

**Between Tongues: The Discourses of Decolonization in M. Nourbese Philip's
"Discourse on the Logic of Language" and Rita Wong's "write around the absence"**
Brittany Kraus

This outstanding essay by Brittany Kraus deftly analyses Marlene Nourbese Philip's much discussed and internationally recognized poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language" (1988) in conjunction with Rita Wong's more recent and still little discussed poem "write around the absence" (1998). As Kraus persuasively demonstrates, despite their differing "ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritages" – Wong is Chinese-Canadian, Philip of Afro-Caribbean descent – the two poets use experimental form and richly interwoven metaphors to "counter, mediate, and resist" what Wong describes as the "steam-roller" of English as a colonizing language. Both poets also subtly reclaim and "re-member" lost mother-tongues in these "poly-vocal and poly-tongued" texts. Kraus's own terms for describing words as they function in these two poems – they are not "static," they "move between linguistic, cultural, and territorial barriers" – might also be applied to her own skilful use of critical language in this innovative and polished comparative analysis.

– Dr. Marjorie Stone

Both M. Nourbese Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" and Rita Wong's "write around the absence" break away from conventional aesthetic and poetic techniques in order to highlight, and subsequently disturb, the oppressive and subjugating strategies encoded within, and propagated by, the English language. English, or "the father-tongue," is not only a codified site of colonial and imperial authority, through which racist and misogynistic discourses are mobilized, but also a historical, metaphorical, and literal site perpetuating systematic violence and cultural repression and erasure. The "mother-tongue," or the language of the "other" (meaning not white, heterosexual, and male), is both invoked and appealed to in Wong and Philip's poems as a space in which to counter, mediate and resist the homogenizing forces and "disruptive linguistic oppression that standard English" has affected and continues to affect (Verhagen 85). While drawing upon different ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritages – Wong is Chinese-Canadian and Philip, now a Canadian citizen, is of Afro-Caribbean descent – each poet not only participates in destabilizing the "imperial project" of the English language (Guttman 53), but also incites a remembrance, reclamation and re-articulation of cultural and linguistic identities through acts of mediation and motion.

Wong's "write around the absence" is a poem of intervention; moreover, it is a poem that intervenes. By juxtaposing English with Cantonese, Wong effectively unsettles the authority of the English language by questioning the authority that it assumes, an authority that "tramples budding / memory into sawdusty / stereotypes, [and] regimented capitals" ("write around" 354). The assumed dominance of English over other languages is both visually and linguistically represented in the poem: as the English words move diagonally across the page, the faded Chinese characters are quite literally "flattened out by the steamroller of the english language" (354). Yet the Chinese pictograms, though written-over, nonetheless occupy both the background and centre of the poem, paradoxically present and absent at the same time. As Christine Kim suggests, the "hierarchical logic of language demands that certain words be perceived as more central to meaning than others" (72). Thus, by including the pictograms – indecipherable to anyone who does not read

Cantonese (or, furthermore, meaningless to anyone who does not recognize that these are, in fact, Cantonese characters) – Wong indicates that language itself occupies a tenuous space. As both a “means of communication and an instrument of domination”, language can make meaning or subsume it (Kim 72). Language can recognize its own culturally and linguistically diverse etymologies or obscure them in an “etymology of assimilation” (Wong 354) wherein other voices, other languages and other peoples are effectively relegated to the margins of the page and the margins of society.

