

TO "HEAL THE WORD WOUNDED":
AGENCY AND THE MATERIALITY OF
LANGUAGE AND FORM IN
M. NOURBESE PHILIP'S *SHE TRIES HER
TONGUE, HER SILENCE SOFTLY BREAKS*

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To insist that texts are . . . participants in history [conceived] as structured social and gender relations is to reclaim them for society . . . for political scrutiny by those whom they have excluded, as much as those whom they have celebrated. . . . And it is to reclaim them for intentional political action, and ourselves for political accountability.

—Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism"

In both her opening essay—"The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy"—and the linked poetic sequences that comprise *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, M. Nourbese Philip confronts us with the question of how to account for the entanglement of the historical subject's flesh-and-blood body with language. Pointing to the socially constructed capacity of language to deformulate identity, she asks: "from whose perspective are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky?" (*She Tries* 20).¹ When Philip writes of the "anguish that is English . . . for all African Caribbean people," she signifies the material effects of an alien mastering language that is "etymologically hostile [to] and expressive of the non-being of the African" (15). From her Tobagonian specificity, Philip theorizes an African-Caribbean writing practice committed to using "the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated" (19). For this project, she recuperates the existing potential of what she calls the Caribbean "demotic variant of English" (18). An "Afrosporic" linguistic practice that

"is and is not English" re-sounds the memory of enslavement history in its "upside down, inside out" subversion of conventional usage, its "tonal accentuation," its rhythms, its "oratorical energies," its "slides and glissandos" (Interview 229, *She Tries* 17, 23). Philip identifies all of these tendencies as the "linguistic result of the African attempting to leave her impress on the language" (17).

Caribbean poet-critic Edward Brathwaite disrupts the descriptors ("bad English," "broken English," "patois," "dialect") imposed by a neo-colonialist standard/deviation model on nonconforming demotic practitioners with his concept of "nation voice," the submerged language of enslaved New World Africans (7). Similarly, Philip reappropriates the site of linguistic violence as a means of asserting African-Caribbean agency: "this strange wonderful you tink it easy jive ass kickass massa day done Chagaramus is we own ole mass pretty mass pansweet language" (18). By contextualizing her discursive practice in diasporic history, Philip points us to the "worldliness" or "circumstantial reality" of texts and reintroduces the unruly problematic of truth-claims based in the lived experience of particular social realities (Said 39). The spacing of cultural difference between my Anglo-European location and that of the Afro-Caribbean speaking subject reinforces Philip's sense of English as a "tainted tongue." Its New World creolisation irrevocably marks it as an arena where uneven power relations have been, and continue to be, mapped out, called down, transformed (19-20).² In the reading that follows, I seek to engage Philip's complex and disjunctive text as a material manifestation of her hybrid location between axes of identity, geographical spaces, linguistic and cultural traditions, and histories. As a critical method, I heed Philip's call to interrogate the assumption that literature exists apart from "its connection to the social matrix—to labour, to history and politics" by attending to the socio-historic framing contexts for her writing ("Social Barbarism" 98). Philip's poetic praxis activates theoretical questions circulating around the crucially interlinked concepts—body, memory, history, and materiality. Bringing the site-specific body of Philip's text into dialogue with body-relevant theories, particularly feminist, post-colonial, and new historicist, enables a practice of historicizing the body and its relationship to language in a race-accountable way. Further, reading for the performative, relational body, that is, the body as it positions itself in social space through the language it uses, offers the possibility of a criti-

cal practice “responsive to the living conditions of the social subject” and attentive to the textual micro-contexts where social reality can be renegotiated and transformed (Spillers, “Order” 246).

Philip notes that “there was a profound eruption of the body into the text of *She Tries Her Tongue*”; however, this is not just any body, but the “female African body” (24). Philip theorizes this body as a corporeal text that refused to submit to the cultural deformation of the colonial process:

When the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and the memory and history which body could contain. The text of her history and memory were inscribed upon and within the body which would become the repository of all the tools necessary for spiritual and cultural survival. (“Managing” 298)

One way to read *She Tries Her Tongue* is as an elegiac return to the diasporic memories scored in and on this Afra-Caribbean embodied text. Memory is powerfully registered by the speaker’s relentless return to the excised “tongue,” a figure mediating the corporeality of language: “obscenity / tongueless wonder / blackened stump of a tongue / torn / out” (92). In “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” Philip invokes, through an (invented) archival document from colonialist history, a scene where the material inscription of the New World order is a “human sequence written in blood” (Spillers, “Mama’s” 67):

