

WAS IT THERE OR WAS IT HERE?:
TRANSCULTURAL VISIONS
IN MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIP'S EARLY POETRY¹

Pedro Miguel Carmona Rodríguez
Escuela Superior de Turismo Iriarte (UNED)

RESUMEN

La dinámica de aculturación versus deculturación que describía de forma simplista el tránsito de una formación cultural a otra fue reemplazada en el último cuarto del siglo XX por el estudio de cómo la transferencia cultural crea un continuo personal y experiencial. En Canadá, la literatura producida por autores inmigrantes está particularmente interesada en los procesos transculturales subyacentes en la construcción del sujeto. Este artículo explora la poesía temprana de la autora canadiense de origen afrocaribeño Marlene Nourbese Philip con el fin de revelar que *Thorns* (1980) y *Salmon Courage* (1983) son un ejemplo de ese continuo transcultural. Además, en ambas colecciones, el tránsito entre culturas es paralelo a la articulación de localizaciones provisionales que minan el estatismo de los discursos centrados de nación y estado. Con la conciencia de surgir de la zona de contacto y el intersticio, la poesía de Philip aparece incapaz de decidirse por un asentamiento fácil, mientras favorece en su lugar la movilidad, la inestabilidad y los espacios cambiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía transcultural / transnacional, Marlene Nourbese Philip, literatura caribeño canadiense.

ABSTRACT

The dynamics of acculturation versus deculturation which reductively described the passage from one cultural formation to another was replaced in the last quarter of the twentieth century by the study of how cultural transference creates a personal and experiential continuum. In Canada, the writings of immigrant authors are attentive to the transcultural processes lying underneath the constitution of the migrant subject. This paper explores the early poetry by the Canadian writer of Afro-Caribbean origin Marlene Nourbese Philip to unveil that *Thorns* (1980) and *Salmon Courage* (1983) exemplify that transcultural continuum. Additionally, in both collections, the transit between cultures is parallel to the articulation of provisional locations counteracting the stasis of the centred discourses of nation and state. Imbued with the consciousness of emerging from the contact-zone and the *in-between*, Philip's poetry appears unable to decide on a site of easy accommodation to favour instead mobility, instability and changing spaces.

KEY WORDS: transcultural / transnational poetry, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Caribbean Canadian writing.



Coined by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz to describe Afro-Cuban culture in the 1940s, the term *transcultural* has subsequently rooted itself in literary and cultural studies. More than thirty years since the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama firstly used it in a literary context, the transcultural has already superseded the two-fold dynamics of acculturation and deculturation that, in a reductive fashion, initially depicted cultural transference from the point of view of the metropolis (Pratt, 1992: 228). The processes of migration and diaspora in which we are all immersed have sharpened the relevance of the transcultural when examining any contemporary social formation and its cultural products. Within the scope of a transcultural analysis, fluidity and exchange of influences have gained prevalence with respect to origin and cultural fixation as coordinates that shape the definition of the subject occupying an interstitial zone between several stances of cultural enunciation. In contrast to the operations of acculturation and deculturation, the transcultural analysis intends to be attentive to the multiplicity of positions across which the diasporic subject is constituted. The back and forth path along the experiential and personal continuum coexists, therefore, with multi-layered ruptures and discontinuities that are part and parcel of articulations of migratory subjectivity. Consequently, such a panorama of dislocations and splits defines the wide field of transcultural writing in Canada, and Afro-Caribbean poetry is no exception.

This paper examines a minimal part of that production focusing on Marlene Nourbese Philip's early collections of poetry. *Thorns* (1980) and *Salmon Courage* (1983) incessantly travel north and south, from Canada to Trinidad and Tobago, drawing paths on water (Phillips, 1993: 1-2)². In the process, present and past intermingle, whereas cultural and national borders are created and deconstructed by a steady transit. Deeply self-conscious of emerging from the contact-zone (Pratt, 1992: 6) and the in-between (Bhabha, 1994: 1; see Jay, 1998), Philip's poetry is unable to decide on a site of easy accommodation, and, as Coomi S. Vevaina explains in the context of hyphenated poetry, «abound[s] in paradoxes, uncertainties and an overwhelming sense of irretrievable loss» (1999: 125). The transcultural identities of Philip's poetic speakers reveal a strategic parallax from which to critically examine two or more cultures and literary traditions. Simultaneously, this lack of location is an enclave of self-empowerment from which to revise hierarchical constructions of national belonging (see Munasinghe, 2002), and, furthermore, tackle processual definitions of culturally split subjectivities.

