

Lillian Allen
b. Kingston, Jamaica, 1951

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Primary Works

print

- Psychic Unrest*. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1999
- Women Do This Every Day: Selected Poems of Lillian Allen*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1993
- Why Me?* Sherry Guppy, illus. Toronto: Well Versed Publications, 1991
- Nothing But a Hero: Poetry for Children and Young People*. Toronto: Well Versed Publications, 1992
- If You See Truth: Poems for Children and Young People*. (2nd ed.) Toronto: Verse to Vinyl, 1990. 32pp
- If You See the Truth*. Toronto: Verse to Vinyl, 1987. 16pp
- If You See Truth*. Bucks, UK: Frontline, 1987
- The Teeth of the Whirlwind*. (with Dionne Brand, Clifton Joseph, Charles C. Smith). Toronto: Black Perspectives, 1984
- Rhythm an' Hardtimes*. Toronto: Domestic Bliss, 1982

sound

- (We Shall Take Our) Freedom and Dance*. CD. Verse to Vinyl, 1998
- Conditions Critical*. CD. Verse to Vinyl, 1998[?]
- Don't They Know*. Audiocassette. Verse to Vinyl, 1994
- Conditions Critical*. LP. Festival Records, 1988
- Let the Heart See*. Audiocassette. Verse to Vinyl, 1987
- Conditions Critical*. Audiocassette. Verse to Vinyl, 1986
- Revolutionary Tea Party*. LP. Verse to Vinyl, 1986
- Curfew Inna BC*. Audiocassette. Curfew, 1985
- Live in Concert, Lillian Allen: The Poetry of Lillian Allen*. Audiocassette, 1985
- De Dub Poets* (with Devon Haughton and Clifton Joseph). LP. Verse to Vinyl, 1984
- Dub Poet: The Poetry of Lillian Allen*. Audiocassette. Verse to Vinyl, 1983

video

- Unnatural Causes: A Lillian Allen Poem*. Video recording. National Film Board. 1989

essays

- "Transforming the cultural fortress: imagining cultural equity." *Parallogramme* 19.3 (Winter 1993-1994): 48-59.
- "Introduction." *Women Do This Every Day: Selected Poems of Lillian Allen*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1993.11-21.
- "Revolutionary acts: creating ourselves into existence." *Parallogramme* 13.4 (April-May 1988): 28-39.
- "De Dub Poets: Renegades in a One Poet Town." *This Magazine* 21. 7 (December 1987/January 1988): 14-21.
- "Introduction." *Roots and Culture* by Devon Haughton. Toronto: Domestic Bliss, 1983. 6-7.

Lillian Allen is Professor of Creative Writing at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Best known as a pioneer of dub poetry and its foremost practitioner in Canada, Allen is also a well-known writer on cultural politics and an author of short stories and plays as well as books for children. She co-produced / co-directed the film *Blak Wi Blakk* on Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka and co-produced / hosted WORDBEAT, a thirteen-part CBC radio series on poetry and the spoken word. Among many other awards, Allen has received two Junos for her recordings and the Canadian Congress of Black Women award for contributions to “black culture in particular and Canadian culture in general.”

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1951, Allen was raised in Spanish Town, the fifth in a family of ten children. Her father was a civil servant and a community-builder and leader in the church; her mother was also very active in the community and in the education of her children. In 1969, Allen left for Canada to attend Waterloo University in Kitchener, Ontario. Later that year she moved to New York City and worked on the *Caribbean Daily*, where “I Fight Back,” a dub poem that was to become a signature piece, was first published. She studied communications and black studies at NYCC (then a college of the City University of New York) and creative writing at New York University; she also attended workshops by African-American poets and contributed to readings-in-the-park events. After a year back in Jamaica, in 1974 Allen moved to Toronto and the English and Creative Writing Programme at York University. She was among the first to graduate from the new programme, with a BA in 1978.

During this four-year period Allen served as a community legal worker in the large downtown Toronto housing estate of Regent Park, where a significant number of residents were recent Afro-Caribbean immigrants (Smith 4). In a whirl of black community activism, Allen’s poetry became seamlessly integrated with her political and social work. She later wrote, “the audience [at those community meetings in the seventies] came to love and expect the poetry and demanded it when it was not there” (Introduction 17). As education coordinator for the Immi-Can youth project, she also contributed research and lyrics to the reggae band Truths and Rights (Walker 170).

At the 1978 World Festival of Youth in Cuba, Allen met Jamaican poet Oku Onuora and discovered that he was working on a similar, politically-committed type of performance poetry, which he called “dub poetry” (Walker 166). Walker describes dub poetry partly by distinguishing it from hip hop: rappers’ words are shaped by a strong, unchanging and pre-existing beat “while the metre of the dub poet’s verse usually influences and shapes the music created specifically to accompany the poem” (155). Carr has pointed out the importance of the reggae tradition and of the ‘riddim’ line or ‘dread beat’ of reggae to the sound and message of early dub poetry internationally (12).

