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Dominique Dubois

► **To cite this version:**

Dominique Dubois. Alienation, Despair and Resilience: The Story of Black Women Immigrants in Her Head a Village by Makeda Silvera. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2002, *Urban America in Black Women's Fiction*, 22, pp.77-93. hal-02344231

HAL Id: hal-02344231

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344231>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

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Alienation, Despair and Resilience:
The Story of Black Women Immigrants
In Her Head a Village by Makeda Silvera

The short stories of *Her Head a Village*¹ present the reader with a gallery of women characters who immigrated to Canada for economic reasons or who are the daughters of such immigrants. Their background is mostly working class even if a few of the protagonists manage to make it to the middle class through their jobs as secretaries or teachers. Quite naturally, their environment is essentially urban as it is in big cities that they are more likely to find the jobs they so desperately need to survive. Unsurprisingly, Toronto, which is one of the largest Caribbean cities outside the West Indies, is the backdrop against which most of the short stories are set.

The streets that Millie Maxwell, the heroine of "Canada Sweet, Girl," walks along during the nine years of her stay there are familiar to anyone who has read the works of Austin Clarke, who is probably the most illustrious of Silvera's predecessors to have described the tragic plight of the Caribbean immigrant confronted by ostracism and xenophobia.

Thus, Millie spends her first nights at the YWCA at the intersection of College Street and Yonge Street. When she is expelled from the youth hostel because she cannot pay the rent, she hangs about in a "doughnut" shop on Bloor Street West. The first job she gets is at a West Indian restaurant on Bathurst Street and when she is finally arrested by the police because she is an illegal immigrant after all, she is taken to Strathcona, like many others before her. In other stories, such situational references may be

¹ Makeda Silvera, *Her Head a Village* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1994). All subsequent references to the collection will be given in brackets in the text.

more limited but they are always a grim reminder that the Canadian city is no heaven for Caribbean immigrants, be they landed or non-landed.²

All the stories in the collection speak of the same difficulty of integrating a society whose multiculturalism is no guarantee of tolerance and acceptance of the other. From the petty nagging of the civil servant who keeps asking the protagonist of "The Welfare Line" for documents she produced ages ago to the harassment to which an overzealous immigration officer subjects the "woman in black polka dot pant suit" (28) in "Caribbean Chameleon," the list of racially motivated vexations Caribbean people have to suffer is long indeed.

In this respect, the paragon of intolerance is no doubt the man who plans to kill Asha and her female friend in "Baby" because they are lesbians, as his male chauvinism is clearly compounded with a hatred for women, no doubt born of his sexual impotence:

"Bwoy, dem girls different. Dem need a good fuck. Can't understand how nice Black woman like dem get influence in dis lesbian business."

"Nastiness man, nastiness. Satan work."

He'd overheard the last comment many times. He'd watched the two women closely each time they came into the Hotspot. They had an independent streak about them. He didn't like it. They come to Canada and they adopt foreign ways, he thought to himself. (71)

The scene ends in complete defeat for the man: cast in the role of the voyeur, he gets so sexually aroused at hearing the two women in the bedroom that he starts masturbating while holding a gun in his hand. He soon ejaculates and as his penis goes limp so does his resolve to get rid of the two women who, unaware of what is going on in the next room, have started making love. Unable to stand their screams of pleasure, he leaves the house after putting

² "Landed" and "non-landed" refer to the status of the immigrants who arrive in Canada. Until they get their official immigration papers, they are said to be non-landed.

his gun away. The man's isolation and impotency, symbolised by the detumescence of his penis and his incapacity to use his gun, are made even more ironic as the scene is internally focalised.

The short story is the epitome of what is at stake in Silvera's collection. Indeed, beyond the mere depiction of the physical and psychological hardships confronting the immigrants—old and new—in their everyday lives, the writer's aim is clearly to examine how these hardships create the conditions of the deep alienation the female protagonists suffer from and how that alienation in turn leads them to reject the predominantly male-oriented Canadian society and to seek comfort in sisterhood and lesbianism.

