

“Come Mek Wi Work Together”:
*Community Witness and Social Agency
in Lillian Allen’s Dub Poetry*

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We believe that art in itself is symbolic and although it can play a major role in people’s lives and in social and political movements, it cannot change the structure of social relations. Our work extends beyond merely creating art; we take our poetry and our conviction into the community.

LILLIAN ALLEN, “DE DUB: RENEGADES IN A ONE POEM TOWN”

FOR MORE THAN ten years, Lillian Allen—Jamaican-Canadian dub poet, arts activist, community worker, and mother—has been performing a transformative vision of social change and cultural affirmation in the African tradition of the *griot* or storyteller-keeper of social memory. As a cross-over artist, Allen works within a complex intersection of African, Jamaican, and Western traditions, history, rhythms, languages, and popular culture practices. In the following discussion, I seek to contextualize dub aesthetics in the legacies of the African diaspora as these interface with Western traditions, material practices, and technologies. It is also essential to engage Allen’s work in the contexts and development of Jamaican women’s movements as these emerge with the struggle for national liberation from neocolonial economic and cultural subjugation. Most important, I argue that dub aesthetics are deeply community-rooted and accountable. Because of Allen’s complex locations as Afro-Jamaican-Caribbean-Canadian heterosexual woman, her voice rings simultaneously across multiple communities of affiliation: the international African diaspora, Jamaicans, African-Canadians, anti-imperialists, women of colour, cross-racial feminists, labour unions, environmentalists, alternative arts cul-

tural workers, and “community Canada” itself.¹ The range of publishing formats, venues, and “versions” in which her work appears signals the multiple communities to which it speaks.² She calls all of these to different possibilities of affirmation, resistance, renewal, awareness, commitment, and accountability.³ Crucially, through body, voice, rhythm, and “noise,” Allen’s dub poetry complicates received Western notions of history, literature, language, culture, and nation, and intersects categories of race, gender, and class.

Allen asserts in an interview: “anything that victimizes humanity would be fair game for my poetry” (1990). As a testament to her belief in “Anta [her child] and her little friends” as the “future who stand up” (“cover notes,” *Revolutionary Tea Party*), Allen “mentors” what it means to be a person who makes a difference both through resistance and affirmation. Her work rejoices in what she calls “the sheer festivity of the Jamaican language,” the powerful and pleasurable rhythms of music, dance, bodies in motion, and the potential of creativity as a significant means of honouring the dignity, culture-specific traditions, and integrity of the African peoples in the diaspora. Through her community-accountable art, she calls her diverse publics into co-creation of a political and spiritual vision of possibility and hope.

I Dub Aesthetics in the Diaspora

Dub poetry is just another chapter in a long succession of dynamic innovative forms which includes the griots of Africa, slave narratives, the dialect poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the Baptist church preacher. There are the blues poets—Langston Hughes and others of the Harlem Renaissance—. . . black American jazz and blues with their poets of the sixties, Jamaican DJs and then dub poets and black American rap . . . bringing out the dynamism of the word has always been part of black culture and lifestyle.

CLIFTON JOSEPH, qtd. in Lillian Allen, “De Dub”

Dub poetry works out of the cultural-spiritual-political-historical matrix of black empowerment practices that include the Maroon uprisings and festivals during the period of enslavement in Jamaica, Jamaican intellectual Marcus Garvey’s “Africa for Africans” movement, Rastafarianism, Roots Reggae, and the Ameri-

can Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.⁴ Toronto-based dub artist, Clifton Joseph points to the way that dub poetry is deeply invested in the cultural legacy of the international African diaspora.⁵ In its migrations and cross-migrations, this webbed community reflects the tangled histories of Western empire-building, enslavement, and enduring neocolonial economic and cultural relations. When the nations of Europe set upon their “civilizing” missions, little did they realize that five hundred years later, the peoples they had subjugated would be rewriting the history and culture of the Western world. The aftermath of the slave trade in the late twentieth-century resulted in what Jamaican vernacular poet Louise Bennett terms “colonization in reverse” or a new transatlantic trade in culture, traditions, and language practices (*Jamaica* 179). While British slavers exported human cargo from Western Africa to Britain and her outlying colonies, more recently, peoples of the African diaspora have exported dynamic oral forms that displace the univocal centrality of Western culture and history in the metropolitan centres of London, New York, and Toronto. Reggae and rap, which have captured a significant corner of the youth market in North America and England, participate with myriad diasporic oral, dance, and musical practices that are transforming twentieth-century popular culture and social memory.

The Jamaican-originated dub poetry of Michael Smith, Oku Onuora, and Mutaburuka in Kingston, Jamaica; of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Jean Binta Breeze in London, England; of Lillian Allen, Clifton Joseph, Ishaka, and Ahdri Zhina Mandiela in Toronto; and of the African Poets in Montreal, is a testament to the enduring presence, cultural impact, and dissonant histories of the African diaspora. Dub as an international phenomenon was given a forum in the 1993 International Dub Poetry Festival held in Toronto. This festival served to showcase many of the spoken word practices from African diasporic cultures, including Jamaican dub poetry, Trinidadian Rapso, Soca from the Dominican Republic and South-African Township Jive—all of which have taken root in several metropolitan centres.⁶

Dub poetry grew out of African-Jamaican linguistic, musical, and poetic lineages and strongly influences twentieth-century

political-spiritual movements for social change and national liberation.⁷ Because of the history of enslavement and empire, all of these are inevitably tangled with, and disruptive of, Western norms for language, poetry, aesthetics, culture, and most important, social identity. Dub poetry is heir to a range of African and Jamaican communal forms of storytelling and history-making, preaching and political oratory, body performance, verbal dexterity, "signifyin'" (ritual insult games), and "testifyin'" or public witness.⁸ In resistance to the plantation slavers' double prohibitions against English literacy and maintaining West African languages and practices, people of the diaspora sustained a living cultural archive in their bodies and voices; dance, song, theatre, and story were and continue to be central registers of social memory. In the last thirty years, the adaptation and appropriation of electronic media, sound recordings, video art, and film to this living performance tradition reveal the tricksterish ingenuity by which African peoples in the diaspora continue to redeploy diverse Western traditions and technologies to maintain their histories and identities. Dub should be understood in a continuum with diasporic oral, musical, and popular culture performance practices including (but not exhausting) gospel, jazz, blues, r & b, ska, calypso, rapso, megasound system DJs, reggae, and rap.⁹

Dub poetry's culture-specific genealogy includes the early twentieth-century Jamaican vernacular work of Claude McKay, Una Marson, and most important, Louise Bennett. In refusing to conform to "standard English," such artists foster what Edward Kamau Brathwaite calls "nation language," an affirmative term he uses to disrupt the hierarchical "bad English" connotations of "dialect" ("English" 21). Jamaican English is itself a powerful register of enslavement history where, as M. Nourbese Philip notes, English was a "foreign tongue," a "l/anguish," imposed on an uprooted people: "The havoc that the African wreaked upon the English language is, in fact, a metaphorical equivalent of the havoc that coming to the New World represented for the African" (18, 56-59). The result of this linguistic disruption was, and is, a hybrid form that is West African in rhythm, syntax, and speech timbre but outwardly adaptive to "the cultural imperative

of European languages": "it may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues" (Brathwaite, "English" 18, 21).¹⁰ Allen's work traverses the spectrum from Jamaican nation language to "standard English" and in this way, functions to preserve historical memory and complex social identity for the Afro-Jamaican in Canada.

