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Sounding body: Anthony McNeill, or Poetry as fugitive practice

Jason Allen-Paisant 

I tend to describe joy as this experience of transformation or release from the constraint or costume of the individual or the subject [...] I think it's about floating, it's about being nothing and being everything at the same time; this sense of the self disappearing in the context of the vastness of the earth, the ocean, the sky, the land. That kind of joy is always about self-dissolution, escape.

— Saiyida Hartman

The vanishing line of the maroon coincides with that of the magician: a 'beyond' of the visible which is also a beyond of colonial reality, a projection of a world that is both past and to come.

—Dénètem Touam Bona¹

Radical experiments in Jamaican artistic expression in the 1970s and their role in cultural decolonisation in that period have been the subject of scholarly interest in recent times. A notable example is the March 2019 issue of *Small Axe*, which itself emerged from a symposium entitled “The Jamaican 1970s” at CUNY and Columbia University campuses in 2017. Such recent studies, if they do refer to experiments and projects in poetry in Jamaica during the 1970s, have consistently side-lined one figure of major importance, whose work remains one of the most aesthetically bold, vibrant, and original embodiments of Jamaican poetry of that time. That figure is Anthony McNeill.

In Brian Meeks' article in the abovementioned issue of *Small Axe*, a reflection on his own poetry written in the 1970s, the author spotlights Lorna Goodison, Jerry Small, Mikey Smith, Oku Onuora, and Mutabaruka, but fails to mention McNeill in his cataloguing of the outstanding poets who fused the aesthetics of Jamaican popular music and oral performance into their poetry. The omission is all the more noticeable, given his discussion of the role of *Savacou* (the journal launched by Kamau Brathwaite in 1971) in nurturing the ‘emerging poets’ of the time, and the fact that McNeill's first collection, *Reel from 'The Life Movie'*, was published in issue six of *Savacou* (1972).

Meeks' omission is just one illustration of the critical fate of McNeill who, despite being one of Jamaica's most ambitious and prolific poets, has been

largely ignored by scholars of Caribbean poetry. Two rare scholarly treatments of his work are a paper by Anthony Kellman presented at the University of Cambridge in 2012 and a 1999 review essay by Elaine Savory of *Chinese Lanterns from the Blue Child* (McNeill's third published collection to date). In spite of the critical neglect of McNeill's poetry, he has been, and remains, a poet in whom the fugitive poetics of African/diasporic sound art of the 1970s can be traced.

I define fugitivity as an alternative geography of affects and modes of communication, existing on the margins of, and despite, the plantation formations of the Americas and their systems of surveillance.² This alternative way of being is deeply rooted in a sense of ancestry which provides another template of humanness and the urge to cultivate what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe as 'another world in the world'.³ Fugitivity consists of 'networks of secret communication and invisible conveyance'.⁴ For the Black body, such networks 'plot the unmappable—the unseen, the unseeable, the affective, the performative, the sensory'.⁵ Fugitivity, a term that has been very prominent in recent Black study – through the work of scholars such as Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman – is what Caribbean scholars have long referred to as 'marronnage'. Rex Nettleford's notion of 'cultural marronnage'⁶ refers to the Black Caribbean body 'as a site of acts of imagination' that disturbed 'the technologies of colonial power':⁷ this mode of spatial production comes into being and is sustained by the body's link to African spirituality and what Nettleford describes as 'the configuration of a nether world beyond the master's laws'.⁸ It is a form of 'engineering' which speaks to how Black bodies 'make meaning outside objectifying systems, through movement and voice'.⁹

The importance of taking a fresh look at McNeill's poetry in the contemporary moment lies precisely in the way it articulates a poetics of fugitivity. I want to show that the kind of thinking that McNeill represents is linked to the poetics of fugitivity that lies in Black Jamaican musical innovations of the 1970s, as manifested by, say, Lee 'Scratch' Perry and U-Roy. But significantly, I also want to show that this poetics takes root in a deeper Afro-Caribbean metaphysics of sound and the voice, which we see in poets such as Kamau Brathwaite, NourbeSe Philip and Aimé Césaire. McNeill's work warrants renewed scrutiny in this era as we assess the past futures imagined by various forms of anticolonial resistance. It may appear that the 'past' future his work suggests may not be so 'past' after all, but still current, in the way it leads us to think through a different way of conceiving, knowing, and inhabiting time-space outside of the colonial matrix, and centres Black spiritualities. His proposition for a poetics around sound and the body, that carves a space outside of plantation temporality through African/diasporic spirituality on a personal and collective level, anticipates the future (and the now) of contemporary Black artistic expression that works and thinks through refusal, that is, the praxis of a 'sliding away' from the world as proposed as its own form of critique – as a praxis of fugitivity.¹⁰ Fugitivity is, in my view, at the heart of the issues which Black artistic expression grapples with today, that is,

of how to live humanness outside of, or despite, an anti-Black capitalist system, for fugitivity is about creating space for humanness outside its Western normalised and racialised configurations.

