ANGLO SAXONICA

M. NourbeSe Philip's *She Tries her Tongue, her Silence Softly Breaks* and the Possibilities of Language

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks (1989), M. NourbeSe Philip's widely acclaimed poetry collection,[1] explores the themes of identity, diaspora, colonialism and exile and how these are intimately related to language. Through the analysis of selected poems, this essay aims to explore the crucial role played by language in the lyrical subject's struggle to come to terms with her identity as a Black immigrant woman, her sense of belonging, and with her own use of the English language. This analysis and interpretation draws on key concepts such as nation language (Brathwaite), in betweenness (Bhabha), the violence of language and the remainder (Lecercle). I argue that Philip subverts Western literary forms as a way of denouncing and resisting the violence perpetrated by the English language against the peoples of the African diaspora. In her poems, this is achieved mainly through the fragmentation of words and the collage of scientific and legal texts, as well as through a permanent questioning of the power of the English language. This act of resistance is, for the poet, the only way to tell her story and to open the space for other stories to be shared and other voices to be heard.

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"Speech, voice, language, and word – all are ways of being in the world" (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 82). Thus states M. NourbeSe Philip in "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy". Born in Trinidad and Tobago, a Caribbean archipelago and a former British colony, Marlene Nourbese Philip migrates to Canada to further her studies and to practice law, a profession which she abandons to dedicate herself to writing and poetry (Philip, *Trying Tongues* 683). Later, with the essay collection titled *A Genealogy of Resistance* (1997), she begins publishing under the name M. NourbeSe Philip. Her works explore themes such as colonialism, diaspora and exile, identity and language. In *She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*, originally published in 1989, Philip explores these themes and how they are intrinsically connected to the English language. Several authors have discussed Philip's use of language and touched upon the complicated relationship between language and the poet's identity and history. Naomi Guttman discussed the link between Philip's search for the mother tongue and her use of classical myths, particularly those that tell the story of women victims of sexual violence. She reads this poetry collection as an attempt to create a Caribbean mythology made of stories about mothers and daughters. Similarly, Kristen Mahlis argues that these poems allow the poet to remake the English language to better reflect the anglophone Caribbean islands, creating a dialogue between the Western literary canon and an Afro-Caribbean voice that shows the pain and suffering of the African diaspora. More recently, Samantha Pinto adds that Philip's collection reflects, both structurally and stylistically, the history of the English language with the aim of restoring the visibility and subjectivity of Black women.

The imposition of the English language on enslaved people brought to the Americas had the goal of forcing them to forget their mother tongues and, consequently, their cultures. The descendants of enslaved people, who are a part of the African diaspora, are still grappling with this loss (of the mother and of the mother tongue) and with the imposition of a new language – they, too, must learn to live in a language that is not their own. Such is the focus of NourbeSe Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue*, where we encounter a poetic subject tormented by the loss of her mother tongue and the violence of a language that speaks of her non-being. Looking at selected excerpts from *She Tries Her Tongue*, I intend to explore how the English language becomes a tool of resistance against the violence it perpetrates and that continues to make this poetic subject a stranger. Based on concepts such as nation language (Brathwaite), in betweenness (Bhabha), the violence of language (Lecercle), I argue that, in *She tries her tongue*, Philip deconstructs and re-constructs the English language through Western literary forms such as fragmentation and collage to denounce its violence and resist the limits this language imposes. Poetry is, then, the medium through which Philip resists this violent language imposed on her to include stories and voices that had once been silenced.

THE LEGACY OF ENGLISH IN THE CARIBBEAN

The English language has a long and violent history in the Caribbean islands. Colonisation forced European languages and cultures upon the native populations of the islands, whose languages and cultures were subsequently destroyed. As the transatlantic slave trade emerged, enslaved people from West Africa were brought to the Caribbean by European colonisers, amongst them the English. These colonisers settled in the islands, imposing their languages and customs to the native populations and to the enslaved people brought from the African continent. Although the English language was, as Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains, "the language of public discourse and conversations, of obedience, command and conception" (7), the languages spoken by the enslaved people brought to the Caribbean resisted, despite their inferior status. These African languages, because of their contact with the imposed English language, were in permanent transformation; likewise, English was also being transfigured by the African languages in the Caribbean. Michael Aceto, when discussing Creole languages in the Caribbean, explains that, contrary to the generally accepted theory that Creole Englishes in the Caribbean emerged in the context of the slave plantation, these languages were "the results of pre-existing English-derived varieties 'mixing' together to produce new varieties" and that these new varieties, in turn, influenced the kind of English spoken by the settlers (135). Centuries

