Article

"Verbs are a Tragedy": Poetics of Refusal From the Black Diaspora

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Abstract

"Language [is] a foreign anguish," once declared Afro-Caribbean diasporic poet NourbeSe Philip. Philip's sentiment holds true predominantly for those who write within Anglophone spheres, yet cannot relay their anguish to their mothers in English. This article argues that the English language, as a diasporic tongue, is a limited and limiting entity that precludes the rich spectrum of expression of diasporic consciousness. A number of poets from the Black Diaspora have sought to transgress the boundaries of their language, and in turn produced strategies for liberation. In this article, I analyze and compare the work of NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, June Jordan, and Claire Harris to demonstrate how the desire for liberation from coloniality has produced linguistically deconstructive impulses in these poets. Their resulting oeuvre is characterized by a distinctive refusal that tends toward fragmentation, incompleteness, and a sense of strangeness.

Keywords

African Diaspora, poetry, decolonization, methods, comparative literature

"Language [is] a foreign anguish," once proclaimed NourbeSe Philip, a diasporic Afro-Caribbean poet whose insights will inform much of this article

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(Philip, 1989, p. xiii). Philip's reflections resonate deeply with those of us who write in Anglophone spheres but struggle to articulate our anguish to our mothers in English. Likewise, this article emerges as an intrinsic effect of its author's diasporic condition. In contemporary culture, migration and displacement, often driven by imperialism, capitalism, poverty, civil unrest, climate change, among other factors, pervade critical discourses and serve as potent analytical tools. Consequently, the term "diaspora" has become a somewhat ubiquitous, albeit less specific, word in today's discourses, encompassing all individuals and communities scattered across the globe due to conditions instituted by these forces.

In the semantic sense, the term "diaspora" originates from the Greek compound verb created by combining the words "to disperse" and "across," referring to people scattered across the world. We encounter the first usage of the term, before the Common Era, to refer to Jewish peoples in the aftermath of their exodus from Jerusalem, emphasizing the displacement that is inherent to the making of diaspora. Beyond displacement, diasporic self-consciousness also entails a loss of completeness ensued from this rift of separation, resulting in a degree of fragmentation. Given this, the term "diaspora" has taken on new significance in recent years, as globalization and other forces mentioned above have led to increasing displacement and fragmentation around the world. Among these debates, I turn to a specific instance of diasporic experience and focus on the transatlantic slave trade and the resulting dispersion of its survivors. This pivotal juncture generated multivalent and self-reflexive elaborations on identity, memory, and imagination, and did so through a variety of visual and literary strategies. One such strategy, to which this paper by and large relates, is the Black Diaspora's conceptualization of the English language as a foreign and limiting imposition and the development of literary counterstrategies to surmount it.

Broadly speaking, language is argued to be one of the principal tools of control and imperial domination. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Ashcroft et al. (2002) contend that the origins of the study of the English language and the expansion of the empire stem from a single ideological climate, and that the development of one is inherently tied to the development of the other. The English language, put to the service of the empire, not only played a pivotal part for propaganda, but also served to bifurcate the collective thinking and understanding of the world into binary configurations predicated entirely on an antithetical imagining of the periphery versus the imperial center, colonizer versus colonized.

Postcolonial critic Ashis Nandy's imperative articulation of culture of imperialism exhibits a similar understanding of the role of language in

colonial expansion. Nandy observes that the endmost violence of colonialism lies in its producing a culture where the colonized are persistently lured into fighting their oppressors, albeit only within the psychological boundaries drawn by the latter (Nandy, 1983). Colonialism implants within the cultures of the colonized certain rules, structures, and codes that are commonly understood and shared by both the oppressors and the oppressed. The following quote by Nandy furthers this point: "The main function of these codes is to alter the original cultural priorities on both sides and bring to the centre of the colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or subordinate in the two confronting cultures" (Nandy, 1983, p. 2).

