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Publication Date

2009-02-01

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Thinking Gender 2009

In the Beginning, there was rhythm: Embodiment, divinity, and punk rock spirituality in the music
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At the opening of the *Mystic Fable*, Michel de Certeau introduces his readers to the figure of the madwoman. This madwoman is a spiritual figure who occupies an interstitial space, being at once of this world and of the body, while also able to channel the divine. De Certeau's mad, mystic woman represents an abject body, constructed from humanity's scraps. She is the embodiment of all that is excessive, and while this places her outside of society, it nonetheless permits her to introduce new possibilities and new means of communicating and speaking. Her words cross lines, existing outside of the modes of speech to which we are accustomed, creating new meanings, resulting in a form of mystic speech.¹

While de Certeau's madwoman was from the 16th Century, I looked to a more recent historical period, attempting to situate a more manifestation of this type of mystic speech in the British punk rock scene of the 1970s. While the self-consciously nihilistic punk movement would seem at face value to have little to no connection with mysticism and religiosity, some women working in punk rock were able to translate punk rock idioms into transgressive, feminist ways of speaking, that, I will argue, can be understood as a form of mystic speech. The Slits, considered among the most iconoclastic punk bands of the late 1970s and early 1980s, construct a musical performance of bodily abjection through the use of musical sounds and particular vocalizations that emphasize the abject female body. Drawing on these expressions of the body, and investigating

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, I: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 31 – 32.

how the Slits were influenced by Rastafari theology, I will argue that The Slits articulate a spirituality that expresses the possibility for divine union through erotic bodily engagement.

The Slits participated in a growing trend towards incorporating elements of reggae into punk at the end of the 1970s. Vivien Goldman has argued that the connection between punk and reggae is a result of the fact that “punks and dreadlocks are on the same side of the fence. Bluntly, who gets picked up in the street by the police? Answer: those natty dreads and crazy baldheads.”² Goldman does not address the seemingly obvious issues of racial privilege and appropriation that are at play here. Simply put, punk rock in the 1970s was a largely white, working class phenomenon, while reggae, and the Rastafari spiritual tradition from which it emerged, was interested in empowering black people and resisting racism. The parallel Goldman draws between Rastafarians and punks oversimplifies the complex racial and class dynamics that are at play. In addition, Rastafari was a strongly patriarchal tradition. According to Terisa E. Turner, “original Rastafari is uncompromising in its commitment to ‘chant down Babylon,’ the capitalist male system. However, it is bound by the ‘capitalist male deal.’ Sexism is the key defining feature distinguishing the old Rasta from the new.”³ Turner goes on to argue that, since the 1980s, black feminist thought has led to reforms within the Rastafari movement. The Slits, however, were incorporating elements of reggae and dub into their music before this surge in feminist Rastafari thought. It could be argued that their ability to use elements of what was then, a sexist tradition, while women of colour had yet to successfully articulate their own space within Rastafari movement, is as a result of the privilege that The Slits’ whiteness allowed them, granting them an amount of power over women of colour.

²Vivien Goldman, “Jah Punk: New Wave digs Reggae,” *Sounds*, 3 September 1977.

³Theresa E. Turner, “Rastafari and the new society: Caribbean and East African feminist roots of a popular movement to reclaim the earthly commons,” *Arise! Ye mighty people: Gender, Class, and Race in Popular Struggles*, ed. Bryan J. Ferguson (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994), 10.

The Slits' use of elements of Rastafari musical styles thus remains very problematic, and cannot be divorced from issues of race, gender, and privilege. Given their use of Rastafari musical traditions, however, a consideration of the role of the body in Rastafari theology can nonetheless provide an avenue for interpreting the spiritual ramifications of The Slits' music.

A 1981 recording of the song "In the Beginning," included on a live BBC Peel Sessions release, opens with Ari Up, the lead singer of The Slits, chanting a verse that at times becomes babbling and incomprehensible. She is accompanied by a high-pitched guitar lick that makes use of the instrument's high, harmonic resonances. An unstructured bass riff introduces a dance-like groove that immediately evokes the relationship between this music and the body – the bass line is low and resonant, something that can be felt, as well as heard, by a listener. Up's vocals, however, are what speak most tellingly of bodily engagement. She ranges from whispers to screams, sometimes spitting out and clearly articulating her words, sometimes allowing them to fade into incomprehensible gibberish. A different recording of the song, released the same year, on the album *Return of the Giant Slits*, features Up at her least comprehensible: the song is performed much faster, with rhythms sped up, as she intones the lyrics quickly and incoherently, over a much looser instrumental accompaniment.