EDICT II

Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ, when removed, should be hung on high in a central place, so that all may see and tremble. (58)

Here the captive and mutilated body of the enslaved African “bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” (Spillers, “Mama’s” 67). Philip’s mimicry of fact-based discourse is used to recast rather than to authorize history, to interrogate the para-legal codes that delegitimize free speech. The excised tongue also signifies enforced language loss and, by extension, loss of culture and history—the enabling conditions of relational subjectivity. In her title poem, Philip posits the pulsions of the performative body as a kind of visceral speak-

ing through which to reclaim agency even at the site of such silencing:

That body might become tongue
 Tempered to speech
 And where the latter falters
 Paper with its words
 The crack of silence;
 That skin become
 Slur slide susurrations (98)

The materiality of language which Philip's praxis points us to, then, cannot be solely accounted for or contained at the level of the text. While I do not deny that register of materiality identified by Anthony Easthope and others as language determined by the laws of its own graphematic nature (13, 15), Philip's work necessitates engagement with a contradictory lived materiality "socially inscribed and discursively produced" (Woolf, "Reinstating" 138). The graphematic materiality of Philip's text—different type faces, spacing, vertical texts, and multiply juxtaposed texts—further activates the social fact of poetry as labour by poet, typesetter, and reader, each of whom is a living social subject implicated in the act of performing this text within a particular arrangement of power relations.

"Questions, Questions"

Philip's concern with historical relations, materiality, and corporeality intersects those marked by feminist, post-colonial, and new historicist renegotiations of certain axioms of poststructuralist theory. Until recently, the most prominent academic discourses, even within feminist practice, through which the social subject and her body have been thought were psychoanalytic and semiotic. But are *jouissance*, desire, and codification the only modalities that our theorizing can register and account for? What of the "practical body," the "useful body," the "intelligible body" (Bordo 25)? The pained body? The traumatic body? The breathing, sensate, visceral body? The diseased body? The laughing body? The dancer's body, the domestic labourer's body, the poet's body, the sex trade worker's body, the student's body, in all their registers?³ The "return to history" enacted in new historicist and post-colonial criticism and the resurgence of the embodied social

subject, theorized by many feminists, speaks back to a "textualised hegemony" which seems to suspend that unruly category of extra-textual reality or materiality as a relevant category for inquiry and knowledge (Slemon, *After Europe* xvi).⁴ This "return" that Philip's work activates for me has been counter-read by some as a nostalgia for referential transparency and a flight from theory (Howard 19); however, such a resurgence of these concerns cannot be so easily dismissed.

While Bennington and Young in "Poststructuralism and the Question of History" take great pains to address "the alleged anti- or a-historicism of Poststructuralism" (2), I find myself asking what is at stake that so many theoretically conversant critics continue to wilfully "mis-read," to reassert categories like "history," "materiality," "lived experience," and "body" with a certain urgency, as if they actually were threatened? While these words may be marshalled as "magical signs" or alibis for engaging the questions that attend them, they may also be deployed as "struggle concepts" through which we come to know and articulate the uneven operations of power (Ebert 32, 34). Those critics who have solidarity investments with the subjugated recognize that embodied agency is at stake. As Janet Woolf observed of the American public policy of silence on safe sex education and AIDS research, "people die of discourse every day" (UWO lecture). Situating literature within a matrix of social discourses, including public policy, activates an ethico-political imperative to reflect on the material conditions and the social relations that condition lived experience, while submitting concepts like "the body" and "history" that we cannot live without to persistent critique (Spivak, "On the Politics" 93). Like the essentialist problematic of invoking marked identities, such concepts may be "conditions of possibility," several of a "group of grounding mistakes that enable us to make sense of our lives" in the name of political accountability and intervention (Kirby 93; Spivak, "Acting Bits" 781). It is the "mutable intertexture" of our discursively animated visceral bodies that is the "stuff of our interventions . . . biology rewriting itself" (Kirby 93, 98). My intent, then, is not to unproblematize the related categories of history, body, and materiality. Rather, I seek to situate my critical practice within a liminal space which disturbs the binary figurations of inside/outside, text/world, literature/history, and posits their complex negotiations, their interanimating mutual determination.

