Because words don’t (always) need pages, I have published extensively in the form of readings, performances and recordings. I have been reluctant to commit my poetry to the page over the years because, for the most part, these poems are not meant to lay still.

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. In some ways, I had to reverse this process to “finalize” these poems for print; finding their written essence; pages do need words. (Allen, Women Do This 9)

In this passage from dub poet Lillian Allen’s Preface to Women Do This Every Day, she uses the words poems and poetry for oral works, extends the word publication to material forms that are not written, and through the terms the page and performance inverts the literacy / orality hierarchy of Euro-Canadian literature. In these ways, she introduces her readers to the notion that word art is not necessarily written and that there is an alternative creative process -- very different from but related to the writerly process -- shaped by the material and cultural possibilities of sound.

If Allen’s interiorised account of her publication history is illuminating, her official publication history also offers insight into the textualization process of which she writes. She began performing her dub poetry in the early 1980’s and self-published her first book of poems, Rhythm an’ Hardtimes, in 1982. She made the dub albums Revolutionary Tea Party (1986) and Conditions Critical (1987), both with members of the Parachute Club band, in 1986 and 1987 respectively; these were followed in print by Women Do This Every Day: Selected Poems of Lillian Allen (1993) and Psychic Unrest (1999).

Allen has consistently “published” in both sound and print because of the genre she works in, dub poetry. According to Christian Habekost in Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry, dub is

neither a literary genre nor exclusively a musical style. Yet it is almost everything in between. [...] On all occasions the SOUND of the spoken WORD gives rise to a musical “riddim,” the central formative aspect of the genre. Yet the POWER of dub poetry, though most obvious in the context of a live or recorded performance, is prevalent also in the written text – if one knows how to trace it” (1; emphases in original).

Dub grew up, both politically and aesthetically, under the inspiration of reggae. Its syncopated rhythms, its attention to the beat in both writing and performance, and its emancipatory activist content characterize the genre. Originating in Jamaica in the 1970’s, it quickly became part of the inventory of verbal art forms of the Jamaican diaspora in London, Toronto, and New York. Today, written and performed dub flourishes through the work of
numerous poets in Canada, Britain, Jamaica, and the United States, co-existing alongside its super-commercialized descendant, hip hop.

Allen has been a very successful dub poet, occupying a unique place, together with other dub poets, in Canadian literature. My object here is to trace in her poetry the creative process of transforming the spoken word into written form. In particular, I explore the meanings and political implications of writing Jamaican English Creole (hereafter JEC), of book design, and of print technology that she exploits to “commit” her poetry to the page. I argue that Allen incorporates the specific dub notion of riddim to help her create a bridge between orality and print, as well as to manage the cultural effects of each medium. She also carries out reversals and other transmutations of very strong European orthographic and printing norms; and she pays attention to the possibilities of the body, specifically the vocal tract, when recreating in print some of the non-verbal meanings of sound. In what follows I will survey her work, consider the meanings of riddim / rhythm within the dub movement, and read certain key moments in and around her 1993 collection of print poems, Women Do This Every Day.

The poetry of Allen champions those who are oppressed because they are black (of African descent), because they are poor, and/or because they are female. These conditions do not always intersect in one subject in her work: there are poems about black men, poor men, refugees and refugee families, women of no specified colour, and victims of the bureaucracy of social assistance, homelessness, and police brutality. In Women Do This Every Day, there are also poems about the larger picture: 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”, “Redwood”), feminist politics (“Battle Scars”) and different encounters with the spirit of protest and revolution (“Nicaragua”, “Conditions Critical”, “Why Do We Have To Fight”, among others). The targets of Allen’s protest are linked by her perception of a complex interaction of capitalism, sexism, and racism. Black women are doubly oppressed: “a woman’s work is not recognized / if she be black makes it doubly-dized” (“Why Do We Have To Fight”).

Allen’s poetics feed from her conviction about the primal connection between physical and political/spiritual realities. Women Do This is bracketed by two poems which she has said (in Performance; Personal interview) are among her favourites. The first is a feminist ballad, “Nellie Belly Swelly”, in which she tells the story of the feminist radicalizing of a young girl, raped by a village man, hidden away as her pregnancy becomes evident, and finally sent away to give birth to the rapist’s child. This specific narrative is illustrative of the social position of young women during Allen’s adolescence in Jamaica. The community’s double standard and its fear and consequent shaming of woman’s sexuality contrasts with the pride and happiness of the last poem in the collection, “Birth Poem”, which in print is minimal but in audio recording is the beautiful vocalizations of a woman panting in labour (“ah a ah ah a ah ah aa”). In this performance of childbirth, the female persona’s “labour” is manifested in its sense of physical work; and the pride she takes in the newborn is the climax of the labour and song.

