

# HYPHENS, BOUNDARIES AND THIRD SPACES: IDENTITY AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN AFRO-CARIBBEAN-CANADIAN WRITING

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

## RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta demostrar que los escritores afro-caribeño-canadienses emplean la indeterminación cultural del intersticio nacional/cultural para reconceptualizar la posición del sujeto *afrospórico* en Canadá, ya que la ambivalencia predominante en este espacio les permite habitar una oscilación perpetua entre la preservación de la diferencia y la búsqueda de la similitud. Primero, la definición del término *transcultural* dibuja la escena en la que enraizar la literatura afro-caribeño-canadiense contemporánea. En segundo lugar, un trazo diacrónico a través de dicha manifestación cultural, y por medio de las obras de su figura más representativa, Austin Clarke, muestra como el campo ha estado cambiando hasta llegar al momento actual de diversidad textual, lo cual obstaculiza la firme constitución de ese mismo campo. Finalmente, se dirige la atención sobre el concepto del *tercer espacio* de intervención, que es condición primordial para la enunciación de la *diferencia* en un marco transcultural que choca con el paradigma de *diversidad* que sacó a la luz la Ley Multicultural canadiense de 1988.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura afro-caribeño-canadiense, tercer espacio, intersticio, literatura transcultural.

## ABSTRACT

«Hyphens, Boundaries and Third Spaces: Identity and Cultural Politics in Afro-Caribbean-Canadian Writing». This paper intends to show that Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writers use the indeterminacy of the cultural/national *in-between* to reconceptualise the position of the *Afrosporic* subject in Canada, since the dominant ambivalence of this space allows them to inhabit a continuous oscillation between the preservation of difference and the pursuit of similarity. Firstly, the definition of the term *transculture* provides the scene in which to root contemporary Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing. Secondly, a diachronic sketch through such a cultural manifestation by resorting to the works of its most representative figure, Austin Clarke, shows how the field has been shifting to reach the present stage of textual diversity, which precludes the firm constitution of the field itself. Finally, I briefly turn to the concept of the *third space* of intervention, which is a necessary condition for the enunciation of *difference* in a transcultural frame that counteracts the paradigm of *diversity* brought to light by the 1988 Canadian Multicultural Act.

KEY WORDS: Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing, third space, in-between, transcultural literature.



Writing about the relevance of hyphenated identities and the cultural and political potential of their position in the Canadian context, Barbara Godard considers the hyphen as a mark of both separation and union (1993: 154-55). This ambivalence is essential in the reconceptualisation of the position of the *Afrosporic*, a portmanteau term designating the subject of African origin involved in the worldwide processes of diaspora and migration (Philip, 1992: 45), since it allows him/her to inhabit (in) a continuous oscillation between the preservation of difference and the pursuit of similarity. The increasing interest in highlighting the national, racial and/or sexual identity of the individual as part of the contemporary prominence of identity politics has confirmed the validity of the hyphenated forms. They are part of an opposition against the absorbing impulse of the dominant culture with the goal of effecting a relocation of the structures of power that help constitute the border of the national. The diaspora has complicated this process and determined an endless negotiation between spaces, cultures and times turning its paradigmatic subject into the inhabitant of the *in-between* (Bhabha, 1994: 1), that site where the borders of the post-Enlightenment centred nation-state appear insufficient to enclose the multiple nations. It is that space whose nature avoids representation (Bhabha, 1994: 37), where process prevails against product and where the definite borders blur in favour of hybrid experiences and multiple identities. This multiplicity results from the transcultural voyage<sup>1</sup>.

The present emphasis on cultural diversity, the last consequence of which is the interest in multicultural societies, has unveiled a conception of identity as a multilayered formation. In what follows, I try to show that the meaning of the triply hyphenated form *Afro-Caribbean-Canadian* goes beyond the present pervasive political correction. The hyphens here signal an accumulation that is not merely a question of quantity. They purport to reveal and represent cultural specificity in a situation of transcultural contact that undermines the harmonious though aseptic lack of exchange promoted by the policy of multiculturalism. Firstly, the definition of the term *transculture* provides the scene in which I locate Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing. Secondly, through a brief description of its origins and present situation, I draw attention to the difficulty of delimiting the field and sub-fields like Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women's writing. Finally, I focus on the third space of intervention as necessary condition for the enunciation of cultural difference in a transcultural frame that counteracts the paradigm of cultural diversity proposed by the Canadian policies of multiculturalism.