At this juncture, I need to clarify a distinction between historiography and historical relations/processes because these are frequently and misleadingly collapsed under the single sign "history."⁵ While we can only know historical relations through their narration, they are not identical and should not be collapsed. Similarly, literature as a technology of specific historical formations should not be collapsed with the "circumstantial reality which surrounds the instance of discourse" (Said 34). Here, it is important to expand material conditions from the traditional Marxist designation of economic relations, although these are a potent register, to a wider matrix of interdependent and unevenly constructed social relations, including gender, race, sexuality, age, and ability, that condition daily life. Rather than Derrida's famous formulation of "no outside text," which neatly eliminates the question of the outside by ingesting it, I want to suggest an irreducible inside-outside. Elizabeth Grosz figures this relation as a "Möbius strip" (York lecture). The lived body may itself be conceptualized as a spacing or interval at the juncture of materiality and discursivity, neither totalizable under one or the other of these mutually determining, but not homologous, categories. Revisiting that childhood fiction—"sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never kill you"—I want to urge with Jody Berland that we "turn our backs on the urgent social realities of our fragile bodies and our bodies' world at our peril" (28).

As a counterproblematic, in reading for the female African body of Philip's text, we must uphold the caution against fetishizing the black woman as a sign of "re-embodiment" by historicizing the endemic construction of "woman" and "black" as closer to the material, the body, and animality (Smith 45). The constitution of the Western female subject is often organized around a (benevolent) imperialist logic that recuperates the figure of the other woman as her condition of possibility (Spivak, "Three Women's" 267). It is relevant to ask whether my own staging of Philip's intervention in Western disembodied discourses might reinsert her texts within a neo-colonial framework and deploy her racially-marked history as an enabling category for my Western critical formations. While I do not seek an alibi for my inevitable complicity with the imperial apparatus of unearned privileges and powers conferred on me by my status as a Western middle-class woman, I see no other means to follow my commitment to unlearning in-

stitutional privilege as one axiomatic of "feminism-in-decolonization" than to engage the questions raised for me by Philip's texts across this charged terrain of uneven power relations (Spivak, "Acting Bits" 771).⁶ I also take Sara Suleri's point about the "embarrassed privilege" Western feminists presently "grant racially encoded feminism" as a kind of alibi for relentless engagement with complex questions, but does her critique entirely delegitimize the project of engagement across the power differentials of feminist spaces? Within the inevitability of a benevolently imperialist framework, I believe meaningful interventions and ongoing negotiations can be staged without iconizing the postcolonial woman or "raising [biological] identity to the power of theory" (Suleri 758-59, 762). I would suggest that Philip "speaks in tongues" to invoke multiple "implied readers" (Henderson 22). Like the writers of slave narratives before her, who strategically addressed Northern white women as one set of potential readers (Fox-Genovese, "My Statue" 75), Philip not only speaks primarily within and to the Afro-Caribbean communities from which she identifies, but also engages Western readers. Such a "simultaneity of discourse" is a textual strategy by which black women writers testify to community identity at the same time as dialogically asserting their agency through entering into "contestatorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant" (Henderson 20). This engagement with multiple communities activates recognition of our mutually implicated histories, a necessary condition for changing social relations.

Materiality of Language

Philip's poetic praxis clears space for linguistic agency despite the anguish of an imposed foreign tongue, and activates a displacement of colonial and neo-colonial power relations as they are realized in language. Many of her sequence titles signal linguistic intervention as the dominant gesture of her text: "Discourse on the Logic of Language," "Universal Grammar," "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power," "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue," and "She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks." Through her emphasis on language, Philip also puts pressure on various discourses that legitimize and materialize colonialist and neo-colonist practices: education (grammar lessons), religion (catechism), nineteenth-century scientific racism, documentary

