provided, it is reproduced as is.

11. It is this same political analysis which sought - through the 1977 takeover of carnival leadership by the Race Today collective, of which Johnson was a member - to direct the militancy that previously exploded into riots at the 1976 Notting Hill Gate Carnival. The main criticism against the previous carnival committee - levelled by, amongst others, Darcus Howe - was that it failed to provide a 'coherent explanation for the violence' and that it showed a 'paralysis in directing the resistance' (Pryce, 1985:38; emphases added).

12. 'Babylon': A Rastafarian adaptation of the biblical name. It refers to, amongst others, police.

13. Most commentators on the history of reggae who consider the British tradition, mention the 1970s as a time when reggae gained popularity in that country. The music's concerns lay close to the general despair second-generation blacks in Britain at that time (and into the 1980s and beyond) experienced in their dealings with a largely racist and economically exclusive society. See Cohen (1980:74), Hebdige (1977:151 and 1979:34, 40), and Jones (1988:35, 40-43, 45).

It is important to remember that West Indians started to emigrate to Britain in the early 1950s following the 1948 Nationality Act which guaranteed British citizenship to citizens of the British Commonwealth (Denselow, 1989:126). Tied to this was the hope of economic prosperity West Indians would read into the active recruiting campaigns embarked on by London Transport, British Hotels and the Health Service (Denselow, 1989:126; Sinfield, 1989:126). As we now know, it was also a capitalist initiative to have easy access to a cheap labour source. Sinfield ironically summarises this point: 'Imported labour is free - you don't have to pay for its breeding and rearing; and during recessions it may conveniently be laid off, as The Economist pointed out in 1959' (1989:126).

The second generation was generally less submissive than their immigrant parents who still thought of Britain as a 'mother country' which would take care of them (Hebdige, 1979:40-41). See also Hall, et al., (1981:355-356).

14. Enoch Powell, an influential, conservative British parliamentarian of the 1970s, rose to eminence as symbol of official British racism after his (in)famous speech of April 1968 in which he raised the spectre of (white) Britain swamped by black immigrants. 'The message was', Nairn states, referring to Powell's speech, 'that Britain's coloured immigrant population does indeed present a mortal threat to the British (or rather, to the English - ...) and must be got to return home whence they came' (1970:3-4).

In his speech, Powell evoked the experiences and thoughts of an 'ordinary man' so as to present his racism as the 'authentic' thoughts of 'the people'. This process - gaining support by latching onto the phobias of white, English Britons - is elsewhere analyzed by Hall in his discussion of the rise of Thatcherism (1980:157-185). According to him, Thatcher's 'authoritarian populism' was 'the transformation of the field of practical and popular ideologies, so as to construct a

"popular" consent to an authoritarian regime' and the interpellation of "the people" to the practices of the dominant classes' (1980:169, 176).

The National Front, with an ideology rabidly racist, anti-immigrant, and pro-repatriation, was officially formed in 1966 from five far-right groups: the League of Empire Loyalists, the Greater British Movement, the British National Party, the Racial Preservation Society and the English National Party. Writing in 1981, Hall et al. describe the National Front as 'the most active agency propagating open racial fascism at grass-roots level. It has been recruiting steadily in working-class and lower-middle-class areas, and in schools' (1981:334).

15. Anonymous report, Race Today, 1982, 14 (3), p.88.

16. The act is Section 4 of Britain's Vagrancy Act of 1824. It is almost needless to point out the inevitable racial bias that accompanied this legislation in that in practice the police picked on unemployed black youth. See Campbell (1980b:89).

17. It is interesting to note the interplay between the written and the oral here. Even though Johnson's practice in itself subverts the notion of a clear-cut division between the written and the oral (he composes his poetry in writing), in this poem he explicitly fuses the two forms: a letter being composed/read aloud. It would also be interesting to explore this interplay between the oral and the written in more detail, something which lies far beyond the scope of this project. An exploration of the relationships between the poetry of William Blake and Linton Kwesi Johnson, for instance, could yield interesting results. In both metre and theme (its evocation of urban despair), Johnson's 'Inglan is a bitch' (from Bass Culture) is quite close to Blake's 'London'. Similarly, Johnson's 'Street 66' (also from Bass Culture) calls to mind Eliot's 'Preludes', with its description of the end of a day, but Johnson exploring a different and specific setting compared to Eliot's attempts at arriving at a sense of the despair of a general 'human condition'.

18. Johnson sees neo-nazi groups such as the National Front as:

just a kind of extension of the police force,.... They take care of those kinds of terrorist activities that the police couldn't so easily get away with. Like petrol bombings of people's shops and all that kind of thing. Killing people on the streets like the Asians that were killed last year. The police turn a blind eye. (1982:163)

As a news journalist and co-editor of Race Today, Johnson was aware of such racist attacks. A perusal of the pages of Race Today will show the extent of these incidents. Neither are they confined to a distant past. As late as 1986, for instance, Race Today (17 [2]) carries news of a resurgence in fascist activity and at present one witnesses a resurgence of fascism amongst white youth sweeping especially Europe. The connections between unofficial fascist activity and racist legislation is

not an unfounded fantasy. See for instance Cale (1992:12-15).

19. Jones shows how the Notting Hill carnival changes shape during the late 1970s, partly following the introduction of reggae. The introduction of reggae increases the carnival's political significance for the West-Indian British, evident in the 500% increase in attendance at the 1976 carnival. The British government responds by increasing the police presence by 25 000% (Jones, 1988:45). According to Johnson, it is this attempt to police the carnival off the streets that resulted in the Notting Hill riots of August 1976. As a member of the Mass Band Renegades, Johnson performed 'Forces of victory' as part of a masque at the carnival of 1978 (1985LP). See also Hebdige (1979:24).

20. Railton Road is considered as central to the Brixton community's life (Race Today, 1986, 17 [2], p.4).

21. The term 'bass culture' itself refers to reggae. The bass guitar and bass drums are central to reggae and the development of dub-music is an exploitation of bass sounds. As Ehrlich puts it, '[d]ub is ... the natural result of a Jamaican cultural tendency in music - a fondness for bass - evolving over the years into an entire musical art form and dominion of its own' (1982:106). When on 'Man free', for instance, Johnson says 'drum and bass', he cues the bass and drums to take over after the end of a verse (1978LP). See also Alleyne (1988:111).