The pejorative dismissal of Jamaican English is matched by belated and grudging critical recognition of vernacular and dub poetry. Louise Bennett, beloved by the Jamaican people as a live performer of vernacular poetry since the 1940s, was snubbed by academics until Mervyn Morris's 1964 article—"On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously" (Bennett 9). Some recent criticism continues to read dub dismissively. In his 1988 review of two volumes of dub poetry, Victor Chan charges that dub poetry does not reflect any "subtlety of approach, anything that is inward looking, musing, quiet, reflective, tender, delicate, or registering a complexity of position or feeling. . . . And for those of us who value and want more than the broad effects, the clout on the head, the deafening roar, the enraged shout, this poetry is just not enough" (50).¹¹ Chan's comments reveal that he is measuring dub against traditional assumptions about the Western lyric form. Both Christian Habekost's booklength study, *Verbal Riddim* (1993) and Kevin McGuirk's article on Linton Kwesi Johnson take dub poetry seriously as a practice that disrupts notions of the English lyric and cultural aesthetics at large. I join these critics in urging that dub be viewed as a political and social form rather than seen through a primarily aesthetic lens. Dub reframes the logic and assumptions of Western cultural gatekeepers who have asserted the incompatibility of political and aesthetic categories.

Historically, "art for art's sake" aestheticism has mandated that elite forms such as poetry should not be contaminated by but transcend the political and historical. Conversely, leftist cultural critics argue that aesthetic traditions are so mired in normative, so-called "universal," notions of "beauty" and "transcendence" that they are entirely incompatible with representing political and social urgencies.¹² I suggest that dub operates from a different framework of culture and knowledge which I am calling

dub-aesthetics-in-the-diaspora and which necessitates a reconsideration of Western notions of the aesthetic, the literary, and the poetic. Engaging dub poetry in the context of its popular traditions and politicized aesthetic fractures the inevitable equation between “aesthetics” and “elite” cultural forms in a post-Empire world.¹³

The twentieth-century Jamaican popular music scene out of which dub poetry arises—Burru drumming, ska, dance-hall disc-jockey talkover or toasting, and reggae—also extends a legacy of West African dance and drum polyrhythms, syncopation, and pauses.¹⁴ Dub poetry takes its name and aesthetic from the dance-hall disc-jockey method of dubbing out the lead vocal tracks on pre-recorded instrumental reggae, and producing a re-mixed version with sound effects, along with witty political, social, or sexual commentary. However, as Linton Kwesi Johnson maintains, dub is indebted but not reducible to the musical styles of reggae artists like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh or mega-sound system disc jockeys like Big Youth, U-Roy, and I-Roy (Interview 22).¹⁵ Rather than improvising lyrics on top of pre-recorded instrumentation, a dub poet writes lyrics that are often spoken over an original reggae composition (Johnson 25), deploying a full range of vocal, instrumental, and electronic studio mixing effects—echoes, repetitions, fades, and instrumental syncopation (Allen, “De Dub” 17). As Edward Kamau Brathwaite emphasizes, the “noise” of dub poetry is an integral part of the meaning, keeping faith with the African oral performance heritage (“English” 24).

In dub poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, the menacing reggae bass line or “dread beat” provided the driving rhythm of the dub poem. This heavy, pulsing rhythm is a musical embodiment of Rastafarian notions of “dread,” an apocalyptic challenge to neocolonial economic and cultural powers.¹⁶ Linton Kwesi Johnson’s “Bass Culture” simultaneously signifies on the material practice of the dread beat and its disruption of high culture expectations for delicate beauty in poetry (*Tings* 15). Like Johnson, Allen’s sound recording “Riddim An’ Hardtimes” asserts the Rastafarian dread practice of bearing prophetic witness to enduring subjugation in the metropolitan centre, while simul-

taneously affirming culture as a means of embodying dignity and resistance:

An' him chucks on some riddim
 an' yu hear him say
 riddim an' hardtimes
 riddim an' hardtimes
 music a prance
 dance inna head
 drumbeat roll
 hot like lead . . .
 roots wid a Reggae resistance
 riddim
 noh dub them call it . . .
 dem pounce out the music
 carve out the sounds
 hard hard
 hard like lead
 an it bus im in im belly
 an' a Albert Johnson dead
 Albert Johnson dead
 dead
 dead (*Women* 63-64)¹⁷

The confrontational dread line with its end-drop repetition of "dead" is one that is impossible not to register. As a kind of "campaign poem" (Habekost, *Verbal* 159), it protests the phenomenon of police shooting of black youth through a cameo focus on Jamaican-Canadian Albert Johnson who was shot in his living room in Toronto. This poem joins with community organizations, demonstrations, and media awareness campaigns to bear political witness. Dub poetry is not bound, however, to reggae drum-beats for its dread effect. As Peter Hitchcock suggests, the voice becomes its own instrument, "so closely allied with the beat that if you remove the reggae instrumentation you can still hear its sound in the voice of the poem" (77).

The oral and rhythmic performance elements of the dub aesthetic are so integral to its effects that this form presents a significant challenge to Western notions of print-bound literature and history. In the introduction to her selected poems, Allen notes, "I have been reluctant to commit my poetry to the page over the years because . . . these poems are not meant to lie

still" (9). In the classroom and at the public lecture, a cassette-player is essential to do justice to the oral aesthetics of dub. Carolyn Cooper argues that in addition to the "noise" of dub, the "non-verbal elements of production and performance"—"melody, rhythm, body, dancefloor spectacle and display"—are integral to dub aesthetics (*Noises* 5). Dub poetry then is contained by neither the printed page nor the sound recording, yet all of these "versions" are animated by its performance contexts. Cooper suggests that while the live event becomes the privileged dub version, even "the poem pressed to the page encodes performance" (*Noises* 65). Having encountered Allen's work first through a live performance, then through her two albums, *Revolutionary Tea Party* and *Conditions Critical*, I now "hear" Allen voicing her poems when I read them as printed in *Women Do This Every Day*. In contrast, my students frequently find them flat if they read them before going to the audio laboratory to listen to them. Audio recordings miss the full performance communication—an aspect of dub poetry which teaching and research cannot fully accommodate other than to sponsor live performance and promote student attendance whenever possible. Accounting for performance contexts necessitates the development of what Vèvè Clark calls "diaspora literacy" for non-Jamaican listeners. This might be defined as cultivating interdisciplinary intimacy with the social, cultural, spiritual, and political history and contexts that inform the texture of dub aesthetics (42). As Allen says, "People think you can just listen to a work and understand everything. . . . For people to understand what we're doing, they have to understand something about the culture" (Unpublished interview, 1990). The Western critic is not the "ideal" reader of dub poetry. It requires a new form of cultural literacy and new critical methods which span formalist and new historicist cultural studies approaches.¹⁸

In "De Dub: Renegades in a One Poem Town," Allen recounts how the Canadian League of Poets refused membership to herself and two other dub poets in 1984 because they were not "poets but performers" (14). This incident reveals the way that normative assumptions about poetry and language are implicated in often invisible, but persistent, hierarchical norms of culture and race.

