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Caribbean Women Writers

ESSAYS FROM THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Edited by SELWYN R. CUDJOE

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Managing the Unmanageable

MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIP

European thought has traditionally designated certain groups not only as inferior but also, paradoxically, as threats to their order, systems, and traditions of knowledge. Women, Africans, Asians, and aboriginals can be said to comprise these groups and together they constitute the threat of the Other—that embodiment of everything which the white male perceived himself not to be. Where the latter was male, the Other was female; where he was rational, the Other was irrational; where he was controlled, the Other was uncontrolled—a slave to his or her emotions; where he was white and therefore the repository of all that was good, the Other was black and the repository of all that was evil. If left unchecked, western European thought suggests, these qualities—of the Other—could undermine the social order; for this reason these groups are considered potentially, if not actually, unmanageable. At all times they must be managed.

Historically, dealing with the unmanageable has run the gamut from the actual destruction of peoples when necessary—genocidal practices in the Americas, for instance—to management: putting the unmanageable into preordained places within society so that they can be more easily controlled.

A telling example of how management works to control that which is considered different and representative of Otherness may be seen in the early responses of European artists to the plastic arts of Africa and Oceania. Contact between the European artist and these areas of the world was a part of the colonial conquest by Europe; many works of art from Africa and Oceania were in fact acquired by Western museums as a direct

consequence of colonial wars of conquest. As Hal Foster argues in "The 'Primitive' Unconscious,"[1] before contact with the art of Africa and Oceania, European art, having exhausted its traditions, was at an impasse. Contact with, and the influence of, the African and Oceanic aesthetic, particularly in the plastic arts, was indispensable to the revitalizing of European art traditions. Without these influences the modernist art movement would not have been possible.

The essentially spiritual and ritualistic nature of the African and Oceanic cultural aesthetic which the European artist either misunderstood or was uncomfortable with would eventually lead to the invention of the concept of primitivism, which became a conceptual tool to manage those very cultures and societies.

In working on the poems that comprise the manuscript *She Tries Her Tongue*,[2] I came up hard—to use a Jamaican expression, I "buck up" against the weight of Eurocentric traditions and became aware that even poetry and the way it was brought to, and taught in, the Caribbean was a way of management. I was, in fact, working in a language which traditionally had been yet another tool of oppression, a language that has at best omitted the reality and experience of the managed—the African in the New World—and at worst discoursed on her nonbeing. The challenge for me was to use that language, albeit the language of my oppression, but the only one I had, to subvert the inner and hidden discourse—the discourse of my non-being.

How does a writer who belongs to one of those traditionally managed groups begin to write from her place in a language that is not her own? How does she discover or uncover a place and language of empowerment? These were some of the questions that faced me. The power I sought was not the same power the white European male/father has used to manage, control, and destroy the other, but a power directed at controlling our words, our reality, and our experience.

"You better know your place." In the Caribbean this expression was often used to remind children of their essentially inferior position in society or to chastise someone who had been perceived to have stepped out of his or her social position. In *She Tries*... I set out to be unmanageable. I refused to "know my place," the place set apart for the managed peoples of the world. I intended to define my own place and space and in so doing I would come up against the role of language and the issues relating to that. I was also to discover that I could not challenge the language without challenging the canon that surrounded the poetic genre. The following is a quotation from notes I made as I worked on the poem

1. Hal Foster, *Recodings* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), p. 181.
2. Winner of the 1988 Casa de las Americas prize for poetry.