The birth of multicultural policies in Canada has propelled the preservation of cultural specificity. Thus, the Canadian national context turned into the

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas the term *transcultural* was coined by the Cuban sociologist Fernando ORTIZ to describe Afro-Cuban culture, it was well into the 1970s when the Uruguayan critic Angel RAMA incorporated it into literary studies. ORTIZ's transcultural was devised to replace the dynamics of acculturation and deculturation, which reductively, depicted the cultural transference from the point of view of the metropolis (PRATT, 1992: 228).

*mosaic* advocating the coexistence of the different social groups in a condition of permanent contact but without mixing. The more dynamic *kaleidoscope*, a formation that admits not only the contact but also the influence of some pieces on some others, is occupying more and more space beside the already traditional mosaic model (see Keefer, 1991). Like in a kaleidoscope, where shapes and colours merge, the kaleidoscopic spectrum witnesses the intermixing of cultural influences. The in-between in which Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing is rooted could not exist without this transcultural model.

Mary Louise Pratt considers the transcultural exchange of influences as a by-product of what she terms the *contact-zone*. Pratt's term is indebted to studies in linguistics in which a contact-language is an improvised code developed by the native speakers of two different languages in a situation of coalescence (1992: 6). The resulting language is a hybrid between the two languages in coexistence, which takes characteristics from both of them and is in perpetual formation. It is this continuous (trans-)formation that characterises the cultural manifestations of the transculture. Pratt affirms that «[e]thnographers have used [the term] transcultural to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture». Those marginal groups, Pratt continues, «do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their [culture], and what they use it for» (1992: 6).

Without using very much in-terms like contact-zone or any of its variants, Jean Lamore sees the transcultural as a flow of cultural elements that is «secular, constant, permanent» and «a mutual acquisition of cultural elements» (1992: 45. My translation). Lamore's definition draws attention to the transcultural as governed by a process of continuous (trans-)formation caused by the permanent movement of cultural influences. In the Canadian scene, the present paradigms of emigration and transit complicate the concept of an immutable national identity whereas the proposal of fluid identities gains more strength. It is in such a panorama that I want to contextualise a discussion of the hyphenated compound *Afro-Caribbean-Canadian*.

To inscribe a double or triple inheritance in the transcultural individual's particular history, the outlet is a negotiation of past (doubly unfolded here in the label Afro-Caribbean) and present (Canadian), then and now. The hyphen stands, therefore, as the marker of an oscillation between here (Canada) and there (The Caribbean or any other site of emigration), as Bhabha would put it (1994: 1; see Carmona, 2005). This permanent duality is not resolved with the mere replacement of one reality for the other. Instead of a substitution of margin for centre, there is a continuous destabilisation of the cultural centre.

The graphic image of hyphenated groups represented on a line brings to mind a continuum where there exists the possibility of a horizontal movement of cultural influences as the result of the contact with the coterminous element. This contact is productive, never obliterating. In this schematic explanation, the hyphen acts as the border-zone, the site of the hybrid and creative potential. The hyphen therefore retains the group's cultural specificity against the WASP Canadian, while it also relegates the non-WASP to the margin. The displacement to the margin helps Afro-Caribbean-Canadian authors invalidate claims of cultural supremacy



(Bhabha, 1990: 4). This accepted marginality is used to draw attention to a distinguishable voice within the Canadian spectrum. The hyphenated form allows the diasporic individual to reclaim a part of his/her identity that is unacknowledged by the simple *Canadian*. It advocates hybridity as essential in the continuous reconfiguration of migrant identities. Bearing in mind this idea of the margin as site of creativity and productivity, I turn to trace a brief overview of the origin of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing.

