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A POET OF PLACE

An Interview with M. NOURBESE Philip

by Kristen Mahlis

The following interview took place over the course of two meetings, April 13 and 14, 2002, in Toronto, Canada.

MAHLIS: You begin your collection of essays *A Genealogy of Resistance* with a striking image of your father bringing light to the family, an image that seems both symbolic and deeply personal. Could you talk about that image as a prelude to discussing your family background?

PHILIP: It's a very powerful image that remains with me from my childhood. We didn't have electricity at that time, we lived in Plymouth, literally on the coast, we had one of those kerosene lamps—I think people use them now for camping—and after you lit the little filigreed bag you pumped it and the light got brighter and brighter. There was something very overwhelming and powerful in that image of my father bringing light to the house every night in that way. I never saw my mother do it; I don't think she ever did. I think that act of bringing light to the house becomes something of a metaphor for his role in the family: when some years later he moved us from Tobago to Trinidad because the education system was "better" in Trinidad—I think that his bringing light to the house in that figurative sense was carried over into his trying to bring some light—in the form of education—to the family, from his perspective. I say from his perspective, because those kinds of actions are always fraught with contradictions and gains and losses, but I think that there is something lasting for me around that metaphor.

MAHLIS: How did your life change when you moved from Tobago to Trinidad?

PHILIP: One of the things I recall, and it has always remained with me, is that it was the move from a time that—I'm almost close to tears as I talk about this—a time that was—I suppose the best word would be, idyllic. Tobago was and to a large degree is still very rural and not developed or organized in the way Trinidad is—Trinidad has oil and natural gas, which has led to a kind of industrial development—and so I have memories almost of a sense of running wild in Tobago, although knowing my mother, I don't think there was a lot of running wild! But in the sense of playing outside and among the trees in the hot sun, there remains in my memory this image of being at home and at ease in the natural environment. The green of the vegetation, the gold of

the sun—these are the enduring images from that time. Trinidad, on the other hand, was all concrete and paved over. It was also the place where I would have a much more formalized education that was very directed, particularly in terms of it being a colony moving into independence, and if you were “bright enough” then you were supposed to advance in a particular path from secondary school, hopefully to win scholarships and go on to university. So, in my being, there’s a split—a before and an after that Tobago and Trinidad represent for me.

MAHLIS: You’ve described yourself as “poet of place,” developing a voice out of a sense of place, and I wonder if in that move from Tobago to Trinidad you feel split between the two places, although you talk about writing not so much *about* place as *from* place.

PHILIP: In terms of what you said to me about your topic [topic of interviewer’s book on Caribbean women writers and exile] of exile, that move from Tobago to Trinidad was my first experience of exile, and probably the most profound, because I have said, and probably written, that the place I write from is Tobago, even though I only spent the first eight years of my life there. So it has a disproportionately large presence in my psychic life and casts a very large shadow in my life as a writer. I think if you write from place, the writing will be about place, but I think the reason that I made that distinction is that so much of the writing, especially by people who aren’t from that place, is *about* the place, without engaging with and emphasizing the deep, and often dangerous, currents and contradictions that any place or person has. For me, making that distinction, writing *from* means that I am always trying to stand on that place when I write about it; while physical distance is often necessary to get a perspective on a place or event, emotionally there is a desire to remain rooted in my place, however I care to define that.

MAHLIS: One of the things I find striking in reading that first passage in *The Genealogy of Resistance* is how you describe your relationship with your father, because so often with women writers the mother–daughter relationship is foregrounded, and you say at one point that you begin there for no particular reason, but because you needed to begin somewhere. You also say that your relationship with your mother is expressed through the poetry and stories you write. Was this a conscious choice, to express your relationship with your father through genealogy and your relationship with your mother through poetry?

PHILIP: I think that my relationship with my mother—and I think this is the case with many women—is far more murky, just as the relationship with my daughter is far more murky than the one I have with my sons, and this has something to do with gender. So, it wasn’t conscious when I started with him, as I say in the essay: that was the image that presented itself, but things are more clear cut and sharp edged with him. It’s almost as if you can get in and get out without too much damage done, whereas with the mother, the stakes seem higher somehow, a much different undertaking. I also think there’s something else going on: as you may know I studied and