Hey! Hey! Hey!
 this is a one poem town
 this is a one poem town
 ride in on your macramed verses
 through barber green mind
 keep it kool! kool! kool!
 on the page
 'cause, if you bring one in
 any other way
 we'll shoot you with metaphors
 tie you cordless
 hang you high in ironies
 drop a pun 'pon yu toe
 run you down, down, down
 and out of town
 'cause, this is a one poem town
 and hey! What yu doing here anyway?
 So don't come with no pling, ying, jing
 ding something
 calling it poetry
 'cause this is a one poem town
 and you're not here to stay?!
 Are you? ("One Poem Town" *Women* 117)

Here, Allen works out of the diaspora tradition of signifyin' or strategic inversion, and its Jamaican counterpart, the "cuss poem" in which verbal dexterity is a means of casting a rhetorical spell on the "enemy" by rendering him silent and hence powerless (Habekost, *Verbal* 139-43). In a deft reversal of cultural appropriation, Allen ventriloquizes the "Poetry Establishment" voice. The result is an ironic carnival of dueling voices in which the "pling, ying, jing, ding" assumptions of a John Wayne-style cultural gatekeeper, whose mission is to run the poetry outlaw out of town, are mimicked in Caribbean-inflected rhythms and intonations. These layered voices double and re-double just as the co-implication of Western and African histories and cross-migration have done. As Hitchcock suggests, dub as the doubling of voices, sound systems, and cultures, is the sound of diaspora, the "state of being in between," echoing the Middle Passages of the transatlantic slave trade (n.pag.).

Allen's Jamaican voice mimes the Anglo-Canadian voice, stereotyping dub aesthetics: "so don't come here with no pling,

ying, jing, / ding something / calling it poetry." This parodied reduction of the "noise," dread beat, and sound effects of dub to rhyming doggerel and "macrame" folk art unmasks the Poetry Establishment persona's cultural illiteracy. While Allen's emphatic vocal delivery asserts that noise is integral to a dub aesthetic, her strategies of ironic allegory, rhetorical address, and popular culture allusion suggest that dub also works through layered devices. She invites new possibilities of community through the shared references and laughter of recognition. Her comedic witness to the Canadian League of Poets incident becomes a kind of parable which foregrounds the way that cultural practices are part of a continuum of discourses which construct and reinforce race-based norms of social reality. Like the early minstrel performers, who parody the minstrel's mask only to turn black caricature back on itself, Allen masquerades as the Poetry Establishment persona to initiate black backtalk or wilful mis-speaking in "One Poem Town" (Baker, Jr., *Modernism* 21-24). In this way, dubbing may be taken as a symbolic act of transgressively doubling over Anglo-European forms and assumptions to disrupt and re-appropriate them.¹⁹

Elsewhere, Allen addresses the demand for complexity, metaphor, and allusion, typically associated with "good" Western poetry, by pointing out that many dub poems allude frequently to social and historical events (Unpublished interview, 1990). In the tradition of the African *griot*, the dread beat and dub voice function as a talking newspaper to offer commentary on lived social history—past and in-the-making.²⁰ Not surprisingly, many of the references in Allen's dub poems situate present day diasporic African experience in the historical context of enslavement:

is a long time wi knocking
 an everytime yu slam the door
 sey: no job
 discrimination injustice
 a feel the whip lick
 an is the same boat
 the same boat
 the same boat
 Oh Lawd Oh Lawd Oh Lawd eh ya
(Women 83)

Allen reappropriates the cliché—"we're in the same boat"—to collapse historical time frames between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave trade in the Caribbean and late twentieth-century economic discrimination in Canada. In this poem, which testifies to urban struggle in the housing projects of Toronto's Regent Park, Allen also calls upon the voice signature of murdered Jamaican dub poet Michael Smith, who was well known for his vocalization of community lament—"Oh Laaaaawd" (Cooper, *Noises* 65). As a living archive, Allen's work testifies to other recent events: the exploitation of female domestic workers; apartheid in South Africa; sexual abuse of a pre-teenage girl in Jamaica; homelessness in Canada, and the global and enduring threat of nuclear annihilation.²¹ Allen's cultural allusions also pay homage to figures of import in the international and Caribbean diaspora across centuries and continents: "Tribute to Miss Lou" (Louise Bennett), "Nothing but a Hero" (Harriet Tubman), and "The Day Mandela was Released" (Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X). Clearly, this is a system of reference and allusion that requires a different set of "literacy" skills from that evoked by the Western lyric.²² Allen performs the lived histories of the African diaspora at centre stage, re-sounding changes in the written histories of the West.

As keeper of social memory and community educator, the dub poet undertakes a significant psychic and spiritual function in reaffirming a sense of racial health and cultural pride. In the contemporary cultural and national history of Jamaica, dub is informed by Rastafarianism, which was inspired by Jamaican mentor Marcus Garvey's early twentieth-century black nationalism. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1917 with some 1,200 branches worldwide, has been a formative influence on significant black cultural and political movements of the twentieth-century (Nettleford 312). Garvey's cross-migrations between New York and Jamaica and his travels to Africa contributed to his interest in black political nationalism in Africa and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the US. These exemplified for many the emergence of an international black community across the diaspora. Garvey had

a messianic vision—of redemption through repatriation to the promised land Africa and of black empowerment through reawakening African cultural traditions and history. Jamaican Rastafarians and reggae musicians built upon Garvey's vision in their use of cultural forms as a call to liberation before political independence in 1962 (Lewis 3).

Allen's dance-hall track, "The Subversives," turns on this relationship between cultural forms and renewed social identity:

You made me a uniform
 a place in line
 stick me in the dictionary
 legitimize your understanding
 I exist as a definition
 intransitive verb in a line
 I break from your sentence
 write a paragraph of my own
 create new forms
 Space
 dig lane ways
 jump your ratrace rides
 turn gutters into trenches . . .
 We who create space
 who transform what you say is
 Send you scurrying
 scurrying to the dictionary
 to add new words (*Women* 39-40)

Creating new forms is cast here as urban guerrilla trench warfare, which detonates the closed house of culture, standard language practices, and prose style, along with, we might imagine, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Out from under the passive voice and the intransitive verb, these linguistic insurgents, as performed by the Toronto All-Girl Subversive Choir, have reclaimed cultural agency through the appropriation and redeployment of received forms and imposed identities. Allen marks this cultural warfare both through the driving dance-hall drumbeat and the "concrete poetry" suspension of "space" on the page to mark the necessary creation of new territory for transformative social identities. On both of her albums, Allen encodes a short-form poetry manifesto—"Dis word breeds my rhythm. Dis word carries my freedom. Dis word is my hand: my weapon!"—which under-

scores the collaboration of culture-making and social transformation that is central to her aesthetic.

