

BOOK REVIEWS

FRONTIERS: ESSAYS AND WRITINGS ON RACISM AND CULTURE

M. Nourbese Philip. Stratford Ontario: Mercury Press, 1992.

LOOKING FOR LIVINGSTONE: AN ODYSSEY OF SILENCE

M. Nourbese Philip. Stratford Ontario: Mercury Press, 1991.

by Leslie Sanders

Sometimes it appears that we Africans in the New World have been weaned forever on the milk of otherness; we have been too long "othered" by those societies who traditionally have thought and currently think nothing of enriching themselves on our labour then discarding us....We need now, however, to be m/othered by those very societies and cultures which have destroyed our cultures....By Canada. But more important than that, Canada *needs* to m/other us. Her very salvation depends on m/othering all her peoples—those who be/long(ed) here when the first Europeans arrived...as well as those, like the African, who unwittingly encountered History and became seminal in its development.

With this bold trope, in the "Introduction" to *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*, Nourbese Philip proclaims the intent of her timely and welcome collection. Most have already been published elsewhere; in fact, some may seem unduly topical, for example, those regarding Black community resistance to the Royal Ontario Museum's "Out of Africa" exhibition;

the split in the Toronto Women's Press over "appropriation of voice" and subsequent debates of this issue in the Writers' Union of Canada; Vision 21's picketing of the Toronto meeting of PEN, and Canadian PEN President June Callwood's vicious response. However their reissue here is important because they constitute a reappropriation of incidents whose "official" versions persist. The essays are themselves an important history of cultural struggles over the meaning of Canadian "multiculturalism." Some essays thus analyze the arts community, arts funding and multiculturalism as policy, delineating how racist attitudes shape and determine cultural production, providing visibility to some work at the expense of others. Particularly important are Philip's discussions of audience, for this book is crucially about the creation of dialogue where now there is little. Citing Raymond Williams, Philip asserts that no work of art is complete until it is received, and so art, its community, its audience, its market, are interrelated in complex ways. Her working out of this relationship in "Who's Listening? artists, audience & language" illuminates her analyses of other issues as well, for she describes racism, in part, as willful and perverse misreadings of the "other." Never only critical, Philip offers resolutions that are pointed challenges to those in power. Read as history, the collection clarifies more recent events than are recorded here; notably, the controversy over Showboat as the opening production of the North York Civic Centre is better understood in terms of the events that the essays relate.¹

Philip reads history both passionately and dispassionately. She quotes James Baldwin: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Relating the horrific recent history of

South Africa ("The Sick Butterfly; South Africa's War Against Children"), Philip meditates upon how black south African children have propelled into the open the brutality and bankruptcy of the South African state. Her essays reveal as well how our view of children and childhood is, in response, and of necessity, altered. In "Women and Theft," Philip pursues etymology and implication in quest of a deeper understanding of the commonplace. This rigorous philosophical technique is simply and playfully rendered; by the end of this essay, women's "poverty" has, indelibly, become "theft"; complex economic and political theory is effortlessly made plain. In "Social Barbarism and the Spoils of Modernism," Philip considers the erasure of context and connection in the Moderns' appropriation of African art. Her own British Caribbean education, she recollects, termed the erasure artistic transcendence.

M/othering, these essays imply, erases nothing, honours all connections, restores history. As the trope governing this book, "m/othering" suggests both reality and promise, denial and nurture, alienation and connection, rejection and independence. Taken as a whole, *Frontiers* offers im/pertinent advice on m/othering: "For Canada," the epigram reads, "in the effort of becoming a space of true true be/longing."

Where the essays in *Frontiers* are, by and large, both literal and local, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* employs figurative and poetic language, both poetry and prose, in the quest for belonging. It turns to Africa and to mythical time to raise what are in some ways matters quite similar to those in the essays.