practiced law for several years. It was only after I became a lawyer, or perhaps when I was in law school, that I realized that my father always wanted to be a lawyer. I really believe that I was finishing his business for him in some very strange way. I wasn't conscious of doing it, and I think whatever has come down through the psychic DNA of the family has come through him, in terms of this longing for place, and longing to root oneself in a place. In *Genealogy*, it's his mother, Ti Miss Maam, who grows cocoa and has this passionate love of where she's from and of the cocoa that she grows. He, like many people of his generation, rejected Tobago for a while: it was "backward"; Trinidad was not. But later on, much, much later on, he came back to this almost obsessional commitment to the place, to the point of advocating for it to secede from Trinidad and so on. Now, to put that in perspective, there has always been—and still is—a strand in the history of Tobago that encompasses this desire to secede from Trinidad—the two islands were only joined through some colonial fiat that didn't necessarily have the interests of Tobago or its people as its *raison d'être*. And so there is a kind of fierce commitment and loyalty to place in Tobagonians that I haven't seen in Trinidad. Whatever it is, it has come through him to me, and it has manifested itself rather differently, but I see that that's the passing, through his mother to him and then to me. What it does is give me some kind of context, some kind of understanding of place and kin and exile. You may recall from *Genealogy* that although my grandmother was unlettered and a peasant proprietor, she understood empire and grasped its workings in a powerful way, particularly as it impacted on the production and sale of her cocoa, and this in turn has made me feel that I wasn't alien, there was somebody else there before me who understood, in a similar way, the forces arrayed against us; that I wasn't this aberrant person flailing away at the powers-that-be, that something—call it what you will, some sort of emotional, cultural, or psychic DNA—had come down to me, and she is the conduit.

MAHLIS: Is that sense of place expressed differently in your father's mother and your father? There was the added gap of a difference in education, in that your grandmother, Ti Miss Maam, was unlettered, but do you think that sense of place is gendered?

PHILIP: I think it is, because in my father it manifests itself in the language of politics and nationhood and those kinds of things, whereas in my case, it expresses itself in poetry and writing and the image that I use when I go back to my grandmother, Ti Miss Maam, of the cocoa, which was danced at a certain time in its production to polish the beans—similar to people pressing grapes with their feet; in *Genealogy*, I talk about dancing words in the same way. I think that's the current I'm swimming in, and though the connection to place comes through him, with him, it speaks the language of the patriarchy: this is mine and I own this, that kind of discourse. This is one reason I've always shied away from using this language—Kamau Brathwaite talks about "nation language" when he refers to the Caribbean—I talk about the demotic, because for me, nation is a male discourse. While I understand and support what he's doing in that this vernacular or what some call *dialect* or *patois* is the language through which people come to assemble themselves as a nation, I can't rest there. I'm far more

interested in playing with the whole idea of *demos*, going back to Egypt, to draw a bead, so to speak, on the hidden histories of the people responsible for the richly subversive language of the Caribbean. The demotic was the popular or vulgar form of Egyptian writing and opposed to the hieratic or priestly style. And it was this meaning and the fact that it is specifically related to Egypt that attracted me to this word as a descriptive term for the Caribbean languages. Because as you know until recently Western scholarship had been successful in removing Egypt from Africa. To rename what was traditionally described as “bad English” with a word of Greek origin harking back to Egyptian writing was a nice riposte and subversive of categories.

MAHLIS: In that same essay, you compare yourself to Athena leaping from her father’s forehead, but then you qualify that by going on to say that no, it really isn’t that, that’s not the model or metaphor you want to use; instead, you bring in the *Orishas*, and that gesture seems to bring together two modes of expression.

PHILIP: Yes, because that latter mode of expression, the *Orisha* and African spirituality, is so hidden and has historically been so marginalized and delegitimized—they were actually illegal in most colonial jurisdictions—so it’s working with the hidden. Athena, on the other hand, like Greek mythology, has been so embraced by and is an integral part of the West. So it’s working with those two traditions, if you will. And in the one case I feel that it’s like flying in the dark, because you really don’t know what it is—sure, there are lots of books written about *Orisha* and African spirituality—but you still don’t know in that deep emotional sense in which you want to know. And in the other case, the Greek gods and myths, everything is still very much out there.

MAHLIS: Was there any particular event or overwhelming emotion that led you to leave law and turn yourself to that very uncertain profession of poetry?

PHILIP: There was no overwhelming event; I’d always known that I wasn’t going to stay in law for the rest of my life: I gave myself five years and I lasted seven. But it’s interesting that when I made the decision and actually left I was pregnant like you are right now, and I was having a lot of thoughts around the way we as women don’t take up space legitimately; that it’s only when we’re pregnant that our bodies are supposed to balloon out—the fat woman still is not seen as legitimate—all those kind of issues I was very aware of. And for some reason, the idea of space, and how we did or didn’t take it up was plaguing me. At the same time I was working on a series of poems about the Caribbean, which I was allowing to take up a lot of space in terms of line length. They still remain unpublished. I had this strong feeling, and this more than anything else was overwhelming, of wanting more space, I needed more space for my ideas. I think that was the actual backdrop, being pregnant, working on these poems where I was pushing the line length to the maximum and wanting more space. The poems eventually grew too big for me, literally, and I had to put them away. I think now I’m ready, have been for the last while, to go back to them. But what those poems taught me was how to work with space and the page, because in *She Tries Her Tongue*, there are all those experimentations and relationships with the page, and I don’t think I

could have done that had I not done the previous manuscript in which I pushed the line length as I did. I was working with two ideas of history, the uppercase History—the large events that happened, the fact that the Caribbean was a theater of war for all of these European powers—those were the big poems. And then I had the small poems, dealing with small history of family and so on, so I was trying to juxtapose those two ideas, and that seems to be a theme that runs through all my work, juxtaposition of apparently contradictory ideas. So, I had to leave those aside; they just grew too big for me and I couldn't handle them anymore.