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² Such is the expression that in Caryl PHILLIPS' *Crossing the River* (1993) represents the attempt to re-member the black individual's dispersed genealogy. Like Marlene Nourbese PHILIP's poetry of dislocation, the novel by the British writer draws on the cultural and physical distance created by the vicious uprooting of the African peoples and their subsequent diasporas across what GILROY (1993) terms the black Atlantic.

Marlene Nourbese Philip is what Leslie Sanders has called a new world writer (1992: 83), an artist committed to the claiming of the voice of the diaspora, and more particularly, to what she terms the Afrospora (Philip 1993a: 82). Philip's work intends to disentangle the complexities of speaking about the multi-layered identity of the contemporary individual genealogically ingrained in the diaspora of the black African peoples. Hence the passage between Africa, the Caribbean islands and North America conditions her work, as also do the conflict between the search for the individual and collective roots and the assumption that any origin is provisional and constructed. These contradictions greatly determine Philip's prose and poetry, which, as Claire Buck asserts, «[...] attempts to fuse the disparate threads that make up the New World experience» (1992: 911).

In Canada, Philip's contemporary critical and creative writings have found a solid cornerstone in the social egalitarian struggle and in the denunciation of racism, sexism, the contradictions of the multicultural model and, in very general terms, in the analysis of the Canadian society at the turn of the century. As a sign of that inextricable linkage between writing and culture that defines her production, the lack of critical attention paid to her early poetry partially confirmed Nourbese Philip's statement on the invisibility of the black Canadian writer (1992; Harris, 1993: 184). This affirmation was also reinforced by the lack of reprinted editions and the difficulty that *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage* faced when trying to break in the hermetic circle of Canadian publishing, reviewing, reading and teaching. All these factors certified Philip's suspicion that the Canadian book industry of the 1990s was not «market driven, but race-determined» (1992: 160; 1993b: 233; see Padolski, 1997).

It is precisely this state of apparent non-existence in Canada that fosters in Philip's first collections of poetry a will to return, at least imaginatively, to her homeland in Trinidad and Tobago (see Chamcy, 1997: 78-122). *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage* coincide in articulating a vertiginous displacement between North and South³. This permanent motion transgresses the boundaries of states and counters the stasis of any centred definition of nation, to decide in turn on a view of *nations on the move*, as Duany (2000) would put it. Thus, the diasporic subject is regarded as a transnational entity and the nation as a construct able to survive the transcultural passage. The transnational crossings of Philip's early poetry already advance much of the course that her later work will take and depict a culturally split subject that will be the protagonist of her entire production⁴. Boundary crossing is, consequently, a

³ In contrast to *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) and *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991), symbols of PHILIP's back-to-Africa turn, *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage* give more prevalence to the Caribbean element of the compound Afro-Caribbean-Canadian. In so doing, these two works approach Philip's production to that of other Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women writers like Dionne BRAND or Claire HARRIS, for whom the Caribbean is always a distant presence (see ZACKODNIK, 1995; SARBADIKHARY, 1996; CARMONA, 2003).