II Race-Gender-Class: Complex Relations

A woman's work is not recognized
 if she be black it be doubly dized
 without a man she's in nothings land
 LILLIAN ALLEN, "Why Do We Have to Fight?"

An examination of the history of Canada indicates that class cannot be understood without reference to ethnic and gender relations; similarly, gender and ethnicity cannot be understood without reference to class relations.

ROXANNA NG, "Sexism, Racism, Canadian Nationalism"

Allen's *Selected Poems* are dedicated to, among others, a network of sisters and aunts. She frequently honours "(s)heros" in the African diaspora like Harriet Tubman, Louise Bennett, and her own mother (in "My Momma"), so that there is a strong and pervasive sense of female community informing her practice. As the title poem of Allen's *Women Do This Every Day* suggests, her voice and vision have been focused consistently on questions of full female participation in economic, national, and race-based struggles for social transformation: Nine months outa de year / a woman in labour / if it was a man / a bet they woulda paid her (38).

Allen deftly puns on labour to underscore the ways in which women's daily work is frequently underpaid or "neverpaid." Her emphasis on questions of class, work, and economics as central to any understanding of racialized and gendered experience reflects the primacy of the nationalist struggle in Jamaica. Feminism in the Caribbean cannot be understood outside of its implication in and emergence from the nationalist struggles against economic imperialism and foreign domination (Reddock 62).²³ Allen's definition of black women's writing in Canada puts a spin on Western conceptions of a gender-first feminism: "It must be of necessity anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-sexist" ("A Writing of Resistance" 67). At the same time, she emphasizes the blind spots of nationalist struggle for women:

The limitations of black nationalism and the patriarchy of the male-dominated white left made it imperative for women to raise issues of women's oppression, to construct a new vision of the world that included our full and equal participation and to carry on the fight on this front. ("De Dub" 19)

Allen's work foregrounds what Himani Bannerji calls the "converging determinations" of race, gender, and class—each mutually implicated in the other ("Passion" 30-31).

Rhoda Reddock dispels reductive dismissals of feminism as a 1960s Western import by tracing a long lineage of women's organizations in the English-speaking Caribbean which includes the Lady Musgrave Women's Self-Help Movement of Jamaica (1865); the Women's Social Service Club of Jamaica (1918); the Jamaica Women's Liberal Club (1937); and leaders such as Amy Ashwood Garvey (Marcus Garvey's first wife) who delivered an address on specific problems of Jamaican women at the 1945 Pan-African Congress. Reddock, along with Honor Ford-Smith, emphasizes the way in which the struggle for women's participation grew out of the struggle for racial equality and pride advocated by the Garvey movement (77). Women's cultural representation in the early twentieth century also takes as its subject the class and race contradictions of lived reality for women in Jamaica, particularly seen in Louise Bennett's persona poems showing the verbal wit of market-place higglers:

One police-man dah-come, but me
 Dah-try get one more sale
 Shoes lace! Toot' pase! buy quick noh sah
 Yuh want me go to a jail? (*Jamaica* 27)

In this tradition, Allen's character in "Good Womanhood" goes through a mid-life awakening into the contradictions of domestic abuse and motherhood through her participation in overlapping movements for social change:

twenty-five years
 she balanced that life
 knife-edge of good womanhood
 then the civil rights movement came
 opened up a door
 Black peoples' and women's movements came
 opened up some more

she took a class
 joined a club
 got involved for the first time
 on the picket lines
 at the age of fifty-nine
 climbed out of sublime (Women 37)

Allen suggests the co-implication of one liberation movement with the other: race uplift and class struggle ultimately also explode the codes of good womanhood.

One of the most striking cultural results of Caribbean-based feminism has been a renaissance in women's writing which is exemplified by three significant anthologies: *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990), *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (1990), and *Creation Fire: A CAFRA Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry* (1990). The impact of this renaissance is particularly strong in Canada, home to a significant number of distinguished Caribbean women, who, like Allen, have won important literary prizes: Louise Bennett, Olive Senior, Makeda Silvera, M. Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, Claire Harris, Afua Cooper, Lorna Goodison, and Ayanna Black.²⁴ Allen's poems often explicitly put pressure on the "doubly dized" racialized and economic experience of black women in Canada:

I scrub floor's
 serve backra's meals on time
 spend two days working in one
 twelve days in a week
 Here I am in Canada
 bringing up someone else's child
 while someone else and me in absentee
 bring up my own (Women 139)

The domestic worker personae of "I Fight Back" gives testimony to the intolerable workdays and rupturing of the family that such a woman must endure. Use of the vernacular form *backra* or master reveals again the continuity between indentured labour practices and plantation slavery. Makeda Silvera's collection of oral history testimonials by Caribbean domestic workers, *Silenced*, bears parallel witness to unjust working conditions, abuse, exploitation, and silencing strategies. A close look at

Canada's immigration policy with respect to domestic workers reveals its implication in neocolonial practices. In 1955, the Domestic Worker Scheme was implemented to recruit approximately 300 women annually from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados to redress a perceived "shortage of labour." This terminology itself masks the fact that the working conditions and wages are so dismal that Anglo/European women typically refuse employment in this sector. These workers initially signed a one year contract, after which they could choose to seek other work and had the option of becoming landed immigrants; however, it was difficult for them to sponsor their male partners and children. Employment and Immigration subsequently changed this policy to a Temporary Employment Visa which maintained a cheap immigrant labour pool without offering the possibility of Canadian citizenship. Because domestic workers' job descriptions involve living in, they are frequently exploited and are subject to physical and sexual abuse. They have little access to legal counsel or labour boards because of their isolation and fear of dismissal (Silvera 5-11; Simms 338). Silvera's and Allen's testimonials complicate the possibility of universal sisterhood for Canadian feminism by pointing up the class-race disparities among women.

Allen's representation of gender questions also reflects her commitment to simultaneously upholding and interrogating black heterosexual masculinity as do other diasporic feminists like bell hooks.²⁵ Allen's dialogue with black masculinity includes confrontation and challenge in "Nelly Belly Swelly," which tells the true story of a thirteen-year-old girl who is impregnated by her step-father (also the high-school principal), and then hidden away in shame until she has had her baby. The skipping-rope rhyme refrain—"psst psst psst Nellie belly swelly / Nellie belly swelly Nellie belly swelly"—strikes an appropriate register for the confusion of this girl's play mates who use it as a form of gossip to pass the mysterious news of their friend's plight. Allen recounts how some of the men in her community accuse her of airing dirty laundry, but she retorts that she will not stop until they take up the refrain of gender justice ("Unpublished Interview" 1990).

