

REVIEWS

M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Foreword by Evie Shockley. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015. 102pp. \$15.95

Thanks in no small part to the critical acclaim garnered by *Zong!* (2008), M. NourbeSe Philip's first US book of poetry, some of the author's early writing has now appeared in this new volume from Wesleyan. Originally published in Cuba in 1988 and in the UK in 1993, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* is finally available in the US. For those of us with access to NourbeSe Philip's sound recordings on PennSound, and to her individual works published in various journals, this collection represents an important addition to our reading and understanding of one of the most innovative poets writing today from global perspectives. (The Caribbean, the UK, and Canada are just three of her vantage points.)

Like NourbeSe Philip's overlapping global perspectives, her book as a whole has the structure of a Venn diagram. Insofar as the title is an eponym of the last poem in the book, both title and poem frame the collection, giving it a circular shape from beginning to end. The title itself can be read as two titles, simultaneously detached and linked by a comma, a caesura that encapsulates the silent break between the two predicates. Moreover, as in *Zong!*, NourbeSe Philip back-ends this book with an autobiographical essay that explains its social, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Not a strategy that I generally like (it was the one thing I thought detracted from the power of *Zong!*), here it seems appropriate. Since the book is also frontloaded by Evie Shockley's introduction, NourbeSe Philip's afterword amplifies Shockley's efforts to familiarize American audiences with the aesthetics, formal strategies, and cultural modalities informing the author's work. Shockley's introduction partially overlaps NourbeSe Philip's afterword, thanks to the eponymous book title and concluding poem, which suture this entire structure.

This Venn diagram structure also describes the relationship between one's "mother" and one's "acquired" languages. These terms, as NourbeSe Philip shows us, must be qualified: the poems in this collection argue that all language is acquired and that all languages, therefore, may be regarded as either one's actual or potential mother tongues. But it's precisely the differences between the actual and the potential that constitute history—here, the history of colonialism. NourbeSe Philip's poems move from excoriating enslavement and theft to valorizing language acquisition. She acknowledges what has

been lost (daughters, mothers, and their languages) but also reminds us that what is lost is not destroyed. Most important, these poems insist that what has been imposed (another mother tongue) *had already* belonged to those on whom it was forced.

This past perfect of prior ownership is best expressed and justified in a section of the book entitled “Universal Grammar,” but it gets established in the formal and thematic structures of the book overall. Unlike the collective, almost epic, sweep of *Zong!*, *She Tries Her Tongue*, *Her Silence Softly Breaks* focuses on the rippling effects of colonialism and slavery on the African mother-daughter relationship. The sequence of poems can be read as loosely corresponding to a *bildungslied*, a kind of formation poem. We begin with theft, a daughter snatched from her mother—“Where she, where she, where she / be, where she gone?” This daughter winds up in an “Adoption Bureau,” attends a Catholic school (“The Catechist” and “Eucharistic Contradictions”) and eventually, while learning her “new” language, not only “recalls” the language she has lost but also learns the “Declensions of Beauty” associated with the new language in a mouth not made (she has “Flying Cheek-Bones”) to form these strange sounds: “English / is my mother tongue. / A mother tongue is not / not a foreign lan lan lang / language / l /anguish” (“Discourse on the Logic of Language”).

This “adopted” mother tongue displaces—without erasing—the mother whose desperate voice, and searching cries, echo down the corridors of history, haunting the daughter like a haint insisting that she never forget: “Hold we to the centre of remembrance / that forgets the never that severs / word from source.” Nonetheless, in order to escape a silence her new “mother” and “father” would not find objectionable for a “good” Catholic girl, she must “try” this new tongue that is somehow still “her” tongue even before she begins contorting her (biological) tongue into the positions required by English. In brief, she must move on: “the tribe of belongings small and separate, / when gone. . . / on these exact places of exacted grief / I placed mint-fresh grief coins / sealed the eyes with certain and final.” This trying of the tongue is indeed trying. Hence the stutter effects (“lan lan lang”) in “Discourse on the Logic of Language.” This trying, this stuttering, is formalized at the level of the name: the eponym is itself a kind of slow stutter. Thus the titles of several, but not all, sections are followed by poems with the same titles. It can be trying, be difficult, to move on from one word, one title, one tongue, to the next.

But what does it mean to move on? As NourbeSe Philip points out in two sections, “The Question of Language Is the Answer to Power” and the eponymous “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue,” freedom is only another illusion. Though we might figure it as open skies (e.g., Dunbar’s caged bird) or as open plains (Philip’s response to this dream is the curated displays of the museum in “African Majesty”), freedom is nostalgia that has been

trampled under the relentless march of history. In the “Universal Grammar” section, NourbeSe Philip builds on Chomsky’s concept of innate grammars (children at birth have the capacity to speak any language they are exposed to) and explores linguistic categorization per se as a historically determined phenomenon. These poems mimic Western forms of definition, the dictionary, pronunciation guides, and lexicons, underscoring their collective, if unevenly developed, histories:

fragments
 brief
 as Sappho’s
tremble of tongue on the brink of
ex/
 *(when the passage of sound is completely
 blocked a consonant is called)*
plosive
tongue on the brink of
ex/
 (prefix—occurring only before vowels)
odus
orcize
on the brink of
ex/
 (to strip or peel off (the skin) 1547)
coriate
The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting

This tension between universal and contingent grammars (think of Saussure’s *langue/parole* dialectics) offers only the possibility—not certainty—of expression (another loaded term), and only vis-à-vis the expropriation of a mother tongue.

Of course, as Shockley and NourbeSe Philip point out in the introduction and afterword, one expropriates what, in fact, one already possesses. This prior ownership is not only related to innate grammatical properties of the brain. The partial transfer of the ownership of English (or Spanish, Portuguese, French, etc.) from Europeans to Africans did not begin when enslaved and colonized Africans were forced to learn another language. It began when Africans, prior to and during colonialism and slavery, taught themselves (and were taught) European languages to facilitate trade. That’s my qualification of NourbeSe Philip’s argument. To be fair, her focus is only on mandatory learning; her context, after all, is the forced separation of mothers from their daughters under colonialism and slavery. Yet she speaks truth to power in a broader sense

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.