22. Furthermore, see Easthope (1991:127), Frith and Goodwin (1990:41), Hebdige (1977:147, 1979:118 and 1990:59-60), Hoy (1992:767), Jones (1990:64) and Rolleston (1991:88). Garofalo provides a specific example from a different tradition of music:

As the early Civil Rights movement was transformed into the more militant demand for Black Power, the slickness and sophistication of the pop-orientated Motown sound was overpowered by the harder driving, grittier (and angrier) rhythm and blues of artists like James Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett. This harsher rhythm and blues sound was consciously understood to signify the growing militance of the Black Community. It mattered little whether or not the music was overtly political.... (1987:90)

Similarly, Shusterman shows that the formal aspects of rap-music help to situate its subversive agenda; that rap-music's political nature is found both in the music alone - as an element of the music on its own - and as emphasised by the music. Referring to Spike Lee's film, Do the Right Thing, Shusterman says:

The film's climactic race riot, ..., is set off by the [local pizzeria] proprietor's violent refusal to allow rap music to be played in his shop

'because of the noise.' Rap's typical loudness, one of its most offensive and criticized features for bourgeois sensibility, is a consciously calculated and thematized feature of its aesthetic, as we can see in Public Enemy's song 'Bring the noise,' a slogan adopted by many other rappers. (1991:629, note 3)

23. See note 1 immediately above.

24. The linguistic markers point to the speaker being a Rastafarian and Rastafarianism is historically a male-dominated culture. See Barrett (1977:2) and Kritzing (1971:583) in this regard. However, while Rastafarianism is seen as traditionally patriarchal and sexist, women within the movement do not passively accept their subjected positioning. The movement itself should not be seen as a monolithic, immutable entity without internal contradictions which allow for contestation: 'Not all of the doctrine on females are held by all males, furthermore how a belief impacts on a particular family unit varies from household to household' (Rowe, 1980:16). Rowe, herself a Rastafarian, states that the traditional, sexist view of women as 'impure' is most prevalent amongst older Rastafarian males, while younger males have gradually started to accept women's views on doctrine and their participation in central rituals (1980:14).

25. Due to an ambiguous Jamaican Creole phonology, the last line here may be interpreted, on the one hand, literally as the mundane and routine task of checking stock and, metaphorically, as considering one's personal situation. On the other hand, Johnson's Jamaican phonology does not differentiate between 'stack' and 'stock' (note that 'clock' becomes 'clack' to rhyme with 'cluck', with the vowel slightly rounded); 'stack' could thus also refer to a theft with Standard English 'stack' - 'but w'en mi tek a stack' - and the speaker's reluctance to pay for the crime by sitting out time in jail and thus becoming a 'clack-watchah'.

26. See Burnett (1986:430) and Johnson (1986:4).

27. Another indication of Johnson's radical politics: Rodney was a pan-Africanist, Marxist academic and activist involved in the Working Peoples' Alliance in Guyana, in opposition to the neo-colonialist government of Forbes Burnham. Johnson's lamentation that, with Rodney's assassination, his own 'dream/come jus get blown to smidahreen (smithereens)' clearly marks his political sympathies (1991:33).

28. See Waters for not only the use of Rastafarian symbols in Jamaican electioneering, but also for a general history of Jamaican politics and election related violence (1985).

29. Four decades after emigrating to England, (mostly middle-class) Caribbeans are

now returning to their parents' islands because of continuing - and increasing - racist and economic disadvantage in England. See Angella Johnson (1994:25).

30. See Davis and Simon (1982:163), Denselow (1989:143), Dhondy (1979:86 and 1980:4), Johnson (1982:164), Kindermann (1984:105), Rugg (1979:44-45) and Salkey, (1980:8).

31. It is important to understand the difference in emphasis here. It has previously been suggested that a study of oral performance based on reception should be wary of reducing the audience to a homogeneous mass, especially if such a study attempts to arrive at a knowledge of 'audience response'. While common historical experiences in what Johnson constitutes as and perceives to be his primary audience are acknowledged, this project is not specifically interested in how his audience 'responds' to his work. The best a critic can do is to consider Johnson's attempts at speaking to his audience within the parameters of those common histories; one cannot, however, presume that the audience - because they are second-generation, black British - all respond in a predetermined manner. One could consider the emphasis of this study, then, to be more on the attempts to and the way in which Johnson's work attempts to constitute a primary audience. Which audience responds, how the audience responds, and why the audience responds should perhaps be left to the audience.

32. 'As far as blacks in Britain are concerned, [they are] not ... part of what may be loosely described as the "general reading public"' (Johnson, 1977:83).

33. Johnson insists that he uses 'folk forms, religious forms, calypso, soul, jazz' (1982:163), but his musical accompaniment is recognizably reggae-based, with the dominant bass and the incessant rhythm guitar characteristic of reggae.

34. In a review of a film on Rastafarianism, Johnson criticises the film for not 'soliciting the views of other sections of the black community on Rastas in Britain' and for its biased historical silences about the spread of Rastafarianism in Britain (1979b:21). Not only does this suggest Johnson's critical view of Rastafarianism, but it also points to his desire for some historical accuracy in the depiction of Rastafarianism in Britain: that other views on the subject may provide further, alternative insights.

35. See Chapter 2, note 21 for a discussion of the Jamaican Creole variant spoken in Britain.

36. Johnson is emphatic about himself coining the phrase 'dub-poetry' to refer to toasters in Jamaica because he was trying to argue that 'what the DJs in Jamaica were actually doing is poetry'; he prefers to see his own work simply as poetry (in Partridge, 1985LP).

37. For discussions of Jamaican Creole, see Roberts (1988), Trudgill and Hannah (1985) and V.K. Edwards (1979).

38. The phonetic alphabet and the vowel charts for Received Pronunciation and Jamaican Creole used here are from Trudgill and Hannah (1985:x, xii and 10, and 97, respectively). Typographical deviations from Trudgill and Hannah's representations of phonetic symbols are noted.

39. Note that the terminal vowel in words such as 'fiyah' and 'wiyah' lies somewhere between chopped [α :] (thus the vowel in 'bard', for instance, shortened), and [\wedge] (to rhyme with 'putt').

40. Greek epsilon [ϵ] is used for the frontal, half-open vowel, as in 'bed' and 'merry'.

41. Maggie Thatcher on the go
 with a racist show
 but she have to go

and,

 the people they fight
 to stay alive down there
 the people they fight
 for their rights down there.

In 'Come we goh dung deh', there is no vocal distinction between the vowel of 'stay' and the initial vowel in 'alive' so that it is pronounced as one word 'stay-live'.

42. V.K. Edwards suggests that it more likely comes from West African Akan 'se' than from English 'say' (1979:30).

43. This does not refer to the tense of the verb, which has already been marked in the first line of that stanza as past: 'It woz ...'.

44. The other two areas are the relationships between the artist and his or her music, and the artist and his or her audience. The measure of co-optation is then 'always relative and the emphasis is on the complex interaction of the various "arenas of struggle"' (Garofalo, 1987:84). A progressive relationship between Johnson and his audience, and between him and the music he uses, has already been argued.

45. This information comes from an interview conducted in 1982. Despite the record label being established as early as then, Making History was still released by Island Records, due to Johnson's contractual commitments.

Chapter 4

1. This biographical sketch makes use of numerous sources and, unless an author is quoted, sources are not cited within the text. Interviews with Mbuli are cited under his name and entered in the bibliography accordingly. Where known, the name of the interviewer is listed in the bibliography. Similarly, where the writer of a press article is known, the source is cited by that name; otherwise, the source is identified by the name of the publication.

The sources for Mbuli's biography are: ADA Magazine (no.10, 1992), The Argus (4 August 1989), Devereaux (1989a, 1989b and 1989c), Feldman (1990), Leshoai (1993), Makhaya (1990 and 1991), Mbuli (1986, 1989a, 1989b and 1990), Metsoamere (1992), Molefe (1989), Nawa (1989), The New Nation (18-24 January 1991, 7-13 June 1991, and 24-30 July 1992), O'Hara (1988), The Saturday Star (18 March 1989), Daniel Simon (1989), and The Sowetan (4 May 1990).