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Anglo Saxonica
DOI: 10.5334/as.81

later, this complex process that began with the imposition of the English language and resulted in a variety of Creoles, continues to heavily influence the literature written in the Anglophone Caribbean by Caribbean writers and poets. Taught by an educational system that carried "the contours of an English heritage" (Brathwaite 8), where they learned about Wordsworth's daffodils and the pentameter, these writers felt the need to distance themselves from a model that could never represent the experience of the Caribbean. According to Brathwaite, the new system or model is called 'nation language', "an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility" (13), with strong ties to the African languages in the Caribbean and their sounds and rhythms. NourbeSe Philip, in an interview with Kristen Mahlis, discusses her relationship with Brathwaite's nation language. She asserts that "nation is a male discourse" and, as such, she avoids using this kind of language, although she recognises the purpose of the concept (Philip, *A Poet of Place* 684). Instead, she prefers a language that focuses "on the hidden histories of the people responsible for the richly subversive language of the Caribbean", which she calls the Caribbean demotic: "a language capable of great rhythms and musicality; one that is and is not English, and one which is among the most vital in the English-speaking world today" (*A Poet of Place* 685; *She Tries Her Tongue* 106). It is this Caribbean demotic that permeates the poems of *She tries her tongue* in a thorough subversive exercise in language that confronts empire, patriarchy and the violence of a language that means a profound wound for the Black diaspora.

Black immigrants from the Anglophone Caribbean have mostly settled in English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. Caribbean immigration to Canada can be traced back to the eighteenth century, but it was during the 1970s that it rose to its highest numbers, mostly due to legislative changes to Canada's immigration policies. The country needed skilled workers, which led the government to introduce the 1967 Immigration Act. No longer focusing on place of origin or race, as previous immigration policies had done, this new act opened Canada's borders to immigrants from all over the world, provided they could demonstrate their skills for the job market. NourbeSe Philip is part of these immigrants from the Caribbean that arrived in Canada during this period. Recently graduated, she migrated to Toronto to pursue postgraduate studies in Law. After seven years working as a lawyer, she left her job to continue writing. Her life, as she explains in an interview with Mahlis, is defined by the "experience of exile" (*A Poet of Place* 683). Moving from Tobago to Trinidad at a young age, and then from Trinidad to Canada, Philip embodies the experience of the African diaspora. Diaspora means dislocation, both physically (from one geographical space to another) and linguistically. Even if one moves to a place where they speak the same language, the newly arrived diasporic subject must learn how to live in a new language, a new way of being. Living in between two countries, two geographies and two cultures, Philip's writing reflects her in-betweenness as a Black immigrant woman in a country that, although claiming to be multicultural, is still distinctly white Anglo-Saxon. Because of this, her writing (both her poetry and critical essays) is marked by a distrust of the English language. In the same interview, Philip states that

> there's good reason why people distrust writing in the Caribbean, because so much of our despair has come about through writing, I mean the laws and regulations about us and our life. Why should we trust writing? There's nothing in our history that suggests that we should trust it, because writing is so integrally linked to being enslaved (…). (*A Poet of Place* 690)

This distrust of writing and, inherently, of language is reflected in the poems of *She tries her tongue*. Language becomes a place from where Philip, as a diasporic subject and as a descendant of enslaved people, challenges the rigidity of categories such as nation, language and culture. Sophia Lehmann, discussing the role of diaspora in Philip's poetry collection, writes that "[t]he uniformity of a fixed or rigidly bounded culture is replaced by more open and mutable one in which the spaces *between* languages and countries become sites of new creation rather than marginality" (104). I would argue that marginality is still an incredibly important aspect of Philip's work: it is, after all, her starting point. A Black immigrant woman; three categories located in the margin, a place from where she resists to a centre occupied by white Anglo-Saxon men in a country such as Canada. From this confrontation between two countries and two cultures emerge spaces in between. Spaces that are also, as Lehmann suggests, spaces of creation, of possibilities, in the same vein as Homi Bhabha, in his seminal work *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha argues that these 'in between' spaces "provide the terrain

Anglo Saxonica
DOI: 10.5334/as.81

for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1–2). In other words, diasporic subjects who leave their home countries and arrive at a new country must grapple with two different cultures, identities and ways of being that open space for negotiating identities and "experiences of nationness" (2). This negotiation is a violent struggle that happens in language, because "it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*" (Benveniste 224), a process that is violent because, to become a subject, one does it "by acquiring a linguistic place and imposing it on others" (Lecercle 257).

