Performing Rituals of Self-Narration: Benjamin Zephaniah's Storytelling

Alessandra Ruggiero

Abstract
The article focuses on Benjamin Zephaniah and his choice of performance poetry as a militant artistic practice, which led him to gain a prominent position in the contemporary British cultural panorama. His controversial position within mainstream culture is analysed considering the performative character of literature intended as an event, and exploring the condition of the contemporary postcolonial writer, who is becoming more and more a literary celebrity. Zephaniah narrates himself and his art on multiple platforms and by making use of different media, trying to transfer a shared past (and present) through storytelling performances which operate not so much as a form of archive but as a form of empowered repertoire.

Key-words: Benjamin Zephaniah, self-narration, performance poetry.

1. Introduction

Benjamin Zephaniah is a Black British poet of Jamaican origins who is well known for his contentious stance on UK mainstream culture. Even though inscribing his art in a genealogy of performance poets such as Lynton Kwesi Johnson, John Agard, Grace Nichols and Lemn Sissay, to name just a few[1], and insisting on the revolutionary quality of "oral" poetry, he has nonetheless participated more and more often in official celebrations of Britishness. After having famously rejected an OBE in 2003, his public appearances in the national and international cultural arena have increasingly shown the character of a statement of belonging to a country which he

[1] In *Rapid Rappin*, a poem included in the collection *City Psalms* (1992), he acknowledges the important role that these poets have had in shaping his public *persona* and his poetics, and declares how grateful he is "because dey pave the way" (Zephaniah 1992: 39).

celebrates as multicultural, thus apparently avoiding that marginality which, according to bell hooks (1990: 341), "offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds". However, his numerous writings for children and teenagers, which are a peculiar feature of his artistic production, bear witness to his steady commitment to educate the younger generations on diversity and underline his sound belief in the possibility of imagining – and realising – possible new worlds.

Between 1998 and 2015 Zephaniah received eighteen honorary doctorates from British universities. In the "Biography" published on his personal website[2] he mentions his book publications, record releases and television appearances, which became more and more frequent in Britain during the 1990s, as well as his writings for children, musical recordings and concerts – including Nelson Mandela's *Two Nations Celebrate* concert that he hosted at the Royal Albert Hall in July 1996 (Zephaniah 2017). In 2009 he was voted third favourite poet – after T.S. Eliot and John Donne – in a BBC poll. In 2011 he was Poet in Residence at Keats House, and in 2012 he took a permanent position as Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University. His literary career – started after a very difficult childhood and adolescence which led him to an approved school for eighteen months, and then to prison for two more years – testifies to the growing reputation he earned both in Britain and abroad, even though it raises issues about the writer's position within mainstream culture, which could be the effect of a process of commodification of difference (Huggan 2001; Ponzanesi 2014)[3]. His success can lead to accusations of selling-out to the establishment – which has happened on several occasions – but his goal is to use this success to reach as many people as possible, without necessarily compromising his work (Zephaniah 2003).

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital", which

[2] Zephaniah's official website, which has changed several times over the years, is now available at https://benjaminzephaniah.com, and also includes links to the author's Facebook, Twitter and Myspace accounts.

[3] The construction of the public *persona* of postcolonial writers, as well as the function of literary prizes in the creation of their celebrity status, are widely discussed by Huggan (1994; 2001) and Ponzanesi (2014); the latter also explores the role that participatory culture plays in these processes.

implies the "monopoly of literary legitimacy" (Bourdieu 1993: 42), and on Graham Huggan's binary dialectic between postcolonialism and postcoloniality – or rather, between their "apparently conflicting regimes of value" which are in fact "mutually entangled" (Huggan 2001: 6) – I intend to examine the strategies that Zephaniah uses to negotiate the legitimation of his position within British culture, and to consider why, feeling unhappy with "preaching about the sufferings of Black people to Black people, […] he sought a wider mainstream audience" (Zephaniah 2017).

