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ESSAYS & INTERVIEWS
M. NOURBESE PHILIP

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...that's all them bastards have left us: words
—Derek Walcott

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ASAP / Journal printed “Banana Republics of Poetry”

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SHOUT-OUTS AND THANK-YOUS

OUR SOCIETY IS ONE IN WHICH SOCIAL AMNESIA flourishes and memory is its casualty. In relation to the struggle against anti-Black racism in Toronto, many, many people not only talked the talk, but walked the walk, not necessarily in high-profile ways, but steadily and quietly in as many different ways as there are people. They all helped to humanize this city and country and contributed to us, African Canadians, feeling a greater sense of be/longing in a stranger land. Many are forgotten or not known. It often appears as if prior to this moment there was no struggle on the part of African Canadians. The fight today is only possible because of those who went before and who fought back against those forces that appear so much more brazen today in their attempts to reduce us once again to nothingness. Most importantly, I acknowledge and thank the First Nations of this beautiful land, strange to us, but which has provided us, orphaned by history, succour and a place to be/long.

Miigwetch.

With this in mind, I offer *Shout-Outs* to the individuals, allies and organizations who, over the last twenty-five years, have been a part of that struggle. I will no doubt omit many through ignorance or the limitations of my memory; for these omissions, I apologize. In no particular order they are:

Organizations: Black Education Project, Harriet Tubman Centre (this now-defunct organization was started by the YMCA on Robina Avenue in Toronto in 1973); Black Secretariat; Third World Books and Crafts; Tropicana; BADC; CIUT-FM; Caribana;

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And in all the languages of loss, thank you to the Ancestors.

Ase

JAMMIN' STILL

Whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted in himself doesn't uproot others.

—Simone Weil¹

[T]he singing voice invariably revises the signing voice, it marks a point of exorbitant originality for African American cultures and expressivities....the singing voice, the originality, stands above all as a "disturbance" of New World configurations of value, a disturbance decried by the West from the earliest moments of contact with African and African diasporic cultures.

—Lindon Barrett²

The struggle against embedded journalism is not just being trapped in a green zone and how you break out of it, but how do you break out of a mental green zone that we're conditioned to embrace.

—Jeremy Scahill³

Social amnesia is society's repression of remembrance—society's own past. It is a psychic commodity of the commodity society.

—Russell Jacoby⁴

I write memory on the margins of history, in the shadow of empire and on the frontier of Silence; I write against the grain as an unembedded, disappeared poet and writer in Canada; I write from a place of multiple identities—Black, African-descended, female, immigrant (or interloper) and Caribbean—which often by their very nature generate hostilities within the body politic of a so-called multicultural nation. And what better place to write an introduction

to this work than Tobago, the island of my birth, to which I've been making annual pilgrimages for the last thirty-five years. Some ten years of those visits were intended to bring my father, suffering from dementia and resident in Trinidad, on annual trips back to the island he called home, a place he loved dearly and which he wanted to see become independent of Trinidad.⁵ As I walk past the spot where one of the houses I grew up in used to be, or drive past the Catholic school I went to as a child, where one of the nuns ran hurtling down the hill pursued by a bull, I often wonder what pulls me back here year after year—sometimes for as little as a week, at others for as long as eighteen months when my partner and I brought our young children to live and attend school here. This island has grounded my life in poetry and in writing; it often frustrates me, as it did my father and many others, leading him to move the entire family to Trinidad, where he felt the schooling was better, thus starting another train of exile and longing for belonging. And some mornings the ocean is at least three shades of blue; at other times grey and sullen, and always it is enough.

It was here, a little more than a quarter of a century ago, I wrote "Echoes in a Stranger Land," the introduction to my first collection of essays, *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*.⁶ The title, *Frontiers*, was a play on one of its meanings, margin, whose connotation within social contexts often suggests a sense of being overlooked. The frontier, however, despite its historical links with colonial discourse, suggested to me a place where anything was possible. A place where one could, because one was far away from the usual systems of control, experiment and try out different ways of being, identities even, including writing as a different way of being in the world. Behind the frontier was the hinterland, and for me the connotation of that latter word was one of backwoods or backwater. As a Black writer, one has continually to strategize about how to use what is intended to incapacitate you to your own advantage.