MAHLIS: So in trying to bring together those two kinds of history, the uppercase History, and the lowercase history, the stories perhaps previously untold, was this what led you to include the epigraphs from Ovid, the stories of Proserpine and Ceres with which you begin *She Tries Her Tongue*, and the story of Philomel that you end with? Was this an attempt to engage with the classical mythology that has been canonized, or were you primarily drawing on these stories for their archetypal significance?

PHILIP: Yes to both questions. Maybe if I had a greater understanding of, let's say, Yoruba mythology, I might not have chosen those myths, but I do think they do speak to certain kinds of archetypal forces and feelings. I was also interested in the fact that we had been forced into a discourse with Western culture; this is why that myth of Philomela having her tongue torn out at the end of "She Tries" is such a powerful one for me: how do you sing without a tongue, how do you take this language—English for me—that has so distorted you and turn it into something for your own well-being? There's a big contradiction there. For many years after *She Tries Her Tongue* I was learning what I had done in the work. During the writing of it, there were certain things I was conscious of engaging with: I was conscious that I wanted to destroy the lyric. But things like that multivocal polyphony, at times harsh, sometimes cacophonous and atonal, all those things that I think that work is all about—that only came to me later after the work was done. I became aware that in setting out to destroy the lyric voice what I had in fact done was replace it with a polyvocal, multivocal chorus. A student asked me one day to read one of the poems. I never used to read poems from the second part of the book, because the first few poems, which I had begun at an earlier time, including "And Over Every Land and Sea," can be read by the solo voice far more easily than the later poems, which begin to fragment. I suddenly heard myself saying, in response to the student's request to read "Universal Grammar," "Yes, if you read it with me." That's it, I thought, that's what I was doing—moving from the solo voice to the chorus. I realized too that the presence of the chorus meant that I had been successful in displacing the lyric voice. And maybe that's more familiar to women; maybe that's closer to the woman's way of being or even the African way of being, having that chorus rather than the solo voice which is the fount of everything including its own legitimacy. Those were some of the ideas I became conscious of in the aftermath of writing *She Tries her Tongue*. I wrote an essay in which I talk about wanting to put the poem back in its matrix, unlike Eliot's objective correlative that represented the poetic experience which has been sculpted or lifted out of its matrix. Part of the matrix for me, growing up in a colony, was being taught

Greek myths, so that had to be a part of the chorus, if you will. What was different was that I would be speaking to the people who occupied these myths and they would be speaking to me, and, more than anything else, what I really enjoyed doing was making up my own sources of authority, such as the titles of books. So much of our lives as people living in colonies had to do with people literally making things up which then received the imprimatur of the colonial government and which were then imposed on you. Becoming the source of my authority was one way of subverting that: making up these important-sounding titles and attaching them to little snippets. English fairy tales and nursery rhymes; stories like *Alice in Wonderland*—like the Greek myths these were very much part of our linguistic landscape. So while these works were not necessarily at the forefront of my consciousness, in terms of what I was working with, I was aware of trying to create a choral approach to poetry. I also think that the way the poems are—even though they do become more difficult to read in our western, logical, linear way—they’re a more accurate representation of what the Caribbean is all about. You can actually trace the development from the solo voice to the beginning of the chorus in “And Over Every Land and Sea,” where you begin to see these voices coming in; that’s maybe the transition poem, from the poems that are more within that lyric mode into those that are beginning to fragment.

MAHLIS: And in that fragmenting of the lyric voice into one that is multivocal, it does seem that the mother and the daughter start switching positions; the *she* of the poem becomes the daughter searching for the mother, not just the mother searching for the daughter. This seemed to indicate the poet looking for the mother tongue, what is lost, perhaps irrevocably, because it’s so unresolved.

PHILIP: That’s right, that’s exactly what I was trying to do, because Ceres sets out to look for her, but in my case it was the poet looking for any number of things—the mother tongue, the mother country, that essential mother.

MAHLIS: Although I could talk to you more about *She Tries Her Tongue*, I wanted to switch topics here and ask to talk about whether you think that there is something distinctly Caribbean in the various voices that come from the Caribbean. I’m thinking in particular of Martiniquan writer Edouard Glissant’s notion of *Antillanité* or *Caribbeanness*. And finding a voice, somewhere between the father tongue and the mother tongue, in the Caribbean demotic, is so central to your work. This goes back to your idea that the Caribbean aesthetic is based in performance, more so than the silently read written word, and yet Caribbean drama is not as well-known as fiction and poetry.