For one thing, colonialism modifies cultural priorities, dislocating and shifting language to create a frame of mind, a collective colonial consciousness that rests upon a categorical distinction of colonizer and colonized, us and Other, civilized and savage, human and property. And the psychological limits to which Nandy alludes constitute the very grammar of imperialism: rules that govern and manage colonial relationalities. Writers from settler societies, such as Canada and the USA, continue to operate from within the framework of the erstwhile empire's cultural hegemony. I argue that the before mentioned psychological limits are set and maintained by the very language of these societies. The reader, then, should approach this article as a call for rethinking language, which I treat as a necessary decolonial demand. Settler-colonialism foists upon Indigenous peoples of the world, among numerous other acts of brutality, a treacherous (dis)order that woefully displaces and replaces Indigenous bodies, languages, knowledge, and lifeways, uprooting ancient bones and rending tongues asunder, replacing them with a new system of signs that reflect the colonizer's worldview.

The primary aim of this article is to reframe the notion of completeness, complicated due to diasporic fragmentation. Yet, as I will argue, if paradoxically, incompleteness is a complete effect of diasporic condition. To that end, rather than to dismiss it, I uncover the myriad of ways of reckoning with it by looking at writers who have ultimately turned it into a poetic structure. Furthermore, I seek to demonstrate that although poetry largely entails a play on syntax, writing that leverages said diasporic position is a powerful and impactful mode of decolonial practice. The centrality of language to the functioning of the colonial enterprise renders this argument especially germane to the realm of poetry, where language is the primary concern. The poets examined in this article generate a lexical fusion that refuses, among other things, to pander to the principles of syntax. These cases of the diaspora articulating itself through linguistic means, unfixing the politically codified structure of their language, and instead writing in the embrace of a broken cadence,

missing verbs, and fractured lines serve a decolonial purpose. I later conceptualize this argument through two notions: incompleteness and strangeness.

Borrowing a notion from Dionne Brand, this article contends that English as a diasporic tongue is a limited and limiting entity that precludes the rich spectrum of expression of diasporic consciousness. A number of poets from the Black Diaspora have sought to transgress the boundaries of language. Through decentering syntax, they also decentered a history that is explicitly imperial. By looking at how Brand, NourbeSe Philip, June Jordan, and Claire Harris broadened the possibilities of the language they deployed, I argue that they produced strategies for liberation. While it may be an obvious yet tenuous assertion that these poets, all operating from within settler societies, must be writing toward some form of liberation—be it from coloniality, imperialist grammar, or simply the need for completeness—the concept of liberty for Black diaspora poets clearly extends far beyond personal emancipation to encompass what Brand termed the collective "I," as well as linguistic liberation from the colonizer's language. However, in their works, English is far from being something to be discarded altogether. Rather, I argue that they are liberating the English language from its own shackles, thus revealing its potential to hold and nurture the complex and multivalent expressions of Black diasporic subjectivities. These poets write differently, if strangely, and stand out from the plethora of existing diasporic literature in one almost tangible aspect: they are acutely aware of the ideology inherent in the English language, as I explain above. While it may too often appear that their subject matter is anything but the English language, except for Philip, the self-reflexive poems I analyze here show that their oeuvre is structured by but pushes against the constraints imposed by this limited and limiting framework.

In my earlier definition of imperial grammar, I referred to it as a set of rules that manage and govern colonial relationalities. The imperial grammar not only tightly delineates the syntax of language, but also dictates the roles that must be assumed by individuals in settler societies and how they should relate to one another. The notion of completeness, where things fit snugly into their places, becomes the hallmark of both language and the societies that utilize it. However, an examination of contemporary cultural theory reveals that diaspora is anything but complete. One notable example is the work of Gilroy (1993), who emphasized the transnational, intercultural, and mutable character of what he termed the Black Atlantic. It was the journey across the Atlantic ensuing from the slave trade that determined the very character of the diaspora. For Gilroy, the Middle Passage, conversely, neither connoted a complete separation nor a blank slate. Rather, it played a central role not simply as a point of fragmentation but more importantly as a

productive site of transculturation and syncretization, where languages, cultures, stories, and histories melded, and continue to meld, together.

