





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Benjamin Zephaniah's dub poetry and its appeal to children: an ecocritical reading

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Dub poetry is a form of performance poetry that originated with Black poets in Jamaica, Britain, and Canada. It is accompanied by rhythmical accentuation and gesticulation while performing in front of the audience. This study analyses the children's dub poetry of the contemporary Black British poet Benjamin Zephaniah to highlight the unique characteristics that make his poetry more appealing to children. This is accomplished through an ecocritical reading of his early children's poems, which highlight his biocentric attitude and revolutionary stance against any form of anthropocentrism. The study demonstrates that Zephaniah is an eco-writer who has an effective method of engaging children with his poetry in both its forms, oral and printed, through his performative techniques, rhetorical strategies, humorous style, and serious cosmopolitan topics in the belief that poetry is political and poets should be activists.

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Introduction

Dub poetry is a recent artistic form of performance poetry and a sub-genre of spoken-word poetry that is associated with Black poets in Jamaica, Britain, and Canada. It involves direct interaction with the audience and is accompanied by rhythmic accentuation and gestures. As is emphasised in this study, this type of live performance differs from conventional poetry and is effective in attracting children's attention. The study aims to explore the distinctive characteristics that make dub poetry intriguing for children, in both its oral and printed forms, through an ecocritical reading of the early children's poetry of the Black British poet Benjamin Zephaniah, including *Talking Turkeys*, *Funky Chickens*, and *Wicked World*. The significance of the study lies in focusing on aspects that have not been combined in a single study: dub poetry, children's literature, and ecocriticism, which will hopefully contribute to modern and children's literature and will be an inspiring resource for researchers as well as educators bringing Zephaniah's poetry into classrooms. The study establishes how dub poetry appeals to children and has gained widespread recognition through the poet's performative qualities, humorous style, and serious undertones. It also makes a case for the educative value of Zephaniah's poetry in terms of its alignment with contemporary cosmopolitan themes, particularly animal rights, environmentalism, and racial equality. His works also merit scholarly investigation, as they have immensely popularised this type of poetry based on his unique style of fusing a new "modern musical style ... thus breaking new ground for dub poetry's formula of 'word and sound'" (Habekost 1993a, p. 228). Karen Coats's definition of children's poetry agrees with the features of dub poetry as seen today: "being almost always shared communally and is hardly ever done without the involvement of the entire body. Children's poems and songs often have actions to accompany them, gestures that adults teach children to imitate as part of the song" (2013, p. 139). She also adds that "children's poem brings the body into language through strong beats and sounds that evoke their sensory referents" (Coats 2013, p. 140). Besides, children's literature has been defined in numerous ways but contains the following characteristics: being understandable, familiar, and simple and having sensual qualities, communicative musicality, and humour, which all intersect with dub poetry. This study demonstrates that Zephaniah's performative qualities, which grab children's attention in the oral form, are also found on the printed page.

Methods of research

As Zephaniah explicitly responds to contemporary universal themes such as animal welfare and environmental ethics, his dub poetry can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. According to Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (1996, p. xviii). Barry (2017) elaborated that ecocritics "give special canonical emphasis to writers who foreground nature as a major part of their subject matter" (p. 264). Bellarsi (2009) mentioned that ecocritics "have attacked anthropocentrism and the centrality it accords to man ... ecocritics seek to displace anthropocentrism in favor of ecocentrism" (p. 74). Coupe (2000) stated that ecocriticism "seeks to ensure that nature is given as much attention within the humanities as is currently given to gender, class and race" (p. 303). Zephaniah's children's poems emulate the above definitions of ecocriticism through his exploration of the relationship between humans and non-humans. Thus, the present paper will thematically analyse a selection of Zephaniah's children's poems from the perspective of ecocriticism together with formal scrutiny of his poems in an

attempt to bring to light the characteristics of dub poetry which make it appealing to children.

Dub poetry

The term "dub poetry" was coined by the Jamaican poet Oku Onuora in 1979 to refer to "a poem that has a built-in reggae rhythm; hence, when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm ... one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem" (Morris 1997, p. 2). Oku Onuora also emphasised the flexibility that this form offers and negated the claim that dub poetry straitjackets its poets. He stated that as a dub poet, he was not restricted but could rather dub into his poetry "a reggae rhythm, a jazz rhythm, a disco rhythm, any kind of rhythm that suits the words" (Habekost 1993b, pp. 206–207). The works of the Black British poet Linton Kwesi Johnson also contributed to dub poetry's rise with the 1978 album *Dread Beat and Blood*. His poetry was associated with a reggae beat, and it was through his "records and concert tours" that "dub poetry appealed to an international mass audience, paving the way for a great number of other talented poets" (Habekost 1993a, p. 19).

Tracing the emergence of dub poetry, which first gained prominence in England in the 1980s, reveals that it is a hybrid of African-Jamaican oral traditions and was developed by Black performance poets like Louise Bennett, Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Michael Smith. It originates from ancient African traditions that were transmitted orally with gestures and vocalisation and were brought to the West by African slaves. This form of poetry originally involved songs, drums, and dances; however, with the advancement of technology, other musical instruments, such as those used in jazz, deejay, and reggae, were included while performing. However, this is not the only form of performance poetry that gains its meaning from gestures and loud recitations. Performativity dates back to ancient times when literature was transmitted orally with gestures and vocalisation, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. Dub poetry employs diverse elements of these existing oral traditions and refashions them into a new form.