2. Word power

Zephaniah started his artistic activity in Handsworth as a DJ on the local 'sound system' scene and became very popular for his ability to spice his 'toasts' with sarcastic comments on the social situation. In an interview with Lara Saguisag on "Performance, Politics, and Poetry for Children", he described what poetry meant for him when he was a teenager – something boring and old, "written by dead men" (Saguisag 2007: 17) – and explained how he ended up doing what he really wanted to do, which is exactly what he is doing now: "Poetry in performance, poetry on television and on the radio, poetry that was political and funny at the same time" (p. 18). When he and his friends were young, he explains, they attached very negative connotations to the word 'poetry', and therefore they preferred to use different words, like 'toasting', for example. And it was only by finding a way to connect it to their daily experiences that they finally came to terms with the idea of poetry:

> If we did use the word "poet," it was as dub poet, reggae poet, rap poet. [...] Anything but poet or poetry on its own, because it conjured up this image of the white dead man. Later on we kind of said, "Hey, we can't let a few elite people colonize the word 'poetry'—we got to reclaim it." So then we had the confidence to say we are poets, that's it, full stop. (pp. 17-18)

In his illustrated autobiography for children, when mentioning his first experiments in poetry after he left school at 13, he explains in musical terms what dub poetry is – "a dubbed version of a track, like a remix" (Zephaniah 2011: 24) – and the role that a poet like him, who speaks over an original track, has within his community:

"Dub poets usually speak about important issues – politics, people's rights, and things like that" (p. 24).

Dub poetry is a genre developed in Jamaica in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of the independence from British colonial rule, as a politically charged art form mixing the language of popular music – reggae in particular – with social and political commentaries. As G.A. Elmer Griffin (1995: 60) points out, the genre "combines the values of poetry, the properties of voice as instrument, and the power of the vernacular, spoken in the context of political resistance and identity assertion". According to the definition contained in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, dub poetry finds "its theoretical logic in Kamau Brathwaite's assertion in *Nation Language* (1984) that 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameters'" (Dabydeen, Gilmore, Jones 2007: 134), and performance poetry represents "the muzzling of a Jamaican art form that once stood comparison with the jazz poetics of Eliot or Auden and the sonorous blank verse of Milton, all of whom can be read in performance, and all of whom likewise developed a new voice in response to specific historical circumstances" (p. 135)[4]. Or, as Habekost (1993: 1) puts it, dub poetry "functions as a connecting link between the 'black' oral tradition and the 'white' literary tradition".

As Zephaniah also added later on in the above-mentioned interview, actually his ideal is that of the African griot, which he had already described, in a letter included in the collection for children entitled *Wicked World!* (2000), as a *storyteller* – since "it is our job to keep the ancient stories alive and sometimes we introduce new stories to deal with new subjects" (Zephaniah 2000: 57) – and as a *poet* – since "it is our job to keep the language alive by using wordplay and words that are beautiful and rhythmic" (p. 57).

The activity of griots for him is not limited to a specific "tribe, country or religion" (p. 57); nor is it limited to a specific time in history. Their role is that of being always engaged with politics and social justice, since they can use that "magical potency" which, according to Walter Ong (1982: 32), in African – or, more generally,

[4] The music and culture of Caribbean people are amply discussed in Hebdige (1987). For details on dub poetry, 'toasting' and 'talk over' see Chapter 10, pp. 82-89. The relationship between dub poetry and street culture is also explored in Procter (2003), particularly on pp. 88-108.

in oral cultures – is ascribed to "sounded words", words thought of "as primarily oral, as events", their sense being "necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven". In the same letter he emphasises the qualities that griots share with poets from the oral tradition and, after acknowledging the fact that there is some confusion, among "people-experts", about their position in society, he highlights the role they play as historians, engaged in the task of keeping memories alive, as well as "prophets, looking forward into the future" (Zephaniah 2000: 58). But, above all, he draws his audience's attention to their role as newscasters, which can have a political effect in places where people are prevented from having access to reliable information on what is happening. In those cases, he declares, "we are not just poets, or singers, dancers, or actors, we are all-round commentators, who work for the good of our community and not just for money. We are the oral tradition" (p. 59).

