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CONTEMPORARY POETS
IN THE
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARCHIVE

Edited by Kristen Case
and Alexandra Manglis

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MAKING BLACK CAKE IN COMBUSTIBLE SPACES

M. NourbeSe Philip

*It don't come, never arrive, had not—for the first time since she leaving, had left home, is the first, for the first time in forty years (the) Mother not standing, had not stood over the aluminium bucket with her heavy belly, whipping up the yellow eggs them and the green, green lime-skin. "People buying cake in New York," she says, (the) Mother had said, "not making them."*¹

These are the opening words of a short story of mine, "Burn Sugar," written more than two decades ago. I was, at that time, in the early stages of my lifelong experimentation with language and, particularly in this case, with the Caribbean demotic,² trying to find the written form of this "language . . . nurtured and cherished on the streets of Port of Spain . . . in the mouths of the calypsonians . . . the cuss buds, the limers, the hos (whores), the jackabats, and the market women . . . custodians and lovers of this strange, wonderful, you tink it easy, jiveass, kickass massa day done . . . ole mass, pretty mass, pansweet language."³

As I reread it, I'm aware of a certain discomfort with the language, some of that because I feel more adept all these years later at how to work with the Caribbean demotic; some of it perhaps still lingering in the shame-tinged margins of it not being "proper" english.

Every year it arrive, arriving, use to, in time for Christmas or sometimes—a few times well—not till January; once it even come, coming as late as March. Wherever she be, is, happens, happening to be, Jamaica, London, Toronto, it coming wrap and tie up in two or three layers of brown paper, and tape up in a Peak Freans biscuit tin—from last Christmas—black black from the oven and address on both sides—"Just to make sure it getting there," she hearing, hears (the) Mother saying—in (the) Mother funny printing (she could never write cursive, she used to say). Air mail or sea mail, she figuring out (the) Mother finances—whether she having money or not.

The car speeds along the snow-banked highway; it's filled—two parents, two grown children, one thirteen-year-old grandchild, one small dog, and all the usual stuff

and more that one packs for a few days out of town over the Christmas season. It's December 23, 2017, and we have to make one stop to pick up some seasonal Caribbean food, including a traditional Black Cake, one of the culinary axes around which Christmas celebrations in the Caribbean circle. I have never bought Black Cake before, so I'm breaking with tradition. It's not black enough, I think when I first see the cake, and this concerns me, but I pay for it and we are back on the road headed to our destination on Georgian Bay.

About an hour into the trip the radio begins a podcast about the poet Emily Dickinson and her recipe for Black Cake.⁴

When she cut, cutting the string, she use to, would tear off the Scotch tape—impatient she rips, ripping, would rip off the brown paper, and prizing off the lid she pauses, pausing . . . sitting back on her haunches and laughing her head off—the lid don't, doesn't, never, not matching the tin, but it there all the same—black and moist. The cake—Black Cake.

It's a disjunctive moment—the image of Emily Dickinson making Black Cake. Is it the same Black Cake that now sits in the back of the car? A traditional Christmas delicacy that is woven into my memory of home, childhood, my mother, loss, exile, and the (im)possibility of women like my mother making poetry, or any art for that matter, at a time when manual work extended from sunrise to sun-down.

The podcast does establish a Caribbean connection, referring to the many spices in the recipe such as nutmeg and cinnamon that come from the area. "This is a cake that calls for nineteen eggs!" writes Emilie Hardman.⁵ My mother's calls for twenty-four! And 2 lbs. of butter like Dickinson's. "All assembled it's 19 lbs 4 oz," Hardman continues. I have never weighed my mother's. "And that's before you put the brandy in!" We used rum in which the dried fruit would have been soaking weeks, if not months, ahead. "The black cake first appears in the 1840s in cookbooks," according to Hardman, and is "Caribbean in its origin—the cinnamon, the mace, the nutmeg, it's very tied up with the sugar trade and molasses." My mother used burn sugar, not molasses.

The weeks them pass, passing, used to—she eating the cake sometimes alone by herself; sometimes sharing, she shares a slice with a friend. Then again—sometimes when she alone, is alone, she cries, does cry as she eating—each black mouthful bringing up all kind of memory—then choking, she chokes—the lump of food and memory blocking sticks, sticking up in her throat—big and hard like a rock stone.

