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Multiculturalism in the Poetry of

Lillian Allen, Louise Bennett, Jean 'Binta' Breeze,
and M. Nourbese Philip

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To

My grandmother

For

Boundless love and sweet memories

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PREFACE

This dissertation consists of five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter I is entitled “The Background: Multiculturalism and Dub Poetry”. In *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*, multiculturalism is defined as a term “relating to, reflecting, or adapted to diverse cultures” (815). However, it turns out to be an idealistic movement, as the oppressor, or the dominant white culture, tends to engulf the culture of the other ethnic minorities. It is largely connected with the long history of blacks, their suffering, pain, oppression and marginalization. Though multiculturalism and the Canadian mosaic have theoretical, idealistic assumptions of cultural diversity and interaction, both are criticized as impractical, decorative, socially divisive and regressive (Fleras and Elliott 128). Canadian multiculturalism is divided into three main phases: “incipient, formative, and expansionist,” as pointed out by Elliott and Fleras (71). As a theory, it involves processes of assimilation, integration, segregation and acculturation. Multiculturalism is also concerned with the concept of hybridity. In other words, immigrants usually have a hybrid character which brings together their own national, cultural norms with the cultural values of the multi-ethnic country in which they settle down.

In *Merriam Webster’s Dictionary*, the noun “dub” is defined as “Jamaican popular music in which audio effects and spoken or chanted words are imposed on an instrumental reggae background” (385). Jamaican proverbs, folksongs, oral stories as well as African dances and European ones, such as the quadrille,

are reflected in the literary and the performative modes of African dub poetry. The Jamaican patois used in dub verse is a means of forging the existence of the African cultural identity, and resisting the white cultural dominance. Dub poetry is marked by a diagram of action and interaction taken from African verse and music. According to Christian Habekost, some oral features help to chart this diagram, such as onomatopoeia and alliteration. The Jamaican critic, Carolyn Cooper, and the poet, 'Binta' Breeze, introduce a new form of dub poetry known as meta-dub. The main tendency of this form is to criticize and review the whole poetic genre of dub poetry out of the borders of the reggae rhythm. In the years 1977-82, dub poetry had a political tendency, with its focus on the ghetto. Habekost relates dub poetry to the main feminist mainstream by considering the dub verse written by women in the 1980s. Finally, in the 1990s, dub poetry acquired a socialist tendency, reflecting the collapse of communism as a social system.

Chapter II, entitled "Lillian Allen, The Leading Canadian Dub Poet: Reggae Dub Poetry," focuses on Lillian Allen (1951-) as a major Jamaican-Canadian dub poet, socialist, and artist whose dub poems celebrate her African roots and identity, as well as her call for social equality between Africans and Canadians. The African technique of the griot, which is a kind of social history recitation, as well as the concepts of transnationalism and transhistoricism, are employed in her dub verse in order to point out a relationship between the current postcolonial economic and racial empowerment of blacks, and the history of slave trade. Allen's delineation of the Jamaican

feminist dimension is related to her attack against the postcolonial economic and cultural empowerment of Africans, as well as her call for liberty and equality. She attacks the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as the United Nations International Bill of Human Rights, for their hypothetical claims of equality. Allen tackles the concept of multicultural pluralism in her dub poems, showing how the cultural norms of ethnic minorities are marginalized, while the dominant Quebec Canadian culture is always welcomed. Her dub poetry foreshadows her multiple voice as a Caribbean Canadian member of the Jamaican Diaspora, an anti-racist, a feminist, a member of the coloured minorities, a mouthpiece of environmental and cultural organizations, as well as an anti-imperialist.

Chapter III, “Louise Bennett Coverely: Multiculturalism and Mento Poetry,” considers “Miss Lou” or Louise Bennett (1919-2006) as a Jamaican poet folklorist, and artist performer who deals with multiculturalism. She totally adheres to Jamaican Creole. Her poetry reflects the shaping components of the Jamaican identity, and tackles the dilemmas facing Jamaican people before and after colonialism. The difference between Jamaican patois and standard colonial English, as well as ethnic and racial differences, are issues considered in her poetry. Between the 1940s and 1970s, British colonization, slavery and American culture tried to dominate Jamaican identity, causing Bennett to focus on the theme of identity quest. After Jamaica’s independence from the British colonization, Bennett attempted to write poems with the purpose of helping Jamaicans to reconstruct their true original culture. Bennett points out that the British

colonization has brainwashed many features related to the Jamaican heritage and culture. She uses the Jamaican Creole language as an attempt to revive the lost cultural identity, and to portray the life of the Jamaican population. Bennett has changed the style of the ballad poem, adding to it a Jamaican oral spirit. Bennett's poetry focuses on the image of the Jamaican woman and her varied characteristics. Black immigrants have to forget about many of their cultural norms, in order to cope with the colonial culture which racially marginalizes them.

