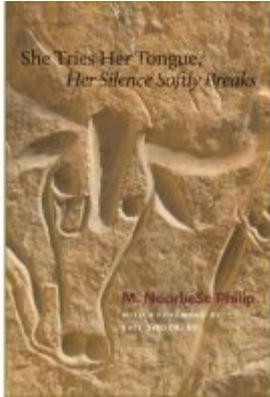


[She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks](#) [by M. NourbeSe Philip](#)

written by Joseph Houlihan | October 12, 2016



She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks by M. NourbeSe Philip
Wesleyan University Press, 2015 (reprint)
110 pages – [Wesleyan](#) / [Amazon](#)

You know the more things change
The more they stay the same
It may be a different age
But I'm on the same page

–“Digging on James Brown,” Tower of Power

M. NourbeSe Philip first published *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* in 1989 with the Canadian Ragweed Press. In 2015, Wesleyan University Press reissued a beautiful edition with a forward by Evie Shockley. It's an important collection. Philip has published many critically acclaimed books, including *Zong!* And this collection exemplifies the enduring vitality of her poetic investigations.

She Tries Her Tongue draws on various sources in pastiche and inquiry. In “And Over Every Land And Sea,” Philip establishes Ovid in the Caribbean. “Cyclamen Girl” follows a similar projection in the Anglican catechism. In “Eucharistic Contradictions,” Philip imagines a cyclamen girl in a yellow confirmation dress, “with a speech spliced and spiced/ into a variety of life and lies...confirms contradictions of church/god/doubt &/ dogma.” At every turn, she interrogates colonial language culture. Through repeating phrases with minor alterations, Philip brings us in on the ambivalent performance of language cultures across bodies. She is excellent at employing the page as a field of referents, to be shifted and reconsidered.

“Discourse on the Logic of Language” presents multiple streams of language, intersecting and conflicting. She mocks and emphasizes the facile

“empiricism” of colonial domination. “Those parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are named after two learned nineteenth century doctors...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 brains than, and were, therefore, superior to, women, Blacks and other people of colour.” By refusing to ignore explicitly racist colonial legacies, Philip exposes their living manifestations. The thundering poem, “The Question of Language is the Answer to Power,” presents unambiguous horror alongside ambivalent language performance. The poem adopts the format of textbook primer, with “Lessons for the Voice: “00 as in how did they ‘lose’ a language, oo as in ‘look’ at the spook.” This clear-eyed presentation of explicit violence alongside the mundane violence of the textbook produces tonal ambiguity and intensity. Philip’s poems are powerfully multivalent. Strong themes emerge. The core of the collection is an ongoing conversation with many voices. The work is “difficult,” in the best sense of all good writing, and productive.

The collection’s eponymous poem, “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks” expands across 16 pages. It traces lineage, exile, memory, dance, and hope, in an investigation into the origins and legacies of the sensation of the uncanny experienced in the context of a mother tongue. And while there is no single conclusion to these questions—questions about culture, about language, about power, about legacy and unacknowledged histories—this vital search endures.



Image from M. NourbeSe Philip’s website