(history and the museum archive). In several sequences, she stages counter-grammar and voice lessons to denaturalize them as part of an educational apparatus used to construct the "non-being" of the enslaved African as the condition of possibility for the Western imperial subject. In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," she disturbs the seeming innocence of primary-school sentence parsing to allegorize the epistemic violence of the colonial process. Parsing is narrativized as "the exercise of dismembering language into fragmentary cells that forget to remember" (66). Using a strategy similar to free indirect discourse, the language situation of the diasporic subject contaminates and displaces the objective intonations of the grammar lesson. Through "parsing" an allegorical imperialist life sentence, recited in the many languages of Empire—"The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting / an elephant / a native / a wild animal / a Black / a woman / a child / somewhere"—the "smallest cell" is re-membered (67). In the darkly comic closing sequence which disturbs the closure of this "universal grammar" lesson, the Afrosporic female subject asserts her agency to refuse the "again and again" of "linguistic rape" (23):

Slip mouth over the syllable: moisten with tongue the word.
Suck Slide Play Caress Blow—Love it, but if the word
gags, does not nourish, bite it off—at its source—
Spit it out
Start again

From *Mother's Recipes on How to Make a Language Yours or How Not to Get Raped*. (66-67)

With this textual play, reminiscent of Hélène Cixous, Philip specifically remembers the superimposed scene of sexual and linguistic violation for the Afrosporic female subject and re-performs it as one where she has the power to fellate or castrate.

Similarly, Philip activates alternate "Lessons for the Voice" in "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power," during which the Afra-Caribbean subject will not cooperate with her training in English phonetics. The social situation of the Afrosporic subject bleeds into the a-political textbook lesson, displacing it with one in the historical relations that condition acquisition of and access to language and culture:

OO as in how did they 'lose' their word?

oo as in 'look' at the spook.

OH as in the slaves came by 'boat' (diphthongal).

AW as in the slaves were valued for their 'brawn'. (70)

In this and the sequences discussed above, Philip effectively turns the lens around, so that the Western subject finds herself to be the object of a decolonizing gaze, no longer in control of the grammar and phonetics lesson, no longer the regulating eye behind the camera or the empowered ethnographic fieldworker. Bell hooks suggests that "looking relations shift when the disempowered look back" ("Representing Whiteness" 340). Such a practice of turning Western discourse and apparatus against itself might be read within a deconstructive framework, but, within another socio-historic context, it resonates with strategies of "sass" and "inversion" practised variously in Afrosporic expressive culture and defined as "using The Man's language against him" (Simms Holt 153, 157). One example of such linguistic resistance was the practice of "stylin' out" or deploying a double-talking pulpit code designed to prophesy "massa day done" under the master's watchful eye in the Afrosporic church.⁷ Like her precursors, Philip notes, "in *She Tries Her Tongue*, I set out to be unmanageable. I refused to 'know my place,' the place set apart for the managed peoples of the world" ("Managing" 296). Self-positioned as the subject who knows, the Afrosporic ethnographer speaks her knowing as the enabling moment of her agency. Gayatri Spivak has recently revised her observation that the subaltern woman cannot speak, to suggest that "if the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not the subaltern any more" ("The New Historicism" 283). When enslaved Africans used sass, invective, and inversion to turn the tables on the master class, it demonstrated, if only temporarily, the way in which hegemonic power is only part of the story of historical relations. Such instances of transformative linguistic agency suggest that power is also deployed by the subjugated.⁸ The moment when the "first world" academic's steadycam is seized by the "native informant" is an opening, a fracture in the framework of epistemic imperialist violence. Scrutinizing re-deployment of the ethnographic gaze effects a displacement of colonial and neo-colonial power relations.

Unmanageable Form/A "Métissage of Styles"

Linking insubordinate speaking to a transformatively unmanageable textual strategy, Philip indicates in her opening essay that her "challenge is to find the literary form of the [Caribbean] demotic language" (23). The resultant demotic form manifests as a kind of interrogative montage in which the multiple genres and practices of orature, lyric, life writing, and documentary are interwoven. Diverse cultural discourses are also invoked and recontextualized: missionary, scientific, educational, literary, and historical. Philip's "cross-cultural montage" of parallel literary, non-literary, and social texts as a strategy of transforming the "discursive dilemma" for the Afrosporic subject is loosely resonant with a new historicist method (Newton 152, Henderson 24). The contradictions of her text might be engaged with the language of postmodernism: I could read for the decentring effect of multiply juxtaposed texts, the dialogic counterpointing of multiple voices, the metapoetic questioning of the status of historiographic documents, the parodic mimicry of scientific and religious discourses, or the ironically re-framed Western intertexts ranging from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to Pound's "Imagist Manifesto." However, in "Managing the Unmanageable," Philip historicizes these strategies as analogies for the female African subject's linguistic disruption. Of her urge to "interrupt the text," she writes, "it may arise from a need to reflect a historical reality: the African in the New World represented a massive interruption of both the Old World and the African text . . . as well as the text of the aboriginal world of the Americas and the Caribbean" (298). She posits, then, a model of social mimeticism in which "the poem as a whole . . . becomes a more accurate mirror of the circumstances that underpin it" (298). Form, like language, becomes a kind of allegory for the fragmentation and disruption of "being" for the African female subject. With terms like "reality" and "mirror," however, Philip's theorization of her practice marks a spacing from postmodernist axioms. To suppress such ruptures would be to domesticate her text, to render its performance that of a postmodern trained seal, reading only for those registers of intelligibility legitimized by a postmodern "canon" (Sangari 158). Conversely, to "call her" on her "errors" from within a Western framework of postmodern "epistemological scepticism" is inevitably to

