




ARTICLE

Decolonizing African and African Diasporan Cultural Memory in Djanet Sears and M. NourbeSe Philip's Works

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez 

University of Huelva, Spain
Email: picuder@uhu.es

Abstract

This article proposes to look back onto the Black Canadian works produced around the turn of the twenty-first century to establish some of the decolonial practices they promoted, arguing that they remain pivotal in decentering the colonial gaze that to this day is at the root of anti-Black hatred. In the face of continued structural violence and anti-Black racism preeminent across Canada to date, it attempts to unpack the purpose and means deployed in their early texts by two pioneer Black Canadian women writers, Djanet Sears and M. NourbeSe Philip, to decolonize African cultural memory from the diaspora by teaching us to value African legacies outside of Eurocentric standards. Drawing from feminist anthropologist Rita Segato, it contends that these texts perform a “counter-pedagogy of cruelty,” that is, an act of resistance to all those sociocultural practices by which people are taught, trained, and hardened to the ongoing commodification of others.

Keywords: African cultural memory; decolonizing culture; Black Canadian writing; Djanet Sears; M. NourbeSe Philip

This article draws from memory studies in attempting to locate the multifarious trajectories in contemporary Canadian literature designed to bring to light Black memories and to record their unique experiences, a subject still under-examined despite the remarkable flourishing of memory studies witnessed since the 1990s and the rise in later years of critical scholarship on this subject.¹ My title invokes

¹ For an account of how the field emerged and developed and of its current critical conversations, see, among others, George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015); Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, “Canada and the Black Atlantic: Epistemologies, Frameworks, Texts,” *Beyond*

the term *cultural memory*, by which, following Astrid Erll, I understand the dynamic processes of remembering and forgetting that preserve or erase social symbols, meanings, and practices within the shared past of a community,² in this case the Canadian nation-state. Canadian nationalism in the 1960s strove to construct a national imagination on the myth of two founding nations, but since then this narrative has been destabilized by still ongoing critiques of its exclusionary practices over all other non-European identities, erasing in the process the indigenous history of Turtle Island. In this if nowhere else, it is clear that cultural memory is a political field within which different stories struggle for their place in history.³ Black stories have been subjected to erasure and consigned to oblivion in Canada too. Scholars have repeatedly pointed out a general unawareness of the historical presence of Black people in the country, perhaps with the exception of the Underground Railroad.⁴ Moreover, some of the earliest Black settlements were pulled down in the urban renovation plans of the 1960s and 1970s, like Africville in Halifax (Nova Scotia) or Hogan's Alley in Vancouver (British Columbia), whereas others such as Amber Valley (Alberta) were simply abandoned due to the hardships of settlement. The plural "stories" is particularly suitable for a community that is in fact the result of many waves of migration from Africa, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Rather than one history, intimately connected to the slave trade, there is a hoard of histories alongside slavery, tying these constituencies to experiences of colonialism, decolonization and neocolonialism, migration, diaspora and globalization. As a result, undertaking a reading of African Canadian literature naturally entails looking beyond the constricting borders of the nation-state, and so this article must incorporate a sense of transnational memory, addressing the renderings of the diasporan trajectories of Black subjects. As John Sundholm suggests, this transnational memory "is not anti-national, but non-national and ambivalent, taking into account the increased mobility, due to immigration/migration, dual citizenship, circulation of labour force, not to mention all those numerous historical events that have shaped new nations and altered state boundaries."⁵ This is particularly true in regard to the relations between the African diaspora and the African continent, due to the ways in which, for many Black Canadian writers, particularly those Caribbean-born or of Caribbean ancestry, Africa has exerted a strong pull as a distant motherland or, rather, in Dionne Brand's formulation, as "a place strictly of the imagination."⁶ This pull was more evident in the writing of the 1980s and 1990s, when authors such as

Understanding Canada, eds. Melissa Tanti, Jeremy Haynes, Daniel Coleman, and Lorraine York (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2017), 99–114; and Karina Vernon, "Beyond National Time: Black Atlantic Temporalities and the Time-Space of Black Canadian Cultural Studies," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 8.1 (2021): 94–97.

² Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6–12.

³ Anh Hua, "Diaspora and Cultural Memory," *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 199.

⁴ On this subject, see, for example, Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁵ John Sundholm, "Visions of Transnational Memory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 3 (2011): 2.

⁶ Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 2001), 25.

Djanet Sears (*Afrika Solo*, 1990)⁷ and M. NourbeSe Philip (*Looking for Livingstone*, 1991)⁸ mined the continent reflectively in order to explore how, though tainted by colonialism, it continued to be deeply imbricated in their own identities. Their works explored different subject positions in the way to identity-making and pointed out the colonial undergirdings of present-day epistemologies. Toward the new millennium, however, Africa receded from the high profile it had held for a while. It becomes only one more location in the larger cartography of the global African diaspora through the archival excavation of erased stories, as evidenced in Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), which narrate multiple journeys criss-crossing the Atlantic and repeated failed attempts at settlement rather than a single journey followed by permanent settlement in Canada.⁹ In addition to this shift, it has also become a tool to probe into the lack of diversity in Canadian cultural institutions to date, as Lisa Codrington does in *The Adventures of the African Girl in Her Search for God* (2017).¹⁰

This article proposes to look back onto the works produced around the turn of the twenty-first century to identify some of the decolonial practices they promoted. In the early 1980s, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o called for African writers to "decolonise the mind," contending that, while "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation [of colonial power,] language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" of neocolonialism.¹¹ Other decolonial theorists have insisted that coloniality (the rationale that some peoples are inferior to others) remains in place, and they have extended the frame of analysis beyond language, arguing that the idea of race "has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established,"¹² which explains how racialization continues to operate to date through the school to prison pipeline and the brutal policing of Black bodies. In Canada too, literary scholars have likewise challenged the marked Anglocentrism and universalizing drive in the study of literature. Thus, Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin's *Decolonising Fictions* brought their focus to bear on:

The cultures of countries that are officially independent yet suffer the continuing pressures of economic and psychological dependency, [sharing] a tension between an imposed or inherited language and culture, and an experienced place. When nominal independence was attained, the majority of the population felt they had no indigenous culture to fall back on, as most people in Africa, India and the South Pacific clearly did. The complex guilts

⁷ Djanet Sears, *Afrika Solo* (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1990).

⁸ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1991).

⁹ Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007).

¹⁰ Lisa Codrington, *Up the Garden Path and the Adventures of the African Girl in Her Search for God* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2017).

¹¹ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford: James Currey, 1981), 9.