Consequently, while this article devotes attention to the links between sound, poetry, and embodied performance in McNeill's work, its broader intervention, chiming with Anne Margaret Castro's recent book¹¹, is to show that McNeill's conjoining of poetry with the sacred provides an example of how Afro-Caribbean poetry defines the outlines of an alternative form of humanness and, thereby, of an 'ontological dissonance'¹² that suggests a future beyond the capitalist template of the human.¹³

Given these concerns, it seemed natural for my focus to be the collection *Credences at the Altar of Cloud*, which Neville Dawes published at the Institute of Jamaica in 1976. *Credences* is the second of only three collections of poems which McNeill published during his lifetime.¹⁴ It is particularly resonant in the way it brings together McNeill's concerns with sound, music and poetry, and his philosophical meditation on the nature of poetry itself, particularly in light of the politics of black liberation in the 1970s. Another feature of particular interest is that this collection pulls together segments of several of the stand-alone collections that he produces in what he would later refer to as his creative 'blitz' that takes place from 1976-1977, during the infamous year-long state of emergency called by the Michael Manley government. *Credences* is therefore of interest from a critical point of view because it constitutes a sort of personal synthesis of McNeill's creative output from this turbulent and artistically effervescent period in Jamaican expressive culture.

Most of McNeill's remarks about music refer to the influence of work from the 1960s and 1970s on *Credences* and other collections.¹⁵ The manipulation of recordings through various sound distortions created an otherworldly, 'psychedelic' aesthetic in Black popular music that was linked to a dynamic of which McNeill, who had lived in the United States in the early 1970s, was keenly aware.¹⁶ Out of the 'space race' that begins in the 1960s Cold War era and extends into the 1970s, space emerged as the ultimate metaphor for an existential struggle, highlighting the search for meaning and for an anchorage point for the self in an era where this was increasingly tenuous. Black musicians found in 'space music' an artistic expression that could transcend the cosmic terror of racial oppression considered to be "out of this world".¹⁷ Tropes of interstellar travel infused the music of artists such as Sun Ra (*Space is the Place*, *Astro-Black*, *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*), Parliament (*Mothership Connection*, *Clones of Dr. Frankenstein*), Stevie Wonder, and Earth Wind and Fire. Even the trumpeter Miles Davis fused his jazz music with space tropes in the mid-1970s in such pieces as *Pangea*, *Dark Magnus* and *Get Up With It*.¹⁸ Jamaican reggae sound artists were no exception: the music of the pioneering Lee Scratch Perry was, and still is, associated with this notion of "interstellar travel". Perry's production on The Upsetters' 1973 *Blackboard Jungle* and *Super Ape* did much to establish an international phenomenon emerging out of

Kingston's recording studios at the time – dub. It was essentially 'the rearranging of elements within an existing recording, through the isolation or distortion of vocal and individual instrumental tracks, to establish a new recording that emphasizes the drum and bass'.¹⁹ It was an aesthetic that emphasised multilayering, unusual encounters, the unpredictable, and the mysterious. It was its own praxis of fugitivity.

Dub was one major manifestation of Black fugitivity in the 1970s. It coupled its critiques of the plight of its Black listeners with space tropes to attempt to transcend the ontological violence of racist oppression through sound. This form of music, in allowing 'space travel', was implicated, in this sense, in an everyday challenge to racist oppression, in what Sylvia Wynter has termed 'being human as praxis'.²⁰ For, if space is the ultimate in the denial of humanity to Black being, given the histories of confinement and capture that characterise the narratives of the African diaspora (the slave ship, the barracoon, the plantation, the tenement, etc.), the metaphysical, transcendent force that 'sonic space' allows and embodies is a state of mind that is exalted, high, that can 'even touch the sky' (to quote Bob Marley), even if a certain Black subjectivity remains unrealised on earth, or has not yet been discovered. Put differently, space is figured as the place/future where Black subjectivity may yet be realised free from oppression and violence.