Having a politically revolutionary nature, the early dub poems were undoubtedly motivated by various socio-political African-American movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Art Movement, Black Power Movement, and Jamaican Rastafarianism. They were also inspired by the British politics of the 1970s, when discrimination against people of colour was common. The rise of slam poetry, hip hop, and deejay, which involved musical rhythms and dances that were associated with political themes related to Black people's lives, are also influential factors that led to the emergence of dub poetry. Therefore, this mixture of talk-over and music like jazz, deejay, and reggae gradually evolved, leading to the introduction of dub poetry. The crucial role of reggae music, popularised by Bob Marley, the most famous Jamaican reggae singer, in the evolution of dub poetry must also be taken into consideration. Over time and after Marley's death, reggae music started to disappear from dub poetry until poets searched for other musical rhythms to incorporate into their poems: "Dub poets founded their own bands with musicians who played exclusively for them and created innovative and sophisticated pieces of music" (Habekost 1993b, p. 212). Over time, reggae rhythm became the primary factor that contributed to the popularity of dub poetry, wherein the poet "selects his words so that they produce a distinctive *musical beat*, marked by syncopes and 'drops' resembling the rhythmical pattern of reggae" (Habekost 1993a, p. 91). Therefore, the factor that distinguishes it from other forms of spoken-word poetry is that it is delivered

through the specific Jamaican rhythm of reggae and is prepared in advance to be performed live in front of an audience. However, dub poetry keeps its performance elements and rhythmic power even in the printed form, as will be elaborated in this paper.

However, there has been an ongoing scholarly debate over the classification and definition of dub poetry among practitioners and critics since its appearance on the literary scene. The common elements in these debates are the focus on verbal rhythm, performance aspects, and socio-political critique that give this poetry its value. The term “dub” is derived from a technological activity of adding or combining sound effects or music. These sound effects can be musical or “wordical”. As a form of verbal rhythm, even when this poetry is not accompanied by music, the rhythm can be felt because of the poet’s accentuation. It has been said that “dub poets generally perform without backing music, delivering chanted speech with pronounced rhythmic accentuation and dramatic stylization of gesture” (Sathyadas 2017, p. 84). Similarly, Zephaniah (2018) emphasised this feature, stating, “It was probably more amazing because I was doing it with just words and no music” (p. 159). As dub poetry is performed with a reggae rhythm instead of reggae music, the dub poet relies on rhythm, rhyming patterns, alliteration, repetition, and onomatopoeia combined with theatrical aspects. Thus, the pronunciation of certain key words is stressed, subsequently unfolding layers of meanings that would not be evident in the printed form. Dub poetry thus involves a blend of oral poetic performance with Black verbal rhythms through “making innovations such as dub and echo system” (Hoyles 2002, p. 65).

Zephaniah’s words in “Rapid Rapping” identify other features of dub poetry, such as orality and spontaneity, as follows: “Long time ago before de book existed/Poetry was oral an not playing mystic ... Done without de ego trip an nu special training” (1992, ll. 53–54, 58). Unlike conventional poetry, dub poetry does not require any special training but is a heritage born from an oral tradition that is undertaken with “nu special training”. Dub poets are not academically trained in schools; their skills result from inheriting oral traditions that they may have heard or seen performed in public gatherings. Zephaniah states that he “evolved as a poet not knowing any mainstream British poetry ... except for the poetry I heard on the streets” (Doumerc 2004, p. 139). As Habekost (1993a) confirms, “dub poetry presents a challenge to academics, white *and* black, by virtue of its programmatic anti-academic stance” (p. 11). It could be stated that this poetry “rests on the ‘low’ street language and delivers this language to the printed version” (Dorchin 2017, p. 166). This, however, does not diminish its beauty but rather increases its accessibility to children.

Zephaniah highlights the musicality and performativity of this poetry in another poem titled “Dis Poetry”:

Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved
 And if I have a problem de riddim gets it solved, ...
 So I tek a Reggae Riddim and build me poetry, ...
 Yu could call dis poetry Dub Ranting
 De tongue plays a beat
 An de body starts skanking
 (1992, ll. 18–19, 21, 26–28)

Inspired by the “reggae” rhythm, the dub poet creates his own “Verbal Riddim” with his tongue that “plays a beat”, accompanied

by his body that “starts skanking” in harmony as the poem is performed. This performative feature grabs children’s attention, as Zephaniah (1992) stresses in the same poem through the words, “Dis poetry is quick an childish” (l. 29). Appropriate use of poetic language and rhythm has been identified as a key factor in making the work intriguing to children (Janeczko et al. 2017). British-based poets of Caribbean heritage such as James Berry, John Agard, Grace Nichols, and Valerie Bloom were engaged creatively in children’s poetry using variations of Caribbean Creoles in their work, thus making language an integral part of their poetic identity (Lockwood 2014). These poets have all used Creoles in a distinctive way similar to Zephaniah; however, Zephaniah’s originality lies in experimenting with such ecological topics as veganism and Rastafarianism, as will be discussed presently.