To describe the history of the Afro-Caribbean-Canadians it is necessary to look at the relatively recent history of the British Empire, when many economic connections were forged between the settler colony of Canada and the British Caribbean area of intervention. Some of these connections have been renewed and strengthened under the neo-colonialism of the United States in this century, which witnessed how the once colonised citizens of the Empire started to emigrate to the once metropolis, in this way reversing the direction of the travel from Europe to the colonies. However, a new reversal in the travel paradigm occurred in the 1960s. As the entry laws of the so far preferred European destinies turn stricter and certain hostility to the immigrant appears more evident, the West Indian starts emigrating to new places. It is then when other sites once colonised come as new reception places, among these the United States and Canada. As Monika Kaup has stated, moving from the Caribbean to Canada diminishes the cultural shock produced for passing from the Third to the First World, since Canada «still struggles to define national standards against European and American influences» (1996: 172-173; see Brown, 1989).

It is in the late 1950s when the first massive groups of immigrants from the Caribbean arrive at the industrial cities of Canada, to work mainly as unskilled employees, and less frequently, to study at Canadian institutions that were holding programmes of development forged within the colonial relations between the two zones. Later, in the 1960s, when Canadian laws of emigration get more relaxed, the great amount of immigrants from the Caribbean and South Asia arrive at the country. Although the presence of blacks in Canada dates back to the days previous to the emancipation of USA slaves, it is the work systems known as Farm Worker and Worker Domestic Scheme that led thousands of Caribbean people to Canada to work as farmers or domestic servants<sup>2</sup>. It is precisely in the arrival and settlement of these former immigrants that some critics like Kaup have seen the beginning of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing.

In Canada the situation of black writing in those years, as the Trinidadian poet, novelist, playwright and social activist Nourbese Philip has explained (1991: 18), has nothing to do with the existence of an already potent tradition in places like Great Britain. In Canada, there was just a void, a zero degree that is both an advantage and a disadvantage. In Philip's opinion, the *newness* of Canada offers the

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<sup>2</sup> Those work schemes were intermittently appearing between 1911 and 1966 with temporal suspensions that restricted the entrance of immigrants of West Indian origin (see CHAMCY, 1997: 84).



possibility of a new beginning. Like Canadian authors of the sixties, she refers to the creation of a new tradition. However, this void outside is parallel to what she terms the *void inside* or, a lack to write and read the whole black experience, starting with the disremembered stories of slavery and reaching the frequent internalisation of a position of personal and cultural subordination. The lack about which Philip talks can be considered as part of the colonial trauma, the fact that the black individual has ended up being unable to value and tell his/her own experience.

In a somehow similar vein, Monika Kaup compares the early period of West Indian-Canadian writing to the situation of mainstream Canadian literature in the sixties (1996: 173). At that moment, the early national literature struggles with the European dominance to make room for itself and writers like Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence or Margaret Atwood claim to be writing in a void, creating their own tradition. The new space offers for the Caribbean individual the possibility of negotiating some of the hierarchies that the colonial tradition in the Caribbean takes for granted. The void in this case brings about a reconceptualisation of place, a new relation with the surrounding space. For the Afro-Caribbean, migrancy means that the patterns of domination and submission still perceivable in an ex-slave colony, admit not only re-negotiation but also subversion in Canada. Canada, as settler colony, is what Alan Lawson calls a «site of slippage» (1995: 22). Drawing on Joanne Tompkins, Lawson writes that settler cultures are «sites of rehearsal or (re)negotiation. They are liminal sites at the point of negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native» (1995: 24). As such, Canada offers the immigrant a feeble national conscience, and the consequent possibility of negotiating hierarchies that are beyond discussion in places where the establishment of the national is hardly under question. The fragility of the Canadian sense of nation allocates the black immigrant an ambivalent position since the lack of a firm national consciousness allows him/her relative access to the national discourse. This access, however, is complicated by the strictures of colour and the lures of the (im)possible social mobility.

This pair determines the early narratives by Austin Clarke, usually considered the most representative Afro-Caribbean-Canadian author, and modified, to a greater or lesser extent, continues reappearing all the way along his latest Canadian-set works, *The Origin Of Waves* (1997) and *The Question* (1999). On dealing briefly with Clarke's literary production, I attempt to exemplify how the position of the Afro-Caribbean in Canada has been shifting from the exiled to the immigrant. Clarke, who arrived at Canada in 1955, has been regarded for years the most outstanding Caribbean-Canadian writer, but, his success, however, has condemned many other writers to invisibility and located him in the position of the community's mouthpiece<sup>3</sup>.

