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## Speaking the Unspeakable: Marlene Nourbese Philip's Poetry and the Creation of a New Caribbean Identity

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Marlene Nourbese Philip's ancestors were at the same time the victims of the crime and the recipients of the punishment for it. Indeed, not only were they uprooted from West Africa as slaves, but when they were "freed" by the British colonists, no earlier than 1962 in this case, they also had to face the consequences of the status of passive subjects which they had held for centuries. They had neither a native tongue, nor an idea of how to govern themselves; they had neither dreams to achieve, nor the means to achieve them. They were silenced.

The mark of this gratuitous punishment remains of course on Philip as a postcolonial subject of Tobago, a small Island in the Caribbean, close to Venezuela. How to be herself when she had been robbed of a self and imposed an identity? How to recover from such a traumatizing crime? How to speak, when her "native" language was imposed by the oppressor? However, if one cannot speak, perhaps one can write. In fact, paradoxically, Philip exposes the trauma and deals with the wounds thanks to language poetry in English, the very language of the oppressor, and this poetry reminds us at once of the French Oulipo, of deconstruction, and of elitist European trends. How can this writing contribute to creating a new, autonomous Caribbean identity, or Philip's own identity? If the themes and places mentioned in her poetry are the only differences between her poetry and the continental one, does it not reinforce the idea that she belongs to the Western World, as the mere representative of a subcategory determined by context, race and gender? She would then belong to one of the very categories that sometimes seem to limit communication between the Western and postcolonial worlds, like "postcolonial feminist poetry." How to achieve liberation without falling into minority categorizations? Or are these categorizations meaningful in ways that are not limiting?

Philip's personality comprises two double displacements. First, she embodies a double exile: her ancestors' and her own, from Tobago to Canada in the late sixties. Second, she experienced a double linguistic distancing: she was split by language in the Lacanian sense, but she also had to learn English, the language of the criminal, as her native language. In her own words, her tongue is not a mother tongue but a father tongue, that of the white male colonist, which tends to categorize negatively other races, as Philip states:

[W]hen we hear certain words and phrases, such as 'thick lips' or 'kinky hair,' the accompanying images are predominantly negative; such expressions connote far more than they denote. From whose perspective are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky? Certainly not from the African's perspective. How then

does the writer describe the Caribbean descendants of West Africans so as not to connote the negativity implied in descriptions such as 'thick lips'? (*She Tries* 20)

This "white" tongue also undermines the female genre at its very grammatical core, because, for instance, of priorities traditionally given to masculine pronouns. In order to denounce this process, Philip exaggerates her use of feminine pronouns, using "she" systematically when a noun describing a person has no gender mark, as in the quote above with "her hair kinky." Nevertheless, as a black woman, she suffers directly from these two flaws of the English language.

She seems, however, to deal with these multiple exiles precisely by writing poems, by using the very language that deprives her of a self, and even more strangely, by writing "language poetry," which gives words unprecedented power of significance and autonomy. How to explain such a paradox?

First, the trauma has to come out, as unspeakable as it may appear because of the fact that slaves were deprived of speech, or because the trauma is too intense. Although Philip values the silences between the words and the "voice of silence," words remain necessary as points of reference, as marks between the silences, so to speak, and that is why they are especially meaningful when written. Philip herself reaffirms it, even though ironically: "Surely thought requires language — how can you, without language, think or conceptualize?" (*She Tries* 22).

Second, in order to speak the unspeakable, language has to be modified, adjusted, given new meaning, and the subversion of the father tongue offers an effective means. Philip creates her own tongue, her own voice, and if the human subject is created by language, then she can create herself by creating her language. Keeping English as her basis, she also points to the criminal's guilt, by writing something that he can understand. She cannot just get rid of English in any case, because it is part of her character. In addition, she needs to communicate, and not only to express, her frustration and trauma, and in her essays, she regularly mentions her audience. She subverts and reappropriates the oppressor's language, but not so much via demotic alteration as via real manipulation.