Therefore, it can be assumed that dub poetry is written in free verse and is intentionally performed and written in Creole English that is spoken by Jamaican immigrants to preserve their African-Caribbean identity. This also reflects that dub poets do not conform to the standard use of the English language. This deviation from the usage of standard English is a common feature among dub poets, resulting in variations in spelling and grammar in both oral and written forms. It seems that children are currently familiar with such language as they listen to similar language in reggae, hip-hop, and rap and can observe the changes in English usage that have been brought about by the Internet and social media. Moreover, Tatiana Savchenko confirmed that

Creole words that vary from Standard English phonetically and graphically did not put significant challenges in understanding West Indian poems for children ... explanation notes on certain words that either were not present in standard English or varied from it grammatically, proved to be helpful and made West Indian poetry for children accessible for any reader and, therefore, worthy of wide recognition. (2017, p. 78)

Thus, it is through the strategic transcription of Creole in the written form that Zephaniah’s poems acquire their effect as a play upon standard English.

Another important characteristic of dub poetry is that each performance differs slightly from other performed versions and from the written one, as it is performed live and relies on the audience’s reaction. In other words, there is an interaction between the poet, text, and audience that leads to these slight variations. Watching Zephaniah’s performance of “Talking Turkeys!!” on YouTube (Considine 2007) provides an insight into how he and the audience became mutually and effectively involved in the performance and how he slightly altered the recitation of the poem from the written version according to the audience’s reaction. This live and direct engagement is the genuine essence of dub poetry, injecting new life into the text every time it is performed. Unlike conventional poetry, where the process of reading a poem is an independent and private experience, the experience of listening to and watching a dub poetry performance is a communal one and therefore elicits a different response. The impact of the latter on the audience is immediate and intensified by the presence of others, making it similar to a theatrical experience.

It is important to highlight that dub poetry has a socio-political character reflecting the influence of Rastafarian philosophy, which is an ideology that originated in Jamaica in the early twentieth century. This ideology advocates, besides other beliefs, the liberation of the African diaspora from Western oppression and the call for freedom, equality, and peace. This poetry is used as a tool for social and political protests whereby poets comment on current events that are associated with people irrespective of

their age. These include racial discrimination, poverty, abuse, violence, and all other forms of oppression. It may be argued that the relevance of the themes of this poetry to children increases its value and appeal, as they find this poetry more meaningful. Adisa Andwele, another dub poet, affirmed this, saying, “Relevance, that’s the key. Using poetry about issues that affect them” (Hoyles 2002, p. 125). This political content reflects the dub poets’ contribution to literature intended for children, as summarised by Lara Saguisag et al.:

In the mid-1980s, writers of Caribbean descent began publishing and performing children’s poetry and their contributions, in both oral and written forms, have been rich and dynamic. Many of these poets began their careers writing and performing political (and often angry) poetry for adults. Among their achievements were the revalidation of oral literature and the elevation of the status of Creole. (2007, p. 4)

Benjamin Zephaniah

Benjamin Zephaniah (1958) belongs to a wave of Black poets who were born or raised in England. His oeuvre includes a list of poetic works for children and many others for teenagers and adults. He began performing poetry at the age of 11 and frequently visited schools due to his increasing recognition on TV and radio. The main themes of his poetry involve concepts such as oppression, inequality, minority rights, animal rights, and environmental issues. He explained his motivation for performing and writing for children as follows:

I want children to be revolutionary as well. I want children to think ... the day *Talking Turkeys* came out, you could buy the second edition because the first edition sold in presales... This was a book about being bullied, and it had poems about racism in it... There was stuff ... that was playful, but there was some serious stuff that kids could also relate to. (Saguisag et al. 2007, p. 20)

Moreover, even while employing humorous and child-friendly language, Zephaniah was able to discuss serious topics with his audience; “his approach was much more satirical, his style had much more of the comedian about it, yet transported serious political message”, which all enhanced the appreciation of his work (Habekost 1993a, p. 29).

Through “serious stuff”, Zephaniah endeavours to raise children’s awareness of the world and views them as planted seeds capable of political and social change. He believes that “Poems can influence individuals, and some of those individuals will go on to hold positions of power” (2003). The captivating power of dub poetry was also pointed out by Valerie Bloom, who highlighted the privileges that modern children enjoy today, unlike in the past. Poets now visit schools and meet children: “There’s much more interaction between the makers of poetry and the users of poetry ... there’s a lot more travelling now and sharing of cultures. That gives the children scope ... for making poetry” (Hoyles, 2002, p. 84).

It should be noted that the “spoken” form plays a more crucial role than the “written” form in the case of Zephaniah’s poetry. Hence, many of his poems appear on CDs, audio recordings, and online. Unlike traditional written poetry, dub poetry has enabled him to create an interactive environment with the audience through his volume, tone of voice, and body movements, as he claims in his poem “Rapid Rapping”. He states, “So dey picking up de microphone fe dere expression/Dey hav fe get it right or dey get verbal reaction” (1992, ll. 7–8). Through this live performance, he obtains a “verbal reaction” and feedback from the

audience, based on which he varies the performance. It was observed that Zephaniah’s poems were better appreciated by students when they heard the recordings. The students stated that “The recording brought out the form and the rhythm through pauses and elongation of some of the words... The sound of the words illuminated the intended meaning which could have been missed if the focus was only on print” (Dikobe 2010, p. 1). Similarly, Morris (1997) highlights that this poetry cannot be fully appreciated if it is presented only in the printed form or as a recording, explaining that “There will still be crucial performance elements missing—the interactive occasion, audience, and rhetoric of a charismatic presence” (p. 6). This, however, does not mean that the written form cannot be appreciated. As Hoyles (2002) stressed, “Once poems are published, people who have heard them performed can read them and hear the performance in their heads” (p. 9). The reader can visualise the dub poet performing the poem using various devices that Zephaniah and other dub poets have used to add performance elements to the written form.