⁴ Apart from the poetry collections under scrutiny here and the already mentioned *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) and the prose-poetry romance *Looking for Livingstone, An Odyssey of Silence* (1991), PHILIP is also the author of the short stories «The Tall Rains» (1986),

form to interrogate any bearing moulding diasporic subjectivities (Brydon, 1989: 16; see Brydon, 2001); between the present in Canada and the past in the Caribbean, North and South of the Atlantic, Philip's subject seems to be uncomfortable in any location but the continuous dislocation. Accordingly, *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage* highlight the double identities of Philip's speakers, dwellers of a balance between geo-cultural sites. Living somewhere between the pursuit of similarity in Canada and the preservation of difference, Philip's poetry has frequent recourse to issues of nostalgia for the past in the Caribbean, seemingly aiming at an eventual revitalisation of traditional notions of nation, subject and home (see Kaup, 1996). Contrary to the idea of launching the other, former space into oblivion for the sake of assimilation in the host site, Renato Walcott claims that «the forgetting required is one that supports the idea that to linger on the past is to refuse national belonging». Thus, Walcott continues, «this assumption is conservative in its manifestations because it suggests a very narrow definition of the nation and what it might be capable of including» (1999: 69; see Walcott, 1997). The intention to remember the other, Caribbean space engenders and structures the poem «Nostalgia 64» in *Thorns*:

Liming by de street corner
 dressed to kill
 from stingy brimmed hat
 to pointy toe shoes,
 Limacoled with de freshness
 of a breeze in a bottle
 checking out de girls dem
 cruising by
 «buh how yuh look sweet so»
 talking bout de latest caiso
 who's a jackabat
 an' who not,
 liming by de street corner
 dressed to kill (Philip, 1980: 2)

The authenticity fuelled by the vernacular sharpens in this poem the representation of the Trinidadian space. The vernacular is representative here of the transitory equilibrium between the local, the national and the international that governs Philip's poetry. In this sense, it identifies the space of Trinidad and distinguishes

«Burn Sugar» (1988), «Whose Idea Was It Anyway?» (1989), «Just a Name» (1990), «Bad Words» (1990), «The Commitment to Hardness» (1992) and «Stop Frame» (1993). As to date, her only novel is *Harriet's Daughter* (1988). Her plays include *The Redemption of Al Bumen* (1993) and *Coups and Calypsos* (1997). Finally, three books on race and culture, *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (1992), *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel* (1993), and *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (1997), and a number of dispersed essays on Canadian society, multiculturalism and gender at the turn of the century complete the literary production by PHILIP.

it from other regional Caribbean spaces. In turn, Caribbean English presents the regional peculiarity as different from any other variety of English spoken in the wide scope of geographical areas marked by the diasporic processes. Caribbean English, the demotic in Philip's words (1989: 18), helps photograph the cultural distance between present Canada and the past on the distant island. An overall picture of Philip's works, nevertheless, brings to mind the fact that Standard and Caribbean English enter in a linguistic and experiential continuum (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989: 41-45; Harris, 1986: 116), since both of them are part of the transcultural experience of the Africans transported to America. In this context, Iain Chambers writes: «'English' becomes a continuum of intersections, encounters and dialogue: a palimpsest that emphasises the powers of impurity. Language becomes the scene of traces, of those immediate places, or local authenticities [...] for which there is no final word, no metaphysical state» (1995: 75; see Wilentz, 1992).

In relying on and promulgating the importance of hybridity as one of their constitutive traits, the transcultural processes refuse any seminal point of origin and end⁵. The attention to the signifier that Philip's poetry evinces reconstructs spaces that play the role of other *vis-à-vis* the Canadian one, and attests to the function of language as creator of performative essences and origins. Given the relevance of cultural and geographical distance, these original spaces strive with the pressure of the present location. In this context, Meredith Gasdby points out that «Caribbean women writers in Canada speak out against the hardships suffered in a hostile landscape [...]. Language connects one to peoples and histories of resistance to physical, emotional, psychic and linguistic conquest» (1998: 146). Much of Philip's poetry in *Thorns* and *Salmon Courage* (re)produces dual settings, *here* versus *there*, to finally be the poetry of the middle ground⁶. In the elaboration of this duality, Caribbean English is the vehicle for the way-back travel, and a further idealisation