From the comfort of a snug, warm cottage I gaze directly out at the white, snowy landscape of the lake, which is actually one of the many small, beautiful coves of

Georgian Bay, all part of Lake Huron. The water is calm though unfrozen and the beauty of the bay before me is in stark contrast to the history of shipwrecks the lake is known for. The surrounding area, traditional home to the Petun, Iroquois, and Ojibway First Nations, is also home to what was once the northernmost terminal of the Underground Railroad, Sydenham, now known as Owen Sound. Over the next few days the winds will whip the water like my mother whipped the eggs for Black Cake that she, Emily Dickinson, and I are all connected to in the creation and consumption of Blackness rooted in certain brute, historical facts.

She not knowing, doesn't know—when she beginning to notice it she don't know, but once she noticing, it always there when she opening the tin—faint but undeniable; musty and old, it rise, rising up, an odour of moldiness and something else from the open tin, that making her nose twitch. Is like it casting a pall over her pleasure, shadowing her delight; it spoiling and clouding the rich, fruity, Black Cake smell, and every time she taking a bite, it there—in her mouth—hanging about, it hangs about her every mouthful. (The) Mother's advice is to pour some make-sure-is-good-Trinidad rum on it. Nothing helping—the smell just there, lingering.

Knowing, she know that something on its annual journey to wherever she happen to be, something inside the cake change, changing within the cake, and whether is the change that causing the funny smell, or the journey to her that causing the change that causing the funny smell . . . she not knowing . . . It not tasting like this back home is what the first bite telling her—back, back home where she hanging round, anxiously hanging about the kitchen, getting in (the) Mother's way—underfoot—waiting for the baking to start.

In her commentary, mentioned above, Emilie Hardman refers to the sugar trade, not the slave trade, or slavery for that matter, although the latter was the foundation, the *sine qua non*, of the former. The sugar trade, as Hardman euphemistically refers to it, would bring sugar, molasses, and spices to northern states like Massachusetts; slavery and its brutal legacies would bring Dickinson in contact with African Americans in Amherst. According to author Aífe Murray, they, along with the Irish immigrants who eventually displaced them in the Dickinson household, as well as indigenous people uprooted from their homelands, comprised the serving classes in Amherst;⁶ indeed, this was the pool of people from whom the servants in the Dickinson household would have come. Some would also have been itinerant, selling goods or wares at the Dickinson Homestead. Murray's thesis, based on extensive archival research and some speculation, is that the maids, labourers, and trades people from these diverse backgrounds residing at, or passing through, the Dickinson Homestead would have had an impact on Dickinson's life and work. The impact, she argues, can be seen both in the

quantity of work Dickinson was able to produce—when she had good and steady help, her output increased—as well as in her poetic diction. The vernacular speech patterns of these individuals, some of whom, like the Irish maid Margaret Maher, worked cheek by jowl with Dickinson in her home and particularly in the kitchen, would, Murray insists, have influenced the poet in many ways, not least of all her unique poetic diction and style. “Emily’s writing suggests influence by her servants’ Hiberno-English and African American Vernacular English [the term linguists use for Black English]; . . . even adopt[ing] some of their linguistic and social strategies . . .”⁷

Murray refers to Dickinson’s kitchen as a “combustible space” where “maid’s and mistress’s lives and languages rubbed off on each other.”⁸ In this “combustible space” we have Dickinson and her servants making Black Cake, a delicacy which is itself the result of what I call the “combustible space” that is the Americas and the Caribbean. I am suggesting here that there was something else at work beyond the simple, and perhaps simplistic, exchange that the metaphor of “rubb[ing] off on each other” implies. Murray asserts that it was “conversation . . . especially with servants whose language backgrounds were different from the poet’s, [that] informed her ear and helped explain her unusual language gestures.”⁹ Along with the aural presence of the Other, whose oral linguistic practices complicate and diversify the “combustible space” that is not only the kitchen of the Dickinson Homestead, but all of the Americas and the Caribbean, there is the Othered nature of the recipe’s ingredients—the spices and the sugar that stand in for another theatre of terror, albeit invisible: the Caribbean. These ingredients, Caribbean ingredients, sugar, nutmeg, and mace, represent an early infusion of other Afrosporic currents and discourses into the United States, discourses which, while still then unheard, linger on the tongue sweetening the stench of that which should never have been, or allowed to be. We could argue that Black Cake is a kind of blackness that Dickinson’s privileged life allowed her to consume, even as she aurally consumed and absorbed the “African American Vernacular English” among others.

