

Two-tongued Sphinx:

deciphering the 'father tongue' in Marlene Nourbese Philip

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In this paper, I will focus on the work *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) by Marlene Nourbese Philip. This collection stands as a metaphor for the losses inherent to the process of dispossession and dispersion that are results from the [African] diaspora: the loss of place, language, and a place in language, once to live in exile is to live with “the loss of something left behind forever” (Said, 2003). In this sense, Marlene Nourbese Philip (1997) commented that to “speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own.” Therefore, Philip’s poetry challenges “the structure and dispersion of discourses” (Saunders, 2007) by rethinking the role of the English language, deconstructing it to its most elementary constituents and (re)defining this language from a “father tongue” to a “mother tongue”. Katherine McKittrick (2006) points out that “[T]hese creative and theoretical spaces are not just words, images, or ideas; they locate real social struggles.” Indeed, poetry is seen as a geographical space where tensions, asymmetries, dislocations, replacements and (re)placements take place via words.

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Introduction

According to the Greek myth of the Oedipus and the Sphinx:

One day, Oedipus encountered the famous Sphinx perched on a rock at the city gates. The Sphinx forced all passersby to solve this riddle: “Which animal walks with four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?” Those who failed the test were flung into a deep ravine. Oedipus solved the riddle [...] Then the Sphinx took her own life by throwing herself from the rock (IMPELLUSO, 2007: 530).

The Sphinx from the myth speaks to Oedipus and he has but one chance to decipher the riddle or be flung from a ravine and be lost forever. For the purpose of this paper, I believe the above mentioned allegory has a hybrid form. The Sphinx’s speech is delivered in two languages for the African descendants and unless the listener can decipher it, she will be doomed to a life of servitude to the father tongue in the New World.

Undoubtedly, the New World was a narrative construction in the minds of the Europeans and its materiality and the accomplishment of the conquest caused losses for the inhabitants of this new narrated and ideologically constructed site, namely the Africans transplanted to the New World as slaves and the Native Americans who were mostly murdered by the Colonizers. Therefore to state that the New World is a discursive creation materialized in the real world by the Colonial conquest implies admitting that language is indeed an empowering tool for those who can exercise the power over the colonized and the oppressed. Inasmuch, the linguistic imposing was just as effective to the Empire and its purposes, as were lashes and weapons because as questioned by Diedrich *et alii*, “For do you spell ‘I am’ when the seamless web defining the self is torn? How do you spell ‘I am’ on water without boundaries? How do you spell ‘I am’, how do you define ‘human’” (1999: 17) in a language that denies you as a human being?

(I)

Voyage through death²...

The African diaspora to the New World is a site of many ruptures and consequent dispossessions. Following the theorist Avtar Brah (1996: 182), the term needs to be historicized once a diaspora is always about: “settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere’ [...] the question is not simply about *who* travels but *when, how, and under what circumstances?* What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora?”

Thus, discourse had a main role on this scenario. Science, Medicine and the Catholic Church were discursively mobilized to inscribe difference upon the Africans and their descendants. “Black savage, inferior, primitive, creatures from the “Dark Continent”. Such excesses imposed to the African’s behavior, that is, the significance of the images that bore the grotesque due to the continuous excess of their presence – as Blacks were the hypertrophy, the extreme complexity – made stereotypes inherent to the African making them different and differentiated. Once enslaved, they were transplanted to the New World and deprived from the very means by which they would articulate the violation and depriving suffered: their original languages.

Accordingly, memory – whether individual or collective – has leading importance in this recapitulation because through memory, the myths, languages, religious beliefs, the history of the multiple traumas and the “history as trauma. And the traumas to be healed in the diasporic formation are plenty. And the traumas to be healed in the diaspórica formation to the Caribbean are many since, as Edward Said reminds us, the exile “is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (2003: 177).