Onuora inspired Allen to nurture dub poetry in Canada, and on her return she worked closely with Toronto poets Clifton Joseph and Devon Haughton and with others of De Dub Poets collective, including Afua Cooper, ahdri zina mandiela, and Krisantha Sri Baggiyadatta. Allen describes the artistic innovation of this period as culturally driven:

Instinctively [Jamaican-Canadian dub poets] set out to shape this new expression, to work with a form whose aim was to increase the dynamism of poetry, to increase its impact and immediacy, a poetic form that could incorporate many aspects of other art forms: performance, drama, fiction, theatre, music, opera, scat, acapella, comedy, video, storytelling and even electronics. (“De Dub” 15)

De Dub Poets album with Joseph and Haughton was released in 1985. Allen's chapbook *Rhythm An' Hardtimes*, which was to sell 8,000 copies,¹ also came out of this period, as well as the audiocassette *Dub Poet: The Poetry of Lillian Allen*. In 1986, Allen made the album *Revolutionary Tea Party* and in 1987 *Conditions Critical* with members of the band Parachute Club; pieces from *Revolutionary Tea Party* topped the pop charts, and the albums won Juno awards for best calypso / reggae in 1987 and 1988 respectively. Allen's performed and recorded dubs since *Conditions Critical* have been characterised by a willingness to experiment sonically, "stretching the internal dynamics and trying to scale the boundaries of what is expected" ("Dis Word" 17).

A large retrospective collection of Allen's written dub poetry was published by the Women's Press in 1993 as *Women Do This Every Day. Psychic Unrest*, containing more writerly poems as well as popular performance pieces, came out in 1999 with Insomniac Press.

Allen's border crossing acts/activism are best exemplified in the way in which she has successfully battled the dubious and elitist distinction between oral and scribal, performance and "real" poetry, in Canadian letters.² In 1984, when Allen, Joseph and Haughton applied to become members of the League of Canadian Poets, their sponsor submitted an audio tape together with their written poetry, explaining, "Their poetry has tremendous support and popularity within the black community, as well as the wider mixed political and poetic communities. I explain this to you, as well as sending a recording of their poetry... [so] that you will understand the context from which they spring" (qtd. in Allen, "De Dub Poets," 14). The sponsor's careful explanation of the cultural context and mixed media of dub poems proved both prescient and insufficient, for the dub poets were rejected by the League as being "performers" rather than poets. The story of the debate and controversy that followed has been recounted by Gingell, Brydon, and most fully by Allen herself in "De Dub Poets."

In response to her experience with the League, Allen composed "One Poem Town." In it, there is a close link between the centralising practice of high literature and the central cultural and social positions of its practitioners:

Hey! Hey! Hey! this is a one poem town

.....
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

.....
'cause this is a one poem town
and you're not here to stay?!
Are you?
(*Women* 117)

¹ Allen, Lillian. "Introduction." *Women Do This Every Day*. Toronto: Womens Press, 1993. 20

² My thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this essay for this succinct thematic statement.

Allen makes the point that the term “poetry” is both defined by and synonymous with the practices of the dominant players (“so don’t come with no pling, ying, jing / ding [...] / calling it poetry”). The plingyingjing poet is greeted with the common racist injunction to immigrants: Go back to where you came from! The coda (“Are you?”), depending on its spoken inflection, can be either a menacing final threat against the poet (as in the sound version on *Conditions Critical*), or, in a sly projection by the plingyingjing poet, a sign of doubt from the kool poets. Carr’s brilliant reading of this poem closely follows the “dubbing” or doubling of voices and personae, in both its written and spoken versions--the dub poet imitating the mainstream literary poets imitating (at times) the dub poet (15). Brydon’s reading of this poem explores the distance between the portrait of mainstream Canadian culture captured by the image of a one-poem town and the multicultural ideal enacted in the poem through its hybrid, doubling form, “mixing Caribbean, African-derived rhythms with North American mythologies: the violence of lynchings and Westerns with that of satire and irony” (211).

Allen’s border crossing is thus intimately tied to genre, medium, and the category “literature” as shaped and controlled by relations of power. The League’s response was not unanimous, and it was later reversed; but the initial literary exclusion reflected a larger socio-political exclusion of immigrants and a lack of valorization for their art forms that, despite an official policy of multiculturalism, is still entrenched in Canada. Dub poetry in Canada, as Gingell notes, has been “a rebel neo-oral form insisting on space within a literary tradition” (252). Allen’s work in particular has not received the attention it deserves in mainstream Canlit critical circles. This neglect is counter-balanced by engaged attention in other contexts: cultural studies (Carr, Eldridge), pop musicology (Habekost), music journalism (Bartley, Walker), and postcolonial/decolonizing theory and criticism (Brydon, Bucknor, Casas, Gingell, Smith). As Brydon notes with irony of the Canadian literary establishment, “Poetry coming out of an African tradition can be valued as popular music, but not as Literature” (212).

“I Fight Back,” perhaps the most famous of Allen’s dubs, concretizes some of the tensions between “here” (the adopted space of Canada) and “there” (original homelands in the Caribbean) from the perspective of an economic refugee and her position in the long history of exploitative relations between Canada and the Caribbean.

ITT ALCAN KAISER

Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce
these are privileged names in my country
but I am illegal here.