Clarke's famous Toronto Trilogy is grounded in the years of the Domestic Worker Scheme. Thus, chronologically, the novel *Meeting Point* (1967) deals with the

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<sup>3</sup> In the United States and Canada, the recognition of one or two writers of Asian, Native or African origin turns invisible other members of the same group. Marlene NOURBESE PHILIP terms this tendency the «one-only syndrome» (1992: 162).

arrival in Toronto of some of the immigrant women that will work as maids for Jewish-Canadian families. Their relation with the initially hostile environment of the city and their experience as pioneers in white Canada are the centre of the narrative in this first novel. The following two, *Storm of Fortune* (1971) and *The Bigger Light* (1975), tackle the attempts of assimilation and the evident economic thrift of some of the characters, exemplified by Boysie Cumberbatch, a character recurrent in the trilogy. Short story-collections like *When Women Rule* (1985) and *Nine Men Who Laughed* (1986), a collection that follows the path of Richard Wright's *Eight Men* (1961) (Clarke, 1997a: 127n9), continue in the same line of argument, although the Caribbean group of protagonists has achieved a more stable social position. In *This City* (1992) and *There Are No Elders* (1993) are governed by a change since for the first time Clarke chooses individuals already belonging to a generation born in Canada. In Monika Kaup's opinion, the shift undergone by Clarke's latest works has to do with the wish to account for the experience of the immigrant, not that of the expatriate (1996: 171-193). For Victor Ramraj, the change is an attempt to unveil what lies at the root of cultural difference while paying attention to similarity (1996: 163). This new analytic mood partially modifies the former attitude of indictment of the white majority. Clarke's literary production is overwhelmingly vast in terms of fiction, but he is also the author of his (fictional) autobiography, *Growing Up Stupid under the Union Jack* (1980), and *Public Enemies: Police, Violence and Black Youth* (1992), a pro-black social rights pamphlet. Additionally, in an attempt to link himself to his homeland of Barbados, he has written *A Passage Back Home* (1994), dedicated to Sam Selvom, and *Pigtails 'N' Breadfruit: The Rituals of Slave Food* (1999), where he mixed local Barbadian cuisine recipes and his memoirs. If, as Walcott holds, «[...] food is one of the central markers of outsider multicultural status in Canada» (1999: 68-69), Clarke has once again asserted the instability of his position in the social, literary and national Canadian spectrum in returning his work to Barbados. This has recently been confirmed by his Giller Prize-winning novel *The Polished Hoe* (2002).

It is possible to trace in Clarke's work the path from the writing of the exile to that of the more permanent immigrant. Thus, the wish to achieve material goods is little by little replaced by the problems of the assimilated immigrant, his/her (dis-)identification and the struggle to enunciate that cultural difference that the hyphen intends to retain. Through the analysis of the cultural distance that separates many of his characters, Clarke seems to point out that its reduction is not a condition for *Canadianness*. On the contrary, being Canadian means to live (with) that cultural distance as a sign of unity.

Clarke's novels are a minimal part of the diversity that characterises Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing. Under this label we gather authors as diverse as George Elliot Clarke, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Cyril Dabydeen, Afua Cooper, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Olive Senior, Makeda Silvera, Ayanna Black or the dub group of poets brought to light by people such as Lillian Allen. To study deeply each of these authors here exceeds the scope of this paper, but it suffices to say that their interests are radically divergent. Thus, the concerns of gender and 'race' link the prose and poetry of the Trinidadian-Canadian Harris, Brand and Philip. Whereas Harris is mainly a poet who highlights the relevance of difference and commonality (Ramraj,



1996: 165), Brand and Philip adopt a more radical and combative standpoint. Silvera, like Brand, has focused on the experience of black lesbians making, therefore, sexual orientation the most recent core of her prose and documentary scripts. This is especially so in the case of Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) and in Silvera's collection of short stories *Her Head a Village* (1994), where the markers of race, gender, class and sexual orientation continually intermingle. Brand's production frequently deals with issues of racism, displacement and segregation. All these resume in her novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), which weaves through several centuries and continents the genealogy of Marie Ursule's descendants, a female slave executed for rebellion in 1824. In turn, Philip aims at the recovery of the suppressed stories of black people and for that purpose she researches the subversive potential of language and silence in her prose-poetry collections *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) and *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991).