“Wash the butter!” (The) Mother wanting to get her out of the way, and is like she feeling the feel of the earthenware bowl—cool, round, beige in colour—(the) Mother pushing at her. Wash the butter, wash the butter, sit and wash the butter at the kitchen table cover with a new piece of oilcloth for Christmas; wash the butter and the sun coming through the breeze blocks, jumping all over the place dappling spots on her hand—it and the butter running competition for yellow. Wash the butter! Round and round . . . pushing the lumps of butter round with a wooden spoon.

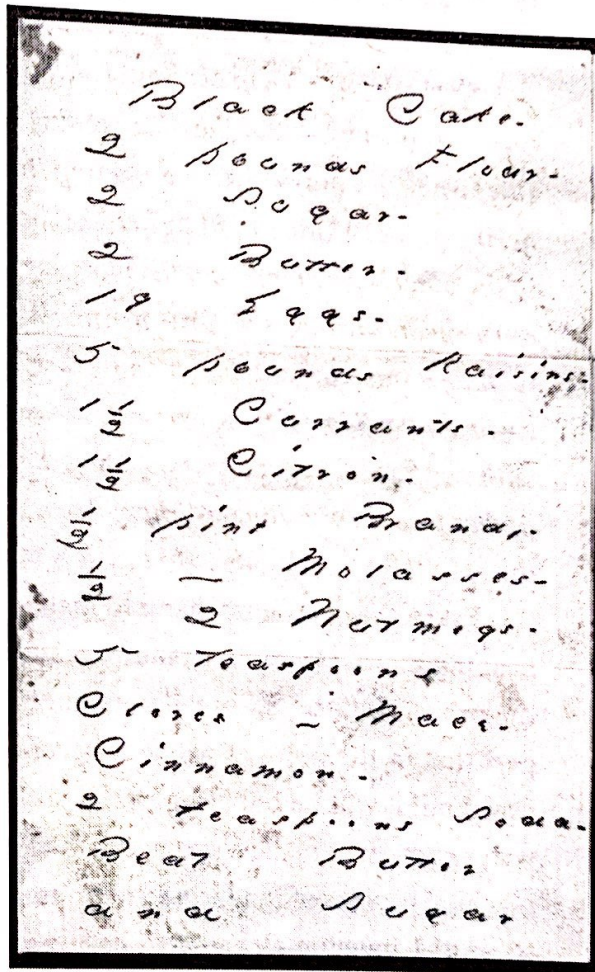
Every year she asking the same question—“Is why you have to do this?” and every year (the) Mother telling her is to get the salt out of the butter, and every year she washing

the butter. The water not looking any different, not tasting any different—if she could only see the salt leaving the butter . . . (the) Mother catching her like this every year, and every year she washing the butter for hours, hours on end until is time to make the burn sugar.

The bought Black Cake is, predictably, disappointing. Tasty yes, but its sweetness, unchallenged, remains unscathed like “the myth in the white dress . . . then you think about her in the kitchen. The physicality of that cake—of making that cake that you share with people. It’s a social cake! This is a woman who is doing something that we think so counter to Emily and her remove from the world.”¹⁰

Now! She stopping—(the) Mother not telling her this but she knowing and (the) Mother knowing—it is understood between them. The coal-pot waiting with its red coals—(the) Mother never letting her light it—and the iron pot waiting on the coal pot, and (the) Mother waiting for the right time. She pushing her hand into the sugar bag—suddenly—one handful, two handful—and the white sugar rising up gentle gentle in the middle of the pot, two handful of white sugar rising gently . . . (the) Mother never letting her do it herself, but to the last grain of sugar, the very last grain, she knowing how much sugar going into the pot. She standing close close to (the) Mother, watching the white sugar and she knowing exactly when it changing—after she count to a hundred, she deciding one year; another year she knowing for sure it not changing while she holding her breath; and last year she closing her eyes and knowing that when she opening them, the sugar

changing. It never working. Every time she losing, disappointing herself—the sugar never changing when she expecting it to, not once in all the years she watching, observing (the) Mother’s rituals. Too quick, too slow, too late—it always catching her—by surprise! First, the sugar turning sticky and brown at the edges, then a darker brown—by surprise!—



smoke stinging, stings her eyes, tears run running down her face, the smell sharp and strong of burning sugar—by surprise!—she not budging, standing still, watching, watches what happening in the pot—by surprise!—the white sugar completely gone, leaving behind a thick, black, sticky mass like molasses—by surprise! If the pot staying on long enough, she wondering if she seeing the sugar changing back, right back to cane juice, runny and opaque . . . catching her by surprise.

