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THE POWER OF THE WORD: TEACHING BLACK FEMINIST CURRICULUM USING DUB POETRY

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ABSTRACT. This essay explores the transformative potential of Dub poetry through a personal account of teaching a Master's elective course in a Faculty of Education. I argue that the epistemology and curriculum of Dub poetry offered multifaceted ways to challenge and disrupt the neoliberal knowledge production in Canadian higher education, and thus allowed students to critically (re)examine taken for granted assumptions about the Canada they live in and, importantly, their roles as teachers. Although a range of poets were studied, this discussion is framed in Black feminist thought and the course focused primarily on two Jamaican-Canadian women Dub poets, Lillian Allen and d'bi young anitafrika.

LE POUVOIR DE LA PAROLE : ENSEIGNER UN PROGRAMME FÉMINISTE NOIR À TRAVERS LA POÉSIE DUB

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article explore le potentiel transformateur de la poésie dub à travers le récit personnel d'un cours que j'ai enseigné au niveau de la maîtrise dans une faculté des sciences de l'éducation. Je soutiens que l'épistémologie et le programme d'études de la poésie dub ont offert de multiples stratégies pour remettre en question et contester la production néolibérale du savoir dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Cette approche a permis aux étudiant·e·s de réexaminer leurs présupposés concernant le Canada et leurs rôles en tant qu'enseignant·e·s. Bien qu'on ait étudié une variété de poètes, cette discussion porte sur la pensée féministe noire et privilégie deux poètes jamaïcaines-canadiennes : Lillian Allen et d'bi young anitafrika.

In the forefront of our move toward change,

there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real.

Audre Lorde (1984, p.39)

Teaching is a powerful and political act, one of the most revolutionary acts that we perform in the university. This was especially evident after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, when Canadian universities took steps to address anti-Black racism through curriculum and teaching. How we teach and what we teach should be at the core of our pedagogy as education professors. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) argues that, for those of us actively researching, teaching and developing courses and materials in Black Women's Studies, the search for holistic, theoretical content and for classroom processes that transform consciousness are necessary for social action. This study aims to address both transformative curriculum and holistic ways of teaching and is based on a narrative inquiry into two iterations of a special topics Master's course taught in 2018 and in 2019. The course centred on the poetry of Black feminist Dub poets. I examine the course content, activities and assignments as exemplars of curricula and pedagogy poised to raise consciousness about social and educational issues in Canadian schools and families. In other words, the study examines the disruptive (transformative) power of Dub poetry as a curricular and pedagogical intervention. As the David Lam Chair in Multicultural Education (2016-2021), I was required to create a special topics course on the theme of multicultural education. I deemed the course befitting the professorship for three reasons. My home department, the Department of Language and Literacy Education, values language and poetry, and has a history of poet-professors. The course offered new knowledges regarding the notion of poetry and language as well as new understandings of Canadian society that students could use in their own educational practice. In addition, and thirdly and most importantly for the purpose of the present article, as a Black woman of Jamaican heritage raised in the UK and Canada, I wanted to share a Jamaican diasporic lens through language, music and poetry

Since 2020, with the murder of Floyd, my university, like many across North America and beyond, has made stronger commitments toward addressing institutional anti-Black racism. As a professor who has worked to concretize Black Canadian Studies in my courses, I am committed to this liberatory framework as a way to understand what it means to be fully human (Collins, 1990; King, 2019; McKittrick, 2021). To that end, every few years, I step back from my scholarship and practice to write an article about my teaching or my experience as a Black female academic (Henry 1994; 1996; 2000; 2001; 2015). My hope is that these studies contribute to understanding the subjective experience of Black women in education who are often erased from curricula. I agree with Katherine McKittrick (2006), who reminds us that Black women

challenge how we know and understand the world, how we resist erasure and subordination, and how we navigate white racialized spaces.

Most Canadians would be familiar with some form of performance poetry or spoken word poetry. Dub poetry is a Jamaican-derived oral art form that reclaims the creativity and beauty of the everyday language of Jamaicans. Jamaican Creole is known by its speakers as "Patwa." The British colonial system taught Jamaicans to devalue and even deride their language. White supremacy has kept this belief in place. The ways that the language intersects with race, class, generation and societal attitudes is a fascinating discussion for another time. Suffice it to note that, to this day, despite its ubiquity throughout Jamaican culture in everyday interactions and the arts, and despite an attitude of pride towards Patwa, the legacy of colonialism still lurks. One still finds Jamaicans who consider the language to be a broken, ungrammatical form of English, rather than an English-based Creole with its own grammar.

Dub has its political and aesthetic roots in reggae, which has had a global musical impact. Dub poetry may or may not be accompanied by reggae music and most Dub poetry carries a political message tackling the issues of the day. The term "Dub" was borrowed from the recording technique of removing and adding sound.