PHILIP: That’s true except for someone like Walcott. While I felt and still feel that *She Tries Her Tongue* is complete, I’ve always had the feeling that it needed performance for another form of completion. I have seen a couple of the poems performed by someone who was teaching a drama course at Brown and it was quite wonderful to see what happens to the work when it’s dramatized. In terms of whether I think that there’s a Caribbeanness, I think that there is, I believe that there is. It’s something that

I'm puzzled at still. I know that when I read Glissant's work *Caribbean Discourse*, I couldn't continue reading it, because what he was saying was so close to what I was thinking. It was painful—it was like hearing my thoughts in somebody else's mouth. If you think of the Caribbean from a purely geographical point of view, there are these little bits of rock— island states—that have been neglected since the end of empire and official colonialism and have fallen on hard times, but there's a disproportionate influence in terms of the people who have come out of the region. If we look at the history of the U.S., the civil rights movement, we see a number of seminal people who even if they didn't come from the Caribbean are of Caribbean descent—Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and before that Marcus Garvey; more recently, there's Louis Farrakhan. Writers like Audre Lorde and June Jordan come to mind. The French Caribbean has given us Césaire and Frantz Fanon. The list goes on. I'm not sure what it is, maybe that openness that Glissant talks about—it's actually contradictory because we're raised in this cauldron, so to speak, which suggests containment, but at the same time we're oriented outwards. I feel strongly that one of the psychological drawbacks of colonialism and capitalism and how globalization works is that you grow up—certainly in my time, maybe less now—you grow up knowing that you're going to leave and that completion has to come from somewhere else, and I think that does a lot of psychic damage, knowing that you can't complete yourself by what's around you. Some of that has changed to some degree, but it continues in different ways. Because of the economic situation, people have to go abroad to work and the societies are continually saturated with U.S. culture through the television.

MAHLIS: So it's on the economic level that it's more psychically damaging, yet on the creative level . . .

PHILIP: On the creative level, because you're living in a small place, you know from the get-go that there's another world out there; it would always amaze me when I first came here how much more knowledgeable the average Trinidadian was about world politics than the average Canadian; I think there's that Janus-face quality about it, where you're looking forward and back, outside and inside at the same time. But on an economic level, when I grew up you knew you had to go away to get further education, and I think there's a psychic price you pay for that.

MAHLIS: And it seems that's precisely what Glissant doesn't talk about too much; he talks about *Antillanité* as a positive force and also talks about what comes out of this *Antillanité* is a poetics of relation, which seems very much similar to certain things that you're doing. He describes it as being multivocal, for example, and connected to everything all at once; in other words, the Caribbean was postmodern long before Europe and North America.

PHILIP: That's what I've been saying, because when people began to read this work—many years ago—they said that it was a postmodern work, which I didn't necessarily disagree with. I said, that's fine, but if you don't understand the Caribbean, if you read it solely as a postmodern work, I think you have to understand that the Caribbean was

postmodern long before the term was coined: Multiple discourses—fragmentation—we’ve been doing this ever since; we just haven’t applied that name to it. But you were saying . . .

MAHLIS: That the psychic damage you talk about is harder to integrate into Glissant’s theories of the poetics of relation, because he sees the poetics of relation as a positive goal for all poets, not just poets from the Caribbean. And I wonder sometimes whether he’s trying to redeem the Caribbean from some diminished sense of this small place, these rocks in the ocean, where nothing “serious” is produced or created. For some, the Caribbean is merely a vacation spot.

PHILIP: That is the public discourse of the Caribbean—sun, sea, and sex. And along with that is an insidious Americanization of the society, where now people talk about summer in Trinidad. My mother’s response to that is, “They need a good winter; then they’ll understand summer.” The concept of summer has no meaning, no relevance on a tropical island. But that’s where I see that some of that psychic damage is still being done. The other that interests me is the idea of place. In one essay I talk about the fact that we don’t really have a literature of place in the Caribbean, given how beautiful a place it is. Most of the literature is a relational type of literature—the relationship between the individual and the family, community, or nation—there’s very little attention devoted to just how spectacularly beautiful this place is. I think it has to do with our history and the question of how do you love a place that is the source of so much pain?

MAHLIS: Jamaica Kincaid, like you, writes about exile, and she says in one of her interviews, “If I had stayed in Antigua, if I had stayed the native, I believe that I would not have been able to write”; I wonder if you have felt a similar sense that you needed to leave Trinidad in order to be able to write?

PHILIP: No. I think with me it was almost a sense I had, that it was preordained that I was going to leave. That is what you did as a colonial person with some education. It was a rite of passage, of adulthood, that was the next step in your life. I don’t have a sense that it was a conscious thing. Writing never appeared to me to be something I would do because that was not what you were expected to do if you came from the class that I came from—I described it as being short on money but long on respectability. My father was a primary school headmaster, or principal, but we didn’t have a lot of money, and it was expected, particularly after independence, that you would become “something,” which was definitely not a writer or a poet.

