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Writing the silence: Fiction and poetry of Marlene Nourbese Philip

Abstract
Like many writers, Marlene Nourbese Philip is preoccupied with the limitations of language: how to make words convey the inexpressible, that which is beyond language. In her book Looking For Livingstone she writes of silence:
Like many writers, Marlene Nourbese Philip is preoccupied with the limitations of language: how to make words convey the inexpressible, that which is beyond language. In her book *Looking For Livingstone* she writes of silence:

Single
Solitary
Unitary

is it?
this absence
of speech
Or legion—
wedged
In the between of words
A presence
absent the touch
the tarnish
in power
in conquest
Silence
Trappist
Celibate
seeking
The absolute
in Virgin
Whole (56)

T.S. Eliot describes the difficulties words pose for a writer.

Words stain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (1963a V, ll. 13–17)

Despite their unsatisfactoriness, however, writers depend on words to communicate. As Eliot’s character, Sweeny, declares: ‘I gotta use words when I talk to you’ (1963c 135). But, for Philip, a black woman raised in the Caribbean and currently living in Canada, the problem is greatly compounded. Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, has chosen to abandon English and write in his own
tongue, Gikuyu, but Philip has no such option. As part of the African diaspora, which violently displaced her ancestors into New World slavery, she has no language or culture to truly call her own. In her essay ‘A Long-Memoried Woman’ she writes:

The policy of all slave-holding nations was to wipe clean the mind of the African slave; how else prevent rebellion, ensure passive workers and guarantee good Christians? The effect of this policy was the separation, wherever possible, of African slaves from others of the same linguistic groups. Slave-owners prohibited and punished the expression of African culture, language, music, religion, or dress, thereby denying any validity to the African world view. (56)

In both her poetry and prose she describes how Africans ‘in the vortex of New World slavery’ re-shaped and restructured the new language forced upon them.

Nouns became strangers to verbs and vice versa; tonal accentuation took the place of several words at a time; rhythms held sway. Many of these ‘techniques’ are rooted in African languages; their collective impact on the English language would result in the latter being, at times unrecognizable as English. Bad English, Broken English, Patois. Dialect. (1985 17)

Such subversion of linguistic correctness, which also attracts official condemnation, represents a kind of triumph.

jerk it
dove it
cook it down
run it down slow
run it down tender
till it come to do the bid in we
this chattel language
babu english
slave idiom
nigger vernacular
coolie pidgin
wog pronunciation
(I say old chap how goes it, what ho?)
this lingua franca
arrrrrrrrgot of a blasted soul. (1989 73)

For a writer, West Indian English is a vital resource, but it also involves issues of readership.

If you work entirely in nation language or the Caribbean demotic of English you do, to a large degree, restrict your audience to those familiar enough with it; if you move
to standard English you lose much of that audience and, along with loss, an understanding of many of the traditions, history and culture which contextualise your work. (1992 37)

In the same essay Philip imagines her inspiration and her readership embodied in two archetypal figures standing one behind each shoulder. John-from-Sussex — male, white and Oxford-educated — represents white colonial tradition and the education it imparted. The other archetype is an old black woman, Abiswa, about whom she knows too little but in whose wisdom she seeks to participate, symbolising the African-Caribbean context ignored in her colonial education.

While she aims to promote dialogue between these archetypal figures, Philip also demonstrates how oppression of women, Africans and other groups is built into the English language:

it bound the foot
sealed the vagina
excised the clitoris
set fire to the bride
the temple dance was no more
in the banish of magic
the witch burned. (1991 13)

Encoded within language, racial discrimination is constantly perpetuated.

mind and body concentrate
history —
the confusion of centuries that passes
as the word
kinks hair
thickens lips
designs prognathous jaws
shrinks the brain
to unleash the promise
in ugly
the absent in image. (1989 78)

Paradoxically, this alien language of oppression is the only one available to celebrate African beauty, as Philip indicates in her poem ‘Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones’.

In whose language
Am I…
Girl with the flying cheek-bones
She is
I am
Woman with the behind that drives men mad
And if not in yours
Where is the woman with a nose broad
As her strength
If not in yours
In whose language
Is the man with the full-moon lips
Carrying the midnight of colour
Split by the stars — a simile
If not in yours (1989 52)

While the same language can be used to exalt and liberate those it oppresses, it cannot be freed of its complicity with the cruelty and oppression of colonialism, an idea Philip explores through images of mother and father tongue.

