

when she writes: “Subversion of the language has already taken place. It began when the African in the New World through alchemical (*al kimiya*, the art of the black and Egypt) practices succeeded in transforming the leavings and detritus of a language and infused it with their own remembered linguistic traditions.” Earlier in the book, NourbeSe Philip specifies that by “memory” she means not only engrams in the brain but also memories encoded at the cellular level: “the smallest cell / remembers / a sound.” What we today call muscle memory captures a great deal, if not all, of what Philip means here. (With the concept of *al kimiya*, however, she does retain a residue of spirituality.) Like Lorenzo Thomas, Amiri Baraka, and others, NourbeSe Philip insists on the impossibility of forgetting what has been lost even as we move into uncertain futures—an insistence that gestures toward the totality of a diasporic culture, and thus a return of the dispersed to a new home. In the interim *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* is a fully realized, moving paean to that possibility.

Tyrone Williams

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Philip Metres, *Sand Opera*. Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2015. 109pp. \$16.95

The title of Philip Metres’s second full-length collection, *Sand Opera*, is an erasure of the term “Standard Operating Procedure.” The book takes as its central premise the idea that the War on Terror, a war of water-boarding and black sites, drone strikes and extraordinary renditions, is at the same time a war conducted with language, a war in which what is unsaid, what is suppressed, erased, and obliterated, speaks as powerfully as what is said. Metres attempts to give voice to the unsaid history of this war—the experiences of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, the mourning of an Iraqi mother in Najaf—and to document how this history is redacted and ultimately denied through the American military’s systematic exploitation of language. And since that language, American English, is to some degree complicit in the abuses of the War on Terror, Metres questions to what extent we can make poetry from it. *Sand Opera*, that is, is built on a poetics of negativity: moments of lyric clarity and condensation are disrupted by techniques of fragmentation in which the ostensible singularity of the lyric “I” is echoed in and constituted by those other, silenced voices to which it’s joined. Metres doubts, ultimately, whether the lyric subject, or the lyric poem, can be extracted from those systems of linguistic and material violence in which it is always enmeshed.

Sand Opera's "disruption" of the lyric "I," of course, has a by-now one-hundred-year precedent in English-language poetry, while its insistence on language's complicity in systems of oppression harkens back to much feminist and radical poetry from the 1960s and 70s. Metres's contribution is to map these ideas onto our own political moment, exploring in particular the role of erasure in producing and denying the subjectivity of what the Bush Administration termed "enemy combatants." *Sand Opera*'s first section, "abu ghraib arias," treats this process most explicitly, developing a series of increasingly illegible erasures in which the testimony of prisoners and guards at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo is interspersed with language culled from official reports and from Standard Operating Procedure manuals. Deploying various forms of erasure—brackets, white space, black bars—the section culminates in two poems in which everything but the pronouns and, in the second, everything but the punctuation has been removed. These last poems in particular, however, feel perhaps a tad too manipulative, too reliant on obvious or easy formal techniques at the expense of more rigorous thinking. Years ago a video circulated on YouTube of a George W. Bush speech in which everything but his gasps and lip-smacks had been edited out. Metres is better when he eschews such gimmickry.

Metres's occasional indulgence in obvious techniques can flaw an otherwise strong collection. It's difficult, for example, not to feel that a poem like "Cell / (ph)one (A simultaneity in four voices)" is too glib, as Metres instructs his readers to "Tear out these pages, then cut into four columns for four readers [...] Improvisation is welcome." Reminiscent of C. A. Conrad's somatic poetry exercises—themselves hardly revolutionary—the poem invokes the well-worn assumption that poetry-as-performance constitutes a form of subversive political action. Another relatively easy attempt at provocation is the collection's multiple see-through pages. "Black Site (Exhibit Q)" reads in its entirety "so I could // pass the time // they also gave me // a Rubik's Cube," and can be read through the translucent page preceding, where the schematics of a Guantanamo interrogation cell are rendered. Though *Library Journal* heralds Metres's use of such techniques as a "formally inventive *cri de coeur*," it's hard to see much inventiveness here: the idea that we can approach or recuperate language only by first encountering, "seeing-through," and turning past its abuses is, instead, rather banal. In a collection that is often powerful, often emotionally resonant, Metres's reliance on formal gimmicks saps the power and dulls the resonance. It's hard to feel a poem's critical force, political *or* aesthetic, if we feel we're being manipulated.