It is the dramatic tension between a real but hopeless desire on the part of these women to integrate what they regard as their new homeland and their incapacity to settle down because of their otherness that we are now going to analyse more closely. Then, we will turn our attention to the special bond that unites women characters and allows them not only to survive but also to enjoy life whatever the hurdles they have to overcome, and ultimately to re-appropriate a space that they can claim as home. As we shall see, the success of the process can only be achieved through a thorough but salutary repositioning in language.

Out of the eleven short stories in the collection, eight feature female protagonists who are recent immigrants to Canada or are the children of such immigrants. Of course, the plight of those who have been in the country for several decades or who, like Jenny and her cousin Helena, are "both Canadian-born of Caribbean parents" (51) seems to be more acceptable than that of newly arrived women. They at least appear to be integrated in Canadian society and don't live under the threat of expulsion because they haven't got their papers.

Millie, on the contrary, lives in constant fear of being arrested by the police and sent back to Jamaica. Because she is an illegal immigrant, she does not claim social security when she is ill and even dares not fly back to her home country to attend her mother's funeral. This does not prevent her from finally being arrested by the police and sent to a detention centre before being

expelled by a cold-hearted judge, who does not take into account the fact that she has lived in Toronto for nine years, has never been in trouble and has a Canadian-born son.

Unsurprisingly, what predominates in the few descriptions of the city given by the autodiegetic narrator is the coldness of the weather. Millie arrives in Toronto in August at the time of the Caribana festival but makes no mention of the weather then. Clearly, there was nothing about the end-of-summer sun to impress the newly arrived Jamaican. On the other hand, her recollection of her first experience of the Canadian winter is recounted at some length. Interestingly, the episode is narrated some nine years after the event, at a time when the heroine thinks she can at last enjoy some peace, behaving like a perfect citizen despite still being non-landed:

Is the month of February. And it nuh rass outside. The sun shining out hell, though. It mek me remember the first winter I was here and see the sun shining so bright, I run out without coat, and then the cold hit me and send me running back inside. Anyway, dis Sunday, I dancing and singing. Drinking my beer. Feeling nice. Memory of sweet Jamaica flooding over me. [...] Next thing I hear is a knock on di door. I say, "Who is it?" The voice say, "The police open up." I open di door and look out on two beefy-face policemen and a police-woman. (43)

What is striking in the description is the deceptiveness of the Canadian sun compared to that of Jamaica. The latter is both bright and hot whereas the former shines but does not warm you up. It clearly symbolises the indifference and selfishness of a society that does not accept outsiders easily, especially when they are black and poor. It is significant that the narrator's feeling of happiness should be associated with her memory of Jamaica. The image of the protagonist being enveloped in the safe cocoon of the past is suddenly shattered by the arrival of the police. The harsh reality is back with a vengeance as the coldness of the winter suddenly intrudes upon her intimacy.

The subsequent reference to the weather appears right at the end of the short story when Millie leaves the court where she has

just been given notice of her expulsion to Jamaica. Once again, the reference is both realistic—it is definitely cold—and metaphoric. Indeed, the numbness Millie feels inside stems much more from the inequity of the judge's decision than from the actual weather. Nothing, not even a fur coat, can protect from the devastating blow that has been dealt her:

I get up from di bench and walk out of di building. I walk towards College Street. [...] Today is one of di coldest day since winter start. People running in all directions for shelter. Di streets dry and it look like smoke jumping out of di pavement. Mi nose running, and di snot turn to ice on mi face. Me cold, even di fox cyaan keep me warm today. Mi don't even want to run for shelter. Dis coldness cyaan match di numbness in me. (48)