It is plausible that McNeill's personal life may have been part of the backdrop to the themes of flight, metamorphosis and transformation present in *Credences* — this desire to escape earth and reach beyond the visible as he sought a view of life which might offset the pain of alcohol and drug abuse.

In 1979, the year in which *Credences* was published, and in the years that led up to it, McNeil led a tortured life, as his friend, the poet Wayne Brown, records:

His life fell apart quite early; by '74 or '75. He would've been about 33, and had already published those terrifying poems, 'Reel from the Life Movie', 'The Lady Accepts the Needle', and the 'Ungod' series. By then, too, he was on drugs, the heavy stuff. And then he lost his job, and then his wife left him. And then he crashed the car. He was on drugs on and off for most of the rest of his life. He also started having mental breakdowns.²¹

'Miraculously, the poetry remained', as Brown notes.²² In *Credences*, McNeill's desire for fusion with the universe often seems like an obsession. It is quite probable that this sentiment amplified his indulgence in drugs, if these allowed a temporary disconnection from the everyday world. Whatever the case might be, it is plausible that his haunting desire to go beyond self and transcend material life was linked as much to his personal life, as to his affinity for Black liberation politics and poetics, and to the social context in which he wrote.

McNeill wrote these poems in a 1970s Jamaica that faced harsh social and political realities. Michael Manley's ambitious democratic-socialist programme geared towards upward class mobility of the mass population had spiralled into an era of political turmoil by 1976. The source of this turmoil was the criminal warfare that had escalated to unprecedented levels between gangs and factions linked to the island's two major political parties, the socialist PNP and the free-market oriented JLP, before the 1976 general election that returned Manley to power. However, political instability was also attributed to subversion by the United States, which had become increasingly uncomfortable with the socialist revolutionary rhetoric of Michael Manley and the prospect of 'another Cuba' in the Caribbean region.

It is surely not insignificant that *Credences* and McNeill's numerous other collections from his creative blitz were written during the year-long state of emergency (1976-1977) called by Manley to curb the political disorders that then rocked the country. Significantly, this period of political turbulence, in which the agents of foreign neocolonialism were thought to be implicated, may have provided a particular inflection to McNeill's theme of poetry as space of liberation. It also suggests *Credences'* grounding — in part — in the specific musical aesthetics of this time, since this period was one of tremendous experimentation and innovation in Jamaican musical forms (which, paradoxically, were fuelled by the political crisis of the era).

The political violence of the 1970s and the socio-economic collapse that attended the Manley regime therefore provide one possible way of understanding McNeill's engagement with the Jamaican musical form of dub in his work, since music was closely tied to the local realities of the time. McNeill's affinity towards dub's soundscapes cannot have been divorced from their intertwined political and social concerns, or from dub's Rastafari-inspired theme of spiritual liberation and empowerment against the backdrop not only of local poverty and violence, but also the larger global African/diasporic struggle against (neo)colonialism.

This collection, therefore, reflects the meetings and intersections of the personal and the political, of which there remains much to be said, given the gaps in information about McNeill's life. That said, whether in allusion to racist society or in a more specific gesture towards his personal life, it is the desire for life beyond the parameters of the everyday world that gives McNeill's poetry its distinctive other-worldly feel, its resonance derived from Afro-Jamaican spiritualities, including Rastafari.

One can, therefore, hardly be surprised by the spatially untethered nature of *Credences'* poems. The yearning for 'light' and 'air' in this collection ('air' is also shorthand for 'music') analogises a quest for magic in a struggle to transcend a world stripped of it. The first of these allusions comes in the form of the graphics on the collection's cover, featuring a depiction of the stars in a night sky behind an 'altar' of clouds.