The course explored Dub poetry's pedagogical, curricular, linguistic and aesthetic possibilities. For the most part, we focused on the poetic and theatrical works of two Jamaican Canadian female Dub poets from two generations, Lillian Allen and d'bi.young anitafrika, and how they have concretized and reshaped Dub poetry and Dub theatre in Canada, all the while connecting with a wider range of Black diasporic poets in Canada, the United Kingdom and Jamaica. The course provided an analytic springboard from which to carry out an intersectional and critical inquiry into issues in everyday Canadian life that are relevant to teacher knowledge and practice, from critiques of "acceptable English" and one's "nation language" to racialized economic marginalization and Black youth alienation.

Students were introduced to several Dub poets in the Jamaican diaspora, sometimes for the mere aesthetic pleasure of the performance or the poetic, sometimes for the social commentary, other times for their foundational historical and political significance. I wanted to introduce students to the poetry's richness and its range of poets. Dub poets themselves have warned us not to compartmentalize them, as captured by Morris (1997):

> Linton Kwesi Johnson says 'I've always seen myself as a poet full stop.' Mutabaruka, similarly, says 'My poetry is just: poetry.' Jean Binta Breeze remarks, 'I'd rather say I am a poet and write some Dub poems than say I am a Dub poet.' (p. 3)

The Power of the Word: Dub Poetry as Canadian Educational Critique was a course designed to examine the language and performance of Dub poetry as a multifaceted linguistic, cultural, transgressive, radical, populist, and activist art form, one that drew attention to its poets as critical theorists of Black life and the human condition. The course offered depictions of contemporary Black lives in Canada and called into question the liberal ideals of multiculturalism that do not take into consideration the specificities of race. As several scholars have remarked, the official language and multicultural policies do not work for all racialized groups (Haque, 2014; Stanley, 2000).

Dub poetry was unfamiliar to most students as a scholarly subject of study. Grace[1], a newly-arrived teacher from Jamaica who used Dub poetry in her Language Arts classes in the Caribbean, commented: "I didn't know that Dub was something that people actually study and write about and analyze." The education system has erased intellectual knowledge by and about Black people, to such an extent that *all* of the students were surprised to learn of the existence and range of content not only of Dub poetry but also of the Black Canadian scholarly texts studied in class complementing its study. Indeed, many had no idea what they had signed up for! They were familiar with other forms of performance poetry and with language variation from experience or from their studies, and this prior knowledge provided rich fertile ground on which to deepen their knowledge.

In what follows, I give a brief discussion of the significance of, and justification for, the course. I also touch on the student demographics. I then articulate the theoretical framework, particularly, the significance of a critical Black feminist lens in the study of Black Canadian women Dub poets' views on Black Canadian life. Next, I describe the methodology and ensuant ethical issues that accompanied studying and writing about one's class and students. The remaining sections focus on examining Dub poetry's epistemic critique of western conceptions of poetry and language, and the ways in which Dub poetry offers an anticolonial critique of knowledge production. The choreography of Dub poetry and its socio-political texts helped supplement the students' lack of knowledge about Black Canadians. As mentioned, the students have undergone an educational system that continues to privilege European knowledges. I argue that the study of the works of Canadian Dub poets disrupts the very ideals underpinning Canadian society, that is, the narrative of an egalitarian multicultural society. Lastly, I share a few of the students' creative and textual applications in their assignments.

TEACHING DUB POETRY IN A FACULTY OF EDUCATION

I teach in a faculty of education where questions of curriculum and pedagogy are axiomatic. For the most part, especially at the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Master of Education (M.Ed.) levels, required "methods" and "core" courses

are necessarily concerned with licensure and Ministry of Education standards. Even though Canadian faculties espouse discourses of equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism, Black Canadian specificities are scarce or altogether absent from curricula, even where they could be appropriate. This absence reflects the politics of knowledge and the western focus on texts by white authors. Suppressing Black knowledges, languages and cultural ways of being denies students the opportunity to ask critical questions and understand the world from informed perspectives other than majority white perspectives. Although I had written about my teaching, as mentioned earlier, I had not intended the course (hereafter referred to as: *The Power of the Word*) to be a pedagogical inquiry. I had been jotting down notes during and after teaching the course, this for my own reflective purposes, especially as I was teaching a new special topics course and because I found the students' comments worthy of reflection for future class planning. After the completion of the second iteration of the course and after reading student feedback, I decided to share what I consider to be a unique Faculty of Education counterstory, that is, a story oppositional to dominant ways of being (Yosso, 2002) and that could contribute to decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BLACK FEMINISMS

My Dub praxis prioritized Black women poets and Black feminist theoretical and pedagogical lenses to create an environment in which students could understand often-ignored inequities in Canadian society and the education system. There are a range of Black feminisms throughout the African diaspora, with its theorists espousing various disciplines, methodologies, and thus views of the world (Da Silva, 2018; Dolphyne, 1991; Florvil, 2020; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Briefly, Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that addresses, and is grounded in, Black women's knowledges, historical positions, and lived experiences in a patriarchal, white supremacist and capitalist society (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2014). Gloria Joseph (1988) envisioned Black feminism as a "philosophy of liberation of humankind," and its classroom practice as "a pedagogy of liberation" (p.177). The Dub poets studied in the course offered intersectional analyses of Black women's historical and social location in the complex matrix of power relations of racism, classism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism in a Euro-centered patriarchal society and thus, presented trenchant analyses and critiques of what it means to be Black in Canada.

