

# “We – the audience with me – are ‘breaking bread together’”: Black Canadian Dub Poets’ Call-and-Response Practices and (Re)Creating Home in the Diaspora

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## Abstract

*This essay looks at the poetic use of call-and response patterns and their role in creating a sense of home and belonging in the works of the African Canadian dub poets Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper. As the author argues, ‘home’ can no longer be thought of solely in terms of house, nation, family, or community, at least not in their traditional sense. Historical experiences of black subjects and cultures have produced radically different perspectives on what constitutes individual and collective belonging, and the meaning(s) of ‘home’. Therefore, in order to address ideas of ‘home’ and affiliation in contexts of black cultural production, it is important to critically assess and (re-)conceptualize ‘home’ as unstable, dynamic, and processual. The poetry by Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper provides dialogic examples of how to recreate home in the diaspora and address black audiences in Canada, in the Caribbean, and beyond.*

**Keywords:** dub poetry, diaspora, Black Canada, call-and-response, home

Uncles have been travelling and toiling for  
a long time  
They often think of home  
Of their mothers making them chocolatetea  
And fry fish and bammie  
Of teaching their nieces to ride bicycles  
Sitting on verandahs with their wives  
eating popsicles  
(Cooper, *Black Matters* 32)

What could be harder than creating a home when you were not even master of your own body, “when even the body was not legally one’s own” (Alexander 190)? What could be harder than creating a sense of belonging when your body is moved regularly? What could be more difficult than establishing relationships when your environment is trying to isolate and displace you? It takes a strong will to endure and an immense gift of creation to overcome these adverse circumstances and succeed. The starting point described above captures the historical situation of African American cultures throughout the Americas. Enslaved, expropriated, dispossessed

and exploited, these people were responsible for their survival, endurance, and liberation; for cultural and social creativity against all odds, for social resistance and establishing an aesthetic vanguard in situations of control, surveillance, and oppression. [1] What forms the basis of this seemingly inexhaustible gift of creation? What are the cultural practices used to turn hope and vision into social relations? How do black writers imagine home when displacement, nomadic life experience, and segregation have marked their existence?

The (dis)location—the in-betweenness—of the im/migrant (especially as depicted in literature) has been widely explored in scholarly work. [2] There have been many arguments for a conception of identity which transcends national and ethnic boundaries as well as comments on the persisting alienation or homelessness that may accompany this kind of existence. This essay departs from the notion of a ‘contrapuntal awareness’ (Said 137) as a critical point of analysis for the investigation of ‘home’ and affiliation; in addition, it follows the assumption that it is the (im)migrant writer, who is suited best to offer knowledge about home related to a

life in-between cultures (Brandel and Raussert). Poetic texts by the African Canadian Dub poets Afua Cooper and Lillian Allen, both born in Jamaica, serve as examples for analysis and as contemporary expressions of a long tradition of black writing in Canada. [3]

As Said puts it, "[m]ost people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that — to borrow a phrase from music— is contrapuntal" (Said 148). Hence, for Said the dynamic, polyphonic, and resistant subject position of the exile or im/migrant is located between different geographies, cultures, traditions, and languages, as well as a in a persisting sense of estrangement. Thinkers such as Fanon and Glissant function as contrapuntal neighbors from the Caribbean in that their works precede and interconnect with Said's, as well as in their treatment of the social and political function of the (de/colonized) poet, questions of otherness, and relational and non-hierarchical forms of humanism. [4]

In order to grasp the creative constructs of and self-reflexive approaches toward 'home' in Afrodescendant cultures this essay ventures beyond traditional definitions of 'home'. Dictionary definitions of 'home' as "one's place of residence," "the social unit formed by a family living together," "a familiar or usual setting: congenial environment," "a place of origin" and "one's own country" ("home") do not suffice in regard to black diasporic subjects, migratory experiences, and the suffering of displacement. These black experiences contradict the utopian imaginaries that are at the very foundations of 'America' in the Northern and the Southern hemispheres. Instead of inserting themselves into the discourse of the geopolitical imaginaries of a nation of immigration, as in the case of the USA, or a multi-ethnic paradise in the case of Canada, these experiences record fluctuations between utopian and dystopian attitudes, hope and disappointment, perseverance and resistance.