(*Women* 139)

Eldridge writes of these lines, “Allen wails out the roster of multinationals as if to signal some doleful emergency, and raises the pitch, siren like, at “Imm-perial” to signify that the roots of such an inequitable arrangement stretch back not merely decades but centuries: it took slavery and colonialism to lay the foundation for *neocolonialism*” (172). ITT, ALCAN and the Canadian chartered banks benefit hugely from trade relationships with Caribbean nations. The banks have had a significant presence in the Caribbean since the late nineteenth century, receiving tax and other economic subsidies from Caribbean governments (Carmichael 100). It was not until 1955, however, that the Canadian government allowed a carefully limited immigration from the Caribbean through a “domestics” scheme for single Caribbean women. The policy assumed that “single” meant “childless”; when it was discovered that women were applying to sponsor their children, the Canadian government began to deport a number of Caribbean domestic workers in 1975 (Makeda vii). This is the historical context of the line “I am illegal here”

(above), as well as the lines, “Here I am in Canada / bringing up someone else’s child / while someone else and me in absentee / bring up my own” (“I Fight Back,” *Women* 139). Another line in “I Fight Back” dramatizes the connection between Afro-Caribbean domestic workers in Canada and historical slavery: “I scrub floors / serve backra’s meals on time / spend two days working in one / twelve days in a week” (139). Backra is a Caribbean English term for white master, historically the slave master; however, in this poem, the speaker works in Canada.

In his close reading Eldridge explicates the meanings of the poem in light of these historical flows not only of labour and capital but also of culture in the Black Atlantic, emphasizing that Allen’s project is a resistance against both economic and *cultural* neo-colonialism.³ His description of the complex relationships between cultural and economic capital in the Black Atlantic, following Gilroy, places an emphasis similar to Brydon’s on the need for an international and diasporic perspective on Allen’s cultural production in Canada.

Allen’s central and pioneering role in establishing and maintaining more equitable social and cultural links between the Caribbean and Canada is evident in her *Parallelogramme* essays. “Revolutionary Acts: Creating Ourselves Into Existence” (1988) analyses the connections between cultural and economic capital in the Canadian arts and culture scene. More precisely, it explores, through interviews, the ideological commitments of a number of women artists of the 1980s, placing Allen very much within this community. For these politically-committed artists, art is not entertainment, but a tool for consciousness raising; art must not only be political, but also engaged in popular education; and the artist accompanies consciousness-raising work with other community work. As Allen put it in another essay, “[Dub poets] made art part and parcel of political work” (“De Dub Poets” 20). By following through on the emancipatory logic of the dub poetry movement, Allen brought the project of dub poetry, rooted in Jamaica’s political and social problems, into conversation with the radically committed impulses of 1980s Toronto.

In the same year, Allen published “De Dub Poets: Renegades in a One Poem Town” in *This Magazine*, explaining the cultural-political aims and historical development of dub poetry to the general reader. The dub movement in Canada, she writes, “boasts more major practitioners than either Jamaica, Britain or the U.S. and this, ironically, makes dub as essentially Canadian as it is a worldwide black phenomenon” (17). She also defines an important feature of dub poetry in Canada: its orientation to feminist/womanist ideals and its perception of “the limitations of black nationalism and the patriarchy of the male-dominated white left” (19). This has not failed to catch the attention of critics. Habekost construes Allen’s feminist dubs as a “warlike” and confrontational message to male dub poets (205) after describing the sexist lyrics of some 1980s male reggae artists and dub poets. Carr gives a detailed account of Allen’s view on feminist and anti-racist agendas, contextualizing it in a description of African diasporic cultural politics and verbal art forms. Casas argues that Allen’s written and performed orality insists on an embodied perception of her social identity, so that identifying with her message inverts the object-based meaning of “female and black” to a subject-based one (“Orality and the Body”).

³ One of his main points is that the reception and production of Black Atlantic culture has always been accompanied by different permutations of perceived criminality. On this point the essay engages in unintended irony, for Eldridge erroneously labels Allen an illegal immigrant (173).

A second wave of African-Canadian women dub poets followed Allen's lead in the mid-to-late-eighties: Afua Cooper and ahdri zina mandiola. With other black, Caribbean-Canadian poets such as Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Nourbese Philip, they shared an outrage at Canadian racism and a fidelity to a black woman immigrant's point of view. Chancy has described the position of diasporic African-Caribbean feminist writers of the time as "exile." Starting with a subjective definition of exile as:

"irrevocab[le]...an irreparable fissuring of self from homeland" (2), she writes that [e]xile arises from ... poverty enmeshed through exploitative labour practices that overwork and underpay; social persecution resulting from one's dehumanization because of color, gender, sexuality, class standing... Such indignities lead to suicide, violence, more poverty, a vicious cycle of hopelessness, or, finally, self-imposed exile, that is, emigration. (2)

African-Caribbean women have emigrated through most of the twentieth century, but the 1970s and 80s generation articulated a strong sense of dispossession (see Chancy 3-7). Their projected position as alienated black women in Canada was not just because they were excluded from economic opportunities, but because the transition from outsider/émigré to insider "Canadian" was in many cases (and for good reason) made only very slowly. The response of many writers was to politicise this dispossession, to extend the position of exile as/because female and black into an awareness of how oppressions based on race, class, gender, and sexuality function together (hooks).