¹² Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.3 (2000): 533.

associated with the violent tearing of the lands from their original inhabitants, and in the Caribbean with the experience of slavery, have generated divisive and unresolved tensions that distinguish the writing of Australia, Canada, and the British West Indies.¹³

These theoretical insights and their creative counterparts (two of which I will be discussing in the following) remain pivotal in decentering the colonial gaze that continues to cast Black people in the West as less than human, thus legitimating anti-Black hatred and violence.¹⁴ The Argentinian feminist anthropologist Rita Laura Segato offers a powerful insight into the ways that the current capitalist patriarchal system exerts what she calls “a pedagogy of cruelty,” by which she means all those practices and acts by which people are taught, trained, and hardened to the ongoing commodification of others. The continuous iteration of brutality, she argues, deprives us of empathy, which is in itself an essential condition for the predator practices of commodification to continue to be carried out with impunity.¹⁵ Nowhere is this pedagogy of cruelty more visible than in the brutality visited daily on Black persons in the West resulting from their condition as “noncitizens,” a situation that Christina Sharpe has defined as “living in the wake.”¹⁶ Anti-Black violence is rampant in all allegedly democratic countries, Canada itself being no exception, as we have reason to know from the Black Lives Matter–Toronto movement as well as by recent publications that vividly paint the larger picture of structural violence and anti-Black racism preeminent across Canada.¹⁷ Following Anthony Morgan’s insightful point that “when we don’t know or allow ourselves to be grounded and guided by our Black histories of resistance and struggle, we support anti-Black power structures in doing just this: changing to remain the same,”¹⁸ this article attempts to unpack the purpose and means deployed by two pioneer Black Canadian women writers, Djanet Sears and M. NourbeSe Philip, to decolonize African cultural memory from the diaspora as counter-pedagogies of cruelty, by teaching us to value African legacies outside of Eurocentric standards.¹⁹ Both authors appear to respond to Edouard Glissant’s appeal to Caribbean writers (and by extension, Black diasporan writers) to dig deep into a collective memory that has been wiped out and replaced with the single history imposed by the West that neglects African histories. He argued: “Because the Caribbean notion of time was fixed in the void of an imposed nonhistory, the writer must contribute to reconstituting its

¹³ Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1993), 13.

¹⁴ For more on the epistemological construction of Black subjects as less than human, see, among others, Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Rita Laura Segato, *Contra-pedagogías de la crueldad* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2018), 11–12.

¹⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ See, among others, Robin Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Rinaldo Walcott and Idil Abdillahi, *Blacklife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2019); Desmond Cole, *The Skin We’re in: A Year of Black Resistance and Power* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2020).

¹⁸ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays and Interviews* (Toronto: BookThug, 2017), 320.

¹⁹ For a concise account of Eurocentric stereotypes of Africa, see Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to Write about Africa,” *Granta* 92 (2005) (<https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>).

tormented chronology.”²⁰ Yet, I also contend that despite their common engagement from an African Canadian viewpoint with a colonized history via the African continent, Sears and Philip differ widely in how they approach such a reconstitution in their texts.

Djanet Sears’s Feminist Autbio-Mythography: *Afrika Solo* (1990)

Afrika Solo, the first published play by a Black Canadian woman, is a loosely fictionalized account of a year-long journey across Africa that Sears herself describes as an “autbio-mythography” in the style of Audre Lorde’s *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).²¹ Its earliest iteration was presented at the “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret” hosted by Nightwood Theatre Company in the spring of 1986; a staged reading followed early in 1987 within the Groundswell Festival run by Nightwood to generate new work by women. After further development, *Afrika Solo* was first performed at the Factory Theatre Studio Café in Toronto a few months later. It is a solo performance built around a character named Janet with the assistance of two other actors—one of them Black—who play several supporting characters and provide musical accompaniment. In combining music and narrative, Sears is following a traditional West African genre—the “Sundiata form”—although she could not afford to incorporate dance as the form properly requires.²² The play is preceded by a musical “incantation” and a short prologue in which the central figure prepares for her journey home and leaves a note for her lover, Ben. The setting moves then to the passenger terminal of Cotonou International Airport in Benin, where she awaits her flight. It is there that the play’s one act unfolds through a sequence of flashbacks narrating the reasons for embarking on the African journey, its several stages, and the character’s final decision to return to Canada. This kind of semi-autobiographical structure, according to Shelley Scott, is fairly typical of feminist theater insofar as it allows the playwright to chart her “struggle to define herself, and to represent this struggle and self onstage.”²³

Interestingly for the reconstitution of the fragmented chronology of African-descended memory mentioned previously, Janet’s African tour has a decidedly historical dimension besides the geographical one. The continent’s complex and diverse past is repeatedly examined in flashbacks of Janet’s visits to the Saharan

²⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 64–65.

²¹ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing Press, 1982).

²² The “sundiata” (in Sears’s spelling) or “sunjata” (a more usual spelling) is an oral epic form widely spread by West African griots’ storytelling. It tells of the life and achievements of the hero, Sunjata, allegedly the founder of the medieval Mali empire. For a full study of this epic form, see Gordon Innes, *Sunjata* (Routledge, 2004), and for a more recent assessment of the historical import of the form and its grounding in an African understanding of the world, see Jan Jansen, “Beyond the Mali Empire: A New Paradigm for the Sunjata Epic,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 51.2 (2018).

²³ Shelley Scott, *Nightwood Theatre: A Woman’s Work Is Always Done* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 214.

desert, Kenyan villages, Nigerian marketplaces, or monuments such as the Royal Palaces of Abomey in Benin.²⁴ These impart a certain didactic tone to the play, insofar as the goal of these sections is to replace stereotypical images with more complex and nuanced ones of the continent. The list of “interesting facts” in the play’s afterword, in which the author collects some of the information that originally influenced her to embark on her own journey, enhances the instructive value of the play and has been conducive to its being performed in high schools in the Toronto metropolitan area over the years. It encompasses very heterogeneous information: events such as the conquest of Egypt by queen Zenobia in CE 266, interesting facts such as the origin of European Black Madonnas on the pre-Christian worship of Isis or the work of Imhotep diagnosing and treating more than two hundred different diseases in ancient Egypt, and the Africanness of literary figures such as Aesop in ancient Greece, the Roman playwright Terence, the military Carthaginian leader Hannibal, or the writer Alexander Pushkin in nineteenth-century Russia. But collecting facts on African history is only part of the task Sears has set out to achieve; as she remarks, the play is intended to “whet [readers’] appetites.”²⁵ The afterword also extends an invitation to all people of African descent to visit Africa on the grounds that making that journey (or, if that is not possible, at the very least sharing Janet’s in the play) will have a therapeutic effect on those “like me [Sears], who have and are still suffering as a direct result of living or more so from being born and growing up in a systematically racist society.”²⁶ Indeed, Janet’s decision to cross the Atlantic is an indirect response to the racist slur thrown at her by her former childhood friend VD—“Why don’t you just go back to where you come from!”²⁷—compounded by the dislocations of a Black diasporic life. Born in England to a Guyanese father and a Jamaican mother whose own experiences of racism in the United Kingdom also occasionally surface in the narrative, after the family moves to Saskatchewan when Janet was in her teens, she owns four passports but wonders “where the hell am I from.”²⁸

Her African quest is thus an attempt to gain a sense of spiritual wholeness she feels she is lacking in spite of enjoying—at least theoretically—full citizenship rights in the Western world. In addition, this kind of healing is implicitly regarded as indispensable to all African diasporan persons to repair the rupture brought about by the Middle Passage. Her sojourn in Africa allows Janet to refashion herself as a new, more wholesome self that is built both on gained knowledge and on the acknowledgment of the complex history of origins and trajectories of African peoples as well as on a spiritual communion with African landscapes themselves. A case in point is Janet’s epiphanic exposure to the greatness of the Saharan desert, which drew her “into its womb like a lost

²⁴ This historical dimension is linked in the play to another popular sci-fi fiction TV show, *Dr. Who*, which relies not on space but on time travel.