Zephaniah claims that dub poetry intrigues children because of its realism and connection to their world. He stated, “Twenty-five years ago, children’s books that included animal characters tended to be about clever, fluffy creatures and their adventures, whereas the animals in my book mainly feared being eaten. Children in my book were being bullied, and the earth was being abused and polluted, just like the real world” (2018, p. 238). This in turn reflects his views of poetry as an art that has ethical, social, and political functions. The concepts of justice and equal rights are not foreign to Caribbean poetry, especially in relation to reggae. However, Zephaniah was among the few to incorporate these concepts into children’s poetry. In contrast to most children’s poetry, which tackles safe subjects, Zephaniah tackles serious ecological topics of present-day relevance such as “vegetarianism, environmental protection, ... and the role of an artist in a society” (Savchenko 2017, p. 52). It is worth mentioning that as a child, Zephaniah had a negative attitude toward the established image of poetry that was taught at school, as he mentions in “Who’s Who”: “I used to think **poets/Were boring**, / Until I became one of **them**” (1995, ll. 5–7). Zephaniah attributes his dislike of academic poetry to his belief that “[p]oetry is killed in the process of teaching. It becomes academic and it’s killed” (Saguisag et al. 2007, p. 26). His dissatisfaction largely stems from his belief that conventional poetry was isolated from the events relevant to its time, which, in his opinion, seemed to make it a dead, tasteless, and valueless art. It should be pointed out that although Zephaniah’s poetry was not the result of the academic literary canon, his voice as a celebrity persona is a valuable and important element in his accessibility to children. However, he believes that poetry should be embedded in current affairs and accessible to all types of people. Therefore, most of his poems are meant to be performed rather than published. He explained, “Performing it brings it to a lot more people. People who are poor can’t afford books... I mean a lot of people sit in front of the television all day, so it seemed logical to me to do on television!” (1997b). Jacko’s (2005) research confirmed that the poem’s “form”, “elements of humor”, and “everyday events” all make the work more interesting to children (p. 28), which are all evident in Zephaniah’s work. Moreover, the addition of ethnic factors such as his Caribbean heritage and the use of Creole make it more attractive to children.

Although Zephaniah believes that dub poetry as a performance art was a way of proving his Caribbean heritage and Black British identity, he agreed to publish his poetry later on: “I realized that even in this age of video and visual aids, people want a book... In 200 years’ time, they’ll be looking back at the history of Black Britain and thinking these are the first Black poets to be published

in Britain” (Hoyles 2002, p. 75). Zephaniah realises the real significance of publishing his poetry, which will immortalise his work and make it available for future generations, and consequently, he extends the performative qualities to be found in the written form as well. Similarly, other Black British poets have also recently begun insisting on publishing their poems. Patience Agbabi, for example, stresses the real motivation for publishing her work: “I was first worried that the poetry might not work on the page. But then I thought that rap lyrics are printed and they work” (Hoyles 2002, p. 166). Thus, Zephaniah’s dub poetry as a performance art works well even in the written form.

His themes and technique

Generally speaking, dub poetry offers Zephaniah some liberty and flexibility, as he emphasises in his poem “According to My Mood”, where he states: “I have *poetic license*, i WriTe thE way i waNt. / i *drop my full stops* where i like .../MY CAPITAL LeteRs go where i liKE” (1995, ll. 1–3). This poetic “license” enabled him to write for children in an exuberant manner that differs from academic conventions. For instance, this poem is printed in an idiosyncratic form, which sums up Zephaniah’s poetic style of using deliberate misspellings, alternative grammar, and varying the font size, capitalisation, and format. Besides, some poems are accompanied by illustrations, while a few take the shape of what is being described. Similar to children’s magazines, some are written as puzzles, such as “Double Talk” in *Funky Chickens*, wherein the text is printed thrice on the two sides of the page. The first is readable and printed normally, the second version is written in a lighter colour in a non-vertical form, and the third is printed on the other side of the page but cannot be read unless one turns the page and looks at the reflection from behind. “Sunnyside Up” in *Talking Turkeys* requires that the reader turns the collection upside down to read the text. Other poems take different forms where the letters are scattered on the page and require the reader to read from bottom to top or from both sides, such as “Write A Way” in *Funky Chickens*, which can be considered as a powerful means of performance on the page that engages children in his poetry and compensates for the missing qualities of oral dub poetry: “Such layout captures the reader’s attention and refers to the deeply personal character of the poems” (Savchenko 2017, p. 59). Since he uses “Caribbean Creole vocabulary”, his language is “creative, rich and varied and has many words unique to Standard English”, which makes his words more memorable (Savchenko 2017, p. 27). However, the powerful wordplay associated with his unsophisticated language is obvious in the spoken and printed forms and serves as a weapon to effectively grab the attention of children, who are familiar with such language and whose language skills might be seen as non-standard. As Zephaniah (2000a) confirmed, “There is no point in using fancy words. It has to be everyday language ... a lot of it comes from street talk... the kids know Jamaican-speak—they listen to Shaggy, reggae, rap and Hip Hop, yeah... The kids understand how to read it”. His approach agrees with the argument explored by Wakely-Mulrone and Joy, who argued that when writing children’s poetry, we can “let ourselves down to them, or lift them up to us” essentially simplifying poetry to suit children’s needs or elevating children’s understanding through poetry (2017, p. 5). It has also been argued that children’s poetry can be used as a method for addressing topics relevant to students’ lives (Rosaen 2003). Besides, children’s poetry is used by educators to discuss complex topics and thus plays an essential role in education (Adoff 1986). Thus, such approaches apply to Zephaniah’s poetry and are well received by the target audience and may support early learning.