"Echoes in a Stranger Land" grappled with issues and ideas of exile, home and belonging as they pertained to living in Canada, a former dominion and an unsettler state. At the time of writing, the Yonge Street riots, as they came to be known, were happening, sparked by the Rodney King tragedy in the U.S.⁷ Now, some twenty-five years later, as I reflect on those issues, I gaze out at the still astonishingly blue ocean and once again I ask myself where

I truly belong, wondering whether I have gained any greater insights over the past twenty-five years.

Labels remain, but I am now considerably older and embrace the idea that while indigenous to the world, I remain exiled, possibly permanently: since although African-descended, I'm not indigenous to that continent, nor am I indigenous to the Caribbean, given that my ancestors were brought into these spaces as enslaved labourers after the eradication of the Indigenous populations. And, being immigrant to Canada, I count myself among the "unbelonged" there. Despite these facts, I call at least two places "home"—Tobago, because it continues to stop my heart with its beauty and has over the years provided a place for me to ground myself and from which to write, and Canada, because my children were born there, and there is where I have done my life's work as a writer. Although I work always from the rock bed of the Caribbean, and in particular Tobago, the work I've done could only have been done in Canada. Although my entry to Canada was as a graduate student, I am among the immigrants this country has accepted. The usual destination of Caribbean immigrants, however, was not Canada but the United Kingdom, the Mother Country, and later the United States. My coming to Canada was breaking with a certain tradition. Had I, however, begun writing in the United Kingdom, epicentre of the former British Empire, or in the United States, epicentre of the current one, my path would have been a very different one as a writer. In the former case I would have had to engage with the long history and tradition of writing from the colonies, now the Commonwealth. Further, the weight of tradition in the U.K. is such that it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to find a poetic language for what cannot be told yet must be told. And in a language that bore us no love and nurtured our non-being.⁸ Writing from the U.S. would have meant an engagement with the long history of writing by African Americans, beginning with the enslaved poet Phyllis Wheatley. In Canada, it felt as if there was not a tradition that I could engage with—either in embrace or rejection.⁹ I could count the Black writers on one hand when I began writing; it felt as if one were truly on the frontier. And lonely. What this loneliness meant was that one would either disappear in the nothingness or be forced to go deep to find the subterranean rivers of tradition that one could link oneself to.

The buzzword today is intersectionality—the nexus of the many ways in which we are and act in the world—we, each of us, are indeed a multitude. In the '70s and '80s, the remarkable thinker Walter Rodney helped to develop the idea of being politically Black, arguing that often the racist act and actor failed to discriminate in terms of his target—Pakistani, African, or Caribbean—the brute force of racism thus landed equally among peoples of colour. By the '90s, however, the broad-brush approach that allowed African Caribbean people, continental Africans and Asians to gather under the rubric of being Black in the political sense (particularly in the U.K.) had fragmented into the particularities of identities — Asian, South and East; Caribbean; continental African and other cultural markers of identity. In the twenty-five years, the list of markers has rightly expanded to include LGBTQ2, as well as the disabled. Riffing on the old and now outdated esoteric and philosophical discussions about the presence of angels, I'm sometimes tempted to ask how many identities can dance on the head of a pin.