2. This line comes from one of Mbuli's poems, 'Why tricks and not solutions' (1989b:77-78). It is one of his peculiarities, during interviews, to respond to questions by citing lines from his poems.

3. Mbube is a form of music popular with black, South African migrant labourers and which, alongside other styles, Rycroft sees as part of a culture of 'musically illiterate groups who nevertheless devise their own brands of music and strive to emulate their more sophisticated peers' (1991:8).

4. There are potential problems - uncritical generalisations, for instance - with an indiscriminate use of terms such as 'traditional' and 'praise poetry'. However, since the overall project concerns contemporary English oral poetry performed with musical accompaniment - a narrowly demarcated field - these categories are not interrogated. Furthermore, as an introduction, the concern here is with a straightforward biography of Mbuli, after which interrogated categories will be introduced.

5. The broad political vision of the U.D.F. and its connections to Mbuli's poetry will be discussed later in this chapter.

6. The author of the cited article does not expressly state the object of this 'accountability' but only refers to the 'Desk's lack of accountability'; it is not clear as to what or who the Cultural Desk should be accountable to. One presumes it to mean accountable not only to progressive and democratic forces in South Africa,

but also accountable in its machinations and democratic in its practices. See De Waal's reference to the 'dubious position of the national Interim Cultural Desk and its former head Mzwakhe Mbuli'. According to him, Mbuli exacerbated internal political conflict in the South African Musicians' Alliance by acting 'as a spokesman [*sic.*] for Sama, although he was not an elected member of the executive' (1990:13).

Mbuli has apparently resorted to his position on the Cultural Desk in order to retaliate against personal 'enemies'. After financial conflict with Shifty Records (the producer of two of his albums), Mbuli evidently used his Cultural Desk portfolio to hinder various projects undertaken by the recording company (Sony, 1991:118).

Interestingly, the anonymous reporter in The New Nation seeks to exempt Mbuli from such criticism: 'He also presided over the cultural boycott as the head of the "hated" Cultural Desk' (18-24 January 1991:8). The scare quotes in the phrase '"hated" Cultural Desk' points more towards the reporter's invocation of irony - that the desk was only purportedly hated - as opposed to merely citing someone. This attempt at Mbuli's salvation is clearer when the reporter says: '[Mbuli's] intolerance for tendencies detrimental to "the struggle" became equated with intolerance for debate'. The reporter thus sees the accusations of intolerance as a misreading of Mbuli's intentions. Simultaneously, the reporter implies that any action advantageous to 'the struggle' (like Mbuli's intolerance of tendencies detrimental to 'the struggle'?) should be precluded from criticism.

7. It is not clear why or how the Cultural Desk closed or was closed. As reported in The New Nation (18-24 January 1991:8, and 7-13 June 1991:23), it appears that the closure was a decision on Mbuli's part. Dikeni, however, suggests an intricate conspiracy behind Mbuli's 'dethronement' (1993:41). According to him, a number of South African cultural organisations met in 1990 - with the financial backing of the African National Congress - to form a national, co-ordinating, cultural organisation. None of the potential member-organisations were clear about the reasons or about who convened the meeting. Amongst its members were the Congress of South African Writers, Performing Arts Workers' Equity, the South African Musicians' Alliance and the 1820 Foundation. Says Dikeni: 'It was to dethrone Mzwakhe, who was regarded as authoritarian. This was to be done in his absence because they were also afraid of facing him square-on' (1993:42).

8. Mbuli produced his third album of poetry, Resistance is Defense, in 1992. This recording is on the Earthworks label (African division) of Virgin Records, a British recording company. Since the recording is not available through local, South African record distributors, it is virtually impossible to come by in this country. An accompanying volume of new poetry which was to be published is also untraceable. Discussion of Mbuli's work is thus limited to his first two recordings; this however, the author believes, does not limit the perspectives and issues involved in the discussion.

9. According to the Director of Publications, 'this cassette with its stirring music and dramatic presentation will have a great influence among revolutionary groups in the RSA and at mass-meetings as well' (in Mbuli 1989b:81).

10. Other critics who see Mbuli's poetry as progressive and revolutionary, in one way or another, are Chapman (1988 and 1991), Cronin (1990), Gwala (1988), Horn (1991), Oliphant (1990), Press (1990b) and Van Niekerk (1989). A number of authors cited in note 1 above use the epithet 'people's poet', or variations thereof, to imply Mbuli's progressive politics.

11. See note 9 above. A better, contextual translation of the Afrikaans (in Mbuli, 1989b:81) would substitute 'provocative' for 'stirring' ('opruieende'). Similarly, 'great influence' is a weak translation of 'groot inslag' - contextually, 'groot inslag' means that the poetry would bring the revolutionary groups to their (revolutionary) senses and spur them to action.

12. From the poem 'Promised Land', Sole (1992) Projections in the Past Tense, Johannesburg: Ravan, p.89.

13. In the context of apartheid South Africa, one needs to understand attempts to constitute group identities as empowering alternatives to the psychologically enervating categories of race and ethnicity inspired by apartheid-capitalism. Talking about 'ethnicity' - but easily translated into a description of general, group-informed identity formations and not narrow nationalism - Roosens points to the political and psychological values of 'ethnogenesis':

Those who do identify with an ethnic category, network, or group can find psychological security in this identification, a feeling of belonging, a certainty that one knows one's origin, that one can live on in the younger generations of one's people who will carry on the struggle, and so on. (1981:16)

However, one has to be wary of the processes and the forms in which such a quest is couched. Roosens argues that ethnogenesis allows one with "ways of being" ... that set [one] apart from outsiders. These ways of being contribute to the content of my self-perception. In this sense, I become my ethnic allegiance'. An attack on cultural symbols (language, rituals, styles) becomes an attack on the person (1981:18). One should be concerned, too, with the ways in which such identity formation takes place, with how one becomes one's ethnic allegiance. If, as Anderson argues, identity is a narration (1991:204), one has to be mindful of how the form of this narrative process influences the content. The process of being 'set apart from outsiders', to use Roosens's terms, has the potential of becoming an organising principle so that the narration evolves narcissistically. Whereas Roosens's formulation posits the 'setting apart' as resultant, the potential exists for

that 'setting apart' to be reversed so as to become the causal element that influences the 'ways of being' in detrimental ways; 'ways of being' are then arrived at by setting oneself apart, as in nationalism. 'Communities are to be distinguished', Anderson asserts, 'not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (1991:6; emphasis added).