English
is my mother tongue.
A mother tongue is not
not a foreign lan lan lang
language
— a foreign anguish.
English is my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue.
What is my mother
tongue
my mammy tongue
my mummy tongue
my momsy tongue
my modder tongue
my ma tongue? (1989 56)

Marlene Philip goes on to explore further the difficulties inherent in using language in her book Looking For Livingstone, which she herself refers to as a book of poetry, but which the blurb on one of her other books describes as a novel. Looking For Livingstone deliberately unsettles genres and genre expectations. Prose and poetry commingle, as in her earlier book, She Tries Her Tongue, and the narrative, which resembles a fable, also evokes books of travel exploration, particularly those of the nineteenth century where authors describe hazardous journeys in supposedly exotic regions and proclaim their so-called ‘discovery’ of landscape features and groups of people hitherto unknown to Europeans. As its subtitle, An Odyssey of Silence, suggests, Philip’s book, while quite brief, also has affinities with epic narrative. Sections of it are dated like journal entries, but the time-frame is enormous and fantastical. Entries are headed:
On her journey the Traveller meets and lives among different groups of people. Each group’s name is an anagram of the word silence, except for one, the CESLIENS, whose name represents the plural, silences. The first group, the ECNELIS, explains the paradoxical relationship between words and silences by outlining two sets of conflicting beliefs. One is that ‘God first created silence: whole, indivisible, complete’ and the Fall occurred when ‘man and woman lay down together and between them created the first word’ (11). God, much displeased, cursed the world with words so that human beings must continually struggle to return to silence. The other belief is that God’s first act was to create the word ‘primary and indispensable’ and its adherents accept the power of words ‘to live by and die, and more than anything else to banish silence’ (11). Every hundred years the ECNELIS go to war with a neighbouring people the SINCEEL, ‘those whose beliefs differ from ours about the primacy of words or silence’ and the loser is condemned for the next century to follow the winner’s beliefs: ‘where there was silence, the winner imposes the word: where the word, silence’ (12). Unwilling to be involved in a war, the Traveller leaves to continue her journey after being told, rather bafflingly by the ECNELIS women, that she will recognise the goal of her journey as soon as she sees it.
Her next sojourn is with the LENSECI who live in an environment so harsh that all their energies are devoted to subsistence farming with no time to debate metaphysical questions: 'They were kind to me, but expected I would earn my keep, so every morning before the sun was up, I left with the women for the fields to return exhausted some twelve hours later' (14). While there, however, she sees a brief, ghostly vision of Dr Livingstone himself and recognises that he is the object of her quest. Although the apparition quickly fades, Livingstone continues to haunt the Traveller’s dreams. Philip represents him as an embodiment of British colonial agency and power, and given the man’s mythic status in his own lifetime and beyond, he fits most appropriately into the narrative fable she creates.

In his own day Livingstone generated a multitude of words through his books and those written about him. Many of the latter were close to hagiography for, in John MacKenzie’s words, ‘He became a Protestant saint whose cult operated at a variety of different levels, imperial, British and Scottish’ (25). To the British public, he was a hero of empire promising to open up new territories in Africa while arguing that Christianity must be yoked with commerce. ‘Commerce and Christianity he told numerous audiences, together become civilisation’, a doctrine highly comforting to British industrialists (Jeal 165). Livingstone was an indomitable traveller whose African journeys reveal astounding stamina and determination, though his claims to be the first European to undertake many of them are open to question, just as his missionary activities, from which his moral and spiritual authority derived, actually amounted to very little. He was a remarkable but deeply flawed human being. Tim Jeal, whose biography Livingstone Philip draws upon in writing her own book, sums up the man’s contradictions.

He failed as a conventional missionary, making but one convert, who subsequently lapsed. He failed as the promoter of other men’s missionary efforts (the two missions that went to Africa at his behest ended in fiascos and heavy loss of life). His first great journey across Africa from coast to coast was an outstanding achievement, but even this was partially marred by his discovery that Portuguese and Arab traders had already reached the centre of the continent. His subsequent return to the Zambezi, as the leader of a government-sponsored expedition, was disastrous…. Livingstone was considered by many to be the greatest geographer of his age, yet a series of miscalculations deceived him into believing that he had found the source of the Nile when he was in fact on the upper Congo. There were other failures too: failure as a husband and a father, failure to persuade the British Government to advance into Africa — yet, almost unbelievably, failures that did nothing to impair his influence, for Livingstone’s ideas, both original and inherited, were to change the way Europeans viewed Africans and Africa itself. (1–2)