Allen has said that “giving birth is the most important thing a person can do in life” (Performance). In “Revolutionary Tea Party”, a chanted poem of working class solidarity, “work” is used in the sense of anyone who “labours”: “We who create the wealth of the world / [and] only get scrapings from them in control” (Women Do This 133). In other words,
the “labour” of carrying and giving birth to a child is comparable to labours of the working class. But since women of all classes “labour” in the sense of give 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 the labouring classes; the work of giving birth, raising, and supporting a child; the work of the artist; and the work of the political activist: these can all be understood as consecrated labours in hope for a better future.

According to Allen, having a baby is like making a revolution (Performance). In “My Momma” Allen declares through another character, an unnamed daughter:

my 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)

This connection between reproductive labour and revolution stresses the redemptive aspects of childbirth. A revolution is a break with history, with a linear European time line (more on this below). Finally, revolution is motion (Allen, Performance). Here revolution must be taken as part of a cluster of important concepts in Allen’s work (and in dub poetry in general) which comprises revolution / motion / emotion / riddim. I will discuss these in relation to riddim below.

In the dub community it is common to draw a connection between the rhythms of JEC and the rhythms of dub. According to Habekost, “[t]he rhythms of Jamaican speech, sustained by and reflected in the musical beat, constitute the dub experience” (92). In describing her methods of composition, Allen has said that she relies on the sounds of JEC words as much as their denotations in creating a poem (Bartley). Clearly, then, as a dub poet Allen depends on the spoken Jamaican word for many of her effects; and when she writes her poems down, she must incorporate those effects somehow on the page.

The problem is that the “phonetic” Latin alphabet in which English is written is anything but phonetic. Because of the many changes that have occurred in English speech since the spellings representing its sounds were first codified in print, the spelling system of English is as syllabic as it is phonetic. That is, English orthography is based on a large number of sight units: units that are pronounced differently but spelled (and therefore look) the same. Examples are the plural marker “s” (pronounced variously as [s] in “cats”, [z] in “cars”, and [ɛz] in “judges”); the past marker “ed” (pronounced [d] in “played”, [t] in “worked”, and [ɛd] in “hunted”); and consistent syllable spellings in sound alternations such as “electric/electricity” ([ɪlektrɪk]/[ɪlektrɪsɪtɪ]) which facilitate sight recognition of meanings but have less to do with their sounds (Venezky).

When a writing system represents meanings systematically as sight units, it can no longer be as easily adapted to represent new sounds. Thus, any writer whose interest is in representing dialectal speech sounds must call on support from other semiotic systems to create the targeted sounds. One such system is linguistic stereotypes, which can be used to
facilitate readers’ identification of new spellings with specific sounds. For example, the written text of “Riddim An’ Hardtimes” contains spelling representations of key, identifying stereotypes of JEC:

An’ him chucks on some riddim
   an’ yu hear him say
      riddim an’ hardtimes
         riddim an’ hardtimes

…..
      riddim a pounce wid a purpose
Truths and Rights
mek me hear yu

(63-64)

Certain spellings are clearly meant to steer the reader to a specific pronunciation (pronunciations of very common words like you, and, with, make). The word [y]u, for example, includes an iconic representation of the shortened, tense vowel Jamaicans use in the second person pronoun. This sound is widely recognized as a feature of JEC -- it is a linguistic stereotype.

However, a reader who is not familiar with JEC will not be able to ‘read’ this representation of a very common Jamaican word sound; they will take it for an eye-spelling of their own pronunciation. The realization that spellings only work within a web of social relations, which fix their sound correlations, means that any attempt to represent speech sounds in writing must take those social relations into account. Allen therefore uses occasional markers of JEC grammar to identify the sounds she is aiming at as JEC: in this case, she places what in Standard English would be a pronoun in the objective case in the position of subject (“him chucks on some riddim,” emphasis added). This is a contextualising signal; it is meant to facilitate the reader’s recognition of JEC by reproducing one of its stereotypical grammatical forms.