This is a process that happens in English, the official language of both Trinidad and Tobago and Canada. In both countries, both former colonies of the British empire, the English language has served "an ideological role in terms of the power and political capital that accrued to those who had access to a proficiency in it" (Nero 164). A language imposed on enslaved people and their descendants, English is inextricably linked to a kind of violence that is both material and immaterial, in Jean-Jacques Lecercle's words. The material violence of words leaving the body and of the scream is connected to the "immaterial violence of persuasion" and of destruction (Lecercle 230). The violence of the screams in the Caribbean slave plantation can never be forgotten because English carries with it the violence of persuasion, of imposition and of the forced forgetting of one's mother tongue.

LOSING A MOTHER TONGUE, OR HOW TO BE/LONG

The forced loss of a mother tongue is an act of extreme violence in language. When a person is forced to forget their own mother tongue, they forget their customs, their community, their culture. Losing a mother tongue is losing one's sense of belonging. In Philip's poetry, the desire to belong (to a place, to a language that is not English, to a community) is palpable. Patricia Saunders, in an interview with Philip, points to the poet's use of a slash to deconstruct the verb "to belong", transforming it in "to be/long" (Philip, *Trying Tongues* 219). The use of the slash to separate the word "belong" in two words (which are still connected since there are no blank spaces between the words and the slash) highlights the double meaning of the verb "to be": it can refer to someone's physical existence or presence (I am, or I exist) and it can refer to the place someone occupies (I am here). When the slash is added to cut through the verb "belong", there is also an emphasis placed on the word "long". With the double meaning of the verb "to be", "to be/long" can refer to time – "How long have you been here?" – or to someone's desire to find their roots, a community, or an identity of one's own – "to long for something". "To be/long" encapsulates the experience of the diaspora: a constant longing for a place and an identity, while simultaneously knowing that the search might never end. In the essay that opens *Frontiers*, her first essay collection, Philip asks herself and the reader: "How do you begin to be/long when everything around you conspires to keep you alien – the language, the customs, the spirituality?" ('Echoes in a Stranger Land' 22). Although the answer is not easy to find, Philip turns to language.

In the poem "Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the Girl with the Flying Cheek-bones", the poetic subject is tormented by a question: "In whose language / Am I / If not in yours" (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 26). She starts asking hesitantly, as confirmed by the two first lines and the carefully placed blank space between the repetition of "If not". It is only then that the poetic subject can ask the question, albeit fragmented. The fragmentation of this question, and the use of the blank space separating it into three distinct lines, invites readers to reflect on the duality of the formulation "Am I", since it stands alone in a single line. As discussed above, the verb "to be" has a double meaning. In this context, the question being asked can be read, consequently, in two different (but always connected) ways: a poetic subject attempting to carve a space for herself in a language that is someone else's ("in whose language can I take up space if not yours?"); at the same time, the poetic subject is asking in whose language can she exist if not in someone else's language. Belonging is, therefore, connected to language. Throughout the poem, this question is repeated several times, but the poetic subject subtly changes its formulation – for example, "I am yours / In whose language / Am I not" -, indicating that this question is a source of profound anguish. For she is unable to find the answers she is looking for and is confronted instead with a language that is not hers ("If not in yours / In whose / In whose language / Am I…") and which does not speak of her existence. She cannot belong to this language that she speaks.

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In fact, the imposition of the English language in the Caribbean represents a wound for those born in the islands colonised by the English. In "Interview with an Empire", Philip asserts that English (which she spells with a lower-case e) "was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being" ('Interview with an Empire' 50). This is reflected in the poetic subject of "Meditations …", tormented because she cannot find the answers to her question. In other words, she cannot find another language that is not English in which she can exist and speak of her subjectivity, because she has no other language in which to speak. A source of pain, English speaks of the poetic subject's non-being, but it is also the only language in which she can speak and exist.