The following will foreground the features of dub poetry in the thematic analysis of Zephaniah’s children’s poems from the perspective of ecocriticism. *Talking Turkeys*, *Funky Chickens*, and *Wicked World* are inspired by various topics that were relevant at that time, including animal rights and veganism, environmentalism, Black rights, tolerance, and social integration. Many of Zephaniah’s poems include references to animals, as indicated by the collections’ titles. *Talking Turkeys* opens with a dedication to “The earth and the children who care” (1995, l. 5). Similarly, *Funky Chickens* is dedicated “To the memory of Danny the Cat” (1997a, p. 5). Zephaniah uses animals to project how humans constitute a threat to the survival of the animal kingdom, and this is a theme that intrigues children of diverse backgrounds. Animal characters are popular in children’s literature and foster their understanding of the characters, since they usually empathise with animals and see images of themselves reflected in nature. Markowsky (1975) emphasised this point, stating that children “may identify with an animal that has human attributes” and that “animals that talk can let us in on another world which we may not be able to see without their help... Animals who are caricatures of certain types of people are funny to adults and children alike” (p. 461). He went on to confirm the ongoing effect of animal characters on children: “small children will probably continue to find delight in their pets, in wild creatures, and in animals in zoos, and also in the world of fantasy inhabited by talking animals” (1975, p. 462). Rosenbergová-Zemková also demonstrated the appeal of poetry related to animals and the natural world to children:

Poems about nature together with fables are an all-time children [sic] favourite ... Any theme connected to nature is of extreme interest to the children because of their curiosity about the world they live in. A cleverly written verse can either answer any number of whys or can present new question marks that have to be explored and ask. The same can be said about the world poetry which also offers the chance to satiate some unquenchable thirst for knowledge that is inherent to children. The world poetry offers the taste of exotics, different customs and different English language forms together with a different culture. This accounts for the popularity of Benjamin Zephaniah. (2011, p. 25)

The popularity of *Talking Turkeys* was emphasised by Freeman et al., who stated that

Any review of recent British additions to children’s literature would be incomplete without mentioning the wealth of poetry that reflects the modern Britain’s diversity. One example is Benjamin Zephaniah’s *Talking Turkeys*, a collection that combines nonsense verse, poetry that makes social or political statements, and poetry about pets. This array gives the volume broad appeal. The verse appears in various fonts and print combinations and is illustrated with offbeat graphics by the Point, a design company. Readers will respond to the stimulating rap beat of the rhymes. (1997, p. 424)

The “various fonts” and “graphics” in Zephaniah’s poems add elements of a performance on the page, and this compensates for the missing performative quality of oral dub poetry. “Talking Turkeys!!” is an extremely popular children’s poem that narrates the fate of turkeys during Christmas and provokes laughter, especially when performed on stage. In the performance form, Zephaniah moves around the stage using his hands and moving his legs to dance when talking about the turkeys playing reggae; he laughs with his audience, varying his voice and intonation with

some speed and rhythm, and pauses to give the audience time to laugh (Considine 2007). Habekost (1993a) emphasised that, unlike other Caribbean dub poets, Zephaniah “had a real talent of communicating with his audience” (p. 29). Thus, his dub poetry enthral children for being a theatrical art that relies on the poet’s facial expressions, voice volume, and gestures. Zephaniah expresses his wonder at the audience’s reaction when he performs the poem “Talking Turkeys!!” He stated, “I was absolutely astonished ... All I did was open the first line, ... and the crowd went wild... . When I said the last line, the roar from the audience reminded me of a football crowd” (2018, pp. 238–239). Through his body gestures, facial expressions, spoken words, comic tone, accentuation, and intonation, Zephaniah creates a verbal rhythm and adds a sense of musicality to the work. When he performs, he says, “It’s just me being physical. I do whatever it takes to bring the poem alive” (Hoyles 2002, p. 74). A number of studies have established that using body language increases the receivers’ interest. It has been stated that “The skills of teachers in using body language have an effect in increasing the interests of students to the course” (Gulec and Temel 2015, p. 163). This applies to the nature of dub poetry, which also involves the usage of body language to attract the audience’s attention.