MAHLIS: Kincaid also expresses a sense of being limited in particular because she was a woman and that she was raised to be a servant, but it sounds as if you weren’t raised to think of yourself as a servant, something like a nurse or one of the servant class, that your father had higher expectations of you.

PHILIP: The light . . .

MAHLIS: That's right, the light. Kincaid says in that same interview of Antigua that it's "such a demoralized place, there's something scary about it, the nights are so thick and scary, the ignorance, the desire not to know is so profound." I don't sense those sentiments in your work.

PHILIP: No. That has certainly not been my experience in Trinidad or Tobago. The school that I went to, which I suppose validated my father's choice in moving us to Trinidad, was one of the premier girls schools on the island, one of two at that time—one Anglican, the other Catholic, both Christian—and we were really being exhorted to be—I remember thinking, even at that age, about the imagery that was used—the cream of the crop, the salt of the earth, it was all very white imagery. The principal would come in and talk to us and tell us, "you're the cream of the crop, the salt of the earth," and it is truly amazing what we women from that school have accomplished, it's truly amazing. There haven't been a lot of writers, though; they've moved into the expected arenas: banks, insurance companies, that kind of stuff, but not many artists generally. It still seems as if the arts, what we call *the arts* here, are very much something those at the lower socioeconomic end would do, as in performance, performance poetry, pan, those kinds of things. So that's still a problem, which is interesting in terms of what we were talking about with Glissant earlier on; that's some of the psychic damage that I think is still at work within the society. But I argue that there's good reason why people distrust writing in the Caribbean, because so much of our despair has come about through writing, I mean the laws and regulations about us and our life. Why should we trust writing? There's nothing in our history that suggests that we should trust it, because writing is so integrally linked to being enslaved: it has meant the erasure of your spirituality with the replacement of the Word. So I think that at a deep psychic level there's every good reason in the book why we should distrust it. But as a writer, however, it causes a lot of anguish, because that's my medium.

MAHLIS: Do you consider yourself a writer in exile?

PHILIP: Yes, I do consider myself writing in exile, and I do that very consciously, because when we think of *exile*, that has traditionally been the terrain mainly of European writers. For me, the exile goes far more deeply than just being here from Trinidad. It's exile from a number of things on many layers—your original language, your mother tongue, your culture, your spirituality, and I think even if I were to go back to Tobago, I would still be in exile. And so it's almost a permanent exile. Do you know the Quebecois writer Max Dorsinville? In his book *Le Pays Natal* he talks about the idea of exile as an archetype for African writers, either from the continent or from the Caribbean. And accompanying exile is the desire to return, whether it be a physical return, as in Césaire actually returning to Martinique, or a metaphorical return in one's writing. When I read that many years ago, I thought that he had definitely plumbed something that was very real in the writings of African people. So for me exile goes far more deeply than just not living in my home country. It's something that began a long time ago.

MAHLIS: So you don't conceive of exile as a freedom from certain cultural restrictions that you had felt in either Trinidad or Tobago.

PHILIP: No, not at all.

MAHLIS: Because I think some other female writers who write from exile do think in those terms, not necessarily from the Caribbean, that they needed to get away to be able to fully find their voice and express themselves.

PHILIP: No, as I said before, because I hadn't been fully conscious of writing as a career when I was there, so that wasn't an issue, though I do think that getting away and getting a perspective on where you're from and what forces created you is really important to any writer. You see, one of the things that I feel very strongly about, and it links to what we were talking before about place, is that if you never form a bond with that place which is the equivalent of your natural mother, then it's very hard, I believe, to love another place. It is for that reason partly why I am so interested in how we relate to where we're from. I think that when I saw Cape Breton, my passion for that place—it was one of the first times in Canada that I felt a sense of love for this land of Canada—but I don't think that would have been possible if I didn't love Tobago. When you read Neil Bissondath's [V. S. Naipaul's nephew] writing about Trinidad, there's a kind of insidious hatred of the place that makes me wonder whether he could truly love another place, and whether if that place—say Canada—turned out to be not kind to him in whatever way, he would move on again. It seems to me that if that initial love of place isn't there, then how can you love anywhere else, because you don't know what love is, what it is to connect with a place. It's one of the things that I'm very concerned about in terms of Canada, that so few of us immigrants, Caribbeans and others, ever connect with the land here.

MAHLIS: As you speak, it's bringing me to the topic of how you talk about space and in particular what you say about inner space, when you talk about in the essay "Dis/Place: The Space Between." You talk about how the threat of rape is the primary way in which women's space is kept contained, and the displacement that comes with that. You've been talking about immigrants not connecting with place, and I'm wondering if you see women similarly feeling displaced because of this threat?

