

Routledge Studies in Linguistics

THE DISCOURSE OF PROTEST, RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN REGGAE MUSIC

A BAKHTINIAN ANALYSIS OF PACIFIC REGGAE

Elizabeth Turner



The Discourse of Protest, Resistance and Social Commentary in Reggae Music

A comprehensive, engaging and timely Bakhtinian examination of the ways in which the music and lyrics of Pacific reggae, aspects of performance, a record album cover and the social and political context construct social commentary, resistance and protest.

Framed predominantly by the theory and philosophy of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, this innovative investigation of the discourse of Pacific reggae in New Zealand produces a multi-faceted analysis of the dialogic relationships that create meaning in this genre of popular music. It focuses on the award-winning EP *What's Be Happen?* by the band Herbs, which has been recognised for its ground-breaking music and social commentary in the early 1980s. Herbs' songs address the racism and ideology of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the relationship between sport and politics, as well as universally relevant conflicts over race relations, the experiences of migrants, and the historic and ongoing loss of indigenous people's lands.

The book demonstrates the striking compatibility between Bakhtin's theorisation of utterances as ethical acts and reggae music, along with the Rastafari philosophy that underpins it, which speaks of resistance to social injustice, of ethical values and the kind of society people seek to achieve. It will appeal to a cross-disciplinary audience of scholars in Bakhtin studies; discourse analysis; popular cultural studies; the literary analysis of popular music and lyrics, and those with an interest in the culture and politics of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific region.

Elizabeth Turner is an independent researcher and academic affiliated to Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

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“The book presents an argument clearly demonstrating how music has seriously impacted New Zealand on a political and social level. Dr Turner broadens the use of Bakhtin’s theory of ‘Dialogism’, originally created for literary analysis, to effectively investigate the historical and cultural significance of the music group Herbs’ first album *What’s Be Happen?* Herbs are described as the ‘vanguard of Pacific Reggae’ by AudioCulture – the online encyclopedia of New Zealand popular music. Dr Turner’s analysis of their first album, which was highly political, draws attention to the impact the album has had on New Zealand at that time and since. It also explores the influence the band and this album has had in forming a music genre that has become internationally recognised.”

Keith McEwing, *Secretary, Music Advisory Committee, The Lilburn Trust*

“Elizabeth Turner skilfully blends an informative study of reggae in Aotearoa New Zealand with a detailed conceptual analysis drawing on the ideas of cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Focusing on the band, Herbs, the book chronicles and interprets a significant era in New Zealand popular music history through an engaging critical lens.”

Professor Henry Johnson, *University of Otago, New Zealand*

“Turner’s scintillating reading of Aotearoa New Zealand band Herbs’ 1981 reggae album *What’s Be Happen* as staging a complex web of dialogic relations to challenge colonialism’s legacy of racism, social exclusion, land loss and cultural dislocation – in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere – highlights the continuing relevance of Bakhtin’s work for thinking practices of resistance by marginalized communities and for affirming the transformative power of popular culture.”

Professor Esther Peeren, Professor of Cultural Analysis,
University of Amsterdam

“In terms of its treatment of Bakhtin’s work alone, this book is a treasure bringing to the fore Turner’s deep and erudite understanding of key Bakhtinian concepts and theories. The main, and highly significant, contribution of Turner’s book is its highly compelling account of Herbs’ classic 1981 album *What’s Be Happen*. Beautifully written with detailed insights concerning both the historical context and ongoing legacy of this landmark recording, *The Discourse of Protest, Resistance and Social Commentary in Reggae Music* will be essential reading for both popular music scholars and general readers with an interest in reggae and its trans-local evolution as a medium of protest.”

