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Reconciling Aesthetics of Presence as Poesis in the works of NourbeSe Philip and Robin Blaser

By

Serena Klumpenhouwer

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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Reconciling Aesthetics of Presence as Poesis in the works of NourbeSe Philip and Robin Blaser

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December 15, 2020

Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

This project, upon taking a close look at the poetics of NourbeSe Philip and Robin Blaser, investigates how centralizing absence as integral to the postmodern poetic process is actually antithetical to the aim of bringing others forward[1]. I argue that in order for a writer to enter humility and bring others forward, she must first understand her own presence in the world. This project interrogates a key concern for contemporary Canadian poets, the 'lyrical I'; that is, should poetics involve minimizing or eradicating the 'self' in the pursuit of the dialogical function of poetry "rather than be a vehicle for 'personal expression' or inscription of individual experience?" (Mossin, 673). The fact that this sentiment, promulgated by poststructuralism's paradigmatic evacuation from liberal humanism in the 1960's was popularizing just as laws and social policies concerning Black civil rights and women's rights were being challenged necessitates a hard look the implications poststructuralism has for historically marginalized and colonized writers, especially given the current political climate of Black Lives Matter and Me Too. This project also examines what is lost when we adopt a mode of aesthetics that rejects narrative, and any regard to the interconnectedness (or 'interbeing', a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh) of history, culture, and identity as key to the development of critical theory and discourse. To elucidate these issues along with the erasure of the non-Western antecedents that led to the development of literary theoretical pursuits across the West, I lean on the critical works of Julia Kristeva, with particular attention to her concept 'abjection', Frantz Fanon's 'sociogeny', and Edouard Glissant's 'relationality'.

[1] Conversation with Miriam Nichols concerning Robin Blaser ("Interview with Miriam Nichols" Serena Klumpenhouwer).

Dedication

For little Black girls with a lot to say.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank God for His provision throughout the duration of this project

It is a genuine pleasure to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, my mentor, and my friend, Dr. Richard Douglass-Chin. For his genius, his never-ending patience, and unyielding dedication to this project and my vision. I came to Dr. Douglass-Chin with seven pages written and decided last minute to change the entire project after half of it was complete. Knowing that it would be a long journey, he supported me every step of the way. I am indebted to him for his enthusiasm and genuine interest in this project, for his timely advice, and his meticulous scrutiny. His guidance and brilliance have dramatically transformed the scope of this project. Thank you, Rich, for countless hours on Zoom and the phone, for your wisdom and friendship, for letting me use your Windsor apartment when my internet was down during the pandemic, for seeing the potential in me, and for going so far beyond the call of duty. You've taught me so much, but one thing that will stick with me is when you quoted Alastair Mcleod, "We all do better when we are loved." We do. And here's the proof.

I would like to thank my internal reader, Dr. Johanna Frank, for her friendship and her mentorship throughout the course of my program. Your kindness and your personal mentorship have impacted me greatly.

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Introduction

This project began as a study of Robin Blaser. My first encounter with Robin Blaser was in my first year of my Master's program. I was fascinated by his astute and careful attentiveness to his poetic process and to his interest in minimizing the 'lyrical I', an interest shared by many contemporary poets. When I began reading his works, I discovered that while most of his readers argued that Blaser's presence in his poetics is subtle, I found his presence to be easily detectable, even bold. Upon making this observation, I began to question why contemporary poets privilege absence over presence; I then questioned the stability of the words 'presence' and 'absence' altogether. Present to whom? Absent to whom? Each of us comes to any given text with a set of preconceived ideas, values, and experiences. A poet cannot simply be absent in her poetics without negotiating that absence with her readers. That is, if the reader detects the 'lyrical I' then the 'I' is indeed visible in the poetic work. These investigations prompted in me, a further curiosity: why are Black writers so often seen as political rather than poetic? If White writers are writing from their experiences, why can't non-White writers do the same without being relegated to a subpar category of didacticism or identity politics? I decided then and there that all poetics are political because every identity involves negotiation of the self and other. If a White male writes a poem called, "My Tragic Odyssey", for example, about his long-lost love Elizabeth with brown long hair and blue eyes, a reader will likely be able to surmise general conclusions about the writer's identity. Such a poem reveals that the poet is interested in classics, identifies with classics, sees beauty as fairly Aryan and chose to use a stereotypically English name for his beloved, a name that has been used for many English heroines and love-interests.