Under the above circumstances, affiliation and home are always up for reflection and negotiation. 'Home' can also no longer be thought of as solely

in terms of house, nation, family, or community, at least not in their traditional sense (Bammer). Historical experiences of black subjects and cultures have produced radically different perspectives on what constitutes individual and collective belonging, and the meaning(s) of 'home'. Therefore, in order to address ideas of 'home' and affiliation in contexts of black cultural production, it is important to critically assess and (re-)conceptualize 'home' as unstable, dynamic, and processual concept.

Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling are certainly right when they maintain that thinking about 'home' is inherently geographic: a matter of "highlighting relations between place, scale, identity and power" (Blunt and Dowling 2). They stress two key elements of 'home', namely 'home' as "place" and 'home' as "spatial imaginary." With a nod to established scholarship, explorations of 'home' need to address meanings of physical place as well as symbolic space. [5] While this also rings true for Afrodescendant cultures, it is important to stress that —because of frequent dispossession, displacement, dislocation and at times the absence of an original place or 'home'—memory and imagination take on a key role in black processes of creating and transforming relations and forging a sense of belonging. Frequently only a metaphorical 'home' is capable of substituting for a physical home. When we think about the creations of relations and a sense of belonging it becomes evident that meanings include and exceed 'home' as physical place and 'home' as "metaphor for intimacy" (Urry 11).

For the black subject in exile and the black im/migrant the act of remembering as an act of creation is essential. For the black poet, writing involves the rewriting of history, the creation of voice, and the creation of audience—or if you like community beyond place and nation. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur exalts poetry for preserving memory while the instances of power often silence it for political interests: "only poetry preserves the force of unforgetting" (501). Similarly, Édouard Glissant stresses that the writer alone holds the power to create expressions of memory capable of transcending "nonhistory" (xvi). Literature is conceived by these thinkers as a relational force

that connects people, places, and times. Literary expression thus becomes a privileged medium to unfold the writers' ability to project the future of their communities in a reassessment of the past. Or, as Toni Morrison puts it so eloquently, "a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last" (149).

In their poetry, Cooper and Allen create imagined homes from the perspective of women poets in the diaspora. For them, poetry represents cultural expression with potential for social change. This change, according to them, can only be realized in dialogic structures. In this sense it seems natural that the call-and-response model with its roots in Afro-descendant music and oral culture occupies a central place in their poetic and performative practice. The audience they address is primarily the black population in the diaspora, although the desires for belonging and being heard that find expression in their lyrics are universal components for the search of home and identity. At the same time, the poetic work on a home for black subjects in Canada is a dialogue with a multiethnic society and a still prevailing white hegemonic structure. The call-and-response model represents a temporal and spatial component in the process of creating a diasporic home. On the one hand, it offers a way to relate the voices of the past to the voices of the present, on the other hand, it allows us to think together distant places metaphorically and symbolically. And it represents a cultural practice that directly connects the poet with her audience, since it involves an unmistakable address and invitation to exchange. This also means that in the act of performance, a temporary sense of community, shared experience, and togetherness is already conveyed. At the same time, the use of call-and-response signifies the poet's assumed readiness to respond to and communicate directly with her audience. Thus, many of Allen's and Cooper's dub poems appear as responses to a call already instigated by black diasporic audiences and black historical experience.

### **Call-and-response and diasporic historiographies: the poetic vision of Afua Cooper**

Dub poetry's beginnings date back to the 1970s in Jamaica, where it rapidly became a powerful expression of popular culture and political resistance. Within the Americas and beyond it quickly spread; in particular, to the Jamaican diaspora in Toronto and London. Artists like Oku Onuora, Mutaburuka, and Michael Smith established dub poetry in Kingston, Jamaica. In London, poetically speaking to a continuing anti-colonial struggle, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean Binta Breeze wrote and performed dub poetry, creating an artistic scene that reached out to other Jamaican communities in England and beyond. Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, and Clifton Joseph, among others, created a diasporic dub poetry scene in Canada, with Toronto as its center (Carr 10–12). Dub poetry represents an Afro-Caribbean rhythmic mode of telling diasporic histories. Through musical and rhythmical elements, dub poetry performs envisioned and lived bridges between uneven temporalities, postulating distant, yet entangled, hemispheres on various continents. Allen's and Cooper's poetry resorts to music as a rhythmic structure, content, and performance in order to mediate temporalities from the colonial past with the promised land of a better future. Both poets express historical transculturations (Rausert and Isensee) in terms of language through a mix of Standard English and Jamaican Creole/Patois, and through a mix of oral and printed poetry. The blending of distinct linguistic rhythms of Jamaican Creole/Patois with musical beats from reggae creates a strong rhythmical expression of lived and remembered temporality. [6] In sum, dub poetry in the style of Cooper and Allen is oral history. And its memory work is self-reflexive, including mnemonic patterns that support memorization in contemporary cultural work.

