



‘Dis/place’ is not my home:  
Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s

## **SHE TRIES HER TONGUE, HER SILENCE SOFLTY BREAKS**

Cláudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

“For the Black woman, place and space come together in the New World [...] irrevocably linking [the] inner place or space [...] with the outer space”. This provocative statement was posed by the afro-caribbean-canadian poet Marlene Nourbese Philip (1997:77), in her book of poetry *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989). During slavery space defined and codified the identity of the Black female slaves in the New World, expanding the “coloniality of power” (GROSGOUEL 2012; 2008), that is, the Eurocentric perceptions that oriented scientific and social thought, to the image of the black female body. Not only was the image marked with such coloniality. The language through which such views were disseminated to explore and dominate Black women, leaving in them a permanent negative also carried coloniality in its structure. Therefore, in order to confront these negative signs, Marlene Nourbese Philip undertakes the task of decolonizing these spaces through a “genealogy of resistance”, questioning those fixed notions of a negative identity and the role of the English language itself, the “Father language”, the language that constructed the Black females’ body connecting it to colonization. Philip decolonizes these spaces – the female body and the plantation – displacing the European narrative of inferiority while resignifying them through strategies born at the subordinate side of difference, breaking with the hegemonic discourses. Her questioning shifts from the visible result – inferiority, racism, sexism – to the strategies employed and which are behind these stereotyped views and perceptions of blacks.

**Keywords:** Body. Language. Language. Place. Space.

*No language is neutral*  
**Dionne Brand**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I begin this article using the title of a book by the Trinidadian poet Dionne Brand “[N]o language is neutral”. The title made me think about language, specifically the

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<sup>1</sup> Professor at Federal University of Rondônia (Foreign Languages Department).



English language. Given that no language is neutral, as Brand poses, does this mean that language plays a role in constructing our places in the world?

Having this in mind, I relate the English language to the construction of the Black female body as being a dis/placed and colonized space. I draw from Aníbal Quijano the concept of “coloniality of power”, that is, the Eurocentric views that orient disciplines. I argue that coloniality constructed the black female body as an extension of the colonized physical territory, the plantation.

Against coloniality, Ramon Grosfoguel proposes the concept of “decolonization”. It is an attempt of unveiling the European matrix that pervades all disciplines. Therefore, African-caribbean-canadian author Marlene Nourbese Philip’s poetry book *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) takes a step towards decolonizing the black female body by cartographing the discourses that socially produced those bodies as spaces to be dominated, linking this violent act to other “practices of subjugation [which] are also spatial acts” (McKITTRICK, 2006, p. xix) that take place via language. I believe that for Marlene Philip geography is an act of subjugation. Thus she turns to decolonizing the black female body.

Furthermore, Philip decomposes the English language to connect it to disciplines that are part of a hegemonic discourse to engender the inferiority of blacks. Through poetry Philip unveils the coloniality that is concealed behind the colonized female body, thus displacing the European narrative of inferiority while resignifying them through strategies born at the subordinate side of difference, breaking with practices of inferiorization.

According to Marlene Philip (1997, p. 77) “[F]or the Black woman, place and space come together in the New World”. I understand that Philip’s statement is more than true. The body, in the plantation economy, is a technology of reproduction to provide labor force. Its insertion in the Eurocentric logic of coloniality allowed the black body to be reduced it to the intimate parts. More than just reduced, these discourses produced it as a terrain, a space that was an extension of the outer space.



Therefore it could be violated, abused and colonized as the outer place was; a place to be conquered.

When we turn to the development of capitalism in the roots of what is acclaimed today as globalization<sup>2</sup> we perceive that it is necessary to identify certain ideas that pervade universalisms in power relations that ruled and continue to rule our world. In order to identify such power relations and the insidious tactics that are employed we must look back to the past to understand how the “coloniality of power” was formulated, bringing forth a “genealogy”, in the same terms posed by Michel Foucault, as an,

examination of descent [which] permits the discovery, under unique aspects of a trait or a concept, of the myriad events through –thanks to which, against which– they were formed. Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent it is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations-or conversely, the complete reversals- the errors, the false appraisal, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 81).

For Marlene Philip, a ‘genealogy’ is “an account [...] of descent from ancestors. Of longing. To know. Where/who/how” (1997, p. 13). The white European male while expanding his power over the globe, brought with him the ideologies abovementioned and imposed his perspectives on them over the colonized peoples. The European perspective was the only one allowed, and anything that deviated from the ‘norm’, that is, the European customs, was banned and disavowed. Whatever was regarded as “grotesque”, “bestial” or “primitive” had to be decomposed into tiny parts to be analyzed and framed in the European matrix of knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> I am following Ramón Grosfoguel (2008) and Aníbal Quijano (2000). The roots of globalization, that is the mobility of people, goods, capital, merchandise, ideology, culture and ideas over national borders has more than five centuries. The novelty is that in the last 30 years the multinational corporations gained autonomy over nation-states.