The speaker of “write around the absence,” identified only as “she” in the first line of the poem, articulates the anxiety – and anguish – caused by living “*half-submerged / in the salty home of / [her] mother tongue*” (“writing around” 354). The oceanic metaphor of the mother-tongue not only positions language as a life-giving entity that, “like the mother’s body, ... carries us, bears us, [and] births us” (Marlatt 172), but also gestures towards language as a potentially international or universal space that which, much like ocean-waters, flows between bordering (and bordered) lands, untamed and unclaimed. Yet, the image of being “half-submerged” in the watery seascape of the mother-tongue also invokes a more ominous image of drowning. The speaker must continuously mediate the divide between her Chinese mother-tongue and her English father-tongue in order to remain afloat between the tongues, rather than be engulfed by one or the other. It is English, however, that threatens to drown out all other voices: “*this is / the sound of / my chinese tongue / whispering: nei tou gnaw ma?*” (“write around” 354). While the Cantonese pictograms, though half-toned and half-concealed, nonetheless indicate a “conscious absence” (Kim 72) within the poem, so too do the whispered Chinese words haunt the poem with their ghost-like presence. Literally relegated to the margin of the page, the Chinese words are deliberately displaced from the English text, dichotomously inhabiting an “alien” yet autonomous space. While conscious of the language’s potential erasure, even extinction, in the face of colonial powers – “no tones can survive this alphabet” (“write around” 354) – Wong’s invocation of Chinese words indicates a hope for the relocation and reclamation of the mother-tongue. Furthermore, the form of the poem itself bears a slight resemblance to a Chinese pictogram, signalling that, although English is dominant on the page, the speaker’s mother-tongue whispers with faint but resonating undertones and overtones.

In an interview with Heather Milne, Wong states: “language that excites me comes from a mindset of ‘power with’ or ‘power to,’ not ‘power over’” (345). In “write around the absence” Wong blatantly critiques the colonial logic of standardized English and the ways in which it wields “power over:”

grammar is the dust on the streets
waiting to be washed off by immigrant cleaners or blown into your eyes
by the wind. grammar is the invisible net in the air, holding your
words in place. grammar, like wealth, belongs in the hands of
the people who produce it. (“write around” 354)

In this “stanza” (a loose descriptor, as Wong’s poem does not adhere to a conventional

stanzaic form), grammar is revealed as neither an arbitrary nor apolitical structure. Rather, grammar comes to represent the institutionalization of standard English and the ongoing institutionalizing practices it enforces. Grammar is a net – a tool for entrapment – that not only holds “words in place” (354) but also people. As Kim argues, the “grammar of nation-states dominates the ways in which social relations and the flow of global capital are typically articulated” (73). Therefore, people who do not comply with the rules of grammar are labelled uneducated, unintelligent, and inarticulate – or foreign. They are cast outside of political and social dialogues as their modes of speaking, writing, and thinking are deemed unacceptable. In a word, they are “othered.” The speaker of “write around the absence” expresses her anger and uneasiness with the white-washing properties of language, and furthermore incites a collective resistance against these same colonial strategies: “write around the absence, she said, show / its existence” (354). Wong implicitly suggests that the binary logic of language – a logic that pits white against non-white, male against female, heterosexual against homosexual, *et cetera* – can effectively be disrupted by an active decoding of the phallogocentric and racialized discourses embedded within the father-tongue. In other words, Wong gives the imperative not only to “write around the absence,” but to *right* it as well.

M. Nourbese Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language” is similarly concerned with the ways in which “the enforcement of the ‘universal grammar’” continues to privilege the position of the white, heterosexual male over all others (Guttman 54). Philip rejects the father- and mother-tongue binary, however, in order to consider the effects of “the cross-fertilization process embedded in the ‘wombs of language’” (Deloughrey 121). That is, Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language” not only interrogates how dominant discourses have oppressed and continue to oppress historically marginalized figures, but also explores the relationships between “the Caribbean demotic – some say patwa, some say dialect ... others say bad english –” and standard (imperial) English (Philip 129). Whereas “write around the absence” contains more blank page than text, Philip’s poem is visually and verbally dizzying: the text is discernibly divided into sections, but there is no linear structure for the reader to happily follow along. The reader is confronted with the task of learning how to read the poem, a task that demands the reader turn the book sideways and quite literally look at things from a different perspective. The rupturing of perception, or rather *pre-conception*, is of particular interest in Philip’s poem. As Guttman outlines, Philip’s poem engages in four separate and, to some extent, simultaneous discourses: the discourse of law, the discourse of amnesia, the discourse of aphasia and, finally, the discourse of myth (55). These poly-discourses do not create a harmonious choir, but rather one that is off-key and off-tempo. The discordant effects of the multiple discourses in “Discourse on the Logic of Language” function to inform the reader that the so-called logicity of scientific and authoritative language is both self-asserted and self-informed, and furthermore distances colonial English away from its self-imposed universality and self-acclaimed neutrality.