“Back” then in Tabago a quarter of a century ago, I was reading George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, in which he writes: “The pleasure and the paradox of my own exile is that I belong to wherever I am.”¹⁰ Now I read *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* by Alain Mabanckou, the French Congolese writer who, on his first visit back to his home some twenty-five years later, observes: “I look for reasons to love this town, all smashed up though it is, and consumed by its anarchic growth. Like a long-lost lover, faithful as Ulysses' dog, it reaches out its long, shapeless arms to me, and day after day shows me how deep its wounds are, as though I could cauterise them with the wave of a magic wand.”¹¹ Unlike Mabanckou's response to his home, Tobago gives me many reasons to love it, most related to its natural beauty, but the wounds that Mabanckou talks about, which are the wounds of colonialism, are present all the same, though at times better hidden. We cannot, try as we might, cauterize the wound of colonialism: it suppurates, bleeds sometimes, extrudes pus, sometimes appears healed but aches always. On some days, however, I gaze out at the ocean, count the shades of blue and am content, wounds and all.

Twenty-five years ago the Yonge Street riots would lead to a government-sanctioned investigation by Stephen Lewis, who would identify and name the deeply systemic roots of anti-Black racism in Ontario. It would be the latest in a string of official reports on

the plight of African Canadians. Then-NDP premier Bob Rae, who had commissioned the report, accepted many of the report's findings, and under his governance Ontario saw the establishment of the Anti-Racism Secretariat.¹² Under the subsequent Mike Harris Conservative government, the Secretariat was promptly disbanded, and one of the government's first actions was to permit the use of hollow-point bullets by the police, despite the government publicly observing that the Black community would be unhappy about this. One of those bullets, shortly after their mandated use, would kill the unarmed First Nations man, Dudley George, in 1995, in what was known as the Ipperwash Crisis.¹³ Black communities in Canada continue to be challenged by issues of police carding¹⁴ of young Black men and women, unfulfilled expectations and aborted potential. Unwarranted killings of African Canadians by the police continue to plague the communities. In the passage of time, we've seen the opening, to great and vocal opposition, of an Africentric alternative primary school, which, while welcome, actually speaks to a failure of the mainstream educational system to provide a curriculum and pedagogical environment that meet the needs of young African Canadian children.

A subsequent attempt to start an Africentric high school at Oakwood Collegiate in the St. Clair/Oakwood area in 2011—the neighbourhood I have lived in for the last forty years—was greeted with great hostility by the neighbourhood, despite the fact that the school has traditionally had a large number of African Canadian students.¹⁵ Yet another example of how African Canadians are made to feel unwelcome in this city.

A quarter of a century later has also seen the emergence of Black Lives Matter, the brainchild of queer and trans women from the United States, which has spawned offshoots in different cities in the U.S., Canada and overseas. A response to the wanton police shootings of African American men and women, BLM's name appeared to simply state a fact at the heart of which was actually a wish—that Black lives ought to matter in the face of utter disregard on the part of law enforcers, which offends and outrages members of the Black community.

It seems redundant that one has to state that Black lives matter; indeed, in a capitalist economy Black lives have *always* mattered, unfortunately, however, not for their intrinsic value but for their use value. The financial system we live with and in today has its

roots in a system of speculative financing that was developed during the transatlantic trade in Africans, which, through a system of promissory notes, allowed for someone in Liverpool, for instance, to purchase an African in West Africa and have him or her transported to the Caribbean or the Americas for sale, and receive payment for that transaction in Liverpool.¹⁶ Many European nations and Europeans made their fortunes on a trade at the heart of which was the purchase and sale of Africans. It is in this sense that I say that Black lives have always mattered, and it is this essential dehumanization of Black lives that generates the need for us to state today what should be redundant—that Black lives do matter. For their intrinsic worth. It has been remarkable, however, how the assertion of what should not really need to be stated, that Black lives matter, becomes an irritant for so many who insist that it is exclusionary or, in response, that all lives matter, or blue lives matter. As if the very statement that Black lives matter negates the value of other lives. Is it that, perhaps unconsciously, those who oppose the slogan understand that acceptance of, and acting on, the fact that Black lives do indeed matter would shift so much that we have taken for granted that they grow uncomfortable at the possibility of such a seismic change? For make no mistake, if Black lives truly mattered, or if Indigenous lives mattered, speaking to the two genocides at the heart of the unsettling of the Americas and the Caribbean, we would, indeed, be living in an altered universe.