"Discourse on the Logic of Language," which contains many of the themes and issues already mentioned:

> To take the poem one step further and re-embed it, re-encrust it within its context—to put it back in the mire of its origins. So in *Discourse on the Logic of Language*, the poem is sculpted out of the colonial experience—exploitation of peoples, destruction of mother tongues—to become "a work of art"—objective and, according to the canon of Literature, universal. The next step, for me, is to deuniversalize it—make it specific and particular once again. Eliot talked of the objective correlative—the arousal in the reader of the exact emotion the poet felt as *he* wrote. This assumes the existence of certain universal values that would or could prompt the reader to share with the writer *his* emotions. This assumption is never articulated and the so-called universal values were really a cover for imperialistic modes of thought and ways of acting upon the world. The patterns of culture, the images, the forms of thinking, the Literature that were being imposed around the world on different peoples were very specific to a very specific culture (Western/European), and a very specific class within that culture—they were however propounded as universal. So the little Black girl in the West Indies was supposed to conjure up the same feeling that Eliot had when he wrote of fogs and cats and Prufrock.
>
> In *Discourse*, by cramping the space traditionally given the poem itself, by forcing it to share its space with something else—an extended image about women, words, language and silence; with the edicts that established the parameters of silence for the African in the New World, by giving more space to descriptions of the physiology of speech, the scientific legacy of racism we have inherited, and by questioning the tongue as organ and concept, poetry is put in its place—both in terms of it taking a less elevated position—moving from centre stage and page and putting it back where it belongs—and locating it in a particular historical sequence of events (each reading of such a poem could become a mini drama). The canon of objectivity and universality is shifted—I hope permanently disturbed.[3]

She Tries... was the result of my refusal to "know my place." Since completing that manuscript I have become aware of certain shifts. As a writer, I had been aware for some time of a reader over my right shoulder: white, Oxford-educated, and male. Over my left shoulder—in the shadows—was an old wizened and "wisened" black woman. *She Tries*... succeeded in pushing the reader to the right further into the shadows, and the reader over my left shoulder has emerged more clearly from the shadows into the light. *She Tries*... has also taught me my place.

One of the unexpected results of being unmanageable in my writing life has been that many of the poems in *She Tries*... have become unreadable in the traditional sense; in my being unmanageable, the poems

3. Notes from Working Journal (Ms. *She Tries her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*—a work in progress).

themselves have also become unmanageable. One aspect of allowing the poetry to become unmanageable arises from my giving in to the urge to interrupt the text. One can hazard many reasons for this urge. It may arise from a need to reflect a historical reality: the African in the New World represented a massive interruption of both the European text of the Old World and the African text of a more ancient world that had continued uninterrupted for millennia, as well as the text of the aboriginal world of the Americas and the Caribbean.

A friend with whom I raised this issue of interruption of text suggested that the urge was probably the result of Caliban/Prospero relations: wanting both to be in the space of power long dominated by the white European father *and* to return to our lost paradise.

Whatever the reason, the urge to interrupt the text is there and I have acted upon it time and again in both poetry and fiction. The result is that the poem no longer reads as it ought to; it becomes unreadable both because of the interruptions and because so many things happen on the page or pages, as the notes from the working journal reveal. However, in making the poem unreadable, it becomes a more accurate description and expression of what our experience as managed peoples in the Caribbean has been. The African's encounter with the New World was catastrophic and chaotic: how does one and how ought one to manage such an experience in poetry or in writing? How does one make readable what has been an unreadable experience?

The form of the poem becomes not only a more true reflection of the experience out of which it came, but also as important as the content. The poem as a whole, therefore, becomes a more accurate mirror of the circumstances that underpin it.

Another unexpected result of the attempt to allow oneself to be unmanageable within and without the text was the eruption of the body into the text—tongue, lips, brain, penis—the body insisted on being present throughout *She Tries*. . . .

When the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which body could contain. The text of her history and memory was inscribed upon and within the body which would become the repository of all the tools necessary for spiritual and cultural survival. At her most unmanageable, the slave removed her body from control of the white master, either by suicide or by maroonage—running away, where the terrain allowed, to highlands, there to survive with others as whole people and not as chattels. Body, text, history, and memory—the body with its remembered and forgotten texts is of supreme importance in both the larger History and the little histories of the Caribbean. I believe this to be one of the reasons why

the body erupted so forcibly and with such violence in the text of *She Tries*....