The distrust of words shown by the Traveller in Marlene Philip’s Looking For Livingstone is thoroughly vindicated when one discovers how truth was
massaged and manipulated in so much that was written by and about the historical Livingstone. Many who wrote about him were masters of ‘spin’. After Livingstone’s death, Horace Waller, an Anglican clergyman who had briefly been a fellow missionary in Africa, edited his last journals for publication in 1874, carefully selecting from the original material and even in some cases rewriting it. The explorer’s rancorous and paranoid comments were excised along with any criticisms of public figures, such as Prince Albert, to ensure ‘that it was the saintly figure who emerged from the journals rather than the weary traveller with the very human foibles’ (MacKenzie 28). Looking For Livingstone both draws on and unlocks a key feature of the Livingstone myth — the famous meeting at Uju in 1871 with Henry Morton Stanley who had been sent there by James Gordon Bennett, owner and editor of the New York Herald, to obtain what was to be the paper’s biggest scoop. In addition to newspaper articles, Stanley published his book, How I Found Livingstone, which was reprinted many times, with innumerable copies handed out over decades as Sunday School prizes. Philip aims to reveal Livingstone the flawed human being so long concealed by the hagiography of the saintly explorer.

Like Stanley, Philip’s Traveller also aims to discover and meet with the now dead Livingstone and record the meeting for future generations: ‘I’m off to the interior or perish, but I seem to be following you — in your footsteps — or is it you who follows me — each becoming a mirage of the other. I am determined to cure myself of you, Dr Livingstone’ (27). First, however, she must discover silence, her own silence in particular. After leaving the LENSECI she lives among the SCENILE who set her to transcribe books in their library and demand she answer a number of questions including ‘Why was Dr Livingstone buried at Westminster Abbey?’ (19) to which she replies, ‘He discovered silence — my silence — discovered it, owned, possessed it like it never was possessed before’ (20). Colonisation silenced Africans by attempting to subsume and possess their inner being, a process the traveller dreams about as a monstrous copulation: ‘His word slipping in and out of the wet moist spaces of my silence’ (25). The next group she encounters are the CESLIENS who, although able to speak, refuse to do so. They instruct her in silence.

Nothing in nature is silent, they taught me, naturally silent, that is. Everything has its own sound, speech, or language, even if it is only the language of silence (there I go again — ‘even if’), and if you were willing to learn the sound of what appeared to be silence, you understood then that the word was but another sound — of silence. (35)

Travelling further, she arrives in the land of the CLEENIS who insist she spend time in the sweat lodge where all words leave her except three she has chosen before entering, ‘Birth’, ‘Death’ and ‘Silence’.

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The final territory the Traveller visits before encountering Livingstone is NEECLIS, a land of needlewomen and weavers highly skilled in all the arts of living: ‘The NEECLIS knew well how to feed and nourish the senses, all the senses; they had made an art of it, and willingly shared everything with me’ (48). Although enjoying the lush, opulent environment in this world of artists who ‘spend long hours discussing problems of aesthetics — debating designs and pattern, the weight of wool, the right colours of threads and yarns’ (48), the Traveller feels an inner stirring to resume her quest; but before she has a chance, the NEECLIS imprison her ‘in a huge room ablaze with coloured fabric and yarn’ (51), insisting she first weave a tapestry and piece together the quilt of her silence.

Using what we all have … word and silence — neither word alone, nor silence alone, but word and silence — weave, patch, sew together and remember it is your silence — all yours, untouched and uncorrupted. The word does not belong to you — it was owned and whored by others long, long before you set out on your travels — whose words…. But to use your silence you also have to use the word. (52)

Learning that word and silence are two strands, each as important as the other, which, like warp and weft, must be separated in order to make anything of them, the Traveller first weaves a tapestry, then pieces together a quilt of her many silences ‘held together by the most invisible of stitches — the invisible but necessary word’ (55).

The editors of Out of the Kumbla, an anthology of Caribbean women’s writing, draw on textile metaphor to illuminate literary activity, observing that: ‘Caribbean women’s texts are also engaged in the process of radical quilted narrative, braided or woven’. They go on to explain that ‘quilted is posed as a revision of “fragmented” for those writers must piece together a new and distinctive vision’ (Davies and Fido 6). Although African American women proved highly skilled at the task, quilting, like the English language, was imposed on them by white oppressors. A quilt is literally a silent form of communication, but in Looking For Livingstone the Traveller’s quilt not only figures within the text Phillip writes, but the text is also the quilt’s equivalent. Just as the black quilter uses a process once imposed on her by white agency, so the writer must express her silence, her innermost self and vision of the world not only in words but through the language of the oppressor.

Carrying her quilt, the Traveller continues her quest and comes across the Museum of Silence ‘erected to house the many and varied silences of different peoples’ (57, among them some groups she has already visited. When she demands the silences be returned to their owners, the museum proprietors initial response
is one of smiling incomprehension. The Traveller’s pleas become increasingly impassioned. The silence ‘was mine — ours — I challenged, to do with as we pleased — to destroy if we so wanted’ (57). The proprietors make the usual justifications, claiming they are preserving what they have gathered: ‘They told me the silences were best kept where they could be labelled, annotated, dated, catalogued…. It was all there in carefully regulated, climate-controlled rooms’ (57). The Traveller continues her argument: ‘Remove a thing — a person — from its source … from where it belongs naturally, and it will lose meaning — our silence has lost all meaning’ (58). However, the proprietors merely laugh as she condemns them to an eternity of ‘Words! Words! Words!’ Silence represents the state to which colonialism has reduced native peoples, as well as their essential inner being which colonisers have failed to recognise or understand. It is a pathway to each individual’s inner depths and a mode of resistance, that can never be mastered through linguistic dominance.