⁵ Much has been written on the concept of hybridity in postcolonial studies. While some authors see it as a tool that the self-conscious colonised can employ for the derogation of colonial authority (see FERNÁNDEZ RETAMAR, 1974), some others have interpreted it as an effect inimically present in the colonial encounter (see BHABHA 1994). Whereas FANON (1963) analyses hybridity as one of the elements causing the schizophrenia of the colonised, unable to attain the desired whiteness and trapped by a devalued blackness, YOUNG (1995) has pointed out that hybridity stems from the Victorian consciousness and is deeply inserted in a dual conception of self/other, unity and diversity that is never superseded. Relying on YOUNG, LOOMBA (2000) explains that the cross-over that hybridity implies challenges the Victorian vocabulary to which the term is indebted. As she concludes, the interest in and strategic use of hybridity does not only allow us to question hegemonic ideals of nation and authenticity, but to value and decompose the intersections that these concepts determine in the postcolonial arena (2000: 183).

⁶ CRAIGH (1989) identifies the dual setting as one of the characteristics marking and defining the wide field of immigrant Canadian writing. The concern with and resistance to assimilation, the stages of arrival and adaptation are also some of the traits. The list of features identified, however, seems to pinpoint a method of identification that, at the turn of the century, is inadequate to measure the unpredictability of Canadian immigrant writing.



of a space antagonistically designed in relation to the Canadian one. As an instance, the poem «Poisson»:

Bubaloops women
behinds rolling madly
dice thrown with abandon
laughter lolling loudly
at streetside corners
heads haughty poised
on ebony shoulders
precision balanced,
hawking raucous calls
Poisson! Poisson!
Come! Get your fresh poisson,
vocal residue redolent
of cultures long since forgotten (Philip, 1980: 3)

The linguistic *mestizaje* that materialises in the poem decomposes the Caribbean as a mosaic of multiple cultures that have formed a multi-ethnic and polyglossic society. English, French and Spanish relaxed their limits to allow the entrance of African terms that survived the linguistic filter imposed by slavery. Patois and creole varieties are the corollary of the linguistic contact that destabilises any essence to propose, in turn, a principle of hybridity in the origin. Like the subject of Philip's poetry, the Caribbean subject cannot help being a transcultural and cross-cultural product, since the very space that s/he inhabits is the epitome of the coalescence of divergent cultural traditions. The same blending of influences appears when poems like «Poisson» impels us to reconstruct the urban spaces of the Jamaican Port of Spain from the Canadian Toronto, to imagine the South from the North.

As an immediate counterpart to the island ambience of poems like «Nostalgia 64» or «Poisson», the poems that opt for a Canadian locus employ a recurrent demonisation in keeping with a denied attainment of similarity within white Canada. The social mobility of Philip's black immigrants is precluded by the confrontation with racism and inhuman debasement. Difference is, then, the fulcrum for the exclusion of the black immigrant, who is endlessly secluded in a category of threatening other. In Canada, where presumably everyone is an immigrant (Atwood, 1970: 62), the black individuals portrayed in Philip's early poems are the victims of «a blatant ethnocentricity» that, as Claire Harris opines, «condemns people of colour to the sidelines: eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging» (1986: 115). In a similar vein, when intending to answer the question of why racial minority women have depicted Canada so negatively, Arun P. Mukherjee concludes that «their other identities put them in a disadvantage in a racist nation-state» (1999: 155). In *Thorns*, the poem «Blackman Dead» captures the feeling of black helplessness, the brutality shaping racism and the uncomfortable position to which it leads the egalitarian politics of official and ideal multiculturalism:

The magnum pistol barked
its last command broke his chest -

red words of silence erupt
silken ribbons of death
wreathe the sullen Sunday morning madness.

[...]

but to bury him
bury him
in a plain pine coffin
and repeat after me
how bad he was because,
because he was
just another immigrant
I say repeat
after me
how he deserved to die
because he didn't learn our ways
the ways of death
repeat
after me blackman dead, blackman dead
blackman dead.

[...]

as we dress dong
in we tree piece suit
we disco dress
an' we fancy wheels -
dere is a magnum fe each one a we.

[...]