The dehumanisation of Black people through language traces back to the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation system in the Caribbean. Enslaved people from Africa brought to the Caribbean were separated to ensure that they could not communicate with one another and any language other than English was prohibited. Mother tongues were lost, albeit not completely, as many words and rhythms survived and changed the languages being spoken in Trinidad and Tobago, including English. Nevertheless, as a language of imperial power, inherently violent, English becomes a tool to categorise people into beings and non-beings, to which the poetic subject of "Meditations …" opposes. The first part of the poem ends with an open-ended question – "In whose language / Am I…" -, whose tentative answer, provided by the poetic subject, appears in the second part of the poem. Her search for impossible answers is interrupted, as she describes a woman as the "Girl with the flying cheek-bones". The juxtaposition of the lines "She is / I am" allow her to define herself through a comparison with this woman (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 27). This is followed by comparisons and metaphors that highlight the physical characteristics and beauty of people that surround the poetic subject: "a nose broad / As her strength", "the full-moon lips / Carrying the midnight of colour". What would typically be considered not beautiful according to Western European beauty standards (a broad nose) is compared to the woman's strength, subverting the negative connotation of the adjective 'broad' to characterise the woman's nose. However, the poetic subject is using these literary devices to ask questions, almost as if confronting the owner of the language she speaks: "Where is the woman with a nose broad / As her strength / If not in yours". And she continues:

> In whose language
> Is the man with the full-moon lips
> Carrying the midnight of colour
> Split by the stars – a smile
> If not in yours (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 27)

The metaphor in "full-moon lips that carry the midnight of colour", as well as the juxtaposition of "stars" and "a smile" subvert the idea of European beauty, which is carried through language, by bringing together elements of nature (the full moon, a sky full of stars) and the physical attributes of people who look like the poetic subject and whose features are seen as inferior compared to European beauty standards. Una Marson's poem "Kinky Hair Blues" is a lament about what is considered beautiful. A Jamaican poet and activist who lived in London, she was a producer of the radio programme *Caribbean Voices*, which highlighted the work of many Caribbean writers. In her poem, the reader encounters a poetic subject determined to find a beauty shop because she is not considered beautiful and "The boys pass me by, / They say I's not so swell." (Marson 91). She sees other women with "ironed hair" and "bleaching skin" and remarks that she hates this and that she doesn't envy these women. Truthfully, the poetic subject likes her appearance and sees nothing wrong about it. She repeats the lines "I like me black face / And me kinky hair", which contrast with the discouraged spirit of the poetic subject. She does not want to conform to the beauty standards that lead Black women to iron their hair and bleach their skin to look like white English women; she is, in fact, proud of her black face and her kinky hair. Although the poem ends with the poetic subject admitting that she will press her hair and bleach her skin to find a man, the fact that she likes her kinky hair and black face resonates with Philip's poem, whose poetic subject highlights the beauty of women with broad noses and men with skin the colour of the midnight sky. Both Marson and Philip subvert the stereotypical image of Black people; the first through a poetic subject who, in a world that tells her she is no "lovely belle", likes her physical appearance, the second through a poetic

Anglo Saxonica
DOI: 10.5334/as.81

subject who questions a language that demeans those who look like her. Through language, the poetic subject of Philip's "Meditations on the Declension of Beauty" finds a way to be/long in a language that continually speaks of her non-being: by reclaiming words that defy European beauty standards and allow her to, perhaps, begin to be/long in the 'in between' spaces of the English language.