There are other similar references to the coldness of the Canadian weather in the collection³ and they all have the same metonymic dimension, standing as the emblem of a materialistic and selfish society. It is therefore hardly surprising if life for Silvera's protagonists is more often than not a struggle for survival. Millie Maxwell has to slave from eight in the morning to nine at night six days a week in the first job she gets in the Caribbean restaurant on Bathurst Street. She is a cook from eight to two and a waitress from two till around nine p.m. Worse, her only way of having a small flat of her own is by accepting her boss to pay her rent in return for sexual favours. The irony is that when she gets pregnant and decides to keep the baby, she is fired by the man's wife on grounds that she is "worse than a whore" since "at least the other girls don't get pregnant" (40). Even after she quits her job as a cook-cum-waitress, Millie still has to do domestic work for two separate families, working from seven in the morning till eight at night six days a week, to make ends meet.

³ In "Caribbean Chameleon," the protagonist is said to leave "the Caribbean for the North Star. Back to work, to winter, snow, frostbite" (28); in "The Girl Who Loved Weddings," the protagonist's cousin declares in an interview that she "never could get used to the harsh Canadian winter" (51).

But the fate of the “live-in” servants is even less enviable. They may not have to pay rent, but they are shamelessly exploited by their employers, who seem to treat them no differently than the masters of yore used to treat their slaves:

Punsie say she and the people dem baby sleep on the same floor and every time that baby wake up, two, three times at night, she have to get up and feed it. If the baby miserable and won't go back to sleep, she have to stay up. She would say, “Yuh tink that mother would get up and come attend to her child? No, for di work horse can do it. 'Cause I sure she hear her baby crying at night. And di husband, he just as bad, for if him coffee and breakfast don't ready by 7 a.m., mi in trouble.” She would suck her teeth and ask me in disgust, “Yuh think Canada sweet?” (41)

Punsie's remark about Canada is of course an echo of “Canada Sweet, Girl,” the title of the short story and of the two friends' initial impression of Canada when they first settled in Toronto. Of course, the irony is that after several years of hardship, the assertion has become a disenchanting rhetorical question. The precariousness of the immigrant's life explains why they are literally obsessed with finding a job that will enable them to join the middle class. This is what Eve, the narrator of “Carmella,” has always dreamt of since she set foot in Canada. She may sometimes envy her friend's freedom but, as she tells her one day, her ambition in life is “to settle down with a nice guy and have two kids, a car and maybe a dog” (83).

And yet, even such a limited goal is not always easy to attain, as the narrator of “The Welfare Line” knows only too well. Unemployed and abandoned by her husband, she has to rely on welfare to survive and bring up her kids. Because it is nearly Christmas and she wants her children to enjoy the festive period as other children do, she braves the foul weather and goes to the welfare centre to collect her long-overdue cheque in spite of her being ill. She is fortunate enough to get her money, unlike the woman before her. The latter's request is denied despite her adopting the attitude of subservience expected by some of the white clerks:

I catch her Jamaican accent. She definitely street-smart. She not raising her voice to the counter woman, and she standing straight up, no slumping, and she looking right into the woman face. She dress tidy, like she work in the place, like she really understand this welfare thing and the people behind the counter. Her voice rise sometimes, but it come off more forceful than shrill and frighten. You have to be that way to deal with this welfare business, or they take advantage of you. Some of them love to talk to you like you don't have any sense. (76)

Even though she sympathises with the woman, the protagonist does not offer her any word of comfort because she does not want to antagonise the clerk behind the counter. She too has learnt to be "street-smart." In any case, her ordeal is not finished yet as she still plans to go to the Children's Aid Association for toys and clothes for her kids and to the food bank. All in all, she will have spent a whole day queuing for "temporary welfare" (71), as she calls it and having to face the reprobation of passers-by.

