Review of *Nuff Said* by Michelle Muir

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ABSTRACT: *Nuff Said*, Michelle Muir’s debut poetry collection, explores the quest for self-affirmation as a native Canadian of Jamaican descent, and her experience of her multi-ethnic legacy. Her spicy language and rhythmic cadences permeate the poems with a sense of empowerment and motivational energy. Key words: divas, Canadian poet, Caribbean diaspora, spoken word, hip-hop

RESUMEN: *Nuff Said*, primer poemario de Michelle Muir, explora su búsqueda de autoafirmación como canadiense de descendencia jamaicana, y la experiencia de su legado multi-étnico. Sus cadencias ritmicas y su lenguaje sazonado le imprimen a los poemas un sentido de empoderamiento y energía motivacional. Palabras clave: divas, poeta canadiense, diáspora caribeña, lengua oral, hip-hop

“I love to see a young girl go out and grab the world by the lapels. Life’s a bitch. You’ve got to go out and kick ass.”

Maya Angelou

While reading young Canadian poet Michelle Muir’s debut collection *Nuff Said*, I was reminded of Angelou’s words in the above epigraph. Muir’s poems have the exact kind of bravado that Angelou admires in young females. The poems in this collection are a compilation by a young woman with a profound admiration for Maya Angelou, a U.S. poet laureate who experienced in the flesh a life of hardship. Perhaps such fondness for Angelou--appreciated throughout the book—can be traced back to Muir’s overcoming her
struggles with speech: she has a speech impediment, she stutters. When interviewed by freelance journalist Khalid Magram in 2010, Muir stated: “Because of the stutter, I wanted to say many things in as few words as possible.” Thus, the topics Muir avidly explores in *Nuff Said* cover a wide range of social concerns that move from education, politics, race, class, gender, to life in general, expressed in a masterful play of words as seen through the eyes of a multifaceted woman—poet, Spoken Word artist, full time teacher, professional storyteller, university lecturer and motivational speaker.

In this work, Muir identifies elements of oppression often forced upon black men and women. Descended from Jamaican parents, Muir becomes the diasporical voice of men and women who have long been oppressed, even though removed in time and place from the colonial Caribbean. As she points out in her poem “I Hope They Ask The Things I Didn’t,” her parents, following the “North Star” of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, settled in Canada, where they decided was the best place to raise a family. Their endeavor was accompanied by a desire to teach their children about their roots:

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Keeping the oral tradition alive every step of the way.
It was my family who quilted for me
the African-Scottish-Jamaican-Canadian stories of my history. (42)
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Given her parents’ strong support of keeping their multi-ethnic oral tradition alive, it is no surprise then that Muir not only eventually overcame her stutter, but also played an important role in preserving her family roots by raising the voice of social concern. Muir regretfully acknowledges how, despite being Canadian-born, she can still feel discrimination due to her skin color:

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Even now
Being Canadian doesn’t always feel as good as it could.
Like when my landlady looked me up and down
And said that we negros all look alike
I want them to take heed of Bob Marley’s creed
For us to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery. (43)
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Muir’s recollection of personal experiences in *Nuff Said* is the confident representation of her concerns from a woman’s liberal perspective.

The series of seven poems titled “Mich-Understood” (a playful combination of Michelle and ‘misunderstood’) display the poet’s desire to make a statement of self-affirmation. Her “imaginary bitches,” as she calls them in the very first poem of the series, take the reader on a wild journey of personal possibilities. One of her most outstanding achievements in this series is the manner in which Muir alternates between multiple imaginary personas in order to convey her thoughts and emotions, as she approaches each issue by letting one of her ‘divas’ take over. It proves rather convenient to shift personalities given different situations:

These other ladies
Are my layers of moods and attitudes.
They are my way of dealing with life’s constant glitches. (2)

The divas trapped inside the poet each claim a voice in her psyche by adopting different postures, while conveying the author’s conscientious stance in the face of life’s dilemmas. The divas, all six, own a name and distinctive characteristics: the sophisticated Dina Desiree, the shy and friendly Nikki, the teacher Ms. Muir, the exuberant and sensual Shugga, the fierceful Mona, and the artist Indigo. Together these voices come alive in the poet’s words of empowerment that convey her uniqueness, even as they remind the poet that it is time to take back control of her life, pride, desire, passion, and sensuality. As an extended tribute to women who “go out and grab the world by the lapels” as Angelou would likely agree, these divas address every woman’s concerns. These seven poems in *Nuff Said* ring with sincerity.

Muir, as an elementary school teacher, also gives us her insight on particular issues of education today. This poet-educator is full of conviction that “All students deserve access to an education that is creative and innovative, artistic and holistic, critical and analytical.” “The Thread” quite possibly best illustrates her educational vision:
If using ideas and thoughts
From outside the box
Will get our kids to reprise and summarize
Metaphors and puns
Discuss the poetic assonance
In the setting suns
And get them to understand similes
And personification
Just think of what it would do
For the life of indoctrination (32)

Muir resents the “Apple god world” with electronic devices that have come to replace a more intimate communication between humans, aiming instead “To keep us ear-budded and interfacing completely erasing the need for you to stand next to me” (30). She proposes, however, that since communication is a central tool to achieve an effective education in today’s schools, an effort should be made to reach out to students using the same means that hold them captivated: “then you know just as well as I do, that we should be using the media to teach our classes” (31).

The 2006-2007 Poetry Face Off champion demonstrates that there is poetry all around us, even in daily activities that would seem trivial to the naked eye. In the poems “A Few of My Favorite Things” and “To Do,” paydays, Oreos, tea, Google, yoga, and telephone calls—to name just a few—become the main characters. The playful style in Muir’s poetry revolves around a contemporary urban setting by boldly fusing poetic techniques of repetition and musicality in the structure. As is the case with Angelou’s poetry, the anaphora we see throughout Muir’s work is intentional, as she acknowledges in her poem “Sunday Kind of Love”: “I’ve used the word love 44 times/and I did it intentionally” (90). Not only does repetitiveness happen with a purpose; in speaking of word choice, the poet lets her muse run wild, verbalizing strong feelings to provoke the reader: “With so much shit in the world, you’d think we’d have more flowers” (61).

A performer for audiences across Canada and the United States, Muir knows how to use repetition and word choice, contributing to
the cadences and rhythms of *Nuff Said* poems, which also includes a Spoken Word CD, featuring the author performing selections from her work. The musicality of the poems’ hip-hop-like lyrics does not go by unnoticed, being perhaps the most outstanding mark of Muir’s poetry collection. At times the spoken mood in the poems is celebratory and infectious, all the more when the reader becomes engaged in Muir’s vocal performance, as in the opening poem “Nuff Said”:

I am a super-sonic  
Jaime Sommers bionic  
Multi-tasking-do-it myself-before-asking  
Get-up-and-stand-up-fo’yo’self, kind of diva  
straight —up-minded, kind of diva. (1)

The social issues often discussed in much Caribbean literature take on a new form in the voice of *Nuff Said*; the poems in the collection are intended to denounce social injustices while promoting cultural awareness and a sense of empowerment. As a young Canadian poet of Caribbean descent, Michelle Muir encourages thought-provoking questions about who we are, where we are, and what are we doing to make a positive change. *Nuff Said*’s readers will enjoy the frankness of Muir’s poetic vision. Regarding *Nuff Said*, Muir disclosed that “After reading this book, there is nothing more to say in terms of who people might think I am. This is it, enough said.” Nuff said, indeed.

**Works Cited**