²⁵ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 97.

²⁶ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 96.

²⁷ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 38.

²⁸ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 40.

child”²⁹ and generated her metaphorical rebirth as Djanet, a new spelling of her name³⁰—in obvious allusion to Audre Lorde’s book—after the Algerian oasis town meaning “paradise” in Arabic. Djanet is also the town closest to the Tassili plateau where remarkable petroglyphs depicting beings wearing helmets and space suits—another neat addition to an overall sci-fi thread of allusions running through this play that will be described in the following—were listed as a UNESCO heritage site in the 1980s. This location becomes yet another link to an African past much more ancient than many Western civilizations can lay claim to, and one more stepping stone on Djanet’s road to spiritual regeneration, as she explains in her afterword: “Finding out about my history and learning about the stories of my ancestors were like finding myself standing on a path that extended far behind me, a path that also allowed me to see several, once invisible, roads that lay ahead.”³¹

The spiritual transformation encoded in the name change—“I changed my being and spirit this way”³²—is matched by a physical one that unfolds throughout the performance. On several occasions, Djanet retrieves from her cloth bag pieces of clothing to change her appearance:

By adding to her costume throughout the play, and by rehearsing and altering her identity and character, Djanet’s performative presence refuses capture and containment by any one of the signifying codes through which she is constructed—in favour of the totality—while highlighting the importance of the female body in its changing context.³³

This process of rehearsing and discarding alternative identities comes to a head in the final scene, when, according to the stage directions, Djanet adds to her Western outfit of t-shirt and jeans “a brilliantly embroidered West African Boubou.... Djanet unknits [the now empty cloth bag] revealing the original length of west African fabric. She wraps the fabric around her head.”³⁴ As she walks toward the departure gate to catch her flight home, Djanet smiles, a gesture that, together with her wardrobe change, powerfully suggests that her quest for healing has successfully been completed. Interestingly, this transfiguration has taken place within the physical limits of the airport terminal, although imaginatively transformed into a succession of many different African locales for a few minutes at a time in each of the performative flashbacks that comprise the

²⁹ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 46.

³⁰ From this point forward, I will be using the regular spelling “Janet” for the older self and “Djanet” for the new although, due to the performative nature of the play, the borders between one and the other may be hard to discern on occasion. Furthermore, to prevent confusions deriving from the play’s autobiographical content, I will be referring to the author by surname “Sears” when discussing her role as playwright and as “Janet” or “Djanet” for the character.

³¹ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 101. It should be noted that British-born Sears cannot claim a direct genealogy to any of these locations, her parentage being Caribbean.

³² Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 155.

³³ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 249.

³⁴ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 93.

narrative. The choice of the airport as the play's setting and general backdrop for the entire quest might be questionable, given an airport has been defined as a "nonplace" by spatial theorist Marc Augé, that is, one of those spaces of "circulation, consumption, and communication"³⁵ brought about by supermodernity and emblematic of globalization, which resist all relational or historical links and are unconcerned with identity except in allowing travelers passage. The airport is, then, a place without memories. It might be at first sight paradoxical that a play so deeply concerned with identity-building should have such a setting, but it is precisely the airport's absence of bonds to any particular locale and its firm anchoring in the present, in the here and now, that strengthens its capacity to be performed and lends itself to the kind of ongoing transformations the playwright had envisioned. As a result, the airport terminal becomes a threshold, a womb from which a new, healed Djanet can emerge in her new costume and with new qualities of resilience and fortitude. In order to make visible for readers of the published play this performative aspect they would otherwise be missing out on, the book's graphic design features at the top of each page a pattern vaguely identified as "African" and meaning "the restless wandering search, 'changing one's self, playing many roles.'"³⁶ In addition, interspersed pictures of the original performance chronicle the phases of Djanet's transformation.

Nevertheless, Djanet's act of Black self-invention does not only result from a new name and a syncretic costume. It comes through most strongly in the play's Black Atlantic music, which fuses Guyanese calypso, West African rhythms and genres, Jamaican reggae, TV jingles and series scores, and popular pop songs by Black singers, from Nina Simone to The Jackson 5. All of them fit together inside the physical space of the airport—of which we are reminded periodically through airport announcements—as yet another set of diasporic cultural signs in permanent circulation. Fittingly, it is through the medium of music that the central figure gets to finally solve the conundrum of where home is during a visit with the Bambuti people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who are extremely proficient in singing. Wanting to offer them "a song that rang with the true essence of Canadiana," Djanet starts to sing the Canadian anthem, but seeing that they were not enjoying it much, she decides to intone it "like an intense soulful gospel ballad."³⁷ Healing the wound that originally resulted from internalized racism, Djanet can then define herself as "the African heartbeat in a Canadian song. African Canadian."³⁸ The insertion of a diasporic element in the Canadian national anthem critiques both the notions of home and nation as essentially moored and is yet another form, of many throughout the play, of celebrating a positionality and hybridity characteristic of a pervasive (and not wholly unproblematic) multicultural atmosphere in Canada at the time.³⁹

³⁵ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso Books, 2008 [1992]), viii.

³⁶ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, interleaf. The exact African source or origin of the pattern is not mentioned.

³⁷ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 86–87.

³⁸ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 88.

³⁹ Jacqueline Petropoulos has perceptively discussed the sociopolitical context of the play in "Performing African Canadian Identity: Diasporic Reinvention in *Afrika Solo*," *Feminist Review* 84 (2006): 104–23.

