

# Black Women Writing, or How To Tell It Like It Is

by Myriam J. A. Chancy

*The question of becoming a writer has, for me, often centred on how to write in a language which is not my own, which has been imposed through colonization.*

*En analysant la poésie de M. Nourbese Philip, l'auteure démontre comment l'autobiographie et la critique littéraire ne sont pas nécessairement opposées l'une à l'autre. Cet essai relie ces deux genres littéraires d'une façon qui démontre comment les liens entre le personnel, l'historique et l'imaginaire ne sont que des parties d'un tout, particulièrement pour celles dont la vie a été rendue quasi-invisible par la société canadienne dominante. En tant qu'écrivaines, les femmes noires ont démontré que la littérature peut servir d'excellent outil politique pour exprimer leur colère ainsi que leur marginalité historique. De plus, la littérature leur donne la liberté de réécrire leur histoire.*

I remember attending an all-girl, Canadian, Catholic junior high school where morning began with the singing of the national anthem followed by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer or the recitation of a Hail Mary: tradition ruled my days. I do not remember having had the feeling that traditions as basic as these spoke to me, specifically, as a Black girl whose one dream was to become a poet, a writer, a teller of stories. At the same time as the school was organized to give young girls the chance to form social bonds with one another and to encourage self-esteem by isolating us from the (sanctioned) competitiveness of boys, certain choices were made for us which denied girls the opportunity to explore the full range of their capabilities. I soon discovered, for instance, that home economics was composed solely of cooking and sewing

classes, not of carpentry and woodwork. Disgruntled, I pondered whether to sew a shirt or an apron and soon learned that I had no aptitude for such work. I had failed before ever having begun at what was presented to me as quintessential "women's work." At some level, I did not want to learn it. I wanted to be able to apply myself to a skill of my own choosing: a skill which would not be determined by the expectation that as a good, Catholic girl I would grow up to marry a good, Catholic man, and then cook balanced meals while darning for our nuclear family. It was not that I was, or am, rejecting this possibility, but that it was a role prescribed for me because of my sex and was not of my own choosing; furthermore, as a Black girl, I was made to feel that mastery of these basic skills would get me further than mastery of English or Art. My avenues for success were already presented to me as marginal and my hopes for becoming a writer became too distant for me to even imagine as a possibility.

My maternal grandmother was a woman who made a living from the labour of her hands. She is spoken of with respect and admiration and I wonder at times if she became a seamstress by choice. Did it matter then? Does it matter now? Perhaps she had chosen to be a seamstress in order to work with needle and thread to leave some mark upon the fabric of this world. With her work, she provided for four children, one of whom is my mother. My grandmother was widowed and survived. There are lessons she is still teaching me beyond the grave even though I have known her through stories and a picture in

my family album in which her smiling face harbours the secrets of many generations of self-subsisting women—women who were taught "women's work" to service men but who shirked the lessons they had been taught in order to survive with or without men in cultures which did not openly support the single or the widowed woman, especially with children, whatever her class. Such women are somehow lost from our collective consciousness or devalued for having led untraditional lives.

I am learning that there is some truth in the cliché "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Black women today are still struggling to survive whether they do so through traditional or untraditional means. As a group, we still exist either in the margins of society or are invisible as we toil in its centre. Women writers of the African diaspora have sought to express our oppression and the necessity of remembering our foremothers in poetry, fiction, and personal writings but still we struggle to be published, read, heard: remaining invisible except to each other, perhaps. I have found that I have not been as alone or different as I felt myself to be while growing up as a racial minority in the Canadian school system. Women writers of African descent in Canada, such as Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera, Afua Cooper, and M. Nourbese Philip have made it possible for me to engage in personal/critical work which uncovers the connections between us as Black women at the same time as rediscovering that which has been kept from us: our cultural heritage, the language of our grandmothers, ourselves.