Born in Jamaica, Cooper moved to Canada in 1980. She literally makes history tangible and audible in her writing and performances. She embeds her writing within a conception of the social as changeable. History does not remain an abstract thing. History is felt, lived,

expressed, and reflected in the work of this poet, who at the same time is a historian. As a founder of Toronto's Dub Poets Collective and a vibrant performer, with several recordings to her credit including *Love and Revolution* (2009), Cooper makes history come alive through a voice whose rhythm and accentuation is shaped by the soundings of reggae and other musical expressions. As Lisa Tomlinson puts it, Cooper's dub poetry and her literary historical work "reposition the path of the Black Atlantic" to include "the unique feature of cultural exchange between Canada, her native Jamaica, and the wider Caribbean" (107). Indeed, Cooper puts black history and black literature on the cultural map of Canada. "Canada is the place where Black literature is happening," she insists, referring to contemporary writers such as Dionne Brand, Olive Senior, and Esi Edugyan (Cooper, qtd. in Tomlinson 110).

Strongly influenced by Oku Onouora's dub poems from Jamaica, Cooper locates in reggae and its rhythms major possibilities for shaping "sound, rhythm, voice, and music in her poetry" (Tomlinson 112). In her diasporic historiographies she synthesizes the oral and the "page poet" (Tomlinson 113). As with dub poetry overall, Cooper's poetry is frequently chanted and performed to reggae rhythms. It also borrows from and mixes together American rhythm & blues, calypso, jazz, Afro-Latin rhythms, and rap, and draws on African and Caribbean oral traditions while adding diasporic variations dependent on the performance setting. Her poetic historiographies spiritually resort to the Rastafarian movement (Knopf 84), and reveal that her vision of the social and home embraces the rational as well as the spiritual. Her work fuses the factual with the affectionate, and archival memory with imagination. In her most recent poetry collection, *Black Matters* (2020), home is memory work and imaginary flight at the same time. In the poem "A World greener than Eden" Cooper is remembering her father and grandfather as planter, gardener, and cultivator. She creates a multi-generational tapestry of black men as rooted and connected to land and community:

My father planted a provision ground  
with yam of all sorts  
yellow  
Negro  
afu....  
My father always praised the soil  
Decades before my grandfather planted  
citrus groves ...  
and grapefruit trees that bore so much that  
neighbours  
friends, and passersby  
invited themselves into our yard to partake  
...  
These men built a well,  
with a spout pointing in each of the four  
directions,  
that carried water to irrigate the crops they  
planted. (Cooper, *Black Matters* 67-71)

While the above poem expresses the poet's act of remembering, in the poem "Live with you in a house by the river," of the same collection, Cooper envisions a pastoral scene of fulfilled domestic life in the future:

You will grow lilies and morning glory  
at the bottom of the steps that lead to the  
verandah  
You will line the footpath with red and white  
roses  
You will colour our cottage  
with blue and gold from a Haitian painting  
(*Black Matters* 59).

Both poems express a deep desire for home and belonging that is cloaked in images of black Caribbean culture and yet universal in its appeal. And they were written in response to and dialogue with photography illustrating Cooper's embrace of multi-media expression.

Cooper's work is emblematic of a dub poetry scene in Canada characterized by dynamic compositions and performances, as well as mixed media borrowings from theatre, video art, and electronics. Thematically, she addresses a wide range of issues such as colonialism, slavery, diasporic displacement, racism, sexism, police violence, immigration, homelessness, and class divides. In Cooper's poetry, history is written large and juxtaposed and fused with personal life stories. Dub poetry, accordingly, represents an individual and collective way of

telling history(ies). Similar to African American poets in the U.S. and dub poets in Jamaica, Cooper employs call-and-response patterns with a recurrent chorus that also rhythmically structures the poems and invites a dialogue between poet and community. In an interview with Emily Allen Williams she insists, “I am in communion with the audience. I am creating a dialogue—a discursive space” (323). Performing poetry becomes a sacred act: “We—the audience with me—are ‘breaking bread together’” (323).