The lyrics of "In the Beginning" locate God in rhythm, and, consequentially, through the dance-like rhythms that are used in the song, God and the divine become located in the body. The Slits avoid using complete sentences, and the lyrics are delivered in short, rhythmic bursts. They play with language and syntax. They use the phrase "Here's a space full of rhythm bars/Which rhythm objects rhythm on," where the word rhythm functions as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. This kind of linguistic re-invention is found in other Slits songs as well and is also characteristic of

Rastafari traditions, where language is altered to create a “socially charged new ‘dialect,’”⁴ built around the use of “I,” which becomes important in Rastafari ritual language because the speaker becomes implicated in religious practice while rejecting the colonizer’s power to name. Such approaches are strategies of resituating power, by taking language, that often delimits boundaries and difference, and using it to transcend those boundaries. In “In the Beginning,” the different uses of the word “rhythm” work to emphasize the divine power that rhythm has for The Slits. When the word is used as a verb, rhythm becomes an active agent. Because of the The Slits’ often ambiguous, unclear diction, the word “rhythm” often sounds like the Rastafari word “riddim,” which refers to the percussion and bass of a Rastafari song. According to Verena Reckford, the “riddim” plays an integral role in Rastafari spiritual practices. Reckford states that

For Jamaicans, the ‘ridim’ (*sic.*) talks. In Rastafarian ceremonies, in which music is an integral part, there can be no spiritual peaking, as it were, unless the ridim is right.⁵

Understanding rhythm with this Rastafarian context in mind, it becomes more than just a musical characteristic, and is a vital part of engagement with the divine. In *In the Beginning*, The Slits proclaim that God *is* rhythm. They sing:

God tells you
I am rhythm
God tells you
I’m the roots of life
God tells you
I am wisdom
God tells you
Live eternal life⁶

Earlier in the song, The Slits situate rhythm in the body, singing:

⁴ John P. Homiak, “Dub History: Soundings n Rastafari Livity and Language,” *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, ed. Barry Chevannes (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 160.

⁵ Verena Reckford, “From Burru Drums to Reggae Ridims: The Evolution of Rasta Music,” *Chanting Down Babylon* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 232.

⁶ Viv Albertine, Tessa Pollit, Ari Up, “In the Beginning,” *The Peel Sessions*, Strange Fruit, BBC Worldwide Music Production, SFRSCD052, 1981.

Makes us create our own rhythm
 Based on your natural rhythm
 And dance with people and by yourself
 Walking is rhythm and hypnotizes you
 Into nodding your head in time with the rhythm
 Like hands with your legs doing an offbeat
 As soon as you sit still, you start tapping your feet⁷

The body is constructed as a vehicle through which rhythm is expressed, and through which divinity can be accessed.

The Slits' development of their own mystic means of speaking is not restricted to the structure and content of their lyrics. Their musical borrowings from Rastafarian culture represent an attempt at translating Rastafari traditions into a new context. De Certeau argues that mystic speech was fundamentally translational. He says that "it crossed the lines. It created a whole by unceasing operations upon foreign words."⁸

The Slits translate Rastafari theology through the medium of punk rock. Rastafari spirituality has an extensive history of situating divinity in the body. A major tenet of the religion is that the late Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, was the Christian God, embodied on earth. Additionally, the use of marijuana or ganja is considered a religious sacrament and a means of using the body, under the influence of the drug, to attain divine union.

The Slits explore this in the song *New Town*, which is about seeking a drug fix, as a means of escapism, and can be understood as a desire to transcend the physical world for a divine realm. Lead vocalist Ari Up sings about how she "needs another fix," her vocals take on an explicitly sexual quality, culminating in orgasmic panting as she begs for a fix, saying "if not I'll be sick."⁹ It is interesting that her vocalization at once evokes the body as a site of divinity, while the lyrics imply

⁷ Albertine, Pollit, Up. "In the Beginning."

⁸ de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 118.

⁹ Albertine, Pollitt, Up, "New Town," *The Peel Sessions*, Strange Fruit, BBC Worldwide Music Production, SFRSCD052, 1981.

that she wants to escape the body and avoid sickness. Drugs provide the means of nourishing the body to prevent that sickness, by acting as the vehicle for bodily ecstasy and engagement with the divine. By the end of the song, Up's vocals, which, up to this point have been erratic and irregular, are joined by a unison chorus that intones the final notes of the song with her, implying the achievement of unity.