Another way of getting around the limitations of English orthography is to use the conventions that govern that orthography to help create the new sound. For example, “riddim” is the phonetic spelling of the English word “rhythm” in JEC; and it is in fact a consistent rendering through the conventions of English spelling. To start with, the sound [θ] (“th”) creates distinctive meaning in words in English (there is a meaning difference between thin and din) but not in JEC (that is, [θ] does not exist). Therefore, Allen replaces the letters “th” with the letter “d”: [ridim]. In addition, the second vowel receives full value in Allen’s spelling (riddim), indicating the Jamaican syllable-timed pronunciation (Roberts 32) as opposed to the stress-timed English one, the latter of which reduces the second vowel. Finally, since a [d] between two vowels in North American English is habitually reduced to a tap (a very fast, soft [d]), an extra “d” is inserted to stress the full value of the “d” in the Jamaican version: “riddim”.

Short of the existence of a codified Jamaican spelling system, ‘translating’ a spelling this way is one of few resources for recreating the speech sounds of JEC in writing.
However, it has the disadvantage of representing what is in essence a different language (JEC) as a low-prestige dialect of English. This is not only because these spellings claim a strong relationship between JEC and English – they claim that JEC is a version of English – but also because disrupting the much codified system of English spellings in this way can carry a large social penalty.

Allen’s spellings are caught in this dynamic of social perception in two different ways. Firstly, prescriptive spelling rules in written English create a powerful group boundary. In a general, everyday context, a word spelled outside of the conventions of correctness is “wrong”; and its writer is seen as a suspect member of the group of the literate, since an important marker of literacy in the European languages is control of standard spellings. Illiteracy carries a strong social stigma. Because of this stigma, and because of the strength of deeply embedded social pressures to maintain the spelling standard (formal education, dictionaries, editors), there is very little room for innovation in this area.

Some room for innovation, however, is created by the European literary traditions of dialect writing and experimental poetry. Since Allen’s dubs in Women Do This Every Day are printed on a printing press, bound into a book by an established publisher, identified as poetry on the cover, and sold in bookstores, the material can easily be identified as literary, and therefore a possible arena for spelling innovation. In other words, Allen’s “wrong” spellings in this case will not be seen as incorrect but as innovative.

However, the cultural stereotypes she must access in order to identify her spelling innovations as Jamaican are double-edged. This is the second way in which Allen must create a fine balance between different sorts of representational accuracy. Her written representation of JEC speech negotiates a relationship with her readers through a complex network of intertexts. Images of JEC speakers in the mass media and in different discourses include a European liberal romantic one, with roots in Montaigne's noble savage; the hero of youth culture, with his covert prestige and his ‘garage’, drum and bass, and hip hop; the reggae man as representative of a certain culture, lifestyle, and protest tradition; and finally, a dated image of Caribbean English Creole speakers in Canada as the underclass, the poor, and the Other. It is these social stereotypes Allen must negotiate when using linguistic stereotypes to identify the provenance of her spellings. Since she cannot avoid these discourses, her use of eye-spellings and other markers of difference in print must be perceived as an appropriation of stereotypes. This appropriation is carried forward through a well-developed dub aesthetics.

Central to the very recognizable form of a dub poem is a defined rhythm. As I have said, the rhythm of JEC and the rhythm of dub are in a close political and perceptual relationship. Rhythm thus carries functions and meanings in the dub poetry movement that bear a closer look. According to Habekost, “rhythm” as “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.’ Moreover, riddim […] is frequently associated with violence, blood and pain; but, at the same time, it can be ‘food’ for the suffering people” (93). He adds that repetition in dub, as a technique for achieving riddim, originates in an African philosophical conception of time:

While the European poetic tradition tends to conceal the repeating constituents of its forms, the black tradition emphasizes them as a crucial means of distinct improvisation and extemporization; they become an expression of one of the
fundamental formative principles of black culture, which is based on the idea of circulation and cyclical development, as opposed to the European principle of progression. (94)

Specific to Allen’s work, as I have said, is a cluster of concepts that incorporate riddim: revolution / motion / emotion / riddim. Revolution is both a cycle, based on the word’s etymology (from the Latin revolve, from re + volvere, to roll, turn) and an interruption of the European forward march of progress, a severing of the linear time line. Motion is riddim in the sense of (rhythmic) dance, physical motion, the motion of the body, but also in the sense of the rhythms of the body, its breathing and heart beat. Emotion is also motion, but as emotion a more organic motivation for political and moral decision-making than the measured linearity of reason (Performance). Thus “riddim” is the motivating, creative force for any poem but also for social action and political protest; for Allen and other roots (African) oriented poets, it is a reference to a quintessentially African inheritance. Finally, riddim is synonymous with dub: a riddim was the original term for a dub poem.