Allen's volume, *Women Do This Every Da*y (1993), is peppered with poems that at once acknowledge Black women's transformative capacity as in her poem "My Momma" (pp. 28-30) and struggle for humanity in everyday interactions and institutions wherein Black women are required "to fit" in a white system, as in her poem, "Social Worker." Allen tackles sexual abuse against young girls

in “Nellie Belly Swelly.” For her part, in “Once Upon a Black Boy” anitafrika (2018) creates a scenario in which they plead with their son not to change out of his school uniform at the end of the school day before coming home. anitafrika hopes that, in the public sphere, the uniform will act as a protective measure against this 6-foot child being perceived as a threatening thug. As a queer Black woman, anitafrika’s poetry broached oft-ignored themes of homophobia in “Revolushun III” (2007) and the diversity of Black women’s experiences in “Black Woman” (2018): “Calling all Black Woman from across the land: [...] Transgender, cisgender, two-spirit, queer and lesbian. All spectrum, all abilities” (anitafrika, 2018, para 4).

Both artists engage the Black woman as subject, broaching topics that undergird the specificities that often go unspoken in university education classes. Coupled with Black feminist thought and pedagogy, then, Dub poetry and its offshoots such as Dub theatre performed by artists such as anitafrika and their mentor Ahdri Zhina Mandiela can offer an alternative epistemic lens to understand Black Canadian realities and prioritize the realities of Black women and girls in their elucidation of anticolonial and transformative education. Moreover, these texts trouble the over-reliance on African American texts to address Canadian issues.

METHODOLOGY

The narrative inquiry underpinning the study can be considered an example of single-case study design. Case studies explore a bounded system or case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information to cull the richness of the context. The purpose is to identify their uniqueness or complexity and/or similarities across cases or to other cases and to arrive at a broad, in-depth understanding of the case(s) (Glette & Wiig, 2022). A case can be a person, people, an event, an institution, or as in this instance, a Dub poetry course.

This narrative inquiry relates to a number of complementary approaches and literatures used in the study of pedagogy: reflective practice, self-study, research on teaching, and teacher research. Regardless of terminology and differences in definitions, these are approaches that educators use to describe the process of critically studying their teaching and the social and academic development of, and feedback from, their students (Clarke & Erickson, 2003). Reflection on one’s practice has a long history in education. (See, for example: Clandinin & Connelly 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993; Dewey, 1933/1993; Schön, 2017.)

For educators interested in researching teaching, data opportunities are ubiquitous. We often take for granted that we collect and analyze data when we plan and design courses, when we observe and assess our students, when

our classes are evaluated for their teaching, and when we draw from our own past experiences. Data for this study were no exception, and were gathered from classroom activities, conversations in and outside of class with students about the content and their learning, my own observations during classes (a form of participant observation), and a review of documents (viz., required readings, student assignments, and related literatures mentioned above as well as critical works on race and Black feminisms).

My aim with this inquiry was to glean insights from teaching the course and to understand the learning process from the perspective of students. Since I was working with an existing data set and not collecting and analyzing data in tandem as advocated by some qualitative approaches (Charmaz, 2014; 2020, Glaser &Strauss, 2017), thematic analysis was an appropriate inductive method (Amani et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2014; 2019). I carefully read and re-read all classroom artifacts, my class notes from both iterations of teaching, and relevant research. I created and refined codes based upon the themes, patterns, insights, that I observed, going back and forth between the various documents and always, "questioning and querying the assumptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594) in this interpretive process. After writing up my findings, I shared the penultimate draft with the study participants for comments and feedback. Before sharing the findings of my analysis, a discussion about research ethics is appropriate.

Ethics and risks to participants

Ethical dilemmas often emerge when writing about one's teaching with the aim of improving practice (Pinnegar & Murphy, 2019). For example, one cannot guarantee absolute privacy or confidentiality. These realities were stated in the UBC ethics application, the invitation to participate and the participant consent form. Even with the use of pseudonyms, there resides the possibility of identifiability amongst class members. Thus, I had to be judicious about what could be shared and make sure that students were comfortable with the excerpts chosen. In a class where Black and racialized students might have expressed sentiments for the first time in their classes, I felt a responsibility to ensure what Collins (1990) calls "an ethic of care" (p.190) and this not just for the racialized students but for all class members. No student should feel alienated or shut out from discussions, which calls for a delicate balance between racialized students' voices and ensuring a space in which cross-cultural dialogue can flourish.