Toronto has no silk cotton trees
strong enough to bear
one blackman's neck
the only crosses that burn are those upon our souls
and the lynch mobs meet
at Winstons...

[...]

(Philip, 1980: 36-37)

The linguistic duality between Standard English and demotic english that in Philip's poetry represents the black subject's doubleness obeys here to a different reason: it creates two racially antagonistic speakers. One is black, the other white, and their voices come to overlap to provide the inside and the outside of the social hatred for the different, which is made tangible by the physical presence of the black immigrants in the Canadian cities. Directly tackling the dehumanisation justifying the precept of black inferiority popularised by the US Ku Klux Klan, Philip's poetry of denunciation goes beyond the official narrative of inclusion in the Canadian mosaic to unveil the verticality of the ethnic Canadian model in its most poignant side, and thus producing multiple points of convergence with her critical output. Poems like «Don't You Dare», also in *Thorns*, continue lacerating on the cumbersome scratch of racial inequality, but now complicated by gender disparity.



Don't you dare to consider me
human you might realise
you cause me pain,

recognise my spirit see
my soul break day
for fear don't you dare
touch

my womanhood fine wrought
sure
you will shrivel,
see the soft swirl
black surround
a centred vitality

don't you dare
if you will
how can you begin (Philip, 1980: 38)

The poem is an affirmation of subjectivity and womanhood as presence. Instead of the reduction and seclusion within a recurrent othering, to affirm by opposition the unified nature of constructs of nation and universality, blackness and femininity are reinforced as the variables that challenge the phallogentric and imperialist establishment. With the irony of the initial statement the reader is led from the straightforward enunciation of the illocutionary to the perlocutionary. Consequently, the gap between what is said and the meaning attributed to it widens to make room for the denunciation of the racial and chauvinistic claim. Thanks to it, racial subjectivity and gendered (female) subjectivity are constituted as presence, and in this way, we bear witness to the initial stages in the conformation of the race/gender axis that will remain intact all along the way of Philip's later literary production.

Unlike *Thorns*, more coherently centred on the Caribbean-Canadian passage, *Salmon Courage* is a collection presided over by a contradictory impulse. On the one hand, the need to establish the relevance of site, origin and genealogy, and, on the other, the demystification of most of these postulates in terms of a spatio-temporal dimension of identity, as provided by the diasporic paradigms. The piece-title poem «Salmon Courage» stands as representative of the first impulse, and constitutes itself as an autobiographical account that narrates Philip's return to Tobago. There, the poet's persona, pregnant and about to deliver her baby, meditates on the relevance of paying homage to her ancestors and vindicates the envisioning of the future. As the salmon that goes upstream to procreate, Philip returns home to perpetuate her lineage and create a site immune to cultural and physical distance. In this sense, the poem reads:

Here at Woodlands, Moriah,
these thirty-five years later,
still I could smell her fear.
Then, the huddled hills would not have



calmed her, now as they do me.
 Then, the view did not snatch
 the panting breath, now, as it does
 these thirty-five years later, to the day,
 I relive the journey of my salmon mother
 [...]

now, [my salmon father] and his salmon daughter
 face those same huddled, hunchbacked hills.
 She a millstone lawyer, his milestone
 to where he hadn't been.
 He pulls her out, a blood rusted weapon,
 to wield against his friends
 «This, my daughter, the lawyer!»
 she takes her pound of dreams neat,
 no blood under that careless blue sky,
 suggests he wear a sign around his neck,
 «My Daughter IS a Lawyer»,
 and drives the point home,
 quod erat demonstrandum
 [...]

this is called salmon courage my dear father,
 salmon courage,
 and when I am all spawned out
 like the salmon, I too must die -
 but this child will be born,
 must be born salmon (Philip, 1994: 122)

The extolling of site is parallel to the praising of the mother figure as the archetype of courage, the cornerstone of the individual's genealogy, the pivot of the biological reproduction of the nation. The matriarchal figure is in this way the path to the perpetuation of the nation across space and time. In this poem, and in most of Philip's poetry, the mother counters the tendency to oblivion and assimilation in the site of immigration, while also symbolising a return to an original, uncorrupted essence that predates and outlives physical displacements. This representation of the matriarchal figure agrees with what Nira Yuval-Davies calls the mothers as «bearers of the collective» (2000: 27; see Russell, 2000)⁷.