The themes of a Canadian black feminism (Wane), linked tightly to concerns about cultural equity and generic innovation, are almost always in focus in Allen's *Women Do This Every Day*. Epigrammatic feminist statements such as "Feminism 101": "Instead of being the doormat / get up and be the door" (35) are scattered throughout the collection. However, black women are in a special position and their position is analysed as such: "A woman's work is not recognized / if she be black makes it doubly-dized." (93)

In "The Subversives" Allen advances Chancy's analysis of black female dispossession towards a reconstruction of black female identity based on a radical ambiguity:

You have taken my abstractions
broken my images

.....

separate me from self
 race gender
 history

We who create space
who transform what you say is
 send you scurrying
 scurrying to the dictionary
to add new words

We, we are the subversives
We, we are the underground
(39)

The text links the words "self", "race", "gender", and "history" in a visual cross pattern to make an image of the speaker's experience at the intersection of these identities. The

cross pattern suggests a certain relationship for all four terms: this “self” is a social subject, whose identity rests on a network of alliances shaped by “history” (gender and race). At the same time, the arrangement of these selves is such that it cannot be analysed into smaller parts using a conventional syntax (which requires that any single element precede or follow another in a single line); they are related in a way that does not allow the prioritizing of one term. A black female poet is never just a poet, but also a woman, and also black.

“Revolutionary Tea Party” invites the passer-by/reader to “sit here with we / a mek we drink tea” (133; let’s drink tea). The poem is a dramatized, kitchen-table analysis of solidarity: what it is, why it is desired, and what it might look like: “You who see for peace a future / you who understands the past / you who create with yu sweat from the heart / let’s talk, let’s make art, let’s love, dance.” (133) Eldridge suggests that the title “Revolutionary Tea Party” invokes the Boston Tea Party, so that the poem’s protest against (neo)colonial economics intersects in a striking way with its switches in register (177). But the Communist Revolution is also close to the surface in the line “You who have been burned by vanguardism” (133). In this poem, work is the activity of anyone who “labours.” and the “labour” of giving birth to a child can be compared to the labour of the Marxist working class. (The title poem of the book, “Women Do This Every Day” asserts, “Nine months outa de year / a woman in labour / if it was a man / a bet they woulda paid her” (38).) Since women of all classes “labour” in the sense of giving birth, there is an unrecognised kinship between women and the working class; indeed, between all those “who create with yu sweat from the heart” (134). The traditional work of labourers; the work of giving birth, raising, and supporting a child; the work of the artist; and the work of the revolutionary, are all labours consecrating hope for a better future.

Revolution is an important concept in dub poetry, but in Allen’s poems, revolution is tied to feminism (“Feminism 104”: “revolution” (141)). One component of revolution’s transformative power is childbirth: “[M]y Momma she says / any woman who can make a dot into a child / inside of her / and bring it outside to us / is a model for a revolution” (30). However, childbirth can be embedded in negative social structures. The ballad “Nellie Bellie Swellie” (25) is the story of the feminist radicalizing of a young girl when she is raped by a man in the village, hidden as her pregnancy becomes evident, and finally sent away to give birth to the rapist’s child. The community’s double standard and its shame about female sexuality could not be clearer. It contrasts with the pride and happiness of “Birth” (143), which imitates the panting of a woman in labour (in oral versions the pants are sung in rhythm, interspersed sometimes with the lines “women do this every day”). The pride the labouring mother takes in her newborn (“An baps, she born” 143) is the climax of both labour and poem.

Although her work is strongly woman-identified, Allen dubs on behalf of those who are oppressed for any reason: because they are black (of African descent), because they are poor, or because they are female; but also because they are refugees and refugee families, or because they are victims of social assistance bureaucracy, or homelessness, or police brutality. In *Women Do This* there are poems about international and neo-colonial politics (“I Fight Back”); politics of racist and capitalist oppression (“Freedom is Azania (South Africa Must Be Free)”; environmental politics (“Born to Log”); and different encounters with the spirit of protest and revolution (“Nicaragua,” “Conditions Critical,” “Why Do We Have To Fight,” among others). Carr sees this breadth as part of the tradition of the African *griot*, with Allen as *griot* functioning as a “talking newspaper to offer commentary on lived social history--past and in the making” (16).

Perhaps the most famous of these occasional poems is “Riddim an’ Hardtimes” (63). Two shootings of black men by police officers in 1978 and 1979 came to symbolize police racism to black communities in Toronto and became the focus of significant protest. “Riddim An’ Hardtimes” both commemorates the shooting death of the second, Albert Johnson, but also is clearly meant to offer an expression of outrage and a shared beat to a gathering of people:

dem pounce out the music
carv out the sounds
hard hard
hard like lead
an it bus im in im belly
an’ a Albert Johnson
Albert Johnson dead
dead
dead
(*Women* 63-4)

