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Banana Republics Of Poetry

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poetry that has tried to make the pain of that paralysis more knowable, or poetry whose gift has been a kind of intimacy with separation itself. Juliet's overpowering protest that her bounty is as boundless as the sea, her love as deep, was quoted by Hegel in his early essay on love, and the idea of mediation that he would develop in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the idea of a kind of work that makes an infinite gift to consciousness in the form of the expressed truth of the object. The idea of work that produces nothing but a gift is also important in *Capital*, where it is directly satirized. Marx says that surplus labor is given to the capitalist by the worker "as a present." The value-objective truth hammered home by this grisly joke is that labor-power cannot produce gifts. Anything that can produce a gift will not be labor-power, and the individual who makes a gift will not be the subject whose own activity separates its life from fulfillment. Poetry tries not to be these things; and to honor their proscription, poetry tries to be exactly what they are not: it tries to get our own unrealized potential back within reach, first of all by making possible new powers of intimacy with separation. Separation is known anyhow in the body, but is studied and learned in poetry, where the truncation of the subject and its vanishing archaic origin can be tested and contested at every turn.

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BANANA REPUBLICS OF POETRY

M. NOURBESE PHILIP

Whole and undivided, the banana leaf begins life as a long, green flag, its pliable center spine dividing the intense expanse of flutter. Within a couple of days, at the most, it will be a fringed flutter in the wind as the leaf splits then splits again and again along its horizontal ribs. What was once whole, single, and unitary is now many.

The torn fluttering tatters of the banana leaf reawaken a memory I never knew I had. Having grown up in the Caribbean, I must have witnessed this shredding many, many times, yet as if and, indeed, for the first time, I notice this process of whole become multiple. And, as if there are specific receptors at the cellular level within my eyes that awaken at this particular image—the torn fluttering of banana leaves—there is a small explosion of recognition—behind the eyes. A knowing again of that which I didn't know I knew.

Each torn strand sparks a memory—a burst of potentiality—as if my eyes were not simply receiving the images passively, but reaching out to the split, the torn and the broken happily fluttering in the wind. Medieval theories of optics and vision suggest that the act of perception alters us; that seeing is a much more active relationship than we think of it today. But these were not the thoughts that occupied my mind as I gazed at the now fringed flag of possibilities.

Nor was it simply a matter of my recognizing a familiar image—I had never seen this particular image that I had always seen before. It was simultaneously never and ever; a forget and a remember; a then and a now. And, in my gazing at the moving fronds, some now brown, there seemed to arise a relationship between me and the image. Is this, perhaps, what the medieval thinkers meant by ocular desire? Perhaps also a Lordean example of the everyday exotic?

Bananas are not indigenous to the Caribbean. Neither am I. We could perhaps say that they and I share the experience of diaspora—agricultural and human respectively, linked and interconnected by cycles of violence. We, the banana plant and I, appear also to share an experience of shredding, being literally torn by the wind in the one case and, in the other, being torn and fragmented, metaphorically at least, by the winds of History. Could the banana leaf fluttering in its glorious brokenness become a metaphor for the tattered flags, not of nation states, but of states of being where the shredded, torn, and broken can be held together? As metaphor for poetry, perhaps, going forward, if there is such a thing, and backward; inhabiting contradictions, unravelling old systems of control and domination, untelling facts that present as truth which lies. Is it, perhaps, too easy a metaphor?

Perhaps the history of how we, *genus Musa* and I, both remapped ourselves in the Caribbean, the New Old World, is to be found in the fluttering fronds and spaces in between. That is,

in the very act of shredding. My hippocampal maps, etched by the neuronal firing of place cells, no doubt reveal many levels of memory pathways over time, as in the unmemory of witnessing the tearing of the banana leaf. And while neurons in the brain know about time but not space, surely to know about time is also to know something about space, since space is but time shredded into moments, is it not? So, what of the space between my eyes and the fluttering, shredded leaves, the space of ocular desire? A space also colonized by the shredded memory of a particular history.

In South and Southeast Asia, banana leaves were once used as writing surfaces, the horizontal ribs providing ready-made lines. I want to think of the banana leaf in its regeneration through splitting and tearing as itself writing something new and rich with possibilities of the torn and the shredded, the broken and the wounded. Perhaps we can reclaim the term *banana republic* and give new meaning to the expression as referring to spaces where poetry proliferates through splitting, tearing, and dividing. And dividing once again. Into banana republics of poetry.

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