In 2004, when asked in an interview how he would describe his role as a poet, he answered that he believed it had to be that of "a political agitator, an alternative newscaster, a kind of creative intellectual – to think about arguments and put them in poetical terms" (Mahamdallie 2004), so that people could easily understand what was happening in their lives and in society at large. And that of an "alternative newscaster" is precisely the role that he played in all those poems in which he commented on many and diverse topics spanning not merely politics, but also the environment or the lives of members of the royal family. These poems, as Eric Doumerc points out, were often published in *The Guardian* in the 1980s. In particular, Doumerc analyses "Rapping Up the Year", which was published on 30 December 1988 and contained the poet's views on all the events that he believed had made that year unique: from foreign politics, such as the withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan or the *glasnost* policy in the USSR, to domestic problems, such as the racist attitude of the media and the police towards Jamaicans, to conclude with the marital difficulties experienced by Prince Charles and Princess Diana (Doumerc 2005: 199-201). At the end of the interview he concluded by saying: "My role artistically is to keep the oral tradition alive" (Mahamdallie 2004), thus emphasising the peculiar artistic and political role of his performances in the enactment of memory.

Discussing the possibility to archive performances as "vital acts of transfer" and considering the issue within the framework of Performance Studies, Diana Taylor (2003: 20) suggests that the binary opposition to be considered, when dealing with cultural memory, is not the one between written and oral words, but rather that between the "archive" and the "repertoire" of performance, and she clearly describes the different roles they play in shaping cultural knowledge. The archive, being tightly connected to enduring materials – such as maps, texts, monuments and archaeological remains – separates "the source of 'knowledge' from the knower" (p. 20), whereas the repertoire, including "ephemeral, non reproducible knowledge" such as performances, movement and singing, "enacts embodied memory" (p. 20) and requires presence, as "people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there', being part of the transmission" (p. 20).

The connection with the oral tradition is at the core of Zephaniah's performance poetry, and according to him oral poetry is not to be considered as a secondary sub-genre within poetry. This emerges clearly in an interview with Errol Lloyd (1998), in which he compares poetry to "a big tree with many branches"; it is possible to climb up the tree by choosing one of the branches, but this does not mean that the rest of the tree is not available for further explorations. "I came on to that tree through oral poetry" he declares, "but through that I have come to love classical poetry, limericks, nonsense verse – all kinds of poetry equally and that's the important thing. A lot of people bring a snobbish approach and classify written poetry above the oral, forgetting that the oral came first" (Lloyd 1998).

In line with the arguments of Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin on the power of words in oral cultures[5], Christian Habekost (1993: 79), in his volume which explores the role of African-Caribbean dub poetry within the postcolonial language debate, points out that:

[5] In the chapter which deals with the liberation of postcolonial writing, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (1989: 81) argue that oral cultures are characterised by "the assumption that words, uttered under appropriate circumstances have the power to bring into being the events or states they stand for, to embody rather than represent reality" and that, as a consequence, for them "language possesses power over truth and reality".

[...] the notion of the word together with the sound of the voice (and musical rhythm) evokes the act of performance, the need to utter – to sound – a word in order to make it alive, to transform it into a vital experience. It suggests that the word without the sound, i.e. the printed word, is dead, while the word bewitched by the dynamics of voice, sound, and rhythm is able to set both the body and the mind of the listener in motion.

This is the same question that Zephaniah tackles in *Dis Poetry* (1992), the poem that might be considered his manifesto, as he traces his art back to the creativity of musical 'dance-hall' performers ("Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops / De tongue fires a riddim dat shoots like a shot / Dis poetry is designed fe rantin / Dance hall style, Big mouth chanting", p. 12) while at the same time detaching himself from the British canonical poets ("I've tried Shakespeare, Respect due dere / But dis is de stuff I like"; p. 12).

Performance poets, however, as Kwame Dawes (2005: 294) brings to the fore, "do not speak of performance as merely the act of stepping on stage to read or recite, but see the performance of language, sound, rhythm and rhetoric as elemental to the poem as it appears on the page"; the performance takes place also on the page, as the "poem's 'performability' enhances its presence on the page" (p. 294). Accordingly, Zephaniah (1992: 12) in his poem emphasises the importance of the rhythm that the performance confers on poetry, but also acknowledges the value of the printed word, which nonetheless cannot go without the theatrical quality of the spoken word:

> Dis poetry is not afraid of going ina book
> Still dis poetry need ears fe hear an eyes fe hav a look
> Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved
> An if I hav a problem de riddim gets it solved,
> I've tried to be more Romantic, it does nu good for me
> So I tek a Reggae Riddim an build me poetry.

3. Performance and politics

In the 1980s the popularity of Zephaniah's performances grew enormously and made him a star of the East End alternative scene.