Chapter IV, "Jean 'Binta' Breeze: Multiculturalism and Meta-Dub Poetry" focuses on Breeze (1957 -) as the originator of what is known as "Women's domestic dub," which criticizes the racially marginalized status of black women. She has contributed a new poetic genre known as meta-dub, which is free from the reggae rhythm. Nancy of the Maroons is a Jamaican warrior whose struggle against post-colonialism and slavery is portrayed in Breeze's dub poetry. The spirit of black feminism in the 1970s and 1980s encouraged Jean 'Binta' Breeze to develop African rhyming beats, such as calypso, quadrille, mento and European folk songs.

Chapter V, "Silence, Body and Space in the Poetry of Marlene Nourbese Philip: A Multicultural Perspective," is mainly concerned with Philip (1947 -) as an African Canadian poet, dramatist and essay writer, born in Tobago. She also focuses on the "ai" sound as part of her attempt to modify the father tongue, or the colonial standard English, to give it the African spirit, and put an end to the silence imposed on mother

tongue. This idea of language metamorphosis is tackled by Philip in many of her poems. The image of the child is a motif in her poetry. Body/ Memory and retrospection interrupt silence, turning it into the immigrant's means of resistance, and foregrounding the blacks' history of enslavement and marginalization. Space, body, the parsing technique and intertextuality from Greek mythology are among the elements that heighten Philip's polyphonic, diverse discourses. Philip's focus on language fragmentation, typographical marks, as well as vertical and horizontal movements between poetic discourses are all part of her linguistic/ textual transformation of the English patriarchal language. Her diverse scientific, didactic, religious and socio-realistic discourses convey her state of a culture's loss within the Canadian atmosphere of cultural diversity. The study is followed by a list of all the works consulted in this dissertation.

CHAPTER I: The Background

Multiculturalism and Dub Poetry

Introduction:

The present study attempts to trace the concept of multiculturalism in selected poems by four women poets of Jamaican-Canadian origin, namely Lillian Allen, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Louise Bennett and M. Nourbese Philip. It is hoped that it will be a new contribution to academic studies, as it attempts to assess multiculturalism in the poetry of these women poets. Actually, in multiethnic countries like Canada, multiculturalism is a cultural pluralism which leads to racial discrimination, and which involves power and resistance. To fight racial discrimination, these poets use dub poetry. The study will show how the selected poems encapsulate the racial and ethnic dilemmas that face blacks in multicultural countries. They use their Jamaican cultural heritage and language as a means of resisting racial subjugation. For instance, Breeze focuses on the legendary Jamaican woman warrior, Nancy of the Maroons, and her struggle to fight British colonization. Bennett says that writing should be in the Jamaican patois so that Jamaican citizens should not be separated from their culture and vernacular. Philip points out that colonial standard English, or what she calls the father language, dominates her mother tongue which is related to the history of ex-slavery. Therefore, she introduces silence and memory retrospection as a means of culture resistance. Allen focuses on history recitation, or the technique of griot, to attack the racial, cultural and political

empowerment of blacks by multicultural Canadian society. All four women poets assert in their poetry that in multi-ethnic countries, the means of cultural assimilation simply leads to cultural loss of identity.

Multiculturalism has been the official policy of the Canadian government for many years. Therefore, besides giving an overview of it, this chapter will also attempt to shed light on some of the concepts that are closely connected with it, namely: acculturation, assimilation, segregation and integration. Dub poetry will also be expounded, as it is the ultimate means of resistance used by ethnic minorities to express their pain and agony, as well as their revolt against the oppressive white culture. The study focuses on it as a new literary African form shedding light on its different sub-genres such as meta-dub, rapso-poetry, campaign-dub poetry and women-dub-poetry. Hence, it is convenient to divide this chapter into two main parts: Part I is devoted to multiculturalism and part II is concerned with dub-poetry.