In reading the works of other Black women, the question of becoming a writer has, for me, often centred on how to write in a language which is not my own, which has been imposed through colonization. It is this search for a language of my own which has brought me to the poetry of M. Nourbese Philip who has worked in particular to reclaim the loss of African dialects by inscribing in her texts the New World dialects of the English Caribbean. She says:

...what I'm struggling to do is find a written form of that spoken language that the people on the street nurtured—what used to be called “bad English.”...I'm trying to find...the deep structures of that oral language. (1991, 19)

Philip's explorations incorporate the interrogation of “standard English” by revealing the depths to which language contributes to the oppression of the formerly and continually colonized. She alternately deconstructs standard English and reconstructs the Caribbean demotic by unveiling the points of intersection between the violence of imperialism and colonialism and the efforts on the part of the enslaved to maintain cultural and linguistic integrity despite that devastation. As an exiled writer from Trinidad and Tobago, Philip sees Canada as a space in which a New World Caribbean tradition can be forged.

Yet Canada has had an uncomfortable history of denial and erasure when it comes to the history of Black people (and Black women specifically) here.<sup>1</sup> This history has resulted in the marginalization, until very recently, of Black literary voices from the mainstream; thus, it appeared, for Philip, that “there was nothing there” (1991, 19). Philip's sense of Canada's forbidding landscape, both real and imagined, is not new: Canadian literature is by and far populated by writers who sought to break with the old (England) in order to bring in the new (Canada). Margaret Atwood states in her 1971 text *Survival* that “the central symbol for Canada—and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature—is undoubtedly Survival, la Survivance...” (32).

The theme of survival is evident in

Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, in which Canada serves as the backdrop for much of the struggles her characters take on; in this sense, Philip's work—as in the case of most writers of the African diaspora writing in Canada—belongs to an expressly Canadian tradition. In a larger context her work belongs to a female Caribbean literary tradition which defies national borders: in that survival, for the Afro-Caribbean woman, is not a question of simply making it back “from the awful experience—the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship—that killed everyone else” (Atwood 33), but of recognizing that the process of conquering the great North American frontier resulted in the genocide of indigenous peoples in all of the Americas as well as in Africa—a genocide which continues to this day. Survival, then, in this context, is part of a global, collective effort to struggle not against the elements but against generational, human destruction.

Philip illustrates the degree to which African and Afro-Caribbean cultures have been disrupted in her opening series of poems titled “And Over Every Land and Sea” in which a Mother and Daughter attempt, in vain, by scouring every corner of the earth, to find each other. The mother-figure in the poem “Questions! Questions!,” speaking in the Caribbean demotic, summons her Daughter; her questioning voice is full of desperation:

Where she, where she, where she  
be, where she gone?  
Where high and low meet I search,  
find can't, way down the island's  
way  
I gone—south:  
...  
grief gone mad with crazy—so them  
say.  
Before the questions too late,  
before I forget how they stay,  
crazy or no crazy I must find she.  
(1989, 28)

The “craziness” the Mother speaks of is a bi-product of the alienation the Daughter suffers as a result of being forced to survive without her Mother, that is, without her cultural roots. On the Daughter's side there is a struggle not to give into “craziness” which would only result in a

further alienation from her past. Philip makes clear that the search that both figures undertake is symptomatic of a legacy of familial and cultural divisions brought about by colonization. Reading this part of the poem I have asked myself: How many times did one of my foremothers have to battle being labelled “crazy” as she resisted her oppressions as a Black woman, here, in the Caribbean, around the globe? How many times did I think I was crazy for wanting to know the truth of my history?

Mother and Daughter in Philip's poem survive in exile and it is not clear that either of them knows the face of the woman they look for, just as it is true that we often attempt to reclaim the past with little knowledge of the shape of those people and cultural markers which were taken from us, destroyed, or manipulated to fit new contexts. In “Clues,” again the Mother speaks:

She gone—gone to where and don't  
know  
looking for me looking for she;  
is pinch somebody pinch and tell me,  
up where north marry cold I could  
find she—  
Stateside, England, Canada—some-  
where about (30)

By the end of the series of poems, the daughter sits in the “Adoption Bureau” with a sense of being searched for and she too searches:

Something! Anything! of her.  
She came, you say, from where  
she went—to her loss:  
“the need of your need”  
in her groin (36)

The only hope for these women is to find one another in the annals of history—annals from which they have been cut out and forgotten.