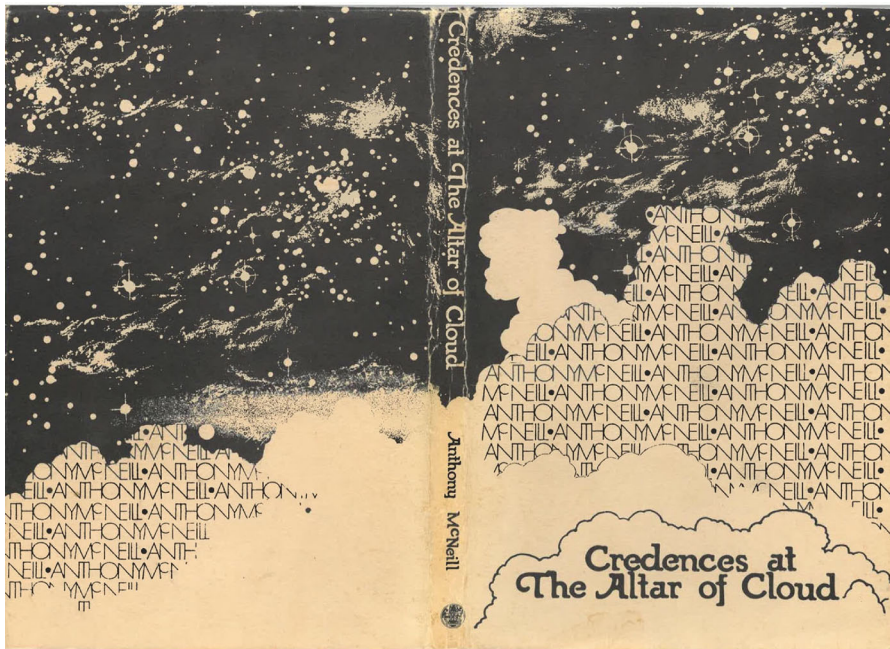


Fig 1. Book cover of *Credences*.

The sense of groundless space conveyed by the collection is suggestive of dub's aesthetics and of its attempts at depicting a fluid texture of reality through sonic sleight-of-hand. Mentions of place are absent from the collection. Evocations of Bob Marley, McCoy Tyner and Miles Davis do little to account for any sense of locatedness; instead, they fuel McNeill's themes of volatility, the fusion of body and spirit and the desire to assimilate the universe.²³ The absence of any reference to location and of any human voice (other than that of the speaker) also distills a sense of fluid space-time. And this, even if a number of the poems evoke McNeill's demons, and the loss that results from his turbulent life in the 1970's, when he abused drugs and alcohol:

when i fell in the valley the shadow of alcohol cross
in me out from the long sea

[...]

my prayer inside the poetry turnin

[...]

my folly

needle

up, me (p. 83)

The poems remain always tied to a desire to be 'extracted' from everyday terrestrial life and of tending towards a more sublime, otherworldly reality. Organic images of fluids, of watery spaces brimming with sounds or ineffable

with silences, abound in *Credences* ('the ocean coming returning', 'the blue distances', 'the water seeking its mirror' p. 26, and so on). The liquid symbolises the movement through different dimensions of space. The frightening and the sublime resolve themselves for the viewer/reader, life and death are profoundly linked, and point toward the profound desire to transcend the limitations of frail, time-dependent human bodies.

Spatially untethered, then, the poems move in and out of a private affective space of deep yearning and ambition and the wide, inclusive space of a world pictured as contradictory, ever in motion, but always organic.

The poems' formal operation connects the notion of (dis)embodied 'space travel' to the power of sound. In *Credences*, spirituality is portrayed as something that causes one to lose one's grounding or sense of control. This includes sound's potential to alter perceptions of time and space. One example is McNeill's use of the poetic 'turn', which, for him, becomes a way of giving multiple resonances to a single image. He compares the 'turn' to a 'bird' (p. 59), connecting the poetic image to the idea of flight, and suggesting physical mobility and dynamism as the distinctive quality of the image. The concept of music is, here again, ready to hand, since aerodynamism is seen as a musical quality in poetry's formal operation. Poetry is referred to as 'the air without hands' (p. 22), with the dual play on 'air' as both earth's atmosphere/substance necessary for breathing and musical melody. A central theme is poetry as both 'air' and 'light', always 'without hands', underscoring the autonomous life to which McNeill sees poets as being subordinated, a sort of widened circle that embraces nature and its living consciousness.