Consequently, using the concept of ‘race’, the world was divided into white/black, civilized/primitive, superior/inferior, conqueror/conquered and this organizing principle was validated by sciences since the “coloniality” was also entrenched in the construction of knowledge about peoples and the world.

Every detail was calculated to dominate and differentiate Africans, transforming them in the “Other”. Colonial encounters far from bringing understanding about the African peoples so as to build respect, instead, created a black mythology, “a form of modern, secularized (...) discourse which treats its subject as universally accepted, scientifically established, and therefore no longer open to criticism by a political or theoretical opposition” (BRANTLINGER, 1986, p. 187). Moreover what happened was the establishment of stereotyped and Eurocentric perspectives about the Africans through the constant fixed images. Binary oppositions made Africans become human/inhuman, visible/invisible, and savage/docile. The more was discovered about the Africans, the more distant they were pushed away from a place within the category of ‘humans’.

When Charles Darwin published his book *The Origin of Species* in 1859, those who were in favor of a secession between humans and the ‘uncivilized’ Africans, the Europeans could finally have their argument translated into scientific terms, adapting the theory of Darwinism to their purposes. Disciplines became allies to Imperial purposes to explain the existence of ‘higher’ and ‘lower races’.

The descriptions of what the Europeans encountered are rendered in terms of abstractions: all Africans are ‘men’. By reducing the unknown to a contained familiar, the “Other” can be analyzed and restricted; reduced to its smallest parts which will be dismembered, and when they are recomposed this ‘Other’ will forever be veiled with the European’s gaze.

Significantly enough, the case of the Hottentot<sup>3</sup> Venus is emblematic of the division between ‘civilization’ and ‘primitivism’. This African woman became

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Hottentot’ is a derogatory name used to refer to the *Khoikhoi*, native peoples from Southwest Africa.



“representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female” (GILMAN, 1986, p. 225).

[I]n this view of mankind, black occupied the antithetical position to the white (...) This polygenetic view was applied to all aspects of mankind, including sexuality and beauty. The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot.

Saartjie Baartmann, also known as Sarah Bartmann or Saat-Jee, the Hottentot Venus, was exhibited in 1810 in London<sup>4</sup>. Her protruding buttocks were an ‘anomaly’, and thus an evidence of degeneration. After her death, an autopsy was carried out and her genital organs were also exposed to the public. Consequently, “Sarah Baartmann’s sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks, serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century” and the description of her sexual parts “reflects the general nineteenth-century understanding of female sexuality as pathological (...) the female genitalia came to define the [Black] female of the nineteenth century” (GILMAN, 1986, p. 235). One specimen then served as a metonymy for all the others.

This confirms the importance of disciplines to inscribe subjects as objects. Michel Foucault’s assertion ratifies my argument: “Discipline is a political anatomy of detail” (1984, p. 183). Eventually, disciplines were part of a higher political project: capitalism. Consequently, the black female body was changed into a ‘docile’ body and with the aid of several disciplines since they:

increase the force of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience) (...) it dissociates power from the body (...) on the other hand, it reserves the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 182).

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<sup>4</sup> Saartjie baartmann died in Paris in 1815.



Owing to that, the black female body is a space that is inhabited by violence, the same violence that is exercised outside in the dominated and conquered physical space, therefore turning it into a part of the public space. Marlene Nourbese Philip poses this issue in the following terms:

The body. And the most precious of resources – the space. Between. The legs. The Black woman comes to the New World with only the body. And the space between. The European buys her not only for her strength, but (...) to produce new chattels – units of production – for the plantation machine. The Black woman. And the space between her legs (PHILIP, 1997, p. 76).

This space is a “[S]ite of oppression – vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space in designated form – the plantation machine” (PHILIP, 1997, p. 76).

For all these reasons, the black female body demands a process of ‘decolonization’, that is, the removal of the European matrix of power from it, by means of a “decolonial thinking” that aims at to “represent[ing] the complex processes of the system” (GROSFOGUEL, 2008, p. 12).

Decolonization implies the usage of a language that is decolonial, not being the same from the master. Audre Lorde stated in her 1984 essay that “the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, p. 110). However, the master’s tool might be corroded at its basis. It may not be possible to transgress being outside the discourse, but by corroding the basis, little by little, it can bring the house – if not down completely – at least it will shake its basis.

A close reading of Marlene Nourbese Philip’s poetry book allows us to envision Grosfoguel’s concept at work, while the author “resignif[ies] the Western hegemonic discourses from a subaltern epistemic locations” (GROSFOGUEL, 2012, p. 254)

The question that runs throughout the book is “From whose perspective?” (PHILIP, 1989, p. 20) and the issue of dis/placement of the Black female in the New World. At the same time I recognized that Philip’s main concern is related to what is done with language, rather, what language did to the African females. Consequently



Philip's poetry is a political act of emancipation from the "foreign anguish" (PHILIP, 1989, p. 57) that English is.

