

WRITING ON THE MARGINS: M. NOURBESE PHILIP AND QUESTIONS OF BE/LONGING

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Tobago-born M. NourbeSe Philip is a poet and essayist living in Toronto, Canada. Her work often focuses on her experiences as a poet who is a Black immigrant woman. Although physically in Canada, Philip asserts that she writes from Tobago, creating a metaphorical isthmus that connects the culture and peoples of two spaces that were once British colonies and that share the same official language. By analyzing a selection of poems from *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) and essays from *Bla_K: Essays & Interviews* (2017), I aim at exploring how this metaphorical isthmus between Tobago and Canada is reflected in Philip's work. Anchored to Fernando Ortiz's concept of "transculturation" and Homi Bhabha's concept of the "in-between," I argue that Philip's poems and essays reflect how the poet negotiates her identity as a Black immigrant woman in a country such as Canada, and how this affects the way she moves in this cultural and geographic space.

Keywords: M. NourbeSe Philip, Identity, Migration

Introduction

A «Black, African-descended, female, immigrant (or interloper) and Caribbean», M. NourbeSe Philip's work has defied linguistic and cultural boundaries (Philip 2017: 13). Living in Canada but writing from Tobago, Philip stands in-between two cultures tied by language and colonialism where poetry occupies an important place in the poet's be/longing to these geographical places. After all, one's identity is intimately tied to one's sense of place. Both *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (2015), one of her most celebrated poetry collections, and *Bla_K* (2017), her latest essay collection, reflect this in-betweenness and the struggles Philip has faced as a Black, immigrant woman writing in Canada. In this paper, I will argue that it is through poetry and language that Philip creates a connection between her homeland of Tobago and Canada, effectively creating a metaphorical isthmus that unites both geographical places.

My analysis of the selected excerpts is anchored in two key concepts: transculturation and the in-between. The first «expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist

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merely in acquiring another culture [...] but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture» (Ortiz 102). According to Ortiz, transculturation reflects the constant readjustment and disadjustment to a new culture that is in tension with the immigrant's previous culture. Thus, this concept is significant to the discussion of Philip's work because it focuses on the dual struggle that is the process of moving to a new country –the adaptation to a new culture while uprooting a previous one–, something that the poet discusses in her poems and essays.

The subject who moves to a new country is forced to acquire a culture very different from their own to belong to this new culture; however, because of their immigrant status and the fact that they are part of a different culture, this belonging is never truly complete. This immigrant subject lives, consequently, in-between cultures, geographical spaces and peoples. As Homi Bhabha explains, these in-between spaces are originated «in the articulation of cultural differences» and «initiate new signs of identity» (Bhabha 2). To be in-between is, therefore, to constantly negotiate one's identity in the face of a new culture that is different from one's own. However, as Bhabha argues, these in-between spaces also provide the opportunity to create «innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself» (Bhabha 2). As I will discuss further along, Philip's work as a Black, immigrant woman echoes her in-betweenness: moving from Trinidad and Tobago to Canada, a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon country, means that she lives in a space located between the dominant culture in Canada and the culture from where she is.

Uprooting: from Tobago to Trinidad to Canada

Philip's first experience with migration is at eight years old, when her family moves from Tobago to Trinidad. In an interview with Kristen Mahlis, Philip explains that this had been her father's decision «because the education system was “better” in Trinidad», referring to this experience as her «first experience of exile» (2004: 682-683), which was followed by her move to Jamaica to attend university and, finally, to Toronto, Canada, where she still lives. As she argues in “Echoes in a Stranger Land”, an essay first published in *Frontiers* (1992) and revisited in *Bla_K*, exile «has come to be the signature and permanent mark of the modern age» (Philip 2017: 37). However, her exile did not start with her physical move from Tobago to Trinidad, but much before.