As I walked away I remembered the CESLIENS — they had kept and cherished their Silence — given up the word and kept their Silence. They were the richer for it.

None of their silence was on display in the Museum of Silence. (58)

As her meeting with Livingstone approaches, the Traveller considers how to greet him. Stanley’s historical encounter was memorialised by his question, ‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’ which, even in its own day, was considered somewhat ridiculous. The words Stanley had hoped would lend dignity to a solemn occasion were later hailed with explosions of laughter and disbelief. They were used in music-hall burlesques; friends or strangers greeted other substituting their own names for Livingstone’s. ‘Dr Livingstone, I presume?’ one dummy asked of another in a fashion plate in the October 1872 issue of Tailor and Cutter. (Jeal 343)

Philip’s traveller rehearses a number of possible greetings.

‘Hello there, Mr Livingstone; ‘Good day to you, Sir’, ‘Well, fancy meeting you’; ‘Good to see you, you old bugger.’ — they all sounded forced. Would I be cool enough to give him a first rate black hand shake and say, ‘Yo there, Livi baby, my man, my main man!’? (60)

When they do finally meet, she asks, ‘You’re new here, aren’t you?’ (61), and keeps on addressing him as ‘Livingstone-I-presume’. As they converse, she cites examples of his presumption, reminding him that his geographical ‘discoveries’ were well known to people already living there and that his journeys throughout the continent were possible only because of the African guides and porters who accompanied him as servants. She particularly challenges Livingstone over the supposed ‘fact’ that he discovered and named Victoria Falls, pointing out that it already had a name, ‘Mosioatunya or The Smoke That Thunders’, and that, “You and your supporters, your nation of liars, had the power to change a lie into a fact” (68).
The Livingstone whom the Traveller meets is a pathetic figure: ‘This old white man — tall, gaunt — my nemesis — half-blind, bronzed by the African sun, the indiscriminate African sun — malarial, sick or crazy — it was all the same’ (61); but, as the embodiment of white power, authority and supremacy imposed on Africa through imperialism, he is still a menace. The Traveller responds to his boast that he was called ‘the foe of darkness’ with ‘And what a foe you were’, explaining, ‘let’s say the darkness wasn’t all out there — in the “dark continent”. You and your kind carried their own dark continents within them’ (66). Nevertheless, the meeting between Livingstone and the Traveller proceeds fairly amicably. Over coffee and brandy they continue the debate about them’ (66). Nevertheless, the meeting between Livingstone and the Traveller proceeds fairly amicably. Over coffee and brandy they continue the debate about

I reached out my hand felt the evidence of SILENCE all around me original primal alpha and omega and forever through its blackness I touched something warm familiar like my own hand human something I could not see in the SILENCE reaching out through the SILENCE of space the SILENCE of time through the silence of SILENCE I touched it his hand held it his hand and the SILENCE.

I surrendered to the SILENCE within. (75)

By creating a setting where some form of reconciliation might just be possible, darkness and silence obliterate the difference between white man and black woman. Only in the work of art Philip has created can these two figures, separated by history, race, colour and gender, take each other’s hand and engage meaningfully with one another. The quilt of the black woman’s silence, stitched together with words becomes the symbol of their meeting. Looking For Livingstone, however, ends with a rather wry epilogue entitled ‘Author’s Note’ which reads like a scholarly commentary.

A record of the documents and records of The Traveller, which form the basis of this work, are bound in two volumes, and on deposit at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. The leather-bound books are burgundy coloured, hand-sewn and of legal size — 8 1/2 by 14 inches. Embossed in gold in the centre of each cover are the words: ‘Diary of a Traveller’. These words are repeated on the flyleaf in a round, strong hand in an ink which is quite faded. Also on each cover, some two inches above the lower edge, and also embossed in gold, are the words ‘Volume I’ and ‘Volume II’; these words appear on the spines of the books as well. (np)

The books’ physical appearance is considered more important than their content. We are told that the second volume contains three faded photographs one of which ‘is of two people, one white, the other black, both seated on what appears to be a colourful rug or blanket. A fire burns to their right … they are identified as Dr. David Livingstone and The Traveller’ (np). According to this official description, a note by the author on the last page of volume two states that these