In fact, she even rejects the concept of demotic English, patois or dialect, because "[t]hese words are for the most part negative descriptions of the linguistic result of the African attempting to leave her impression on the language" (*She Tries* 17). She thus uses other processes, such as deconstructive ones, as her favorite concept of "i-image" shows. An i-image is the image or idea that one has in mind and wants to project on paper in words. It constitutes, as Philip describes it, the DNA of writing, its essential component (*She Tries* 12). It is therefore very personal, subjective, linked to the "I." She also links the decomposition of the word to Rastafarian methods.

Language poetry, however, can threaten communication even if a large audience understands the original language. Language poetry has flourished especially in the twentieth century in the Western world, and its goal remains to let language speak, or to let words have a life of their own. Instead of expressing a feeling or mood in particular, it seeks pure feelings, pure notions and pure language. The work of the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé serves as a landmark in this movement. In line with the artist that Nietzsche would describe years after the poet's death, Mallarmé, separated from the concrete world thanks to words and images, set his imagination free (or almost) from the referentiality of language, to attain pure expression, pure feeling in the written form. In spite of the fact that he feared to disappear as an agent subject because of the nothingness

surrounding such abstractness, he became more of a free agent than by writing any referential poem, by freeing himself from the system. His problem was that communication could no longer be part of his work, because his use of words disconnected from referents became extremely obscure, except for the few "right" readers.

In Philip's case, the emphasis on context, a contrast to Mallarmé's poems, and apparently against the very principle of language poetry, allows for a different liberation from referentiality. Indeed, the context is, in itself, linguistic, the loss or absence of a true mother language due to colonization. This allows for the paradox to become conceivable: contextualized language poetry. It exists only in the unique framework of postcolonial poetry, and undoubtedly offers an original form. In addition, if Mallarmé was still attached to traditional form because of his European training and reverence for his predecessors, Philip wanted to break free from it as well, and her double personal struggle allowed her to leap from only abstract to in fact cubist poetry, juxtaposing forms and formats, and dissecting or transforming words. One of Philip's most famous poems, "Discourse on the Logic of Language," from *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly breaks*, illustrates both points.

The central columns on each of the two pages look like poems in the traditional sense. They display recurrent patterns and words, announcing assonances and rhymes, yet this quickly turns out to be a parody, and becomes a dissection. The intertwined repetitions provide a dizzying feeling miming, possibly, the power of the oppressor, the hammering of imposed rules and words, or the vertigo leading to the silence of paralysis. Philip plays with grammar and syntax. She writes "not" at the end of line 2, finishing a statement meaning that there is no mother tongue. Then, however, she starts line 3 with "not" as well, which not only offers the first instance of stammering patterns in the poem, but also provides a double negation, that is an affirmation in fact, of the fact that English is, indeed, a foreign language to her persona.

The fact that the word "language" cannot appear at once, but needs some stammering and hesitation on line 4 before appearing, confirms the difficulty of the contradiction between mother and father tongue, and of uttering the crime. "Language" is used as fragmented on line 4, and then as shifting on line 5, with "l/anguish." Playing on the sound of the word, Philip shifts from "language" to "anguish," clearly linking the two concepts not only in reality, but also in language itself, in English, as if the two were connected already as words, and not only as ideas in the poet's mind. Everything happens as if there were always already a connection between the two, a purely linguistic connection that in fact supported the signifying one. This support reverses the traditional view of words as expression of ideas, because here their form and sound draws them together as signs, and brings their meanings together in a second step. Philip thus shows violence as integrated at the core of language itself, at the core of words. Their *form* brings their meanings together. The word becomes an oppressor, and it is no wonder that a woman, or an individual from another race, should find it difficult to use this language without feeling betrayed.

Shifts from one word to another also mime the geographical displacement lying at the core of the postcolonial subject's self. The space of the page provides a good miniature for geographical space, and the use of verticality and horizontality, as well as the scattering of various typographies and forms on the page, allow Philip to convey



displacement and discomfort in her poem. The use of capital letters to describe the mother's behavior clearly highlights the most important message of the poem, yet it is relegated to the margin, as the postcolonial subject is. This paragraph, in addition, starts like the description of an animal's birth, but turns into the most human symbolic act on the second page, still in capital letters and in the left margin. It pleads for a look at individuals beyond appearances.