The "Bard of Stratford"[6], as he was called by the *New Musical Express* (Bradshaw 1982), had a special relation with his audience, which is still one of the most peculiar features of his performances. In 1987 he was shortlisted for the position of Creative Artist in Residence at Cambridge University; however, this appreciation for his talent, which of course had a popular basis, generated a fierce debate over the value of his poetry, and the opportunity to welcome him in the shrine to high culture was seriously questioned. The headline chosen by *The Sun* for its editorial on that occasion was: "Would You Let This Man Near Your Daughter?". After asking himself for which qualities Zephaniah had been selected, the author of the article explained: "He is black. He is Rastafarian. He has tasted approved schools and Borstals. And, oh yes, he is a poet", and concluded by asking his readers: "Is this really the kind of man parents would wish to have teaching their sons and daughters?" (Anon. 1987: 1).

Habekost (1995: 30) briefly surveys the controversy arisen over that unhappy choice and, quoting from an article published in *The Guardian* on 30 April 1987, he focuses on the fact that it was considered "too much of a challenge to academia, which at the end decided against the dub poet". The same happened when he applied for the Chair of Professor of Poetry at Oxford.

A quite different controversy arose in November 2003, as Zephaniah turned down an Order of the British Empire awarded to him by the Blair government. The poet explained his point of view in an article published in *The Guardian* in which he declared:

> I get angry when I hear that word "empire"; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised. […] Benjamin Zephaniah OBE – no way Mr Blair, no way Mrs Queen. I am profoundly anti-empire. (Zephaniah 2003: online)

Only a couple of years before, in the introduction to his poetry collection *Too Black, Too Strong* (2001), he had affirmed that he

[6] Paul Bradshaw (1982: 15), the journalist interviewing him for the *New Musical Express*, told the story of a "working poet in recession ridden Britain" who had chosen London's East End to take "the Alternative Cabaret scene by storm with his rhythmic rantings". Of course, it was another Bard from another Stratford.

was not interested in winning awards and that, even if "playing the game" could be more convenient for him, he would never choose to compromise with power:

> I could never stand on a platform and honestly say that the height of my career was receiving an OBE, and in an environment where the artist is scorned for being political. I have to confess that I still believe that there are things that are more important than me or my poetry. [...] I may not be right but I feel that (my) poetry has a purpose, well many purposes. (Zephaniah 2001: 12)

Among those purposes is the commitment to speak for those who are denied that right. In a review of the book, however, Kwame Dawes (2002: 160) suggested that touring the world for the British Council, or taking part in other celebratory occasions, implies that he is considered "a figure whose ranting against Britain allows Britain to declare its wonderful liberal sensibility" and that he "may have actually been co-opted by the very system he denounces".

In the following years, Zephaniah partook in numerous events at which he voiced the concerns of his Black British community, but also spoke about Britain's culture and accomplishments. In 2010, for example, he took part in *The People Speak*[7] because it was a way to recount "another history, the history of people struggling to survive, struggling against their masters, struggling to take control of their lives" (Rempton 2010: online), and the reading he chose was taken from *The Mask of Anarchy* by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

During the 2012 Olympic Games, a themed season of BBC worldwide programmes entitled *London Calling*[8] was also advertised by Zephaniah who, being interviewed while he was Poet in Residence at Keats House, celebrated the city for its multicultural character:

> My London is the poetry of the street, the poetry of the city, for me it's a great source of inspiration. I came to live in London in 1979. It's the place

[7] *The People Speak* was an event held at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, in September 2010 and then shown on 31 October 2010 on the UK History channel. The project, led by Colin Firth, saw several artists reading texts or singing songs connected to particular moments and events in the history of Britain, in order to underline the power of words to shape history.

[8] The subtitle was *The City of 2012, brought to life by the BBC*.

where culturally creative people come and live. This is the place to be. London is the melting pot: music, multiculturalism. My London is a funky, intelligent, beautiful place. (BBC 2012, my transcript)[9]

But on the same occasion, as a patron of the Newham Monitoring Project, he also recorded a video to launch an appeal inviting young people in East London to use the toll-free number available in case they were stopped and searched[10].