In South African cultural politics and political culture, Kistner critiques not the notion of a national culture or oppositional cultural production, but the ways in which terms and categories are uncritically used for various forms of legitimation and privileging. One of her criticisms, by implication, is that past definitions of a national culture as oppositional discourse do not succeed because of the ways in which notions of oppositional culture are constituted. Central to this is the fact that '[a] general equivalence is assumed between "culture of the oppressed", "national culture", "resistance culture"' (1989:310). The problem with this equation is clear: it easily leads to a romanticisation of the 'oppressed' so that whatever the 'oppressed' do is seen as revolutionary or progressive. As rectification, Kistner emphasizes the need for class-analysis in cultural discourse so as to

wrest oppositional cultural production from its snug co-existence with a nationalism explained by colonial subjugation. In order to equip cultural production with the capacity for education and, very optimistically, resistance, a contradictory and dialectical relation to its conditions of existence has to be postulated (logically and politically). (1989:312)

She also refers to Fanon's 'scepticism of and polemics against a neo-colonialism which finds its ideological home in a neo-liberal universalism parading as a claim to nationhood' (1989:312). Part of the present critique of the literary criticism at hand is that it is the 'nation' - and the quest for such - as single, organising principle and defined in terms of a simple opposition to the apartheid narrative, which leads to occlusionary criticism - literature being evaluated simply in terms of either its support or (otherwise assumed) non-support for the quest for an alternative nationhood. Part of this project is to uncover the gaps in what Attwell refers to as a 'stultifying anti-intellectualism and chauvinism in South African literary culture' and a 'mystified and self-congratulatory conception of the relationship between historical literary studies and popular struggle' (1990:96; both emphases added). See also, in toto, Sole (1990).

14. A personal note may clarify this. I first heard a recording of Mbuli's oral poetry after having been acquainted with Johnson's work for approximately ten years. The broad similarities between the poets - in form and politics - were immediately apparent, but I was convinced that Johnson's work was more powerful both in political content and in execution. The flurry in critical acclaim for Mbuli was surprising because few of the critics, though mentioning Johnson, seemed to have heard his work. If they had, they did not critically compare Mbuli's work with

Johnson's. Convinced that Johnson's work was better, I considered Mbuli's critics' comments as ill-informed. Subsequent research has shown critical pronouncements on Mbuli not only to be under-researched, but to be grounded in trends in (especially) local criticism of black South African literature. Part of this project is thus to, through the comparative reading of Johnson and Mbuli, provide a concrete and small example of how one can redress critical shortcomings.

15. Sole's study (1983) employs a wide range of research and assesses an equally wide range of issues; therefore, it cannot be summarised easily. The author is deeply indebted to it for a number of arguments - and its critical approach - in the following section on Mbuli's criticism; for this and for the precise historical background to Sole's assertions, the reader is referred to the article in its entirety.

16. With 'populist' is meant both the uncritical acceptance and valorisation of values belonging to a nebulous 'people' (see Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988:189-190), and the employment/deployment of a rhetoric which uses popular symbols that simultaneously gloss specifically class differences, normally in the name of a national ideal. The ambiguities of populist discourse - because of its dependence on a vague concept such as 'the people' - renders it problematic as a revolutionary concept, as Hall shows in the way it was deployed by the Thatcher administration in Great Britain to present an ultimately conservative and racist reform movement as a 'revolution from below' (1980:157-185).

See also Hegedüs:

An essential feature of populism is its rhetoric aimed at mobilization of support from underprivileged groups and its manipulative character for controlling 'marginal' groups.... The populist ideology is moralistic, emotional and anti-intellectual, and non-specific in its programme.... [T]he notion of class conflict is not a part of that populist rhetoric. (1983:381-382)

17. Implicit in Sole's statement is the notion that both audience and critic easily accept writers' claims to be such voices:

Claims to be 'the voice of the black people' by black writers of varying political persuasions need to be looked at more critically in the light of the ongoing struggle for popular support by opposition groups in this country. Otherwise, it is easy for writers and politicians to claim representative status and be believed without further ado. (1983:66)

18. See Chapman, who collapses into a rhetoric that is - without even considering his lack of historical specificity about the contexts to which it is supposed to refer - meaningless. He sees Mbuli as 'a manifestation of the time' and as 'answering a

need' (1991:10). The issue is not about whether Mbuli was/is a manifestation (and answering a need) of the time. Any text is in some way or another a manifestation of the time. The question is, surely, in which ways Mbuli was a manifestation of the time and which need he was answering.

19. Once again, the reader is referred to Sole (1983) in toto.

20. During the 1970s already, various South African poets and performing arts groups performed their poetry with musical accompaniment, for example Lefifi Tladi and his group Dashiki, the Medupe group and Ingoapele Mandingoane (Sole 1987:256-257, 259-260). See Scheub (1985) for an idea of the scope and variety of oral literature in Africa alone. The long tradition of toasting and dub-poetry in Jamaica and Great Britain - partly the subject of this thesis - is another instance.

21. The history of the general musical form that Mbuli employs, mbaqanga, will be explored later in this chapter and the parallels to the development of reggae will be shown.

22. This is not to imply that her positioning as white academic disallows her from criticising Mbuli's poetry. Van Niekerk herself invokes that identification - even if to merely point to its supposed inadequacy. The point of contention is the (ludicrous) contradiction between her repudiation of 'white academic standards' and her, as white academic, writing about Mbuli's poetry. It is the convolutions of her condescension that is under scrutiny here.

23. Van Niekerk does not specify what she means by 'concreteness'; it is taken to imply the lack of abstract (political) generalisations.

24. As in the previous chapter, the printed versions of poems are cited for ease of reproduction, although the sound-recordings are analyzed. The oral renditions of the cited poems are recorded on Johnson (1984LP) and Mbuli (1986LP) respectively. See pp.100-102 above for a discussion of 'Reggae fi dada'.

25. Here, Attwell quotes Njabulo Ndebele as part of a summary of a debate about the use of realism by black South African authors. Although Ndebele's statements may over-generalise, the statement has particular relevance to the work of Mbuli. Ndebele goes on: 'Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms' (in Attwell, 1990:97). One may agree with what Ndebele sees as the easy confirmation employed by much of the literature under discussion, but one needs to be cautious of what Ndebele implies by 'transformation', this term lying close to the liberal-aesthetic belief in the personally redemptive features of literature, turning readers into 'better' persons.

26. Interestingly, Press's floundering provides one with an example which shows that the claimed discardment of 'academic standards' by academics, as implied by Van Niekerk, is to a significant extent a dubious move, if not impossible.

27. Petersen is here writing an introduction which surveys the contents of a special edition of Kunapipi on South African literature. While one thus does not expect her to develop the 'different set of tools', her list contains significant silences.

28. The opposition between oral and print literature should in any event be approached with caution. The essentialising romanticism implicit in a strict opposition has already been criticised. Furthermore, Johnson and Mbuli are poets who perform oral poetry while both are literate and both produce their poetry in print form as well.

29. One cannot help but point to the incorrect conjecture here. Even if one ignores the faulty formulation - the essentialism of the direct, unmediated relationship assumed between experience and types of literature - Petersen's musing is easily disproved by simply pointing at writers like Breyten Breytenbach, Jeremy Cronin, Dambudzo Marachera and, closer to the concerns of this project, Linton Kwesi Johnson, all of whom have suffered detention in some way but who have produced literature high in 'innovation' and 'contemplation'.

