

**Of Resistant Mothers and Women Turned Goddesses:
Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Salmon Courage*
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Abstract

Salmon Courage (1983) is Marlene Nourbese Philip's second collection of poems, published three years after *Thorns*, her first book, and six before the outstanding *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. *Salmon Courage* follows the thematic and formal lines opened up in *Thorns* yet showing an evolution in form and content, pointing to the directions which will be fully developed later on in her best-known, fully mature poetic work. In *Salmon Courage* her principal focus is on women, both *per se* and as mothers. Women are presented as strong and venerable, to the point that they are accorded godly qualities. It manages to repair several wrongs: that of the cultural dispossession meant by the Middle Passage for Afrosporic peoples (particularly women) and that of being forced to live in white- and male-dominated societies which condemn women to live in a state of perpetual oppression.

This paper offers a reading of Marlene Nourbese Philip's second collection of poems, *Salmon Courage* (1983), which seeks to sustain the hypothesis that the poet's early works either contain in seed or tackle explicitly the motifs and topics which will only develop fully later, in her mature and fully accomplished collection *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989). This reading is performed taking *Thorns* (1980) as a starting point, and is to be grounded on the notion of transculturality as posited by Wolfgang Iser, namely, the suggestion that neither cultures nor identities are to be identified as isolated and self-containing entities, but rather as intertwined, fluid realities which are unendingly shifting and mutable.

As an individual, Nourbese Philip's sense of national identity seems to be clear, since she has considered herself a Canadian citizen

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ever since her arrival there in 1968: “I carry a Canadian passport; I, therefore, am Canadian” (1994: 16), she states in an early essay. Yet her literary work fits neither in a single national nor cultural shelf. Philip’s writing is Canadian if for no other reason because it has been both produced and published in that country. But it is also Caribbean inasmuch as Caribbean concerns are as present in her writing as much as those Canadian, and also because of stylistic reasons, such as her use of Caribbean English Creole or the flow of rhythms and, especially, the cultural syncretism pervading her work, aspects deeply remindful of the condition of Caribbean culture as suggested by Antonio Benítez Rojo (1998) – his indefinable “in a certain manner.” Her work can also be labelled African. Probably the mentioned overwhelming presence of rhythm in her writing has much to do with her African ancestry, but also in terms of choice of topics, use of mythology and general allusion is the black continent a relevant focus. Hence my claim that Nourbese Philip’s work is an outstanding sample of transculturality, a quality which follows her being a transnational subject. The writer stands as a full representative of what Paul Gilroy (2007) defines as “the Black Atlantic,” that powerful counterculture of modernity.

If there is a common core to all the poems included in *Thorns*, the first collection, it is the pervading presence of grief. Indeed, many poems in the volume depict what we could call ‘epiphanies of grief,’ and these are also present in *Salmon Courage*. Actually, overall the themes tackled are the same in both collections, yet the style has evolved from one to the other: the poems collected in *Salmon Courage* are longer and less condensed, and frequently a narrative tone replaces former introspection. Often, the departing point is an anecdote, expanded to utmost poetic reverberations. As it happened in *Thorns*, the poems are not thematically sequenced, a strategy which collaborates in keeping the reader’s attention. Yet there is a dominant theme in the collection and it is that of womanhood, often related to motherhood. And grief and dislocation, the two main motifs in *Thorns*, are also very present here, so much so that, again, we can consider both collections as a compact groundwork for Philip’s later, perceptibly more mature and achieving *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*.

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Like its prequel, *Salmon Courage* also opens with a *poetics*, or rather an *anti-poetics*, since the first poem, “Anonymous” (3),¹ starts from the negative: “If no one listens and cries / is it still poetry?” With this simple question Philip challenges the basic pattern of communication and the whole body of reception theories developed in the twentieth century, with their emphasis on the reader’s central role. This challenge responds to the socio-cultural conditions where Philip’s skill is developing: the Canada of the early 1980s, an eminently white cultural environment where multiculturalism has still not become the official policy and the poetic output of a black woman runs the risk of passing inadvertent. Is her poetry then less valid in such a context? Of course not, as the poem concludes:

is it still music
if there is no one to hear
is it love
or does the sea always roar
in the shell at the ear?