The story ends with the protagonist riding on the subway amidst the cold indifference of her fellow passengers. Like the black protagonist of Ralph Ellison's famous novel, she is invisible until she starts rummaging in the garbage bag she got at Children's Aid to carry the things that were given to her. By flaunting her poverty so conspicuously, she becomes a nuisance and has once again to face reprobation. As in previous instances, the analogy between the coldness of the weather and racism in Canadian society is pointedly underlined by the narrator:

The train like a funeral home, so I start to open some of the packages they give me at the Children's Aid. All white dolls coming out of these packages. Everything white. White Barbie, white Ken. So mi begin to talk to miself about all this whiteness around me and in the bag. Some people in the train staring, but I don't care. After standing in the welfare line today I'm entitled to talk to myself. Is my garbage bag. Is my business. So let dem look with dem starchy face. (80)

Life in the big, soulless Canadian city is indeed a dispiriting experience and it is little surprising that a lot of Silvera's heroines should feel alienated and rootless. As the young protagonist of "The Travelling Man" remarks, here in Canada, she is split into "two persons" (94). Having left Jamaica at an early age with her mother and elder brother but without her father, she feels drawn to the country of her birth without being able to really identify with it because she claims not to know "its language and its rhythm" (94). Her alienation stems from the tension she feels, torn between a place (Canada) which, cold as it is, has become home and the island she was born on, which now only exists in the vague memories she retains of her life there:

I'm split. I'm two persons: one the little girl, standing with blue-green water on each side; one the woman in the cold. Frozen bones. I'm a child struggling to wake from a nightmare. I'm a woman looking for lost bones, searching. I knew that we would leave the land, travel, come to this place, and that I would be an old woman. Frozen, broken bones. But now I'm the little girl again. (94)

The heroine of "The Travelling Man" is not the only one to feel torn in that way. Millie Maxwell often dreams of home, of its warm sun and of the parties she used to go to. And yet, she too feels that Canada is her new mother country and she is well aware that if she gets expelled she has nowhere to return to, now that her mother is dead and her friends have gone. The protagonist of "The Welfare Line" no doubt expresses the same feeling when she claims that she has a right to speak to herself aloud. She is fed up with being ignored and wants to be considered as a full citizen. This does not mean that she rejects her roots. Indeed, her idea of a successful feast is still Caribbean in spirit. Not only does she intend to cook Caribbean food but she also plans to have the right sort of entertainment to accompany it. As she remarks, "[we] can't celebrate the season without music. We have to play the devil, play the music, play the fool" (80). It is significant that the things she needs for preparing her Christmas meal are fresh and will come from the market—"coconut, green banana, goat for the curry, some

red peas" (80)—whereas the things she picked at the food bank were tins.

This profound nostalgia for one's roots, compounded with the feeling that there is no turning back, may explain why quite a few of Silvera's heroines suffer from an irrepressible restlessness. Carmella, the absentee protagonist of the eponymous short story, is no doubt the perfect embodiment of this malaise. As Eve, her long-standing friend and the narrator of the story remarks, "for the last ten years, [Carmella] had been passing through every province in Canada" (81). What Eve learns about her friend comes from the letters Carmella sends her. The letters express the ambiguity of Carmella's stand as they reveal both her delight at being free from the constraints of society that Eve chose to embrace—she is married, with kids—and her disenchantment at being unable to share it with someone she cares for:

I unfolded the letter once again and read.

Dearest, dearest friend,

I miss you. It's not the same without you. (89)

Beyond the words, it is the typography that expresses the gap that now separates the two women despite the obvious tenderness that still exists between them after all these years of separation. The cousin of the first-person narrator in "The Girl Who Loved Weddings" is clearly affected by the same incapacity to settle down. In the ten years or so between the moment she left home to live her life—she was fifteen then—and her marriage to Monty, the Rastafarian, Helena successively lived in Calgary, Vancouver, Quebec and Las Vegas before returning home. Significantly, she also changed her name and pretended she was a newly arrived Caribbean immigrant.

The restlessness also accounts for the difficult relationship Silvera's heroines have with men. If we discount the two or three female characters in the collection who seem to be happily

married—it should be emphasised that the husbands never appear as characters in the stories though—most of the others are either divorced or single. When a relationship between a woman and a man is described, it is presented as shallow and tense or even as degrading. Indeed, the only way men seem to be able to view women is as sexual objects.