Cooper has made her mark in African Canadian culture and politics as a poet, historian, activist, and cultural worker. She has challenged the Canadian myth of the “Two Solitudes” — the French and the English and their conflicted relationship (Knopf 105). In her work, she unearths silenced black Canadian history and draws attention to the lot of First Nations people in Canada as well as the Caribbean. According to her, “slavery in Canada has been Canada’s best-kept secret” (304), and she makes it her objective to recover and discover the history of black people in Canada and their transatlantic and inter-American diasporic links from colonial times to the present. From the very beginning of her career as poet music has played a central role. Hand-clapping and singing from church services and roadside preaching practices in Jamaica formed her first musical influences. In an interview with H. Nigel Thomas (2006), Cooper remembers: “We were discovering who we were as Africans and making it central to our identity (qtd. in Thomas, 74). To her, heritage and music became a firm bond: “Popular music — reggae music especially, dub poetry with drums in the background— and theatre with a focus on African style and issues of African identity were all ways we used to reclaim that heritage” (ibid.).

For her early poems from *Breaking Chains* she worked with an African percussion group in the style of spoken word (Williams 317). Having grown up in the 1970s, she belongs to a generation with a new consciousness of black historiography. Rastafari was prominent, reggae music blossomed in Jamaica, Black history and Black power ideas circulated among the younger generation, and Walter Rodney became a source of inspiration for black struggle. Already before Cooper’s move from Jamaica to Canada,

the ideas of anti-apartheid and Black Power crisscrossed the Americas. The Toronto dub community emerged out of the Black political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. In Cooper’s memories, demonstrations and marches would end in public places and parks where people would talk, dance, sing, perform, and make music. An artistic movement accompanied the political movement, and “the arts were central in every way” in the black struggles against discrimination and apartheid (Williams 319).

Cooper’s poems in many ways pay homage to black musical expression, celebrating the musical achievements of Bob Marley and Mahalia Jackson, among others. Music to Cooper represents a rhythmic and spiritual force. The content, structure, and performance of her poetry have musical roots. Politically she is anti-colonial and a black feminist. Her poems let female bodies in particular move, dance, and transcend. Bodies give birth, die, and rise up again. Music and movement are conceived as fundamental to the liberation of spirit, body, and society at large. Jamaican Creole/Patois adds a rhythmic tonality to her voice in “She Dance,” when she molds the social poetically:

She dance wid di wind  
 fi di wind  
 against di wind  
 har hands held high in  
 supplication to God  
 she dance and dance  
 now is like Damballah possess har.  
 (Cooper, *Memories Have Tongue*, 99)

The female dancer’s moves are multidirectional. She goes with and against the wind. Cooper suggests both affirmation and resistance in the short poetic lines. The woman’s dance expresses a Pan-African consciousness. Music, rhythm, and dance from the African west coast join with black diasporic moves. Music is celebrated as a life force. Many of the poems in *Memories Have Tongue* like “Stepping To Da Muse/Sic” and “The Upper Room” are expressions of transcendence. Black music and rhythms pave the way to uplift and ascent. Inspired by the voice of Mahalia Jackson, icon of African American gospel music, the poetic voice

in "The Upper Room" declares:

You crown me with your chants  
 And I spin, yes  
 I stumble and then  
 I rise ...  
 As you take me to the Upper Room.  
 (Cooper, *Memories Have Tongue*, 101)

Cooper's poetic women are women in the whirlwind of history. As Keith B. Mitchell puts it, "Cooper is especially interested in recuperating and revising forgotten and submerged histories of African-Canadian women" (38). For her, it is essential to address different generations, from the very young to the very old, to remind them of the bonds and ties of past and present African diaspora. In her historic imagination she resurrects Marie Joseph Angélique, a slave woman who set fire to her master's house and burned down most of Montreal as a consequence, and she does so in different types of texts, for different age groups and audiences. Cooper starts off with a children's poem, "Marie Joseph Angélique." A longer, more elaborate version occurs in "Confessions of a Woman Who Burnt Down a Town" and the best-selling and award-winning historical biography *The Hanging of Angélique: Canada, Slavery, and the Burning of Montréal* (2006b).