Related to this is “The Grammar of Love” (4), which, with a shift from the aural to the oral (a further thematic backbone of the collection, as we are going to see) turns around the dichotomy between what is said and what remains silent. This poem also inaugurates the theme of womanhood, in its allusion to the close relation between love and violence during the author’s childhood. This is so if we consider that male chauvinism and tyranny are frequent in the Caribbean area (Senior, 1991: 32 *et passim*). “Real Men” (24) is an ironic poem which precisely denounces the macho stereotype underlying such behaviour:

Real men make war,
Not love,
Don’t bleed except when killed,
Kick shit,
Never clean it,
A real man never says sorry—
Just meets you outside.

¹ Page number between brackets without further reference will hereon refer to *Salmon Courage*.

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And of course, the reverse of this behaviour is woman's oppression:

She does everything and anything:
fries eggs, washes clothes, cleans house,
gets killed, raped, scarred and scared,
over, under and undressed,
and sometimes a trifle distressed,
trying to make the real man real happy.

“A Habit of Angels” (12) is a long and disturbing poem describing the sacred atmosphere of a nun convent where, remarkably, the concepts of woman and god repeatedly merge together in images like the following:

There is a presence here—
is it God or
Woman that silently hums
Balanced as a spinning top
In this air?

“The House of God,” as convents are traditionally considered, is here defined as “The House of Women.” The denouncement of women's oppression and the will to dignify them go as far as to turn her into a godly figure which replaces the oppressive version of a *Male Christian* god. Following with this idea, in “Angola 1984” (34) the concern with womanhood focuses on motherhood. Within the context referred to in the title, “the Unknown Mother” is praised now, as she is the real life-maker and life-giver, skills described in terms which recall the prerogative exclusively accorded to God by the Christian faith:

the Unknown Mother, for whom
there have been no graves, no medals
no cenotaphs, except those of her sons,
shows her bloodied face, bares her
teeth, aspirates the Word and *makes it* flesh.²

² The fact that the woman “aspirates the Word” to make it flesh not only refashions the biblical text, but also advances the later development of Philip's poetry. She is very

The woman is pregnant, and about to give birth. Yet her labours are boycotted by figures (presumably men) “dressed in white,” where colour is charged with racial connotations. Indeed the birth reads as an allegory where the foetus, still to be born, is the possibility of a better life for black people, in this particular case Angolan. Significantly, the birth assistants are two female African goddesses: Isis and Ta-urt, related to birth giving and motherhood in traditional Egyptian culture (Hart,1986: 10, 211):

Ta-urt pregnant as a sow,
part crocodile,
part lion,
part hippo,
and all woman,
stood to her right and
belched her approval:
“For the Goddess’ sake push
Now
Give us all birth”.

The fact that Ta-urt “belches” her approval is a challenge to the stereotypes of feminine behaviour that incarcerate women. The last line, “Give us all birth,” insists on the identification Woman-God, indirectly reinforced by the immediately previous invocation to a female Goddess.

Among several shorter poems, “Black Fruit II” (16) continues with the issue of motherhood but from a different perspective. The author addresses her little son, announcing the moment, yet to come, when he will grow up and become independent from her. This poem also points out the engagement between body and historical memory which will be fully developed in Philip’s later work, and which symbolically takes the child back to the African continent:

You, who carry the memory of sound in your body

conscious of the relationship between body and language or literary production (See, for instance, Philip, 1997: 103).

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the rush of Victoria's Falls
the dry winds of the Sahara,
the silence of the rain forests

Afraid that a racist society may destroy her innocent son, she is not ready to give him up without resistance:

I would rather pulverize your soul,
shatter the sound of the Falls,
scatter the winds,
burn the rain forests,
and take your blood back
to where it came from
than let them have you.

We see that there is a subtle but significant progression from the former collection: in *Salmon Courage* grief is turned into resistance against injustice and oppression.