In fact, the word poem makes a literary product out of what was originally an improvised, interactive, local activity:

[I]n the dance halls of Jamaica, competing sound systems with speakers the size of refrigerators would vie for the biggest crowds. DJs – the mighty U-Roy, Big Youth, and I Roy – chanted their messages over the instrumental versions on the flip side of popular [reggae] songs. DJs were so totally marginalized (reggae was not completely accepted for air-play on the island’s radio stations until the late seventies) that they talked about anything and everything in the society – from the private and personal to social and political taboos.

The studio mixers of the music, meanwhile, became conscious of the way in which the live DJs worked with the music. They attuned their techniques to create re-mixed versions of the instrumentals. The mixers’ techniques of echoing, repeats, fades, dropping in and out of instruments to create internal rhythmic dynamics [characteristic aural features of dub], caught the imagination of the emerging dub poets. (Allen “De Dub Poets”, 17)

The motivation for the emergence of dub poets as poets, I surmise, had to do with the Jamaican experience of poetry: a type of literature (that is, written, with high official prestige) that pays attention to rhyme, rhythm, and word choice. The Jamaican experience of literature has been described by several Caribbean writers, including Allen (Women Do This 11) as implicated, for better or worse, with the British school system of the Anglophone Caribbean. Thus, calling a riddim also a poem could only happen under certain social conditions: a sense of pride about dub as verbal art, and an internalization of literature as the written (and recited) British tradition.

However, in the British tradition the genre poem belongs in a different material world. When private, it is written; when destined to be read by many, it is most often found in a book. Therefore in following Allen’s process of transforming a dub performance into a written poem, it is important not to ignore the part of her “performance” that is carried out through the design of the book. The book as object is a message – its production and reception is also a communicative event. The corollary is that the size and weight of the book and the colour and design of its cover are a part of the communicative intent of the poet and
should be read as a part of Allen’s project of distilling a performance into print (taking ‘print’ as a culture -- a book culture -- as much as a technology).

The first edition of *Women Do This Every Day* has a collage-style composition on the front cover depicting in a stylized way three black women; they are made with irregular paper shapes and have no facial features, but their various skin tones (dark brown or black, medium brown, warm tan) are a part of the warmth of the colours of their dresses: gold, orange, lime green. This composition is roughly square in shape, set against a black background, occupying the bottom two thirds of the cover; on the remaining third is the author’s name in white letters on a black background, and the title. In short, the colour of the book – of the background to the letters and composition on the front cover, and the colour of the back cover – is black.

Clearly black as colour and as a signifier of identity is important in the aesthetic and the communicative intent of this book. The poem “Jazz You” begins

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

The synaesthesia in this stanza is nearly total (touch, sight, sound, smell). It leads the reader back to the ‘hot’ colours of the cover, and to the perception that black is not neutral but, above all, sensual. Black is also, in “Dark Winds”, an important part of a communal experience:

Man and woman and youth and I one
seeped in a voyage of discovery
a mystic deep black journey
a denseness and the blackness of the glory
glowing shining
the past and present well aligning
(75)

*Black* means a connection with a cohesive group, and with a present informed by a rich, nurturing past; it is a specific cultural and spiritual consciousness. But in the refrain of this dub, *black* has a different significance, tied to oppression:

what the people have to do today mi say
just a juggle fi get a little peace

…..
cause them black cause them black
cause the system just a progress pon them back
pon them back
(77)
The rhyming of “cause them black” with “pon them back” drives home Allen’s anti-racist message. The economic well-being of Canada, Europe, and the United States; their “progress” of expanding economies; “progressing” technological research and development; and “progressing” distance from the Third and Fourth Worlds, depend not only on the economic boost they received in the pre-industrial and industrial age from chattel slavery in the New World, but from its lingering class/race effects, and from the insidious Othering mentality that allowed the practice of chattel slavery in the first place.