Cooper wants to make unheard voices heard. She is especially interested in filling the gaps in Canadian history; pointing to slavery and racism in colonial and contemporary Canada, enables her to create a new sense of history and belonging. Remembering for her is an act of knowledge production; at the same time, it is an important step toward raising consciousness and fueling social action. In all three texts by Cooper about Marie Joseph Angélique, she humanizes her protagonist beyond questions of class, citizenship, gender, and race. She firmly establishes her as a model freedom fighter, as a feminist abolitionist of time past, and an inspiration for black immigrant women in Canada today. By resurrecting a freedom-seeking woman from colonial times, she lifts the veil from race and colorblindness in Canadian history writing and conscience. Her rhetoric reveals her to be the

poet-as-historiographer and the historiographer-as-poet. She writes history with sounds and rhythms that are intricately connected to content, creating a holistic historiography, one that embraces the oral and written discourse through the performative. Her texts appear "oraliterary" (Mitchell 40). Her prose and poetry have a chant-like quality that turns her scholarship into a public text to be shared, spread, and appreciated far beyond the academic discourse – another side of her creativity which shows that she envisions a more inclusive vision of the social. She extends African griot traditions and brings old African ways of storytelling and history-making into the discourse of African Canadian historiography.

Through the fusion of contemporary rhythm (reggae in particular) with the unearthing of unnoticed historical data of African Canadian history, she adds new pieces of knowledge to the tapestry of African diaspora history. One such example is her poem about Richard Pierpoint, "Revolutionary Soldier (a poem in three voices)" (Cooper, *Copper Woman* 56-59). In this poem, Richard Pierpoint, who was born in Africa, enslaved, and brought to the Americas, and who served in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 "in a corps of colour raised on the frontier of Niagara" (*Copper Woman* 57), writes the King's Governor a letter requesting permission to return to his homeland. In her poetic rendering of the letter, Cooper retells Pierpoint's entanglement in the history of the slave trade, the independence movements in the Americas, and the establishment of early settlements. One of the voices in the poem is the migratory subject Pierpoint himself, writing, "at the age of sixteen I was made prisoner/sold as slave/conveyed to America in the year 1760 ... I wish to see again the Senegal waters flow" (*Copper Woman* 56, 58). A second voice belongs to Cooper's envisioned public, voicing support for Pierpoint's plea: "So please your Majestic/ Listen to the petitioner's plea/He yearns to return/To the land of his family" (*Copper Woman* 58). The third voice is that of Cooper herself, the dub poet, chanting "Revolutionary soldier" to reggae rhythms with reference to Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldier." Marley's song laments the conscription of freed slaves by the government to fight Native American tribes. Cooper transfers

the historical setting to Upper Canada:

Revolutionary soldier  
 revolutionary soldier  
 stolen from Africa  
     brought to Upper Canada  
 revolutionary soldier  
     Revolution (*Copper Woman*, 59)

Cooper discovers historical sources and chants history so that black diasporas in the Americas get entangled with the African homeland. Thus, she establishes a model for black historiography as an alternative knowledge to the established historical discourse. Cooper's objective is "to revise English and French Canadian historiographies" (Knopf 105). Just like the actors in her poem "Negro Cemeteries" in *Copper Woman*, Cooper unearths the silenced (his)stories and songs of black people in Canadian society:

"Negro" cemeteries are surfacing all over  
 Ontario  
 Ancestors rolling over  
 Bones creaking  
 Skeletons dusting themselves off  
 Dry bones shaking in fields of corn.  
 (*Copper Woman*, 25)

In the poem, black history awakens and infuses her vision of the social. Dead black bodies turn into agents who expose the cracks in Canadian myth-making and the silences in Canadian history writing. In "500 Years of Discovery," Cooper admits that she, a "Black African Jamaican woman whose ancestry sprang from another continent, another hemisphere," is "still trying to understand her "place in these Americas" (*Copper Woman* 29). To unearth uneven temporalities and their connectedness, to connect body, history and place lies at the core of Cooper's poetic vision. And it is through musical voice and rhythm that she performs the act of bringing silenced and forgotten history to social consciousness, so that a better Canada and 'Canada as home' can emerge.