ENGLISH IS AN ANGUISH

The English language is a source of violence. Deeply implicated in imperialism and colonialism, English "cannot but be contaminated by such history and experience", argues Philip ('Interview with an Empire' 51). Her distrust of language is evident in her works, marked by a "decontamination process" of this language that has caused immeasurable pain. One of the most significant examples of this process is the poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language", in which the poetic subject deconstructs the apparent objectivity and logic behind the English language (a process which is continued in *Zong!*, with its brutal fragmentation of a historical case report). The poem's first stanza starts with the affirmation that "English / is my mother tongue" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 30). The enjambment in these lines highlight 'English', which stands alone, almost as if it is placed on a pedestal – as is the case of colonial languages, exerting power over those other languages they consider inferior. However, what follows this statement is a poetic subject tormented by the fact that English is her mother tongue, because "A mother tongue is not / a foreign lan lan lang / language" and considers English is "a foreign language / not a mother tongue". The poetic subject's mother tongue is English, but this language is the source of immense anguish for her, since it is also her father tongue, the tongue of the coloniser. Language is, then, something that deeply troubles the poetic subject, as shown by the word play in "language / l/anguish / anguish", where the noun 'language' is fragmented with a slash and the noun 'anguish' is added. Realising that English cannot be her mother tongue, the poetic subject asks, "What is my mother / tongue?". After all, one's mother tongue is "the tongue of one's memories and desires, a tongue that possesses the subject to such an extent that it is always in excess of any attempt to force it within the boundaries of rules" (Lecercle 22). This question is followed by five lines where the poet employs different varieties of the word 'mother' – "mammy", "mummy", "momsy", "modder", "ma" -, making it clear that this is a poetic subject who feels lost in a language which she does not recognise as her own. It also symbolises the explosion of English varieties as a consequence of the violent imposition of the English language during the British colonisation of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as of other islands in the Caribbean. The violence of this imposition is exemplified by "Edict I" and "Edict II", two pieces of legislation added to the poem that determined that slave owners must ensure "that his slaves belong to as many ethnolinguistic groups as possible" to prevent revolts and that corporal punishment should be enforced in case an enslaved person is "caught speaking his native language" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 32). There is violence in prohibiting one from speaking one's mother tongue, as it eventually dies out, forbidden from being transmitted from generation to generation. There is also extreme bodily violence in cutting one's tongue, the main organ of speech, without which one cannot transform sounds into syllables, into words, into speech. To lose a mother tongue is to lose a mother, as the poetic subject says – "I have no mother" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 30). And, as Saidiya Hartman argues, "[t]o lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past" (85). To forcibly lose one's ability to speak is to be forced to "be / tongue / dumb", to speak a "damn dumb / tongue" because this tongue can never have the prestige that English, the father tongue, has (*She Tries Her Tongue* 30). Spoken by the powerful, English is a language that "always leaves out, or excludes, a minority that always returns and threatens to subvert" (Lecercle 242). If in the poem's first stanza English is given a place of prominence, the poetic subject subverts its power by writing it with lower case 'e' – "english / is a foreign anguish" – in its last stanzas (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 32). Full of questions, stuttering moments ("is a foreign lan lan lang / language") and the literal fragmentation of the word "language" into "l/anguish", this poem makes visible the pain and anguish that the English language represents to people who lost their mother tongues. It is an exercise in subverting a colonial and imperial language and its violence.

The threat to subvert English also comes from the form of the poem. As Philip explains, "part of the transformative and decontaminating process is also to find the appropriate form for what I'm saying" ('Interview with an Empire' 52). Form is incredibly important in this poem: if English is

Anglo Saxonica
DOI: 10.5334/as.81

"a foreign anguish", then words are not enough to subvert its violence. Destabilising a language also involves destabilising its structure because violence is, as Lecercle reminds us, located in the very structures of language. As such, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" is a poem that relies heavily on its form to subvert and destabilise the logic behind the English language and its power. In this poem, Philip makes extensive use of collage: she includes texts written in capital letters placed in the margins, edicts regarding language use in slave plantations, texts on nineteenth century scientists and a questionnaire about language and bodily violence. An incredibly popular technique in western modernist literature and poetry, collage is employed in this poem to deconstruct, throughout the poem's four pages, scientific myths that, although long dispelled, have influenced many preconceptions and originated stereotypes about Black people. It is no secret that nineteenth century science originated theories to justify racist beliefs, and in a text located in the second page of the poem, Philip unveils the apparent objectivity of scientific truths. She writes,

> Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to 'proving' that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were, therefore, superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of colour. (*She Tries Her Tongue* 31)