Reggae demonstrates the nexus of music and the body in Rastafari theology. While Slits songs do not sound identical to Rastafari music by any stretch, they borrow stylistic elements that speak to an erotic connection between the body and divinity. Stephen King and Richard J. Jensen argue that the instruments used in reggae have associations with particular parts of the body. They state that "the bass guitar resonates in the face, the abdominal cavity and the pelvic area,"¹⁰ percussion and rhythm guitar are connected to face and head, etc. and go on to quote Lyle Ehrlich, who says that

The bass "says" a phrase, then pauses for a "breath" like a person speaking. The pause "frames" the phrase, and gives the mind of the listener time to absorb it. After a string of notes, the listener becomes accustomed to the presence of the bass in his ears and body . . . [the bass] communicate[s] directly with the heart by actually massaging it in rhythm.¹¹

The bassline of *In the Beginning* functions in this way, introducing pitches and then taking breaths, in a way that also sounds very funk-inspired. The very language that Ehrlich uses to describe this bassline – breathing and speaking – inscribes it with bodily characteristics. The percussion in *In the Beginning* is very light and is comprised mainly of light cymbal and hi-hat sounds, and very little bass drum, which explores the idea of percussion resonating in the face and head, expressing the various areas of the body that are associated with reggae. The Slits take elements of reggae and translates them into punk rock. While reggae is characterized by very slow, lulling tempos, The Slits use the

¹⁰ Stephen King and Richard J. Jensen, "Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song': The Rhetoric of Reggae and Rastafari," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29:3, 28.

¹¹ Ibid.

lighter, faster tempos and styles typical of British punk rock in the 1970s. The rhythm, which remains the unifying quality of the song, calls the body to engage with the music through dance. In Rastafari tradition, dance is a means of catharsis. According to King and Jensen, “reggae brings people together to share the intimate ritual of dance. Through physical activity, the dancer often becomes intoxicated in the celebration of sound and movement.”

With words like “the way we react to ourselves/ when we’re stepping in time to the steps with the steps of the person/we’re stepping with,”¹² *In the Beginning* evokes dance lyrically. Clocking in at over eleven minutes, the song is also one that is not goal oriented, but is about process, specifically the process of engaging the body through dance. The instrumental “riddim” that is established at the beginning of the song carries through continuously, while bodily ecstasy is communicated through the vocals that seem to exist independently of the dance beat. The vocals are often spoken more than they are sung, and do not follow any real melodic line or pattern, remaining at a fairly constant, speech-like pitch level, and never suggesting cadence. There are instances where climax is suggested due to increases in vocal intensity, but the voices invariably flirt with these moments of climax, and fall back, just shy of a climax, returning to spoken incantations, not following any sort of conventional rhythmic pattern, and floating, in an improvisatory way above the bass and percussion. The Slits’ vocals are harsh and imprecise, often using guttural screeches, constructing a musically abject performance – The Slits’ screams and utterances are sounds brought out that were supposed to remain internal. They are the sonic equivalent of those bodily excretions that we don’t want to admit exist. The Slits also confront audiences with visual performances of abjection, for instance, appearing naked and covered in mud on the album cover of *Cut*. The vocals in *In the Beginning* function like a never-ending stream of sound that draws the listener into a sustained encounter with the abject. The resulting sound demonstrates a move away

¹² King and Jensen, 28.

from conventional musical rhetoric, translating the outsider genres of reggae and punk into a music that is even more abject.

According to Up, reviewers reacted harshly against this musically abject performance. She says that “we were totally put in exile, we were totally sabotaged, we were totally hated, most of our reviews were of outrage, and just, ‘Ew! These girls look disgusting and they can’t play music, they can’t do anything!’”¹³ The Slits have stated that they were attempting to articulate a distinctly feminine musical idiom. Guitarist Viv Albertine has commented that “we consciously thought about getting girl rhythms into music and concluded that female rhythms were probably not as steady, structured, or as contained as male rhythms.”¹⁴ The Slits are using a form of strategic essentialism to define a feminine sound. Communicating that sound is a means of empowerment. The Slits borrow from two heavily patriarchal musical traditions – punk and reggae – and commit an act of transgression by translating these genres into a feminine form of mystic speech that speaks to the divinity of the body through the use of the body as a source of transcendence through dance.

The Slits’ borrowings from Rastafari traditions, however, undermines this project of empowerment. The practice of borrowing that The Slits are engaged in is one that is enabled by their privilege as white Europeans. The very act of borrowing and appropriating constitutes a form of discursive violence. Given the growing inclination towards intersectionality in feminist thought – that is to say, a growing understanding that factors including race, gender, and class, function together to construct systems of oppression – we must understand and acknowledge how a song like “In the Beginning” occupies a fraught position, engaging in critique before we simply accept it as a feminist declaration of reciprocity and love, lest we commit acts of discursive violence ourselves.

¹³ Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005), 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

Spirituality is a topic that is not typically addressed in discussions about The Slits. However, attempting to situate the divine in this music functions as an important way of understanding how The Slits were attempting to construct a new mode of speech. In the context of the punk rock engagement with bodily abjection, The Slits' music can function as a site where the body operates as a venue for divine union. While their attempts to articulate a divine embodiment are rendered problematic by issues of race and privilege, The Slits nonetheless attempt to engage in a dialogue with the divine, constructing their own punk rock mystic speech.

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