In this extremely visceral poem, Jamaican English Creole (JEC) spellings are used so markedly they often need explication to a non-Jamaican reader: “an it bus im in im belly” can be translated as “and it burst him in his belly;” “and it punctured his belly.” Together with other dub poets, Allen is well known for her use of JEC (also known as patois). Eldridge, Casas, and others see Allen’s use of JEC as subversive of both linguistic and literary official standards (178; Casas *My Mouth*). While this is no doubt the case, in the dub community it is also common to draw a connection between the rhythms of dub and JEC. According to Habekost, “[t]he rhythms of Jamaican speech, sustained by and reflected in the musical beat, constitute the dub experience” (92). Bucknor goes further in viewing JEC as one of a number of ways in which “the materiality of language filters body pulses into writing” (309), seeing JEC as one of a number of strategies that Allen uses in *Women Do This Every Day* to emphasize “verbal rhythm rather than verbal reference, [...] textual materiality instead of textual referentiality” (302). It is this sort of verbal rhythm that offers a sense of solidarity and a focus for the outraged feelings of a crowd.

Perhaps the most noticeable way in which Allen’s poetry crosses borders is in its insistence on retaining JEC (an oral language) in written poems. According to DeCamp
nearly all speakers of English in Jamaica could be arranged in a sort of linguistic continuum, ranging from the speech of the most backward peasant or labourer [JEC] all the way to that of the well-educated urban professional [Standard Jamaican English]. Each speaker represents not a single point but a span on this continuum, for he is usually able to adjust his speech upward or downward for some distance on it. (82)

Writing is associated with the end of the continuum closest to Standard Jamaican English, while protest songs and oral genres such as dub are associated with the end closer to “the speech of the... labourer.” The transplantation of JEC and other Caribbean English Creoles to the metropolis merely reinforces this division of media, for JEC is even more rigorously excluded from the print mass media and other vehicles of mainstream literacy. This, in turn, means that dub poets who wish to participate in central institutions of literacy must somehow create the creole through the medium of written English.

Since JEC does not have a standardized set of spellings, a reader following closely the way a dub poet writes down the speech sounds of JEC can also follow the poet’s negotiation of the politically-loaded border between orality and print. Allen’s spellings are

as varied as her media-crossing strategies. In “Dis Word,”⁴ for example, the word “this” is spelled in JEC within a poem in which all words but that one are in standard written English:

dis word breeds my rhythm
dis word carries my freedom
dis word is my hand
: my weapon
(*Women* 87)

“Dis” is an accurate rendering--in writing--of the sound of the word in JEC; but that is only a small part of the function of its spelling. First, it has the meanings of the English “this”, which is a deictic, or word denoting the present time and place (at whichever time and place the reader is reading the poem). By referring to its sound through a phonetic spelling, Allen makes a reference to its concreteness. She means, by extension, the word we are reading in the very moment we are reading it. However, due to its specific spelling, “dis” is a JEC word, not a standard English one; the meaning then becomes “this JEC word breeds my rhythm,” and so on. Finally, the contrast between the two dialects in this poem, JEC and standard written English, creates a codeswitch and a miniature border-crossing in the poem itself.

In another such codeswitch, Allen juxtaposes the spellings “riddim” and “rhythm”, placing one above the other in “P O 3”:

R h y t h m

 riddim
rebel revolt
 resistance

R e v o l u t i o n

if these words are not poetic
then poetry has no means to free me
(*Women* 31)

“Rhythm” and “revolution” receive enormous visual emphasis, with their letters distributed widely; but directly underneath “rhythm” is “riddim”. Gingell writes of this switch in spelling that “the text is meta-poetic and challenges the idea of what constitutes ‘proper’ poetic diction, especially the kind of art-for-art’s sake aesthetic that would see politics as anathema to poetry” (237). She adds that the numeral “3” of the title, suggesting the three R’s of a conservative education (reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic) are in this poem “exploded into the six R’s of dub poetry’s pedagogy of the oppressed: rhythm, riddim, rebel, revolt, resistance, and revolution” (236). The word “riddim” in this poem, then, has become not just a phonetic spelling but a new word with a different meaning than the meaning of “rhythm.” (According to Habekost, “riddim” is a specialised term central to reggae as well as dub; in Jamaican popular culture it connotes “ ‘the heartbeat of the people,’ or ‘the pulse of life.’ ” (93).) Gingell also explores the spacing between the syllables in the title, noting that understanding both the first and the last syllable depends on a reader’s effort to imagine a JEC voice. While Canadian English speakers pronounce the grapheme “3” as [θri] (“three”), JEC speakers pronounce it as

⁴ The title is an allusion to Oku Onuora’s famous “Dis Poem.”

[tri] (“tree”), forcing the reader to accept that JEC may be as acceptable a language for writing “poetry” as Canadian English (236).

