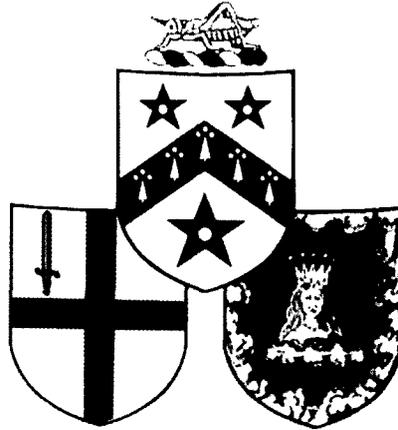


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**ORATURE, ORATORY AND
GETTING THE MESSAGE HEARD**

A Lecture by

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Orature, Oratory and Getting the Message Heard

Professor Lynette Hunter

In my last lecture I spoke of the frustration felt by many English-language writers from outside England, with the language itself: its power to suffocate, to deny words needed for experience that goes on outside of the parameters of colonial power. Nearly all the people working with words about whom I want to speak today, begin with that difficulty; and I want to focus particularly on writing that incorporates elements from the oral and spoken and on oratory itself. To do so we could look at a number of different verbal traditions from all over the world, but I would like to focus on a field that is arguably already too broad, that of verbal cultures in the Black diaspora. It is probably sensible to point out that I agree with Eileen Julien who says,

there is nothing more essentially African about orality nor more essentially oral about Africans... this is not to question an African predilection for words well expressed... What must be recognised, it seems to me, is that speech/listening is a mode of language as is writing/reading. The art of speaking is highly developed and esteemed in Africa for the very material reasons that voice has been and continues to be the more available medium of expression, that people spend a great deal of time with one another, talking, debating, entertaining. For these very reasons, there is also respect for speech and for writing as communicative and powerful social acts. (*African Novels and the Question of Orality*, 1992)

Because our entire system of literary value in England privileges the written as a fixed object, a printed text that remains stable, many people think of oral texts as naive and even childlike, and of oral techniques as simple-minded. There is also a tendency to think that the people who use oral skills are not as sophisticated as those skilled in the written word. So the basic questions I would like to raise for the following set of stories about verbal arts are: first, should we think of the oral craft with words as less demanding and less valuable than the written? and if not, then second, how do we find out enough about those arts to value them?

While I am going to concentrate on people who do use the oral to extend or breathe new life into English language and literature, I would like to begin with a writer who felt his situation was ludicrous: writing in English when he had another, home language, to write in which brought him closer to his intended audience - Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In 1977 Ngugi began to write all his creative work in Gikuyu, his birth tongue, and this after several years of writing in English to considerable acclaim. His work since then has been translated into English, indeed some of the translations are equally skilful, and he has responded to critics and readers in English. However, he writes creatively consistently in Gikuyu and has found the popular and politicised audience he was looking for partly through the language change but also partly through a shift toward the use of oral techniques in his prose, poetry and plays. *Devil on the Cross* is a good example of such a work, and a recent article by Kabir Ahmed analyses the oral techniques in detail. Just one example will give a flavour of the different reading skills that are necessary to bring to such a text. In one scene where the characters are attempting to justify themselves by praising their achievements, Ahmed points out that one needs to be familiar with oral Gikuyu traditions which include the proverb 'self-praise is no recommendation', to understand the implications of the scene.

In Decolonising the Mind Ngugi gives an account of his early education in language and story. He begins by telling us of his extended family and the importance of storytelling for young children:

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. ... The differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones. We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words; it had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content.

This is a scene that is reiterated throughout studies of communities centred on orature, or oral literature. The oral skills are needed for survival, they are necessary to negotiation and important for successful persuasion, over land, property, marriage, action - just as reading and writing are in our culture. Hezekiel Njoroge, in writing about 'The Riddle', notes that in learning riddles children are learning language competence skills, observational skills, normative skills, memory and intellectual skills, and entertainment skills. As the young person acquires these skills, they become more and more respected, and those who achieve the more difficult memory and intellectual skills become revered. They join the group of oral performers called the griots, who hold a place directly analogous to the rhetorician in the oral traditions of classical Europe. Depending on the political structure, they speak for the group or the leader, but they also work on words imaginatively and in participation with the community.