The requirements of institutional research ethics boards, although changing, are based primarily on medical and scientific models of research. Jane Zeni (2001) reminds us that research in educational contexts often involves issues that do not always conform to the guidelines of these boards. Thus, as a case in point, Dave requested that his real name be used in this publication. This

request immediately raised a question, namely, "would the research ethics board approve an application using the participants' names, thereby breaching privacy and confidentiality?" On the other hand, I liked the idea of naming participants. Indeed, "voice" is a salient concept in the work of Black feminist scholars (hooks, 1989; Joseph, 1988; Baker-Bell, 2020). Students have a right to own their own words. Some researchers who advocate for humanizing and empowering research methods use the names of their participants in their studies (Mishler, 1986). Other authors necessarily identify participants by name, such as in historical and biographical studies. I wondered, though, how the other participants might respond to this request, especially regarding one person for whom being openly known and potentially recognized might have had consequences at their workplace. Moreover, the participants had signed consent forms in which they were assured that they would not be identified by name, in accordance with the research ethics board protocol. After conferring with all participants regarding their preferences, it became clear that most saw using their names as a means of recognition, ownership, and empowerment. They deserved to be acknowledged for contributing to the study and had a right to own their words and work (Mishler, 1986).

Ultimately, I had to forsake Dave's request to protect the person who might suffer consequences at their place of employment. Our responsibility as researchers is to avoid harm of any kind to participants. The others understood the decision to not use their names.

DUB POETRY DISRUPTS THE TRADITIONAL CANADIAN CURRICULUM

To set the epistemological centrality of Black women's experience as the course priority, students were introduced to Lillian Allen's "Birth" on the first day. This poem recounts a tale about the anguish of the labour and delivery of her daughter, Anta. Allen is one of Canada's foremost Dub poets, and one of the founders of the Dub Poets Collective. This poet, educator and activist has refashioned the Jamaican oral tradition into a new expression, in a new transnational context, providing a particular feminist/womanist hue. Much of the course focused on her process of creative production. "Birth" in aural/oral and print form was a poem that we returned to on several occasions. Pedagogically, her 1988 live concert version proved to be an ideal medium to present to the students multimodally on the first day of the course. Allen exuded great joy from the moment that she introduced her poem about giving birth to her daughter. Joy is an unexplored pedagogical tool and important in setting a classroom tone. Bettina Love (2019) emphasizes the importance of Black joy in antiracist pedagogies; joy is a way for Black people to acknowledge more than their challenges and trials and to celebrate Black creativity, imagination, healing, and ingenuity.

With print versions in hand, students then enjoyed the video images of Lillian Allen performing her poetry whilst bopping about to the rhythms of the reggae band performing with her. Her energetic physical gestures and vocalizations suggested the physical labour of the birth story that she was telling. Along with her playful, creative use of sound, these signifiers and the repetition of words, phrases and onomatopoeia helped those unfamiliar with Dub poetry to be less befuddled by Patwa. The signifiers were able to open up a discussion of many themes that were revisited in more depth throughout the duration of the course, i.e., the epistemology of Dub, Creoles, the role of reggae, Dub poetry in written and oral forms, orthographic conventions of Patwa, and the ways in which Dub poetry both utilizes and deviates from the kinds of formal poetic and linguistic devices learned in our youth in school—and, of course, the focus on the specificity of Black women's experiences in Canada.

By the second week of the course, I realized the extent of the students' knowledge gaps about Black Canada, and global events affecting Black people, let alone a long Black intellectual tradition. This was not at all their fault. The education system and the media keep us quite illiterate about the African diaspora, privileging some knowledge over others. For example, in a discussion of Caribbean migration, I brought up the topic of the Windrush generation. Only Maya, a Black student from the U.K., understood its reference, and she was able to explain to the class that HMT Empire Windrush was the ship carrying those who migrated from the Caribbean to Britain by invitation from the British government after World Word II. These migrants helped to rebuild Britain's infrastructure and became naturalized British citizens. However, in 2018, many were subject to a racist deportation campaign in which they were denied rights and forced to 'return' to the Caribbean, unfamiliar territory for many (Bulman, 2019). This not-knowing about Windrush, in essence, is part of a larger "epistemology of ignorance" (Mills, 1997, p. 97) that allows those in the dominant group not to know, and which is then perpetuated throughout the education system.

I had anticipated some knowledge gaps and designed the first three weeks of the course to oscillate between poetry and background historical and socio-political readings in order to provide an understanding of Canadian and Caribbean transnational issues. In my view, a course syllabus is always a living document, fine-tuned after meeting the students, then progressively reshaped through understanding the contours of their knowledge and needs. (See the course list of readings in appendices A and B.) As such, the discussion of the Windrush generation and Britain's immigration policies beautifully introduced poets central to this oral form who were also on the syllabus, namely, Louise Bennett and her famous poem "Colonization in Reverse" (1966) which provides social and political commentary on Jamaican post-World War II influx to Britain.