This tight link between sensuality and political meaning in Allen’s work is present in sound as well. As I have said, one of the most obvious connections between sound and print is the Latin alphabet. Although the spelling system of English is an unwieldy, if still possible, channel to recreate dialect sounds, the one-letter one-sound underlying principle of the phonetic Latin alphabet can be used to create distinct consonantal sounds. Allen exploits this principle to manipulate the vocal tract of the reader. This is another way of creating the physical “meanings” indexed by the notion of riddim.

In the section called “The life of a sound” is the poem “Anti-Social Work”, whose 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

Fit Fit

FFfit FFfit FFfit
it it it it it it
FFf f f FFr uttttt
Fi i e e it
.....
(119)

At first 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 being stranded on their own). But reading the word fit aloud brings out its expletive possibilities: the top front teeth must be bared, catching the bottom lip, to pronounce and hold the sound [f]. With air from the lungs coming through this obstruction, a hissing spit must be produced; and with the semantic possibilities of the word foreshortened, its physical properties become its meaning. It is a spit, a hiss, a frustration. And then we all know what the “F” word is – and it is not “fit.” Or is it?

Comment [MCC1]: Font sizes are: 1st line: all twelve point; 2nd line: 16 pt. for second f, 14 point for third f in each unit; 3rd line: all 10 point; 4th line: all 10 point except for capital and following F; last line: 10 point for first e, all rest 12 point.
The meaning of this invective (and other sounds, some rhyming with other invectives, some not, that are contained in the arrangements of fit) can only be understood through the title of the poem: “Anti-Social Work”. The poet seems to be enacting, in print, in sound, in wordless graphic gestures, a rebellion against social pressures to conform. Typeface, with its traditional dependence on a grid (in which individual letters were fitted into straight lines) is an ideal visual and cultural symbol for the meaning “social conformity at all costs”. Another version of this poem (“Social Worker”, 67) includes a social worker as the speaker of lines that are woven through the letters that make up the word “fit”. In the transactions of the powerless with the state, the powerless must “fit” the system. There is also a sense in which the poem performs or throws a fit in frustration at the coercion.

Other manipulations of the vocal tract are scattered throughout Women Do This. In “Another Jazz Poem”, the conventions that support shape-recognition of individual English words are suspended, forcing the reader to (re)create meaning aurally as well as visually. Slowly sounding out individual letters and their combinations in order to ‘read’ the poem reverses the normal practice of silent, rapid reading:

fools don’t rush in
core key keeping
improv is sen say tonal
.....

painted mercurial mood talk
etonal
expresses vis a vis
in / off key
chordal lang use age
unchord inner language
music ain’t music till you play
(yu hear)
(124)

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread; but, in the jazz tradition, to improvise one must ‘rush in’, and it is the fool who does not ‘rush in’, that is, create a connection between the instrument (in this case it is the poet’s voice) and the immediate, unforeseen moment. The reader participates in this timeless, dynamic moment by sounding/sensing out the multiple meanings in ‘improv is sen say tonal’ (improvisational; improvise, sense, say, tonal [sounds]; improv is the senses, the saying, the tones; improv is sensational; and so on). Throughout the rest of the poem, the poet’s analysis of the sounds of words, of their breakdown into parts, and of the possible meanings of these parts alone, combined, made homonymous, carries the reader through a similar experience of improvisation.

In “Nellie Belly Swelly” there is a final example of single-sound-to-letter textualization, in which groups of vowel sounds are placed next to each other to symbolise a
struggle. This technique works especially well because both speech and writing are essentially time-based media, in which sound or graphic elements must follow each other sequentially (see Kress). Thus, to repeat contrasting elements in both speech and writing creates purely abstract, symbolic oppositions in real time that can reinforce the virtual conflict in a narrative. In this case, the narrative is in ballad form: the ballad is about “a little little girl / called Nellie” (25). When thirteen-year-old Nellie, raped by Mr. Thompson, becomes pregnant the village children “skipped to Nellie’s shame”, singing “Nellie belly swelly Nellie belly swelly” (26).