For the first four years Ngugi went to school, he was taught at a local school and in Gikuyu. But after the 1952 state of emergency in Kenya the schools were taken over by the English, and Ngugi recounts a story all too familiar in the history of imperialism, whether it be English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch or..... He says:

one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment - three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks - or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch the culprits? A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day would sing who had given it to him and the ensuing process would bring out all the culprits of the day. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.

Ngugi did well within the system because he was good at English, but later in his life he realised that the people he wanted to read his work could not do so because it was in a language they did not work within, and so, he returned to writing in Gikuyu - much to the dismay of many English-language readers who felt, as he puts it, 'abandoned', just as Chaucer or Dante abandoned Latin for their vernacular tongues.

Now if Ngugi rejected English, other people either retained it or had no choice since it was their birth tongue, but in common with him, many have turned to techniques and devices from the oral tradition. A primary device has been the use of proverbs and folktales from the communities in which they have

grown up, but there is a potential difficulty in understanding the complexity of those tales when they are rendered in print. Take for example two short proverbs recounted by my colleague from Malawi, Jack Mapanje, both about Kalikalanje, the 'fried one' [*appended to this transcript*]. The first version of this proverb tells of a woman widowed when she is six months pregnant, and who develops a craving for human flesh. She goes to a wizard who agrees to get her the flesh in return for her child when it is born. Soon after the child is born, and while the mother is out, he jumps into a frying pan and fries himself, and when she comes home he announces that he is Kalikalanje, the fried one.

Eventually the wizard comes to claim the child and the mother is very sad, but she then proceeds to 'arrange' for the wizard to capture the child. Each time, though, the child escapes - either by luck or by cleverness; and eventually, when he is up a tree looking for honey, his dog kills the wizard who is waiting at the foot of the tree. The boy takes the wizard's intestines and gives them to his mother to eat, which she does, not knowing what they are. And the tale ends with the mother sad that the wizard is dead, but happy that her son is alive.

The second tale has the same story but a different plot line. At the start a pregnant woman tells her husband that she craves ostrich eggs, and he agrees to get them only if she gets him water 'from where the frogs do not croak'. This water is, however, guarded by a wizard, who only lets the woman have some if she agrees to let him have the unborn child. After the child is born, and while she is cooking, the child leaps into a pan and cooks himself, emerging as Kalikalanje. When the wizard comes to claim the child the mother attempts three times to set up an occasion on which he can capture Kalikalanje. What is difficult to understand here is whether she is in fact trying to prevent his capture, or is colluding in it. Eventually Kalikalanje kills the wizard, comes home and kills his mother.

Were these tales to be performed, there would be a number of different ways in which they could be presented. For example, Isidore Okephwo in *African Oral Literature*, talks about the way that dramatisation and dance are closely interrelated in Malawian storytelling, in quoting a description of masked dancer, the kapoli, who,

begins to dance by paddling with the left leg and then the right one. The dancing builds up slowly and warms up to the required climax. The drummers play the drums with their palms but you see from their head and body movements and facial expressions that they are part of the song and the performance too. The audience-participants wear beaming faces; and they imitate the continuously elastic and plastic body movements of the kapoli as they take up the chorus and clap their hands. Some of them talk to each other indicating that the song refers to so and so who is among the crowd. They point at him and laugh as the performance goes on. The kapoli acts the role of the woman complaining in the song. He moves towards the audience-participants, slightly bends towards them, clasps his arms and puts them behind on his back as the women jubilantly join him, melodiously singing the song. He shakes his head as the woman's gesture of making a plea to the husband to leave her free.

This proverb need not be involved in such complex masking, but it will very likely be preceded by a call and response opening, by dramatic flourishes added by the orator or even additions to the story, and by ongoing audience participation.