Underscoring aerodynamism and loss of grounding, the poems incorporate characteristics common to dub. The sequence 'darlin a tired' (p. 57) and the poem 'the verb tried to tell me' (p. 59), for example, are reminiscent of dub-like musical phrasing in their rhythmic pulse that provides an unending flow of lyrics (like the deejay chanting on a dubplate). Chanting is a way of surging away from the body. For both performer and listener, the dub's chanting lyricism conjures the sense of a different space-time from the everyday one, one which is amplified by repeat echo effects enabled by studio technology.²⁴ McNeill's graphic and sonic treatment of images in 'darlin a tired' evoke the dynamics of chanting, echo and reverb ('evoke', in that they are also suggestive of the vocal sound play of early toasters, such as U-Roy and Big Youth):

[...] go poem toward the

flower my wife the daughters of light have given up on their
radiant men

hun g up on crosses so long jesus come down
yoooooooooooooooooooo

have died for us for centuries come down take the nails from
your hands

we love you read yoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
ooooooooooooooooo

book every day the air kissing my face the air kissing my face just
come back from a card session with florrie great woman an
seer under

de shadow o death come out o de shadow calling de name tony
calling the name olive callin the name patrice callibg meant to
say callin

my son my sweet daughter up from the sweet radiant turning
wheel o de
earth turnin wj wheel I wanted to say to thr light straight up but

tsy what dat go up follow the music follow the music follow the
light o my flower my wife i tell you i tell you i tell you as this`

world is made we will

live for

ever

i say (p. 57)²⁵

In this poem that makes liberal use of the physical page, lines that flow out freely towards the margins allow for dub-inspired rhythmic pulsation, and an expanded sense of space, thanks to the floating of images. The deliberate dilation of given sounds is a phrasing effect that suggests, if not creates, time distortions for the listener, transposing dub's technological alterations onto the page. As the conceptual boundary between poetry and performance is blurred, the poem becomes corporeal, a way of inhabiting the body and a cathartic release. The absence of punctuation, where space becomes even more important, naturally seems to give more prevalence to the breath. It is hard not to consider this aesthetic as reflective of the poet's contemporary moment – as it is of ours – where social oppression and everyday assaults create a feeling of suffocation that unsteadies the breath, that threatens the very right to breath.

Dub's echo and reverb techniques produce spectral sounds that haunt the air/ear, as they seem to persist perceptually beyond the duration of one poem, while being present to the beginning of the next. Thus, the poem takes the listener, literally, out of this world. This is McNeill's way of graphically and sonically conveying both the ripples of dub-time and the idea of the poem as a spiritual force that breaks down temporal demarcations. As evidenced in 'flower me a light song' (p. 58), the poem's 'light' is understood as voices of the dead, forces from the invisible that become present in the space of the poem, collapsing the boundary between past and present.

In the poem sequence 'the same energy makes one poem/millions' (p. 11-12), the repetition of 'callin' and 'back to' function like a dub technique of 'mixing down'.

the tongues come out of the distances callin
de distances reboant back

to the sea they are callin callin
back to the air they are callin

back to the wind of night-floer dey are calling

back to the floor

back to
the floor (p. 11)

As the phrases gradually become smaller units, the repetition of 'back to' becomes a kind of reverb, conveying the poet's sense of travel and emotion (music helps the poet to travel from one realm to the next): 'back to the floor/back to/the floor'.

Image shifts throughout sequences of poems convey a sense of infinite possibilities in space. Careful line breaks lend a sense of motion to the image. As such, the poem is seen as having different, or multiple, instantiations and lives: 'bob eneter the blue' transforms into the image of 'bob eneter the blue/church o/dis poem/wid me' (p. 12). Spaces create double-takes forcing the reader/listener to imagine the image as one thing, then another, or to reimagine the image, to constantly expand its possibilities. What McNeill does on the page is evocative of the sound trickery that Lee Perry achieves in the studio.

In 'the same energy makes one poem/millions', the lines 'bob eneter the blue/church o/dis poem/wid me' are a visual depiction of themes declined in various ways throughout the collection: the poet as medium, host of the unexpected ('bob eneter the blue'); poetry as sacred space and connection to the divine ('the blue/church o/dis poem'). Poetry thus understood as an autonomous force is the thematic through-line of this sequence (p. 11-12) of multiple interwoven ideas: poetry as a space that transforms energy; the poet's desire to be physically fit (the organism must be a ready/capable physical receptacle for poetry); the voices of the dead who speak to the poet; the poem that does its own work, surprising the poet; the poem as a mystery that one enters. The underlying theme of the composition is like a musical chord that is constantly returned to, like a jazz theme with its unpredictable variations. This musical sleight-of-hand is its own mode of spatial production: it's a way of dwelling in the unmapped space, a way of cultivating and affirming the space of the unknown and unknowable, a way in which Black expression slips the logics of control that characterise the plantation, white supremacist machinery; for Blackness finds ontological ground in the non-transparent. Sounding the world through poetry is finding ground outside of the spatio-temporal borders of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney would describe as 'the common', the world created by a white supremacist system of knowledge and culture.²⁶