Slaves were taken to the New World with nothing but their bodies, and the image of a home from which they were deprived from. As far as women are concerned, they came to the new land carrying only their inner spaces which would be explored as merchandise and reproductive means to sustain the plantation system. The Black female slaves arrived in the New World “with nothing. But the body. Her body. *The* body – repository and source of everything needed to survive in any but the barest sense. Body memory bodymemory. The African body. Its resources: strength, resistance to disease. The African body. Including the space between the legs, the *raison d’ être* of her importation to the New World” (PHILIP, 1997: 91).

² The title of this and subsequent section was drawn from the poem *Middle Passage* by Robert Hayden.

It is precisely against this silencing, the gendered, racist and sexist silencing that the Afro-Caribbean poet, Marlene Nourbese Philip writes. Her poetics is directed at deciphering the two-tongued sphinx riddle: how does one make a land one's own if she cannot inhabit that language? How can silence softly break?

(II)

...to life upon these shores

If “to speak another language is to enter another consciousness” as argued by Philip (1997: 46), then the Africans in the New World were constrained to enter and live in the consciousness of their Masters, through the proper English, the right English, the Father's language. This was the role of English in Caribbean societies. It obliterated the very means through which living expression for the Africans would be translated. In other words, the erasure of the African original languages hindered them to articulate the so-called “non-being” which was constructed by the Europeans.

The English language, one of the languages of the two-tongued Sphinx, is an “anguish”, a “foreign anguish”, as noted by Philip (1989: 56), a burden to the colonial being. The question that repeats itself is how can the gaps between the non-existence of the Africans be filled with such a weight that it will softly break and open up spaces that can be inhabited by the Africans in the new world. In her poetry book entitled *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), the author presents a poignant insight into history, challenging the readers to take a stand against the violence and obliterations of the official European hegemonic history against the Africans and their descendants.

The perspective taken up by the writer is that one of an observer who later gives an account. To a certain extent, the author is a witness, though not a passive one but an appointed witness. Following this argument further, *She Tries her Tongue*³ (1989) is an account for those who were not allowed agency. Given these facts, poetry is inserted in the interstice formed by the weight of the patriarchal language that rules social practices.

While “linguistic, cultural and geographical separations instituted by the several colonizers [...] are still present” according to Carole Boyce Davies (2010: 748 – Our Translation), a language of emergence was indeed formed in this exiguous space. The Caribbean demotic, which was a reaction against the stereotyped image, provides the Caribbean writer with an “access to a variety of verbal techniques and methods” that enables the artist to “speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates. If

³ From this point onwards, all references to the book *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* will be written as *She Tries Her Tongue*.

allowed free expression, these *i-images* succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness” (PHILIP, 1997: 43; 44).

Consequently, *She Tries Her Tongue* is engaged in a social and discursive practice aimed at changing the material reality behind the text. The intervention in the real world takes place by the cartography undertaken by the author to write down silence in order to break the silencing.

The first section of the book, “And Over Every Land and Sea” is a contemporary adaptation of Ovid’s account of Proserpine’s abduction by Hades from Ceres, her mother, as an allegorical rendering of the loss inherent to the diasporic traumas of the Middle Passage to the New World.

Questions!Questions!

Where she, where she, where she
be, where she gone? [...]
Before the questions too late,
before I forget how they stay
crazy or no crazy I must find she. (*She Tries Her Tongue*, 1989: 28)

Girl and mother separated from each other serve as the account of Africa and her sons and daughters uncoupled without any possibility of return. The search for the lost physical place goes on. Where is language to be found? What are the places to be inhabited in language? The poet reacts against colonial ruling by trying a new language. The syntax is broken; a new one is placed upon it, interrupting the colonial, oppressive, patriarchal text. The father tongue is confronted by the mother tongue anchoring her discourse in a context that is crossed by colonial power relations.

Pointing to the socially constructed capacity that language has to deform identity, Marlene Philip questions from whose perspective the image of Africans were built. The author manages the language of violence perpetrated by the colonizer and enslaver as a means of directing her agency.