In Olive Senior's short-story collections *Summer Lightning* (1986) and *The Arrival of the Snake-Woman* (1989) there is hardly any mention of Canada. Instead, the stories recover an almost mythical Caribbean that frequently takes the form of a psychological space. In it the oral tales of the tradition of the islands are continually resorted to and re-elaborated. Voodoo, obeah and the figures of the sourciantis, jableses and lous-garous bring about what Janette Martin in her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid and Jean Rhys has called «an alternative epistemology» (1997:29). As in Rhys and Kincaid, in the stories by Olive Senior this alternative mode tries to recover a personal and cultural history that has been distorted at best, suppressed at worst.

If considering Philip, Allen or Senior as belonging to the same field is hardly tenable for the degree of diversity of their textual practices, the case of George Elliot Clarke is even more complex. All the authors just mentioned were born in the Caribbean but Clarke is from Nova Scotia where his family settled seven generations ago. Being neither an expatriate nor an immigrant, his affiliation to this group can only be supported in terms of colour (Kaup, 1996: 175). In fact, grouping all these authors within the category *Caribbean* is in itself problematic, and can only be done by means of a transnational criterion. Ignoring their identities as Jamaican, Tribagonian or Barbadian requires the prevalence of the regional impulse over the national one and highlights the contending impulses of the centripetal and the centrifugal; the national and the international; the regional and the global. Leaving this contradictory move aside, the creation of anthologies grouping the works of West Indian authors is confronted with the same problem. Only their ethnic label as non-white Caribbean-born or of Caribbean origin could give certain cohesion to the project. So far, as Kaup points out (1996: 175), three different criteria have been used. First, 'race', then the emphasis on Caribbean culture and finally, as Hutcheon and Richmond decided in their *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990), to gather them together with other representatives of the transcultural boom in literature. In the case of the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian, the constitution of the field would only be valid in terms of 'race'. The emphasis on Caribbean culture, for example, would allow the entrance in this group of non-necessarily-of-African descent authors, for example Neil Bissoondath or Himani Barnnerji, to

mention just a few<sup>4</sup>. In opposition to *Afro-Caribbean-Canadian*, the more inclusive *West Indian-Canadian* would allow us to include all these authors together with Clarke, Samuel Selvon, Philip or Brand in Canada. Significantly, in many cases, and Clarke is an instance, the authors gathered in an anthology openly distrust the edition's structuring axis. Clarke's whole fiction exhibits evident suspicions as regards the official multicultural policies and their egalitarian agenda. As a response to this political attitude, some anthologies intend to diminish the meaning attributed to the concept of minority as a political and cultural signifier, thus turning the celebration of diversity into a parallel to its contention (Kamboureli, 2000: 164). In her introduction to the anthology *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, Smaro Kamboureli challenges minority representations by emphasising the instability of any margin, while highlighting the material production conditions of those writings anthologized (1996: 2; see Clarke, 1997b: xi-xxviii).

If to configure the corpus of the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian brings along with it a serious problem of unity in diversity (O'Callaghan, 1993: 10)<sup>5</sup>, a similar obstacle appears when trying to constitute the more restricted *Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women's writing*. Terms like *African women's writing* include the work of authors whose origin is not necessarily Caribbean, that is, women who could have emigrated to Canada directly from Africa or be the descendants of runaway USA slaves; *women of colour*, as Barbara Godard observes, has come to be employed to refer to the cultural production of a group of lesbians in which Chinese-Canadian and Native-Canadian women are also included together with women of South East Asian and Latin American origin (1996: 109). Both groups include black women from the Caribbean, whom Godard considers the most politically active.

Their political activity starts with deciding on a linguistic variety in which to write about their particular concerns. Such a choice conditions as well the potential readership of their works as Marlene NourbeSe Philip explains in her essay «Who's Listening?: Artists, Audiences & Language» (1992). In this paper Philip describes her personal situation as trying to choose between two traditions, one represented by the imaginary individual she names John-from-Sussex and the other by the equally imaginary Abiswa. The former stands for the dominance of the male, white hierarchy and the latter for the Afro-Caribbean female heritage. Rather than selecting one or the other, Philip says that the ideal would be a dialogical relation between these two metaphoric figures (1992: 27).