Allen's vigilant engagement with black masculinity cuts two ways. "A-wey dis ya society a do to wi sons?" is a lament that echoes in "Rub a Dub Style Inna Regent Park" and across a number of her other poems (*Women* 81). Several of her protagonists are anonymous mothers whose sons have run into trouble with the law. "His Day Came" puts this in perspective when a "youthman" strikes the high-school principle because he said the teen's mother seemed well suited to her factory job. As this boy is carried off in a police cruiser, the poem begs the question of his "juvenile delinquency." Allen also reminds her audience of the recurrent police shootings and harassment of black youth, most often young men (as mentioned above with respect to Albert Johnson):

and BAM!
 them kick down the door
 put everyone pon the floor
 face down flat, face down flat
 It was a brutal attack
 pon the spirit of survival
 pon the culture and the spirit of revival
 pon de youth of Jane & Finch
 cause them black, cause them black
 (*Women* 76)

Allen is throwing her voice to elaborate the ironic contrast between the repressive force used against the creative and transformative spirit of revival and survival. While she testifies to the lengths to which law enforcers will go to suppress what they fear and stereotype as dangerously different, she also asserts the transformative potential of culture in "Rub a Dub Style Inna Regent Park": "Could have been a gun / but's a mike in his hand" (82). Here the disk-jockey rappers mentor a cultural alternative for black young men to perform their worth. These black men exemplify what bell hooks calls "reconstructed black masculinity" (*Black Looks* 113). Allen's community work as a volunteer with black teenage rappers reinforces her commitment to this sector of the black community and her faith in the creative process to sustain and call down a vision of a more just society.

A number of Caribbean cultural critics have noted the way in which popular culture forms like calypso, dance-hall, and reggae

have been frequently deployed for machismo self-styling, sexual “slackness,” and ritual boasting which often belittles women, using them as props in scenes of male agency.²⁶ While there have been some calypsonians and reggae musicians (among them Lady Junie, Johnny P, and Shelly Thunder) who disrupt the terms of dance-hall sexual competitions, their ability to transform the social codes is limited and less well-known (Cooper, “Slackness” 18-19). Though Allen asserts the transformative pleasure of the body through reggae and dance-hall rhythms, she does so without inversions of male-originated strategies of sexual boasting. Instead, she adopts the tradition of *griot*-inspired, broad-based social commentary central to the African-Jamaican national liberation struggle. Further, she asserts women’s integral presence in diaspora history and transformation: “Black women’s writing . . . must seek to unite our visions of the world with others who are struggling for a just society in a worldwide culture of resistance” (“A Writing” 67). The contributions of grandmothers to South African social transformation in “Freedom is Azania”; direct address to sisters struggling under the weight of a Babylonian system in “Sister Hold On”; an extended “Birth Poem” celebrating the daily work of ordinary women; a coalition of diverse urban guerillas in “We Are the Subversives”—a drummer, a marketplace higgler, a member of the arts Incite collective, and a “woman-identified woman”—who collectively interrogate TV packaged dreams that “separate me from self/ from race, from gender / from history” each contribute to Allen’s holistic performance of black women at the speaking centre of cultural liberation (*Women* 40).

III Disrupting Nation & Democracy: Calling Down Community Canada

but this ya country hard eh?
ah wey wi come ya fa
wi come here fi better
dread times
Jah signs

LILLIAN ALLEN, “Riddim an’ Hardtimes”

In the words of my mother tongue, the Caribbean demotic, “We ent going nowhere. We here and is right here we staying.” In Canada. In

this world so new. To criticize, needle and demand; to work hard for;
to give to; to love; to hate—for better or worse—til death do we part.
M. NOURBESE PHILIP, "Echoes in a Stranger Land"

One of the significant sectors which Allen speaks to in her multidirected address might be termed "community Canada." A number of her dub poems call on Anglo-Canada to disrupt the "click / click / click / postcard perfect" stories and myths of national identity we circulate on Canada Day ("Unnatural Causes," *Women* 71). Again, in the mode of the "cuss poem," "I Fight Back" begins by calling down the names of Canadian companies who have business interests in the Caribbean: "ITT ALCAN KAISER / Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce / these are privileged names in my country / but I AM ILLEGAL HERE" (*Women* 139). This confrontation between transnational power-brokers and the lone voice of a Caribbean-Canadian female domestic worker renders visible the unexamined ironic disparity between corporations that have unlimited cross-border investment opportunities and immigrants who are always suspect for wanting to better their economic circumstances. The domestic worker persona declares: "I came to Canada / found the doors of opportunity / well-guarded" (*Women* 139). This and other poems that disrupt notions of Canada as "land of opportunity" also signal the co-implication of Canada in the enduring economic exploitation of peoples of the African diaspora. Not only did early Anglo-Canadians own slaves in Nova Scotia and Ontario but as a settler colony arm of the British empire, the colonization and displacement of First Nations peoples coincided with the enslavement and displacement of African peoples.

A little-known anecdote from Canadian literary history underscores my point. Before emigrating to Canada, Susanna Moodie transcribed the oral testimony of escaped West Indian slave, Mary Prince, while Moodie's soon-to-be husband was off on a gentleman's travel-writing venture to Southern Africa (Whitlock 351). The contradictions within this single early Anglo-Canadian couple are instructive—abolitionist and colonialist. Such ambivalence persists today in liberal pluralist-multiculturalist agendas which at times mask and reproduce cultural, economic, and systemic racism. Allen exposes the reality that Canadian eco-

conomic privilege as a “First World” country is secured, in part, by ongoing exploitive relations with “Third World” export economies and cheap labour in the Caribbean, as well as imported domestic labour to Canada. Our ideas about Canada as the “land of opportunity” and the Caribbean as a vacation getaway of “beautiful tropical beach / coconut tree and rum” serve to hide and secure deep social and economic disparities (*Women* 139). Allen deliberately seeks to disrupt the idealized and co-dependent constructions of “Canada” and the “Caribbean” (or “First” and “Third” world) by bearing witness to the economic conditions of existence in late twentieth-century transnational (“free trade”) capitalism.

“Unnatural Causes” creates the persona of Nelly Bungle, a homeless woman who “tugs her load” across Toronto—the “silvered city.” She is cast as a new pioneer in the Canadian “arctic” of indifference, who is aware of the lip-service allegiance to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: “all people are created equal except in winter” (*Women* 71). Clearly, in Canadian democracy, some citizens are more equal than others. The “photo-ops” from the windows of Allen’s cultural tour bus look out on landscapes that are not featured in nationalist travel brochures—“Unclick.” Allen unframes and unhinges the picture perfect images and concepts of nation by deliberately invoking human rights, equality, and citizenship discourses which are deemed central to the fabric of Canada. In another poem, she poses the central question, “Why do we have to fight / for what is our natural rights? . . . / What would it take to make / a home a right / what would it take to legalize” (*Women* 93). The sound “dub version” of this poem underscores these questions with a heavy driving dread bass, drum, and choral chant line that echo through the holes in Canadian democracy (*Conditions Critical*).