PHILIP: Of course—what I try to do in that essay is make that link between the woman's body being used in the same way—the African woman's body—as the physical land was being used. She was being harvested—bred and harvested. When I go to those male writers in the Caribbean, they know the Caribbean in a way—let's just think of Trinidad—Lamming lived there for a while, Walcott, Selvon; they know Trinidad in a way that I could never know it because I am a woman. My entire life was from home to school, home to school and back; when I was an adult I went to work, but you didn't really wander outside of those confines unless you went to a party. But the way men are able to traverse the land and countryside—Walcott talks about visiting different places in Trinidad—it just didn't happen for women and particu-

larly quote unquote decent women. I think that does have an effect on how you connect with that space around you as a writer and what you do with it and how you're able to use it.

MAHLIS: And it seems the supreme irony that women are symbolically connected with the land, yet we're the ones who are the most cut off from it, because of the agoraphobia, the danger of the open space.

PHILIP: Exactly, because of the undifferentiated, pervasive threat women always confront when they move through space. The only time you would be able to go into certain spaces is if you were with a man as his girlfriend or friend; if you went there as a single woman, people would think you were "loose": all those things are still happening. And what's interesting, when I presented that essay at the Second Caribbean Women Writers Conference in Trinidad, people were very upset about it; I think it really bothered them somehow. Some people were quite concerned that I was linking Nanny of the Maroons with what they perceived as the loose women, these Jamettes, as they were called. In fact, somebody did challenge me: "Are you saying Nanny was a Jamette?" And I said, "no, that's not what I'm saying": what I'm looking at is women in spaces where men usually hold sway, such as the theater of war or the street. How do we negotiate those spaces, what do we do with them? Someone came up to me after—she didn't intervene to help me—but she came to me after and whispered, "I just wanted to tell you that Nanny used to catch bullets in her behind," which is exactly what I was trying to deal with, you know? That's the enduring myth—that she caught bullets in her behind during the fighting against the British—yet the audience was reluctant and resistant to my analysis.

MAHLIS: And that seems to be what you were trying to do within that essay, especially in the play that you created with the Jamettes, taking over that public space and coming into the patriarchal theater of the law, the courtroom, disrupting that and taking that over. Along with that disruption of public space you ask the question, "what is the language of inner space?" Is that a question you're still answering?

PHILIP: I think I'm still answering it; at the same time, I hope I don't ever answer it finally, because I think the journey is probably more interesting than the arrival. [Pause here] I'm pausing because there are so many ideas flashing through my mind at one time. I think every poet, every writer, is translating; even if they're working in their mother tongue, there's a translation that goes on. I think that for someone like myself there's a double translation: I'm translating into a language that's not my own, a language I recognize at some subterranean level to be not my own, and so I started out there because I think that that is the ultimate challenge for the writer—how to get the perfect expression of what is almost inexpressible. But that other layer of exile, that psychic exile, is there for me; I don't think I can say that I know what that language is. I know it exists, and maybe what happens is that every so often I get intimations of it and something comes right, you know you've got it, but it's elusive a lot of the time. I think it's that way for most writers, except that there's another level that I have

to go through to truly understand that, because for me it always surprises me, I have to confess, when I read my fellow poets, Afrosporic poets in particular, not fiction writers, and I see how much they take language for granted. I don't, and in a very profound way, I don't trust language, which may seem very odd for someone who is using language all the time. But I think in some ways I work with English as I suspect people who are not native speakers but who come to work with English would do. There's always a moment of alienness, and I never take any of it for granted. I think this is why people tend to associate my work with language poetry and so on, because I'm looking at language more as an artist looks at paint.

MAHLIS: Do you also ascribe to the notion among a number of writers from the Caribbean and Africa who consider theory and theorizing as a Western mode of thought, an imperializing tendency of putting things in universal terms that are not really universal, kind of an intellectual imperialism, or, as it's often called, *the making of high theory*?

PHILIP: What I have been interested in is how much effort is put into us trying to say—by “us” I mean Caribbean intellectuals, African-American intellectuals, and writers and so on—we theorize, too; we just do it differently. I think your question for me is a good question because one of the things that concerns me about this approach—we do it, too, only we do it differently—is that we're always playing catch-up, a sort of “me, too-ism,” and I understand why it's done, because theory is seen to be the epitome of Western knowledge, and if you can show control of that and show that you do it, too, then we are just like you, so to speak. I have asked myself the question and asked others, what if maybe we don't theorize? What if that is not the way that we approach life, that we do something else? Because it seems to me that as long as we remain locked in the mode of “we theorize, too, but differently,” then there's no hope of actually looking outside that model to see what else we do, we're always trying to subsume what we do in a Western model. I'm answering your question but in a sort of roundabout way. So I'm not even going to say at this point that we don't theorize, because sometimes I think the more important thing is to ask the question just to see where it takes you. I think all societies have organized their lives around certain principles. I think the impulse to order seems universal. If we don't theorize in the way that we think of theory, then what is it that we do? Those are the more interesting and fulfilling questions for me. I know there's a lot of work put into talking about black women's theory and its orality and so on, the theories found in the storytelling; I would like to go to the storytelling and see what the storytelling is doing. I am really uncomfortable with always playing catch-up, because it means then that when another standard is set, we have to play catch-up all over again. But of course, we enter into the realm of the politics of knowledge, and what is acceptable and how do you prove yourself, and I see people I know who are doing theses, and you have to show a command of the theory, particularly around the issues of postmodernism. It's very difficult to get professors to understand that maybe you want to come at it from a different standpoint.