30. Ashcroft et al. refer specifically to literatures written in the contexts of post-colonial countries whose histories differ from that of South Africa. Nevertheless, general similarities between South Africa and other specifically post-colonial societies allow for Ashcroft et al.'s insights to be abstracted for application to South Africa. To them, post-colonial literature develops as an attempt to create a literature markedly different from that of the colonial culture. This development happens in conjunction with local, indigenous attempts at economic and political independence from the colonial metropolis, the literatures functioning as both cultural support bases for the national struggles and as products of such, providing 'a source of important images of national identity' (1989:17). This notion is applicable to South Africa where a similar struggle - albeit aimed at a different type of master-force, not exactly colonial - obtains.

While acknowledging the need and value of national literary endeavours in 'rejecting the claims of the [metropolitan] centre to exclusivity', Ashcroft et al. warn against the potential of such cultural processes giving way to 'nationalist and racist orthodoxies':

[N]ationalism, in which some partial truth or cliché is elevated to orthodoxy, is a danger implicit in such national conceptions of literary production. The impetus towards national self-realization in critical assessments of literature all too often fails to stop short of nationalist myth. (1989:17)

This leads one to ponder the motives behind the critical silences revealed by Mbuli's critics. It may not be entirely peculiar that critics' acclaim of Mbuli as 'people's poet', while not narrowly nationalist, represents some attempt at coddling a South African national identity as alternative to apartheid identities and implicitly supports the anti-apartheid movements' struggles towards national self-realisation. One could speculate in this way about Van Niekerk's condescension towards Mbuli, for example; or about Press's ascription of value to Mbuli by opposing his rhetoric to that of apartheid. It is not the support of the anti-apartheid agenda *per se* this author questions, but the ways in which it may hamper literary critical endeavours. Support of anti-apartheid struggles, in other words, should not prevent one from critically evaluating the art ostensibly in support of the same political project.

31. The sources for this section on the history of marabi and mbaqanga are: Andersson (1981), Ballantine (1987), Coplan (1985), Drury (1985), Rörich, (1989), and Sole and Koch (1990).

32. Sole and Koch point out that marabi may not solely be a working-class invention, but that it may be syncretic - apart from merely stylistically - also in the social and class formations taking part in the wider culture of marabi (1990:210).

33. As Sole and Koch point out, this does not exclude the fact that marabi culture included middle-class cultural forms. It is perhaps the working-class appropriation of middle-class forms for other cultural practices that jars the middle-class sensibility. Sole and Koch sees the rise of marabi found on the culture of amatimiti, as 'a lower class appropriation, with alcohol added, of the more sedate tea parties encouraged by missions as suitable entertainment for their flock' (1990:210). This is an example of how cultural formations are never stable but open to group interpretations and appropriation, while maintaining significant symbolisms to leave the new formation problematically ambiguous; popular culture is always at risk of being co-opted by mass culture, and vice versa.

34. Sole and Koch include 'white middle class commentators' (1990:210).

35. Kwela was an inexpensive and ingenuous imitation of marabi and American jazz, with children in the streets trying to imitate their local musical heroes. The term 'kwela' shows a fascinating process and a creative form of resistance in the way it has come to describe the music. 'Khwela-khwela' refers to the police vans which were constantly driving township streets trying to combat street gambling. At the sight of such a van, someone from the group of gamblers would start playing their penny whistle and the gamblers would pretend to be an audience intent on listening to the music (Andersson [1981:28] and Drury [1985:12]).

36. See Andersson (1981:26), Coplan (1985:161) and Rörich (1989:90).

37. Rörich is quick to dismiss mbaqanga and she does so in problematic terms:

[T]his commercial style fused the blandest marabi and swing elements and finally led to msakazo ("Broadcast") [T]hese styles found a broad audience amongst the lower class blacks whose working and living conditions continued to demand recreations in which individual unhappiness could be mindlessly obliterated. (1989:90)

It is not mbaqanga, in itself, that leads to msakazo, but its commercialisation by big record companies. While she guards against populist approval of the form - valorising it because it is widely enjoyed - she elsewhere praises marabi, also popular amongst lower-classes, for its 'vitality and its symbolic expression of an emerging urban community' (1989:83). While praising marabi, on the one hand, for its closeness to the working-classes, she dismisses mbaqanga - itself enjoyed by the working-class - very much in the terms that an earlier middle-class dismissed marabi. Early mbaqanga indeed had the same type of social relevance that marabi displayed, and by not noting the actual processes involved in 'this commercial style', Rörich unconsciously assigns msakazo as something intrinsic in mbaqanga.

38. The line is modified from a song by reggae singer, Peter Tosh: 'As long as you're a black man, you're an African' ('African', off Equal Rights, 1977, Columbia Records).

39. See Cronin's analysis of Mongane Wally Serote's 'Hell, well, heaven'. Cronin relates the metrical structure of the poem to "'township" music' (marabi, mbaqanga, and kwela), which is 'characterised by a basic riff repeated many times over, with small subtle variations' (1985:35).

40. This is peculiar, given Cronin's earlier, stylistic analysis of form - a convincing and fruitful project - of three Serote poems. See Cronin (1985) and note 39 immediately above.

41. See also Press, who sees in Mbuli's poetry a 'rhythm of urgency' (1990:49).

42. Whatever Mbuli's intended audience is, his main audience is 'young comrades from the townships' (Sony, 1991:115). The section on language will consider audience in its relationship to popular culture and in terms of political commitment.

43. 'I have managed - I want to believe - to become another Shakespeare of this era' (Mbuli, 1990:25).

44. The term 'South African Black English' comes from Mesthrie and McCormick (1993:34) and refers to English spoken primarily by Africans in South Africa as a 'second' or 'third' language.

45. See Titlestad (1993:46-53) for a discussion of the features of South African Black English phonology.

46. Mbuli's addition of the neutral vowel here, when considered, is not for rhythmical or stylistic purposes. It does suggest its existence in South African Black English - though in a non-standard position - and contradicts Titlestad's claim that the neutral vowel, because it does not appear in the vocalic systems of black languages, causes problems for black learners of English (1993:51).

47. Mbuli gives an example of a line which a publisher reportedly criticised as 'ungrammatical': 'aloud I shout' (Meintjies, 1989:15). The line is not ungrammatical, but rather a poetic archaism, common in South African Black English. It is not clear whether the publisher pointed out the difference to Mbuli.

48. For instance, a line from Mbuli reads: 'And Africa shall know no peace' ('The last struggle', 1989b:35). In South African Black English, the topic is repeated with 'it': 'And Africa, it shall know no peace'.

49. For example, in South African Black English, 'I convey royal messages to the people' ('The drum beats', Mbuli, 1989b:19) would read: 'I'm conveying royal messages to the people'.

50. Information from informal discussion with Raj Mesthrie, Department of Linguistics, University of Cape Town, 18 November 1992.

51. From the author's experiences in cultural forums in South Africa, the daffodil has often been used - presumably from the Wordsworth poem [I wandered lonely ...] - to signify a 'Western, high-literary tradition', in naive opposition and supposedly irrelevant to the South African context. Mbuli's opposition between daffodil and blood carries this into further simplicity and reveals his proclivity for ready-made symbols and solutions.