In “Racism as a Barrier to Canadian Citizenship,” Glenda Simms argues that the “concept ‘Canadian’ has been steeped in a tradition of racism and exclusion” (334). For evidence, she offers the many examples of provincial laws and practices, both encoded and covert, such as immigration policies which have frequently constructed “non-whites” as non-citizens or denied them full resident and citizen rights. The list includes land treaty

negotiations with First Nations peoples; the assimilationist mandate of the Department of Indian Affairs in banning traditional ceremonies and languages; the seizure and enforced enrolment of Native children in Residential Schools rife with abuse and mistreatment; the Chinese Head Tax (levied from 1885 at \$50 to 1903 at \$500) and Chinese Exclusion Act enforced until 1947; the deportation of 354 South Asian passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* in 1914; the prisoner of war internment of Canadian-born Japanese citizens during World War II; the refusal of a ship-load of Jewish refugees during World War II and the pronouncement that "none is too many" when a government official was asked how many Jewish refugees Canada would welcome in the aftermath of the holocaust; the refusal of human services to the black community of Africville and its ultimate demolition in Halifax, Nova Scotia; the travesties of justice in the cases of the non-conviction of white teenage rapists and murderers of Native teenage Helen Betty Osborne in The Pas, Manitoba, and of the wrongful incarceration of Micmac Donald Marshall in Nova Scotia; and police shootings of black men and women in Ontario and Quebec during the 1980s and 1990s. Significantly, it was not until the 1967 Immigration Policy that Canada officially opened its doors to non-white new Canadians. Most recently, we might see the 1995 return to an immigrant and refugee \$975 "landing fee," coupled with the \$500 "processing fee," per adult as a thinly veiled return of the head-tax and (white and non-white economic elite) quota system.

The idea of nation resulting from the history of empire-building and colonization is most frequently seen by cultural critics as an oppressive category: it is a centralizing and homogenizing force field that mandates a false unity organized around majority culture norms and values, while excluding all those who do not fit. Canada has had a vexed history of being a colonial satellite in its tenure as a settler society; while in its later incarnation as a former-colony nation-state, there is truth to the claims of Canadian nationalists that Canada is in jeopardy from the US's cultural and economic imperialism in a manner partly resonant with the smaller postcolonial nation states of the Caribbean. Nation, framed as a category of self-definition and resistance can

be seen as empowering and necessary.²⁷ However, Canada's history as a white settler society and colonizer of First Nations peoples in a manner parallel to Australia and New Zealand's colonization of Aboriginal and Maori peoples renders its nation status complex and contradictory. Canada also benefitted from the economic wealth generated by the slave trade and traffic in goods during the colonial period. In a contemporary "global economy," Canada is a member of the powerful "G-7" trade coalition, one of the seven most economically prosperous nations in the world, that continues to prosper from sustained, if transformed, exploitative economic relations with developing countries set in motion during the empire-building period. Seen in this light, the federal government's abdication of ethical responsibility to put pressure on human rights abuses when negotiating global trade agreements because we are just a "little country" is suspect.²⁸

Carole Boyce Davies suggests that the transnational identities of peoples of the African diaspora complicate and disrupt fixed notions of Nation (12-20). For someone like Allen with affinities across the diaspora—in Jamaica, Africa, the US, as well as black communities in Canada—engagement with nation is not simple or singular. M. Nourbese Philip's fractured designation—"be/longing"—poignantly suggests the yearning and liminal locations of people of colour with national allegiances elsewhere, who at best can be ambivalently Canadian. She holds Canada accountable as an adoptive mother country: "Canada needs to m/other us. Her very salvation depends on m/othering all her peoples—those who be/longed here when the first Europeans arrived—the Native peoples; as well as those, like the African, who unwittingly encountered History and became seminal in its development" ("Echoes" 23-24). Philip's dedication to *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* reads: "For Canada, in the effort of becoming a space of true true be/longing." Her stance of loving and vexed dialogue with Canada is one which many minority Canadians have undertaken.²⁹ Allen continues to hold community Canada accountable for its democratic principles—provincial human rights codes, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the United Nations International Bill of Human

Rights. Such ideals she repeatedly invokes while underscoring their failures: "Riddim a pounce wid a purpose / Truths an Rights / mek mi hear yu" (*Women* 63). She contradicts such anti-multiculturalist views as that of *Toronto Star*'s Richard Gwyn, who argues that engaging minority voices does not inevitably result in the break up of Canada, as anti-multiculturalists fear, but in the disruption of centralized and homogenized ideas of Nation (B3). Canada, formed of many distinct cultural entities, has to negotiate its complexities and productive dissonances in ways that allow for the m/othering and be/longing of all its citizens with their diverse transnational allegiances.

IV Politics of Community, Solidarity, and Possibility

My work became so eclectic that I was invited to read at many different events by many different groups—labour unions, schools, cultural and community events, universities, art groups, women's conferences, folk festivals, new music festivals and women's festivals, literary groups, Black heritage classes, libraries, weddings, night-clubs, not to mention the never-ending demand for benefits, rallies and political demonstrations.

LILLIAN ALLEN, *Women Do This Every Day*

A significant feature of the African *griot*'s cultural aesthetic was that it had no meaning outside of its reception in a particular community (Saakana 199). In keeping with this tradition, Allen sidesteps capitalist mediators to take dub poetry straight to the people through performance. In so doing, she leaps class, economic, and literacy barriers that might inhibit access. This communal aspect of dub, enabled by what Allen terms "portable art to go" or "take out art," also disrupts the experience of the solitary reader of Western lyric poetry ("De Dub" 20). As Brathwaite notes, "the oral tradition . . . makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to [her]" ("English" 25). Dub significantly displaces an individualistic aesthetic with an interactive aesthetic in which the audience is called into response, awareness, and accountability.

Dub poetry's communitarian aesthetic is evident on Allen's two albums through her striking collaboration with other voices.

Toronto rappers Ringo Junior and Screecher Nice appear on "Rub a Dub Style"; black Nova-Scotian acappella gospel quartet "Four the Moment," along with Allen's daughter Anta, sing backup on "Sister Hold On"; and former members of The Parachute Club, Lorraine Segato and Billy Bryans, along with *Quebecoise* lesbian folk singer Lucie Blue Tremblay, provide backup vocals on "Dis Ya Mumma Earth." As Allen notes, "dub poetry is not just an art form. It is a declaration that the voice of a people, once unmuzzled, will not submit to censorship of form" ("De Dub" 15). As community-accountable art, these collaborative practices underscore that the voice of resistance is finally not a solo voice.

Allen also draws on the African-influenced communal form of call-and-response to structure many of her dub poems so that multiple voices frequently respond to her poetic injunctions in the tradition of black preaching oratory. "Dis Ya Mumma Earth" specifically recalls Bob Marley's nationalist liberation song to articulate an inclusive ecological politics through call-and-response:

get up stand up
 shout en masse
 wail in the wilderness
 our will . . . will be
 peace . . . justice . . . equality
 join hands in liberation dance
 freedom chants (*Women* 96-97)

Davida Alperin advocates just such an interactive alliance politics in contrast to cultural pluralism or separatism. She sees coalition between groups with different experiences and standpoints as the only workable model for enriched understanding and transformation of complex social relations (30-31). As Philip notes, dub poetry's popular culture status with long roots in African oral practices invites its cross-over appeal ("Who's Listening" 40-41).