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<sup>4</sup> Among all the authors mentioned, BISSOONDATH is especially polemic. Born in Trinidad of Indian origin and long based in Canada, he has repeatedly defended the international character of his writing, siding thus, with his uncle V.S. NAIPAUL. BISSOONDATH does not admit the validity of the hyphenated identity and considers Canadian his only identity. NOURBESE PHILIP herself has accused him of being a racist (1992: 162).

<sup>5</sup> Such is the term with which Evelyn O'CALLAGHAM achieves certain coherence in the corpus of her study of Afro-Caribbean women's fiction (1993: 10). As it happens in the case of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing, the diversity of its form and themes precludes a firm constitution of the field.





The same duality materialises at the level of language since selecting either a standard or dialectal variety implies that there will always be someone who will be unable to understand the work. Whereas the reader belonging to her group will respond to her dialectal writing but not to her works written in the standard, Standard English reaches and secures for more readers the understanding of the work and therefore awakes the publisher's interest more easily than a piece of writing in patois. In the end, it is the marketability of the work what guarantees the writer's survival. On the other hand, the greater the number of volumes published the higher the degree of quality attributed to the work. As Godard puts it, «literary value is produced by a web of institutional practices» (1996: 107) and good/bad books are invented by what J.M. Coetzee has called «the ideological superstructure of publishing, review and criticism (quoted in Philip, 1992: 161). For Philip, «it is [...] clearly the opinion of publishers in Canada that there is no market for books about Black people: they believe that whites are not interested and that Blacks either do not, or are unable to buy books» (1992: 39). The indictment continues in her «Publish + Be Damned» (1992), where she directly claims that the Canadian publishing industry is not market-driven but race-determined (1992: 160). Confronted with such a bleak panorama, she proposes the existence of grants for those publishers who show an evident commitment to the publication of material by transcultural writers. Such a solution she distinguishes from the popular quota system by paying close attention to the quality of the works<sup>6</sup>. The question of literary value is much more complex than what could be accounted for here, but, generally, Philip's proposal would imply a relevant impulse for the work of many transcultural authors who are undervalued by the present system.

Despite the situation that Philip denounces, important major names in publishing are turning their eyes to Afro-Caribbean writing. Dionne Brand's latest novels *In Another Place, Not Here* and *At the Full and Change of the Moon* are published by Vintage and Knopf, respectively, and her collection of poems *No Language is Neutral* (1990) was reprinted in 1998 by McClelland and Stewart. Her *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988) has been reedited by the international Firebrand, and her latest *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) and *Thirsty* (2002) have similarly entered the mainstream field of publishing. Similarly, Clarke's *The Origin of Waves* and *The Question* appeared in M&S, as it has also done *The Polished Hoe*. However, it is much more common that small presses like Mercury, POUI or Williams-Wallace pay attention to the work of these authors as it happens with Philip's works. It was impossible to find a publisher for her first novel *Harriet's Daughter* (1988) which was published in Canada by the Women's Press after a first British edition by Heinemann. Similarly, Philip's third book of poetry, *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks* was repeatedly rejected in Canada after having been awarded the Casa de Las Americas Prize for poetry.

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<sup>6</sup> When political correction and positive discrimination prevail in the publishing industry, the quality of the works automatically diminishes. Such is the observation that DECAIRES NARAIN and O'CALLAGHAN (1994: 626) made about *Creation Fire* (1990), edited by Ramabai SPINET for the Toronto Women's Press.



If the work of small foundations and publishers must be praised for their promotion of Afro-Caribbean writing and culture in general, there is a name that should not be forgotten: Vision 21. The labour of this group has resulted in an appreciation of the strategic possibilities of the term *ex-centric*. Their questioning of the 6% solution condemned the mathematical estimation brought about by the multicultural policy of Ottawa and exposed it as what Barbara Godard has called «a structure of liberal pluralism for homogenisation» (1993: 158). For Vision 21, the government's decision to include a fixed percentage of members of the so-called *visible minorities* in cultural acts is directly connected with the fixation of cultures, the invariable representation of Canadian society as a «dominant white group surrounded by micro-cultures» (Philip, 1992: 155)<sup>7</sup>.