For a non-White reader, these types of descriptions can be certainly alienating, but more importantly, they resonate with people who are coming from a similar cultural and political context, one that is Eurocentric. Upon switching supervisors, I explained to my second supervisor Dr. Douglass-Chin that I was deeply concerned about these ideas. He pointed me to poet, NourbeSe Philip's essay, "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost became a Spy" where she coins the term, "I-mage," elucidating the role of the 'I' in the creation of an image. After I read Philip's essay, I began reading everything of hers that I could get my hands on. Even though Philip is an internationally acclaimed writer, I began to realize that I had not been exposed to many writers or theorists of colour in university— and wondered, *why?* Nevertheless, I was fascinated by Philip and began reading her works along with the Black writers she was influenced by. Because I had mostly been inundated with White writers and White scholarship, I had years of catch up to do in a matter of months. After I did some substantial reading, I asked Dr. Douglass-Chin if he would be willing to allow me to start my thesis from scratch as an investigation of the two poets side by side. He said, yes, and the rest is history.

When NourbeSe Philip posited in 1993 that "only when we understand language and its role in a colonial society can we understand the role of writing and the writer in such a society" (Philip, "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost became a Spy", s*he tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 77), she unsettled widely held assumptions by contemporary postmodernist poets that poetry ought to be process, *poeisis*--words on a page, without focus on historical or cultural context. If he were still alive, Robin Blaser, an American-born poet with dual citizenship (between the US and Canada) would more than likely have rejected Philip's positioning of the

writer within a colonial[2] context. Blaser shares with Philip, a consciousness of the concept of 'Outsideness'; he has described his poetic process as involving an embracing of "foreignness, the Outsideness, as a kind of metaphor for the sense I have of the process that leads to a poem" (Blaser, "The Fire" *The Fire* 10). Philip's 'Outsideness', however, is less a metaphor that she embraces for her poetic process, than a perpetual sense of 'being' as a Black woman in what she posits is still a very colonial Canada (Philip, s*he tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78). Her 'Outsideness' is rooted in a never-ending "exile" (Philip, "Who's Listening" *Frontiers* 27), a term she uses to describe the feelings of those who consider themselves marginalized in Canadian society. She writes, "I carry a Canadian passport: I, therefore, am Canadian. How am I Canadian though, above and beyond the narrow legalistic definition of being a bearer of a Canadian passport; and does the racism in Canadian society present an absolute barrier to those of us who are differently coloured to ever belonging?" (Philip, "Echoes in a Stranger Land" *Frontiers* 16).

While NourbeSe Philip and Robin Blaser may seem an odd pairing, the two poets share a dual national identity –Philip being born in Tobago, spending much of her life in Canada and Blaser born in the US but spending much of his adult life in Canada. When I began reading their poetics and their essays on *poeisis* side by side, I discovered an opportunity expand from their contrasting perspectives on the lyrical 'I', a deeper conversation about the relationship of poetic process to 'Outsideness'; in other words, the relationship of poesis to one's historical and societal position in the world. Born 22 years apart, Blaser (1925) and Philip (1947), their publications on their respective poetic processes that I lean on primarily, span the last 30 years, at times with them writing during the same years. In a mutual quest to write something write

[2]Colonial, in this sense, refers to the historical, political, economic, and Eurocentric hegemonic dynamics that impact how an individual or group exists in West.