Hall (1990) similarly elaborated on the diaspora as a state of perennial becoming, positing that the diasporic identity is produced by imagining anew, telling other stories, and re-telling the past. To that end, the diaspora, Hall suggested, must embark on a path of imaginative discovery, and in so doing, it first must turn its face toward the future, but also, paradoxically, toward the past. In this sense, the notions of "having been" and "being," in enunciating the diaspora, must be bolstered by the notion of "becoming." Hall's approach transcends time and space, but more specifically, history and culture, highlighting the great unlikelihood of an eternally complete diasporic position. In this sense, Hall's enunciation of diaspora is construed fluidly, allowing space for positions that are, by nature, always "becoming." In both Gilroy's and Hall's articulations, the diaspora, far from static and complete, is characterized as always journeying, becoming, and being remade.

Furthermore, Māori scholar Smith (1999) highlights the proclivity of Indigenous and, and one must add, diasporic writers to appropriate the language of the colonizer by incorporating various sounds, inflections, and dialects into their writing. Smith argues that language appropriated in such a manner reflects the ways in which the marginalized make sense of the world (Smith, 1999). I build upon this idea and expand it to include refusals, demonstrating how appropriated language, not only through acculturation and incorporation but also through omissions, such as jettisoning verbs or fragmenting words and lines, produces vital expanses of resistance against colonial impositions. I will demonstrate that diasporic writers often tend toward strange and incomplete language as a means of resistance.

The subsequent pages examine excerpts from poems that I characterize, in light of my previous discussion, as strange and incomplete. I start with a reading from the first part of Trinidad-born Canadian poet Dionne Brand's book-length poem, *Ossuaries* (2010), which fully embodies the notion of strangeness. Next, I introduce Brand's notion of "poetry as metallurgy" and demonstrate how her refusal to indulge the tragedy of verbs is echoed in a sympathetic yet distinct manner in June Jordan's "Moving Towards Home" (1983), where she resists the temptation to depict a literal humanitarian tragedy and demonstrates the uses for the metallurgic process. Later, I turn toward Black womanist feminist poet M. NourbeSe Philip and analyze an excerpt from "Discourse on the Logic of Language" (1989). In this poem, through fragmenting her lines, Philip resists what she sees as an anguish-rousing language, her diasporic mother tongue. The notion of incompleteness, although prevalent throughout the article, takes its most palpable form in Philip's writing. Finally, I discuss Claire Harris's use of marginality to benefit the

collective "I"—a concept previously introduced by Brand—in "A Black Reading" (1984). While existing literature tends to yoke together Brand and Philip, and occasionally Harris, with Jordan often thought of as distinct from this ilk, I argue that all four poets conspire with each other in tacit yet powerful ways to expostulate with, and create counterstrategies to, the limited and limiting nature of English as a diasporic tongue.

Verbs as a Tragedy

The proposal, "verbs are a tragedy," which met the reader in the long-form poem, *Ossuaries* (2010), emerges out of Brand's grappling with coloniality. Brand holds that coloniality offers merely a small enclosure within the full potential of language, since it demands that one abide by one particular logic only. Yet life is larger. And so, too, must be language. The argument for the largeness of language is clearly illustrated by Jacques Derrida, who posited that the sign is an effect of language that can produce "infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion" (Derrida, 1982, p. 320). Despite this, said narrow enclosure functions as the theoretical site of suffering for Black lives. Brand's disavowal of the verb therefore exposes the tension-laden space between the largeness of life and the smallness of the recesses in which it is too often impelled to fit. Language, under the aegis of coloniality, is a narrow concept that binds Black lives into equally narrow roles; and this language, Brand argues, is one that is bound by violence. For this reason, Brand's poetical framework that seeks to, in her words, "to undo, to undo and undo and undo" language and its syntactic compositions serves to generate a strategy, a roadmap of sorts, that the Black diaspora can use to live well (Brand, 2010, p. 21; Greenwood, 2020, 52:25). This undoing results in what I term in this article incompleteness and strangeness.