The tales are apparently simple but in performance very complex. To understand their proverbial content we could turn to the opening scenes, the woman widowed and the woman whose husband will only do her a good favour if she does one for him. Or, we could look at the wizard who helps these

women; does he use special powers, or is he representative of power in general? what gives him the right to stand guard over clean water, or to offer someone human flesh? Or, we could consider the desires of the two women, the one wanting human flesh, who tries to save her son, and one wanting ostrich eggs, who seems to give him up. Or, we could think about the endings: in the first tale the child forgives the mother, but she eats the wizard, and is sad that he is dead; in the second, the child kills the mother although it is not absolutely clear that she has given him up to the wizard. Or, we could simply ask, why is the child 'fried'? and does it make a difference that in one tale the mother is absent and in the other the mother is present?

What unsettles and deepens our reading is the ambiguity of the actions of the mother and the child. Without performance we do not know, and may not even be alerted to the possibility that the mother is helping or hindering the child's escape. Without performance we do not know whether the child is escaping through luck or cleverness or help. Without performance we have no clue as to the status of the wizard; he could be being presented as having rights to act as he does, or as being authoritarian, or as misusing his power. The more we understand about the performance context, the more complex the proverbs can become, and the more the reader will become a reader-participant and begin to value them.

Many contemporary African writers, and writers from England, the Caribbean, the Americas, have turned to the use of folktale. Ato Quayson, in a recent article on Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, comments that the novel has drawn criticism from readers that Tutuola 'merely translates in a literal fashion from the Yoruba in which all the old legends are still verbally told', as if this is a problem. Quayson delicately follows the rhetorical strengths of the text to argue for the value of using the folktales, and goes further to talk about, as many others have, the way later generations of Nigerian writers such as Ben Okri who lives partly in England, take the folktales and push them even further into the novel form, breaking up its conventions. It is a parallel case, if you like, to the use of Hindu mythology I referred to in the last lecture: only because that mythology has been written down it has more 'value'. What do we really mean by that - 'has more value'? I would suggest that it simply means that we have more rules of thumb for evaluating, a better vocabulary for understanding and hence more ways of participating in the text.

Wilson Harris, from Guyana and also living in England, talks about the vital importance of pushing at the novel, pushing at the received generic conventions. This by definition will make things more difficult to read. In *Tradition and the West Indian novel*, Harris argues that the twentieth-century preoccupation with consolidation of character in the novel needs to be different in the Caribbean novel, it needs to move to *fulfilment* of character. Consolidation edges readers toward acceptance rather than dialogue; it generates a tension between the individual and the society very like that to which I referred in the last lecture between the individual and the nation. And Harris deplors the focus on 'suffering' that results, the negativity of the 'victim' position as Margaret Atwood would have it. He argues that the Caribbean is steeped in 'broken parts of such an enormous heritage', that appear like a 'grotesque series of adventures', so we need to look at the individual and search for an 'inward dialogue and space-when one is deprived of a ready conversational tongue and hackneyed comfortable approach'. And Harris is confident that in doing so 'one relives and reverses the "given" conditions of the past'.

There are many ways of approaching this 'reversal' and 'fulfilment'. For example Jamaica Kincaid, from Antigua and the United States, in 'My Mother'. Listen to how rapidly the prose moves into the non-realist, almost allegorical mode, that challenges the idea of consistent character:

Immediately on wishing my mother dead and seeing the pain it caused her, I was sorry and cried so many tears that all the earth around me was drenched [note the excessiveness here]. Standing before my mother, I begged her forgiveness, and I begged so earnestly that she took pity on me, kissing my face and placing my head on her bosom to rest. Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated. I lay on her bosom, breathless, for a time uncountable, until one day, for a reason she has kept to herself, she shook me out and stood me under a tree and I started to breathe again...