We have already mentioned the scene in which a man breaks into the house of two lesbians with the aim of killing them to punish them for what he evidently regards as a sin. What is striking is the man's thoughts as he gets sexually aroused by the two women's amorous games. As the man starts masturbating, he fantasises about the treatment he reserves for them:

Bitches, sluts, ungodly creatures. He intended to tie them up. Strap their legs against each other. Oh, he was going to teach them a lesson. Let them do those things to each other right before his eyes.

He was excited, the crab more restless, the gun hot in his hand.

Tie up them lezzies. Then fuck them. Let them feel what it's like to get fucked by a real man. He wished he had carried his knife so he could slit their throats, watch the red running down their tits.

(72)

This sado-masochistic vision of sex, which would not be out of place in a pornographic film, is revealing of his chauvinistic turn of mind: being the macho type, he cannot imagine a relationship between a man and a woman other than as a domination of the one by the other. His Manichaeian vision of life is no doubt what the two women were trying to avoid by having nothing to do with men. The same seems to hold true of Monty, the Rastafarian. He shamelessly makes a pass at his wife's cousin on his wedding day. When the latter refuses his advances, he does not feel chastened in the least and starts complaining to his wife that she did not offer him a wedding present but that he would settle for the cousin (61).

Despite his Rastafarian ideal of love and respect for the individual, he is no better than the phallocrat of the previous story. By using his wife to solicit for her cousin's favours, he turns one

woman into a “whore” and the other into her “madam.” The women’s acceptance of the situation may at first seem unsettling but is the measure of the contempt they show for his attitude. The irony is that he is so drunk that he does not prove up to it. He is sick and vomits as he tries to have sex with Helena’s cousin. The two women leave him to ponder on his contradictions and spend the rest of the night dancing together in a bar.

But the utmost in terms of sexual degradation is no doubt the incestuous relationship a father imposes for several years on his young daughter with the tacit acceptance of the mother, a night nurse, who prefers to treat the symptom—she takes her daughter to a village doctor to cure her of her “bad” dreams—than the cause of the disorder. The emotional grip the story holds on the reader stems from the form Silvera chooses to relate the child’s tragic plight. Part of the story is an account by the autodiegetic narrator and the remainder is extracts from her diary. The narrative covers some five years in the life of the little girl whereas the diary covers the six months or so that very possibly end up with her actual rape.

Because the girl is the centre of consciousness throughout the short story and is too young to understand what is going on, nothing is mentioned explicitly and it is only gradually that the painful truth is revealed to the reader. And yet, it is the very subtlety of the language that proves the most devastating denunciation of the evils of incest. Silvera simultaneously succeeds in revealing the father’s abuse, the mother’s blameworthy ignorance of the situation and the child’s trauma, compounded by a diffuse sense of guilt.

Silvera’s talent for conveying, through language, her characters’ strain at going through their lives is boundless. Thus, the syncopated syntax of “Caribbean Chameleon,” with its paratactic, predominantly verbless sentences that are almost entirely stripped of their determiners, convincingly renders the Caribbean protagonist’s conflicting thoughts as she flies back to Canada after a holiday in Jamaica, her native country. In particular, it conveys the trauma she experiences when she is harassed by an overzealous immigration officer who cannot accept that a Jamaican woman returning home for her holiday should stay at a hotel rather than at her relatives’. The irony, of course, is that

the madder the black woman gets, the more convinced the officer is that there is something fishy about her. For the reader, though, the only revelation there is to be drawn from the whole event is how bigoted and racist the man is:

Mad woman tek over. Officer frighten like hell. Don't understand di talking of tongues. Call for a body search in locked room. Black polka dot woman don't wait. Tear off shirt. Tear off jacket. Tear off pants. Polka dot woman reach for bra. For drawers. Officer shout for Royal Canadian Mounted Police to take mad woman away. "TAKE HER AWAY. TAKE HER AWAY." Take this wild savage. Monster. Jungle beast. "AWAY. Arrest her for indecent exposure." Woman in black polka dot pant suit foam at the mouth. Hair standing high. Head-wrap drop off. Eyes vacant. Open wide. Sister. Brother. Cousin. Mother. Aunt. Father. Grandparent. Look the other way. (32)

But language is not just a powerful tool of denunciation for Makeda Silvera. She clearly subscribes to the post-colonial feminist view that a repositioning of women in language is necessary for the latter to reclaim their identity as subjects. As we have seen, the condition of the black female immigrant in Canada is highly precarious and alienating. Rejected because of their otherness, these women still occupy the position of silent subalterns that was theirs during colonization. To paraphrase feminist critic Mae Henderson, it is therefore only by entering into "an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self, a dialogue with aspects of 'otherness' within the self" that women can begin to reposition themselves in language, to reclaim a space for themselves and thus reintegrate their true Self (qtd. by Davies 163).

According to Carole Boyce Davies, such a process takes place when women "reverse, interrupt or dismantle the cultural mythologies which position women in language in negative ways; when [they] challenge how the feminine in language is addressed" (163). In other words, what is called for is a decentering of the dominant male position in society, of the type we see at work in Silvera's short stories. But such a decentering would be wasted without the internal dialogue that we mentioned previously.

It is this internal dialogue that the Jamaican writer pursues in *Her Head a Village* through the use of autodiegetic female narrators who relate their stories in Creole, i.e. in their mother tongue. The fictional autobiography is particularly well suited to the introspective journey they undertake to reconnect with their roots and reconstruct their identity while at the same time attempting to appropriate a space for themselves, in a foreign country, among people who are at best indifferent and at worst hostile and offensive. But then, “the autobiographical form allows a sort of re-vision, a radical re-shaping of a life, seen and recounted from the inside, which fits in with a ‘problematic’ protagonist’s attempts to define and order reality” (Davies and Savory 5-6).

Naturally, such a radical re-shaping of life and of its recounting calls for the repositioning in language we evoked earlier and it is easy to understand why the use of Creole in narration should play an essential role in the process. Because it foregrounds the plurivocality that both Davies and Henderson advocate, allowing for the inscription of a plurality of voices within the master narrative, Creole contributes to the undermining of the centrality of the authorial voice by forcing the integration of voices that have traditionally been silenced by society. The narrator of “Her Head a Village,” the short story that opens the collection, is a black, lesbian writer who is haunted by the voices of the women she used to know back in Jamaica. They literally inhabit her head, hence the title of the short story. Interestingly, the dialogue she has with these voices is far from harmonious. They argue with her, remind her of her duties as a radical, Third World writer and generally try to control what she writes in an attempt to pass from the position of unheard subalterns to that of speaking subjects.

Clearly, the voices represent the writer’s political conscience urging her to denounce the evils of a post-colonial world that is still largely dominated by the values of greed and materialism that produced colonialism and slavery. Indeed, the writer is well aware that xenophobia and racism are still rampant, the balance of power still very much in favour of men, and police violence still the order of the day, even in countries deemed

democratic. But she has another, more personal agenda. It is not that she feels unconcerned with these important issues but she wants to address them from a different perspective, a perspective that takes into account the plight of the common people confronted with the hardships of coming to terms with their own lives on a day-to-day basis:

The Black woman writer was full of despair; she wanted to explain to the villagers, once again, that what made writing dangerous for her was who she was. Black/woman/lesbian/mother/worker. [...] But they would not let her continue. In angry, harsh voices they pounded her head. "You want to talk about sexuality as a political issue? Villagers are murdered every time they go out, our young people jailed and thrown out of schools." Without success, she explained that she wanted to talk about all the dangers of writing. (17-18)

In this respect, the short story presents the reader with the writer's inner conflict between her loyalty to the cause of the Third World and her desire to speak of her personal experience, which may be that of a black lesbian, but is also that of an uprooted woman trying to give a meaning to her life through sisterhood. The fact that the writer seems to win the argument and finally manages to write what she had in mind should not lead us to believe that Silvera's aim is to re-instate the authorial voice in the position of the omniscient god.