The ballad begins with the imagery of a domestic garden to represent Nellie’s milieu: Nellie is a rose bush, her sexuality budding, when “lust leap the garden fence / pluck the rose bud / bruk it ina the stem” (25). The struggle that follows is represented in sounds-in-writing:

oh no please no
was no self defence
oh no please no
without pretence
offered no defence
to a little little girl
called Nellie

Nellie couldn’t understand
Mr. Thompson’s hood
so harsh, so wrong
in such an offensive

Nellie plead, Nellie beg
Nellie plead, Nellie beg
but Mr. Thompson’s hood
went right through her legs

(25-26)

Nellie’s emblematic sounds (not the sounds she makes, but the sounds representing her) are the mid and high front vowels – short and long “e” and “i”. Thus her name, the rhyme the children sing, the cumulative rhyme in the first stanza above (fence, defence, pretence) all incorporate those vowels. Mr. Thompson’s emblematic sounds are the back rounded vowels – short and long “o” and “u”. So his name, his “hood”, “so wrong”, and so forth, incorporate these vowels. In terms of the vocal tract, these two groupings of sounds are produced in the front of the mouth with the lips pulled back slightly and in the back of the mouth with the lips rounded, respectively. These two groups of vowels are not only like contrasting colours in the range of possible vowel sounds, but they force a reader who is reading aloud to alternate muscles of the lips and tongue in producing them. For a reader who is
subvocalising, they produce different imaginary pitches – high front vowels are higher in pitch, back rounded vowels lower.

When the struggle starts, then, these vowel groupings alternate, imitating a struggle back and forth: oh no / please / no / … self defence / oh no / please / no / with / out / pretence / offered no / defence / to / a little little girl called Nellie. Another more extended sequence of alternations follows: Mr. Thompson’s in “Mr. Thompson’s hood / so harsh, so wrong / in such an offensive”, Nellie’s again in “Nellie plead, Nellie beg” twice, and finally Mr. Thompson in “but Mr. Thompson’s hood”. 6

At the end of the ballad, Allen draws together a set of antinomies creating the innocent as militant:

In her little tiny heart
Nellie understood war

She mustered an army within her
strengthened her defence
and mined the garden fence

No band made a roll
skies didn’t part
for this new dawn
in fact [sic], nothing heralded it
when this feminist was born

(26-27)

The military references (war, army, mined, band, roll, herald) have implications for the meaning of feminist. The defence / fence rhymes are now linked to battle rather than the rose garden. The antinomies “little tiny heart” / “war”, “army within”, and “mined… garden fence” foreshadow the final tension of this momentous, though interiorized birth; a birth that, unlike the heralded birth of Christ for which skies did part (Gingell 111), is very often a silent feminist awakening.

In all of her poetry Allen insists on the connection between words and action. It is a connection that has no spaces between the two entities: words are action. In “Dis Word”, the only word in the poem spelled outside of the conventions is dis:

dis word breeds my rhythm
dis word carries my freedom
dis word is my hand
    : my weapon

(87)
The spelling “dis” is an accurate rendering of the JEC sound of this; but that is only a small part of the function of the spelling. By making salient its speech sound, Allen is making a reference to its concreteness.

The poem is self-reflexive; unless “dis word” is itself rather than a representation of a word, the poem has no meaning. When we read “dis word”, we are meant to realise it refers to the very ink on the very page we are holding in our hands (just as, if we hear “dis word”, we are meant to realise it refers to the word we are hearing). On the referential plane, “dis” has the meanings of the English “this” – it is a deictic, a concrete grammatical index of a very specific time and place, which cannot be referred to in any other way (specifying the time and place in other words immediately invalidates the reference when the time and place changes; and this means at whichever time and place the reader is reading the poem). On a symbolic plane, dis is a Jamaican word, not an English one; the meaning then becomes “this Jamaican word breeds my rhythm”, and so on.

Deixis is common in written texts that began life as spoken. Most casual conversations contain much more deixis than a written version of the same lines can accommodate, because the conversational participants have information available to them that a reader does not. Deictics of time (such as now, then), or space (such as this, that, here), or person (such as I, you, they), unless they refer to the intra-textual world, require the presence of the speakers to complete their meaning. In textualizing this poem Allen retains the deictic at its centre rather than translating it from its spoken mode, in which the deictic was central, to its written mode, in which the referent of the deictic would normally be specified. In this way she accomplishes a neat transferral of its reference from one material world to the other.

Allen also makes a bridge between the materiality of the spoken word and the materiality of the written word through concrete poetry, which lends itself easily to her commitment to the material, to the present moment of experience, and to the transformation of an interactive performance into an interactive moment of reading. One example is “Anti-Social Work” (above); another is “I Am Africa”, in which words are strewn in suggestive arrangements across the page, ending with the stanza:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{and when the music finds its source} & \\
\text{my heart beats} & \\
\text{I and Africa are one} & \end{align*}
\]

Apart from the use of white space to suggest relationships between elements, Allen has arranged rapidly to rise in airy steps from the anchoring, linking verb are (the essential
relationship between the poet and Africa). In this arrangement of one word is combined the two experiences: that a heart may beat rapidly; and that very strong expectations of form in European literacy -- the arrangement of printed letters from top to bottom -- may be reversed to create a peculiar suspense. This “making strange” of the visual conventions of print draws attention once again to the conventions themselves as well as their material elements.