Finally, it is important to address the play in the context of an African ethnic return, that is, the permanent return to an ancestral land of diasporan people separated from it by several generations.⁴⁰ Djanet's decision that Canada is indeed her home resists the powerful appeal of a diasporic homecoming in Africa, which in the play is suggested through a romantic plot. Janet's sense of homecoming increases during her sojourn as she heads toward the West African coast and becomes aware of physical similarities between the locals and her own family. She spots people who resemble members of her family, neighbors, friends. A woman in a marketplace in Benin welcomes her as a returnee. Janet is disturbed by the sense of familiarity in her surroundings: "It all felt so familiar, yet, at the same time, so unfamiliar. I mean, I was home, but I didn't know anyone or anything here. Somewhere in the last 450 years I'd lost a major connection with this place."⁴¹ Janet's original longing for a successful homemaking would appear to be realized when she falls in love with an African man, Benoit Viton Akonde, as the romantic union of African and African diasporan would symbolically bridge the rift between both identities and seal the passage back through the Door of No Return. Ben is Janet's opposite by virtue of his African birth and lineage, for he can claim the kind of unbroken connection to the place that she thirsts for. Moreover, they bond over their common experiences of racism in Western societies—he lived in France for ten years—and their shared love of popular culture. He also appeals to her childhood fantasy of being an African princess because the character claims that his great-grandfather was the last king of Abomey; in all those ways Ben complements Janet; he is indeed the "African prince" she had fantasized about.⁴² Yet, Sears resists the strong compulsion that lies at the heart of Black diasporan imaginings of the lost homeland to idealize Africa and Africans and to cast Ben as the (African) Prince Charming. When they visit the royal palace of Abomey, Janet is aware not just of its History with a capital "H" but also of its underground links to slavery, as the building contains a large holding area for the enslaved that wait to be sold to Europeans. She muses that "400 years ago I, the descendant of slaves, may have stood here myself. And you, the descendant of African kings, standing right behind me, would have been selling me to the white man to save your own life."⁴³ In leaving Ben behind and returning to Canada, Djanet rejects a romantic and erotic union that would metaphorically repair the rift between Africa and its diaspora and also allow her to successfully complete her own homecoming. At the same time, in making that decision and in stubbornly refusing to answer Ben's repeated calls

⁴⁰ Takeyuki Tsuda, ed., *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009), 1.

⁴¹ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 67. Esi Edugyan has recorded similar thoughts on the familiarity of the unfamiliar during her 2007 visit to her parents' ancestral home in Ghana, described as a place "where everything is at once both strange and familiar," *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press and Canadian Literature Centre, 2014), 25. Looking at her host in Accra, she finds herself searching for her own features in his, and feels her brother and sister doing the same. Despite being warmly welcomed by their relatives, however, Edugyan concludes that they did not belong.

⁴² Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 75.

⁴³ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 77.

while she is at the airport, Djanet also proves to have overcome a crippling nostalgia for lost origins and is strongly determined to renew her commitment to homemaking in the diaspora.

Last but not least, the published play invokes fairly different cultural contexts in three epigraphs. The first is excerpted from Malcolm X, asserting that Black people have learned to hate Africa and thus have ended up hating themselves, for “you can’t hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree.”⁴⁴ The second is an old African American spiritual expressing the longing to fly home; and the third, in a completely different tone, is taken from the popular TV show *Star Trek*: “Beam me up, Scotty” (Captain James T. Kirk). Put together, they suggest that the narrative unfolding in the play is both a journey of discovery—finding factual answers to the question of what Africa is, what its history, geography, and diverse peoples are like—and a journey of regeneration and healing—giving subjective answers to the question of where home is and how the character fits in there. Very importantly, the first aspect is suggested through the opening citation from *Star Trek* and sustained in an early scene, when the familiar theme of the show blares from a public pay TV in the terminal and an enthusiastic Janet, self-identified as a TV addict, adapts the crew’s mission—to explore new lands and civilizations—to her own situation: “L’espace, la frontier finale. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise, in French West Africa.”⁴⁵ In fact, *Star Trek* constitutes an interesting lens through which to view Janet’s African tour, for the show pioneered a very diverse cast to match the non-interventionist mandate of making peaceful contact with other peoples. Obituaries on recently deceased actress Michelle Nicholls, who played Lieutenant Uhura, underlined her role modeling for younger generations and emphasized how her scene of interracial love with William Shatner (playing Captain Kirk), the first to be shown on TV prime time, broke new ground at the time. Such strong commitment to diversity and equal rights establishes a strong contrast with the history of the exploration, colonization, and exploitation of the African continent by European nations for centuries. In stark opposition to *Star Trek* stands another popular TV show that features prominently in the play *Tarzan*, which Janet critiques for its stereotypical portrayal of white supremacy (embodied in Tarzan himself), for its patriarchal norms (conveyed through Jane, who needs to be protected and rescued in each episode), and most of all for its rampant racism, as the African characters “are all either slaves, servants, or man-eating, savage tribesmen.”⁴⁶ Janet’s own journey into the heart of Africa is thus discursively presented as counter-hegemonic. It talks back to Conrad’s canonical text—*Heart of Darkness*⁴⁷—as well as to the history of Western “discovery” of Africa embodied in the popular imagination by programs like *Tarzan* or by historical figures such as the British explorer David Livingstone,

⁴⁴ Sears, *Afrika Solo*.

⁴⁵ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 22.

⁴⁶ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 30.

⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 1899.

whose own Zulu-led trip to Victoria Falls is sarcastically alluded to: “You know, nothing exists until a white man finds it!”⁴⁸ Sears thus revisits the most bitter and entrenched representations of Africa, what King-Aribisala describes as “an Africa that could only be made civilized by Tarzan and Dr. Livingstone of ‘I presume’ fame; an Africa that could only be ‘tamed’ by fictional and nonfictional white men.”⁴⁹

Through these intertextual links, *Afrika Solo* provides a wide-ranging, engaging account of a Black diasporan woman’s identity-building negotiations that, though temporarily charmed by the notion of a fixed, essentialized self, are resolved in favor of a multiply situated, diasporan subjectivity. Thus, while the account itself rehearses many of the central points of an ethnic return, it fails to materialize eventually. Yet, in its complex performative rendering of the homecoming drive and the associated memory work that characterizes Black diasporan writing, Sears’s play attests to the emotional depth that is inherent in the encounter between Africans and diasporan subjects. As Lekan Balogun has argued, “Any meaningful analysis of Sears’s dramaturgy must center the African consciousness that holds the geographies of her life together, and has determined the significant aspect of her outlook, experiences of racism, history of trauma, and the cultural resilience from Africa that maintains itself and is a source of inspiration for her.”⁵⁰ Indeed, *Afrika Solo* further references the persisting significance and testimonial value of the African continent not only as a memory-holder of a heartrending experience of loss, but also as a signpost of resilience and as (perhaps naively) a symbol of the hope for healing.

M. Nourbese Philip’s Feminist Decolonizing Project in *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991)

Written approximately around the same time as *Afrika Solo* and published shortly afterward by another Black Canadian woman of Caribbean ancestry,⁵¹ Marlene Nourbese Philip’s *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991) provides a further critical response to the mythology surrounding the Africa continent, most particularly the one shaped by Eurocentric discourses. Like Sears’s, Philip’s text is a fictional first-person travel account charting a Black woman’s quest for wholeness, that is to say, both are examples of Black women-centered writing in the wake of Audre Lorde’s (auto)bio-mythography. Unlike the play, which is loosely autobiographical and therefore firmly grounded in a confessional form that invokes an implicit assumption of truth-telling, Philip chooses a more experimental mode that makes the text, like others by the same author, hard

⁴⁸ Sears, *Afrika Solo*, 53.

