

University of Guelph, Department of History

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PhD Final Oral Examination

**KING ALPHA'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND:
JAMAICAN MIGRANT AND CANADIAN HOST IN
TORONTO'S TRANSNATIONAL REGGAE MUSIC SCENE, 1973-1990**

ABSTRACT

**Date: Mon., May
27/13**

Time: 10:00 am

**Location: MACK 203
(Goldschmidt Room)**

Committee:

Andrew Hunt , **Chair**

Alan Gordon

Bruce Muirhead

External Examiner

Barbara Lorenzkowski, Concordia
University

Catharine Wilson, **Advisor**

Reggae music facilitated a cultural dialogue between Jamaican migrant and Canadian host in Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s. Cultural exchanges flowed across the city's ethnic frontier, sometimes bridging black and white youth together in an 'oppositional' and musical movement. Migrants were able to enact their Jamaican ethnicity in places where reggae was played. At the same time, many young non-Jamaicans were able to satisfy their curiosity in the music of their migrant friends. The result was that reggae soon became an expected part of Toronto's musical vernacular.

This is not, however, a traditional migrant study. Instead, it examines the process of migration – of people *and* music – as seen from both the migrant *and* the host's perspective. It is as much about black Jamaicans as it is about white Torontonians. As such, twenty Jamaicans and twenty non-Jamaicans were interviewed for this project.

Both migrant and host had to negotiate outmoded constructions of 'race'; a fact that would influence reggae crafted in Toronto. The result was that the Canadian reggae text came to mean different things to different people. Indeed, sometimes the only thread that tied the varied experiences together was that Toronto was the *place* in which reggae happened.

Still, as a hybrid, reggae had rather evolved outside of *place*. It was a transnational musical form, made by a 'people in motion'. That form was constantly updated by influences traversing the Black Atlantic in an on-going and 'triangular' musical conversation. While Jamaican migrants carried their music with them wherever they went, radio and sound systems broadcast British and North American musics back to Jamaica, informing new musics being created there. Simultaneously, Jamaican music was reimagined by West Indian immigrants, their children and even non-Jamaicans living in Britain's urban centres and, later on, in Toronto. Yet, as popular as it may have been, *Reggae Canadiana* never reached the heights it might have and was not nearly as successful as its British counterpart.

Nevertheless, the majority of migrants in this study believe that an association with reggae music gave them a psychological advantage in their own acculturation process and helped them to build successful lives in a strange land. Meanwhile, reggae music served as an important bridge that gave non-Jamaican Torontonians access to the migrant community. Without reggae, many non-Jamaicans believe that they would have had little or no contact with the Jamaican-Canadian community in Toronto. The impact of this contact, however, transcended a shared affection for music and engendered a vital multicultural conversation. Importantly, reggae introduced the possibility for long-lasting and meaningful engagement between migrant and host.