universalize a set of culturally specific preoccupations. As a deterrent to this tendency, Kumkum Sangari offers a vigilant practice of accountability to the "different social formations that condition similar effects like hybridity, nonmimeticism, self-reflexivity, self-location and self-disruption" (181). While Philip, like other Afrosporic writers, acknowledges the overlap between her practice and postmodernist tendencies, the relationship might be conceptualized as one of resonance-dissonance: "I'm not saying that my work can't be read or analyzed in terms of . . . postmodernism, but if one only sees it in that way, one loses . . . sight of the Caribbean and the New World . . . the historical and social matrix from which my writing is partly coming" ("Writing" 229-30).⁹

I want to pause here to meditate on the transformative potential offered by Philip's demotic form, one that is inevitably hybrid, in the same way Caribbean linguistic practice "is and is not English." Many non-Western thinkers have been restive with postmodern and Western post-colonialist (not to mention official multicultural) celebrations of cultural hybridity as one more site of appropriation, domestication, and management. However, Philip, along with theorists like Kumkum Sangari and Françoise Lionnet, points to a "politics of possibility" activated by a practice of *métissage* or creolization, not only of languages, but also of cultural traditions, discourses, and histories. Philip underscores the way in which the demotic variant of English and her "unmanageable" forms put pressure on the mutual implication of histories for Africans, Europeans, Caribbeans, and peoples of the Americas. Like the Caribbean demotic, creolized form or a "*métissage* of styles" resists historical amnesia and activates cultural memory multiply: for the Afrosporic peoples, elegiac; for Anglo-Europeans, interrogative of enduring neo-colonial social relations (Lionnet, "Introduction" 29). Heterogenous forms, then, foreground the historical conditions of their emergence. Rather than reading hybridity as a "matter of the recurring renovation of style through new juxtapositions," as postmodernism frequently does, mixed forms should be read as "the restless product of a long history of miscegenation, assimilation, and syncretization, as well as of conflict, contradiction, and cultural violence" (Sangari 161, 158). Like miscegenation, the mixing of cultural forms, traditions, and languages violates the taboo against mixed genres and categories of all kinds. "The law of Genre" as interrogated by Derrida is en-

coded not only in literary genres, but most vigilantly in social categories. Lionnet reminds us of the persistent Western fear of racial mixing which translated to the regulatory practice of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, extended to Nazi research in and practices of eugenics in the twentieth century, and resurfaced closer to home in Philip Rushton's racialist science at the University of Western Ontario. Philip's deployment of the long poem sequence (genre of choice by postmodern critics) significantly calls for socio-historic contextualization of this genre's border-crossing refusal of genre purity. Putting pressure on the framing conditions of Philip's practice suggests the ideological specificity of such a choice: it cannot be read solely as foregrounding linguistic "indeterminacy" and playful refusal of bourgeois realist codes. In *She Tries Her Tongue*, miscegenation of form runs a kind of textual interference, incites a collision of discourses, that reveals language to be anything but indeterminate in its material effects. This text activates engagement with the mutual implication of discourses and bodies. Philip's practice of mixed genres, discourses, and languages is a "transformative mode" grounded in socio-cultural realities and offers possibilities for new ways of seeing and reconfiguring power (Sangari 162). A trickster element is also at play in Philip's impersonation of styles and forms not her own; she deploys an "aesthetics of ruse" or "transformation and transmutation" that historically allowed the subjugated to survive (Lionnet, "Introduction" 18). This may be closely related to the traditional female trickster figure from West African Dahomean mythology who used wit, disguise, and concealment to overwhelm a larger and more powerful foe. For example, African-American slave narratives witness the practice of sass or sharp-tongued back talk, a trickster strategy by which enslaved women resisted unwanted sexual advances (Braxton 30-31). In similar fashion, Philip speaks back to the "Three Little Pigs" folktale, parodically recast as a mock "how to" manual—"How to Build Your House Safe and Right." She interrogatively disrupts the closure of the happy ending when the wolf can't "huff and puff" the house walls down because the last little pig got smart and built them of brick: "Did the third pig buy his bricks or was he given them, and why? Where did he get his money to buy his bricks with?" (89). Such interrogation of the tale resituates the "right choice of materials" as conditions for safe housing in class