⁴⁹ Karen King-Aribisala, “What Is Africa to Me Now? The Sweet, the Bitter ...” *Research in African Literatures* 46.4 (2015): 15. See also Wainana’s 2005 essay mentioned previously.

⁵⁰ Lekan Balogun, “Mythological Recuperation and Performance as Agency for Genealogical Return in Djanet Sears’s *Afrika Solo*” *Genealogy* 2.14 (2018): 13 (doi:10.3390/genealogy2020014).

⁵¹ The genesis of *Looking for Livingstone* can be traced back to a poem written in early 1987. See M. Nourbese Philip, *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Stratford: The Mercury Press, 1997), 114.

to classify. Some critics consider it a novel, following the designation in the book's blurb,⁵² while for others it is a narrative in poetry and prose⁵³ or a book of (epic) poetry.⁵⁴ Yet others settle for the more general term *book* or *volume*⁵⁵ or even elude the discussion altogether and refer to it by title only.⁵⁶

From my viewpoint, the textual organization of the central figure's travel account into journal entries fits well into the generic tradition of the travelogue, which is flexible enough to embrace prose and poetry, loose thoughts, diagrams, maps, dreams and sketches, and indeed any disparate vehicle for the subject's reflections on self and other(s) during a journey.⁵⁷ This is also, by the way, very much the form adopted ten years later by Dionne Brand's memoir in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001). This is not, however, a neutral genre, but one deeply embedded in a history of imperial exploration and subjugation: "European travel writing, a corpus spanning several centuries, has been hugely influential in producing and circulating knowledge about the rest of the world and fuelling aspirations for expansion and conquest."⁵⁸ As a matter of fact, Livingstone himself, like many other explorers, kept travel journals that were later turned into successful bestselling travel narratives that earned him substantial funds and fame,⁵⁹ so Philip's appropriation of the form is particularly fitting for her feminist decolonizing project.

The book's title itself invokes and redefines a number of personalities and texts central to European history and culture. The term *odyssey* in the subtitle

⁵² Critics who name it a novel include Kirstie McAlpine, "Narratives of Silence: Marlene Nourbese Philip and Joy Kogawa." *The Guises of Canadian Diversity: New European Perspectives*, ed. Serge Jaumain and Marc Maufort (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 133–42; Dawn Thompson, *Writing a Politics of Perception: Memory, Holography, and Women Writers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Isabel Alonso Breto, "Postmodernidad y Revelación de la Historia en *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, de Marlene Nourbese Philip," *Tonos* 12 (2006): 1–22; and Curdella Forbes, "Marlene Nourbese Philip," *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2011), 74–88.

⁵³ Such is the description used by Isabel Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women Writers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁵⁴ For examples of this approach, see Dorothy Jones, "Writing the Silence: Fiction and Poetry of Marlene Nourbese Philip," *Kunapipi* 26.1 (2004): 196–206, and Lori Martindale, "Can Nature's Language be Written, Spoken, and Heard? Mahasweta Devi's 'Pterodactyl' and Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 7.2 (2007).

⁵⁵ See Paul Huebener, *Timing Canada: The Shifting Politics of Time in Canadian Literary Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

⁵⁶ Such is the case in Adetayo Alabi, "Recover, Not Discover: Africa in Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*," *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, ed. Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali A. Mazrui (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 332–43.

⁵⁷ Philip had used journal entries and letters in her essays from early on, so she was well acquainted with the multiple uses of the form; examples dating from as early as 1987 can be found in her collection *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture 1984–1992* (Stratford: The Mercury Press, 1992).

⁵⁸ Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst, eds., *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1.

⁵⁹ Tim Youngs, "Africa/The Congo: The Politics of Darkness," *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 160–62.

casts Philip's unnamed protagonist—succinctly known as “The Traveller” in the “Author’s Note” after the main text—as a modern-day Ulysses looking to return to her home but whose arrival is deferred by substantial obstacles in the course of those travels. At the same time, the notion of “home” is problematic, insofar as she appears to be looking for a person and not a place. Her destination—which positions her alongside Henry Stanley—is no other than Doctor Livingstone, the famous late-nineteenth-century explorer of the African continent and alleged “discoverer” of Victoria Falls, a position of authority and power that the book challenges from its very first page. Instead, Philip’s book adopts a postcolonial critique of travel writing in its connection to imperialism, along the lines of Mary Louise Pratt’s:

As a rule the “discovery” of sites like Lake Tanganyika involved making one’s way to the region and asking the local inhabitants if they knew of any big lakes, etc. in the area, then hiring them to take you there, where-upon with their guidance and support, you proceeded to discover what they already knew.

Crudely, then, discovery in this context consisted of a gesture of converting local knowledges (discourses) into European national and continental knowledges associated with European forms and relations of power.⁶⁰

Looking for Livingstone dislodges the explorer from his central position in (European) history and recovers those local knowledges that were made use of and then cloaked under the Western gaze, dominated by the account of Livingstone’s “feat” summarized in his famous statement “I will open a way to the interior or perish.” Livingstone’s declaration of tenacity is dismantled in Philip’s text by The Traveller, who puts it to new use in describing her own stubborn will to complete her journey, a strategic revision that Thompson describes as “a process of repetition and displacement.”⁶¹ Additionally, the phrase “the interior” bears strong echoes for modern-day readers of the canonical literary telling of the exploration of Africa, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which was instrumental in rendering for the West an Africa that is the cannibal-infested savage land Sears also refers to in *Afrika Solo*.⁶² Philip’s counterhegemonic intent to “write back” to the heart of imperial discourses on Africa is unmistakable due to the identification of The Traveller with those subjugated and silenced by the imperial enterprise. Such identification is not made aprioristically for, as Thompson explains, “the unnamed protagonist makes no explicit effort to mark herself by gender, race, or sexuality—these are revealed in process,”⁶³ through a complex textual system of contrasting hierarchies.

⁶⁰ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁶¹ Thompson, *Writing a Politics of Perception*, 69.

⁶² Conrad’s novel was in turn based on journals he wrote during his six-month sojourn in the Congo in 1890.

⁶³ Thompson, *Writing a Politics of Perception*, 78.