⁷ In their article on Caribbean women's fiction, MORRIS & DUNN (1991) point out the recurrent tendency of many female characters to maintain their link with the motherland when the real mother is not available. PHILIP'S own fiction is further instance, as it is the case in the novel *Harriet's Daughter* (1988) and the short story «Burn Sugar» (1988). The poem «Salmon Courage» and the whole of *She Tries Her Tongue* go a step beyond and parallel the affection for the mother to that of the motherland. On the contrary, the conflicts between mothers and daughters in Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic fiction and poetry frequently represent the tensions between the former metropolis and the newly independent countries through issues of tradition and rupture, for instance (see DOMÍNGUEZ GARCÍA, 2000).

In «Sprung Rhythm», however, site and genealogy are constructed and deconstructed by self-reflexively presenting them as the result of created memories of home, which, in addition, are projected from the Canadian space. Language, rhythm and the daily rituals of the Caribbean are listed and oriented to the depiction of a reality that emigration and the following setting in Canada have erased to a greater or lesser extent.

It was there I learnt to walk
in sprung rhythm,
talk in syncopated bursts of music,
moulding, kneading, distorting, enhancing
a foreign language.
There, family was the whole village, if not island,
and came in all shades of black;
there, I first heard the soporific roar
of the ocean, before I grew ears to hear.
[...]
There, where neat days patiently dovetailed
each other, glued with rituals of purgins,
school, washing and braiding of hair,
Sunday mass and blackpudding breakfasts.
Was it there that I found the place
to know from,
to laugh and be from,
to return and weep from?
Was it there or was it here? (Philip, 1994: 117-118)⁸

Thus, the here/there dichotomy already mentioned, and the negotiation of desire and repression that it implies, appears as the only formula for the articulation of transcultural subjectivities. The «[w]as it there or was it here» with which the poem concludes sums up much of the problematic split of subjectivity recurrent in Philip's poetry. Contradicting this, Philip herself has contended that her poetic sensibility is more Caribbean than Canadian, thus destabilising the fragile balance suggested by the term *negotiation* (Philip, 1993b: 230), conspicuously present in transcultural subjectivities. In Homi Bhabha's words, negotiation, «[...] makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements [...]» and «[...] open[s] up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle [...]» (1994: 25). Philip's speaking subjects, nevertheless, have to cope with cultural distance, with the actuality of a new place where the old «signifiers have lost their habitual referent, deterritorialised» (Godard, 1993: 151; 1996).

⁸ The *Salmon Courage* poems cited here are extracted from the anthology *A Grammar of Dissent: Poetry and Prose by Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand* (1994), edited by Carol MORRELL.

As «Sprung Rhythm» shows, *Salmon Courage* is intent on the exploration of the border/land between cultures, the potential implied by the construction of the intersecting cultural formations from an angle of liminality between them. Thus, the borderland consciousness contaminates the poem «What's in a Name», where the speaking subject comes to reflect on the schizoid borderland inhabited by the Afro-Caribbean individual. S/he is forced to sift through an amount of labels that hardly capture the feeling of being in-between cultures. (Post)colonialism and the paradigms delineated by the emigration from the Caribbean to the former metropolises have created a borderland highly difficult to be traversed. Personal and collective identities exceed any border and adopt then the guise of an identification. Instead of a finished product, identification is a process governed by an endless *différance*, «a suturing, an over-determination, not a subsumption» (Hall & du Gay, 1998: 3). This process floods the poem, which reads:

I always thought I was Negro
till I was Coloured,
West Indian, till I was told
that Columbus was wrong
in thinking he was west of India -
that made me Caribbean.
And throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s,
I was sure I was Black.
Now Black is passé,
African de rigueur,
And me a chameleon of labels (Philip, 1994: 123)