MAHLIS: And then there's the politics of publishing in scholarly journals. . .

PHILIP: It's one of the reasons why I myself have resisted the academy because I feel that I have a lot more freedom to explore new ideas and approaches outside the academy. Of course, it makes it difficult to earn a living. But certainly for me, it's the work that comes first, and whatever theory that comes organically out of it. Let me give you an example that comes to mind, one that I use in an essay called "In the Matter of Memory." We have a Calypsonian in Trinidad called the Mighty Sparrow. He did a song, a calypso, many many years ago, called "Congo Man," I would have been about thirteen at the time. And the calypso describes two white women traveling to Africa who, and I quote here: "find themselves in the hands of a cannibal witch doctor/He cook up one/ He eat one raw/ She taste so good/ He wanted more./ More, more, more, more, more,/ He wanted more." And then part of the refrain is something about "I never had a white meat yet," and then he asks the audience, "You ever had a white meat yet?" and so on. So that calypso comes out and it's very popular—he possibly won the Calypso King contest that year—but what's really fascinating about it is what Sparrow was doing in that calypso. Now, as usually happens, it's the woman's body that's being used to move something forward in a patriarchal culture, so it's two women. But they're white—so, to use a postmodern term, he's transgressing a racial boundary. He's using the stereotypical racist, colonial image of the cannibal witch doctor. But he's also subverting and doing something extremely powerful in a country that is on the cusp of independence—it's coming to independence, or it has just come to independence—he's singing about eating whiteness, and even using the terms that Levi-Strauss has used, "the raw and the cooked." This man—Sparrow—did not even go to university, OK? He probably didn't finish high school. But through the populist art form of the calypso he is riffing on, if you will, or theorizing, what the change from vassal state and subject people could be. Admittedly, he's using the woman's body, but that's to be expected in a patriarchal culture, but he's also challenging white society by using the cannibal trope and stereotype as the mechanism whereby whiteness is consumed. Everything is turned upside down. At thirteen I didn't get it all. I knew there was something sexual going on; people wouldn't tell you, of course you couldn't ask your parents what it was, but the way they would laugh, you knew something was happening: we all knew we were getting our own back on white colonial society. This calypso, "Congo Man," was one of the first references to Africa I recall. So this is what I mean when I ask what is it we do—is what Sparrow is doing theorizing? Possibly, but I think there's something else: it's more than the sum of its parts, there's something else that he's doing. Examples like that give me hope and reinforce this belief that the "we theorize, too" approach is unsatisfactory.

MAHLIS: The social commentary is very powerful; with the humor mixed in with the double meaning, I wonder if that's in any way akin to what Glissant talks about in terms of the development of Creole languages, that that was a mode of communicating and sending messages at various levels that couldn't be understood by the white colonizers.

PHILIP: What Glissant says is very true. I think it's definitely a carryover from that time, and the humor and the double entendre that are so central to calypso were very much a part of that calypso—the way Sparrow would laugh at certain points in the song, you knew he was saying something else and there you see the power of silence. I am not content with simply saying, “that is how we do theory,” because that would be like pouring new wine in old bottles. As you point out, there is humor, there is music, there are a number of other things that are happening simultaneously that don't happen with theory or the way we understand theory. So this is why my question is, “What if we don't theorize, what if we're doing something else?” Something that we haven't yet named. And without critiquing theory or saying that it's wrong, let's try and look at what it is we're doing and see if we can come up with indigenous or more relevant standards for what we do, rather than saying, the West theorizes and, therefore, we have to put ourselves into that mold.

MAHLIS: Could you comment on the name changes that the literature you write has gone through—West Indian literature, Commonwealth literature, Postcolonial literature, Caribbean literature? What do you make of these various labels and whether they reflect a shifting sense of where that literature fits into the larger pantheon of literatures? Do they mark different stages in terms of how the Caribbean has been conceived of as something independent or connected to colonial powers?