52. The weaknesses in the populist nature of the U.D.F./A.N.C. are becoming clear as former alliances are being discarded because of such an incorporative gesture's inability to deal with different demands from different sectors within the former alliance. When problems in black South African education once again reached crisis levels in early 1993, black student leaders in the Western Cape, for instance, asserted their independence from the A.N.C. Responding to Allan Boesak's call on students to refrain from violence, JJ Tyhhalisisu insisted: 'We are in charge, we are the student leaders, not Comrade Boesak. We are not prepared to listen to calls from those who are not informed of the conditions of students' (Gaye Davis, 1993:4; emphases added).

Appendix A - Standard English translations of selected
poems by Linton Kwesi Johnson

Where extensively quoted in the dissertation and where deemed necessary, poems or excerpts from poems by Johnson have been translated into approximate Standard English equivalents so as to make them more intelligible to readers unfamiliar with the Jamaican Creole. No attempt has been made to provide the translations with all the poetic nuances and meanings as would be found in the original versions. The selection is arranged in the order in which poems are referred to in the main text.

1. 'Want fi goh rave'

I was
walking down the road
the other day
when I heard a little youth-man say,

he said:
you now see my situation
I don't have accommodation
I have to sign on at the station
at six in the evening
I say my life has no meaning
I'm just living without feeling

still
I have to make some money
because I've come of age
and I want to go rave.

I was
walking down the road
another day
when I heard another youth-man say,

he said:
I don't work for no pittance
I don't draw their assistance
I used to run a little racket
but what, the police-them stopped it
and I had to hop it

still
 I have to make some money
 because I've come of age
 and I want to go rave.

I was
 walking down the road
 yet another day
 when I heard another youth-man say,

he said
 I have to pick pockets
 take a wallet from a jacket
 I have to do it ferociously
 and if it's a locket I have to pop it
 and if it's a safe I have to crack it
 or chop it with my hatchet

but
 I have to make some money
 because I've come of age
 and I want to go rave.

2. 'Sonny's lettah (Anti-sus poem)'

Brixton Prison
 Jebb Avenue
 London Southwest 2
 England

Dear Mama
 Good Day
 I hope that when
 these few lines reach you
 they may find you in the best of health.

Mama,
 I really don't know how to tell you this,
 because I did make a solemn promise
 to take care of little Jim
 and try my best to look out for him.

Mama,
I really did try my best,
but nonetheless
I'm sorry to tell you that
poor little Jim was arrested.

It was the middle of the rush hour
when everybody just hustled and bustled
to go home for their evening shower;
me and Jim stood
waiting for the bus
not causing a fuss
when all of a sudden
a police van pulled up.

Out jumped three policemen,
all of them carrying batons.
They walked straight up to me and Jim.
One of them held on to Jim
and said they're taking him in;
Jim told him to let go of him
for he did not do a thing
and he's not a thief,
not even for a button.

Jim started to wriggle
the police started to giggle.

Mama,
let me tell you what they did to Jim
Mama,
let me tell you what they did to him:

they thumped him in his belly
and it turned to jelly
they licked him on his back
and his ribs went soft
they licked him on his head
but it's tough like lead
they kicked him in his seat
and it started to bleed.

Mama,
I just couldn't stand up there

and not do anything:

so I hit one in his eye
and he started to cry
I thumped one in his mouth
and he started to shout
I kicked one on his shin
and he started to spin
I thumped him on his chin
and he dropped on a bin

and crashed
and dead.

Mama,
more policemen came down
and beat me to the ground;
they charged Jim with sus,
they charged me with murder.

Mama,
don't fret,
don't get depressed
and down-hearted.
Be of good courage
until I hear from you.

I remain
your son,
Sonny.

3. 'Independent intavenshan'^a

let them go on
now it's calm
but it's us who have to really ride the storm

let them go on
now it's calm

a. 'Independent Intervention'. The abbreviations refer to: 'SWP': Socialist Workers' Party; 'IMG': International Marxist Group; 'CRE': Commission for Racial Equality; 'TUC': Trade Union Congress.

but it's us who have to really ride the storm

what a cheek
they think we're meek
and we can't speak up for ourselves

what a cheek
they think we're weak
and we can't stand up on our feet

but let them go on
now it's calm
but it's us who have to really ride the storm

let them go on
now it's calm
for in the end it's us who have to ride the storm

the SWP can't set us free
the IMG can't do it for us
the Communist Party, cho,^b they are too arty-farty
and the labourites, they're not going to fight for our rights

...

the CRE can't set us free
the TUC can't do it for us
the Liberal Party, they are not very hearty
and the Tory Party is a not-for-us party ...

4. 'Time come'

it soon come^c
it soon come
look out! look out! look out!

fruit soon ripe
to take our bite,

b. 'Cho': an exclamation.

c. 'Soon come' is a Jamaicanism which loosely translates into either 'have patience' or 'it will not be long'.

strength soon come
for us to fling our might.

it soon come
it soon come
look out! look out! look out!

we feel bad
we look sad
we smoke weed
and if your eyes are sharp
read the violence in our eyes;
we're going to smash the sky with our bad bad blood
look out ! look out ! look out!

it soon come
it soon come:
it's the shadow walking behind you
it's me standing up right before you;
look out!

but it's too late now:
I warned you

when you flung me in the prison
I warned you
when you killed Oluwale
I warned you
when you beat Joshua Francis
I warned you
when you picked on the Panthers
I warned you
when you jacked me up against the wall
I didn't bawl
but I warned you.

now you see fire burning in my eye,
smell badness on my breath
feel violence, violence,
bursting out of me;
look out!

it's too late now:
I warned you.

5. 'Bass Culture (for Big Youth)'

1

music of blood
 black reared
 pain rooted
 heart geared

all tensed up
 in the bubble and the bounce
 and the leap and the weight-drop

it is the beat of the heart
 this pulsing of blood
 that is a bubbling bass
 a bad bad beat
 pushing against the wall
 which bars black blood

and it's a whole heap of
 passion gathering
 like a frightful form
 like a righteous harm
 giving off wildly like it's madness

2

BAD OUT THERE

3

hotter than the heights of fire
 living heat down volcano core
 is the cultural wave a dread people deal

spirits riled
 and rise and rail thunder-wise

latent power
 in a form resembling madness
 like violence is the show
 bursting out of slave shackles
 look here! bound to harm the wicked

man feels
 his hurt confirms
 man sights
 destruction all around
 man turns
 love still confirms
 his destiny shines light-wise
 so life takes the form which shifts from calm
 and holds the way of a deadly storm

5

culture pulsing
 high temperature blood
 swinging anger
 shattering the tightened hold
 the false fold
 around flesh which wails freedom
 bitter because of blues^d
 because of maggot suffering
 because of blood clot pressure
 yet still breeding love
 far more mellow
 than the sound of shapes
 chanting loudly

6

SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK!
 what a beat!

7

for the time is nigh
 when passion'll gather high
 when the beat will just lash
 when the wall must be smashed
 and the beat will shift
 as the culture alters
 when oppression scatters.

d. The syntax of the Jamaican Creole makes for ambiguity here. 'Cause' can either mean 'because' or 'caused'. These lines can thus also read: 'bitter caused the blues/caused this maggot-suffering/caused this blood clot pressure'.