For the most part, however, *Sand Opera* deploys forms like the black-bar erasure with dramatic results. Here, for instance, is "The Blues of Ken Davis":

and I remember calling
home that night and saying
I can't take this anymore

if this is what we're going
to do if this is what we've become
then I'm done

they say talk to a chaplain
they say it's all your perception
and every night it's amazing

because you're lying there
no matter how much music you play
no matter how loud you turn it up

you can still hear

More than a perfunctory technical device, the erasure here is integrated into Davis's testimony and made part of the poem's meaning. It represents both the unnameable screams of torture victims and the loss of the speaker's own voice as a result of his need to drown them out. Moreover, the erasure refuses complicity in the spectacle of state violence by refusing to reproduce in language the atrocities that Davis overhears; at the same time, it speaks to our cultural failure to meaningfully address these atrocities as an unacknowledged presence in our national life. If language is one front on which the War on Terror is being fought, the poet's self-reflexive interrogation of his own language, his own aestheticizing of that war, is a necessary corollary to a political poetics.

Still, *Sand Opera* leaves relatively untroubled those stark binaries that much contemporary political poetry relies on. In particular, *Sand Opera* tends to draw a clear line between good and evil, "us" and "them," with "them" representing not the victims, but the perpetrators of the War on Terror. Poem after poem treats or gives voice to the suppressed histories of these victims—and rightly so—but far fewer poems successfully humanize American military operatives or show, as does "The Blues of Ken Davis," this poetry's own structural affiliations with them. Metres can fall into a trap that catches many contemporary poets, where it almost seems impossible to "do" politics without doing it reductively.

Metres is at his best when he pushes poetry toward richer, more dynamic forms of political engagement. In one of *Sand Opera*'s strongest poems, "When I Was a Child, I Lived as a Child, I Said to My Dad," Metres links his playing of a war-based computer game to "a cubicle outside Vegas" where

“Jonah joysticks his Predator above Afghanistan, / drone jockey hovering above a house on computer screen.” It is no easy task to compare oneself empathetically to one of the most criticized figures of the War on Terror, yet Metres depicts the full humanness of the drone operator as he “heads home. Pizza. Diaper rash. Removes a thumb / from his toddler’s sleeping mouth. Again, no sleep.” The poem may not quite reveal the American military operative’s position within an exploitative economic system, where enlisting is often, particularly for working-class youth in the South and Midwest, the most attractive, and sometimes only, financial opportunity available. But it gestures nonetheless toward the political urgency of recognizing the humanness of even those figures whose actions we would unconditionally condemn. *Sand Opera* is most successful, and most truly necessary when it acknowledges this humanness, when it obliterates the false binaries too characteristic of contemporary political poetry and uncovers those histories suppressed and voices marginalized by material and linguistic practices the poet nonetheless acknowledges as his own.

The collection’s final section, “homefront/removes,” juxtaposes the testimony of Mohamed Farag Ahmad Bashmilah, “held and tortured in secret US prisons,” with some of *Sand Opera*’s most stirring lyrics. Here is the best:

You look at me / looking at you. How close the words
creation and *cremation*. How in Hebrew, Adam is kin
to dust, how the stars swam in Abraham’s eyes, his
profligate future. Uncountable windows of light, flashing
open-eyed. The towers burned down into themselves—
just like a cigarette, the poet laureate wanted to say, and
did, on air, knowing that distance makes metaphors
terrifying and the world less so, dividing the night from
night. How to describe the twisted angles and planes?
Picasso: *a picture is a sum of destructions*. The wind draws
dust in to us. Thus, E—who held klieg lights at Ground
Zero carries the towers in his lung roots. A kind of seeding,
this seeing. We are windows, half-open, half-reflecting,
trying to impersonate someone who can breathe.

This last sentence is perhaps an apt characterization of *Sand Opera* itself, a glittering examination of how poetry impersonates politics and how, in the future, the inverse might be true. In the collection’s many poems about children, Metres, *pace* Picasso, envisions a future in which a picture might be more than a sum of destructions, in which language might be sutured together again, and metaphors a little less terrifying. This is, now more than ever, a necessary vision.

Christopher Kempf