privilege and hard economic realities. In trickster fashion, she invokes the folk tale only to demystify its seemingly apolitical surface and reinsert it into a framework of lived social relations.

Body: Memory: History

Philip puts pressure on memory as a juncture between the lived body and its placement in community and global histories. She conceptualizes memory as a resistance strategy and an enabling condition for keeping Afrosporic history alive. Following juxtaposed etymological meditations on history and memory, the poet-speaker asks in the title sequence: "without memory can there be history?" (97). In "Facts to Live By and Die," she meditates on the crucial links between body, memory, and human subjectivity:

4. The cerebral cortex is the storehouse of our memory—it makes us human.
5. What we choose to store in our long-term memory is closely linked to our emotions.
6. Memory is essential to human survival. (87)

For Philip, it is in memory that the human subject maintains her identity, posits herself relationally and communally. Memory is the register for Afrosporic subjects where the body's history is activated and nurtured.

Without memory, there is no agency. Memory, then, may be taken as the trope for, and the means of, material regrounding.

In her essay, "A Long-Memored Woman," Philip speaks to the urgent necessities of re-membling her ancestral heritage in enslavement history:

Some of the reasons why I consciously try to remember what did not happen to me personally, but which accounts for my being here today: to defy a culture that wishes to forget; to rewrite a history that at best forgot and omitted, at worst lied; to seek psychic reparations; to honour those who went before; to grieve for that which was irrevocably lost (language, religion, culture), and those for whom no one grieved; to avoid having to start over again (as so many oppressed groups have had to do); to "save ourselves." (56)

Re-membling becomes a means of historical and social intervention, as well as a means of collective and personal healing. In

Adrienne Rich's terms, the poet/speaker of Philip's text chooses to "resist amnesia," by becoming "consciously historical," and by taking "historical responsibility [which] has, after all, to do with action—where we place the weight of our existences on the line, cast our lot with others, move from an individual consciousness to a collective one" (145). Memory manifests, then, as a yearning toward possibility for change, bringing the past up into accountability in the present tense. The African-Caribbean body's memory offers a challenge to official history. It also displaces memory from the solely individualist frame of the nuclear family photo album for the bourgeois subject onto a terrain of community collectivity: diasporic memory functions not as "white-washed" nostalgia for "the way we were," but as testimony, as witness, as elegy to "remembered loss" (229). Re-membered grief poignantly re-sounds throughout *She Tries Her Tongue*. The volume opens with the mutual cry of the mother and daughter sold away from each other to serve in the plantation economy: "where she, where she be, where she gone?" (28). Another sequence states one of the linguistic quests of Philip's textual project: "to mourn the meaning in loss" (49). The central lyric of "Discourse on the Logic of Language" uses the sound repetitions and play of language poetry to movingly effect a series of linguistic displacements which restage the collision of linguistic economies—colonial father tongue and African mother tongue that renders the new world African female a linguistic orphan in search of her lost origins:

my father tongue
 is a foreign lan lan lang
 language
 l/anguish
 anguish
 a foreign anguish
 is english— (58)

Grieving becomes the enabling moment of healing and agency in this text for the female African-Caribbean subject. Trying her tongue, sounding "absencelosttears," dancing the "grief sealed in memory" are synonymous gestures (92, 98). Embodied memory functions as elegiac witness to a collective loss rooted in socio-historic realities.