Linton Kwesi Johnson and others have expressed misgivings about the "sell-out" tendencies of cross-over forms like reggae in which the historical, material, and political contexts may be easily displaced by embodied pleasure (Hitchcock n.pag.). We

have only to think of university reggae parties to realize the truth of these concerns. Cornel West argues that even within the black community, musical practices are oppositional only in a "weak and vague sense" which "keeps alive some limited agency," but is removed from organized political resistance ("Black Culture" 96). Allen, however, clearly mentors the ways in which dub poetry can be a meaningful mode of social transformation when it is part of an overall engagement with progressive community movements for change.

Upholding West's earlier assertion in the same essay that black cultural forms are marked by "kinetic orality," "passionate physicality," and "combative spirituality," which all foster a sense of "subversive joy and daily perseverance in an apparently hopeless and meaningless historical situation" (93), I would argue that the pleasures of dance and rhythm may be crucial to movements for social transformation and identity affirmation. Struggle against social injustice involves hours of hard work and heartache, but it also can involve rejoicing in the enduring spirit of survival and self-determination. Such uplift is most generously registered in the dancing, singing, and festive body, which can never be entirely contained by commodification and market interests. bell hooks reminds us of the profound implications for embodied and passionate expression of our deepest commitments to justice in the classroom (*Teaching* 194-95, 203-05). Like the popular theatre projects of the Jamaican women's collective, Sistren, Allen's dub poetry may be seen as a form of popular education. Her classroom is the streets, the concert, the reading — wherever a community of listeners and cultural workers are called together to register joy in struggles for social change. Allen's "Revolutionary Tea Party," re-invoking the populist revolt in Boston harbour, issues a call for embodied and passionate justice to work for all who "see for peace a future . . . who understand the past . . . who create with yu sweat from the heart":

let's talk, let's make art, let's love, dance
 Revel in the streets if that's the beat
 Rebel in the streets if that's the beat
 protest demonstrate chant

You who see for us a future
 come sit here with we
 mek wi drink tea
 mek wi talk
 mek wi analyse
 mek wi strategise
 mek wi work together (Women 134)

Kitchen table analysis, cultural work, demonstrations, reggae resistance are all part of Allen's recipe for cultural revolution. Integral to all of these is the embodied joy of solidarity work, registered on the dance floor, in the streets, across the table.³⁰

West articulates a vision of radical democracy through coalition solidarity in "The New Cultural Politics of Difference":

The new cultural politics of difference . . . exposes and explodes the exclusions, blindnesses and silences of the past, calling from it radical libertarian and democratic projects that will create a better present and future. . . . projecting alternative visions, analyses and actions that proceed from particularities and arrive at moral and political connectedness. This connectedness does not signal a homogenous unity or monolithic totality but rather a contingent, fragile coalition building in an effort to pursue common radical libertarian and democratic goals that overlap. (35)

Allen mentors and advocates a community-accountable art form that fosters fragile coalitions across diverse publics. Within and against the grain of the black community at large, the feminist community at large, community Canada, and multiple progressive political communities, Lillian Allen's dub poetry re-sounds: it calls down oppressive powers, affirming the legacy of the African diaspora, and inviting potential allies to undertake a politics of solidarity, possibility, and hope.³¹

NOTES

¹ I am borrowing white actress Linda Griffith's term "community Canada" from the *Book of Jessica*, a dialogue-narrative of her potent and problematic theatre collaboration with Metis writer, Maria Campbell.

² Allen's "publications" include hundreds of live-event performances (solo, with De Dub Poets, and various reggae bands); two dub albums (*Revolutionary Tea Party* 1985 and *Conditions Critical* 1988) which both won Canadian Juno Awards for best reggae album in their respective years; one album and two books for children (*If You See Truth* 1987; *Why Me?* 1991); a self-published book of dub poems (*Riddim an' Hardtimes* 1982), and most recently, *Selected Poems of Lillian Allen: Women Do This Every Day* 1993).

- 3 bell hooks' challenge in "Feminist Scholarship: Ethical Issues" (paralleled by Canadians Himani Bannerji, Makeda Silvera, Dionne Brand, M. Nourbese Philip, and Lee Maracle) challenged white women to account for their modes of seeing, their racial privilege; their investments in and methods of cross-racial work continues to compel me. As a white academic woman, a feminist-in-decolonization, my primary investment is in solidarity and coalition politics. I do not believe that social transformation will ever be possible without cross-racial alliances. As hooks says of the potential of critical conversations across difference, "if revitalized feminist movement is to have a transformative impact on women, then creating a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of our experience, is essential" ("Holding," *Teaching* 110). Without naively assuming any simple or pure form of such a critical dialogue, I continue to uphold its urgent necessity, to take the risk of being an ally, and to affirm my willingness to be held accountable for the powers and privileges, and the enduring blind spots of my racial heritage. As an educator, I continue to believe in the transformative power of living culture that calls young minds to new exposure and awareness, that instigates altered understandings of history and social memory, that bears cultural witness to the failures of democracy and calls it to accountability for its potential. In this light, I find Allen's dub poetry to be a compelling activator of human rights awareness, accountable citizenship, and popular education on multiple fronts.
- 4 While dub poetry foregrounds its relationship to history, it also serves as a crucial reminder that all cultural forms are implicated in questions of social identity and politics.
- 5 Despite valid cautions against the tendency of pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism to assert a unified African culture that flattens out differences between and among groups, it is historically accountable to situate dub poetry in the context of the effects and consequences of the African diaspora, instigated by the slave trade and continuing into the present with waves of migrations and cross-migrations spawned by economic neocolonialism. Diaspora criticism can be used in a sufficiently flexible way to account for local and specific contexts and practices, as well as attending to important resonances among peoples of the African diaspora. For example, the social consequences and modes of cultural resistance in the plantation economies of the Southern US and the Caribbean inevitably set up a call-and-response relationship of mutual influence and inspiration between peoples of African descent. This is illustrated by the importance of Jamaican-American Claude McKay to the Harlem Renaissance, the influence of Jamaican Marcus Garvey on both the Black Power and Rastafarian Movements, as well as the influence of American R&B on Jamaican ska and rocksteady, precursors to reggae. Similarly, I find it relevant to draw upon African American intellectuals bell hooks, Cornel West, and Houston Baker, Jr. to illuminate my discussion of Lillian Allen.
- 6 Kingston (Jamaica), London (England), and Toronto are the principal metropolitan centres where dub has flourished since the early 1980s. It is instructive to recognize not only the vitality of the Caribbean arts community in Canada, but also the traces of a colonial legacy that make Toronto and not New York a site for such cultural ferment. My own approach to dub as an international cultural movement is indebted to Allen and Joseph who have nurtured this community, most prominently through their sponsorship of the 1993 Dub Festival in Toronto.
- 7 For a full cultural history of dub poetry, see Habekost's *Verbal Riddim*. See also Brathwaite's *History of Love*; Brown's *Voiceprint*; Dance's *Fifty Caribbean Writers*; Markham's *Hinterland*.