Dem a pour out a Jamaica, Everybody future plan

Is fe get a big-time job

An settle in de mother lan. (p.179)

Although they "pour out" of Jamaica and have plans for a "big time job" in the motherland, England, Linton Kwesi Johnson's (1980) Dub poem "Inglan is a Bitch", shows the fallacy of the dream in a story of meaningless, tedious low-paying jobs that end in being "on the dole" at 55 years of age. Connections were made with the Jamaican working-class immigrant experience in Canada and especially the plight of Black women in the Canadian labour force. Both Allen and anitafrika highlight these themes in their poetry.

In tandem with Dub poetry, sociopolitical articles such as David Austin's (2007) "All Roads Led to Montreal" and Ross Lamberton's (2004) "The Beating of Clarence Clemons", to name only two, Dub poetry allowed students to read contrapuntally against the white cultural archive, examine the epistemic silences and invisibilities in the official educational curricula as well as critique the longstanding history of racism, Black resistance and antiracist coalitions in Canada. As much as possible, the historical and sociological texts for the course were written by critical Black Canadian scholars. For example, "All Roads Led to Montreal" unearthed the rich political and intellectual ferment of 1960s Montreal, including the convening of the Congress of Caribbean Writers, a political meeting with a range of Black intellectuals from C.L.R. James to Stokely Carmichael. This meeting represented a passing of the torch from Pan-Africanism to Black radical politics. Notably, among other events, Austin documents the largest student occupation in Canadian history, which had repercussions in the Caribbean. This now well-known Caribbean student-initiated occupation of the 9th floor computer lab in the Hall building at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) began as a peaceful protest against a biology professor's inequitable grading practices concerning Black students. Riot police and an eventual fire in the lab where hundreds of students were protesting ended with students being physically battered, arrested and subject to racially violent slurs by counter-protesters, slurs such as "Let the niggers burn!" (Austin 2007, p. 521).

"The Beating of Clarence Clemons" was chosen as one way to historicize activism against anti-black racism in Vancouver. The article describes the mobilization of human rights communities in Vancouver in the 1950s in support of Clemons, a Black longshoreman, who was brutally beaten by the police to the point of paralysis, a coma and his eventual death. These are only two of many examples of the erasure of Black political struggles and activism and interracial solidarity from the official Canadian curriculum.

DUB POETRY PROVIDES AN ANTICOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE

Not all education students are open to decentering the white curriculum despite the lip service given to 'decolonizing the curriculum.' The following exchange exemplifies a narrow, Eurocentric view of the poetic. During the first week of September 2018, a student excitedly approached me to inquire about the class, contemplating the possibility of joining. After sharing some aspects of the course with her, she responded brusquely, "*Oh no!* I thought it was *real* poetry." What is *real* poetry, anyway? An applied linguist major herself, her spurn reflected more than a lack of openness or disregard for Black vernaculars and knowledges. It loudly exposed the colonial elitism in Canadian education as well as the politics of knowledge, raising the epistemological question in curriculum theory: What knowledge is worthwhile? (Pinar, 2015; Schubert, 1986). Epistemologically, Dub poetry decenters the Eurocentric literary canon, asking different questions: "*Whose* knowledge is worthwhile?" And definitely "Whose *language* is worthwhile?" The student's limited view shut off the pedagogical possibilities of transgressive, theoretical and practical knowledge for educators afforded by a study of Dub poetry. Lillian Allen (1993) raised these very issues of linguistic and literary elitism in "One Poem Town," a poetic response to the rejection of her membership application submitted to the League of Canadian Poets. The application was rejected on the grounds that Dub poetry is not poetry. Allen retorted brilliantly:

> *so don't come with no pling, ying jing*
>
> *ding something*
>
> *call it poetry*
>
> *'cause, this is a one poem town*
>
> *and you're not here to stay*
>
> *Are you?* (p.117)

Allen also evokes the question of who can be considered a Canadian ("*you're not here to stay*").

Allen celebrates Patwa, a language that emerged from a complicated history of African enslavement, and that represents the intermixture of African and European languages in contact. Dub epistemology is rooted in a conscious and creative embrace of the culture, identities and languages of people subjected to enslavement and centuries of colonial and imperial dominance. To embrace Dub poetry, then, becomes an act of political resistance to the historical and contemporary injustice inherent in linguistic, social and economic domination. Dub pedagogy disrupts an oft unspoken "ism" in Canadian society, the racist attitudes, unequal power relations and consequent lack of opportunities caused by linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas,1988), or as Baker-Bell (2020) names (and which is more appropriate for this discussion), anti-Black

linguistic racism. It exposes the problematics of the false notion of a "Standard English" and the realities of linguistic variation, important for teachers whose classrooms increasingly reflect varieties of English. Language is social and economic capital. Black students with Caribbean or African accents and speech patterns may be judged negatively at the intersections of race, language and class, and for that reason there is a need for teachers in schools and universities to understand language variation without judgement and validate and build upon the students' linguistic backgrounds where necessary in support of the ability to live in two linguistic worlds.