The Mother and Daughter Philip brings to life in the collection are representative of all Black women living suspended between the past and present as the quality of their lives is determined not by themselves but by their oppressors. The use of the Mother/Daughter bond is a metaphor for the generational disruption of that bond through racist and sexist oppression. Each invokes the other in a recipro-

*Alternative languages become a vehicle of resistance by which to access  
African cultures or preserve what little is remembered of them.*

cal attempt to regain what has been lost to both: language, history, freedom. These opening poems, then, are symbolic of a counter-discourse, an alternative language, which Philip attempts to formulate against the oppression she uncovers in standard English, her "father" tongue.

Thus, in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," Philip moves from stating that English is her "mother tongue" (a first language) to being tongue-tied by the language itself:

What is my mother  
tongue  
my mammy tongue  
my mummy tongue  
my momsy tongue  
my modder tongue  
my ma tongue?

I have no mother  
tongue  
no mother to tongue  
no tongue to mother . . .

I must therefore be tongue  
dumb  
dumb-tongued  
dub-tongued  
damn dumb  
tongue (56)

This section of the poem resonates with the opening Mother-Daughter poems; there is a clear realization that there is no connection to African culture through English and further, no connection to a matriarchal ancestry. This is why on the same page, Philip offers a first person narrative, running lengthwise down the page, next to the above quoted stanzas, which relates the birth of a child who begins to access language through her mother's tongue cleaning her free of "the creamy white substance covering its body."

Alternately competing for its linguistic space on the page is an edict aimed at disrupting this fragile but necessary bond. The edict states in part that "every owner

of slaves shall. . . ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible" to discourage "rebellion and revolution" (56). One page over, edict number two states: "Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended" (58). For the African, then, English becomes "a foreign anguish" and readers must turn the poem on its side to discover the mother with her newborn child attempting to defy the edicts by blowing into her daughter's mouth: "WORDS—HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE—INTO HER DAUGHTER'S MOUTH" (58). This is the language which saturates the opening poems of the collection and binds the lost mothers and daughters of this colonial legacy together:

stop looking for don't see and can't—  
you bind she up tight tight with hope,  
she own and yours not up in together;  
although she tight with nowhere and  
gone  
she going find you, if you keep look-  
ing (30)

Philip sees in the transformation of language by people of African descent an answer to historical colonization, that is, the only means by which an enslaved population could both exact revenge and assert cultural autonomy in the New World to which they were brought and to which they were expected to adapt. The "adoption bureau" of the opening poems thus represents the forced assimilation of countless numbers of Africans who in the New World still suffer from the wounds of slavery. Alternative languages become a vehicle of resistance by which to access African cultures or preserve what little is remembered of them.

In the last three poems of the collection, "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power," "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue" and "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks," Philip presents an

increasingly defiant, female voice:

forgive me this dumbness  
*but thou art the same Lord, whose  
property  
this lack of tongue forgive  
is always to have mercy (94)*

in search of her/story:

each word creates a centre  
circumscribed by memory...and  
history  
waits at rest always  
still at the centre (96)

Here, there is no return to the Caribbean demotic, to "bad English," patois, dialect, as Philip moves her poetry unto the brink of nothingness, of "pure utterance" (98) which perhaps marks the possibility of re-birth into the forgotten or obliterated past. But can history possibly be regained outside of speech? Is the return to silence an option by which freedom can be attained?

The last poems of *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* resonate for me on a level removed from the adaptation of language for survival, and lead me to confront the silences within myself. Philip says of writing *She Tries Her Tongue*: "When I was done with it I found that silence—the concept of silence—confronted me. Was silence always something negative—could there be a positive aspect to it?" (1991, 19). For myself, silence has been a space in which to re-evaluate the political implications of standard language usage to resist the continued co-optation of my cultural heritages and personal experiences. Living as I do between two "father tongues," both French and English, and without access to my "mother tongue" of Haitian créole, it has been difficult for me to articulate the losses Philip brings to life in her mythical creation of the African Mother and Daughter flying the globe in search of each other in ways not linked to the languages of

former colonizers. In what language does one seek connections to the past when, divided through enslavement and colonization, so many of us have been forced to acquire languages which would serve only to wedge us further apart? Perhaps the answer to systemic oppression and marginalization lies not so much in the language we choose to write and speak as in what we choose to say in speech and writing.