This particular story moves into fully-fledged allegory as the mother covers herself with oil from the 'livers of reptiles' and 'grew plates of metal-coloured scales on her back, and light, when it collided with this surface, shatter and collapse into tiny points'. And the metamorphoses become more extreme. Kincaid's story resonates strongly for an English literature trained reader with writings of Ovid and Spenser, but is radically different from them because unlike them she is writing in a period following three hundred years of the realist novel. Even in her more 'realist' writing there are subtle undercurrents of disruption. Take the scene in 'Columbus in Chains' from *Annie John* when she comes back from school having been punished for writing rude comments under a picture of Christopher Columbus, and looks forward to her mother comforting her. However, her father has arrived back first and is entertaining her mother with stories:

My mother brought me my lunch. I took one smell of it, and I could tell that it was the much hated breadfruit. My mother said not at all, it was a new kind of rice imported from Belgium, not breadfruit, mashed and forced through a ricer, as I thought. She went back to talking to my father. My father could hardly get a few words out of his mouth before she was a jellyfish of laughter. I sat there, putting the food in my mouth. I could not believe that she couldn't see how miserable I was and so reach out a hand to comfort me and caress my cheek, the way she usually did when she sensed that something was amiss with me. I could not believe how she laughed at everything he said, and how bitter it made me feel to see how much she liked him. I ate my meal. The more I ate of it, the more I was sure it was breadfruit. When I finished, my mother got up to remove my plate. As she started out the door, I said, 'Tell me really, the name of thing I just ate'.

My mother said, 'You just ate some breadfruit. I made it look like rice so that you would eat it. It's very good for you, filled with lots of vitamins'. As she said this, she laughed. She was standing half inside the door, half outside. Her body was in the shade of the house, but her head was in the sun. When she laughed, her mouth opened to show off big shiny, sharp white teeth. It was as if my mother had suddenly turned into a crocodile.

In small, intimate, yet devastating ways Kincaid denies us consolidation of character.

A writer who takes a different stylistic approach to the question of the consolidation of character is Claire Harris, from Trinidad and Tobago and now living in Calgary, Canada. A prose section of *Drawing Down a Daughter*, called 'A Matter of Fact', plays formally with generic disjunctions as she creates a collage effect around a series of characters. The story begins as a conventional novel, telling the story of a young woman who has become pregnant but the man in question refuses to marry her, and runs off only to be seduced and destroyed by la diablesse. The novel opening moves quickly to an oral folk telling which might possibly have been the source of the story, but then the writer, whose presence we only sense from movement through various different genres, finds out that the events actually did happen. The newspaper says so, the police reports say so, yet the events seem to have happened *after* she wrote her story not before. The entire story becomes a collage of different printed

media, including autobiography and romance as well as the other genres already mentioned. They convey the sense of Wilson Harris's 'broken parts' of a tradition for representing the individual, parts from the conventions of the European novel, from film, from newspaper, from African tale, that are brought together here to tell a story, but the story doesn't quite add up. Claire Harris speaks elsewhere in 'Poets in Limbo' about the difficulty of writing about her self, her blackness, her body, her womanhood, her Caribbean birthright and Canadian life. The collage gives us the sense of there being no consistent characterisation available for her, yet displays the difficulty of fulfilment.

A different approach again is taken by E. Kamau Brathwaite, in which he explodes the English language just as Claire Harris explodes generic stability. Brathwaite goes for the roots of the English language itself and has been credited with the idea of a 'nation language', which treats the distinctive Englishes of the Caribbean not as dialects or creoles, but as languages in themselves. Brathwaite works very largely from music, from jazz or from calypso. He says in 'History of the Voice' that,

In order to break down the pentameter, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso...It does not employ the iambic pentameter. It employs dactyls. It therefore mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way....Compare

(IP) To be or not to be, that is the question

(Kaiso) The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands

Cuba San Domingo

Jamaica Puerto Rico

But not only is there a difference in syllabic or stress pattern, there is an important difference in shape of intonation. In the Shakespeare, the voice travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming movement of the first line, we have a distinct variation....