Dub poetry represents an act of loving one's language and culture. It can be considered a manifestation of the African concept that the Dogon call "nommo" or "nummo": the generative power of the spoken word (Mbiti, 1990). Alkebulan (2009) explains that throughout Africa, people embrace this concept under various names. She continues, "Nommo addresses profound life circumstances… the spoken Word creates human relationships that bring about social transformations" (p.454). We make meaning through and with the Word. Allen (1993) emphasizes the transformational relationality possible through the word in collective dialogue:

> *You who see for us a future*
>
> *come sit here with We*
>
> *mek wi drink tea*
>
> *mek wi talk*
>
> *mek wi analyse*
>
> *mek wi strategise*
>
> *mek wi work together* (p.134)

Allen evokes our fundamental ontological role, which is to be fully human is to be in communion with each other.

To teach using Dub as a pedagogical tool afforded an examination of the unique global significance of Jamaican Patwa or Creole. Unlike other Creoles, it has been embraced and appropriated throughout the world by non-Jamaicans, through Jamaican migration to North America, the United Kingdom and Europe as well as through the worldwide embrace of reggae and dancehall (Gerfer, 2018; Pennycook, 2007). Globally, Patwa has become 'cool' to non-native speakers. I recall in earlier research that I conducted, boys from a range of Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds in a Toronto primary school with a large Jamaican population adopted Patwa in their spoken interactions as a way to look 'cool' and belong (Henry, 1998).

The Power of the Word filled a curricular gap in the Faculty of Education by creating opportunities for students to critically understand how creoles, pidgins

and dialects come into existence and are used in everyday life; the course also offered students an appreciation of aesthetic, social and political significance of creoles, in general and Dub poetry in particular. Students were able to explore the creative relationships between Patwa and 'dread talk' (Pollard, 2014). Poets used Rastafarian borrowings such as "downpress" for "oppress" and "Jah" for God or Jehovah. In addition, they witnessed Black feminist political expression through the reshaping of the Word in anitafrika's live performance at the University of British Columbia. For example, in "Revolushun III" anitafrika (2007) substitutes 'shituashun' for situation,' 'shitstem,' for system and 'womban' for woman. The first two neologisms underscore the social inequity that Black women experience and the second emphasizes women's unique ability to bring life into the world. Dub poetry's epistemology resides in the very language itself, in refusing the master's language and in creating language to exemplify the 's(h)ituations' in which we find ourselves. Just as important as the political and the activist aspects of Dub poetry is "the sheer festivity of the Jamaican Language" (Allen, quoted in Carr, 1998, p. 8), celebrated by its many poets. A Dub pedagogy that includes Canadian poets undoes the deleterious effects of courses that ignore the challenges and realities of Canada's Black people. It opens an alternative conceptual space to analyze systemic and educational inequities (ultimately, Canadian racism) while centering on Black humanity and the Black condition.

DUB POETRY OFFERS AN ANTICOLONIAL CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Rinaldo Walcott has written: "Canadian academic institutions should be ashamed. I cannot think of anyone of them that has a coherent, viable, and strong institutional commitment to the study of Black Canadian life" (2014, p.1). Indeed, Black North American students have been protesting the hegemonically white curriculum since the 1960s (Andrews, 2020). In the United Kingdom, two relevant national campaigns— "Why is my curriculum white?" and "Why isn't my professor Black?"—swept universities in 2014-2015 and underscored the lack of Black inclusivity in university classrooms. Similar demonstrations occurred in major Canadian cities. Too few university students in Canada experience a curriculum that allows critical discussions relevant to the diversity of Black humanity. Black students tell us that they do not feel that they exist within the halls of formal learning (Opini & Henry, 2023). Canadian curricula promote an imagined white settler nation devoid of a significant Black presence and with minimal knowledge of the African diaspora. In many studies, Black people are lumped into the amorphous Canadian governmental category of "visible minority" which obfuscates Black specificities by including us in statistical calculations with other racialized groups. By contrast, our presence has existed since the early seventeenth century (Johnston, 2001), including in Canada, when Mathieu da Costa, translator, explorer and the first

recorded free Black slave arrived onto Canada's shores. Scruffmouth, a Vancouver-based, Western Canadian-born poet of Jamaican heritage performed his Dub poem about da Costa as well as other selections in our Dub poetry class, allowing students to know that Dub poetry is ubiquitous and not merely an art form located in Toronto, the United Kingdom or Jamaica.

Dub poetry encourages an anticolonial pedagogy, one that necessarily is a study of how imperialism, capitalism and Christianity have been tools in the enslavement and colonization of African people, and conversely, the myriad ways that Jamaicans have always resisted colonial subjugation and sustained and recreated their Africanity in a new context. Whether through artistically embracing the language (Patwa), or through music and the arts (such as reggae), or through social and political thought (such as the writing and activism of leaders such as Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey), or through African-derived religions (such as Rastafarianism, other African-derived religions such as Kumina, Myalism and other creolized Afro-Christian forms or worship), or communities of resistance such as the Maroons who resisted slavery and established their own independent societies in the mountainous interior. As Connell (2023) writes, the Maroons "fought the British to a standstill and forced the empire to recognize their freedom and territorial claims in 1739" (p. 224). The Maroons are *still* fighting for their land, their rights and their freedom (Ferguson, 2022).