Rejecting either/or definitions and the establishment of binary oppositions that traditionally have permitted the constitution of the national versus the *other* or non-national, the artists included in Vision 21 advocate the hybridisation of culture and the demystification of pure origins. The third space of cultural intervention they propose is basic for the reconfiguration of the identity of the non-white Canadian. As brought to light by Homi Bhabha (1994), the third space is a site of cultural indecision in which meaning is produced on a principle of hybridity. It rejects claims of originality and the postulates of tradition and the past as immune to discursive practices. Bhabha's formulation is elaborated out of the distinction between cultural difference and cultural diversity, in other words, the difference between an epistemological object and a process of enunciation in which culture is constructed as *knowledgeable* (Bhabha, 1994: 34).

According to Bhabha, contemporary debates on culture agree on that the main problematic appears at «the signficatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs misappropriated», in the so-called limits (1994: 34). However, the scarce theorisation on the border has hardly touched how issues of cultural authority and supremacy are affected by the enunciation of difference. This enunciation produces a division between the demand for a model of tradition to follow and the negation of certitude, in itself part of an articulation of resistance to a monocentric view of culture (1994: 35). The enunciation of cultural difference presents a conflict between the past and the present, between the teleological narrative of tradition and the time of a politics of negotiation, which problematises the binary opposition past/present, since, as Bhabha states, in «signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic» (1994: 35).

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<sup>7</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1989, the *Toronto Star* published a note by PEN Canada in which it was affirmed that African, Asian and Native Americans comprised some 6% per cent of the total Canadian population. Apparently, the base figure was not exact. PEN recognised the error but the number of representatives of these groups hardly varied in subsequent conferences. NOURBESE PHILIP submitted the article «6% Solution» to the *Torontonian* newspaper in response to PEN but her words were never published (PHILIP, 1992: 159).

As the duality past/present is invalidated, so is that of self/other, inasmuch as Bhabha affirms that cultures can never be dualistic (1994: 36). This impossibility is caused by the fact that the act of enunciation is governed by the *différance* of writing and language that impinges as well in the formation of meaning. In the same sense that the 'I' of the enunciation requires the continuous displacement of the 'non-I', the enunciation of cultural difference undermines the coherent and synchronic evolution of an authorised subject of cultural knowledge (1994: 36). Displacing the centred cultural subject in favour of fragmentation and hybridisation, the third space continually produces and reproduces centres and margins which, as Barbara Godard says, are «displaced, used as strategic fulcrum and exposed as irreducible» (1993: 152).

This destabilisation gives the diasporic artist a basis from which to articulate the decentering of his/her expression and experience. The mixture of linguistic and cultural codes is very much the outcome of the disruption of the third space. In it, the archaic cultural *essences* are transformed and produced anew in a circular, endless process that reveals the constructed nature of the cultural location. From their strategic position *in-between*, many Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writers cross boundaries of national culture, race and gender. Their double code allows them to be included in and out of the master text of Canadian literature, but also in and out of the text of Afro-Caribbean literature. In perpetual transit, their discourse of disjuncture proposes fluidity instead of the stability of national markers, those that, as Bhabha proposes, are demystified by the disruptive temporality of the enunciation of cultural difference. The third space uncovers that cultural symbols are not endowed with an inherent fixed meaning but are continually re-read and re-interpreted. Challenging the unity of these symbols in favour of a perpetual process of hybridisation «allows commonality and difference to coexist in a manner which challenges many of the assumptions of traditional 'mainstream' cultural configurations and their pedagogical politics» (Moore-Gilbert *et al.*, 1997: 62). The *in-between* is the space for the formation of anti-nationalist stories to finally «emerge as the others of ourselves» (Bhabha, 1994: 39). In that sense, Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writing is populated by subjects in transit, living on the hyphen, between moving boundaries, in a third space that continually replenishes along a cultural production that exceeds and challenges the pedagogical and performative impulses of nation, culture and any easily determined identity.

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