The best way to understand the rhythmic difference is to listen to the singing of calypso. Calypso, merengue, dance hall, compas and then reggae, are all musical forms which use words and which have been at the forefront of the cultures of the Black diaspora. Some have claimed that there is a direct connection between these performers and the griot of African culture, and they all do speak for communities in modes that encourage participation, even though they do so in different ways. Reggae for example uses predominantly English lyrics and Jamaican choruses. Think of the well-known Bob Marley classic 'No Woman No Cry', and you hear the written quality of reggae, which has been attributed to its use of standard English.

When these word-music forms began to move into American and English culture in the 1950s with the phonograph revolution, they were usually produced on 45s with just music on the back. This led in turn to a new form where the DJ would talk over the music, often interacting with the audience, and in the process this performance led to dub and rap. There is a lot of disagreement about the difference between dub and rap, although the former could be thought of as words over the top of music and rap as words with musical accompaniment. A celebrated rap artist, Benjamin Zephaniah, has been recognised as a valued artist by no less an institution than Cambridge University where he held a Fellowship. However, his work is still not considered valuable enough to be widely taught. And Jamaican dub poet Jean Binta Breeze is even further from recognition, partly because she is one of the few women artists in a predominantly male if not macho and misogynist hip-hop world, one of

the traditions of which, like calypso, is to berate and belittle women, but mainly, I suggest because we don't know how to talk about the kinds of language rearrangements in which she is engaged. If you listen to her poems as oral performances though, you can hear the stylistic patterns of varieties of repetition, parallelism, piling and association, tonality, ideophones, digressions, imagery, allusion and symbolism, that Okpewho notes as typical of the highly sophisticated oral literature of African cultures.

Kamau Brathwaite, has not only turned to music to explode the conventions of written english, but also to the writing of poetry in 'nation language', or alphabetically rendered varieties of english that engage in 'calibanisms':

spelling, breaking, spacing, shaping words in ways that dislocate them from their familiar associations and meanings but more importantly allowing nuances, echoes, puns, rhymes and particular kinds of music 'out' of the language that history has imposed on him to express his experience and vision. (Stewart Brown on Brathwaite).

Brathwaite's 'X/Self Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces' plays with this form as he writes, significantly, of the computer:

I

Dear mamma

i writin you dis letter/wha?
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists!

well not quite!

i mean de same way dem tief/in gun
power from sheena & taken we blues &

gone . . .

say
what?/get on wi de same ole

story?

okay
okay

okay
okay

if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle?

no mamma!

is not one a dem pensive tings like ibm not bang & ovid
nor anything glori. ous like dat!

but is one a de bess tings since cicero o
kay?

This poem dates from 1987, but in a rewriting of 1994 Brathwaite reorganises the poem typographically on the page to reinforce the rhythm of the words and their power of dislocation:

I

Dear mamma

i writin yu dis letter/ *wha?*
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists?

well not quite!

i mean de same way dem tief/in gun
power from sheena & taken we blues &

gone

...

say

wha? get on wid de same ole

story?

okay

okay

okay

okay

if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle

■

No mamma!

is not one a dem pensive tings like ibm or bang & ovid
nor anyting glori. ous like dat!

but is one a de *bess* tings since cicero o
kay?

Brathwaite has come round to arguing that the computer can help him present written text in a way that is closer to the oral; he refers to it as 'sculpting light'. No only do we find here the dislocation of the written by larger oral structures such as folktale, or by smaller oral devices such a repetition and phonology, but by the medium itself.