Consequently, The Traveller is positioned as Livingstone's antagonist, both looking for him and struggling against him as she embarks on a journey that takes her through many lands and puts her in contact with different peoples. In each of these locations, her task is to uncover the local knowledge and thus to unravel the meanings imposed by imperialist discourses. Where Livingstone used local guides and traveled in relative comfort, surrounded by the artifacts of a European lifestyle and maintaining a semblance of the order of his home society, The Traveller carries very little besides the most primitive and unreadable of maps, and chooses to live according to the rules set by the host societies she visits. In anthropological terms, she stands for the emic approach that examines a culture from within, while Livingstone represents the etic, subjecting the target culture to external—supposedly objective but actually Eurocentric—parameters.⁶⁴ The change of perspective The Traveller brings to what is surely one of the most important events in the European history of Africa turns those representations upside down. The resulting new picture of the African interior, as drawn by The Traveller, can be defined as an auto-ethnographic one. By "autoethnography," following Pratt again, I understand an instance in which "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's terms."⁶⁵ Very significantly, The Traveller speaks from the center, condemning the Western history of the discovery and exploration of Africa to the periphery of the telling.⁶⁶

Looking for Livingstone, like *Afrika Solo*, traces the psychological and physical transformation of its central figure through contact with other cultures, although those in Philip's text are not clearly identifiable with any actual ones. To her purposes, it does not matter who they are, where exactly or how they live; their sociohistorical specificities (and in this Philip widely departs from Sears) are dispensable because what matters to the author is solely their common positionality of difference from and subordination to European power. This is a reductive approach: Sears's text works through adding threads from the diverse African cultures and peoples that she encounters to the Western chronology, whereas Philip's overgeneralizes African cultures and reduces them all to the encounter with the colonizer. Another strong connection between both quests is the didactic turn because The Traveller's physical journey is also a quest for knowledge about herself and others. In each of the fictional villages she visits, she goes through an initiation rite that condenses an important lesson both about the target culture and about herself that she is meant to learn. But before reaching that point, she must first live *with* them and *like* them for a long period, whether this involves working the land from sunrise to sunset with the LENSECI or transcribing esoteric script for the SCENILE'S library. In all cases, The Traveller needs to assimilate the knowledge the local people have to impart in order to undo the imperialist imposition of silence over their cultures, as suggested by

⁶⁴ Yet, this too might be a reductionist opposition. On this subject, see Joanna Lewis, *Empire of Sentiment: The Death of Livingstone and the Myth of Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶⁵ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Writing a Politics of Perception*, 78.

the fictional names of these peoples, all of them anagrams of the word *silence*. Every time she successfully completes an initiation rite, The Traveller is joyfully welcomed into the community as one of its members. By getting to know them and actually *becoming* one of them, The Traveller is increasingly imbued in the meanings conferred on colonized Africa, so much so that one might say that, at the end of the day, in a total reversal of Livingstone's voyage of exploration, it is her personification of "the interior" that paradoxically opens a way to travel back to the European explorer.

A preoccupation with language runs through Philip's travelogue. The Traveller often admits to her inability to decode the linguistic systems of the fictional peoples she encounters, such as the map gifted her by the LENSECI, or the esoteric writings of the SCENILE early on. Later, she faces new challenges among the CESLIENS, a people who refuse to speak yet can communicate fluently because "nothing in nature is silent."⁶⁷ The CLEENIS understand well the power of words, whereas the NEECLIS are proficient in weaving words and silences together. Therefore, understanding the nature of silence and learning to accept it and use it for her own designs is a major lesson in The Traveller's quest, for it conveys a knowledge of how many African languages have been suppressed and replaced by European ones. On the opening page of *Looking for Livingstone* Philip reports how "the falls of Mosioatumua—the smoke that thunders—[was] renamed [by the explorer] Victoria Falls."⁶⁸ The colonial practice of renaming effectively silenced their communities, but in learning this lesson The Traveller also performs Philip's "unexpected deconstructive move ... to refuse the dominant definition of this silence as negativity."⁶⁹ In fact, silence is poetically pronounced as "volume and quantity/theorems/of silence/the measurable properties/in the stretch/—leagues miles fathoms/of silence/arcane/out/along its length/across/the infinite of its breadth."⁷⁰ It is infinite, sacred, and secret. Within the system of binary oppositions Philip has built, it stands on the side of the disempowered, but in the politics of decolonization she envisions, it can be used for (re)empowerment. As Hoving argues, "Philip works hard to make silence 'a language of its own' and to delineate a vital non-colonial, Black, gendered counterdiscourse."⁷¹ Silence exposes the fallacy of the imperialist assumptions about the oppressed as well as their failure to engage with another culture without subjugating it or destroying it: "Wasn't that what Livingstone had done? And Prince Henry the Navigator. And Columbus. And Cartier. And all those other explorers. Discover and possess—one and the same thing. And destroy."⁷² Once more, Philip uncovers a pedagogy of cruelty enforced by imperialism that her text aims to dismantle.

⁶⁷ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 35.

⁶⁸ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 7. (Re)naming is equally important for Sears, as described previously.

⁶⁹ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers*, 275.

⁷⁰ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 23.

⁷¹ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers*, 273.

⁷² Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 15.

Colonized and colonizer are locked into a binary opposition that is also one of interdependency.⁷³ While the African peoples and The Traveller are emblems of (African) silence (or rather, of Africans being silenced), Livingstone becomes associated with the (European) word: “Word/and Silence/balance in contradiction/Silence and Word/harmony of opposites/double planets/condemned/together.”⁷⁴ A third notable binary in Philip’s complex construction of meaning is female/male. Thus, for example, another section incorporates the perspective of the Scottish explorer’s wife, Mary, who in a disgruntled letter voices her jealousy over what she perceives as an adulterous affair between her husband and the continent he is “penetrating.”⁷⁵ Here the domestic periphery Mary Livingstone is relegated to exposes yet another hierarchy of power at the very heart of the European center. Moreover, Hoving has noted how the most meaningful spaces in The Traveller’s journey (the magic circle, the sweat lodge, the weaving room where the rite is performed) function as metaphorical wombs because they are circular and enclosed. For this critic, the womb, “the maternal space, offers the possibility of a mode of otherness.”⁷⁶ This claim is also consistent with the fact that the ritual is usually performed under the auspices of a female figure, a woman with cultural authority, as well as with the recurrent images of birth, connoting transformation and (re)generation. Consequently, The Traveller is continually associated to spaces within, most often feminized ones like the womb, and thus susceptible to penetration, triggering numerous and often sexual associations in the book, particularly in the sequence of dreams in which the penetration of the interior of Dr Livingstone’s celebrated dictum is acted out in the two characters’ actual copulation, where the explorer’s control of the means of representation becomes his “turgid phallused word” that slips “in and out of the wet moist spaces of my silence.”⁷⁷

Consequently, *Looking for Livingstone* establishes a provocative dialogue with metropolitan discourses and representations of Africa. Revealingly, two of the most vital institutions controlling those representations, the museum and the library, also feature in the travelogue. The Traveller’s learning curve reaches its peak at the Museum of Silence, where she confronts the knowledge-producing practices of the West. The museum, like travel writing, is deeply enmeshed in the history of empire and partakes of imperialist epistemologies. Its core function is to collect, study, and represent the Other through the display of “exotic” objects. In its deep connection to nineteenth-century imperial history, the museum became a colonial repository in which the polyvocality of the meeting of cultures was replaced by one authorized voice, one “objective” account. In fact, one might

⁷³ The relation colonizer/colonized has occupied postcolonial theorists since its inception; see, among others, Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1967); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972); and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

⁷⁴ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 34.