Assignments and activities

Assignments were intended to encourage students to reflect on the readings and class activities, apply themes to their own realities and express their political and creative voices pursuing issues of concern and interest to them. In this section, I offer a few examples from these projects. Dave, a Canadian-born student of Jamaican heritage, wrote in his final assignment:

> [Dub] creates space for people to embrace their mother tongue and share their journeys to self-discovery... Dub poetry makes it accessible to continue engaging with our culture, our people and ourselves in hopes of creating positive change and spreading love to future generations to come.

In another assignment, he described Dub poetry as a "radical exercise in self-love." This deeply expressed relevance for Jamaican students was not at the exclusion of other students. Tara, a South Asian woman from a Punjabi-speaking household, wrote in one of her reflections:

> Growing up in an immigrant home I witnessed how the imposition of English in India and Canada left my parents and grandparents feeling inferior and rejected from mainstream society.

Margaret, a Canadian-born teacher of western European heritage, had noticed the differential treatment of Black boys at the school where she teaches. She created a readers' theatre as her final assignment, reflecting the stereotyping of

Black boys as 'behavioural problems' and intellectually incapable. This project was accompanied by a research paper that interwove events from the readers' theatre with research literature on the overrepresentation of Black children in special education. Maya used her artistic abilities to create a labour-intensive pointillistic depiction of the people of the Windrush generation and accompanying package of readings, photos and Linton Kwesi Johnson's poem "Inglan is a Bitch" (Johnson, 1980). She explained in her final essay: "My project sought to educate and engage viewers with the injustices the people brought to Britain via the Windrush ship are continuing to face." Regarding the pointillistic drawing, she explained:

> The [pointillistic] drawing had to be striking as to not do a disservice to the subjects and I purposefully selected a process imbued with labour to reflect the words of Kwesi Johnson and the labour the people were invited to commit to.

The refrain "Inglan is a Bitch" reminds the reader of the unrealized dreams of the Windrush generation.

Lastly, in line with the poetic devices used by the authors that we studied, students transferred the devices and aesthetics of Dub poetry so as to communicate their ideas. For example, for her final assignment, Aisha, a Jamaican student, wrote her poem mostly in Patwa, following Allen's written style. Playing with font size, formatting and word placement, she described Jamaicans as "commonwealth citizens," to express the Commonwealth's hierarchical relationship with its Jamaican citizenry. Regarding the economic and political situation, she spoke out against the International Monetary Fund's detrimental influence on Jamaica's economy, autonomy and identity. Aisha wrote, "But **THANK GOD, WE SOON LEF DI IMF**. But mi sis.... now we have di Chinese and fi dem compani." Indeed, as Connell (2023) has written about this neo-colonial relationship with China: "Almost two decades of Chinese loans and infrastructure-led development have left Jamaican workers and farmers as precarious and dispossessed as ever" (p.224). As an educator-activist and concerned Jamaican, Aisha mentioned in her poem that she wrote to the Prime Minister, asking him, "if he has lost his mind," to allow Jamaica to be embroiled in this precarious relationship.

anitafrika (2016) cautions, "Even while responding to the insidious unfairness of racism, it is imperative that we do not place whiteness at the centre of the art we create" (p.26). For educators, decentering whiteness also means being attentive to any disequilibrium for white students who have been at the center of educational thought throughout their lives (De Danaan, 1994). The goal was for students from all backgrounds to apply this knowledge to their own lives, cultural backgrounds, or teaching contexts, as shown in the creative and intellectual production of their assignments. Nonetheless, I was particularly mindful that for the Black students, this class might have been one of a few

opportunities to be historically and culturally centred in a curriculum that was relevant to their lives.

Creating intentional spaces

In this multiracial class, the curriculum begged for resisting the normative ways of teaching. In the 2018 class, the larger of the two, I experimented with separating the students into two groups according to race/cultures, which, later, I came to understand to be a strategy some call "affinity grouping" (DiAngelo & Burton, 2022). We read *Intentional BlackLove: Space Making, Visionary Solidarity, and Black Feminisms for Movement Building*, by Angela Nixon (2017), an account of the 2016 Black feminisms forum in Brazil. The student voice is all important in Black feminist pedagogies and not always easy to cultivate amongst a range of students. I grouped the white students in one group and the Black and South Asian students in another group. The sole South Asian student often aligned herself with the Black students in other activities, so I felt comfortable with my grouping choice. Before beginning the group activity, I asked the class why they thought I might take such an approach. They understood. The grouping was intended as a liberatory pedagogical act, reflecting Nixon's text – "an intentional Blacklove space," a place where Black people could collectively make sense of their experience. White supremacy works so pervasively that white students may inadvertently dominate discussions even in lessons with Black content or courses focused on Black experiences. Alternatively, it is sometimes a comfort to have discussions with others who share your experience whether by race, sexuality, gender disability or other life experience. Constructivist theorists (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Wells & Edwards, 2013) underscore the ways that learning takes place in meaningful group interaction. However, many of these theories do not adequately take into consideration the power relations and differential identities in classroom interactions. Black students are often burdened to explicate texts to their class members, or contrarily, are silenced in the presence of white students. In addition, with most curricula, they are denied the right to learn about their own cultures from critical, informed perspectives.