In the section Guttman terms the “discourse of aphasia,” Philip cleaves (English) words apart and rearranges them in stuttering configurations: “English / is my mother tongue / A mother tongue is not / not a foreign lan lan lang / language / l / anguish / – a foreign anguish” (148). Aphasia, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (the empirical – and imperial – authority on word-meanings!), is the “loss of speech, partial or

total, or loss of spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centres.” By incorporating an aphasic discourse into the text, Philip highlights a complex relationship between dominant and subordinated languages, peoples and histories. The “struggle by the dominated to adopt a language which has been forced upon them at the expense of remembering their ‘mother-tongue’” is a struggle characterized by conflict and anxiety (Guttman 56). The linguistic oppression that standard English has enforced upon the Caribbean demotic not only traces its roots back to a history of slavery, but also manifests within modern Caribbean speech. From the father-tongue’s rape of the mother-tongue, a “dumb-tongued / dub-tongued” child was born (Philip 149). The speaker’s voice, which stands between the mother-tongue (the capitalized letters running vertically down the page) and the father-tongue (the italicized slave edicts of colonial law), attempts to locate her mammy/mummy/mommy/modder tongue, but does not know where to look, or even what she is looking for. When she asks, “What is my mother tongue?” (149), she articulates a desire to find a language that can voice the “concerns of a displaced people” (Guttman 64). Yet the demotic – the language of the people – has already been penetrated by the “principal organ of oppression and exploitation” (Philip 152), the colonial and colonizing discourses of the father-tongue. The speaker cannot locate her mother-tongue because it has been severed from its cultural and linguistic origins. Just as the “slave caught speaking his native language” (138) is punished (and silenced) by the removal of his tongue, so too has the mother-tongue been cut out of the mouth of the people.

But words are not static. They move between linguistic, cultural and territorial barriers, finding homes in disparate places or displacing homes in “found” places. They mark, transfer, impose, assimilate, and induce forgetfulness, but they also resist, reclaim, re-articulate and incite remembrance. Memory or “re-memory” (Morrison qtd. in Guttman 53) is a central theme in “Discourse on the Logic of Language” and is most notably evident in the viscerally animalistic and erotic images of a mother licking her newborn child. With her tongue, the mother cleans the “creamy white substance” off of the baby’s body (136), a powerful image considering its dual connotations. On one hand, “creamy white substance” refers to the protective fluid that covers the bodies of all newborns; on the other hand, it conjures up the image of a man’s ejaculate. Thus, the mother not only licks the baby clean of the birth-fluid, but also licks the baby clean of what she has been born into – a long, bloody history of colonial violence and patriarchal oppression. The mother also blows “her words, her mother’s words, those of her mother’s mother, and all the mothers before” into her child’s mouth (138), an act that is at once nurturing, vitalizing, and resistant. The symbiotic relationship between mother and daughter emphasizes the “crucial link of female corporeality to language ... and confronts the male corporeality of the literary canon” (Deloughrey 134). Furthermore, the mother-daughter bond reinforces the power of trans-generational (and transgressive) memory. Passed from mouth to mouth, the mother imbues her child with the words of her female ancestors, the words of every daughter, mother, and grand-mother who came before. The mother’s act, however, is non-verbal. She gives her daughter voice through breath, articulating vast land- and seascapes of memory, history, culture, and tradition without uttering a word. Even though the mother’s gift to her daughter is language itself, language is re-envisioned as a space outside of “the ideological weight of the father tongue” (Deloughrey 134), a space before and between tongues in which the daughter can remember what has been forgotten and move towards a better future.

Both Wong's "write around the absence" and Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" subvert the assumed authority of standard English and draw attention to the "dis-logic" of language. Their poems are poly-vocal and poly-tongued, and both poets navigate between registers, between binaries, and between spaces in order to indicate the "foreign anguish" (Philip 149) caused by living "half-submerged" (Wong 354) in the mother-tongue while burdened with the colonial violence of the father-tongue. Each writer enacts a poetics of motion, in which language is neither fixed nor stagnant but moves across the page and across identities. By negotiating the spaces between tongues, Philip and Wong destabilize standard English as a neutral construction and furthermore engage in discourses of decolonization that incite a collective reclamation and (re)remembrance of the silenced voices, muted tones and severed tongues of historically and temporarily marginalized figures.

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