One way to understand Brand's critique of limited and limiting nature of English as a diasporic tongue would be to examine how incompleteness manifests in her work. In the below excerpt from the first part of poem, "Ossuary I," Brand destabilizes the conventional significance of verbs in the English language by declaring she lost verbs: "the chain-link fences glittered like jewellery, / expensive jewellery, portable jewellery, / I lost verbs, whole, like the hull of almonds" (Brand, 2010, p. 14).

In traditional syntax, verbs serve as vital components of meaning-making, and without them, a sentence is rendered incomplete and fragmented. When this occurs, the subject and action cannot be distinguished, leaving the reader with uncertainty about who is doing what or what is being done to the subject. While Brand does not initially explicate whether this loss of verbs is intentional or accidental, the subsequent stanzas below imply that, in either

case, verbs may not be as essential as commonly believed. Brand shows this in two ways.

First, by likening chain-link fences to precious and expensive ornaments, Brand highlights the allure of this ordinary object. Here, an immediate question arises: to what end? An answer is promptly provided in the following line, whereby the loss of verbs is characterized as comparable to losing the shell of an almond. The conspicuous unremarkableness of this gesture, which pales in comparison to the attractive chain-link fences, suggests the utter redundancy of verbs. Brand dramatically highlights this redundancy in the following stanzas by suggesting that she is better off without verbs, while simultaneously listing a host of nouns that she is actually better off with:

> after consideration you will discover, as I,
>
> that verbs are a tragedy, a bleeding cliffside, explosions,
>
> I'm better off without, with vermillion, candles
>
> this bedding, this mercy,
>
> this stretcher, this solitary perfectable [*sic*] strangeness,
>
> and edge, such cloth this compass (Brand, 2010, pp. 14–15)

Second, the chain-link fence, the reader finds out upon closer inspection, is not just any old household item, but a covert reference to division and segregation. Similarly, the cliffside serves as a natural barrier between land and sea, a sustained metaphor of separation likely redolent of the journeys of captive Africans across the Middle Passage. However, the cliffside's significance extends beyond its immediate association with the transatlantic slave trade. This is a non-human object that appears to be bleeding as a tragic result, one may assume, of the violent calamities and explosions caused by verbs. The bleeding takes on a softer expression in the following line as blood red becomes "vermillion," a more sophisticated and less visceral term. The poem then moves on to imagery of candles, bedding, stretchers, and mercy, evoking a space of safety, self-soothing, and healing, as well as contemplation of forgiveness. The stark contrast in mental states between the two stanzas serves to highlight the tragedy inherent in verbs.

The above references to the dehumanization of Africans who were forcefully taken from their homeland and subjected to segregation in the so-called new world may be one of the most palpable, if easy to read, metaphors in this

poem. On a more profound layer, colonialism and chattel slavery are revealed not simply as concepts, but tangible acts—tragic verbs—committed by specific subjects against other subjects. Brand here directs our attention to the oft-occluded violence ingrained in these terms. By deftly utilizing metaphors to illustrate their innate tragedy, she suggests that verbs are not only a part of the imperial grammar but also define the diasporic experience. For one thing, as a poet of the diaspora, her own use of the English language, of which verbs are a vital constituent, cannot be separated from the tragic history of colonialism and slavery.

If one does away with the word that implies action, what type of narratives, then, adjectives, nouns, and adverbs might utter? Brand asserts that such combination holds the potential to, in effect, "re-state a world" (Greenwood, 2020, 49:55). In the purview of this long-form, multi-part poem, only by abandoning the verb does Brand's language become liberated and arrive at a space of healing and soothing. As a result, the poem's sentences become fragmented, but now imbued with potential for healing. It must be noted, though, in the rest of the poem, Brand returns to contemplating difficult and somewhat violent imagery, such as "murder, melancholic skulls . . . hunger sickness . . . electric shocks . . . machine guns . . . knives," but now, without verbs, her language fully embodies the previously unreachable yet entirely perfectible strangeness (Brand, 2010, pp. 16–20). On that note, Brand's idiosyncratic spelling of "perfectible" as "perfectable" hints that this strangeness is one of language. Her rather "strange" spelling, however, does not in fact show that her language needs correction or is less than precise; rather, it demonstrates that liberty from the tragic condition of verbs is rooted precisely in a strange language. The result is a motley assemblage of incomplete sentences that signify no action, strange and seemingly unrelated imagery juxtaposed with commas.