In making endless connections between images, McNeill therefore sketches out a practice of language grounded in the non-physical, in terms of the endless possibilities for connections that reside in the liminal space between the poet's human existence and the world of spirit. His insubordination to grammar reflects a desire to open up himself and the poem to sensation and feeling, to a sense of being seized by the world. The verses below enact their own proposition:

sometime that grammar ting chust
git to go
on account o
light and more light (p. 118)

"The poet", McNeill says in his *Notes on Poetics*, 'subordinates himself/herself to the poem'.²⁷ Accordingly,

the voice bounces back
from the distances
moving at me
at high speed
I want to stop it
I can't
it writes through me
quickly as light (p. 51)

Similarly, the poet also speaks of presences within the self, that write through him in ways in which – or saying things that – he would not be able to write by himself. He becomes 'just like a sponge':

just like a sponge
someone said
if I tried to write it myself
a would ketch hell
wid all of dese poems (53)

The phrase 'wid all of dese poems' indirectly evokes the voluminous quantity of his poetic production – including four full-length manuscripts written in one weekend. In fact, he claims to have written over twenty collections of poetry between June 1976 and February 1977.²⁸ He attributes this voluminous production to his mediumistic disposition, mentioning that this blitz occurred thanks to 'a trancelike state' and 'attitude'.

The fugitive space is a ritual one, both a 'safe space' that evokes an African ancestor and a space for alternative communication, for magic; it entails an

alternative geography created through the use of language itself. Language, manipulated, allows for a reconfigured sense of self. It gives access to spirit, since it has power to create images, and images have an expansive capacity that frees the mind from its stanchions. It is precisely because of this that the poet must rest from the *effort* of moulding language into something they desire to see:

if you love language
leave it alone

it's perfectly capable of giving you all (p. 6)

With images that are always shifting, always in flux, the poet underscores the themes of freedom and liberated subjectivity. The approach to word and image relies on an idea of consciousness as a fluid, moving entity. 'Trying words' is being open to the invisible, to the unexpected and the unknown. McNeill's breaking up of grammar is an attempt at capturing all the possible dimensions of the world through moving, turning, shifting images.

Language *is* movement, and the poetic turn is capital for its production, for unleashing multiple significations; meaning turns on the hinge of the line break. The poem is therefore very graphic, bearing a visual quality which is part and parcel of the meaning: an image is created that can be viewed from different perspectives, as in the following verses:

the light and de air
meet widout hands

in de middle distance
one finger

is seeking you blue
boy we are signing (p. 36)

From one perspective, one finger is seeking the blue (symbol of mystery, magic and of poetry's autonomy); from another, the image of a 'blue boy' (presumably the poet) looms up ('... is seeking you blue/boy'). From yet another perspective, it is the idea of music that is being emphasised ('... blue/boy we are swinging'). We do get the impression that McNeill's lines have us *swinging* from one meaning to the next: the turn and the double-entendre are used to produce multiple semiotics.

The connection McNeill makes between poetry and flight evokes a longer tradition of Afro-Caribbean aesthetics. He is a poet from the Caribbean, where knowledge systems such as Vodou, Myal, Pukkumina, etc. have been closely linked to the use of sound in the history of colonial resistance – ritual ceremonies, chanting, drumming, dancing that allows the traffic of spirits.

The centrality of sonic vibration in McNeill's poetics connects it to works by other Caribbean poets such as Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Kamau Brathwaite, and Aimé Césaire, through the understanding of poetry as a space through which matter moves. McNeill's aesthetics is thereby emblematic of a larger poetics of fugitivity in Afro-Caribbean arts and history, whereby the natural universe can be awakened and sustained, and with it the ontological ground of Black life. This poetic quest works to restore cosmological connection where it has been obscured by the colonial system, thereby constituting what Clinton Hutton calls 'rituals of re-possession',²⁹ which preserve and maintain what Sylvia Wynter might call an alternative space for making ourselves human.³⁰