Professor Andy Bennett, Professor of Cultural Sociology,
Griffith University, Queensland, Australia



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A Bakhtinian Analysis of Pacific Reggae

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1 Constructing an encounter between Mikhail Bakhtin and the New Zealand band Herbs

Elizabeth Turner

One night in September 2012, I was invited to an event in the Great Hall of the neo-baroque Town Hall in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.¹ This space has been the setting in the past for most of the city's important civic functions including a reception for survivors of the battle at Gallipoli in 1915; events to honour Britain's Prince of Wales in 1920 and Queen Elizabeth as Head of State in 1953; and for a dinner for US President Bill Clinton and other Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum leaders in 1999. Radical feminist Germaine Greer gave a speech here in 1972, and the hall has been a venue for concerts by orchestras, musicians, classical singers and rock bands, including The Beatles in 1964. But on this night I had been invited to witness and celebrate the induction of the band Herbs into the Aotearoa New Zealand Music Hall of Fame. Sitting in a red velvet seat in the front row of the balcony of the Great Hall, with its white pilasters and ornate ceiling, I watched musicians, songwriters, families and friends eating and talking at large, dark-clothed dining tables, and young people dressed in black carrying trays of drinks and food through the room below. The centre of the balcony above them was taken up by film crews, cameras and computer monitors, and on the far side, among more cameras, lights and white reflective screens, people came and went for interviews with Māori Television. While film and sound technicians tinkered with wiring and cables, the seats beside me were gradually filled by other guests and supporters.

*We had gathered for the Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA) Silver Scroll Awards ceremony, to be part of the music industry's recognition of Herbs as the founders of Pacific reggae in New Zealand, for their "enormous contribution to the cultural fabric of life ... while forging a unique and original sound"² I was there at the invitation of the band's founding member and songwriter Toni Fonoti because I was working on a study that explored the discourse and cultural significance of Herbs' music and their first Pacific reggae mini-album, *What's Be Happen?* (Herbs, 1981).*

The lights went down, I leaned forward, and proceedings began on the stage with a series of bands covering songs chosen as finalists for best song of the preceding year. Then it was time to celebrate Herbs. At the words "Give it up for Herbs!", past and present members of the band began to emerge from between the tables nearest the stage among spotlights that found them in the darkness of the auditorium. The musicians gathered on stage to the noise of applause and the sound of their song "Dragons

2 *Constructing an encounter*

and Demons”, followed by a roll call of 17 names that included two deceased band members, Fred Faleauto and Charles Tumabai. Long-time Māori band member and leading elder of the band, Dilworth Karaka greeted the audience in languages of the Pacific and spoke on the musicians’ behalf. As he finished speaking, the musicians began a spontaneous a cappella singing of the traditional Māori waiata (song) “E Papa”. I stood; everyone stood; and, like everyone else, I sang, with great pride to be part of this.

In a celebration that included film of performances, as well as clips of archive footage and shots of album covers accompanied by a soundtrack of Herbs’ songs, there were commentaries and tributes from musicians, journalists, critics, and former managers that emphasised the courage of the band members, who hadn’t been afraid in the late 1970s and early 1980s to highlight injustices that they and others had to face. Herbs drew on Bob Marley’s influence in juxtaposing pointed lyrics and music that stirs people to move and dance, then developed it and made it “Pacific” (APRAAMCOS, 2012). In fusing Pacific and reggae sounds, the band “gave a voice to an emerging, politically-aware audience ... they gave a generation of young Māori and Pasifika musicians and songwriters a new path to follow ... original New Zealand music could be as culturally diverse as [its] people”.³ Herbs spoke out in their music against the loss of indigenous Māori people’s land, atomic tests in the Pacific, racist treatment of migrants and so-called over-stayers in New Zealand, the apartheid regime in South Africa and that country’s racially selected team’s rugby tour of New Zealand. At a time when Aotearoa New Zealand had no history of political bands, Herbs’ songs of social commentary forged a new path and were a voice for oppressed people.