### Lillian Allen: (Re-)Rooting dub poetry in the Canadian diaspora

Born in Jamaica, Lillian Allen has crisscrossed the Americas with stays in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Canada. She emigrated from Jamaica to Canada in 1969 and first got into a vital dub poetry scene in New York City in the 70s. Arguably Canada's most prominent dub poet, she performs verses on cultural, social, and political topics. Her performances include a distinct rhythmic and declamatory vocal style that is in dialogue with a reggae and calypso accompaniment. Allen has consistently published in both sound and print, as is common in dub poetry. Since the 1980s she has performed at cultural, literary, music, and political festivals and events in Canada, the U.S., the Caribbean, England, and Europe. She published her first book of poems, *Rhythm an' Hardtimes*, in 1982, and as a performance artist she recorded *Dub Poet: The Poetry of Lillian Allen* (1983) and *De Dub Poets* (1984), the latter including the voices of Toronto poets Clifton Joseph and Devon Haughton. Collaborating with various musicians, she later recorded *Revolutionary Tea Party* (1986) and *Conditions Critical* (1987), the former including songs like "I Fight Back" and "Riddim an' Hardtimes," which reached a broader public in Canada and Jamaica. Both records were released and distributed by Allen's label, Verse to Vinyl, and they received Juno Awards for best reggae/calypso album in 1986 and 1989 respectively (Roberts 7).

As poet and recording artist she has shown that "dub poetry has continued to inspire and sustain struggle in the many locales where it has been rerouted/rerooted in the Caribbean diaspora" (Gingell 220). Allen resorts to reggae to fuse rhythm, body, and voice as political media. "Though Allen asserts the transformative pleasure of the body through reggae and dance-hall rhythms," Carr explains, "she does so without inversions of male-originated strategies of sexual boasting" (24). Instead, she replaces these strategies by adopting a "griot-inspired, broad-based social commentary central to the African-Jamaican national liberation struggle" (24). Inspired by a trans-American expansion of Black Power, the "Black is Beautiful" cultural

movement, and Rastafarian spirituality, Allen's dub poetry gives voice to women's experiences in the Caribbean diaspora. Using the musical framing of her political messages, she reaches both subaltern and dominant groups "through the backdoor of mainstream cultural establishment" (Knopf 91). Carolyn Cooper observes that "reggae business is also a magical enterprise in which poor ghetto youths, identifying with the heroes of Hollywood fantasy, can rise to international fame and fortune" (153). At the same time, dub poetry has continued to sustain struggle in the many locations "where it has been rerouted/rerouted in the Caribbean diaspora" (Gingell 220).

Allen addresses the physical pleasures of rhythm and dance in her performances, yet she channels body politics away from eroticism to express a collective movement the aim of which is social change. She links the imaginaries of the Black Power and other African American movements with Rastafarianism, thus creating a black diasporic matrix for affirmation and resistance.

Her reflections on black experience are often embedded in immigration settings that loom large in her poetry. Color as metaphor is omnipresent in *Women Do This Every Day*. Black as color and marker of identity is important in the aesthetic and communicative intent of poems like "Jazz You." The poem begins,

Molten shimmer red  
 charcoal roasting  
 like hot, burn  
 burn black, burn sax  
 burn blue  
 burn into my flesh  
 brewing a potpourri of a storm  
 ablowing waves of hues. (Allen, *Women*  
 120)

But in the refrain of this dub, *black* has a different significance, tied to oppression:

what the people have to do today mi say  
 just a juggle fi get a little peace. (*Women*  
 120)

As the dub poem expresses in diasporic

Jamaican, transculturation is complex, presented as conflicted, contested, and promising. Rethinking 'home', she reflects immigrant experiences in multiple perspectives. In the poem "In these Canadian Bones" (*Psychic Unrest*, 1999), Allen performs a more positive view of transformative processes. In the course of the poem, the Caribbean immigrant becomes a cultural and political agent who shapes the social within a multigenerational diasporic experience. Music, in its reggae and calypso expressions, represents the matrix for shaping new cultural landscapes in Canada. Poetic body politics unfold, as collective imagination, musical rhythm, and personal voice fuse in the poetic voice of the immigrant persona: the lines "In these Canadian bones/where Africa landed" (Allen, *Psychic* 65) mark the beginning of a multilayered and multitemporal diasporic agency. The words "and Jamaica bubble inna reggae redstripe and calypso proddings of culture" (Allen, *Psychic* 65) expose the musical flows within the Americas that led to new cultural production. The immigrant persona is equipped with power and is perceived as mobile and productive: "We are creating this very landscape we walk on" (Allen, *Psychic* 65). Allen's vision shows that the black diaspora subject is equipped with agency to create home in a metaphorical as well as material way.