I have long been silent about my own origins. In this writing I begin to break with silence to hear and see myself more clearly. For years I have known that there is a link between my father's family and that of Toussaint Louverture. It is not often spoken about; it is a point of fact that even without concrete proof has been affirmed without ceremony. Surely there is some pride invested in passing down this remnant of a link to what is often historicized as the first successful slave revolt in the New World. Toussaint became a hero of that revolution which liberated (superficially, briefly) Haiti from French domination in 1804. In 1988, proof finally appeared in my mailbox in the form of an article from a Haitian newspaper<sup>2</sup> in which the descendants of Toussaint were enumerated. I was finally able to see how the past is so often restructured in order to highlight patriarchal descent over matriarchal descent. There are in fact no biological descendants of Toussaint: he had two sons who had no children of their own and thus genealogists trace his primary descendants through his siblings. My connection to the sacred memory of Toussaint is reached through his sister, Geneviève Affiba. The historical record which remains of Geneviève states only that she was bought as a slave by a Monsieur de la Fontaine and that she gave birth to nine sons and three daughters as the concubine of another French colonist whose name I now bear. Nothing else is known. There is no record of her involvement in the revolution in the early 1800s, no record of her means of subsistence other than her title as "concubine." Nothing else is known. Although I am her descendant, she is remembered only as the link to Toussaint: her own existence erased in favor of the visibly heroic. Perhaps she had sown Toussaint's tunic as he headed off to war. Perhaps her own children, young but fearless, girls and boys,

had joined their uncle on the battlefields for a new Haiti. Perhaps. Her mark, and that of other women, on the revolution is lost, as are all of the mundane, everyday revolutionary acts committed by women as a way of life and survival.

I have only one living grandmother now and the things she could teach me are lost in the ocean which separates us. History, too, has conspired to keep us from knowing each other fully as Black women. Survival in this New World demands that we leave each other behind again and again in order to escape endless cycles of missed opportunities in the Caribbean. And yet, I speak of her here and recall her as I have my other grandmothers, though our lives are overlapping as I write these lines. Like the Daughter of Philip's poems, I seek each out in photos, letters, and a thousand acts of memory. This I know: it is possible to resist my own erasure and theirs in the vastness of the Canadian literary landscape, as Philip has shown, by writing of that which has been forgotten, of those among us forced into submission, stripped of our ways of living, seeing, and speaking. I believe that in writing we, as Black women, can re-make our history, if not our lives.

*Myriam J. A. Chancy was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and raised in Québec City and Winnipeg. She obtained her B.A. from the University of Manitoba in 1989, and her M.A. from Dalhousie University. She is presently a Canada Council Fellow and is completing her Ph.D. in English literature in the U.S. Her publications include a personal/critical essay in Frontiers and poetry in the Fall 1993 issue of At the Crossroads.*

<sup>1</sup>Please see: Adrienne Shadd, "Institutionalized Racism and Canadian History: Notes of a Black Canadian" in *Racism in Canada*, ed. Ormond McKague. Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1991; Dionne Brand, "A Working Paper on Black Women in Toronto: Gender, Race and Class," *Fireweed: Theory* 19 (Sept. 1984): 26-43; Agnes Calliste, "Canada's Immigration Policy and Domesticity from the Caribbean: The Second Domestic Scheme" in *Race, Class, Gender: Bonds and Barriers*, ed. Jesse Vorst et al. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>See: Jacques Cauna, "La Famille et la Descendance de Toussaint Louverture," *Le Nouvelliste* Vendredi 28 octobre (1988): 3, 4, 9.

## References

- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1971.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. Interview. "Secrecy and Silence," by Barbara Carey. *Books in Canada* (Sept. 1991): 17-21.
- Philip, M. Nourbese. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1989.

# PARAGRAPH

THE CANADIAN FICTION REVIEW

**TOPICAL**

**VATIC**

**MUSCULAR**

**REFRESHING**

**NYMPHOLEPTIC**

**COAST TO COAST**

**\$14 one year**

**\$26 two years**

**(GST included)**

**PARAGRAPH**

**137 Birmingham Street**

**Stratford, Ontario**

**NSA 2T1**