The exile Philip discusses in this essay is «the legacy of colonialism and imperialism that first exiled Africans from their ethnicity and all its expressions –language, religion, education, music, patterns of family relations– into the pale

and beyond, into the nether land of race». Consequently, all African-descended people are exiles who cannot access their ancestors' culture and must contend with a culture that, although presented as their own, was, and continues to be, imposed on them: «we not knowing that the literature and history, even the grammar we learning in school, is part of the contour map in we own geography of exile» (38). This excerpt is part of a paragraph written in the Caribbean demotic, a variety of English she often uses in her writings. Philip's use of both standard English and the Caribbean demotic draws attention to the process of transculturation that happens when someone moves from one culture to another, from Tobago to Trinidad and, finally, to Canada to continue her studies. Growing up in Trinidad and Tobago, a former British colony¹, Philip was taught standard English at school, as well as English literature, and was taught images that she was unfamiliar with. «Every schoolchild had to engage with Wordsworth's daffodils at some time, although we had never seen them», she recalls in "Interview with an Empire" (53). Writing in the Caribbean demotic in an essay, an academic piece of writing subjected to strict rules about grammar and form, can therefore be read as a disruptive act against the imposition of standard English (and of the English culture) in the Caribbean. Because she is an immigrant in Canada, where English is an official language, the use of both varieties represents the constant tension within a subject living in-between two cultures and trying to understand how to live in a new culture while uprooting their previous one.

This tension is a recurring theme in Philip's work, including her poetry. The poem "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks" starts with a lament for the loss of the subject's «parents», «brother and sister», and «tribe of belongings small and separate». The subject mourns this loss as she is catapulted «with the fate of a slingshot stone» (Philip 2015: 58). The use of the catapult and the slingshot as symbols for the subject's exile to an unknown place is particularly interesting, since these are devices that require someone to release the tension of their parts to throw something (in this case, someone) with great force. The poem's subject has no control over where she lands, much like Philip's own experiences with exile. As she affirms in the interview with Mahlis, «it was pre-ordained that I was going to leave. That is what you did as a colonial person with some education. It was a rite of passage, of adulthood, that was the next step in your life» (2004: 689). Although aware of this need to leave her homeland, the process itself is, nevertheless, painful. In an excerpt from *The Practical Guide to Gardening*, a book invented by Philip for this poem, the narrator describes

1 Trinidad and Tobago became an independent country in 1962, a few years before Philip immigrated to Canada.

the transplantation of a plant, reminding readers keep the plant's roots exposed for as little as possible: like plants, people being "transplanted" require a place where they can ground their roots. When the subject is catapulted to a new, unknown place, this necessarily means that their roots are ripped from the ground and placed somewhere new, which affects the subject's identity. «Geography is linked deliberately to culture, language, the ability to hear and a variety of modes of articulation. It is where one speaks from», argues Carole Boyce Davies (15). This is something that the subject struggles with throughout the poem: as she moves to a new geographical place, she is confronted with the impossibility of articulating herself because she has lost her connection to her previous culture. Newly arrived, she attempts to search for her cultural roots, which are embedded in language and must be remembered to ensure her survival in a new place and in a new culture. The second stanza of the poem suggests this: it starts with the verbs «seek», «search» and «uproot» in the same line, followed by «the forget and remember of root words» (Philip 2015: 60). This stanza, in which the subject seems desperate to remember her «root words», is placed next to a list of six facts titled "Facts to Live By and Die". The first five facts seem to have been adapted from a scientific textbook about the brain and memory. The last one, however, informs the reader that «Memory is essential to human survival» (Philip 2015: 61). Moving to a new place made the subject to temporarily forget her roots as she learns to navigate a new culture and a new language. It is, therefore, essential that she remembers those «root words» in order to survive in this new environment. This is, after all, part of the process of transculturation, where moving to a new country implies learning its culture but also uprooting (and, thus, remembering) her previous culture.

As a poet who began her writing career in Canada, Philip states that the place she writes from is Tobago, the island where she was born. Like many Caribbean-born people, Philip immigrated to Canada in the late sixties, following a large wave of migration that started with the introduction of the 1962 Immigration Act. This act «reduced the emphasis of people migrating to Canada based on the colour of their skin or their nationality and increased the emphasis on their education and skills» (Labelle & al). Philip immigrated to Toronto, Canada, to pursue graduate studies in law and politics and stayed to practice law, eventually quitting her profession to dedicate her life to writing and poetry. In the opening essay of *Bla K*, "Jammin' Still", Philip recounts her journey from Tobago to Canada and recognises that her work could only have been done in Canada and not the United Kingdom or the United States of America, the most frequent destinations of Caribbean immigration. As she explains, this is because both countries have a long tradition of writing by Black writers and, as such, «it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to find a poetic language for what