"Salmon Courage" (14) is a longer poem where, back in her birth-place as an adult, the poet states: "I relive the journey of my salmon mother." The identification between mother and salmon is clarified in the article "A Genealogy of Resistance," published fourteen years later:

It is she! the "salmon woman of Woodlands,
Moriah" ... Back to an island she leaving as a child.
With a husband she knew slightly better, to raise five
children. Is she who telling the stories ... without
whom the stories would not be. (Philip, 1997: 24)

Her mother is in charge of keeping and telling family stories which abound in proverbially energetic Caribbean women and mothers, full of strength and dignity. Through this poem (and metonymically through the whole collection), homage is paid not only to her own but to all mothers, who emulate the salmon's courageous quest in going upstream to lay its eggs, that is, in the case of Black women, in going against the grain in their male-chauvinist and white-dominated societies.

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Motherhood is thus focused on and accorded well-deserved attributes of strength and dignity.

While *Thorns* associated mothering with childhood, this collection focuses, instead, on the issue of generational shift. Yet the geographic and cultural trajectory fulfilled in the first collection is reproduced here, and we also find several poems which revisit the double dislocation meant by the double exile, from Africa and from the Caribbean, while exploring the cultural rearrangement which needs to follow the geographical re-location in Canada. The last two poems demand particular attention, as they synthesize and conclude, respectively, this elongated journey. Both are built around female figures.

The first part of “Odetta” (37) relates the geographical journey of the Afrosporic peoples in Canada. Through the figure of the mythical Afro-American singer born in 1930, a woman becomes epitome of a multitude of women. Or maybe we should say that a voice becomes epitome of a multitude of voices, because in the poem, which culminates the poetic exploration of the tension between voice and silence that also accounts for the collection’s thematic coherence, Odetta is fully identified as sound. Initially as pure and innocent sound, which will later on evolve towards increasingly complex forms of black music –forms whose kernel remains back in African soil: reggae, calypso, mento and ska in the Caribbean; rhythm and blues in North-America:

Bareback
it rode
the raw blue words
bucking and twisting
in the grip of pure sound

The recurrence of the adjective “bareback,” denotative of African mores, refers yet here to the plundering and dispossession, both material and cultural, undergone by the African voice as she is captured to be enslaved:

this voice ambushed
somewhere

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between Cape of Good Hope
and the Mediterranean
between the Atlantic
and the Indian Ocean
fired in the New World

Once in the Caribbean (“bareback it rode / the raw blue words / the blackstrap burnt sugar / field holler catching the power”), the time will come when through migration to North America she will manage to escape slavery, first, and male oppression later:

I’m never coming back
I’ve got the Monday morning blues voice
of the lynch mob
the what’ll I have for this big buck
and here’s a good breeder voice
the voice of
I’m going to North America to make my fortune

And the poem resumes the proactive attitude that, as is being argued, prevails in *Salmon Courage* as a continuation and a response to the grief prevailing in *Thorns*:

we shall overcome
when will it all end
of the black and beautiful
right on gimmie five
rhythm and blues
that wants a piece of the action (my emphasis)

The poem’s second part carries a different title: “The Voice of the Lost ones” (38) and it provides an insight to the experiences of Afrosporic peoples in the northern countries where they have migrated: Canada, Great Britain and the United States. There is an irony in the fact that having eventually managed to break away from the ordeals of capture, slavery and colonialism, Afrosporic peoples in these countries should fall prey to racism, a scourge again taken up and denounced in this section of the poem:

It rode the raw blue words
the massa day done voice
of back to Africa
Brixton, Soweto, Watts, and Miami
bareback
the gunsmoke blue voice
of niggers go home
and Albert Johnson dead³

Odetta becomes, eventually, an ode in praise of the great names of black music, all rooted in her. Not only does the poem, thus, synthesize the journey of Afrosporic peoples in the New World, but also the author's will to give voice, through her own, to a silenced portion of the world community. Purposefully enough, the leading thread of that journey is a voice, Odetta's, turned into music. Let us remember that during slavery verbal communication among slaves was forbidden, yet slaves were allowed to sing while working in the cotton fields, since the masters held the belief that this would improve the results (White and White, 2005).⁴ History thus underscores the importance of music for Afrosporic peoples, as well as the author's wish that her own poetic voice may merge with that of the Black musicians listed in her poem. Artists who, as she now does through her poems, managed to sideway the oppression meant to them due to their skin colour. Odetta's voice is both theirs and Philip's, both Philip's and a whole people's.