Poetry as Metallurgy

Brand's strange and incomplete style is borne from what she termed "poetry as metallurgy." Brand characterizes poetry as a process that involves analyzing the physical and chemical properties of language in order to create, through pressure, a tangible and functional language the "I" can use to live well. However, the use of the pronoun "I" extends beyond the individual and becomes a tool for centering positions that have been marginalized, making them more present in the world (Greenwood, 2020).

Certain regimes of language, in particular, those that arise out of colonialism, provide only limited instructions for us. To address the vastness of Black life, which defies such limitations, Brand believes it is necessary to explore

language as a means of allowing Black lives to exist both on and off the page (Greenwood, 2020). Brand's notion of "poetry as metallurgy" is rooted in what she sees as the fundamental premise of poetry, which entails transforming language. In this view, poetry is a tool for reorganizing thought. This much is obvious. Coupled, however, with the process of applying pressure as in metallurgy, it serves as the critical threshold that produces a new language, or more accurately, makes language new.

It is within this context, where the continual remaking of language, that Brand provides fertile grounds for unsettling the primacy of the English language and its hegemonic function outlined earlier. And Black women's poetry from the diaspora is undoubtably one spectacular site that is enlivened through parallel efforts to disrupt the order of the English language. Demanding a new language appears to be the prime objective of Black diasporic writers. For English, in the eyes of the diaspora, is far from a given and one must first undo and remake language as though to purify it, or better, to enlarge it enough to accommodate life itself.

We observe a similar consideration for the well-being of the collective "I" and the implementation of the metallurgic process, albeit in different degrees, in the works of June Jordan and Claire Harris. To illustrate this, I turn to Jordan's 1982 poem "Moving Towards Home," which was penned as a reaction to what is known today as The Sabra and Shatila Massacre. On 16 September 1982, in two west Beirut neighborhoods home to Palestinian refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, unimaginable atrocities were committed by the Lebanese Maronite Christian militia animated under the auspices of Israel. News reports indicated that nearly 3,500 people, from children to the elderly, were murdered during the 3-day massacre (TRTWorld, 2019). The killings sparked profuse attention in the West, with thousands of outraged members of the public filling the streets with demonstrations. At the face of such unspeakable destruction, Jordan wrote: "I do not wish to speak about the bulldozer and the / red dirt / not quite covering all of the arms and legs" (Jordan, 2007, p. 242). Here, with visible reticence toward the doing words, Jordan refuses to describe the oppressing cries that fill the air in the height of a brutal ethnic cleansing. Stomping feet, rambling bulldozer engine, dirt landing on lifeless bodies. All of these are the sounds, the signifiers, of doing an indescribable act, and nowhere else does the tragedy of verbs appear as palpable as it is in this instance. That, Jordan knew just too well, as she drew attention in an earlier essay, "Problems of Language in a Democratic State," to the ways in which state violence is normalized through a guileful manipulation of words: "the uniformity of official state language appalled me. How could this be 1984 in 1982?" (Jordan, 2003, p. 230).[1] Jordan termed this "the language of the powerful" (Jordan, 2003, p. 227). In the months preceding the massacre, she

had already witnessed the Israeli invasion of Lebanon facilitated by the US taxes, as she notes, and how the state of Israel abnegated, in a host of seemingly innocuous mass media headlines, the accountability for what the world clearly discerned as an invasion.[2] What Jordan observed during that period was the malleability of language that served the state's interests, which in turn led to a recognition, I assert, of its very potential to be reshaped along the lines of the racialized, marginalized, and disenfranchised.