Introduction

The construction of an encounter between Herbs’ Pacific reggae in Aotearoa New Zealand and the ideas of language and cultural theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) may seem an unlikely project to some. However, the aim of this book is to demonstrate that the philosophy and discourse theories of Bakhtin are particularly fitting for a detailed analysis of the discourse of such popular songs of social commentary, protest and resistance to injustice. With what has been characterised as a righteous anger, Herbs’ extended play album (EP) *What’s Be Happen?*⁴ connects, marks and speaks of historically significant international and domestic political events, issues and injustices in the late 1970s and early 1980s. And it does so in a particular, popular, discursive space that falls outside the dominant discourses at that time.

Although grounded in a specific context at a particular moment in time, the themes of Herbs’ album have relevance for those beyond the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand who suffer racism and are socially and economically marginalised, and those who experience the cultural dislocation of migration. In its novel and productive extension of Bakhtin’s theories and analytical tools to Herbs’ music, the book will be of interest to people studying Bakhtin’s work, to anyone investigating historically and culturally significant artefacts of popular culture, and to

those with an interest in reggae music. Others with an interest in the cultural politics of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific region or in the literary analysis of music and lyrics will also find it useful, as will those involved with exploring popular constructions of resistance to social injustice.

Although previous studies of popular cultural artefacts have drawn on aspects of Bakhtin's work, there has been no comprehensive application of his theories and concepts to the discourse of recorded popular music. While this form of popular cultural artefact was beyond the scope of Bakhtin's literary work, I hope to show that his ideas are not only compatible with the analysis of present-day, popular and creative constructions of resistance and protest related to ethical values (see also Turner, 2015), but are also strikingly fruitful. To achieve this aim, I also draw on relevant literature from other discipline areas, including the study of popular music, literary theorist and critic Terry Eagleton's approach to the analysis of poetry, and theories of identity in cultural psychology, as well as interviews with Herbs' songwriters Toni Fonoti and Phil Toms.⁵

I argue that Bakhtin's philosophy and theories have relevance for an analysis and interpretation of the meanings constructed in Herbs' highly political album for a number of related reasons. These are, in brief, Bakhtin's focus on popular culture and literary texts; his politicisation of theories of language and discourse; his focus on the construction of meaning and understanding (Renfrew, 2015); his overarching notion of dialogism (see Bakhtin, 1981), which conceives meaning as a dynamic and relational phenomenon (see Bostad et al., 2004) derived "from relations *between* the intersecting meaningful acts" of subjects (Brandist, 2004, p. 38); and his conceptualisation of utterances as ethical acts.

Herbs' first reggae album is seen as a defining moment in the history of New Zealand popular music, in which the multi-ethnic mix of five musicians introduced an innovative and distinctive style of Pacific reggae. In 1981 the Auckland band consisted of vocalist and songwriter Toni Fonoti, of Samoan heritage; Tongan drummer Fred Faleauto, now deceased; Tongan guitarist Spenser Fusimalohi; Māori rhythm guitar player Dilworth Karaka; and European (Pākehā) bassist and songwriter Phil Toms. Through the musicians' localisation of Jamaican roots reggae,⁶ the album embodied the influence of Bob Marley on Māori and Pacific Islands musicians, activists and audiences in particular, for whom Marley's music "became part of the fabric of the post-colonial ... experience of history and their search for identity" (Fala, 2008, p. 85).

In drawing on Bakhtin's ideas, the analysis of Herbs' album is grounded in a theoretical approach that explicitly regards popular culture as "the privileged bearer of democratic and progressive values" (Hirschkop, 1986, p. 92). Bakhtin's theory ascribes value to popular cultural products, and privileges discourse that has the power to subvert the authority of monologism (see Bakhtin, 1981c). He uses the term monologism to signify discourse that expects no answer. For Bakhtin, monologic discourse represents authoritative claims to a single truth that make no allowances for other perspectives: "the shutting down of dialogue" (White, 2009, p. 1). While monologism denotes an authoritarian attitude towards other discourses and a single evaluative point of view, Bakhtin (1986f) posits a