The collection concludes with "Byeri" (39), another long poem. It is an extension of the previous and a pertinent conclusion for the whole work, since we now meet the Afrosporic woman in Canada, the final station of her complex journey. In Canada she has a chance to reflect upon her African origins and upon the disruption which eventually brought her there.

This reflection comes about as she watches a particular piece from an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario: Byeri. In a cautionary note, the reader (like the exhibition visitor) is informed that Byeri are

³ Albert Johnson was a Jamaican immigrant shot dead by the police in front of his home in Toronto on August 26, 1979.

⁴ A historical reality Philip recreates poetically in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*.

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very small figures sacred for the people Fang, in Gabon, which have a reliquary function. Their mission is to watch over the dead's bones. The exhibited figure is a feminine Word-carved image, and the poet invokes it thus:

Fang woman of the flying hair,
behind the plexiglass enclosure,
you sweat palm oil and copal;
or is it tears that create
a patina of grief on your body wood?

In the intersection between palm oil and Byeri's tears, grief gains presence again. The poet identifies with the figure, conscious both of the loss she has to put up with as a black woman: "...us, who lost the ordinary course", and of the fact that her feeling of communion with the figure has been distorted without remedy by history:

In the ordinary course of things,
I should have come upon you
as a child maybe...
on some ancestor's box of bark,
guarding her bones, her skull.

Also the figure's watching mission has been interrupted, as the continuity between the poet and her ancestors has been smashed up. And yet, notwithstanding the historical interruption meant by the Middle Passage and the time that has passed since, the small wooden image now discovered in a cold exhibition room remains a sacred object for the poet. She even feels that the African image belongs to her, that it is her Byeri watches over. In order to emphasize its holiness, along the poem the line "Fang woman of the lying hair" is repeated, turning it into a prayer. Another recurring aspect is the expression of the goddess's pain:

Fang woman with the flying hair,
your mouth stretched wide in a silent scream,
is that palm oil or is it that your pores weep?

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As the climax approaches, we are suggested that the distance between the poetic self and the African goddess gets actually inexistent, since what the goddess really watches over is the poet's time: "my future, present and past", and also because, eventually, both are linked by the yoke of grief and unanswered questions:

A hair's breath millenium away from you,
my mouth stretches wide as yours,
in a scream that shatters the glass
and your complicit silence remains
to haunt my questions.

We arrive to the climax of both the poem and the collection with a loop which subverts the concepts of time and space as conceived in western cultures, a loop where the poet and the sacred figure definitely recover that bond which was temporarily lost after the Middle Passage:

Guardian of relics, keeper of bones,
Fang woman of the flying hair,
you stand on my grave
and become what you once guarded.
You stand on my grave
while two tears of palm oil
creep slowly down my screaming face.

In these final lines, the poet has eventually adopted Byeri as her protector. On her part, Byeri recovers its original reliquary function as it becomes the guardian of the poet's tomb. This poetic tomb symbolically transgresses the distance between Africa and America and between the past and a distorted present. As its originally sacred character would have it, through the poet's look Byeri is able to recreate the communion between African goddess and poetic self –woman– previous to the trauma of the Middle Passage. Hence the eloquent image which closes the poem and culminates the collection, where both merge together: "the tears which were in Byeri's face are now running down the woman's cheeks."

What happened to her characters in previous poems happens now to the very poet: through her tears, which account for both her assumption of loss and her poetic attempt at redemption, the Afrosporic woman writer

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manages to become a goddess herself. An *African* goddess. As the poet states elsewhere: “The leitmotiv of seeking and returning to the mother as in the motherland, Africa, ...continually plays a part in almost all writing by New World Africans. ...Loss and return play an important part in their writings, and sometimes ...there’s actually a physical return” (Williamson, 1993: 229). Though unusual, Marlene Nourbese Philip’s return to Africa in “Byeri,” the poem concluding the initial stage of her writing career, is certainly a physical return.

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