Regarding its theme, “Talking Turkeys!!” touches on serious topics such as anthropocentrism and exploitation of nonhuman entities. As a vegan and an advocate of animal rights, Zephaniah argues against the maltreatment of domestic animals, whose lives are destroyed by greedy humans who want to satisfy their lust: “Humans get greedy an waste more dan need be” (1995, l. 32). He concludes the poem by promoting a biocentric attitude toward turkeys:

Be nice to yu turkey dis Christmas
An spare dem de cut of de knife,
Join Turkeys United an dey’ll be delighted
An yu will mek new friends “**FOR LIFE.**” (1995, ll. 37–40)

The proposed unity can be interpreted as the poet’s dream to end racial discrimination between people of different ethnicities and for them to become “new friends”. He skilfully and implicitly touches on ethnic issues using humour, as reflected in the following line, “Turkeys jus wanna play reggae and hip-hop”, two artistic forms related to Afro-Caribbean ethnicity. This sense of humour is a key component in Zephaniah’s poetry that makes his poems enjoyable. He explains the deliberate use of humour: “I don’t think radical dub poetry is devoid of humor... . for me it was certainly an attempt to get back to the politics” (Doumerc 2004, p. 143). By delivering serious commentaries under the guise of humour, he attracts large audiences and is consequently able to spread his social and political agendas. Doumerc (2007) states that Zephaniah “combines humor with seriousness to make his message more palatable” (p. 173). Zephaniah tackled serious topics in his poetry but never shied away from using “humor and self-irony” to make his works more accessible (Habekost 1993a, p. 240). Zephaniah confirmed how this animal poem still captures “the imagination of so many children and young people”:

I’ve known situations where teachers have got competitive about whose class or school has a child that can perform the best recitation of the poem. What has given me most joy over the years is when new generations of children discover the poem, and the number of children who have performed it, many of them posting their performance online. This happens all year round, all over the world, but there’s

always a noticeable spike around Christmas. The poem lives through them for sure. (2018, p. 239)

He also stated that *Talking Turkeys* was voted by children as “the fifth-best children’s book of all time” on the BBC’s National Poetry Day (2000a).

In “Friends”, Zephaniah employs apostrophe by addressing animals as close friends who understand him well. Consequently, he implies that he has an intimate bond with animals—one that he lacks with humans, thus encouraging audiences to create a union with animals. This can be clearly seen where he writes them in bold for emphasis as follows: “We must stick together/**Monkey, snake, me, you and toad**” (1995, ll. 12–13). “Luv Song” shares the same theme of expressing his love for animals as follows: “**I have luv fe dis hedgehog**/An everyday I luv her more an more” (1995, ll. 3–4). The form of the poem draws children’s attention; like concrete poetry or what is called “shape” poetry, the lines of this poem are printed in a form that takes the visual shape of a hedgehog accompanied by a drawing of a hedgehog’s head, which makes the reading experience interesting for children. As Savchenko explains, “The graphic design of children’s books of West Indian authors make their poetry more entertaining and easier accessible to the reader” (2017, p. 60). In “Memories”, the poet bemoans the exploitation of animals by humans and perceives humans as threats to the existence of animals, expressed as follows: “I saw furs of animals/Upon human backs... . I called it Human Madness” (1995, ll. 28–29, 33). The capitalisation of the letters “h” and “m” in “Human” and “Madness” is intended to illuminate the cruelty of humans.

Zephaniah’s compassion toward animals is elaborated in an interview wherein he stated, “I strike up a relationship with animals. I think you have to earn their friendship. I go jogging in the forest and talk to animals” (2003). He became vegan at the age of 13 because of the empathy that he felt toward animals. His attitude was further supported by his Rastafarian beliefs and way of life, which advocate avoiding any food that contains meat and meat products and promote vegetarianism and veganism. In his study of contemporary themes in modern children’s poetry, Rosenbergová-Zemková reaches the conclusion that among six poets of British and American descent, “the theme of vegetarianism was identified only in the collection of Benjamin Zephaniah and nowhere else” (2011, p. 58). Zephaniah rarely confines his work to the traditional subjects and boundaries of poetry. Instead, he has experimented with both the form and the substance of poetry, invoking the reader’s interest and imagination.

Living in an age of ecological crisis, Zephaniah has raised his voice to present global environmental issues, alerting humankind to dangerous environmental practices and calling for action. For instance, in “Christmas Wise”, he envisages healthy “world peace” that is “Fully complete wid its ozone layer” and has “clean air” without “too much waste” (1995, l. 12). *Funky Chicken* opens with a short ecological poem entitled “Natural Anthem” in which he pleads with God to save the Earth as follows:

God save our gracious green
... .
Save our asparagus,
God save
Our
Green. (1997, ll. 1, 6–9)

The repetition of the word “green” three times in this short poem alludes to ecocriticism. The poet’s powerful stress on saving the earth is evident in the way in which the words “our” and “Green” have been singled out. In “Health Care”, he requests that the “Prime ministers please/Think of de trees” and “Take care of de planet” (1997, ll. 7–8, 16). In “All You Sea”, he warns children of widespread sea pollution that threatens the ecosystem and states, “Three billion gallons/Of sewage/Floating in de sea” (1997, ll. 1–3). “We People Too” is a lengthy 15-stanza poem narrated by a different animal in the refrain of each stanza. Each animal protests the harmful human activities that threaten its natural environment and demands the right to live in harmony on this planet, stating, “We really need this planet” (2000b, l. 105).