The key word is *proving*, highlighted by single quotation marks in the poem's text. Dr. Broca's belief that brain size determines one's intelligence skewed his research, as he searched for anything that could prove his own prejudiced beliefs. This piece of text only shows how scientific research can be influenced by someone's beliefs and, furthermore, how subjective scientific truths can be. The following paragraph of this short text explains how speech happens: "The motor cortex controls the muscles of speech". This connection between muscles, organs and speech is also explored in the last page of the poem, composed of a collage of four multiple-choice questions. This collage challenges the reader to reflect on the violence of a colonial language such as English. In the first set of answers, the tongue is juxtaposed to the penis, establishing a comparison between the two organs and the extreme violence that both can inflict to symbolise "the linguistic rape and subsequent forced marriage between African and English tongues" (Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue* 106). The last question which further exposes the violence of the English. The question starts with an explanation of the mechanics of the act of speech: "Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx, where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 33). Speech is a violent act in itself, as air is expelled out of our lungs and physically affects the organs of speech. So what is needed to transform the sounds someone makes into coherent speech? The possible answers mention the lips, tongue and jawbones working in a coordinate manner; the mother tongue; and, finally, "the overseer's whip", emphasising, once more, the violence of the English language that forcibly erased mother tongues.

Nonetheless, the most significant example of collage in this poem is placed vertically along the left margins of two pages of this poem. It is a text completely written in upper case; the strength of it draws the reader's eyes to it almost immediately, forcing the reader to physically turn the pages around to read the text. It tells of a mother and her new-born daughter, and how the mother uses her tongue to clean the child "of the creamy white substance covering its body", the remnants of birth (*She Tries Her Tongue* 30). This cleansing ritual is followed by the mother opening her child's mouth and "blowing words" into it – "her words, her mother's words, those of her mother's mother, and all their mothers before" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 32). The two texts are carefully placed in the margins of the pages, next to the stanzas about English as a foreign anguish. The visual contrast between the two – a poem and a piece of prose; one read vertically, the other horizontally – strengthens the contrast between each one's contents. The poem focuses on the loss of the mother tongue due to the imposition of English as a father tongue, full of violence and pain. The text emphasises the strength of the mother tongue, whose words are passed down generation to generation from grandmothers and mothers to daughters. Because a mother tongue is forbidden, the act of blowing words into a child' mouth can be seen as disruptive and an act of resistance against the father tongue; although not spoken out loud, the mother tongue is still transmitted to new generations, defiantly surviving a language that tries to destroy it.

Anglo Saxonica
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OF SILENCES AND PURE UTTERANCES

As I have discussed, the mother tongue survives the violence of the English language, disruptively transmitted from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. It is disruptive because it threatens, always, to subvert the power of English. As Lecercle explains, this language "is an abstraction", "a system of rules" (105). Rules that are threatened by the subversive presence of the mother tongue, similarly to Lecercle's remainder, "the linguistic equivalent of the Freudian unconscious, excluded or repressed by the rules of grammar, but trying to return in jokes, slips of the tongue, solecisms, and poetry" (23). It is an inescapable aspect of language, like the mother tongue. In the poems I have discussed so far, the mother tongue disrupts the apparent logic and stability of the English language through metaphors (which Lecercle tells us is an example of the remainder at work), the fragmentation of words and collage of textual materials. These devices, so commonly used in Western literature, are used by the poet to question the legitimacy of English's power and influence, disturbing its grammatical rules and the stereotypes and beliefs ingrained in this language. "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks", the final poem in this collection, continues this transformative project. The poem encapsulates what it is like to live in a language that is not one's own, the frantic search for a lost mother tongue and the attempt to find one's own voice in between these two languages. It begins with a citation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that speaks of the transformative power of the mother tongue: "*All Things are alter'd, nothing is destroyed*" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 58). The lines that follow speak of loss (of communal and familial ties, of "belongings small and separate"), and of being thrown like a "slingshot stone / loosed from the catapult pronged double with history / and time (…)" to an unknown place – the slingshot and the catapult being a metaphor for migration, being led to leave a home and a community for a myriad of reasons. As Evie Shockley remarks in the foreword to this edition of the poetry collection, these fourteen lines feature "syntactic patterns derived from the Caribbean demotic" and "gesture toward the English literary tradition's beloved sonnet form" (xiii–xiv). This is testament to the in-betweenness of someone like Philip, a woman born in a language that is hers but insists on making her invisible. Metaphors for the African diaspora, the slingshot-catapult metaphor is juxtaposed to the metaphor of transplanting plants in the next page of the poem. Always "a painful process", transplanting must be done carefully to ensure the survivability of the plant's roots (*She Tries Her Tongue* 59). This is because roots can wither and die, just like "root words" can be forgotten as one migrates from a place to another, or from one language to another (*She Tries Her Tongue* 60). The enjambment in "uncharged / pathways electric with the exposed lie" show how these root words, the mother tongue, carry with them the possibility of exposing the lies that hide in powerful colonial languages, of subverting, in the spirit of the remainder, their violence. At this point in the poem, subverting English is a mere possibility, because these "root words" have not yet been used, as the poem mentions "synapses of unuse and gone / words". However, given the juxtaposition of a text titled "Facts to Live By and Die" with the current stanza, the reader knows that these words are still somewhere within the poetic subject's memory, because "Memory is essential to human survival" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 61).