something that connects to others, Philip's essays are deeply grounded in her relationship to her present society and its historical underpinnings whereas Blaser's essays tilt toward the influences of men writing across the ocean decades before he was alive, including French Romantic poet Gerard de Nerval (1808-1855) and French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). A key concern for Philip and Blaser remained the issue of the 'lyrical I', an issue among contemporary poets that Blaser scholar Andrew Mossin has deemed "decisive"; simply put, that poetics involves minimizing of the 'self' in the pursuit of the dialogical function of poetry "rather than being a vehicle for 'personal expression' or inscription of individual experience" (Mossin, "In the Shadow of Nerval: Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser and the poetics of (mis)translation" 673).The fact that this sentiment, promulgated by poststructuralism's paradigmatic evacuation from liberal humanism in the 1960's, was popularizing just as laws and social policies concerning Black civil rights and women's rights were being challenged, necessitates a hard look the implications poststructuralism has on historically marginalized and colonized writers, especially given the current political climate of Black Lives Matter and Me Too. I argue that in order for poets to achieve true connection with what is outside themselves—a generally uncontested aim, they must contend with their positionality in the world and how that positionality impacts language, their chief vessel of creation and communication. To frame this conversation, my paper will be organized into three vignettes: translation, image and nation, and presence and absence in Robin Blaser and NourbeSe Philip's creative and critical works. Given that the chief concern of this investigation is with voice, I have organized a section of this thesis as a kind of boundless conversation that includes interviews with NourbeSe Philip-and-Blaser scholars: Miriam Nichols, Charles Bernstein, Ted Byrne, Richard Douglass-Chin, and Katherine

McKittrick. My hope is that these interviews respond to one another as conversations that transcend geography and scholarly interests.

Since the 1960's, Robin Blaser's essays and poetics have critiqued the presence of the lyrical 'I' by means of discussing these three concepts: the 'Other', the 'Outside', and the 'Real'. These terms have roots in Lacanian theory (and beyond), and in the works of Michel Foucault, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. During the 70's and 80's, Blaser was immersed in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty – an immersion which oriented him toward the theoretical and likely inspired the preoccupation with philosophy that continues to show up in his poetic works (Nichols, *Radical Affections* 177). In light of Blaser's being a homosexual writing in the 70's and 80's, I would argue that it is no coincidence that both the concept of the 'Other' and his reinterpretation of the Foucauldian concept of the 'Outside' never totally disappear from his essays or his poems; however, rather than simply echoing other theorists, Blaser very much makes these concepts his own. As his chief editor and friend, Miriam Nichols attests, he "adapts these critical methods to serve his own orientation to perceptual experience" (Nichols, *Radical Affections* 301). Blaser's 'Outside', for instance, should not be reduced to any one theorist's definition of the 'Outside' because his 'Outside' invokes several complex meanings, including that which is ineffable and exists outside the bounds of identity and consciousness. A poet's accessing the 'Real' for Blaser involves an evacuation of the 'lyrical I', a minimizing of the self to create what contemporary and friend Ted Byrne calls in my interview with him a "gap which a resurgent identity poetics is currently refilling; this may be good for the oppressed but not necessarily good for poetry" (Byrne, "Klumpenhouwer Interview"). Responding to Byrne, having read the interview, Richard Douglass-Chin asked me in conversation, "Why does identity politics get relegated to something pitted against poetry**? Who is it that can *afford* to dispense**, supposedly, with "identity

politics"? Do we need a different name for this? Everyone engages in identity politics. Everyone" (Douglass-Chin).