cannot be told yet must be told» (Philip 2017: 15). However, in the same essay, Philip acknowledges that her writing is grounded in Tobago, something that she has previously talked about in the interview with Mahlis I discussed above: «the place I write from is Tobago». She explains that there is a difference between writing in and writing from, since the latter demonstrates «a desire to remain rooted in my place» (2004: 683). Writing in Canada but writing from Tobago means, then, that both places are linked through her writing, a metaphorical isthmus that connects the two places she calls home: Tobago in the Caribbean and Canada in North America.

An isthmus is a narrow connection between two larger parts; what connects Tobago and Canada is, I believe, the English language. Both former colonies of the British empire, Trinidad and Tobago and Canada share English as the official language, used in government, laws and schools. English is also, as I have discussed above, the language in which Philip writes and which is deeply connected to her experiences of exile: as a colonial language, it was, much like exile, imposed on her ancestors and, consequently, on her. This language represents a profound wound for Philip, but there is no other language in which to write. As she confesses, «English is not my mother tongue. It is my father tongue [...]. But it is my mother tongue and father tongue all wrapped together in some kind of ghastly embrace – or is it struggle? Or perhaps both?» (Philip 2017: 31).

To be / long

There is no other language but English for Philip to write in. It is a colonial and imperial language that has erased people, cultures and other languages throughout time, and which was forced upon the New World. «This language [...] was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status» (2017: 50), Philip writes in “Interview with an Empire”. The “non-being” of Black people is intimately connected to their invisibility in Canadian history and culture. Although Black people have been in Canada since the sixteenth century as enslaved people, their presence has remained mainly invisible. As Katherine McKittrick argues, Blackness in Canada is a surprise «because it should not be here [in Canada], was not here before, was always here, is only momentarily here, was always over there (beyond Canada, for example)» (ch. 4, s. p.). The presence of Black people in Canada is, then, in permanent tension with the country’s attempts to erase it throughout history, as both George Elliot Clarke and McKittrick argue. Philip herself says that, while she has lived in Canada for most of her life, her immigrant status, as well as her black skin, places her as «the “unbelonged” there» (Philip 2017: 15).

Although she speaks English, one of the official languages of Canada, this language prevents her from being seen as equal. Linda Kinnahan, in her discussion of Philip's *She tries her tongue*, argues that «language is revealed as profoundly bound up in the effort to train the eye to see the black body as racially embodied and other, to see the white body as racially transparent and normative» (116). This connection between language and body (and, I would add, place) is the focus of the poem “Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones”. In it, the subject attempts to find the answer to the question «In whose language / Am I / If not in yours» (Philip 2015: 26). This question is, in fact, a double question, given that the verb to be has two meanings –to exist and to stand in a place–, symbolising the profound link between geography, language and culture: “where do I exist, and how do I exist, if not in a language that erases me?”. The subject of this poem is searching for a place in a language and, consequently, in a culture that she does not see as her own but someone else's. This frantic search is followed by a stanza where the subject presents images of different Black people and reimagines their physical traits in a more positive light. For example, the subject identifies herself as the «[g]irl with the flying cheek-bones». She points at a «woman with a nose broad / As her strength», comparing her strength to the broadness of her nose, a physical attribute often considered less beautiful according to Eurocentric standards of beauty. And, finally, there is «the man with the full-moon lips / Carrying the midnight of colour / Split by the stars – a smile», a metaphor that compares a Black man with the wonder of a midnight sky lit by stars and a full-moon (27). This poem is an exercise in questioning the English language and the way it imposes negative images for the benefit of a particular group of people, excluding and erasing others. It is also another example of transculturation and in-betweenness, where the subject of the poem is attempting to find herself in-between her homeland and a new place, connecting them through a language that, although painful, connects these two places and cultures.