Accordingly, in the lines, "because I do not wish to speak about unspeakable events / that must follow from those who dare / 'to purify' a people / those who dare / 'to exterminate' a people" the doing words are emphasized in a manner that lucidly disagrees with such doing and further refuses a telling of that which it entailed (Jordan, 2007, p. 242). Carefully tucked inside quotation marks, these verbs are not that of Jordan's vocabulary. Instead, she demonstrates, through borrowing verbs from the colonizer's repertoire, that she refuses to articulate the doing, the carrying out of these atrocities, and neither does she dwell on their affective echoes transmitted across time. Here, the reader is by no means asked to feel any unpleasant emotions: we are not meant to feel for the brutalized and massacred Palestinians. After all, there is very little that pang of conscience could actually establish after the fact. Instead, I suggest that Jordan is, in fact, aware that violent regimes of language are bound inextricably to violent regimes; therefore, attempts to remake the language in a manner that can reclaim life and all its vastness, from narrow enclosures, as she claims: "I was born a Black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian" (Jordan, 2007, p. 242).

It is precisely within the ostensibly strange conjunction of Blackness and Palestinianness—and perhaps within an intertwined plea for freedom from a violent state—that language begins to fracture for Jordan, too. These three lines offer a particularly distinct instance of the limited and limiting nature of English as a diasporic tongue, and how Jordan is inching toward its boundary edge. Jordan's "Moving Towards Home" requires a language that is strange, not due to the violent subject matter it assumes—a retelling of violent narratives is not in and of itself violent—but due to the pressure exerted by the physical and chemical behavior of word combinations, namely "to purify a people." As earlier suggested by Brand, out of this pressure then, a new language for the "I" to live well must emerge; and herein observed in action is the idea of poetry as a metallurgic process. Immutable language, hardened through its application to extreme ends in the service of projects of colonizing, becomes increasingly ductile. With this in mind, Jordan was neither "made" Palestinian nor has she "become" one. The strange dissonance within the utterance "I am become," far from a wispy echo of archaic oral storytelling forms, represents the tension that arises from the collision of two verbs,

two tragedies, as it were, and the resulting pressure that ensues; this juncture is where the metallurgic process occurs.

All of this demonstrates that a refusal to engage the doing words, or to abandon certain words all together is not so much a denial as it is a generative process. One significant outcome of this process would be the creation of a novel language. The writers I examine here appear to assume a type of obligation, as Christina Sharpe notes, to sound their language anew and demand a new thinking (Sharpe, 2016). New thinking, however, can only emerge out of new language. Since, in the words of French thinker Deleuze (2000), "[t]o think is always to interpret—to explicate, to develop, to decipher, to translate a sign" (p. 97). Language, of which signs are a part and parcel, is what shapes consciousness. As such, new configurations, strange omissions, and unanticipated additions of/from/to old, habitual signs are precisely what precipitate novel modes thinking.

Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014) posit that an analytical practice of refusal must involve actively resisting depictions of pain and indignity. This practice then serves to prevent the settler colonial gaze from capitalizing on such narratives. bell hooks, in a similar vein, reminds us that we are often told to only speak about our pain, "only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, and unfulfilled longing" (hooks, 1990, p. 343). In this sense, with each deliberate refusal, each word jettisoned, and each sentence rendered incomplete, slowly starved this metaphorical beast that subsists on the graphic depictions of voicelessness, lostness, woundedness, smallness, and the twisted pleasures gained from the debasement and degradation of Black life, as Saidiya Hartman would describe (Hartman, 2008).

English, a Father Tongue

Brand contends that antiblack violence that was set in motion by chattel slavery still continues today, and this violence appears to be an ongoing practice (Greenwood, 2020). If antiblack violence is a continual practice, so too must be resistance. In the afterlife of chattel slavery, another Black womanist feminist poet, M. NourbeSe Philip ruminates, similarly, on the question of resisting an anguish rousing, diasporic mother tongue. Philip's fragmented utterances below mimic the prevailing wounding of the slave trade.