The first video, and the poem that he subsequently performed (*The London Breed*, contained in *Too Black, Too Strong*), recalls the famous calypso *London Is the Place for Me* sang by the Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Kitchener upon arrival at Tilbury Docks in 1948 on board the *SS Empire Windrush*. His performance, captured on Pathé newsreel, is still one of the most enduring images of mid-twentieth-century migrations from the English-speaking Caribbean to the mother country and emphasised the idea of belonging to the imperial homeland.

Tina Ramnarine (2007: 50) underlines the importance of the context of the performance for calypsonians and stresses the role of music, by which migrants can remember the past and dream of the future, adding that "[w]ith their thematic parallels, calypso in Britain can be analysed in relation to the performance poetry of writers such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah and to the British Caribbean fiction that emerged from the 1950s onward".

In *The London Breed* Zephaniah (2001: 84) praises the British capital for having grown upon different traditions and different music; because people arrived there from all over the world and "Tis they that made dis city strong", and he hopes that a new "London

[9] http://www.londoncallingbbc.com/benjamin-zephaniah.html, last accessed September 2, 2012. This is how his video was introduced on the programme website: "While the BBC team was filming vignettes of real Londoners as part of *London Calling* to highlight the wonders of the UK capital city, they captured this remarkable impromptu performance from one of Britain's most beloved poets, Benjamin Zephaniah. Luckily the camera was still rolling as the charismatic wordsmith launched into a nuanced and heartfelt performance celebrating London for its human glory, from tribulations to triumphs and from grit to glamour" (BBC 2012).

[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09J7RjGd9nY, last accessed August 2, 2017.

Breed" will be generated by this melting pot. Most of the poems collected in *Too Black, Too Strong* celebrate a new Britain and are introduced by an essay in which the poet describes to the reader his Black British identity: he is no more a Rastafarian who longs to go back to Africa, as he was when he lived in Birmingham. He admits that the more he travels, the more he loves Britain, "probably one of the only places that can take an angry, illiterate, uneducated, ex-hustler, rebellious Rastafarian and give him the opportunity to represent the country" (p. 12). However, it is just because of his love for the place that he wants to fight for his rights and, more in general, for those of Black people. By exploring his close association with the British Council and the other organisations who send him around the world to speak on their behalf, he underlines the strength of a country which looks so liberal for just allowing his voice to be heard.

In the *Guardian* article he wrote when he refused the OBE, he told his readers of the last time he had met the Queen, at a concert he was hosting: "She came backstage to meet me. […] Me and the South African performers I was working with that night thought it rather funny that we had a royal groupie. She's a bit stiff but she's a nice old lady" (Zephaniah 2003). And after making clear that he has nothing against her or the royal family, he concludes by saying: "It is the institution of the monarchy that I loathe so very much, the monarchy that still refuses to apologise for sanctioning slavery" (Zephaniah 2003). But later on he introduces what he considers to be his "biggest deal with the establishment", which is his work with the British Council, of which the Queen is patron:

> I have no problem with this. It has never told me what to say, or what not to say. I have always been free to criticise the government and even the council itself. This is what being a poet is about. Most importantly, through my work with the council I am able to show the world what Britain is really about in terms of our arts, and I am able to partake in the type of political and cultural intercourse which is not possible in the mainstream political arena. (Zephaniah 2003)

The main feature of his art seems then to be its political nature, since it is imbued with a desire for his Black British community to "move from the margins and come to the centre" (Zephaniah 2001:14). Zephaniah's poetry, as Eric Doumerc underlines, has a stereoscopic

nature and offers some kind of double vision of the British society. This "double consciousness", as Doumerc argues, is related to both the thematic aspects and the forms that he uses:

> His poetry transcends racial and cultural boundaries as it is steeped in the very British tradition of doggerel and nonsense while paying homage to the Caribbean oral tradition in its various forms and guises. His poetry is a hybrid, creolised product of the meeting of two cultures. (Doumerc 2005: 195)

In this sense, we could recall W.E.B. DuBois's notion of "double consciousness" as the "peculiar sensation" of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others", of feeling "two-ness" (DuBois [1903] 1999: 11). Actually, we could speak of a constant dialogue between different selves; a changing consciousness which is characteristic of diasporic subjectivities and that, rather than being experienced in terms of dispossession or fragmentation ("I don't have an identity crisis" he repeats in *Knowing me*; Zephaniah 2001: 62-63), might lead to different ways of belonging, in a city – and in a country – where "cultures melt and intertwine" (p. 84).

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