Each stanza in "She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks" is placed to the left of a text. Some of these texts are fictitious, others taken from influential texts in western literature, such as the Bible and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Different voices are thus heard throughout the poem, similarly to the polyvocality of "Discourse on the Logic of Language" due the collage of texts juxtaposed to poem's stanzas. In "She Tries Her Tongue…", the collage of excerpts from *The Acts of the Apostles*, which belongs to the Gospel of Luke, shows how humankind came to speak different languages: "they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues … every man heard them speak in his own language" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 65). This collage is followed by stanzas that reflect on language and power. The first lines show how emotions are felt in a similar fashion in any language: "absencelosstears laughter grief / in any language / the same" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 66). However, the poetic subject is aware that, despite this, not all languages hold the same power. Unlike the divine inspiration that led the men in *The Acts of the Apostles* to speak different languages and to spread the word of God throughout the world, the language spoken by this poetic subject is not considered divine. Much to the contrary, it is a language that has been destroyed, whose speaker has been transformed into a "tongueless wonder", a "blackened stump of a tongue". This language has, therefore, been cursed, by another more powerful language ("a tongue that cursed"), with the absence

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of "tears laughtergrief / in the word". This powerful tongue has transformed the poetic subject into a foreigner in this language, although this poetic subject speaks it. At first, this poetic subject begs for forgiveness for having been made a foreigner in her own language: "forgive her me this foreigness / (...) forgive me this dumbness / (...) this lack of tongue forgive" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 68). But as she begins to remember her root words, once silenced, she begins to free herself from the constraints of English, its rules and its power: "Hold we to the centre of remembrance / that forgets the never that severs / word from stone" (*She Tries Her Tongue* 70). Remembering "breaks the culture of silence" that has surrounded the poetic subject, a silence that is now being broken not just by words, but by the body:

That body might become tongue
Tempered to speech
And where the latter falters
Paper with its words
The crack of silence (*She Tries Her Tongue* 72)

In these last verses of the poem, the poetic subject finds the ability to use these root words through her body that becomes, like a tongue, able to speak and cover the silences left by a powerful language with words. Almost like an incantation, the poetic subject asks that her skin be able to carry the voices and rhythms of her mother tongue. She wishes to sing like Philomela, a mythical figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* commonly employed in western literary works such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The allusion to Philomela in the last poem of Philip's collection is particularly significant: Philomela is raped and has her tongue cut to prevent her from telling her sister what had happened. Despite this, she weaves a tapestry telling her story, and is later transformed by the gods into a nightingale. Incorporating this myth in the poem, as well as using the collage of texts, speaks of a desire from the poetic subject to incorporate the once forgotten rhythms and voices of her mother tongue. To overcome the linguistic rape perpetrated by the English language, she remembers her root words and uses them to sing like Philomela, incorporating both English and the Caribbean demotic through words, silences and form.

The poems of this collection speak of loss, exile, belonging and of mothers and daughters. Dedicated to all mothers, the poems of *She tries her tongue; her silence softly breaks* break free of the constraints of the English language to create space for words, rhythms and forms belonging to the Caribbean. As Philip herself explains, in these poems she questions "the tradition of the solitary voice of the poet – often male, a white male, who embodied the wisdom of the society, and who spoke for, on behalf of and to *his* society or culture. In a voice of authority." ('Interview with an Empire' 57). She does this by including several voices heard throughout her poems: of the powerful, but mainly of Black mothers and daughters, in an exercise in polyvocality that adds to her subversive use of fragmentation, collage and metaphor throughout to further challenge the legitimacy of English's power, to destroy the rules that govern this language and to reconstruct it with the aim of including voices and mother tongues that had been silenced. Alluding to Philomela's myth, the poetic subject echoes Philip's desire to tell history in her own words, transforming speech into song, into pure utterance.

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