The indecision of the borderland, conversely, offers a position of provisionality used to implement a parallax from which to critically revise ideas of culture and nation. The borderland that impregnates this poem is a territory of doubleness and supplementarity in the Derridean sense of the word. As such, the cultural territories in contact entail a relation in which they are attentive to their mutual complementation, each of them bearing the traces of the other and unveiling the counterpart's lack. This (non) location between cultures enables the borderland writer to examine inside out and outside in two or more cultural traditions, the analysis being always inflected by a transitional position between geographies, cultures and, as in «What's in a Name», labels. To inhabit the borderland is to live with deep contrasts hardly able of conciliation, which inform the artistic representations of borderland authors, to whom Cáliz-Montoro regards as «hunters of myths and topographers» (2000: 43). As part of the challenge to conventional artistic registers, the borderland implies definitions that contradict their very ontology, avoid the either/or binary to accept the experiential amalgamation. The ultimate aftermath is a feeling of pervasive schizophrenia resulting from the impossibility of determining one's identity (see Anzaldúa, 1999).

In contrast to the dynamic process of identification in «What's in a Name», the stagnation of liminality comes to inform the poem «July Again». It is the position of the outsider, and rarely the interloper, that qualifies the speaking subject to



accomplish an almost ethnographic rendition of Canadian society at the outset of summer. The reversal of racial and social roles is evident when the speaker adopts the stance so many times occupied by the white traveller in observing the social group under analysis. From this position of authority and presumed objectivity, the speaker observes the Canadian reliance on the colonial past, the official adoption of the bicultural models and the feature of pervasive neutrality and political correction dominating the social arena:

July again, and every Italian house on the block
sports an earsplitting, earth splitting back hoe
that thrusts beneath skirted porches,
seeking cool dank basement secrets,
producing a fall out of cantinas.

July again, and old Queen Vic
raises her jowled head once more.
Fireworks day is what kids call it;
Spinning wheels, rockets, roman candles
fall swiftly charred,
brilliant for one brief moment...
like the Empire.

July again, and the hot heavy days
have won yet another war of independence
in the ceaseless struggle of
check - summer,
mate - winter,
in this bye bye lingual,
multi-ethnic, mini-climacteric country
[...]
July again,
the mornings, cool and clipped like the BBC accents,
seem always to hesitate...
caught between neither and nor
like Canada. (Philip, 1994: 123)

From the angle of strategic marginality provided by the liminal position, the speaker is able to tip emblematic constructions of social unity by emphasising the Canadian impossibility of national definition. Trapped between the relevance of the past and the influence of the neo-colonialism dictated from the United States, Canada is the land of the *neither and nor*, the negative definition as the form to achieve a sense of national self; the «as Canadian as... possible...under the circumstances» (see Hutcheon, 1991: 1-45). The national reliance on the colonial past appears evident on the First of July, when Canadians celebrate Dominion Day. Rather close to the festivity of American Independence on the Fourth of July, the two of them foreground the different development of a national discourse in the two countries (see Corse, 1997; Mackey, 1999). The already problematic Canadian



national consciousness has been further complicated by the turning of Canada into the reception site for millions of immigrants from the former British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish colonies, who struggle for a pursuit of difference and similarity within the national Canadian project.

The only way to enunciate the difference that all these groups exhibit is by means of a transcultural model characterised by conditions of hybridity and negotiation of positions across cultural and social discourses. This transcultural model delegitimises the two-fold dynamics of acculturation and deculturation, while it also makes room for new modes of the national formation. This transcultural view of subjectivity implies a new conceptualisation of the migrant as inevitably split and of the nation as an entity able to survive the geographical and geo-cultural passage. All these processes inform Philip's poetry of ruptures and continuities, which is additionally a further enhancement of all of them. Negotiation and equilibrium are fundamental terms that point out the impossibility of easy accommodations and the prevalence of dislocation; doubleness and split subjectivity endlessly defer the answer to the question *was it there or was it here?*



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