This poem not only reflects Philip's experiences as an immigrant, but it also reflects her presence as a writer in Canada trying to find a place within its literary institutions. A Black woman writing in Canada, who, when she first started, did not encounter a literary tradition with which she could engage, Philip has often discussed the challenges she faced since she started writing. She calls herself «an unembedded, disappearing poet and writer in Canada» in the essay “Jammin' Still” (Philip 2017: 13). Other essays, such as “Interview with an Empire” and “Who's Listening? Artists, Audiences & Language”, also discuss the issue of her continued disappearance from Canadian literature, both as a poet and a critic. In “Who's Listening?”, first published in *Frontiers* and revisited in *Bla_K*, Philip reflects on the Canadian literary institutions and how the Eurocentric

powers that lie behind these have shaped her work. In particular, she discusses her dilemma: should she write entirely in the Caribbean demotic or in standard English? Her choice, to write in both varieties, has consequently had an impact on how her work has been received, particularly in Canada. Although her poetry has been widely acclaimed worldwide, in Canada it has been largely ignored by literary critics, as Paul Barrett argues, and she has often been excluded from important anthologies of Canadian literature. Lorraine York, writing about Philip's role as a public intellectual, believes that this invisibility as a poet in Canada is due to her hypervisibility as an activist in the same country, «brought about by a radical misunderstanding and abjection of her work as a cultural activist» (8). I would add that this reaction to her work (or lack thereof) has deeper roots. In the aforementioned essay, Philip discusses the prevalence of racism and sexism in the publishing industry in Canada, which has worked to silence Black writers, particularly Black female writers like herself. One of the issues she mentions is applying for funding as an immigrant poet who «must show the Canadian component in her work», which greatly influences the success of the work of immigrant artists, since they must prove their Canadian-ness through their work (Philip 2017: 71). This is clearly a challenge for these artists, but especially for Black artists in Canada. As McKittrick writes, «[t]o belong as black in Canada is therefore to necessarily belong elsewhere. This process of naming Canadian blackness as Caribbean or U.S. unhinges black people from Canada, while also reducing black specificities to an all-encompassing elsewhere (simply non-Canadian)» (ch. 4, s. p.). Writing as a Black immigrant woman in Canada is, thus, deeply connected to belonging.

Although language connects Trinidad and Tobago and Canada, this is a fraught connection. As Philip asks, «[h]ow do you begin to be/long when everything around you conspires to keep you alien – the language, the customs, the spirituality?» (Philip 2017: 46). The tentative answer is through writing. Because Black people, particularly Black women, have been silenced throughout history, writing is radically important to Philip because it allows her to address the wounds that the English language and colonialism continue to inflict upon her. English has been responsible for her silence and, as an act of resistance, she uses this language to own her voice. This is best exemplified by the poem “She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks”. As discussed above, this poem features a subject who is searching for her lost cultural and linguistic roots. It is heavily influenced by the myth of Philomela, who is raped, and her tongue is cut to prevent her from revealing this. As revenge, she weaves a tapestry that tells her story, angering her rapist, who tries to murder her. To protect her, the gods transform her into a nightingale. Like Philomela, the subject of the poem has been silenced by a rape that is perpetrated by the English language: «When

silence is / Abdication of word tongue and lip». However, because this subject has no other option but to speak in this language, she, like Philomela, must find a way to tell her story: «Might I... like Philomela... sing» (Philip 2015: 72). As Mahlis argues, in this poem «Philip is claiming her power to speak as a New World writer, to assert a connection to place, and to insert herself in a tradition that has itself been silenced by the influx of European immigrants to the Canadian territories» (Mahlis 2005: 197). It is through poetry that Philip connects her homeland of Trinidad and Tobago and Canada, because to be/long is to «embrace the idea of fluidity and movement» that comes when one is in-between cultures, languages and homes (Philip 2017: 33).

Conclusion

Disrupting the fixity of the verb “to belong”, M. NourbeSe Philip’s work has challenged our understanding of be/longing. A Black, immigrant woman living in a predominantly white space and language, Philip has used poetry as a tool to grasp what it means to live in-between. Writing in a language that is but is not her own, her work as a poet writing on the margins has pushed boundaries. As Davies writes, «Black women /’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist /s in myriad places and times» (26). As an exiled poet, Philip exists in-between cultures and languages, never truly belonging, in the fixed sense of the term, to either. Therefore, writing is, for her, a way to be/long, creating a metaphorical isthmus that connects the two places she calls home: Tobago, where she writes from, and Canada, where she writes in.

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