For one thing, the internal dialogue does take place and more importantly perhaps, the stance the writer takes up is one that she comes to share with Maddie,⁴ one of the villagers, who is said to be "a woman of spirits, a mystic woman who carr[ies] a sharpened pencil behind her ear" (12). Like the writer in the story, Maddie also happens to be a recent immigrant to Canada and is not unsympathetic to her identity quest. In this respect, she may be viewed as the writer's alter ego, and it is hardly surprising that the two women should appear side by side at the end of the short story and that the task of recounting has been attributed to Maddie.

⁴ The character's nickname is of course revealing of the way society rates writers, insisting as it does on the streak of madness.

Equally symbolic is the fact that the scene conjured up by the artist should be cast in spatial terms, taking place as it does in the middle of the countryside. Sisterhood has helped the protagonist to come to terms with who she is and where she now lives without compromising her integrity as a radical writer while reconnecting with her roots:

The Black woman writer slept late, dreaming first of her grandparents' village and then of her lovers. Now Maddie's face came. She took Maddie's hand and they set out down the village streets, through the fields of wild flowers, dandelions, Easter lilies. Maddie took the pencil from her head and began to write. With Maddie beside her, she awoke in a bed of wild flowers, refreshed. (18)

The protagonist of "Her Head a Village" is no doubt the most articulate of the characters in the collection of short stories. But she is far from being the only one of her kind. In fact, every one of Silvera's women protagonists, in her own way, attempts to reclaim a space for herself, a space free from the evils of a capitalistic society in which greed, indifference to the sufferings of others and sheer xenophobia are the order of the day. Thus, Carmella, the heroine of the eponymous short story, is faced with a dilemma that it will take her part of her life to solve. On the one hand, she is determined not to reproduce her mother's pattern and become what she calls "the typical Caribbean person" (84), but on the other hand, she cannot identify with the narrow-minded, middle-class women she comes across in her everyday life, now that she has immigrated to Canada.

After several years spent wandering around the country, trying to adjust to her new existence, she finally succeeds in claiming a space for herself on a small, isolated island, far from big cities and their endless injustices. But as in the case of the writer of "Her Head a Village," her happiness is incomplete because she misses the company of a true friend, as her letters to the female narrator of the story amply suggest. But at least she has found a certain peace of mind, which her long-standing friend

clearly envies her, as the closing sentences of the story reveal all too plainly:

Her letters kept me alive. I lived through them. They provided that glimmer, that spark during periods in my life when night takes over and the dawn becomes a memory. I looked down again at her latest letter and read the note scrawled at the bottom:

P.S. P.E.I. will be great. Come out and visit. Have you learned to swim yet? I bet not. Come let me teach you next summer.

Yes, I thought to myself, maybe next year. (92)

Once again, we can sense the tension we have noticed earlier between the character's aspirations and the harsh reality she has to adjust to. And yet, the autodiegetic narrator's final comment may be more optimistic than it seems. Indeed, she may not have learnt how to swim but she certainly has learnt how to write, an art that she claimed she had no time to master earlier in the short story. As such, she is emblematic of most of Silvera's heroines who come to terms with their difficult existences thanks to the indefectible friendship and complicity that bind them together all through their lives, and thanks to a repositioning in language. Sisterhood is clearly what makes them accept their uprootedness and alienation. The repositioning in language is the process by which such an acceptance is finally acknowledged.

Such an agenda makes for militant writing and there is much of that in Makeda Silvera's fiction but her stories are never Manichaean, they are wonderfully crafted and thus always make compelling reading. This is no doubt why she can be regarded as one of the most promising Caribbean women writers of her generation.

DOMINIQUE DUBOIS
Université d'Angers

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