The functions of JEC in Allen’s work are thus *also* related to the positions of speaking persona and reader/listener. It puts the unidialectal, non-Jamaican reader/listener into a position rarely experienced by unidialectal readers/speakers of English when reading poetry. Bartley describes to Allen being at the release party for the *Conditions Critical* album and “having a really hard time figuring out what you were saying in the line that goes: *Dem a mash it up down inna Jamaica*. I thought: *What are they saying!* and I was listening like crazy trying to figure it out.” (19; emphasis in original) Allen’s response validates Bartley’s effort: “The fact that you said you had to listen carefully, I’m very happy about [...] because the second most important thing we have to do in this ‘multi-cultural’ country is to *listen* carefully to other people.” (19; emphasis in original) The use of JEC, in other words, reverses the systemic insider/outsider positions of Jamaican-Canadian and Euro-Canadian in Canada. It also appropriates stereotypes of JEC speakers in the mass media and in different discourses (the hero of youth culture; the Rasta man; and the image of creole speakers in Canada as the underclass, the poor, and the Other). Since Allen cannot avoid these discourses, her use of JEC in performance and in print functions as a critical appropriation of these stereotypes (cf. Eldridge, Carr, and Casas “Whose Rhythm” on Allen’s critical appropriation techniques).

Allen’s regard for bp nichol (“poem for bp” *Psychic Unrest* 69) emphasizes her frequent and skilled use of concrete poetry techniques. In *Women Do This*, “Social Worker” is set in different scripts to make concrete the different identities, and perhaps symbolize the characteristics, of the two speakers: a social worker and a client (Gingell 237). On *Conditions Critical* Allen voices the social worker’s lines in a piercing falsetto; in print they are in italics. Of the lines “fit fit fit / fit et et et in / a little square / a computer printout page” (68), Gingell writes that they emphasize the sound of the word “fit” by repeating it in whole or in part. She concludes, “even the large white space that Allen creates between the final “et” and the word in is a graphic way of suggesting the breath being withheld until the round peg is finally forced into the square hole (i.e. the fully rounded individual is forced into the shape he or she takes in bureaucratic records, symbolized by the computer print-out page)” (238).

“Anti-Social Work” is a related poem, or perhaps a version, whose only words are “fit,” “anti-fit,” and “anti social work”. Smaller segments of these words create “it” and “fi”. The representation of these words in visual variations covers a whole page. In fact, it is the word “fit” that does most of the work of this poem; “anti-fit” is the climax, and “anti social work” the conclusion. Thus

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Fit    Fit

Fffit  Fffit  Fffit
it     it    it      it    it    it
Fff    f    f    Fff  tttttt
          Fi  ie    e          it
.....
(Women 119)

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The most obvious meanings of this passage are the direct visual meanings of the varying type sizes: the letters seem to be struggling to fit in the same word, that is to fit convention, and to fit together. A whole line of objectified *it*'s are stranded on their own.

Concrete poetry lends itself easily to Allen's commitment to the material, to the present moment of experience, and to personal and social transformation (or revolution). While a dub poem can be wordless in sound, in print it needs some visual representation of the meanings created by those sounds. "Birth", which, in sound, is the panting song of a woman in labour, in print is a series of "ah"s arranged horizontally on the page, with letters of different sizes:

ah a ah ah a ah ah aa

.....

ah a ah ah a ah ah aaaa

aha aaaaa ahaa

an baps

she born

(*Women* 143)

Following the adventures of the letters "a" and "h" in this poem (both of which represent universal human vocal sounds, and are therefore not referential in the same way that conventionalized speech sounds are) forces the reader to follow closely cues that are basic to the visual: size, proportion, repetition, alternation. This type of "reading" does not depend on language as we normally think of it--words--but on certain material aspects of language: vocal sounds and body rhythms. How to write these embodied aspects of language? Allen explains that dub poetry is fundamentally a transformative practice, and that the "aesthetics of dub" means that it is "not just an art form" but a "building towards this moment of transformation, both in the person of this listener and in the process of the form" ("Message" 61-62). Perhaps Allen's most pervasive and fruitful theme is the theme of transformation, and the transformation of orality to print is one of the most important transformations she brings into focus.

The version is an important, related part of Allen's poetics: many poems are reprinted as different versions (often under the same title) in different collections. Allen has produced audio tapes and compact discs along the same principles. Her emphasis on the *process* of creation, on "versions" rather than on a final written artefact, is part of a resistance against language forms that are relatively rigid. Allen explains that "it's not only the art. We take the world into the poetry, and we take the poetry back into the community. And then take what we get from it back into the work. It has to be a process." ("The Message" 59-60) On the other hand, "from the moment... books start being stored on microfiche, you're in trouble with the book" (59). The Subversives' view of writing (see above) is a similar resistance to the transcendental signified, reminiscent of Derrida's *arche-writing*. Fighting social structures symbolised, and even propagated, by writing as a metaphor, the Subversives overturn the written codification of their signs by creating multiple, oral versions.

In "So What (Perspective Poem)," Allen contrasts high literature (always written, never musical) with the enormous social power of an activist's "song":

So what so what so what
So your years of schooled craft

have created fine poems

 so it gave life to the dying
 so it brought peace to one single land
 so no one should imperil its form

 so, so self assured and turgid
 so what if I write a poem like a song?
 (*Women* 127)

In the centre of the poem there is a turn from the ironic (“so it brought peace to a single land”) to the direct (“so no one should imperil its form”). The sudden turn, the juxtaposition of the two lines, and the verb “imperil” (evoking also “imperial”) raise the role of print-capitalism (Anderson) in the establishment of European written literature. The rise of European nation states coincided with colonial expansion. Thus, English high literature and its forms are not just irrelevant, but, through their role in colonisation, life-destroying.