In Allen's vision of the social, it is the act of musical and cultural creation that facilitates the immigrant's immersion into Canadian society. Evidently, the immigrant's voice is full of diasporic history and a global black cultural consciousness that empowers the immigrant to take a creative role in shaping Canadian culture and society. The poem unfolds a generational narrative that highlights different temporalities within migration and immigration. Where the immigrant persona stands for arrival, first contact, and orientation in the opening of the poem, the second stanza celebrates a positive second-generation transculturation in the presence of the immigrant persona's daughter. Again, it is through musical tropes that Allen lets the immigrant persona reflect immersion and integration: "My daughter sings opera/speaks perfect Canadian" (*Psychic* 65). The immigrant persona herself is aware of difference and tension: "And I dream in dialect/grown malleable by my Canadian tongue"



(Allen, *Psychic* 65). Yet, music also remains a consolation and inspiration for a future vision: “I dream ... of a world where all that matters is the colour of love/compassion/heart and music that grooves you” (Allen, *Psychic* 65). The immigrant persona “dreams in dialect,” seeking to make the utopia of a true Canadian transnationality and transethnicity a reality. The power to achieve utopia is located in music, be it opera, reggae, or calypso. For her, transculturation is in process, never to be completed, and is full of ruptures. While the daughter’s experience provides hope, the poem does not negate her continuous marginalization in Canadian society.

Allen is conscious of the conflicted temporalities involved in an imaginary nation-building. Her poems traverse several space and time zones to capture the diasporic sentiment of her own Canadian experience. Being in diaspora often challenges linear modes of time that are connected with homogeneous progression; alternative expressions of temporality frequently shape the cultural and social rituals and practices in diasporic communities. A co-existence of different real and imagined worlds emerges; ancestors, homeland, and diasporic location —with its historical roots and routes— inhabit an imagined spatiotemporal world in motion. Similar to Walter Benjamin’s “messianic time,” these “ancestral chronotopes” suspend clear-cut temporal differences and priorities (Eisenlohr 167). “We are Hurons, and visitors and traders/ Adventurers and underground railroaders,” Allen’s poetic voice announces in “Toronto/pOetic gEsture” from a series of Toronto poems (*Anxiety*). First Nations people, colonial traders, and fleeing slaves merge in a diasporic conception of time and space.

The line “We are the Iroquois’s promise of unity” (“pOetic gEsture”) signals that this conception of the social can be reached only through an embrace of difference and change. The diasporic self continues in a process of becoming: “Making us larger than we are becoming.” Transcendence is found in social and artistic creativity: “Dub Poetry, Hip Hop, Opera, Visual smarts and Community Arts” (“pOetic gEsture”).

Allen sees poets, artists, and cultural workers as crucial players in the making of a diasporic

world and a historically multilayered Canada. For her, specificity of sound, expression, and rhythm is part of Jamaican speech and lends a particular sonic quality to her poetic vision in which every syllable and word matters. “The rhythms of Jamaican speech, sustained by and reflected in the musical beat, constitute the dub experience,” as Habekost emphasizes (92).

The intimate connection between voice, speech, and beat enhances poetry as a medium for both reflecting and promoting activism. “I Fight Back” is in the style of “signifyin’” and the “cuss poem” (Carr 10, 25), and one of Allen’s poems from *Women Do This Every Day* that shows precisely this empowering synthesis. Allen reflects the in-between-experience through diasporic motherhood. Her poem links generations and invokes motherly ties that are both threatened by and challenge the experience of displacement and political exclusion in Canada. The lines “My children scream/ My grandmother is dying” set the emotional tone before the lyrical I as mother reflects her migration experience: “I came to Canada/ found the doors of opportunities/ well guarded” (*Women* 139). Space and time are multiplied in the exploitative working system. “I scrub floors / serve backra’s meals on time / spend two days working in one/ twelve days in a Week” (*Women* 139). Allen intensifies the time-space compression of diasporic experience by relating it to a work load that makes lived time more intense than real time. In addition, motherhood takes on dual bonding and care: “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 mother figure stands for a double agency that keeps ties strong between homeland and Canada and within (extended) family circuits. The chorus in capital letters that repeats the poem’s title, “AND I FIGHT BACK” (*Women* 139) expresses the endurance, resistance, and, here, triple agency of the female poetic person: working, caring, taking political action. The poem provides a critical reflection on Canadian immigration myths and takes a critical stance against neocolonial practices in the Canadian labor system. In performed and recorded versions of “I Fight Back,” the speech-beat dialogue underscores the urgency of Allen’s

plea to revise immigration policies.