- ⁸ For insight into African-American vernacular practices of testifyin' and signifyin' which have resonance with Afro-Caribbean practices, see Smitherman and Kochman.
- ⁹ Houston Baker, Jr. explores the resonant tradition of the blues as an African-American vernacular musical form in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984).
- ¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the intersection of West African Twi-Asante and Yoruba with English in Jamaican language practices, see Mervyn Alleyne's chapter on "Language," in *Roots of Jamaican Culture*.
- ¹¹ Similarly, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993) in an article on "West Indian Poetry" describes vernacular poetry as "a free verse so free it sometimes becomes only angry prose" (1373). In *Verbal Riddim*, Habekost engages the argument against the "straightjacket" of "dub ranting," instigated by practitioner Jean Binta Breeze (44-47). It is both important to recognize the limits of a prophetic and apocalyptic aesthetic, as well as its particular cultural and historical conditions. Habekost makes the useful observation, following some of the leading practitioners, that dub as a living cultural form must evolve to expand its repertoire and range as it moves through changing political currents into the new millennium (237-40). This is true of all poetry; it must keep an ear to the ground, an eye to the street, reflecting the pulsing and changing life concerns of the communities to which it gives witness.
- ¹² For the leftist critique, see John Beverly's call to "read against literature itself" in *Against Literature*, 1993.
- ¹³ While Carolyn Cooper, among other Caribbean critics, argues that there clearly need to be standards to guard against "dub doggerel" or "poetrics passing itself off as poetry," these should emerge from within the popular culture, historical, and oral specificity of dub aesthetics, rather than being mapped on from Western aesthetics (*Noises* 72, 74).
- ¹⁴ See Saakana on the West African roots of Afro-Caribbean music, and Hebbidge on contemporary Afro-Caribbean popular culture and musical forms.
- ¹⁵ Similarly, Allen maintains a clear distinction between dub and rap which both have roots in dance-hall disk jockey talkover. She argues that rap is dance and rhyme driven "music with words," while the "message is often sacrificed to rhythm and music." Dub, on the other hand, with its "information-based aesthetic" is "words with music," so that the "message is front and centre" (Unpublished interview, 1994).
- ¹⁶ I am indebted to Peter Hitchcock's discussion of dread rhythms and Rastafari. See Habekost on the "bass aesthetic" or "riddim" line, which is the basic musical unit of reggae but stretches back to traditional African drumming (*Verbal* 59). This cultural link is often referred to as the pulsebeat or heartbeat of the African peoples in the diaspora, as in Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem "Bass Culture" (*Tings* 15-16).
- ¹⁷ This poem is also an example of what Habekost calls "ghetto dub" or testimonial poetry that bears witness to conditions of urban struggle (*Verbal* 117). Another Allen poem in this category is "Rub a Dub Style Inna Regent Park."
- ¹⁸ In *Verbal Riddim*, Habekost models an inventive and ethical method of attending to the complex aesthetics and culture-specificity of dub through his hybrid formalist/cultural studies critical practice of reading both textual and performance "versions" of particular poems.
- ¹⁹ It is important to recognize that dub aesthetics are not solely based on resistance to Western cultural and economic imperialism, as Ahdri Mandiela asserts in an interview on the International Dub Poetry video: "Protest is only part of what it is

that we do. . . . There is contentment, love, desire, crying—all of the emotions. Dub poetry is poetry. Poetry for me has always been a visceral event. And if that is in a singular mode all the time, it means that we are living in a singular mode, which we are not" (Joseph).

- 20 For discussion of the social function of the African griot, see Habekost in *Verbal Riddim* 57, 78; Saakana 192; and Hitchcock n.pag.
- 21 See Hitchcock and D'Aguiar on dub poetry as a political document of recent history. Habekost suggests the term "campaign poetry" for those poems which take up a particular issue in recent history like police shooting of black youth (159).
- 22 Cultural studies, popular culture studies, radical pedagogy, new historicism, postcolonial studies, diaspora studies, black studies, and African studies are among a number of newly emerging academic approaches that may offer some ways of shifting cultural literacy to more richly engage emergent non-Western forms. In contrast to E.D. Hirsch's notion of "cultural literacy," it seems that what we need in a global society is "multicultural literacy" as called for in *The Graywolf Annual*, edited by Rick Simonson and Scott Walker. In addition, it may be useful to explore the parallels between dub poetry, sound poetry, performance poetry, and spoken word events. All of these critical and performance categories must be invoked with attention to their limitations as well as their possibilities.
- 23 Given Jamaica's particular colonial history, it is hardly surprising that the development of the feminist movement is rife with the contradictions of class and race. For example, when women won enfranchisement in 1919, it was only black middle-strata women who were deemed worthy citizens (Reddock 70).
- 24 Lorna Goodison won the Caribbean Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1986; Olive Senior won the Commonwealth Literary Prize in 1986; and M. Nourbese Philip won the Casa de las Americas Prize in 1988.
- 25 See bell hooks's "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," in *Black Looks* and "Representations: Feminism and Black Masculinity" and "Black Women and Men: Partnership in the 1990s," in *Yearning*.
- 26 See Carolyn Cooper's essay on male and female practitioners of dance-hall talkover in the sexual boasting tradition ("Slackness"). See Elizabeth Wheeler on the male-dominant voice and sexual representations in Caribbean oral performance, as contrasted with the subversions of Louise Bennett and contemporary British dub poet, Jean Binta Breeze.
- 27 Arun Mukherjee discusses the contradictions of Canada's status as a nation-state in "Canadian Nationalism."
- 28 See Paul Knox on the limitations of Canada's lip-service commitment to human rights (D5).
- 29 Since the mid-1980s, Caribbean-Canadian and Aboriginal public intellectuals have offered vocal and incisive critiques that foreground culture in the public square as an arena of racial negotiation and which make the category of "race" and the mechanisms of racialization visible for analysis. Brand's *Bread Out of Stone* and Philip's *Frontiers* offer significant commentaries on race politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Lenore Keeshig Tobias and many other First Nations critics have put cultural appropriation on the public table. Philip's *Showing Grit* confronts the remnants of *Showboat* and *Miss Saigon*. The media and political pundits' anxiety around the 1994 Conference "Writing Thru Race" reveals how potent and uncomfortable a category "race" is for majority Canada to confront as part of its own history.
- 30 I am advocating a re-animated concept of participatory democracy that takes into account the holes and failures of democratic traditions, while using the discourse

itself as a leverage point to call nations to accountability for what they profess. I am particularly indebted to Cornel West for this return to democratic traditions and discourses as offering a politics of hope and possibility; see his "The New Cultural Politics of Difference."

- ³¹ I am grateful for a SSHRCC Postdoctoral Fellowship and a Carleton University Research Grant which partially enabled this work; special thanks goes to my energetic and thorough research assistant, Naomi Laird; to the women of *Divá*, who first invited me to do this article (with a lament for the Harris government's suspension of funding to this journal); to *ARIEL*'s anonymous reviewer for helpful editorial suggestions, to Kevin McGuirk for his work on "outside literature" and for the many insightful conversations on poetry, culture, and society; to Sandra Haydon for her good questions; to students who were my teachers as we engaged Allen's poetry; and most especially to Lillian Allen for the vital work and critical conversations.

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