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Geoffrey Philp, *Dub Wise*

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REFERENCES

Geoffrey Philp, *Dub Wise* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2010), 72 p, ISBN 9781845231712

- 1 Geoffrey Philp is a poet and short-story writer who was born in 1958 in Jamaica and emigrated to Miami in 1979. He has been living there ever since. His first four collections of poetry (*Exodus and Other Poems*, 1990; *Florida Bound*, 1995; *Hurricane Center*, 1998; and *Xango Music*, 2001) signalled the arrival of a major new poetic talent walking in the footsteps of Derek Walcott, Mervyn Morris, Dennis Scott and Kamau Brathwaite, among others. His most recent collection, *Dub Wise* (Peepal Tree Press, 2010) continues in the same vein and situates Philp's art in a truly Caribbean aesthetics. Four major themes seem to stand out in that collection: the establishment of a Caribbean literary tradition influenced by reggae and Rastafarianism, the survival of African culture in the Caribbean, living as a Jamaican in Florida, and the need for love, compassion and openness.
- 2 With this new collection, it is quite clear that Philp embodies the continuation of a Caribbean tradition of criticism and creative writing. Indeed, his style is deeply reminiscent of Derek Walcott's poetry, densely metaphorical in "Beyond Mountain View". But it also bears the influence of Kamau Brathwaite's more pared-down couplets in "Limbo: Version". His "Ode to Brother Joe: Version" updates a poem by the late Tony McNeill, "Ode to Brother Joe", about a Rastafarian elder lost in Babylon. "Warner Woman: Version" is dedicated to Edward Baugh and is, of course, a take on his famous "Warner Woman". The word "version" in these titles testifies to the influence of reggae culture on Philp. This word refers to an instrumental or a dub version of a well-known reggae tune. Originally, the version was the flip side of a reggae 45 on which a deejay would improvise or "toast" his commentary. Thus, Philp's poems are versions of well-known Caribbean classics, but the word is also meant to be taken metaphorically as Philp extends a tradition here which goes back to early popular music like ska or rock

steady, but also a tradition by poets like Mervyn Morris, Tony McNeill and Dennis Scott which has consisted in incorporating popular culture into the world of poetry. The poet and critic Kwame Dawes has identified this natural mysticism in his book of the same name (Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic* [Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1999]), a reggae aesthetics which has pervaded the poetry of many post-Independence poets. The poems “For Brother Bob” and “Mule Train: Version” are good illustrations of how this aesthetics works. The very title of the collection is a pun on an expression used by reggae musicians to refer to a type of reggae music known as dub, which is a reinterpretation of a well-known tune with only the bass line and drum patterns mixed in a prominent way with snatches of the guitar and organ parts coming in and out the mix. Thus, to play a reggae song “dubwise” means to play only the drum and bass parts of the song. Philp puns on this phrase as he spells it “dub wise” in two words, referring therefore to the accumulated wisdom embodied by the reggae tradition and the literary tradition he has inherited from his teachers and mentors.

- 3 The presence of African retentions in the Caribbean is an important theme in *Dub Wise*. “Limbo: Version” celebrates the resilience of African culture in the Caribbean and brings to mind Kamau Brathwaite’s “Negus” as well as John Agard’s poems about the “limbo dancer” (John Agard, *Limbo Dancer in Dark Glasses* [Greenheart, 1983]) surviving the ordeal of the Middle Passage to create a new Afro-Caribbean culture in the New World:

Spirit flashes down the spine of twin
crosses that hold my body, yet free
my arms to undulate through time
until I am as small as a spider;
drums pull me under the tide
that has borne so many back to Guinee (*Dub Wise*, 19)

- 4 In this excerpt, the limbo dancer appears as the bearer of ancestral culture as he becomes reincarnated as Anansi, the West African spider who appears as a character in so many West Indian folktales and stories.
- 5 “Dancing with Katrina” deals with New Orleans’ inhabitants’ courage in the face of adversity and with the rôle of their “creole” culture and of the jazz heritage in that process of survival. “Gathering of the Gods: Miami 2010” looks at the survival of Yoruba culture in the Caribbean, particularly in Miami. Influenced by Kamau Brathwaite’s approach and also by his friend Adrian Castro’s teachings, Philp celebrates the reincarnation of the Yoruba deities Ogun, Shango and Olodumare in modern America:

The six o’clock train, emissary of Ogun
whistles through West Dixie, the meandering line
that divides Miami, while my daughter
cruises through amber haze and I lisp
my entreaties to the orishas to keep her safe
from fying metal (*Dub Wise*, 20)

- 6 “Erzulie’s Daughter” is a playful poem which looks at the reemergence of certain African traditions in today’s dancehall music (Erzulie is the Haitian goddess of love).
- 7 But Philp does not forget his Jamaican roots in multicultural Florida, and his love for his home island appears in a number of poems. “Beyond Mountain View” is reminiscent of Derek Walcott’s “Homecoming: Anse La Raye” in which Walcott famously wrote that there are “homecomings without home” (*Collected Poems*, 128) and felt like a tourist in his home island. In “Beyond Mountain View”, the persona drives to the airport to go

back to Florida after a short stay in Jamaica. On the drive to the airport, familiar sights, smells and sounds bring back childhood memories and make him realise that he is now just a “traveller” and part of a “line of holiday traffic” (*Dub Wise*, 48). The last lines of the poem is full of pathos and hint at the fact that Jamaica is no longer home for the persona:

and a man, armed with a rake and machete
clears debris from the embankments
branches that block signs for travellers like me
who have forgotten which side of the road leads home (*Dub Wise*, 48)

- 8 The political violence that led the poet to leave Jamaica in 1979 is powerfully evoked in “Mysteries”, a piece that examines the poet’s reaction to the senseless death of one of his friends through the prism of a childhood game called “dandy shandy” (*Dub Wise*, 57). “Confession” deals with the contrast between the old Jamaica, where people still manage to live together in poverty without murdering one another, and the new Jamaica, where political violence has led to so many deaths. The voice we hear in this poem is that of a young man interrogated by the police about the murder of an older man in a shop. The old man was telling the young one about how different things were back then and the young man could not stand it and shot him down. The absurdity of the situation leads the reader to ponder over the price to pay to continue to live in such an environment.
- 9 However, there is also joy and celebration in *Dub Wise*. Love, compassion, the need to look towards the future are all present too. There is a love poem for his wife (“Summer Love”) and a powerful piece about the futility of suicide (“All Suicides”). “Poetry Woman” celebrates the rôle Caribbean women have played in the transmission of a certain cultural heritage and in the survival of the human spirit in difficult circumstances. The final poem in the collection, “A Prayer for My Children”, is an ode to cultural openness and insists on the need to open up to other cultures while remaining faithful to one’s roots. The poem lays stress on the necessity to draw nourishment from one’s cultural heritage while embracing other cultural influences.

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