PHILIP: I think naming is really important—I think it's central to who we are as humans and as Africans. I have a poem in *Salmon Courage* that you probably don't know—it's out of print, but I can send you a copy—it's called “Anonymous.” It's a very short poem, about seven or eight lines, but it goes through this whole idea, first I thought I was Caribbean, then I was West Indian, then I'm not. When I think of African Americans, in terms of the shift from being *colored* or *negro* to being *black*—which then spreads throughout the African world—that was a major shift. It has an impact because it's the power of naming itself, and in that case embracing what was initially suggested as being negative. And now the latest shift from *black* to *African American*, which to my mind is an attempt to embrace Africa, which was for so long denied, and still is today, to a large degree, by many African people in the Caribbean and the West. I myself like the term *Caribbean* because it speaks to a lost history, the Caribs who were there as well as the Taino and the Arawaks. I'm amused at the term *West Indian*. For me it indicates the power of Western society that you can actually incorrectly name a place and have it exist and quite blithely go along with it. We can't afford to underestimate the importance of naming. With the expansion of the tourist industry in Tobago, there has been a resurgence of the use of the word *plantation*. Where we lived some time ago they were building a group of villas called *Plantation Villas*. My question is: what does the plantation mean for us African peoples? The name of the holding company that recently opened one of the largest hotels, the Hilton hotel, has the word plantation in it, and one of the pictures that is used to advertise it is an old painting of a slave plantation. What does that say to us, and what do we understand the plantation means? Why should we be embracing a word like that, or allowing a world like that to be used to advertise ourselves at this point in our history?

There is a power in naming and to be calling places *plantation* I think reflects what has happened in the Caribbean despite independence—namely that the colonization hasn't ended, and, if anything, there is a recolonization that is going on that is part of the tourist industry, part of that larger process of globalization and a *plantationizing* of the world.

MAHLIS: This brings me to another question I have about another term that is used a lot, the *new world order*, to talk about the economic and cultural changes brought about by global communications and international markets.

PHILIP: I think it's a misnomer because it's neither new nor ordered. Capitalism unleashed is profoundly disruptive—it uproots families, communities, and old orders. So I think that it is an attempt to confuse people through language. First Nations people have critiqued the use of the expression *new world order* to describe the Americas, because from whose perspective is it a new world? Certainly not from theirs. I myself have used the expression *new world writer* because I think that for people like myself who were brought here forcibly, this was a new world. Can we have an expression that will allow both for that as well as for the reality that the First Nations people experienced—that for them this was not a new world, because the term *new world* erases that very long history that was there. One of the things that I have said is that for me, the new world is a site of massive interruptions. It's the interruption of the First Nations discourse—a fatal interruption; it's the interruption of African life to be brought here—also too often fatal; even the European life is interrupted. So what you have is this area where all these discontinuous histories are coming up forcibly against each other.

MAHLIS: Along these same lines, Derek Walcott writes of “the oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and the melancholy of the new.”

PHILIP: Certainly Walcott represents one tradition in the Caribbean and that is the European tradition, even though I think some of his most successful poetry is to be found in those poems where he captures the rhythms of the demotic. I'm thinking of a poem that I particularly love by him, “Spoiler's Return,” which I think is one of his most powerful poems. But he is very much within the tradition of Europe. I think Europe has to be acknowledged as one of the progenitors of the Caribbean: it's like the refrain from my poem “Discourse on the Logic of Language”: “English is my mother tongue/is my father tongue.” We can't pretend that Europe does not exist; if we do so, we do so at a great risk. Having said that, however, I don't think that you can necessarily equate looking for Africa with longing for Europe, which Walcott has done elsewhere. I don't think the two things are equal or the same. In the one case you have a father who, if you want to be very brutal, who raped a mother, attempted to kill her and bury her; somehow the mother survives and the child maybe hears the mother crying and realizes she is still alive somewhere and begins to search for her. Albeit that yes, we do fantasize, we do romanticize the lost mother, that's what the poem “And Over Every Land and Sea” is all about; it's that feeling of trying to find

a lost parent to reunite with her or him, and psychological literature is replete with it. What you're looking for you don't know, you tend to romanticize; children who are looking for their real parents do a lot of that kind of romanticization: the father will be so wonderful, the mother will be special, and so on. He is correct in cautioning us to be careful about that romanticization, because although we are African, we are also of the West, very much so. Again, I think Caribbean people carry that potential of being both/and. Because we are of the West, we are of the new world. I have sometimes thought of us as almost a separate tribe, and I use that word deliberately: having our roots in Africa, but also being of the new world. But I personally cannot equate that with this longing for Europe, because that European father has been very present, has been very abusive, and, you could say, has maybe given us some things, but they were essentially the leavings from his table. And I think that what we have done as a Caribbean tribe is take that on board along with the African aesthetic and convert what was deemed garbage into something that's living and breathing and astoundingly beautiful. And I see that with the language, because if you think of the kind of language, any European language, that we would have been exposed to, it would have been orders, commands, insults: it was not language at its highest or its finest. And yet the people took that linguistic heritage, combined it with an African kinetic ability, and have fashioned one of the most beautiful languages or meta-languages—if you think of the entire Caribbean, because we speak different kinds of demotic—I think that exists today. So, I certainly position myself much more in the tradition of Kamau Brathwaite, who clearly sees Africa as a powerful presence in the Caribbean. For me, it is a mothering presence, a mother who has been hidden and despised and who has nurtured that effervescent ability to overcome this attempt to erase you and to create something that is living, breathing, and beautiful. That's where I see the genius of the Caribbean people, but I think it's a genius that's also linked to Africa but one which has a particular manifestation given where we are, on these little rocks in the Antillean sea.