In “The Tourists Are Coming”, Zephaniah’s environmental concern is tinged with a sense of humour as he repeatedly warns tourists about polluting the land, emphasising, “They must respect what we have planted/They should not take us for granted” (2000b, ll. 9–10). Therefore, it is evident that Zephaniah has strong environmental beliefs and wants to protect the ecosystem and natural resources, a concern that also stems from his Rastafarian roots. These examples reflect Zephaniah’s pre-occupation with contemporary ecological crises such as pollution and deforestation, themes that children are familiar with as their environmental awareness is cultivated in school. Following the UNESCO recommendations, schools encourage empathy and responsibility for animals and the environment in an attempt to promote children’s awareness and develop their understanding of environmental problems. Thus, Zephaniah’s ecological themes like animal rights and environmental protection are relevant to today’s children, which in turn makes his poetry more captivating to them.

Zephaniah uses his poetry to defend anything that constitutes the environment, that is, both non-humans and humans. According to Branch et al. (1998), ecocriticism “implies a move toward a mere biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and physical environment” (p. xiii). This implies that ecocriticism is a biocentric view that involves humans and non-humans alike. From this perspective, the ecocritical reading can be extended to include racial discrimination toward people of colour under the broad umbrella of ecocriticism. For example, “Civil Lies” is a parody based supposedly on civil “rights” wherein he ironically blames the West for its “civil lies” and the claim that “the Blacks” were discovered by the Whites. Zephaniah implicitly rejects this claim and attempts to prove that people of colour were born free before they were enslaved by the Whites and later regained their freedom. The entire poem is written in italics and takes the form of a letter addressed to his American “teacher”, signed by “Mr Africa”. In “Walking Black Home”, he also highlights the racial discrimination against Black minorities on a daily basis through the wordplay of its title, where he replaces the word “back” with “Black”. The word “Black” is capitalised and written in bold, which replaces the strong accentuation in the performed form as follows: “Sometimes it’s hard/To get a taxi/When you are **Black**” (1997, ll. 17–19). Thus, Zephaniah “rebels against the inert weight of racism and is strongly determined to write about the circumstances of black people living in Britain today” (Sathyadas 2017, p. 87). This central interest in issues related to the Black diaspora reflects Zephaniah’s Rastafarian philosophy, as he confirms in a comic tone: “I’d started a revolutionary movement called the IRA—the Independent Rasta Army” (2018, p. 160).

Due to his biocentric attitude, Zephaniah believes in the intrinsic value of all living beings and endeavours to create a new world that is devoid of any exploitation and mistreatment, whether it be toward animals, the environment, or Black minorities.

As the examples above call for harmonious human–environment interaction, other poems seek social integration of all humans regardless of their race, a current trend that is amply demonstrated in many of Zephaniah’s poems. He is among the few poets to incorporate race, immigration, abuse, and similar serious themes into children’s literature. He explicitly discussed this in an interview, where he stated, “The most important thing is being a human being... to me, the important thing is being a humanitarian” (Duomerc 2004, p. 144). Thus, what distinguishes Zephaniah from other dub poets is his unbiased, inclusive, and humanistic approach hailing the rights of all people irrespective of their differences in colour, race, and gender. The opening poem, “Greet Tings”, in *Talking Turkeys* lists different greetings from different languages to demonstrate how greetings can unify people despite their differences. Zephaniah’s altruistic attitude is obvious as he opens his poem with the Arabic words “Assalaam Alaikum” and ends with the English word “Welcome” and not the other way round. This sense of integration can also be seen in “Rap Connected”, in which the poet mentions that “rap” is a form of unity among different races that makes them “connected”:

We are black and brown

We are white an sound

We have pride of place... .

We are all de same

(1995, ll. 22–24, 27)

The poet repeats the pronoun “we” in most of the lines to identify himself as a member of a collective entity, where the poem includes an image of the poet’s smiling face among other faces to show that they are all connected by “rap” and are “de same”. Zephaniah concludes *Talking Turkeys* in the same manner that it began, with a commentary on tolerance toward all people regardless of race. This is his “big dream”, to live peacefully so that “This great world would work together/as a team”, as stated in the poem, “Once Upon a Time” (1995, ll. 22–23). The repetition of the words “great big” highlights his big dream, which is also illustrated by the enlarged reflection of his body that accompanies the poem. In “U. N. (United Neighbours)”, a short poem of two strophes, the poet and his “European” neighbour wonder “Why nations cannot live as wan” (1997, l. 8). He incorporates the title between brackets, which indicates his desire to integrate both the “African” and “European” neighbour as “wan” nation. His substitution of the word “nations” with “neighbours” reflects his skill in fusing comic elements with serious ethnic topics. In “I De Rap Guy”, he elaborates on the fact that “unity” is the goal of dubbing his poems by saying, “**What I spread is unity... . / I want racial harmony**” (1997, ll. 17, 19). The entire poem is written equally in bold and non-bold typeface, which reflects the dichotomisation of people into Black and White and thereby supports and resonates with the theme. In “Good Hope”, as the title indicates, the poet states that he believes that “it is possible/For all people/To live in peace” whether they are “Christians”, “Muslims”, or “Jews” (1997, ll. 5–7). This hope acts as sustenance for him and encourages him to keep writing, as he states in the same poem: “**If I did not believe/I would stop writing**” (1997, ll. 20–21). Therefore, it is evident that Zephaniah’s poetry does not “support the idea of superiority of one nation over the other. On the contrary, he calls for racial harmony and unity” (Savchenko 2017, pp. 48–49). In essence, while his heritage is an integral part of his work, the messages he propagates are universal, recognising the rights of all those who are oppressed or silenced, which reflects how his work is relevant internationally.

and hence gains wide recognition. This stems from his identification with Rastafarian views, as he plainly and repeatedly states, “**I am de rapping rasta**” and “**I am proud of every race**” (1997, “I De Rap Guy”, ll. 1, 31).