The author establishes an oppositional discourse to the hegemonic language by presenting words in the English language and their role as "real social struggles" (McKITTRICK, 2006, p. 60). One example is the definition Philip gives to the verb "rape". Far from being a mere act of violating a woman, the poet redefines it to brandshily renders the violation women went through.

raped – regular, active, used transitively the again and again against women particled into the passive voice as in, 'to get raped'; past present future-tense(d) against the singular or plural number of the unnamed subject, man (PHILIP, 1989, p. 66).

Rape, as defined by Philip is an ongoing, repeated action done to Black women. The canonical construction of a sentence in the English language is subject, verb and complement. The subject receives the action performed by a verb. Philip translates this grammar logic into the act of rape. Subjects, unnamed, unknown are passive receivers of an action from verbs that are active. Men are active; black women are victimized by white men's desire. The constant violation affects "how the female reads the external language of place, or public space – the outer space" (PHILIP, 1997, p. 75). The inner and private spaces, the intimate parts, are mutated into a public space, becoming one single colonizable place. According to Philip (1997, p. 77):

*'Dis place'* – the space between. The legs. For the Black woman *'dis placed'* to and in the New World, the inner space between the legs would also mutate into *'dis place'* – fulcrum of the New World plantation.

Philip's proposition is reflected in Patricia Joan Saunders statement about the black female body. As Saunders posits, "[T]he language of colonialism (...) was a language of oppression and violation, particularly sexual violation" (SAUNDERS, 2007, p. 91). Therefore Philip proposes that the English language must be infused with other meanings. The outcome will be a language that is the Caribbean demotic.



this chattel language  
babu English  
slave idiom  
nigger vernacular  
coolie pidgin  
wog pronunciation (PHILIP, 1989, p. 73)

Only by the usage of the “chattel language” the history of enslavement and continuous rapes can be rendered. Being triply dislocated “through race, gender and language” (PHILIP, 1997, p. 59), particularly the linguistic dislocation placed Black women in a non-space and silenced their voices and their bodies. Marlene Philip questions the perspective through which images and representations are produced while confronting the presupposed authority of science and its influence on language and the construction of Black female identity.

Philip exposes that the construction of sciences that follow a European logic and perspective while, at the same time, the author reveals the ideology that permeated the nineteenth century. Anatomy, for instance, was one of the sciences at the service of the Empire.

Those parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are named after two learned nineteenth century doctors, the eponymous Doctors Wernicke and Broca respectively (PHILIP, 1989, p. 57).

There is a critique of the images that were constructed with the assistance of sciences. One of them, and a powerful idea that justified slavery was that of the size of the brain.

Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted much of his time to ‘proving’ that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brain than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of color (PHILIP, 1989, p. 57).





Superiority of the white ‘race’ is a construction to which much time and effort was devoted in building. This apparent displacement of a scientific discourse on a book of poetry reveals a criticism to the idea of science itself.

By placing the scientific definitions in the same context as historical and social discourses, Philip closes the constructed gaps between the language of science, as ‘fact’ or ‘truth’, and the language of sociocultural discourses, thereby creating a space for conceptualizing science as both informed and produced by social and cultural agendas. In doing so, she bridges the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, and medicine (SAUNDERS, 2007, p. 105).

What Philip presents is that the discourse of science was never objective. The poet identifies that the oppression towards all the ones that are ‘different’ starts in the body, more precisely in the tongue because it both articulates speeches and oppresses:

- In the man the tongue is
- (a) the principal organ of taste.
  - (b) the principal organ of articulate speech.
  - (c) the principal organ of oppression and exploitation.
  - (d) all of the above (PHILIP, 1989, p. 59).

The tongue, this muscular organ, defined those who can be included in the category of humans and those who could be confined to slavery and subjugation. Philip engages in a close “examining of processes involved in producing and disseminating (...) coercion, terror, and legal and cultural practices and discourses” (SAUNDERS, 2007, p. 101). Hence questions of language are questions of power, indeed. Language and power came together to the New World.

Taken altogether, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* is an in-depth reflection on issues of representation and construction of the black female subjectivity, while denouncing the processes that are at work behind the multiple dis/placements black women go through, since “living language continually encapsulates, reflects and refines the entire experiential life and world view of (...) race and consequently society at large” (PHILIP, 1989, p. 14). The veil that covered black women’s body can never be a home; instead, it is a source of pain and degradation and



it is to this pain that Marlene Philip relates to in her poetry book refers to in order to claim for a place for women, a place that they can call home.

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