A look at the figure of Lee 'Scratch' Perry can shed light on this. Perry, it could be said, was a poet in his own right who used his body as a space of performance. He was the fugitive artist *par excellence*. He suggested that art can create a world within the world, that, indeed, art can create an alternative temporality, a different reality within the reality of the 'common'. Art can function as camouflage, as Nettleford explained.³¹

This embodied fugitivity is a composite manifestation. First of all, as mode of dress – looking at Perry, we imagine what a human/like creature from another planet might look like: the mirrors, the medals, the emblems, the bracelets, necklaces and rings, various items hanging or attached. These are superimposed onto the clothing, disguising or deflecting away from it. His predilection for mirrors suggests a preoccupation with what is out there, what lies beyond the frontiers of the body – a sense that the body involves more than the physical carriage. Perhaps it is part of the reason for his subversion of society's preoccupation with its adornment. One feels that Perry may be testing what it might mean to be at the frontiers of the human. The cultivation of otherness is what his aesthetic is all about, the search for encounters between things seen and unseen.

Hence, also, his speech and his language, always given to riddles, to an abundance of free (gently forming or fast moving) associations – because language is also part of this composite aesthetic of fugitivity – it is a means of slipping away, but also a way of inviting the unexpected, of living with and in it. Perry's language is a float and flow, a fugitive praxis of being.

Though he worked with the page, McNeill brought to poetry what Perry brought to the studio, a sense of the unexpected, and of the expansive liberation found in sound, a feeling of the magic involved in improvisation, the magic of 'the gift', to use his term. This was, of course, always associated with Black spirituality. In other words, poetry, for McNeill, was an embodied *and* spiritual praxis. But saying this is tautological, since McNeill had a clear sense that the human being was a fusion of matter and spirit; for him, nothing seemed to highlight this more than art.

The divine trinity ‘has nothing to do with God’, McNeill states in his Letter to Fernanda Steele dated January 6, 1977. Instead, it is ‘(1) Earth (2) The human body (3) The poem’. He further declares that ‘there is nothing the Earth – and perhaps, the body – does not know’.³² It is likely that McNeill associated this position with the cosmos of Rastafari, with which he was deeply fascinated, much like the spiritual associations frequently found in reggae music often stem from the centrality of Earth in the Rastafari worldview. For instance, the Nyabinghi believe that the sound of the drum goes down into the earth, travels to the Fire Key, an altar inside the tabernacle, from which it ascends into the atmosphere.³³ This centres the belief that rhythm conjoins all living things, allowing for continual traffic between visible and invisible landscapes. The organic relations linking Earth and sound in Rastafari cosmology foreground rhythm as the embodiment of the life force. Sound is a vital way of making contact with the world’s energies. McNeill’s first collection *Reel from ‘The Life Movie’* reveals his exploration of Rastafari and African Earth-bound consciousness. The poem ‘Ode to Brother Joe’³⁴ is one in which he figures Rasta livity as a space of liberation offering an alternative template of humanness, even as the Rasta way of life endures assaults from a Jamaican state machinery deeply steeped in anti-Blackness:

the drums start
 Hail Selassie I
 Jah Rastafari
 and the room fills with the power
 and beauty of blackness,
 a furnace of optimism

But the law thinks different.
 This evening the Babylon catch
 Brother Joe in his act of praise
 and carry him off to the workhouse³⁵

Coda: Poetry and ceremony: On reassessing ‘futures past’

As I sit down to finish this article, I have learnt that Lee ‘Scratch Perry’ has died. Before him, U-Roy had left us in February 2021. A treasured ‘sound artist’ in her own right, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze joined the ancestors in August of 2021. Most, if not all of these elders and pioneers, had their heyday in the 1970s. Jean Breeze was recognised as one of the famous dub poets, a form of poetry which, as the name suggests, is closely associated with the music. Through the human voice, it aims to manifest similar dynamics of improvisation, reverb, rupture, incantation, and multilayering, as the studio art known as dub. Breeze trained in theatre at the Cultural Training Institute (now the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts) in Kingston in the 1970s; her practice grew out of an intense awareness of the soundscape of 1970s Jamaican music. This was a period in which everything was possible; the heady wind of Independence was still in the air. Crime and violence was rife, but so were hope and enthusiasm.