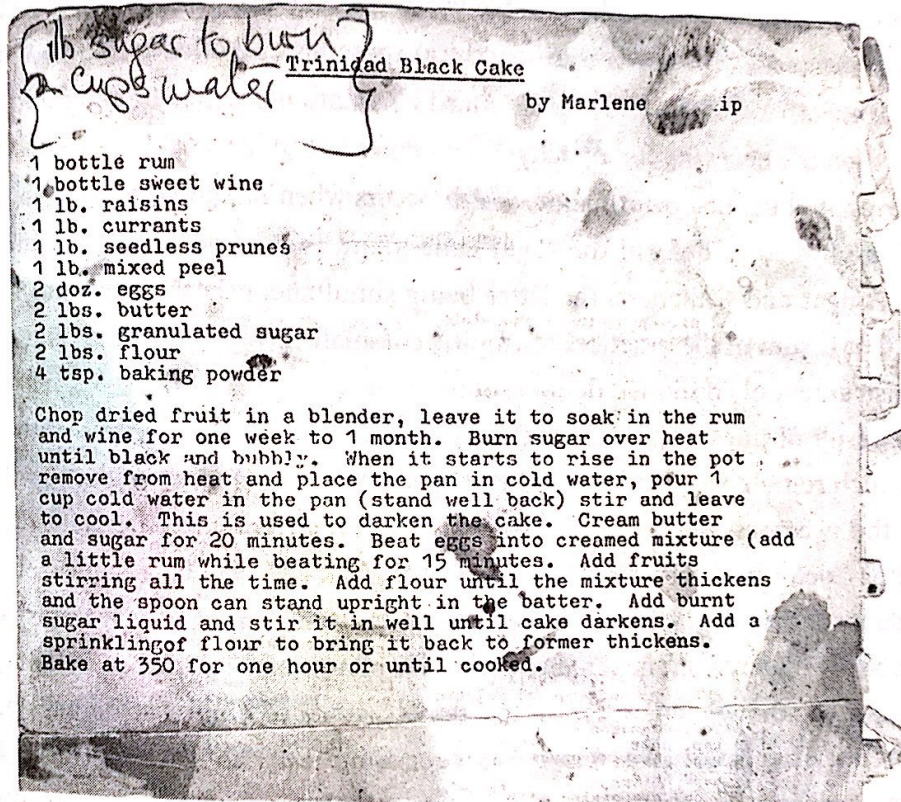
(The) Mother grabbing a kitchen towel, grabbing the pot and putting it in the sink—all one gesture, clean and complete—and it sitting there hissing and sizzling. (The) Mother opening the tap and steam for so rising up and brip brap—just so it all over—smoke gone, steam gone, smoke and steam gone leaving behind this thick thick, black liquid.

She looking down at the liquid—calling it her magic liquid; is like it having a life of it own—its own life—and the cake needing it to make it taste different. She glancing over at (the) Mother—maybe like she needing (the) Mother to taste different. She wonder, wondering if (the) Mother needing her like she needing (the) Mother—which of them essential to the other—which of them the burn sugar? Sticking a finger in the pot, she touching the burn sugar, turning, she turns her finger this way and that, looking at it in the sunlight, turning it this way and that, making sure, she makes sure she not dropping any of the burn sugar on the floor; closing her eyes, she closes them, and touching she touches her tongue with her finger . . . gently, and tasting she tastes the taste of the burn sugar. She screwing up her face then smiling it tasting like it should—strong, black and bitter and it making the cake taste like no other cake . . .

Every year I turn my hand to making blackness. And bitterness. First, you pour a heaping mound of white granulated sugar into a pot (preferably done outdoors since the process will set off fire alarms); heat the sugar until it becomes caramelized, then past that to the point at which it becomes black in colour, by which point the sugar, now liquid, will be bubbling in the pot. Wait for it to become sufficiently black; add water enough to make a syrup, the thicker and more bitter, the better.