Clearly, then, as a dub poet, Allen relies on the spoken Jamaican word for many of her effects. When she writes her poems down, she uses alliterations, repetitions, and elliptical phrasing to translate the sound effects on the page. Next to the speech-beat dialogue, performativity of words plays a crucial role in her poetic work. Many of her poems put to music such as "For Billie Holiday" show a complex dialogical relationship between music and text through which Allen reflects the social and proposes betterment. These performances ask the listener for an intense and concentrated engagement with the play between words, sound, and music. However, Allen also uses her chants and slogans in performances in political demonstrations to create a common voice among participants; music and poetic chant become a tool to channel protest in the diaspora communities. In Allen's poetic practice, sound as power is a concrete physical and social force.

One example of Allen's participatory poetic approach is her poem "Colors" (from *Nothing But A Hero*, 1991) that is also included in the recording titled *Family Folk Festival: A Multicultural Sing Along* (1993). Questions like "Who thinned the colors for the atmosphere" (Allen, "Colors") address the audience directly. The rhetorical strategies in the poem thus support Allen's poetic performance, which in a call-and-response mode traverses the promises and fractures of a Canadian multicultural mosaic. Caribbean oral tradition and a slow-paced reggae rhythm form the basis for a musical-poetic progression that culminates in the chorus sung by children and Allen together. Her performance is an invitation for the children to join, a projection of a better future Canada. "Colors" illustrates that Allen resorts to a broad spectrum of resistance practices. While "I Fight Back," with its "cuss style," is straightforward in its argumentation and accusation, "Colors" uses modes of indirection through which Allen addresses the shortcomings of Canadian foundation myths. "Is anyone listening here?" she asks in the poem, highlighting the necessity of sounding protest and critique. She creates a metaphorical tapestry of colors that recalls Canadian ideals: "Blue tights/green overcoat/

polka dot underwear/Yellow ribbon/brown bobby pin/hanging from her hair/Black belt/purple shoes/mauve hat/striped socks/Red and white Crinoline top" (Allen, "Colors"). A series of rhetorical questions – "Who made the sky blue/Who made the pink hot" (Allen, "Colors") – expresses discomfort without accusing anyone directly. The poem circles back to the opening line of colors – "Blue tights/green overcoat/polka dot underwear" (Allen, "Colors") – but finishes on a note of welcome and inclusion: "Yellow ribbon/brown bobby pin/ glad you are here." Individual and collective voices carry the message when she alternates with a children's choir that chants the chorus lines to a slow reggae rhythm. Like the slow groove underlying the poem's performance, the critical commentary of the poem cautiously takes shape. Allen's poem challenges Canada's self-acclaimed status as a multi-ethnic and multicultural paradise, asking "Who took day and night/ Joined them back to back?" She shifts between lost utopia and utopia reimaged when she contrasts Canadian immigrant realities with high flying Canadian ideals. As a coda, the poetic voice recites the multiple colors existing side by side. Sound in Allen's poetry is persistent, expressing endurance as well as insisting on the recuperation of lost dreams and ideals. Sound for Allen and for Cooper is a popular and profound way to shape the social and ideas of home and express them anew.

In Cooper's and Allen's poems and performances, home is a metaphorical and temporary entity that emerges holistically as a dialogue between past and present and transforms situationally. As the location of the performance and the audience change, a new community is always created. But the core message of a shared black history of oppression suffered and an irrepressible will to survive, as well as an unbroken spirituality that transcends material existence, remains. Thus, the call-and-response pattern creates a metaphorical, spiritual, and lived experience of home in the Canadian diaspora. At the same time Cooper and Allen speak to the co-imagined black diasporas outside Canada and their related audiences around the world.

## Endnotes

- [1] See Butler and Athanasiou 2013.
- [2] See Birkle 2004, 2014; Chancy 1997, Page 2011, Brandel and Kirschner 2020.
- [3] See Siemerling 2015.
- [4] See Fanon 1967, Glissant 1997.
- [5] See Duyvendak 2011, George 1999, Papastergiadis 1998 and Rapport and Dawson 1998.
- [6] See Habekost 1993.

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