The challenge, therefore, facing the African Caribbean writer who is all sensitive to language and to the issues that language generates, is to use the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated (PHILIP, 1989: 19).

These linguistic openings are the gaps through which silence would start to softly break, exposing other unknown realities to the English language. Such a position is a clear refusal to “know my place”, the place set apart for the managed peoples of the world” (PHILIP, 1990: 296). Instead, it is a position which advances a redefinition and change of space and place, coming up “against the role of language and the issues relating to that” (PHILIP, 1990: 296).

Philip’s position is much aligned with that of Audre Lorde (1984) and Anne McClintock (2011), according to whom there are real and material differences – age, class, gender, social

position – and if poetry is to be a “revelatory distillation of experience” which helps to “give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (LORDE, 1984: 37) then the poet is the medium through which the word will bear testimony for the representation and staging of social difference. The author is a “privileged scribe register[ing] the oral testimony for the unprivileged” (McCLINTOCK, 2011: 475 – Our Translation). Even so, the author dares to speak.

But I speak. In a certain manner. Of descent. Of enumerated ancestors – intermediate persons – of Africa. Whose public genealogy is one of pain. And killing. And mayhem. And tribes. And genital mutilation. And AIDS. And cannibalism. And incompetence. And army cops. And dictators. And killing. And killing... And yet there is another genealogy: of language. Spoken with the whole body [...] A genealogy of language [...] “hurry go bring it come” that African claims. Through the language [...] Other times. Others spaces (PHILIP, 1997: 25).

This geography is extended from the physical space to the Black female’s inner space inasmuch “black matters are spatial matters” (McKITTRICK, 2006: xvi). The bodyspaces are sites of a contentious practice in which “blood and deceit / twinned / in always” (PHILIP, 1989: 40). Gender position is rewritten and contested; the speaking body is unsilenced through the invention of S/Place” (McKITTRICK, 2006: 49). Analyzing the process through which gender relations are constructed offers an insight to the forms in which power is articulated under certain social and historical moments.

However if the gendered speech is to be heard and to produce a real effect within society, then the Master’s tongue, which, as Audre Lorde carefully reminds us “will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984: 112). The father tongue needs to go through a deeper deciphering process so that it will reflect, inscribe and reinvent the Black female within the Americas. For doing so, the African presence in the New World needs to be asserted and relived via the ancestral words carried within the Black female enslaved body. Secrets, myths and tradition ought to be evoked to dismantle the master’s house.

In order for the Black female to reclaim her identity and locate herself within language, the father tongue needs to be deciphered. The riddle posed to the Black female by the two-tongued Sphinx is a double one: how do you reclaim your personhood by finding a place in language? How do you decipher the father tongue since English, the father tongue means a long-lasting anguish?

English is
my father tongue
A father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue (*She Tries Her Tongue*, 1989: 56)

The possible and effective solution is to infuse English with the ancestral words in the New World to the new generation born under the burden of enslavement. If women are the guardians of tradition, and myths then they are also keepers of the word and its holiness. In the New World, the Black female has the same role as that of the African *griot*: she is the unifier and the one responsible for guarding her people's ancestry and to pass it on. Hence, the mother blows the secrets need to be passed on to the children, the descendants in the New World. They are blown into the child's mouth, making this new, hybrid text alive:

THE MOTHER THEN PUT HER FINGERS INTO HER CHILD'S MOUTH – GENTLY FORCING IT OPEN. SHE TOUCHES HER TONGUE TO THE CHILD'S TONGUE, AND HOLDING THE TINY MOUTH OPEN, SHE BLOWS INTO IT – HARD. SHE WAS BLOWING WORDS-HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE-INTO HER DAUGHTERS (*She Tries Her Tongue*, 1989: 58)

The act of blowing the words stands as a metaphor. It is the breath of life. The ancestral words bring the African presence to the surface, constituting the inner space that will be extended to the outside. This creative force gathers all that was dispersed into unit so that the blowing and the word sustain each other mutually, creating, inscribing and preserving the word.