Edicts, quoted on these two pages, possess a major shock power of course, and the use of official language (like that of a dictionary, which Philip uses very often in her works) reinforces the flavorless, foreign and oppressive quality of the English language. The multiple choice questions allow for shock as well, gathering meanings and showing their ambiguities, but also allow for a display of the absurdity of thought in English, or of the systems of communication linked to the English-speaking culture. The categorization of answers as right or wrong in multiple choice questionnaires shows how subtlety and nuance are taken away from a language by the cultural system attached to it. The message is clear: how to use such a perverted language, that allows for such absurdity?

The criticism of the absurdity of this dominant culture, exemplified by Philip's use of questionnaires and edicts, extends to denouncing Western scientism and positivism within that culture. She does not even need to explain this, but just displays the affirmation of white scientists, for instance, about the brain and evaluations of intelligence, performed in categorizing ways, without nuance or ambiguity, and without sufficient proof. Language allows scientists to present their beliefs as truths, and to claim the inferiority of non-white races in an official, scientific, and therefore persuasive way. This device even enables Philip to question the Western scientific methods altogether, by juxtaposing definitions and excerpts from different sources, provoking meaningful clashes.

The multiplicity of perspectives on the same page brings to mind expressionism of course, and could possibly be described as cubist, for at least two reasons. First, it plays with multiple perspectives visually, as one needs to move the page or one's head to read the vertical lines. Second, it also plays figuratively with perspectives, because of the different sources and tones Philip uses. The title of the poem provides the only somewhat explicit ironic comment in the poem by invoking "logic," which points to the very lack of logic in the English language and mindset. Philip uses typical genres and paradigms of the Western culture regularly as well, as an ironic gesture. "The Book of Uncommon Prayer" offers a very short and sharp variation on the "Kyrie Eleison" words of western Requiem masses, by adding to the refrain: "Is it in the nature of God to forgive himself — / For his sin?"

She also uses space and place and shows how point of view can change the definition of any word. For her, indeed, place and word are inseparable, and studying literature in terms of love, life and death—in universalizing terms—implies overlooking the importance of locality and place. Love and death do not have the same connotations and definitions in every part of the world. In "Universal Grammar," Philip offers a surprisingly convincing proof of the possible shifts in definitions that can occur when one changes perspectives on a word. She allegorically demonstrates, simultaneously, that identity can change dramatically with changes in perspectives, and in contexts, geographic as well as historical. She uses the clause "the smallest cell remembers," which can easily be understood in a postcolonial context as the remembrance of the crime of

oppression and slavery. Yet on the first page, she prepared the reader and thereby provokes a much more complex understanding of the line, by defining "the," "smallest," "cell" and "remembers" as discrete words, in completely new ways. Suddenly the very word "the," for instance, because it *determines* a noun, becomes a grammatical "cell" already, and this echoes the word "cell" which appears a few lines later: "The - distinguishing adjective, limiting the noun, cell" (*She Tries* 62). Here the definite article does not provide information about the word it determines, but limits it instead. What most readers, even open-minded ones supposedly aware of linguistic biases, consider enriching in a nominal group, suddenly becomes a negative bond, just like slavery, which, as definite articles seem to us, seemed natural to slave-owners a century ago.

Clearly, in Philip's case, the necessity to express her trauma resulted in a much more deeply rooted motivation to write language poetry, arguably more urgent than for most European poets playing around like the Oulipo and formalists. This reveals how the Caribbean current in language poetry developed not from the European trend, but from its own original motivation, that happened to coincide with the European trend of that time, but which added context to language poetry itself. This can explain the rise of an undeniably genuine Caribbean identity, without any outside reference or authority except for inevitable traces of them. Indeed, most of the writers in this same vein have undergone the same kind of displacements and trauma, have been "to the white side," and have returned, to use their father tongue and subvert it to create their voice. This voice is not an alteration of English, like a Creole or a demotic English, but a new voice. This becomes even more meaningful in the light of Derrida's theory of the supplement, which leads to, among numerous conclusions, the idea of the missing origin. Following this theory, everything is only the trace of a trace, only a mark of something that never was, something that was identified and marked, inscribed, for the sake of understanding and categorization only. If one considers the new identity developed by Caribbean writers, it is the perfect exemplification of the supplement theory: a Caribbean nation, identity, or unique language has never existed. Traces of ancestry, as well as traces of English and African Languages, filled the void left by decolonization. This new identity was never born at one point of origin, but is made of traces of lacks and losses. The fact that no punishment ever struck the criminal actually helped in this process, because it forced a reaction, and Philip's case is not an isolated one, nor is Tobago's.