6. 'Street 66'

the room was dark-dusk howling softly
 six o'clock,
 charcoal light defying sight was
 moving black;
 the sound was music mellow steady flow,
 and man-son's mind just mystic red,
 green, red, green ... pure scene.

no man would dance but leap and shake
 that shock through feeling ripe;
 shape that sound tumbling down
 making movement rough enough;
 because when the music met my ears/head,
 I felt the sting, knew the shock,
 yea had to do and ride the rock.

out of this rock
 shall come
 a greener rhythm
 even more dread
 than what
 the breeze of marijuana.
 vibrating violence
 is how we move
 rocking with green rhythm
 the drought
 and dry root out.

the mighty poet I-Roy was on the wire,
 Western did a dance and each one laughed:
 he was feeling I-ry,^e dread I.
 'Street 66,' the said man said,
 'any policeman who comes here
 will get some righteous raas klaat licks,^f
 yea man, a whole heap of kicks.'

e. 'I-ry': good. Variants: 'iry', 'irie'.

f. 'Raas klaat' (or 'rass claat') is a phrase of contempt or anger. According to Burnett, 'rass' is a contraction of 'your ass' and 'claat' means 'cloth' (1986:437, 432). One can thus see the level of contempt in wishing 'raas klaat licks' (beatings) on someone.

hours beat the scene moving right
 when all of a sudden
 bam bam bam a knocking on the door.
 'Who is that?' asked Western feeling right.
 'Open up! It's the police! Open up!'
 'What address do you want?'
 'Number sixty-six! Come on, open up!'
 Western feeling high replied:
 'Yes, this is Street 66;
 step right in and take some licks.'

7. 'Inglan is a bitch'

when I'd just come to London town
 I used to work on the underground
 but working on the underground
 you don't get to know your way around

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch
 there's no running away from it

I got a little job in a big hotel
 and after a while, I was doing quite well
 they started me off as a dish-washer
 but when I took stock, I don't turn clock-watcher

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch
 no matter try and hide from it

when they give you your little wage packet
 first they rob it with their big tax racket
 you have to struggle to make ends meet
 and when you go to bed you just can't sleep

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch for true
 it's no lie I tell, it's true

I used to work dig ditch when it's cold, no bitch
 I did strong like a mule, but, boy, was I fooled
 then after a while I just stopped the overtime
 then after a while I just put down my tool

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch
 you have to know how to survive in it

well, I did day work and I did night work
 I did clean work and I did dirty work
 they say that blacks are very lazy
 but if you saw how I worked you would say I was crazy

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch
 you better face up to it

they have a little factory up in Brockly
 in this factory all they do is pack crockery
 for the last fifteen years they had my labour
 now after fifteen years I've fallen from favour

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch
 there's no running away from it

I know they have work, work in abundance
 yet still, they make me redundant
 now, at fifty-five I'm getting quite old
 yet still, they send me to go draw dole

England is a bitch
 there's no escaping it
 England is a bitch for true
 and what are we going to do about it?

8. 'Reggae fi Dada'

go along dada
go along gone yes sir
you never had no life to live
just the one life to give
you did your time on earth
you never got your just desserts
go along go smile in the sun
go along go sit in the palace of peace

oh the water
it's so deep
the water
it's so dark
and it's full of harbour sharks

the land is like a rock
slowly shattering to sand
sinking in a sea of calamity
where fear breeds shadows
that lurk in the dark
where people fear to walk
fear to think fear to talk
where the present is haunted by the past

so there I was born
got to know about storms
learned to cling to the dawn
and when I heard my daddy's sick
I quickly packed a grip and took a trip

I never had the time
when I reached
to see a sunny beach
when I reached
just people living in shacks
people living back-to-back
amongst cockroaches and rats
amongst dirt and disease
subject to terrorist attacks
political intrigue
constant grief
and no sign of relief

oh the grass
turned brown
so many trees
cut down

from country to town
it's just thistle and thorn
in the wound of the poor
it's a miracle how they endure

the pain night and day
the stench of decay
the glaring sights
the guarded affluence
the arrogant vices
cold eyes of contempt
the mocking symbols of independence

so there I was born
got to know about storms
learned to cling to the dawn
and when the news reached me
saying my one daddy's dead
I caught a plane quick

and when I reached my sunny isle
it was the same old style
the money well dry
the bullets they fly
plenty innocents die
many rivers run dry
marijuana planes flying high
the poor man he tries
you'd think a little try he tries
holding on by and by
when a dollar can't buy
a little dinner for a fly

go along dada
go along gone sir
you never had no life to live
just the one life to give
you did your time on earth
you never got your just desserts

go along go smile in the sun
go along go sit in the palace of peace

I know you couldn't take it dada
the anguish and the pain
the suffering the problems the strain
the struggling in vain
to make two ends meet
so that the children could get
a little something to eat
to put clothes on their backs
to put shoes on their feet
when a dollar can't buy
a little dinner for a fly

I know you tried dada
you fought a good fight
but the dice were loaded
and the card pack fixed
yet still you reached fifty-six
before you lost your leg wicket
I know you were born down here
so we buried you in a Stranger's Burying Ground
near to mum and cousin Doris
not far from the quarry
down at August Town

9. 'Mi revalueshanary fren'

my revolutionary friend is not the same again
you know since when?
since the masses shattered silence -
started to grumble
since party paramountcy took a tumble
from Hungary to Poland to Romania
since the cosy castles started to crumble
when we confront each in reasoning
my friend always end up with the same thing
this is the song he loves to sing:

Kádár
he had to go
Zhivkov

he had to go
 Hoxha
 he had to go
 Honecker
 he had to go
 Ceausescu
 he had to go
 just like apartheid
 will have to go

a while ago my friend and I were talking
 so I said to him:

what a way the earth runs nowadays, man
 it's getting harder by the day
 to know where you stand
 because when you think you're there on solid land
 when you take stock you find you're in quicksand
 you now notice how the landscape shifts
 as if a volcano's under it and nothing can stop it
 because things just bubble and boil down below
 strata separate and refold
 and when you think you've reached the mountain top
 it's a brand new plateau you'll encounter

my revolutionary friend shook his head and sighed
 this was his reply:

Kádár
 he had to go ...

well, I was not satisfied with what my friend replied
 and to get a deeper meaning of the reasoning
 I said to him:

well alright
 so Gorby gave the people glasnost
 and it posed the Stalinists with plenty problems
 so Gorby let go perestroika on them
 confounding bureaucratic stratagems
 but we have to face up to the cold facts
 he also opened up Pandora's box
 yes, people's power just showers every hour
 and everybody claims they're democratic

but some are wolf and some are sheep
and that is problematic
and things like those you would call a dialectic?

my revolutionary friend paused a while and he smiled
then he looked me in my eye and replied:

Kádár
he had to go ...

well, I couldn't elaborate
because it was getting late
so in spite of my lack of understanding
about the meaning of the changes
in the east for the west, nonetheless
and although I have my reservations
about the consequences and implications
especially for black liberation
to bring the reasoning to a conclusion
I had to agree with my friend
hoping that when we met up once again
we could have a fuller conversation

so I said to him, you know what?
he said what? I said:

Kádár
he had to go ...