Looking for Livingstone is a quest narrative. The story begins on "THE FIRST AND LAST DAY OF THE MONTH OF THE MONTH OF NEW MOONS (OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE LAST AND FIRST

MONTH) IN THE FIRST YEAR OF OUR WORD: 0300 HOURS." Each chapter notes the passage of time precisely: "THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY IN THE TWO THOUSANDTH MONTH OF THE TWO BILLIONTH YEAR OF OUR WORD: 1000 HOURS." The Traveller's quest is, at first, indefinite, but gradually it becomes clearer to her, figured concretely as a search for the explorer David Livingstone. More important but less tangibly, it becomes an investigation into the meaning of silence and word, her own silence, which is to say, as well and inseparably, her own voice. In her search for Livingstone, the Traveller encounters seven tribes, the name of each an anagram of the word silence. Either through their practices or through the trials they impose on her, each helps her to clarify her understanding and purify her intention. Not until she possesses her silence fully, however, does she meet up with Livingstone. The encounter is wonderfully resonant, comic and poignant, and concludes, quite unexpectedly, with a remarkable peace.

The bold originality of *Looking for Livingstone* cannot be conveyed by setting and plot alone. The Traveller is Everywoman, defined, though in no sense limited, by race and history. The rich mix of genre that this narrative evokes ranges from epic to science fiction, each form interrogated by the Traveller's race and gender. Details of ritual and custom, the various signs and metaphors through which meaning is evoked, are both familiar in their simplicity and connections to various spiritual traditions, and yet private to the seeker, their specific meaning and significance interpreted by her and demanding of readers their own personal journey.

This personal journey is not, however, simply transcendent, for *Looking for Livingstone* firmly grounds meaning in contexts of history and discourse. The work constitutes a critique of Eurocentricity at one of its most literal sites: the British imperial presence in Africa. The Traveller's debate with Livingstone over the na-

ture of his accomplishments comprises a witty and complex summation of the issues related to European mapping of the "Dark Continent."

This is a tale to be read at many levels. The most radical, in many respects, is its investigation of the trope of silence as it has come to represent, in contemporary cultural and feminist discourse, the absence of expression by Africans (of the continent and diaspora) and by women, particularly by black women. Like the trope of centre/margin, evoked by allusions to mapping within the narrative, the antinomies of silence and voice situate and fix in contemporary understanding the possibility for the "not represented."

Looking for Livingstone as well mischievously rebuffs appropriative theorizing about that silence and what it promises. For example, just before meeting Livingstone, the Traveller encounters the "Museum of Silence, erected to house the many and varied silences of different peoples." When the Traveller challenges the curators that they were "ours to do with as we pleased—to destroy if we so wanted," she is told that they "were best kept there where they could be labeled, annotated, dated, catalogued...in carefully regulated, climate-controlled rooms."

Looking for Livingstone permanently disrupts how we read many texts of both Europe and Africa, not only because, thematically, it appropriates and deconstructs some central icons, but also because of the linguistic simplicity and elegance of the prose and the extraordinary intricacy of its poetry. Philip rarely falters in this work: the poetry evokes the anguish that heralds new insight, and visually suggests both word and silence as, sprinkled across whole pages, it offers a sharp contrast to the visual density of the prose. Her tone ranges: rituals are described with the disruptive vividness of dreams, in language sparse and dignified. In contrast, the Traveller emerges with her own distinctive voice, earthy, informal, witty and troublesome, living within her narrative as well as framing it.

With these most recent works, Nourbese Philip emerges as a powerful presence in Canada; in fact, *Frontiers* records that emergence. Troubled and troubling, eloquent and witty, Philip persistently and courageously strives to clarify conflicts, expand debates, disturb complacency, extend our vision. She makes plain her own longings so we may all be.

Parts of the review of Looking for Livingstone have appeared in Journal of Canadian Poetry, Volume 8, 1993.

¹See M. Nourbese Philip, *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel*, Second Edition (Toronto: Poui Publications, 1993).

SHARING OUR EXPERIENCE

Arun Mukherjee, ed. Ottawa: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1993.

by Shelagh Wilkinson

This is a book that is long-overdue. Those of us who teach in women's studies have known that the voices we offer to our students as representatives of Canadian women's experience have never included the many voices of aboriginal women, lesbian women, women with disabilities, old women, immigrant, refugee, working class women; in fact, all those who are marginalized by the social and cultural "norms" of this country have always been counted out. Some teachers, recognizing the loss that such a silence has meant for our students, cringed at the misrepresentation that our course material displayed and scurried around xeroxing articles for hand-out material, hoping that this would somehow help to fill the gaps in our course outlines and resource lists. It has been a "hit and miss" effort at best, doing little to introduce students to the rich diversity of voices that must be included if we are to teach from the experience of women in Canada.