I.i. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is ethnicity as public policy: it is society's view of the individual's assigned place within its construct ... The multicultural society has tended to diminish the role and autonomy of the individual by insisting on placing individuals within preconceived, highly stereotypical confines. It has confused the positive role that ethnicity--one's racial, cultural and historical background(s) – can play in creating the fullness of the self (N. Bissondath 214).

Fleras and Elliott point out that the Canadian nation is divided into “three major forces (aboriginal first nation, charter groups, and ethnoracial minorities)”(1). Multiculturalism as a theory is criticized as being the initiator of cultural and social disunity in Canadian life. Some critics, like Reginald Bibby, regard multiculturalism “as irrelevant, counterproductive, or unworkable. Official endorsement of multiculturalism, it is said, threatens to ghettoize our diversity”(2-3). As a theory, it simply leads to a disunited, disconnected society whose members are not mutually involved with one another. It is a relative theory combining diverse cultures together in the image of a mosaic. Canadian mosaic is vertically considered by several critics. This is mainly because ethnic minorities are demeaned as having low social class standards, and in many cases holding mean, depreciating occupations. They are also racially segregated and socially alienated, if they decide to stick to their own culture, traditions, history and mother tongue.

In *Controversial Issues in Multiculturalism*, Mitchell Maki defines the “pluralistic multicultural approach” as an idealistic, cohesive movement that harmoniously unites ethnic minorities together (1). Maki differentiates between multiculturalism as a theory and acculturation, on the one hand, and assimilation, on the other. He adds that acculturation and assimilation adopt different cultural traditions in the attempt made by ethnic minorities to reach cultural absorption. However, Maki asserts that this view is superficial owing to the fact that ethnic minority’s cultural identity is the byproduct of the clash between old and foreign cultural traditions. Consequently, blacks tend to

lose their identity as they lose the uniting bonds with their mother country. Dark skin colour and other physical differences have strengthened the marginalization of blacks. Their new, acquired cultural identity is formulated as a result of a long historic ethnic experience that is marked by oppression and discrimination. Hence, the idealistic visions of acculturation and assimilation are proved to be hypothetical, just like the notion of the melting pot. This is mainly because “cultures of colour” cannot be spiritually or harmoniously assimilated with other foreign cultures (Maki 4). Intermarriages between ethnic minorities and whites are not welcomed, and face many social obstacles. The new generations of coloured children start to forget all about their mother culture, and think of acculturation as their only social solution.

Assimilation and Pluralism

Assimilation and cultural pluralism as concepts call for social equality between nations belonging to different cultural backgrounds. Assimilation as a movement defends the rights of ethnic minorities to live as equals with whites, enjoy the same job opportunities, and accommodation, and look upon intermarriages between members of nations as a social matter of fact. Social stability should be expanded with the notion of assimilation to include the fields of education, economy, politics and language. However, according to Maki, assimilation has two dimensions. One calls for acculturation with the white culture, while the other encourages social involvement, hegemony or what is known as “amalgamation” between ethnic minorities and whites (Maki 7). Cultural pluralism is, on the other hand, a

movement which involves some measures of segregation, as it encourages ethnic minorities to speak their mother tongue and keep their cultural norms. However, as a movement, it ends with social separation and isolation of ethnic minorities who are actually divided into two groups: “territorialists” and “biculturalists” (Maki 7). Territorialists promote social separation from the main white culture's mainstream in such fields of life as politics and economy. Biculturalists welcome the idea of a limited social exchange between themselves and whites. However, they still have their own distinct family bonds, accommodation and working places.

As a counter-reaction to the hypothetical idea of assimilation, as well as oppression, segregation and enslavement that are forced upon ethnic minorities, pluralism has emerged as a movement. In fact it is related to blacks who suffer from poverty and shortage of working opportunities, forcing them to become members of movements that call for returning to Africa. John F. Longers comments on assimilation and pluralism as hypothetical movements, saying: “assimilation and pluralism ... represent ... utopian visions of how [ethnic minorities] ... can live in peace and harmony; [as they are supposed to be] unified in ... equity [as well as] ... History” of humanity (6). However, this contradicts reality of a racial bias which confronts ethnic minorities who “have passed through enslavement, Jim Crow laws, Indian removal and wars, and the development of a reservations system” (Longers 6). In this condition of an ethnic strife, “[m]ultiethnic societies [historically known to] offer many