⁷⁵ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 29.

⁷⁶ Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers*, 305.

⁷⁷ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 26 and 25, respectively.

apply Edward Said's definition of Orientalism to knowledge about Africa with only minimal modifications:

Under the general heading of knowledge of [Africa], and within the umbrella of western hegemony over [Africa] during the period from [the nineteenth century], there emerged a complex [Africa] suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about [hu]mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character. Additionally, the imaginative examination of things [African] was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an [African] world emerged then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.⁷⁸

Postcolonial theory since the publication of Said's groundbreaking study in 1978 has permeated fields such as anthropology and museology, triggering a long process of self-reflectiveness and decolonization nudged on by critical voices outraged at the persistence of Eurocentric paradigms, among them Philip's. The writer intervened in the confrontation between the Black Canadian community and the Royal Ontario Museum over the display "Into the Heart of Africa" in 1989, which she scathingly renamed "Cutting Out the Heart of Africa" in one of the essays later collected in *Frontiers*.⁷⁹ Museum decolonization of the kind Philip demanded from the ROM involves a number of related practices: acknowledging the historical conditions under which some of the collections were acquired (colonial rule, war, conquest), assessing the Eurocentric assumptions undergirding museum discourses and practices, and transforming it into a space committed to presenting multiple perspectives. Unless those requirements are met, the museum will remain "a significant site of [Africans'] racial oppression."⁸⁰ At the time, Philip was very outspoken about the need for the ROM to devolve what she called "the booty of soldiers and spiritual 'exotica' collected by missionaries"⁸¹ to the African (Canadian) community and to offer to store them on their behalf. This is the same position adopted by The Traveller at the Museum of Silence; she is furious to find that it houses many different "silences" taken away from their rightful owners, so she confronts the museum's proprietors, demanding their immediate return: "It had been theft originally, I continued, now it was nothing but 'intimidation! Plain and simple—extortion to continue to hold the entire store of our silence

⁷⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 7–8.

⁷⁹ Philip, *Frontiers*, 108. Philip's antiracist activism over the years has come at a cost, as Linda M. Morra discusses at length in *Unarrested Archives: Case Studies in Twentieth-Century Canadian Women's Authorship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

⁸⁰ Philip, *Frontiers*, 104.

⁸¹ Philip, *Frontiers*, 104.

ransom, demand we pay for it, and give assurances we could care for it' as they had."⁸² But the owners remain unmoved; they feel they are best prepared to guard and preserve 'culture.' It is obvious that the Museum of Silence is predicated on colonial assumptions by which a foreign culture is mined for objects that are assigned stable, 'objective' meaning—"labelled, annotated, dated, catalogued"⁸³—without any regard for the source communities. In gathering artifacts from all known cultures, it aims to perform the ultimate goal of universalism. The Traveller finds, then, that the fluid cultures she has become a member of in the course of her journey have solidified into a structure, an edifice containing everything in display cases, "behind plexiglass."⁸⁴ She continues to remonstrate, arguing that "remove a thing—a person—from its source ... and it will lose meaning."⁸⁵ Philip is advocating here a renunciation of universalism and an admission of the relational, experiential, affective, and performative quality of culture that resists attempts to "fix" it in place.

Although eventually The Traveller must admit defeat and leaves the Museum of Silence in frustration, her fictional call for a new ethics has been taken up in the intervening decades of museum practice.⁸⁶ For Janet Marstine, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical anthropology have had a major impact on current museum practices due to their strong joint demand to reassess the politics of representation. A new contemporary museum ethics, she claims, is sensitive and accountable to all stakeholders, which "opens up possibilities for systemic transformation—towards social responsibility, radical transparency and shared guardianship of heritage."⁸⁷ Radical transparency, for example, is predicated on a feminist politics of positionality that reveals the theoretical approach it stems from instead of hiding it under a patriarchal voice of authority—like the labels and catalogs of the Museum of Silence—while a shared guardianship of heritage both acknowledges the claims of the source communities and

⁸² Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 57.

⁸³ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 57.

⁸⁴ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 58.

⁸⁵ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 58.

⁸⁶ For instance, the Royal Ontario Museum opened a permanent gallery on Egypt and Nubia very soon after the controversy over "Into the Heart of Africa." The issue, however, goes much further. Ferraz de Matos and Sansone aptly point out that already in 1970 the UNESCO convention against illicit export passed a resolution for repatriation of artefacts pillaged, stolen, or abusively gathered. These debates, regularly promoted by colonized communities in several countries, have been rekindled by the Black Lives Matter movement, when demonstrations tore down monuments to figures closely connected to the slave trade and a long history of European exploitation of other peoples, which in turned forced us all to think anew about "the place of colonialism as regards architectural, historical, cultural and museum heritage"; Patrícia Ferraz de Matos and Livio Sansone, "Introduction: Decolonisation Matters," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 30.2 (2021): 81. For a more detailed discussion of legal and ethical questions surrounding restitution, see Alexander Herman's *Restitution: The Return of Cultural Artefacts* (Chicago, IL: Lund Humphries, 2021), particularly chapter 3 on museums and imperial violence.

⁸⁷ Janet Marstine, "The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics," *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*, ed. Janet Marstine (London: Routledge, 2011), 10.

eschews a politics of ownership by accepting that culture is continually evolving for and with the community.⁸⁸

The Traveller leaves the Museum of Silence with a curse and the promise that “I would remember—never forget how they had gorged themselves, grew fat over the centuries on our silence.”⁸⁹ This highlights the relation of power and knowledge, and how European epistemologies and the circulation of knowledge are predicated on African absences and suggests the crucial role that the museum plays in them as well because, to this day, “museums continue to be perceived as a trusted source of knowledge.”⁹⁰ The same applies to libraries, which Philip also incorporates in her creative analysis of cultural imperialism in this rich book. The Traveller’s quest is followed by an author’s note following the convention of the “found” manuscript and addressing the book’s physicality. It appears to consist of 210 pages of parchment collected in two leather-bound volumes whose covers bear the gold-embossed words “Diary of a Traveller.” Volume 2 contains three Polaroids: one of Livingstone, another of the meeting with The Traveller, and the third is “entirely black, rendering nothing visible,”⁹¹ another instance of the invisibility and silencing of Africa under colonialism. Together with the narrative, annotations, and maps, however, there are several paratextual materials that appear to have been added by another hand, above all a typed anthropological description of the peoples visited by The Traveller. The author’s note also registers two disputing claims: The Traveller’s is that the two volumes are a facsimile of the original, given to the CESLIENS for safekeeping because they were the only ones to remain free from colonization, whereas the Bodleian Library’s chief librarian claims that theirs is the only original copy. As a result, at a more general level too, readers can perceive the quest narrative—and *Looking for Livingstone* as a work of art—literally as part of two disparate worlds, Europe and Africa, as The Traveller’s volumes have one foot inside Western knowledge (as they are physically housed in the Bodleian Library) and the other in the heart of Africa (the original buried by the CESLIENS).