The process of re-membering is figured throughout *She Tries*

Her Tongue as the epic journey of seeking and returning to the mother and mother tongue. Within the nexus of race-gender, Philip's textual dedication—"for all the mothers"—signifies differently than such veneration of the maternal does in a Western feminist context. In the volume's opening sequence, "And Over Every Land and Sea," Philip re-situates Ovid's Proserpine-Ceres myth as an allegory of the abduction and sale of an African mother's children on the slave market. While Western feminists have reclaimed this myth as a narrative of not-quite-suppressed mother-daughter bonds within a male sexual economy, Philip puts a further spin on it by reading it through the intersecting social matrix of race-gender. Her poetic narration brings into focus the differing socio-historic conditions for the reproduction of mothering and the recuperation of the mother-daughter dyad. Specifically, the slave trade disrupted the African kinship system and recast reproduction as "an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties." While the consequences for all enslaved peoples was a "cultural unmaking," for females it was an "un-gendering" in which "motherhood as female blood-rite/right" was denied (Spillers, "Mama's" 75). In her opening essay, Philip points to the particularized body of the African female as the "site of exploitation and [the] profoundly anti-human demands [of] forced reproduction along with subsequent forceful abduction and sale of children" within a New World plantation economy (24). This historically specific body, traversed by axes of identity other than gender, makes available for questioning the conditions of privilege that define the limits of Western feminist projects such as writing the body, reclaiming a mother tongue, and renegotiating the mother-daughter dyad.¹⁰

In "Writing a Memory of Loosing that Place," Philip identifies the endemic yearning in diasporic writing for a return to the mother as also signifying longing for the "motherland, Africa." It is deployed multiply as an allegoric witness to the loss of geographical homeland and the disruption of the African family (229). Philip's elegiac quest marks its kinship with the precursor tradition of autobiographical slave narratives in which "the literary act has been . . . an attempt to regain that sense of place" in the New World context by giving witness to physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual displacement (Braxton 2). Within the social matrix of enslavement history, the mother was often the

keeper of the culture's memory: "matrilineal filiation in slave societies was the only acknowledged genealogy, and hence the only possible means of retracing memory and charting the contours of a historical past" (Lionnet, "Of Mangoes" 339). Further, for enslaved peoples, honouring the place of the grandmother in the slave quarters was a strategy of asserting their own social hierarchy despite the violence done to their kinship structures in the plantation economy. Over against the production-ranked value of the field hand, the Afrosporic community assigned other values to those women who played leadership roles through maintaining traditional practices of herbal healing, fortune-telling, cooking, and child-rearing (Jones 41). As a strategy of counter-memory, Philip's return to her cultural past re-members not only the trauma of being an enslaved African and female, but also the enduring esteemed position of the mother.

Further, Philip's quest for and invocation of a reclaimed mother tongue as a trope for oral memory—marked and "infused . . . with her own remembered linguistic traditions"—plays upon the conjunction of memory and the spoken word in opposition to official history and the written word (19). The mother tongue, according to Temma Kaplan, "is the oral tradition" (cited in Braxton 5). However, it is important to note that the boundaries between the oral and the written are reciprocal, as enslaved peoples' Biblically-based freedom songs and spirituals like "Let My People Go" indicate (Sangari 167). Within Philip's text, while she revalues the mother tongue, in cadences and rhythms inflected by Afrosporic expressive culture, both spoken and musical, she chooses to do so within the written context. Such a cross-weaving between what have been cast by Western culture as discreet registers of expression underscores her hybrid historical location between cultures, traditions, and histories. This puts pressure on the West's false binarism between speech and writing, marking them both as performative utterance: "the designed interplay between speech and reception, between verblivity and textuality, is the text's situation, its placing of itself in the world" (Said 40). Memory as oral history is also performative: "memory functions as a flexible, collective, material practice open to improvisation and personal reminiscence (but not dependent on it)" (Sangari 169). It is the improvisatory nature of oral history which allows for intervention and agency; Philip's invented documents

toy with fact-based discourses only to restage the scene of colonialist history. The formerly subjugated body mobilizes Foucauldian "counter-memory," which activates new understandings of present social relations by contextualizing them in those of the past (hooks, "Representing Whiteness" 344). As Philip states, "I am also arguing for a subversive role for memory . . . it has a potentially kinetic quality and must impel us to action" ("Echoes" 20). Putting pressure on writing as language performance, as an interventionary project intentionally activated, creates an opening for the "practical turn a criticism might take" in refusing the "compulsion to jettison the terrible flesh and blood" (Spillers, "Order" 248, 246).