Claire Harris is one of the most extreme experimenters with all of these elements, particularly in her combination of linguistic dislocations with typographic play. Yet the work of both these writers benefits enormously from insisting on the crossover with music. Unlike many 'language poets' as they are called, Harris and Brathwaite have specific political, social and cultural aims that are

embedded in their poetics, which the immediate performance context of the word-music forms clarifies. Jean Binta Breeze moves easily from one register, of nation language, to another often more 'standard english' register, yet the intonations of her voice conveyed by her recordings always remind us of the ironies, sarcasms, satire, parody and social observation with which she engages. If, in contrast, we turn to a section of a poem by Claire Harris, *Drawing Down a Daughter*, which is conveyed by the page alone, we could be at a loss as to how to read. Take the following:

Girl all of us in this family know how to make float how to make bakes the real thing and acra not even your father's mother make so good and pilau and callaloo with crab & salt pork barefoot rice rich black cake cassava pone (is true your Carib great aunt on your dad side teach your mother that) but the coconut ice cream and five-fingers confetti buljol souse those are our things

Child this is the gospel on bakes

first strain sunlight through avocado leaves
then pour into a dim country kitchen through bare
windows on a wooden table freshly scrubbed
*I'm warning a lazy person is a nasty
person* flurry of elbows
place a yellow oil cloth on this a bowl
a kneading board a dull knife spoons
then draw up an old chair have a grand-father carve
birds flowers the child likes to trace sweep of petals

Notice how the rhythm and intonation changes on the other side of the central line 'Child this is the gospel on bakes'. Not only does the vocabulary become standard, but the layout returns to a familiar free verse typography. In contrast the section before that central line is laid out almost like a piece of prose but with pause marks rendered by extra spaces. Indeed a recent article by Nigerian poet Femi Oyebode argues that what we find in the oral is closely linked to prosody, its pitch, tone, rhythm and tempo, that contemporary poetry only partly compensates for through traditional layout.

I would like to finish by continuing in this domestic vein, and taking a look at a short story by M. Nourbese Philip 'Burn Sugar', which lies right along the border between the oral and the written, and reminds us of those opening questions: should we value the oral skills less and, if not, how do we find out more about them? It seems to me that the answer to the first question is clearly 'no', but the answer to the second is more problematic. At the same time we live in a country where these skills are increasingly being circulated and distributed. The immigration to England by many African and Afro-Caribbean writers has made the writing available here and there are substantial communities of writers and orators that have built up. Many of those communities are keen to participate in the surrounding cultures, and I personally feel that it would be a great loss to me if I did not begin to learn to participate as well.

'Burn Sugar' is a story about a young woman who has left home in the Caribbean for a large city in North America, possibly New York, and for the first time since she left home the Christmas cake her mother always sends her has not arrived. From the first page, the conventionally educated english reader can see that the language is ungrammatical, words are not spelled correctly, and often a first reading for a reader not used to the nation language rendition is very confused. But on re-reading, the story acquires immense power as the woman recalls her childhood, especially the making of the cake. The memory circles around the central images of the burn sugar, the essential ingredient of the cake.

As her mother heats the sugar from white to light brown to dark brown to black, the young woman remembers wondering if it would turn white again with intense heat.

The image is central in many ways. The story is partly about race, and about the experience of being 'made black' by people in a country not used to you, whereas you have come from a culture where everyone around you is a shade of roughly the same colour. And now the young woman lives in a world where she had adopted the patterns of a primarily white culture, its consumerism, its representations, its ways of life, and she wonders at one point if she hasn't become 'white' inside. And the story is also about the change from youth to older age, from girl to woman, from a traditional culture to a foreign culture. So the young woman tries to make the cake, and the reader watches her caught in this attempt to relive part of her past and her tradition at the same time as she is worried about the smoke alarm in her very western apartment going off. As she thinks about all these changes in her life, her narration becomes increasingly formal and latinated, with words like 'transformation' and 'metamorphosis' taking hold of the rhythm. But then, she suddenly forgets a vital stage in the making of the cake, and she telephones her mother who abruptly breaks the formal register with the question 'What you mean chile?', and when questioned by her daughter about the meaning, the deeper significance of the cake, she says

'let me tell you something girl', Mammy voice was rough, her face tight tight - 'some things don't have no meaning - no meaning at all, and if you don't know that you in for a lot of trouble. Is what you trying to tell me, child - that it have a meaning for we to be here - in this part of the world - the way we was brought here? That have a meaning? No child' - the voice was gentler now - 'no child, you wrong and don't go looking for no meaning - it just going break you-'.'