NourbeSe Philip's collection *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* is a collection of poems and essays that also discuss the lyrical 'I' most notably in her essay "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost became a Spy" where she coins the term 'I-mage' locating the 'I' in the images writers unearth in their poetics. Philip posits that "living language continually encapsulates, reflects, and refines the entire experimental life and world view of the tribe, the race and consequently of society at large" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 80). Not unlike the contemporary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, Philip's poems in *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*, a collection of poetry spanning over five years, and her long poem *Zong!* aesthetically elevate language so that form, syntax, design-- in other words, the actual words on the page-- are what readers notice before theme. However, Philip's poetics conduct expansive investigations of the relationship between diasporic peoples of colour and the English language, a relationship steeped in a violent colonial history. One aim of this project, in response, is to investigate Philip's poetic process as she also addresses the issue of the lyrical 'I', along with presence and absence, colonial implications of language and estrangement, and aesthetics. I will do this by conducting a close reading of her poetic and scholarly works including her collection of poems, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks, Zong!,* and her essays. From my findings I will then launch us into a deeper conversation and critique of poststructuralism's evacuation from the lyrical 'I' and the prevailing impact it has had on marginalized writers.

Some of the issues Blaser raises with regards to his poetic process and the lyrical 'I' are in tandem with those of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, who were acutely aware of what Ron

Silliman calls, "the xenophobic limitations of the Anglo-literary paradigm" (Silliman, *In the American Tree*: *Language, Realism, Poetry* xviii) (1984). Emerging in the early 1970's, just after the end of the Civil Rights movement, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets raised issues of literary constraints, including the issue of reference, and innovated a new direction for poets to address the creative process by focusing on the material elements of a poem; in short, the "invocation of a specific medium, language itself" (Silliman*, In the American Tree: Language Realism, Poetry* xviii). In some sense, along with their efforts to elucidate language as both the medium and the message, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armentrout, Charles Bernstein and many others, promulgated, along with the post-structuralists, a move away from the centrality of personal narrative toward the elevation of the medium. Considering that post-structuralism was peaking right as the Civil Rights Movement (1965), the Woman's Suffrage Movement (1965)[3] and the Gay Liberation Movement (1960s-1980s) were occurring as well as many Independence movements across Africa and the Caribbean, its evacuation from centralizing a narrative voice in the poetic arts during this period raises questions about where contemporary poetics was heading as a non-cultural, non-referential, non-political artform then, and why.

In *Orientalism,* Edward Said critiques the separation of "pure knowledge and political knowledge" (Said, *Orientalism* 9) while discussing the humanities. He posits that "the determining impingement on most knowledge produced in contemporary West […] is that it be nonpolitical, that is scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief" (Said, *Orientalism* 9). He argues, "no one is helped in understanding this today when the adjective 'political' is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of a

[3] While the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920 allowed women to vote, Black women were unable to vote in many Southern states until 1965 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage>

pretended suprapolitical objectivity" (Said, *Orientalism* 10). Other prominent thinkers who shared these thoughts include Edouard Glissant, and Frantz Fanon, who largely provide the - theoretical framing for my paper. Eduard Glissant's theory of 'relationality' Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) where he adapts Freud's psychoanalytic investigation of the individual; he posits:

> Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen that the Black man's alienation is not an individual problem. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny. (Fanon *Black Skin White Masks* 11).

I include this long quotation to illustrate Fanon's thought trajectory that leads to his coinage 'sociogeny', a term that I will be returning to throughout this paper. First of all, the phylogenetic refers to the evolutionary development of any organism, but what is more interesting is the ontogenetic, which is, in a psychoanalytic context, the entire organism's development, the factors that contribute to the whole. Freud's substitution of phylogenetic for the ontogenetic is what I believe most influenced Fanon's coinage of 'sociogeny'. Sylvia Wynter claims that "Fanon's 'sociogeny' is not an attempt […]to rethink the relation between symptom and culture, but about how the human qua human comes to be structured as such, as a recognizably "biological definition of what it means to *be*, and therefore what it means to be human" (Marlott, "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and 'the Damned' 57). In essence, sociogeny accounts for the social factor in the development of all things, including language. Fanon's theory insists that scientific, aesthetic, and linguistic structures are inescapably impacted by the society they are in.