This is Philip’s parting shot at an academic world that is deeply imbricated in the construction of the systems of inclusions and exclusions at the core of imperial discourses. The library is an embodiment of the archive, both in the Foucauldian sense—the system that governs discourses within a certain culture and unifies and regulates them⁹²—and at a more practical level as an institution that, like the museum, records and preserves what has been granted cultural value and is thus to be saved and kept in circulation for future generations. Ideas and practices of archival science “had evolved to provide essential bureaucratic support and legitimacy for emergent nation states, colonial administrations, mercantile and evangelical endeavors, and even war efforts around the world.”⁹³ The Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford is one of the oldest research libraries in Europe

⁸⁸ Marstine, “The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics,” 3–21.

⁸⁹ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*, 58.

⁹⁰ Marstine, “The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics,” 14.

⁹¹ Philip, *Looking for Livingstone*.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 128–31.

⁹³ Kelvin L. White and Anne J. Gilliland, “Promoting Reflexivity and Inclusivity in Archival Education, Research, and Practice,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 80.3 (2010): 235.

as well as one of only five patent libraries in the United Kingdom. Serving the interests of its national and imperial administration, since the seventeenth century it has received one copy of each book published in the country. Like the museum, it is predicated on universalism, and its chief librarian constitutes one of the principal guardians of (Western) knowledge. A (presumably) white male situated at the very center of the imperial metropolis, he stands in counterpoint to The Traveller as a representative of situated knowledge, and through her in strong contrast to each and all of the indigenous women who passed their wisdom on to her. Interestingly, the added value placed on those other fictional counter-archives is in keeping with the author's own practice in creating what Morra calls a "minor archive," that is, "an alternative space, a private cache deliberately withheld from formal institutions, by which to critique the existing national arrangements of archives and to expand her engagement with others beyond national borders."⁹⁴ This is yet further evidence of Philip's distrust of established cultural institutions for the role they have traditionally played in the erasure of African cultures and for their continual exclusion of the achievements of Black diasporan subjects in North America. The museum and the library constitute major agents of memorialization, which turns them into key instruments of knowledge and meaning-making *about* the past but also *for* the future, which means they are agents in the construction of (a Black) cultural memory. Philip's focalization on both institutions at the very end of the book, and particularly her insistence on not forgetting the acts of (mis)appropriation displayed in the Museum of Silence, compels us to become more fully aware and critical of current practices of memorialization in order to demand more self-reflexive, inclusive agendas, filling the gaping holes left by colonial history.⁹⁵

To conclude, Philip's and Sears's texts converge in their revisionist goals to decolonize African and African diasporan cultural memory as counter-pedagogies of cruelty. As Simon Gikandi has argued, "For people of African and Asian descent, the central categories of European modernity—history, national language, subjectivity—have value only when they are fertilized by figures of the 'other' imagination which colonialism has sought to repress."⁹⁶ Although both texts attest to the need of their authors to "contest the meaning and method of colonial modernism,"⁹⁷ they stand far apart as regards their means. As discussed previously, Sears's dramaturgy incorporates West African motifs and music together with Western popular culture references, working through the addition of real peoples, cultures, and events that Sears experienced firsthand onto an already existing Western timeline and archive that had excluded them.⁹⁸ In addition,

⁹⁴ Morra, *Unarrested Archives*, 6.

⁹⁵ The need to keep a counter-memory also surfaces in Lawrence Hill's *Some Great Thing*, where the character Ben Grafton acts as an amateur historian, keeping a counter-archive with all the bits of Black Canadian life excluded from public record. On this subject, see Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, "The Racialization of Canadian History: African Canadian Fiction, 1990–2005," *National Plots: Interrogation, Revision, and Re-Inscription in Canadian Historical Fiction, 1832–2005*, ed. Andrea Cabajsky and Brett Josef Grubisic (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 188–213.

⁹⁶ Simon Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 11.

⁹⁷ Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo*, 15.

⁹⁸ See Balogun, "Mythological Recuperation and Performance as Agency for Genealogical Return in Djanet Sears's *Afrika Solo*," for an analysis of how *Afrika Solo* aesthetics draw from Yoruba myth.

throughout her career Sears has played a major role in the promotion of Black theater and arts in Canada as a highly respected director, founding member of Obsidian Theatre Company and AfriCanadian Writing Festival, and editor of a two-volume collection of Black Canadian plays.⁹⁹ These facts of Sears's later life are consistent with the author's note in *Afrika Solo*'s implicit acceptance of the assumptions of Western history and with its appeal to insert African facts and events into a ready-made chronology to make it more diverse. Together, they suggest a pattern of psychic healing of the fractures brought about by African enslavement and a role model for the well-being of an African diasporan woman in the West. On the contrary, Philip's fictional travelogue contests the very concept of history, as the text unfolds by performing a different kind of memory work, one that is unmoored from the chronology and order of the West and is rooted deep within the (silenced) self, what one may call, as Thompson does, a process of "recuperation and reindigenization."¹⁰⁰ It is, however, worth noting that this approach keeps African lands and peoples at a remove, as a culture and place strictly of the imagination, and that their rich diversity is reduced in order to underscore the import of their encounter with the repressive forces of colonialism. This is in line with the work of other Caribbean writers who, according to Gikandi, have suggested that "to escape the prisonhouse of colonial history, the writer must expunge history from the imaginary text altogether."¹⁰¹ Philip's later work and public positions through essays and interviews are also consistent, attesting to a deeply rooted distrust of all Canadian (read more generally as "Western") cultural institutions, which she considers complicit in the colonial silencing of African-descended peoples and whose extractionist practices have brought about the appropriation and erasure of their cultural memory.

Acknowledgments. Funding for open access charge: Universidad de Huelva. The author also gratefully acknowledges the support of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University (Canada), where she has been virtual visiting fellow during the writing of this article.

Competing interest. None.

Author biography. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez is a Professor in the Department of English at the University of Huelva, Spain. Her research interests are the inter-sections of gender, genre, nation and race. She is the author of three books and (co-)editor of eight collections of essays. Her latest publications have discussed the work of writers of Black and Asian ancestry in the UK and Canada. (<http://www.cpch.hk/thanatic-ethics-the-circulation-of-bodies-in-migratory-spaces/>).

⁹⁹ Djanet Sears, *Testifyin': Contemporary African Canadian Drama*, vols. 1 and 2 (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2000 and 2003).

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, *Writing a Politics of Perception*, 78.

¹⁰¹ Gikandi, *Writing in Limbo*, 17. St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott is mentioned as an example of this approach.

Cite this article: Cuder-Domínguez, Pilar. 2023. "Decolonizing African and African Diasporan Cultural Memory in Djanet Sears and M. NourbeSe Philip's Works." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 332–352. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.24>