There is a second reason, which has to do with the fact that for the black woman a double managing is at work. Historically for her there was the management of the overseer's whip or gun, but there was the penis, symbol of potential or real management in male-female relations. Today the overseer's whip has been replaced in some instances by more subtle practices of racism; the penis continues, however, to be the symbol of control and management, used to cow or control. The ultimate weapon of management and control for the female is rape; this knowledge and the consequential fear is, I believe, latent in all female bodies.

In the poem "Universal Grammar," I appended an excerpt from *Mother's Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours, or How Not to Get Raped*: "Slip mouth over the syllable; moisten with tongue the word. / Suck Slide Play Caress Blow—Love it, but if the word / gags, does not nourish, bite it off—at its source— / Spit it out. / Start again" I was suggesting in this excerpt from the imaginary *Mother's Recipes* the link between linguistic rape and physical rape, but more than that the potential for unmanageability even when faced, as a woman, with that ultimate weapon of control—rape. *Mother's Recipes* was an attempt to place woman's body center stage again as actor and not as the acted upon.

Working through the poems contained in *She Tries*... resulted in an epistemological break for me; my relationship with Western European traditions, particularly as they relate to literature, and systems of knowledge has been irrevocably ruptured. The understanding of how the underpinning of knowledge is often nothing but power—power of the white European male to define his knowledge as absolute—was a painful but liberating experience. An excellent example of this exercise of power may be seen in how the roots of classical Greek civilization, which are embedded in Afro-Asiatic civilizations, have been erased over the centuries. Where this erasure was not possible, the African source of Greek civilization, most notably Egypt, was Europeanized and Egyptians make to appear light-skinned and a part of Mediterranean rather than African culture. The rupture to which I have referred has resulted in my becoming an epistemological orphan; how to construct a replacement for the old epistemological order is a task which is both challenging and difficult but which is essential.

All of this, however, brings me back to language and power, for as Noam Chomsky, the linguist, has noted, language is nothing but a dialect with an army. Someone, at some time, established the linguistic rules that govern us today: that the noun should agree with the verb, for instance, and that person had the power to enforce that rule. This is not

to say that we should ignore those rules; in some instances they are useful. But understanding that the foundation of much European thought and knowledge systems is power enables us all to be more unmanageable. For those of us who use the demotic languages of the Caribbean—dialect—to express our reality in writing or in speech, an understanding of the underpinnings of power enables us to challenge what has been until very recently the linguistic hegemony of Western Europe in the Caribbean.

We, the managed, historically the object and focus of much management activity, often think of ourselves as marginalized in relation to the larger culture—Western European or American. Often, however, the words we use to describe ourselves collude in our management. To think of ourselves as marginal or marginalized is to put us forever at the edge and not center stage. The word *margin*, however, has another meaning which I prefer to think of when it is used as a descriptive term for managed peoples—it also means frontier. And when we think of ourselves as being on the frontier, our perspective immediately changes. Our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscoverd space and place up ahead which we are about to uncover—spaces in which we can empower ourselves.

From margin to frontier—is a deceptively simple act requiring no movement or change, but only the substitution of one word for another. It is an important and liberating first step, this substitution of words and meanings, but to make that authentic leap from margin to frontier demands nothing less than a profound revolution in thinking and metamorphosis in consciousness.

As women writers we each attempt in our own way to write and rewrite our experiences; in my own case it often is the Caribbean experience in its myriad forms. In this act of writing we too are being unmanageable, for the managers have not traditionally thought of us as thinkers, or writers, or keepers of memory and history. By far the majority of Caribbean women remain hewers of wood and drawers of water, women who, like my mother, grew strong out of a severe lack of choice. These women, by being in their own way unmanageable, have allowed us to stand on their backs to provide us with more choice than they had. In changing the margin to frontier, we continue the long tradition of unmanageability, which has permeated our experiences here in the New World and, I hope, hasten the demise of all managers and systems of management.