The mother has had to put her recognition of brutality away, but the daughter is surrounded by it, and has to deal with it - which she does in dealing with the cake that she eventually bakes.

However, there is an additional point to recounting this story. 'Burn Sugar' has been criticised as poor and badly-written. Philip has had a lot of trouble finding publishers for her work, although now she is becoming more established after 20 years. The work has been criticised for the irregular grammar, the 'bad' spelling, the different registers of nation language, standard english and the formality of some of the final scene which has been seen as excessive, almost as if compensating for the lack of control over the text. I would argue that the story is a profoundly searching insight into changes of many kinds, that has been embedded into what is essentially a recipe - you could almost make the cake from this story - the recipe, as Philip well knows, being a genre lying right along the boundary of the oral and the written, so many of us finding out about how to cook from watching others, and only occasionally going to a book for something different or special.

The story asks us to understand something about that background in orality, as well as the writer's own background, and to value it - otherwise after a slightly confused first reading the story may be put aside, and we will miss out on the densely rich possibilities it offers. The context that we are willing to bring to a reading is vital, and can radically change people's attitudes to a piece of writing. For example, if we know, as I do, that Nourbese Philip, from Trinidad and Tobago, was a practising lawyer in Toronto, we can get a hold on the formal english of the concluding sections of this story, and understand it as a possible gesture toward parody. And we also need to make an effort to find out about, some of the oral storytelling techniques, some of the linguistic elements.

So, if we listen to Jack Mapanje, Wilson Harris, Claire Harris, Kamau Brathwaite, we might note how Philip uses the nation language insistence on the present tense alternating with abrupt past tenses of

the standard english, to convey some of the frustration and anxiety of the young woman in the opening lines. Or the way that the story teller often gives the audience the isolated noun or verb as a tag, and then amplifies around it, because when we are a listening audience it is so easy to miss a key phrase, in for example 'she say, the Mother had said' or 'wherever she is, happen to be'. Or the way that the teller of the tale can play with repetition, extending the tension and creating humour, as in the 'rip, rip off, rip the brown paper, prise of the lid, pause...' with its gradual extension of phrasing and cumulative assonances of 'r' and 'p'. And the way that having told a scene, the teller needs to re-focus the audience before moving on, as here with the concluding final sentence-phrase 'The cake'.

In fact Philip herself has written at length on many of these issues both in poetry and critical prose, so we can also turn to her to find out more about how to read her writing. The only simple answer to the second question, how do we begin to value oral literature, orature and writing with oral techniques, is to read more, to listen more and to talk about the writing more with other interested people - which is what I am now going to do.

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Kalikalanje I (Yao)

This story is a sad one. There was once a woman who was widowed when she was only six months pregnant. During her pregnancy she had a craving to eat human flesh and this food she got from a certain sorcerer, Lisimu. She also promised to repay Lisimu with the child when it was a year old. When the boy was born he was named Ambungo. Now one day while his mother was away drawing water, he accidentally fried himself in a pan which his mother had put on the fire to cook some groundnuts in. When she returned he told her that his name was no longer Ambungo but Kalikalanje (The Fried One) because he had fried himself in the pan. He was at that time still under a year old.

Lisimu waited patiently for his flesh to be repaid. But three years passed and nothing happened. One day he approached Kalikalanje's mother and reminded her of her promise. The woman loved her son and grew sad, but she told Lisimu that she would fulfil her promise. Now to hand the boy over to the wizard was not easy. On the first day she put food for the boy on a shelf and hid the wizard so that he could kill the boy when he approached. But the boy turned into a cockroach and ate the food that way. So this plan failed.

Next day the mother bought a red piece of cloth for her son so that the wizard could identify him when he was among his friends. But the boy tore up the cloth and shared it among his playmates. On the third day the mother went to the garden, cut some grass, and tied Lisimu inside a bundle of it! She then told the boy to take it to the garden. Once there, Kalikalanje said, "I cannot carry you, bundle, unless you stand up and dance".