Is this not a sitting duck for fashionable categorization, however? What could any American Humanities department wish for, when it finds a writer combining gender and race issues, the two most fashionable "minorities" in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does the fight for liberation turn into the smoothest of integrations, by way of condescending categorization? Does the literature of dissent turn into, as in Franco Moretti's theory of world literature, a literature actually "securing consent" (27)? Will the colonial crime never be punished, then?

The introduction to *Grammar of Dissent*, an anthology published in 1994 and gathering works by Philip, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand, all three women coming from the Caribbean and living in Canada, exemplifies this danger. The end reads as follows:

Their eloquent contribution to literature in Canada is their making their universe visible, persuasive, *acceptable*. They have proven that *oppositional* literature, literature that is formed from a context, that speaks directly and passionately

about the contradictions in our society and its oppression of certain groups, can be *also* excellent, stunning not only thematically but technically. (my emphasis)

"Acceptable" means that the major achievement of this poetry is integration, or surrender, which contradicts its very purpose, and betrays the reflexes with which the most open-minded critics still perceived, at least eight years ago, the work of people like Philip. "Oppositional" describes the work as one of conflict instead of one of creation. The conflict may have led to creation, but should it focus entirely on it? Finally, "also" clearly marginalizes the work as one that may at best reach the standards of the Western canon. This would tend to confirm the hypothesis that dissent ultimately leads to consent.

The contrary may be the case, however. Philip's position might be the ideal one for the *creation* of a new Caribbean subject. Her use of deconstruction, for instance, should allow her not to be categorized as a black woman writer, however she herself defines herself so. The difference between that and categorization is, that this categorization is precisely *her choice*, the subject she has created for herself. The Caribbean writer exists, as striking similarities between several of them clearly emerge. Yet even an active subject, one that is no longer subjected to the colonist, like the postcolonial language poet, needs to *belong*. Subject and power are interdependent. One needs the pressure and recognition of an exterior authority to exist as a subject; one needs this authority against which to rebel in order to exist as agent. When the colonists withdrew from the Caribbean, no authority was left, and subjectivity died in the Caribbean. As Judith Butler argues in her interpretation of Althusser's principle of interpellation, subject and power need each other to exist; they define each other. She states: "I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. . . . [O]nly by occupying -- being occupied by -- that injurious term can I resist and oppose it" (104). Can one then see the crime of colonization be seen as a positive event for the Caribbean subject, because it triggered its resistance, and therefore its very birth and agency? Certainly not, because a much more authentic agency came from the power of leaders in the African community themselves before deportation. Yet the colonists did appropriate the position of authority in the Caribbean, and therefore the Caribbean subject was, until decolonization, defined through or by the white power figure. When that authority disappeared, no power matched the subject any longer, and subjectivity disappeared to leave only a blank. A new sense of belonging was needed, and in order to achieve it, a transition seemed optimal that combined dissent, political and cultural struggle against the former colonist, with some integration and categorization, a form of consent, but aiming at independence and reappropriation, to allow for a new subjectivity.

What may come after such a step? As Philip herself suggests, belonging to the "human race" as the only category is the goal. Categorization should be overcome, to reach the paradox of an ideal universalization made of multiplicity. This raises many questions of course, most notably the following: will this multiplicity, the one we already observe in postmodernism in the broadest sense, be shattered and engulfed by a flattening universality again? Probably not, because each domain will become an equally honored field. Proof is found in this very paper, for it does not emerge from a specialist of the Caribbean, of postcolonialism, of women writers or black writers, but from a specialist of language poetry. Could this serve as proof that multiplicity might have its chance precisely in a form of universalization?

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