Before the 1993 publication of *Women Do This Every Day*, Allen had self-published three children’s books: *Why Me?*; *Nothing But a Hero*; and *If You See Truth*. *Why me?*, an illustrated story book, is told from the point of view of a young girl growing up in a middle-class, urban environment, listing the events of a “bad day”. It both dramatizes and normalizes the quotidian stresses of a single-parent family, depicted as black and hip by illustrator Sherry Guppy. A number of poems by Allen written for children are in this reassuring vein, shoring up the identity of children who might be suffering from a number of stresses in the Caribbean community in Canada, including the stresses of shifting and conflicting diasporic identities:

To the child who loves to sing silly songs
 to the child who dresses a little weird
 to the child whose heart wanders
 for you, chum, I’ve written this song

Not everyone can fit in a round or square

Oh we are the same but different
 we’re each unique but we’re one
 (“To the Child,” *Nothing But a Hero* 19)

Other poems in the two collections educate in progressive values (“Mother Earth”; “We Are the Future”; *If You See Truth*), while others introduce the child to black history and to traditions of the Caribbean (“Anancy”, “Mandela”, “Nothing But a Hero”). Their political project is clearly anti-racist, educating the next generation of (black and white) artists and audiences.

Why Me? is a story book version of the ballad “A Very Bad Day” in *If You See Truth*. The differences between the two versions are in small differences of wording and larger differences of formatting, type and page design, illustration, and in some cases lineation (though it is clear that line breaks in the story book are dictated in some cases by page margins and page design rather than prosody). These differences arise partly from the different media of the text: the story book is meant to be read to a child while sharing the illustrations; the poem is meant to be read by an adult and recited/performed to a child. In the story book, the words and pictures interact with each other, and the pace

and rhythm of the verbal text is dictated by its division into pages as the reader's attention moves from one page to the next. The story book, in other words, is meant to engage the child's attention visually, while the poem does so aurally.

The nature and importance of the version in Allen's work is clear in this series, especially as a corollary of self-publication. Of the eleven poems in *Nothing But a Hero*, eight are also in the second edition of *If You See Truth*, with small to large differences. These eight are also among the fifty-five collected in *Women Do This Every Day*. Allen has also produced audio-tapes along the same principles. In the Preface to *Women* Allen writes, "As I prepared poems for this collection, I was required to "finalize" pieces I had never imagined as final. Like a jazz musician with the word as her instrument, reading and performing these poems is an extension of the creative and creation process for the work" (9). But the importance of the version also stems from the cultural politics of dub: "Because our poetry is not strictly page-bound, and because institutions in our society do not account for our existence, we have gone directly to the public by recording and self-publishing. We were able to sidestep the all-powerful "middle-man" who serves as the arbiter of culture" ("Introduction" 21). The middle-man in literature is of course the publisher; but together with publisher comes copyright, royalties, and all the other apparatus of text-as-commodity of the European literary tradition. Outside of this tradition, playing with the boundaries of a text by reproducing it in different versions is not only natural, but necessary; within this tradition, the text is far more fixed in form and medium. Both Allen ("De Dub", Introduction) and cultural studies critics of her work (Carr, Eldridge) have done a good job of tracing the class-race relations of cultural production in Canada and the Caribbean that make self-publication a corollary of anti-colonial resistance.

Brydon's essay outlines struggles over the term "multiculturalism" in Canada during the eighties and early nineties and suggests that Canadian literature may be creating nuanced and sophisticated new models of identity, nation, authenticity and diversity while public debate and the literary establishment are stuck in outmoded categories that reinforce the one-poem town mentality (214). These relations are also the focus of Allen's 1993 essay "Transforming the cultural fortress: imagining cultural equity," in which she narrates the case history of a national, grassroots artists' organization that tried to become less exclusionary through by-law and policy but failed to become more representative of non-European artists in the end. Several times in the essay, Allen states that official funding bodies exclude non-Eurocentric art from funding.

In her most recent poetry collection, *Psychic Unrest*, Allen explores the harmful contradictions of official multicultural policy in "Stereotype Friggin'--The Ethnic and the Visible Minority... in Stereo-Typed to Fit" (43-45); a humorous side to this is the well-loved Toronto ballad "Rasta in Court" (55-57), in which a Rasta man on a bike defends his right to ride without a headlight because "When Jah give light him give I and I, I sight" (56). The painful contradictions of the OJ case are also explored: "Nothing can be as terrible as being murdered / nothing can be as painful as losing a loved one / ... / nothing is as ugly as racism / nothing is simple in a fucked-up America / being woman and black / with no relief in sight" (21-22). Also included in the collection is "Don't They Know," a dub against domestic violence whose sound versions were recorded as the title tracks to the cassette *Don't They Know* in 1994 ("Don't they know there's a war / there's a war going on down there / United Nations won't send no peacekeepers in / the Justice Department say its budget's thin" (47)). The subject of this dub is Elizabeth, an older, less hopeful version, perhaps, of Nellie, the young rape victim of the first dub in *Women*

Do This Every Day. For Nellie, “no / was no self defence” (25); in this poem, Elizabeth sits in jail, even though she has explained “it was self-defence” (47).