The bundle therefore stood up and began to dance. The boy said, "This is strange. I have never before heard of grass dancing. I am sure there is somebody inside this bundle". And so he returned home.

Finally he was instructed to collect honey from a big tree far away. While he was up the tree Lisimu arrived and began to hack away at the trunk; but the boy was saved by his dog, Maliranyenje, which attacked the wizard and killed him. The boy took the evil man's intestines to his mother and she ate

them greedily, not knowing their origin. When Kalikalanje revealed the truth she was sorry for Lisimu but rejoiced because her son would live.

Kalikalanje II (Nyanja)

There was once a woman who went with her husband to hoe in the garden. While there the woman sneezed and the man said, "What do you want?"

The woman said, "I want the eggs of an ostrich".

And the man said, "Well, I want water from where the frogs do not croak". So they struck a bargain. The man went to find the eggs of an ostrich, brought back five, and gave them to his wife. The woman set off to find water where frogs do not croak. But alas she found that a wizard called Namzimu was guarding the water.

She told him that she wanted some, and he asked, "What will you give me in exchange for it?"

The woman bargained with Namzimu saying, "I am with child. When the child is born I will give it to you".

Namzimu then said, "Draw water".

So she drew a large pot of water, went to her village, and gave it to her husband. The husband said, "My wife, this is very good".

Some time later Namzimu came to the woman and said, "Give me the child to eat".

She replied, "No, the child is not yet born".

And so Namzimu went away. Three days passed and the child was born. It was still tiny when, one day, while the woman was roasting castor-oil beans, it leapt on a potsherd and said, "I am Kalikalanje," and then jumped off the potsherd with a bow, a spear, and four dogs.

When Namzimu came a second time to ask for the child, the woman said, "The child has been born but he is very clever. If you want to catch him, you must devise a trick. Go and hide on the roof when the sun sets".

This Namzimu did. At dusk she told Kalikalanje that there were strange noises on the roof and that he should go up and see what was causing them. While Kalikalanje went searching for his arrows, the woman called up to Namzimu, saying,

"Dance on the roof"

When Namzimu danced, however Kalikalanje stood at the door and said, "Ho! What's that dancing up there? I don't want to climb onto a roof where there is dancing". So Kalikalanje ran away and Namzimu did not catch him that night.

Next day the woman took Namzimu to the garden and hid him in the grass, saying, "Stay here. Tonight I'm sending Kalikalanje to come and burn the grass. You will see a youth with his head shaved on one side and wearing a black loin cloth. That is Kalikalanje".

That night the woman shaved Kalikalanje on one side of his head, put on him a black cloth, and sent him to the garden, saying, "Go and burn the grass in the garden".

So Kalikalanje took his shaving knife and black cloth, and his dogs and his spear, and called his companions. "Come to my mother's garden to play", he said.

When they came to a parting in the paths, Kalikalanje said to his friends, "Come, let me shave your hair on one side so we can play properly".

When he had shaved his companions' heads, he put on them pieces of black cloth and said, "You are all now Kalikalanje. When we reach the garden and start to burn the grass remember that everyone is called Kalikalanje". His comrades readily agreed to fall in with the plan.

They came to the garden and burned the grass, meanwhile constantly calling one another Kalikalanje.

When they came to one especially large bundle of grass Kalikalanje said, "Let us burn this grass through and through and let us hold our bows in our hands". Quickly Namzimu leapt out of the bundle and Kalikalanje shouted to his comrades saying, "Come on, let us kill him". So they killed Namzimu with their bows and arrows.

Then Kalikalanje returned to the village. Here he met his mother and spoke to her, saying, "Mother, you wanted a wild beast to eat me. For that I am going to kill you". So Kalikalanje killed his mother.

The Boy Born From a Shin Bone (Yao)

Some young girls once said, "Come let's go and pluck leaves to