The birth of this new language “in-between” the spaces of the New World is part of the weight that will fracture and softly break her silence. As asserted by critic Carole Boyce Davies, “when women use the tongue, then, it gets removed from its primary male identification” (1994: 160). Following the theorist a little further, the act of speech is linked not only to the anatomical organs involved. Rather, one speaks “through the cultural histories embedded in a “mother tongue”, through an oppressive force; through all of these in their collectivity and multiplicity” (DAVIES, 1994: 161). Marlene Philip confirms such proposition in her “LESSONS FOR THE VOICE (I) (Cont'd). Words, as she states, do carry emotional and physical responses to the context:

Facts to Remember

- (1) Words collect emotional and physical responses
- (2) The larger the space, the more weight and friction is required on the consonant.
- (3) Intention, sound and word together produce clarity.
- (4) Anxiety to convey meaning often results in over emphasis and emphasis is a way of conveying meaning means that you are unconsciously holding on to meaning and limiting it.

(5) When you reach down the sound, it is touched off like a drum; it releases itself and reaches as far as you wish.

The sound is there to back the word. (*She Tries Her Tongue*, 1989: 72)

The word emerges from the body and as it forces its way through from the brain to the outer space, that is, the context, and it will be affected by gender, age, class, and race alike. In this action of spreading the once blown word, the poet questions become a part of the trauma healing process:

LESSONS FOR THE VOICE (I) (Cont'd)

(Helpful questions and commentary)

(1) *Within the holds of the slave ship, how much weight and friction would be necessary to convey the meaning of life?*

(2) *Intention, sound and word of death would come together with astonishing clarity to banish anxiety – anxiety to convey the meaning of life.*

(3) *By holding to the meaning of life, did the slaves unconsciously limit it – or merely the word?*

(4) *How far down would they have to reach for a sound that would banish the future, restore the past and back their word in the present?*

(5) *Do words collect historical responses? (She Tries Her Tongue, 1989: 74)*

Indeed, the poem before mentioned is in itself a rhetorical question. If words are the carriers of the historical burden, they can, on the other hand, serve as responses to historical nullifications imposed to minorities. Owing to that, the poet's attempt is to heal this wounded and fragmented word into other tongues redeeming it. In view of such, Marlene Nourbese Philip observes that “[O]ur position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead which we are about to uncover – spaces in which we can empower ourselves” (PHILIP, 1990: 300).

Such empowerment will be staged and enacted within this rebirth *in* language, and also through it. Silence, words, history, gender are reactions that will lead to a subversion of the patriarchal tongue, healing it to a nurturing presence. The riddle, once deciphered, will allow the female poet to speak in other tongues, bringing the “dialogic of differences based on a complex subjectivity” (HENDERSON, 1990: 119) and the two-tongued Sphinx will be embodied by the witness, speaking alongside the poet's speech.

Final Remarks

Silence, memory, poetry, the Word. All of them are connected to the inner spaces, the dis-places. The silences of memory are many and unveiling them is the poet's task so that the historical silences shall not prevail. As we have presented in this essay, *She Tries Her Tongue* is a fruitful attempt to disclose the paths traced by a history of silencing and linguistic violence.

The author subverts the standard English language by adopting an analytical perspective in relation to the role of the word as a violence perpetrator and an agent of a "foreign anguish," an anguish which is healed through the act of deciphering it to a mother tongue. By doing so, it is infused with other elements, namely the African and the Creole presences, so that it can translate new meanings and also give space for the Afro-Caribbeans, to *be* in the word.

Marlene Philip poses an intriguing question: "Without memory can there be history?" (*She Tries Her Tongue*, 1989: 97). Her poetics clearly answers that. Without a new meaning, there cannot be a full existence in the world/word, since it is "imperative that poetry recreates silenced histories and myths, and starts interrogating the most painful experiences: the loss of history as well as the loss of our words" (PHILIP, 1997: p. 56). And these silenced stories have just started being told.

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