> my father tongue
>
> is a foreign lan lan lang
>
> language

l/anguish

anguish

a foreign anguish

is english —

another tongue (Philip, 1989, p. 32)

Notice, again, the marked absence of a doing word in the above excerpt from Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language." The emphasis is, again, on the being, as opposed to doing. Philip hereby depicts English as a foreign anguish. Foreign, not exactly in a sense that it is unfamiliar, as Philip makes it evident that it is deeply familiar, but in the sense that it is far-flung and non-native. It is an alien imposition. Furthermore, stops of rhythmic iteration in the second line of the stanza, "lan lan lang," bear an aural resemblance to "land, land, land." This is indeed calculatedly so. Through rhythm, Philip subtly and skillfully reveals the inextricable linkage of land and language, as well as the profound impact of being separated from them. As she ponders whether English is another tongue, it becomes clear to the reader that, for Philip, English is a fraught, perilous yet an organizing conception that mediates the relationalities between her father, herself, and her mother.

Indeed, Philip hereby questions the premise that English is a mother tongue, when in fact it is "really, a father tongue, in that it was the White male colonizers bringing us language" (Williamson, 1993, pp. 227–228). Such interrogation is central to Philip's writing. Through pulsing iterations and words sliced in unanticipated places, all of which constitute a strategically uncouth rhythm, a subversive intervention, Philip posits counter-hegemonic possibilities for writing, remolding the colonizer's language: a language that is understood to be expressly brimming with suffering. Philip's lacerated lines do not only mirror the devastating experiences of captive Africans during the slave trade and the irreducible yet fragmented identities of the Black diaspora today, but also go one step further. Philip's lacerated lines reimagine a possible futurity outside of imperial grammar.

Both Brand and Philip, as Morrell (1994) observes, "startle" the reader by questioning standard English and substituting new usages, often in the Caribbean vernacular, for old ones (pp. 10–11). Through this startling manner, which can indeed seem strange to the reader, both poets generate novel linguistic usages and new semiotic realities, that have been erased by the constraints of standard English. Theirs is an intervention that is political in

nature; and both poets furthermore engage the reader in consciousness-raising experiences through their innovative use of language, as Morrell puts it:

> These poets must be innovative, because they are aware of always speaking *against* (the dominant white society) in order to speak *for* (the experience of blacks and women). In order to mark their different position, they also must write against dominant language use and "correct" poetic images and themes. This writing against is essential because language encodes the cultural and political facts of dominance and exclusion. (Morrell, 1994, p. 15)

The above observation urges us to rethink, as Morrell would concur, the famous and influential credo of the second-wave feminists, "personal is political." In the work of Brand and Philip, it is the collective that assumes a political character, revealing the ways in which personal subject positions relate to larger political and social undercurrents that shape the lives of many. Personal experiences of the individual "I," in this regard, become a galvanizing force of change for the collective category of the "I." A parallel understanding is discernible in the poetry of Claire Harris, whose treatment of the "I" serves to resist the pervasive tendency to fragment marginalized groups into ever-smaller factions. Rather than succumb to this divisive framework, Harris seeks to establish a shared foundation of unity and solidarity, even though this objective, Morrell (1994) notes, is likely to remain utopian. The following excerpt from the 1984 poem "A Black Reading" shows that Harris's strategy, too, entails a refusal to accept the narrow bounds of the page and, more broadly, of language:

I dream of a new naming

new words new lines

shaping a new world

I ride it

        as at a durbar

barelegged through wide fields

of baobab soaring in the wash

of midnight

I am real

when my long

Arabian stride breaks through

daylight I cling to the black

truth race

bareback towards the light

dream hooves churning

the yellow lies

I make anew the shape

of things (Harris, 1984, p. 35)

Saturated with allusions to far-off lands such as the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and Arabia, respectively, the passage above is an emphatic reclamation of the Black truth. Complementing the land-based references is the imagery of riding, racing, soaring, and churning, which suggests a sense of urgency and momentum toward Harris's possible new world. Furthermore, the baobab tree, a clear allusion to Africa and a symbol of strength, embodies the possibility for rootedness and belonging despite the continual trauma of forced migration and displacement ensued from the transatlantic slave trade. Harris, not unlike Philip, ties her language to land, underscoring the great import of connection to place, if symbolically, in diasporic consciousness.