The future was beautiful because it was to be created, and it was being created by these artists. It was like having a blank canvas. There was a lot of work around sound and the body, and these different productions fashioned themselves around an idea of fugitivity. It was about having one body for the slave master and all his avatars and another one for the reality you knew was you, to riff off a song said to be popular among the enslaved in the United States.³⁶

In this era of ‘Black Lives Matter’, what McNeill invites us to think about in terms of sound, poetics, and spirituality, is still relevant to the realities that Black people face in 2021. The idea of Black poetry as a way of entering a different world from the one that is proposed, of creating a mental landscape that can sustain life, still deserves thought in a time such as this. Black sound art and aesthetics lead us to think about what it means to live in a body deemed as always, already, transgressive. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand suggests that to inhabit the Black body is also to inhabit *an idea*, an idea which has been essential for us. This is the idea of Africa, the idea of an ancestry that, for our ancestors, could give a different meaning to their lives than the claustrophobia of violence in which they lived.³⁷ This is, of course, connected to Nettleford’s notion of ‘cultural marronage’, which holds that even the slave has a way of handling their body that escapes the control and the viewing reality of the white society. Living in a system of white supremacy, the Black body slips control through the kinds of breathing that are available to it, through the forms of breath — meaning the kinds of movement, co-movements, sounds — that amplify this body; through the gestic repertoire and aesthetic that ultimately render it threatening.

Fugitivity continues to speak to us as Black people insofar as the aesthetic as a mode of being grounded in refusal, in the preservation of an unmappable geography, is its own form of critique. It suggests a way of living *through* the racial assaults of the contemporary society. This form of Black poetics, then, is a form of thinking that is for and about the future.

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Notes

¹ The translation is mine.

² Kelley, “Follow the Tree Flowers”, 184.

³ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 10.

⁴ Kelley, “Follow the Tree Flowers”, 184.

⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Nettleford, *Dance Jamaica*, 20.
⁷ Bogues, "Rex Nettleford", 27.
⁸ Nettleford, *Dance Jamaica*, 20.
⁹ Ford-Smith, "The Body and Performance in 1970s Jamaica", 157.
¹⁰ Kelley, "Follow the Tree Flowers", 184.
¹¹ See Castro, *The Sacred Act of Reading*.
¹² Bradley and Ferreira da Silva, "Four Theses on Aesthetics".
¹³ Wynter, "Unsettling", 288.
¹⁴ All citations of McNeill are to this edition. Page numbers will be indicated in parentheses after each citation.
¹⁵ See Anthony McNeill, "Anthony McNeill on Credences at the Altar of Cloud", and Daryl Dance, *New World Adams*.
¹⁶ Dance, *New World Adams*, 175.
¹⁷ Hendricks, "Rainbows, Moonbeams and Orange Snow".
¹⁸ Veal, *Dub*, 209.
¹⁹ Meschino, "Lee 'Scratch' Perry".
²⁰ See Wynter, "Human Being as Noun?".
²¹ Wayne Brown, "The McNeill Papers".
²² Ibid.
²³ That there is, at the same time, an important sense of place and grounding in McNeill's work goes without saying, as the balance of this essay should show. In fact, as I examine the way in which place becomes 'abstracted' from this collection, I want to suggest that this abstraction of place and emphasis on disembodied 'lightspeed travel' reflect back certain dynamics within McNeill's cosmology that might connect to

the drum and its rhythms, and to the movement of spirits associated with them.

²⁴ Oliver, "In Dub Conference", 205.

²⁵ There are no proofreading errors here, as McNeill emphasises in prefatory notes to all of his published collections. "Mutants" as he calls typos, "have a place in the garden" and a "rationale" that the rational mind does not know. Generally, McNeill is resistant to the idea of an 'error' in a poem that "writes through [him]/ at light speed", viewing such "errors" as "gifts".

²⁶ Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 18.

²⁷ McNeill, *Notes*.

²⁸ Dance, *New World Adams*, 172. I have confirmed this through my own exploration of his archives. "*Credences* uses material from about nineteen of the manuscripts", McNeill reveals. See Dance, *New World Adams*, 175.

²⁹ Hutton, "The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora", 131.

³⁰ Wynter, "Ethno or Sociopoetics", 394.

³¹ Nettleford, *Dance Jamaica*, 20.

³² See Poynting, "Anthony McNeill: Author Webpage".

³³ Blagrove, "Roaring Lion".

³⁴ McNeill, "Ode to Brother Joe".

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hutton, "The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora", 100.

³⁷ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 44.

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