10. 'Tings an' times'

duped
doped
demoralised

dizzied
dazed
traumatised

blinded by resplendent light of love
dazzled by the firmament of freedom
he couldn't detect deceit
even when it kicked him in his teeth

he couldn't cry corruption
 and believe in man
 he never knew about cliques
 he was humble he was meek
 he never knew intrigue
 he was never in that league
 he never understood
 that on the road to socialism
 you'd encounter nepotism
 his wife dangerous
 his brother treacherous
 and his cousin very vicious

duped ...

now like a fragile fragment of light
 trapped in the belly of the dark night
 like a blind man stupefied and dazed
 lost and alone in a mystical maze

for days

upon
 days
 upon
 days
 upon
 days

watch him drifting across the ocean of life
 without rudder nor anchor nor sail
 for days

upon
 days
 upon
 days
 upon
 days

call him flotsam of the tides of the times
 if you like
 lost in the labyrinth of life
 if you like

duped ...

ship-wrecked against the sands of the tides of the times
 meditating on the bad old days
 face down on the gleaming seashore
 not so certain not so sure like before
 the salt of the sea on the sand in his eyes
 and he would give it back
 if he could cry
 the sound of the surge of the sea
 harmonizing with the swaying bamboo trees
 and his brains just ticking
 with all kind of thoughts now in it
 like those desperate days of defiance
 when young rebels fought against oppression
 when young rebels flung fire-bombs
 when they marched with their banners raised
 chanting freedom chanting justice chanting blood and fire
 when enough crucial trails blazed
 taking the struggle to a higher stage

duped ...

now washed up
 wet-up
 mashed up
 he rises
 catches up
 and sits up
 with his hand upon his jaw
 and his head hanging down
 he considers how young rebels are getting old how
 some sell their soul
 some get left out in the cold
 some get elevated
 some get depreciated
 some turn middle-class
 some gamble race horses
 some try to live clean
 some get vicious and mean
 some are plagued with doubt
 some still sit it out
 one and two fight the struggle in their heads
 lead the leaderless in their heads
 win the revolution in their heads
 all turn prime minister in their heads

duped ...

now he was wondering pondering considering
 posing all kind of riddles to himself like
 now that we've come out of the one room there
 and time and fortune have been some of our friends
 now that we've got our council flat
 and we're this and we're that
 with colour tv and all the mod cons
 now that we've created some space
 and enough of us own a little place
 now that we've got our mp and our black jp^g
 blacks on the radio
 blacks on tv
 we're sir and we're lord and we're mbe^h
 and forget we forget or is that it?
 do we need another mooses
 to take us across the sea
 and say go on walk across
 you're free you're free
 as we enter the twenty-first century
 or are we long past that era that there stage
 and it's each and everyone who has to rise now
 to meet the dawning of a different age?

he was wondering pondering considering
 when he heard a voice like the wind say, cho
 it's just things and times
 wonders and signs
 but don't get mystic
 be realistic
 and he heard a next voice like the sea say
 sometimes the pungent odour of decay
 signals that a brand new life is on the way.

g. 'mp': Member of Parliament; 'jp': Justice of the Peace.

h. 'mbe': Member of the Order of the British Empire.

11. 'Reality poem'

this is the age of reality
but some of us deal in mythology
this is the age of science and technology
but some of us check for antiquity

when we can't face reality
we let go of our clarity
some latch on to vanity
some hold insanity
some get visions
start to preach religion
but they can't make decision
when it comes to our fight
they can't make decision
when it comes to our rights

man,
this is the age of reality ...

that one there gone out of line
they don't live in our time
for they say they get signs
and they blind their eyes
to the light of the world
and gone searching within
the dark of their doom
and shout about sin
instead of fighting to win

man,
this is the age of reality ...

this is the age of decision
so let's let go of religion
this is the age of decision
so let's let go of division
this is the age of reality
so let's let go of mythology
this is the age of science and technology
so let us hold the clarity ...

12. 'New Craas massahkah'

first the coming
and the going
in and out of the party

the dubbing
and the rubbing
and the rocking to the rhythm

the dancing
and the scankingⁱ
and the party really swinging

then the crash
and the bang
and the flames start to throng

the heat
and the smoke
and the people start to choke

the screaming
and the crying
and the dying in the fire...

we did know that it could happen
you know - anytime, anywhere
for didn't it happen to us
and the Asians-them already?
but in spite of all that
everybody was still shocked
when we got the cold facts
about that brutal attack
when we found out about the fire over at New Cross
about the innocent life that was lost
about the physically scarred
the mentally marred
and the relatives who took it so hard
and you know, although plenty people were surprised

i. 'Scanking' refers to either a type of dance or any dancing done to reggae.

to know that that kind of thing
 could happen to us
 in this Great Britain
 in London today
 and a few were frightened
 and a few were subdued
 almost everybody had to sympathise
 with the loved ones of the injured and the dead
 for this massacre made us come to realise
 it could have been me
 it could have been you
 or one of our children
 who fell victim to the terror by night

but wait
 you now remember
 how the whole of black Britain rocked with grief
 how the whole of black Britain turned a melancholy blue
 not the possible blue of the murderer's eyes
 but like the smoke of gloom on that cold sunday morning

but stop
 you now remember
 how the whole of black Britain rocked with rage
 how the whole of black Britain turned a fiery red
 not the callous red of the killer's eyes
 but red with rage like the flames of the fire

first the laughing
 and the talking
 and the styling^j in the party

the moving
 and the grooving
 and the dancing to the disco

the joking
 and the jiving
 and the joy of the party

j. 'Styling' means, loosely, to strike a pose or, while dancing, to strut; the word is closely associated with bluesdance culture.

then the panic
and the pushing
and the boring through the fire

the running
and the jumping
and the flames rising higher

the weeping
and the moaning
o the harrow of the fire...

it's a hell of a something for true you know
what a terrible price we have to pay though, ma
just to live a little life
just to struggle to survive
everyday is just worries and struggle and strife
imagine, so many young people
cut off before their prime
before the twilight of their time
without reason nor rhyme
casting this shadow of gloom over our lives

look how the police and the press
tried there desperate best
to put a stop to our quest for the truth
do you remember? first they said it could be arson
then they said perhaps not
first they said a fire-bomb
then they said maybe not
they implied it could be whites
they implied it could be blacks
responsible for the attack
against those innocent young blacks

instead of raising the alarm
to make the public know what's going on
plenty papers printed pure lies
to blind joe public's eye
and the police plotted and schemed
confused and concealed
I heard that
even the poor parents of the dead they tried to use
but you know

in spite of their wicked propaganda
we refuse to surrender
to their ugly innuendo
for up till now
not one of them
neither Stockwell, neither Wilson nor Bell
not one of them can tell us why
not one of them can tell us who
who turned that night of joy into a morning of sorrow
who turned the jollity into an ugly tragedy!

first the coming ...

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