Equally significant is perhaps the most strange and enigmatic couplet of the entire passage: "dream hooves churning / the yellow lies" (Harris, 1984, p. 35). The imagery of "yellow lies" likely alludes to the notion of "white lies" but indicates more than a mere distortion of truth; it suggests the sullied and foul nature of the falsehoods, false structures, including those of language, that uphold oppressive systems. These lies, however, are trampled on by the rider who, in their fierce stride across vast expanses of land, dreams of a new language and, subsequently, a new world. The near homophonous relationship between "I ride it" and "I write it" is far from accidental or inconsequential. It is this very aural relationship that defines the writer as one who takes action and moves toward a possible new world. Here, the rider is none other than the writer, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. The vastness of

said lands, moreover, is a clear reference to the vastness of Black life and diasporic consciousness, which cannot possibly be contained within the limited and limiting nature of English as a diasporic tongue. Finally, the excerpt that begins with a dream to create new words, new lines—to write differently and seek to understand differently—aptly culminates, through the leaps and bounds of the rider/writer, in the remaking of reality itself.

Conclusion

It is within these poetic frameworks spearheaded by Black poets, within this methodology drawing upon refusals, upon an incomplete language, upon a solitary perfectable strangeness, that I have sought to highlight the limitations of English as a diasporic tongue. Poets from the Black Diaspora, namely Dionne Brand, NourbeSe Philip, June Jordan, and Claire Harris, have attempted to liberate this language from its own shackles to allow for multivalent expressions of diasporic subjectivities. These poets have transcended the boundaries of language, employing strategies such as decentered syntax, strangeness, incompleteness, and fragmentation to resist and disrupt the imperial grammar and the tragedy inherent in verbs. By analyzing excerpts from their works, I have demonstrated how the poets achieved a mode of linguistic liberation and countered the limited and limiting nature of English as a diasporic tongue. With this in mind, the reclamation of all that has fallen into coloniality then does not, in fact, arises out of recuperating what was presumably rendered incomplete; rather, it emerges from a language that is enlarged enough to hold the expressions of a life, which has always been too vast to fit into narrow enclosures of English. Echoing a similar sentiment, Harris declares the following statement, which embodies this article's premise: "[W]e are here; we have always been here; we have always been central. 'Here', of course, stands in for the eternal present" (Morrell, 1994, p. 33). Black life has always been vast. The collective category of the "I" has always been central. English, on the other hand, has been bound to a limited and limiting ideology. What is completeness, then, if not a false ideal, that English, by being so ideological a construct, has imposed onto the diaspora?

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Notes

1. Here, Jordan is referring, I strongly suspect, to George Orwell's 1949 novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. In it, Orwell speaks about what he termed *Newspeak*, the official language of the state, which was used to not only conceal the truth from the masses, but to also render impossible verbal expressions of dissenting views.
2. In the fall of 1982, before the massacre in Lebanon, June Jordan helped a few Israeli, Arab, and American poets organize a night of poetry readings to fundraise for children in Lebanon who were injured or left homeless by the invading Israelis. The night concluded with Jordan's reading and upon her closing, a group of what she calls "whitemen" encircled her and began hurling threats and insults. One among the group later remarked that, referring to Jordan, "that Black woman over the should be burned alive in green fire" (Jordan, 2003, p. 192). Reflecting on this troublesome incident, Jordan recognized that the language around anti-Semitism has become a weapon wielded by those who sought to quell the critique of Israel's militarism in the region. Such astute yet poignant assessment, which certainly still finds a resonance today, left her, as she explains, deeply bitter, shocked, and questioning what life would look like after the massacre in Lebanon.

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