This ecocritical analysis reflects the socio-political nature of Zephaniah’s poetic discourse, which denounces any form of oppression, whether toward animals, the environment, or Black minorities. He very cleverly touches on contemporary topics, and, as has been observed, “Zephaniah is not afraid to talk about the most controversial themes. He speaks openly about abuse, death, racial shunning, or destruction of rainforests” (Rosenbergová-Zemková 2011, p. 45). Studying the examples quoted above reflects that Zephaniah’s success as a dub poet is not only limited to the oral form. It extends to the printed pages as well, especially when the poems are read aloud. As he writes in “Poetics”, “[T]here are poems for the ear+/ There are poems for the page” (1997, ll. 34–35). Thus, to ensure that the performance is lively for children and to compensate for the missing qualities of oral dub poetry, his poems are written using different patterns. Based on the examples above, it is evident that many words are written in bold or italics and in various fonts, a technique that Zephaniah uses to stress the pronunciation of these words when read aloud, thereby illustrating their meaning. The misspelling of words such as “dis” for “this”, “de” for “the”, and “wid” for “with”, for example, is another common feature that is deliberately employed by the poet and reflects his Caribbean heritage. These are all sociolinguistic markers that draw children’s attention and add an extra layer to the text. In short, the familiarity and accessibility of his language to children were emphasised by Rosenbergová-Zemková, who stated:

Zephaniah’s poetry is very modern. The lingo of Jamaican English does not differ very much from the internet and mobile lingo of contemporary children. For that reason, the child reader would not have [a] problem understanding the poems even without further explanatory notes. (2011, p. 42)

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse the children’s dub poetry of the contemporary Black British poet Benjamin Zephaniah to highlight the characteristics that make his poetry more appealing to children. This was done through an ecocritical reading of his early children’s poems, highlighting his biocentric attitude and revolutionary stance against anthropocentrism.

Through his performative rhythmical poetry, Zephaniah becomes the voice of the voiceless, that is, the animals, the environment, and Black minorities. He uses poetry as an instrument for social and political change. Zephaniah propagates the same concepts of ecocriticism in his exploration of the relationship between humans and non-humans. As an animal lover and a patron of the Vegan Society, Zephaniah’s poems about animals and the environment explore mankind’s inhumanity toward nature. He is an ardent supporter of animal rights, and his poems call for animal rights and fight exploitation and anthropocentrism using a humorous tone. As an eco-writer, his ecopoetry alerts humans to the numerous crises that threaten the planet. To highlight his anti-racism stance, his poems are invariably imbued with issues related to apartheid, bullies, and slavery. As a humanitarian, he calls for social integration as an essential aspect of building a healthy, liveable society that respects and accepts all humans regardless of race or colour. His poems can be regarded as ecocritical texts that are preoccupied with contemporary issues of animal rights, environmental crises, and Black minorities. Briefly, he opposes any monocentric attitudes such as anthropocentrism and ecocentrism and believes in biocentrism. In fact, a study on contemporary children’s poetry identified Zephaniah as among the few who

discuss ecocentric themes such as vegetarianism, thus differentiating him from his peers. Furthermore, the spontaneity, intimacy, and live performance of dub poetry helped him to establish an important position for himself in the British literary scene. This has ensured that his work has a universal reach and appeal. The potential appeal of dub poetry is emphasised by Zephaniah, as he proudly stated: “In this age of technology and mass communication, I’m still very impressed by the fact that people still wanna come out and listen to poetry” (Doumerc 2004, p. 146).

This study elaborates on the features of Zephaniah’s dub poetry and the strong appeal that it has for children, in both its oral and printed forms, due to its performative qualities and rhetorical strategies as well as the poet’s unique selection of themes that are relevant to children and evoke laughter. As one student stated, “I think Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetry is fantastic. It made us all laugh. He’s also inspired me to write my own poetry about Wales” (*Daily Post* 2005, p. 8).

This study contributes to the existing literature by analysing Zephaniah’s dub poetry for children and the qualities that appeal to children and engage their attention through the lens of ecocriticism. Given Zephaniah’s popularity with children and, for many years, in schools, the study hopes to contribute to children’s literature through its consideration of a wide range of Zephaniah’s poems, which hopefully will make it quite an interesting and useful resource for many teachers, researchers, and readers alike. The insightful explanation of dub poetry and its nature is a genre of literature that deserves more scholarly attention. Future research can be conducted based on the following questions: How can research on children’s response to Zephaniah’s works and the works of other dub poets such as Levi Tafari and Adisa be conducted? What is the positive effect of dub poetry on children? Why is dub poetry mostly a male-dominated domain? How do other British Caribbean poets engage creatively with children?

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