That process of rendering the white sugar black always appears magical to me, akin to what I imagine alchemy to have been like, except this appears a reversal, albeit partial, of the alchemical process, which begins with the *nigredo*, the black stage, which, in turn, becomes the *albedo*, the white stage. The following stages, the yellow and red, finally yield the goal of the transformation—the prized philosopher's stone.¹¹ I am curious to know where the practice of using burn sugar among the descendants of the enslaved, like my mother, comes from and have yet to find the source. It is a puzzle because the molasses that Dickinson's recipe calls for would have been readily available in the sugar economies of the Caribbean, yet the key ingredient of Black Cake

as I knew (and know) it, the ingredient that gives it its unique taste, dare I say, as prized as the philosopher's stone, is burn sugar, not molasses. It is, however, a tradition that, like many others, is being impacted by the easy availability of commercial browning products. Making burn sugar—making blackness from whiteness—remains a challenging and difficult process for me. In all respects.



(The) Mother's Recipe—

The imagination, Gaston Bachelard writes, "is . . . the faculty of deforming the images offered by perception, of freeing ourselves from the immediate images; it is especially the faculty of changing images."¹² Alchemical work, through deformative processes such as burning or putrefying is intended to deform nature with the goal of creating the philosopher's stone. In a similar way, preparing burn sugar deforms the white sugar, itself the product of earlier deformative processes—the deformation of the African into the non-existence of a negative blackness, through the terrifying, exhaustive, and exploitative practices of transforming and deforming the sugar cane plant into sugar—white sugar. The outcome and legacy of the transatlantic trade in

Africans is a layering and mirroring of deformations between the enslaved, the land they worked, and the crops which they produced. Are these deformative processes reversible? the young narrator in "Burn Sugar" wonders, as she gazes at the rendering of white into black, yet another deformation, through the application of heat—in "combustible spaces." If enough heat were applied long enough, would the blackness of the burn sugar transform into the original cane juice, thin and somewhat opaque, that is expressed from the cane stalk? Can we move past the oppositional binary of black and white to a place that resists clarity and transparency and offers a refuge, a place of maroonage, perhaps, with echoes of Edouard Glissant's insistence on the right to, and possibly even the necessity for, opacity?¹³

The result of the first deformation, which occurs when black bodies in "combustible spaces" are forced to deform the sugar cane plant, is twofold—material and non-material. Sugar and whiteness, the latter being simultaneously the product of deformation that is sum of the practices of empire, colonialism, slavery, and racism, as well as the instrument of continued deformation.

The result of the second deformation process is the black bitterness of the burn sugar, which reminds us of all that is forgotten, unremembered, or seldom spoken; it rescues the sweetness of the cake from being unscathed, lending it a certain memory of a bitter, deformed history that lingers, an aftertaste on the tongues of those descendants of that original deformation, as much as the taste of the sugared spices of the Caribbean lingered on the tongues of the inhabitants of the Dickinson Homestead, also deformed, though unaware, by the same history of empire, colonialism, and racism. It is a bitter history we consume as we consume the rich Blackness that is Black Cake, but perhaps, like the philosopher's stone, the burn sugar has the potential of generating transformative possibilities within and for us.

To return to Dickinson's Black Cake and Murray's analysis of the generative role the kitchen and her various servants and helpers played in her work: Can we perhaps interpret the role of these familiar unfamiliar with their distinctive vernaculars, people who as servants and labourers would have been marginal in nineteenth-century life in the United States, people whose histories contained and spilled trauma—the Irish famine, the Indigenous genocide, and the transatlantic trade in the Americas—as catalysing a certain deformative process in Dickinson's linguistic imaginings, much like the burn sugar (which she didn't use in her Black Cake) does? Could we, perhaps, say that her tongue acquired a taste for that linguistic bitterness, coming out of a deformed history of colonialism, racism, and classism that would have been present in her household, which, in turn, resulted in a poetry that refused to be unscathed?

... (The) Mother nodding her head and at last she knowing that now is the time—time for the burn sugar. She picking up the jar, holding it very carefully, and when (the) Mother nodding again she beginning to pour—she pouring, (the) Mother stirring. The batter staying true to itself in how it willing to change—at first it turning from yellow to beige to brown—just like me, she thinking, then it turning a dark brown like her sister, then an even darker brown—almost black—the colour of her brother, and all the time (the) Mother stirring. She emptying the jar of burn sugar—her magic liquid—and the batter colouring up now like her old grandmother—a seasoned black that sometimes whitish flecks of butter, egg and sugar still betraying, and (the) Mother's arm not stopping beating and the batter turning in and on and over itself...