Feedback from three students was helpful in knowing that they were appreciative of this discursive 'Blackspace' (Nixon, 2017, p.68) in which they could raise issues with heart and soul in "visionary solidarity" (Nixon, 2017, p. 67) and co-create futures without having to modify ideas or tread softly for fear of the white gaze. This arrangement was followed by a whole-group discussion. Indeed, the Dub poets studied called for this collective space where people can make sense of their worlds. As mentioned above, Allen (1993) exhorted earlier "mek we talk… mek we strategize" (p. 137). Indeed, the role of an educator is to encourage inclusive participation, offering various ways for all to be involved, keeping in mind students' various identities and backgrounds (Bovill, 2020).

And, in this case, with this reading, it seemed appropriate. After all, a Dub pedagogy is necessarily transgressive.

DUB POETRY OFFERS A CRITIQUE OF CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM

Lastly, and importantly, Dub poetry offers a critique of Canadian multiculturalism. Canada's renowned multicultural policy and high world rankings contribute to its consistent status as one of the most inclusive, socially just countries in the world (*U.S. News Best Countries Rankings*, 2026). However, this very country was founded upon an ever-present racial hierarchy in which Black and Indigenous people are placed at the bottom (Henry & James, 2025). Multifaceted forms of violence against Black people are a daily Canadian reality. Pairing scholarly readings from sociologists and historians with Dub poetry enabled the students to more readily identify police brutality and inequitable schooling as structural and systemic phenomena. Allen (1985; 1993) provided many illustrations of lack of access for Caribbean Canadians. In "I Fight Back" for instance, she explains:

> *I came to Canada*
>
> *and found the doors*
>
> *of opportunity well-guarded*
>
> *I scrub floors*
>
> *serve backra's meals on time*
>
> *spend two days working in one*
>
> *twelve days in a week* (1985, p. 13)

Citizenship, and who can be a "real" Canadian, are under contest in her poetry and in this country. Many Black women encounter a lack of opportunity and end up working in low-paying jobs for "backra," or white man or boss. The poem evokes the exploitative Caribbean Domestic Scheme (1955-1967) which was the only "door of opportunity" for mostly professional women to migrate to Canada. The right honourable Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to the House of Commons, was one such woman who participated in the program as a means to migrate to Canada, given the restrictive immigration policies at the time of her arrival in 1960.

A critique of multiculturalism was important for educators who work with students from a range of backgrounds and who could benefit from understanding that multiculturalism has not benefitted all Canadians. Class members were encouraged to understand the intersecting power relations at work in Black lives, and to develop or refine critical pedagogies for the specificities of their own educational environments. The challenge, then, was

for the students to take this new knowledge and apply it to their social and activist contexts.

CONCLUSION

Through a narrative account of the course *The Power of the Word: Dub Poetry as Canadian Educational Critique,* and examples from student assignments, I have explored some of the ways that the epistemology and pedagogy of Dub poetry allowed for a critical (re)-reading of the Black and Caribbean Canadian condition while also providing a critique of knowledge production as well as the hierarchical assumptions about language and culture. Moreover, the study of Dub poetry allowed for a life-affirming curriculum for racialized students, provided a space to investigate topics of interest, opened up possibilities for alternative knowledge production for all students, and called into question the foundational Canadian narrative of equality of opportunity promulgated by the multicultural discourse. At this critical time in Canadian higher education, universities are engaging in discussions about ways to decolonize knowledge and potentially move towards institutional anti-racist practices (Scarborough Charter, 2021). The realization of this goal necessitates a massive restructuring of the policies and practices in place. In the meantime, and always, let us not forget the ways in which what we do every day in classrooms with students can be powerful political acts of decentering master narratives and centering those who have been historically omitted from the curriculum. The epistemology and pedagogy of Dub poetry can engage students in liberatory learning and contribute to worthwhile knowledge production about Black Canadian life. A Dub pedagogy can be a pedagogy of protest against the ever-present colonial legacy in education, and a pedagogy to help students in Education rethink and refine their practice.

This is one story in one course. I hope that this narrative account inspires ways to move away from the Eurocentric and patriarchal curricula that form the majority of the Canadian curriculum and toward one that is more inclusive and that reflects a full spectrum of humanity.

NOTES

1. I am deeply grateful to those who consented to participate in this inquiry. Pseudonyms were used for all participants.

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APPENDIX A: SELECT COURSE TEXTS

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APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS

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