In “The Subversives” Allen links “self / race / gender / history” in a cross pattern to make an image of the poet’s experience:

You have taken my abstractions
broken my images
carved images-of-broken on my mirror
data process needs
package dreams on TV
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

The poem expresses a concern that mass-media stereotypes, “images-of-broken”, separate the poet from “self / race / gender / history”. In the written version, Allen creates spaces between the three terms “race, gender, history”, or perhaps arranges them on the page this way to avoid aligning / a-lining them (as print). The cross pattern they make together with self suggests an intersecting relationship for all four terms.

The modern subject, consciousness as immediately apprehensible to itself, is not the “self” in these lines; this “self” is a social subject, whose identity rests on a network of alliances (gender, class, sexuality, race) shaped by history. At the same time, the arrangement of these “selves” is such that they cannot be analysed into smaller parts using a conventional syntax (which requires that any single element precede or follow another in a line); they are related in a way that does not allow the prioritizing of any. A black female poet is never just a poet; nor ever just black; nor ever just a woman.
In the line “We who create space”, space is created visually as well as verbally; and in the next line, the visual space between create and is gives two meanings to the entire line. The first is: “we who transform what you say are (that is, exist; is is the plural of is in JEC). The second is: “we who transform what you say is the case”, with space around the predicate is emphasising its unrelated, unrelating autonomy. The final two lines are in boldface visually to signify not just louder volume, but also a collective voice (signified in sound by a chorus of female voices).

The entire passage, then, is an analysis of the relationship between “we” dub poets, subversives, and other rebels and “you” agents of mass communication in a dominant, racist culture, who nevertheless depend on technologies that cannot hope to keep up with the creativity of the subversives. The dictionary is not the least important in the triumvirate of data processing, TV, and dictionary. A dictionary in Anglophone cultures takes the place of the romance language Academies (French, Spanish, Italian) which rule on correct usages in each of their languages. The Academie Francaise, for example, coins new words for new computing technology in order to avoid the lawless introduction of Americanisms into the French language. In the eighteenth century the British commissioned a comprehensive dictionary rather than set up a language Academy like that of the French; but the social functions of the dictionary were intended to be, and remain, the same: to regulate the language. On the side of production, non-specialized Anglophone dictionaries typically record only the written language: only words that are “attested” (found) in published writing are included in a dictionary such as the Oxford English Dictionary. On the side of reception, a dictionary is seen as a validation of a certain reality: if a word is not in the dictionary, it is not a “real” word (or the word “doesn’t exist”). Thus, the dictionary is a closed system, a near-perfect tool of cultural control. However, the reality it validates is the reality of scribal culture; many consult a dictionary only to find their reality invalidated by its exclusions.

The task of the subversives, then, is to create a space for imagining alternatives, and to use the weight of dominant discourse (“transform what you say”) against itself. Throughout her work, Allen’s manipulation of the spelling conventions of English and of the conventions of directionality and word segmentation in print both weakens the force of these conventions and highlights their basis in social norms rather than necessity. Her spelling, grammatical, and visual techniques are not, however, a denial of those norms—they depend on those norms. What Allen identifies as a negative in the literary mainstream is exclusiveness (“De Dub Poets”), and the opposite of exclusion is inclusion. Allen uses everything there is to use.

For dub poetry is, as I have said, a balancing act. I disagree with Habekost when he says that “dub poetry epitomises the antagonism between writing and orality”:

Dub poetry is “WORD, SOUND & POWER”. This self-proclaimed credo of the dub poets points to the double dimension of the art form: dub poetry epitomises the antagonism between writing and orality, between WORD as text and WORD as SOUND... (1; emphases in original)