Philip's writing as performative utterance re-places itself in its Afrocentric socio-historic contexts. While her poetic praxis resists tidy recuperation into an Anglo-Eurocentric theoretical framework, Philip's work activates the possibility of intervention in the disembodied and anti-body formations that dominate Western culture from Platonic idealism to Enlightenment rationalism to post-structuralist textism that consign the texted body to the "abstracted space" of philosophical discourse (Berland 23-24). The social practices, discourses, and power relations of empire-building and colonialism—that historical matrix which Philip calls down in her writing—is one of the most pernicious manifestations of such disembodiment. New World settings may be read as a theatre for the cruel enactment of regulated bodies: unnamings and renamings, censoring, and managing those inscribed as corporeal commodity. M. Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, with its persistent meditation on the material effects of language and consequent modulation between the textual and the socio-historical, underscores the imbrication of language with lived history for all embodied subjects. As Philip writes in "Managing the Unmanageable,"

body, text, history, and memory—the body with its remembered and forgotten texts is of supreme importance in both the larger History and the little histories of the Caribbean. I believe this to be one of the reasons why the body erupted so forcibly and with such violence in the text of *She Tries*. . . . (298-9)

Here and elsewhere, Philip reminds us of the interventions a poetic text might make into our disciplinary truths about the rela-

tions between language and corporeality.¹¹ Such reflection can only lead us to continue interrogating the limits of intelligibility constraining the text-based readings we make of bodies, histories, and material conditions. I leave you with the urgency of Philip's *Afra-Caribbean-Canadian* female body writing, and each of our readerly bodies implicated in the materiality of the languages we use, even as we are used by them.

NOTES

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Philip citations will be from this text.

² While I recognize that "difference" is inevitably imbued with connotations of benevolent tolerance of foreignness, I use it here as a marker of uneven power relations as well as complex cultural specificity.

³ See Teresa Ebert on the class privilege that conditions such "ludic" feminist practices as Judith Butler's, in which the pleasurable liberatory body is taken to be *the* sign of transformative agency.

⁴ Feminists who call for a reconceptualization of the place of the embodied social subject in literary and cultural theory include Iris Marion Young, Janet Woolf, Elizabeth Grosz, Michelle Barrett, and Hortense Spillers.

⁵ African-American historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese is particularly helpful in her call for the need to account for the structures of historical relations as framing contexts for literary texts.

⁶ Because of the political problematics with the ambiguously deployed category "post-colonial," as evidenced by the many disclaimers and/or disavowals I witnessed at the 1992 "Gender-Colonialism-PostColonialism" Conference at Guelph University, as

well as in other contexts, and because I contend that colonialism is not "post," but displaced onto various practices of neo-colonialism and trans-national imperialism, I situate my own practice within a project of decolonization.

⁷ See Grace Simms Holt on "inversion" and "stylin'" and Joanne Braxton on "sass" and "invective." While reading for a homology of practices across the differences of African-American and Afro-Caribbean-Canadian texts may verge on reifying a pan-Afrosporic culture, the material force of enslavement history is registered in the parallel expressive practices of the exiled African peoples of the Americas. While there are geographic and national specificities that need tending, cross-border traffic in inspiration, homage, and filiation by peoples of African descent is an enabling practice.

⁸ Judith Newton, following Foucault, disturbs the oppressor-oppressed binary endemic to liberatory narratives and theories by reminding us that power is deployed by the subjugated through local practices. However, it is important to recognize that "power deployed" is relative within racist and neo-colonial structures.

⁹ See bell hooks's "Postmodern Blackness" on the resonance of New World African expressive culture with postmodernist tendencies.

¹⁰ Western feminist texts which interrogate and/or reclaim the site of mothering and the possibility of a maternal idiom include Adrienne Rich's *Of Women Born*, Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering*, Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater," Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror*, and Daphne Marlatt's "Musing with Mother-tongue." Hortense Spillers points out that studies like *The Female Body in Western Culture* elide the African female subject and her body's history ("Mama's" 67).

¹¹ Michelle Barrett interrogates the way disciplinary practices can render intelligible only what is accepted as being "in the true" of their purview (211-15).

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