In those twenty-five years the U.S. did the unexpected and twice elected a biracial African American man to be president and commander-in-chief, then turned on a dime and elected a wealthy, white businessman who appears cut from the cloth of the classic colonial governor and whose stated goal is to “make America great again.”

Those of us who come from cultures that have been riven by colonialism understand its destructive impact: wherever they conquered and/or unsettled, colonial powers disregarded Indigenous and local traditions and practice, all of which would have been centuries if not millennia old, trampling them or forbidding them as they did the drum in Trinidad or the *mbira* (the musical instrument through which the Shona people of Zimbabwe speak to their Ancestors). People’s languages and customary ways of running their lives, practising their religions, and governing themselves was of no consequence. Custom, tradition, mores, laws were all

discounted and dismantled if they got in the way of the colonial project, and, more times than not, it was the colonial governor who administered these destructive practices. In his flagrant and wanton disregard of tradition; in his dismissal of long-accepted procedures and customs; in his wholesale abandonment of protocol and the established ways of governing, Trump hews closely to the role of the colonial governor.

There have been presidents who are Republican and who have governed from the right before, but what has unnerved and destabilized the populace, the world and many in the administration is not just the content of Trump's policies, troubling enough as they are, but his refusal to follow the accepted ways of governance. The comedic engagement with this process on the late-night talk shows provides a way of managing what is, in fact, the reinstitution of colonial governance. A small but powerful example: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson refusing to have the press corps accompany him on his most recent trip to Asia.

Among the complaints lodged against the colonial governor of Virginia in 1702 were the following: "He has taken upon himself the right to preside over the body and limit debate; he states the questions and overrules in an arbitrary and threatening manner; he threatens and abuses all who speak anything contrary to his opinions; he meets privately with members and uses all of the arts of cajoling and threatening for his own ends; his behaviour constitutes intolerable encroachments upon the liberties of both Houses."¹⁷ All of which now appear utterly familiar. Colonized cultures and societies in Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Caribbean all found ways to resist, but none could withstand the colonial onslaught, and they essentially either collapsed or developed dysfunctional ways of accommodating colonialism. These are the wounds Mabanckou writes about; these are the wounds I witness in Trinidad and Tobago. These are the wounds the First Nations of this country live with. What is different this time is that for the first time we are actually witnessing what that process of colonial destabilization would have been like, the results of which are nation-states that today appear to have always been this way—poor, ravaged, war-torn. In the case of the U.S., we are witnessing a colonial threat to a democratic culture, and this is new, although not entirely unexpected given the colonial antecedents of the U.S. State.¹⁸

Consider, for a macabre moment, that Africa could not today

SOCIAL BARBARISM AND THE SPOILS OF MODERNISM

The auditorium of the McLaughlin Planetarium was spacious and bright; I was there to learn about African art: a four-week series of lectures sponsored by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).¹

Around me the room was full of people, all white with the exception of five—including myself—Blacks. I didn't miss the overwhelming irony of my being there to find out about something I should have been as familiar with as I am with the beliefs and practices of Christianity—and I don't mean African "art," since that is a Western construct, but African culture. And I was not familiar with African culture—at least not in the sense of being intimate with it.

The reason for my presence in that room was, I felt, deeply rooted in the very events and circumstances that had brought the pieces, now on display, courtesy of the ROM, to the West and Canada: the same events that had brought the "primitive," the savage, the African—the Other—to the West in the form of "art" or aesthetics. The supreme irony in these events was that while the African aesthetic was being appropriated and manipulated to the West's own purposes; while African "art" was being extolled and praised—and at the same time being evacuated of any ritually appropriate meaning—the peoples of the continent from which these cultural objects originated were being oppressed, enslaved, and denied basic human rights.

It is pretty much received opinion now that the "art of tribal Africa was a major influence on Western art early this century and has remained so for decades."² For "major influence," I would substitute *indispensable debt*, for by the time the moderns came upon the idea of the "primitive," their artistic tradition had been depleted