Rather than “epitomising” the antagonism between writing and orality, dub poetry avoids such easy dualisms, for almost all dub poets publish their work in print as well as performing it. An antagonism between writing and orality is in fact the hallmark of European Orientalist thinking that lines up the terms West / white / civilised / literacy as against East (or African) / black / uncivilised / orality.
Habekost does capture several important aspects of Allen’s work in his definition of dub. The first is the equation of SOUND and POWER. The power that a specific sound may have in the natural world is something Allen is very aware of. It is something akin to naming in primary oral societies or those in which the oral remains the most prevalent form of communication. Naming physically conjures the thing named. According to Allen, to perform is to give power to words; to name is to enter the power of what the name represents. Naming cancer, for example, is to “spell” cancer in order to disempower it (p.c.). Allen also taps visceral responses to sound by imitating vocally the wail of a siren, the lick of a whip, and the spasms of birthing labour. She has used her performances to create cohesion in a crowd with chants and slogans; and thus to focus community protest. Sound as power is a concrete physical and social force.

Habekost also challenges his readers to “trace” the sound power of dub in the written text (in the first quotation from his work, above). He suggests that the way dub poets capture that power in their writing is through rhythm, or riddim; and that written dub thus contains sound for those who can trace its riddim. As it turns out, the device European poetry most relies on—the sounds of words as subvocalised in relatively standard English—runs into certain complexities in the transcription of dub. It is not that Allen cannot recreate JEC in writing; it is that she must recreate it through the ears of speakers of dominant dialects because JEC does not have a separate spelling system. (Creating a separate spelling system for JEC would most likely require the sort of social agreement to codify JEC (through a dictionary) that most Jamaican speakers have so far resisted. Apart from the economic benefits of retaining a strong relationship to standard written English, the nature of JEC speech is that it creates a verbal alternative to the white / black dualisms I listed above, since it is seen as both English and not-quite-English.).

Allen’s written riddim, then, relies on the body, specifically the vocal tract, as a channel for non-referential meanings—frustration, physical struggle, and the experience of jazz improvisation, for example. Riddim is the reason why a deictic such as this (or dis) acquires an intensity and concreteness that links readers in their time and place to the writer in her time and place, in a moment outside of European linear time. (It is this moment a jazz improvisation inhabits). It informs and shapes the poem “I Am Africa”, which is about an experience of physical connection with Africa as a signifier of creativity, collective freedom, and action.

In a wider social perspective, when Allen “finalizes” her poems for print, it is not just a translation between concrete media that she achieves, but between two types of mass media in our society, and the cultural expectations they engender. I have mentioned only very briefly the huge cultural and historical baggage that both literacy and print technology carry in our society. It would be easy to place the pop music industry in schematic opposition to high literature, the first having covert prestige but the second enjoying the support of official cultural institutions such as universities, school boards, and libraries. However, Allen works hard at dismantling such oppositions, having moved throughout her career between these public spheres. Her practice shows that textualization includes the appropriate management of cultural expectations around spelling and choice of print forms, for making evident that these apparently transparent systems of communication have strong cultural and political connotations is a part of the project of dub poetry.

1 In this essay I use text to mean written text, and textualization to mean the process of encoding other media as written text.
This is not a comprehensive, but a selective listing of Allen’s work. Allen has also written plays, and stories and poems for children. In addition, much of her earlier written poetry was self-published, and numerous poems are reprinted as different versions (although under the same title) in different collections. She has also produced audio-tapes along the same principles; clearly the version is an important part of her aesthetic.

One of Allen’s first dub pieces was “Riddim an’ Hardtimes”, composed in 1980 and included in Women Do This Every Day. Its original title, however, was “Riddim on Hardtimes” (Allen, p.c.), that is, a dub piece about hard times.

Although many writers do not have control over the design of their book, we can take the design of this book as having been at the very least approved or co-designed by Allen, since it was published by the Women’s Press, which was a collective.

My thanks to Susan Gingell, who pointed this out to me.

In JEC, hool is the equivalent of Canadian English dick. Its etymology is associated by rhyme with wood, or piece of wood; that is, this is not an anatomical term, but a street term for penis. Its presence in a book of poetry would not be condoned in Jamaica (Allen, p.c.); which means that this poem is written, and written to be read, in a diaspora context. The word “hooh” as used here also emphasises the fact that the identity of this rapist is masked, and that because of the values of the village, the rapist will never be uncovered.

Spell is defined by Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary as “a spoken word or form of words held to have magic power”. This reflection of an old Anglo Saxon reality suits my purposes here very well.

Works Cited


---. Personal interview with author, Toronto, July 1997.

---. Performance, Glendon College, York University, March 7, 2000.