On the whole, this 1998 collection is quieter and perhaps more sombre in tone than *Women Do This Every Day*. Allen has always taken up a position of hybridity, feeling relatively at home in the metropolis and in the Black Power movement (Personal interview); however, in *Psychic Unrest*, she creates a more introverted persona in certain poems of identification with parts of Canada: “The pace of unfolding Newfoundland’s life / connects to my own / . . . / Language swirl of the Newfoundlander’s roll / . . . / I found my connection / Newfoundland’s soul” (“Song for Newfoundland” 59); “And I care about Quebec / not just for Montreal / that pulsing city in heat / whose hips I want to stride / ... / not the hot air fascism / distinct of Bouchard / but the way they love jazz” (65). Several poems commemorate visits to the North Atlantic coast. In Newfoundland there is an unexpected connection to Jamaica : “Somewhere out at sea / in the Atlantic motion / Caribbean waves meet Newfoundland waters / exchange secrets / and bind us in a dance” (“Newfoundland’s Magic” 63). On Sapelo Island, Georgia the connection is directly to Africa, through the Middle Passage (“Sapelo Island” 35) and through the island itself as “a paradigm of endurance / for a people’s survival” (“Cabretta Beach (on Sapelo Island)” 39). These connections with the landscape and language of Canada and the North American coast are embedded in Allen’s long-term concerns with her African roots; and they are also connections with her long-time concern for Caribbean and diasporic struggles for equity and the expression of something essentially Jamaican and black.

A dominant theme of *Psychic Unrest* is language. Epigrams about language float on their own pages, title-less, through the book: “So you want to write...? In whose language...?” (20); “de root of all language is impulse” (53); “the square root of impulse is language” (68); ‘Phonological language: “hello...hello...”’ (84). Allen’s perceptions about language and identity remain fine-tuned. In “Mrs,” the speaker is in a waiting room when a technician comes in and calls the speaker “Mrs”. This description of a fairly mundane mistake is then elaborated with a subtle description of how the speaker reacts with equanimity,

in a pace of my own
in a tempo earned
from struggle and long places
of silences

I no longer engage words
or meanings such as
Mistress
rhymes with distress
.....

Missus
miss us, ourselves
when we answer to words
others name us
(*Psychic* 51).

A similar poem, “No Longer at Bat,” describes “a silent thud / that shatters” when the speaker lets certain words pass her by: “my eyes are no longer on a ball / that society or anyone else / throws me.” (67)

“In these Canadian bones” modifies the old metaphor of woman as possessed or conquered territory: Africa is the conqueror of Canada (both as body and as land), with Jamaica and calypso cast as cultural agents of a deep change. Landscape/territory is considered the product of cultural modifications rather than the pristine, untouched Nature of Anglo-Canadian literature and myth. This landscape is linguistic as well as musical, cultural, somatic, and physical:

In these Canadian bones
where Africa landed
and Jamaica bubble
inna reggae redstripe
and calypso proddings of culture
We are creating this very landscape
we walk on

My daughter sings opera
speaks perfect Canadian
And I dream in dialect
grown malleable by my Canadian tongue
(*Psychic* 65)

The poem illustrates the depth of the changes that can affect language/identity as the speaker finds herself with an altered voice.

In 2003, Allen formed the Dub Poets Collective with Cooper, Broox, Singh, Joseph, young, and Juba. In “Revolutionary Acts” (1988) Allen had written, “What would it look like if twenty of us created an organization around our area of artistic interest or expertise, and twenty different people would do the same each year! It would transform the Canadian cultural landscape” (34). Without these organizations, artists, poets, and performers can easily dwindle or fail to develop; with such organizations, individual poets can be nurtured, imagining and developing the better versions of diversity and identity that Brydon points out Canada so desperately needs. Dub Poets Collective has staged a number of reading series and international dub poetry festivals, inviting poets from as far away as Britain, Jamaica, Cuba, and Bermuda. Its programme of workshops for youth led by Klyde Broox, STEPUP, has been a success. Although events, workshops, and festivals have been funded by several arts councils, the Collective has not so far acquired sufficient operating funds to establish its infrastructure securely. However, in 2006, a Collective member’s book of poems won the 2006 Seraphim Editions award for Best Poetry Book at the Hamilton Literary Awards. They were the first literary awards in Canada to go to dub poetry. From this, one can extract a measure of optimism, if not about the openness of the Canadian mainstream literary establishment, then about the strength of the diasporic and Caribbean poetry movement pioneered and nurtured in Canada by Lillian Allen.

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note:

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keywords:

African-Caribbean woman poet

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dub poetry in Canada
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orality and writing
concrete poetry

In the study of history as an academic discipline, a primary source (also called an original source) is an artifact, document, diary, manuscript, autobiography, recording, or any other source of information that was created at the time under study. It serves as an original source of information about the topic. Similar definitions can be used in library science, and other areas of scholarship, although different fields have somewhat different definitions. In journalism, a primary source can be a primary work definition in English dictionary, primary work meaning, synonyms, see also 'primary accent', 'primary cell', 'primary colour', 'primary election'. Enrich your vocabulary with the English Definition dictionary.