In 1977, when Blaser was writing his essay, “The Practice of Outside”, he was reading the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, including *Signs* and *The Visible and the Invisible*[4] and Michel Foucault’s *Order of things,* which argues that “to be without a discourse, or rather to be within a disappearance of discourse […]is something like being in a spaceship; the ‘Outside’ invades and doubles over us” (Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” *The Fire* 124). For Blaser, the ‘Outside’ is practice and process; that is, an ongoing resistance to the subject, the ‘self’, or what Blaser calls, “limited biographical occasion” (Blaser, “The Practice of the Outside” *The Fire* 123). Blaser’s (and Foucault’s) comparing “being without a discourse” to “a spaceship”, however, assumes a presumptive normalized ideology of science fiction where security would be found *inside* the spacecraft, safe from the *mysterium cosmographicum* (Kepler 1621), the realm of vastness and the unknown. However, for “othered” communities, the concept of safety or security in most spaces is far more dubious. The ‘ship’ for example, recalls for such communities the slave ship that forced Africans out of their homeland, separated them from their families, and enslaved them. Mark Bould’s “The Ship’s Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and the Black SF” states that “from the 1950s onwards, sf (science fiction) in the US magazine and paperback tradition postulated and presumed a color-blind future, generally depicting humankind as one race, which has emerged from an unhappy past of racial misunderstandings and conflict” (Bould, “The Ship’s Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and the Black SF” 177). The ‘supposed’ shared assumptions that we use to bring forth elaborate theoretical pursuits, i.e. ‘spaceship’ often accounts for the “relative absence” (Bould, “The Ship’s Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and the Black SF” 177) of people of colour in various facets of Western society, and I would argue, Western consciousness as well. In a National Geographic Interview with Neil DeGrasse Tyson,

Whoopi Goldberg shares that "it wasn't until Lieutenant Uhura [in Star Trek] that I realized that I was in the future" ("Whoopi wants in on Star Trek" *National Geographic*). Even the title presumes that Goldberg wants to be 'included' in science fiction, by the White people who are in charge. Deeply installed in the Eurocentric consciousness is the supremacy of Whiteness. Are Black people not around in the future? Bould posits that "SF's color-blind future was concocted by Whites and excluded people of color as full subjects" (Bould, "The Ship's Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and the Black SF" 177). The absence of people of colour in Western consciousness calls into question the substantiality of language, and the cultural implications of language, symbolism, etc. we use to bring ideas forward.

Prominent writers on Blaser, many of whom this project relies upon include Miriam Nichols, author of Blaser's only biography along with being his friend, former student, and chief editor. Nichols arguably authors the most extensive scholarship on Blaser, ranging from Blaser's essays and poetics to his personal life, including his relationships with contemporaries, Jack Spicer and Charles Olsen. Other Blaser scholars include Charles Bernstein who studied under Blaser by chance upon moving to Canada during his studies; along with his essays on Blaser's poetics, Bernstein wrote the Afterword to Blaser's *The Holy Forest*. Charles Watts and Ted Byrne, also prominent Blaser scholars writing extensively on the issue of translation in Blaser's works, are the editors of *The Recovery of the Public World,* a collection of essays in honor of Robin Blaser, named after his honorary conference in Vancouver (1995) called "Recovery of the Public World," a title borrowed from scholar Hannah Arendt whom Blaser deeply respected.

Literary studies has never been able to actualize a mode of totally separating the writer or the scholar from the implications of their lived experiences. In fact, historically, literary studies has reflected the values and perspectives of the White upper middle class. According to

Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory, "*right up to the 1820's, the organization of higher education had not changed since the middle ages" (Barry 12). English studies were to embody the "essence of Englishness" and the aristocracy as a part of the international elite (Barry *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory* 12). Founder of founded cultural studies, Stuart Hall addresses the 'Englishness' of education; he posits:

> [the industrial bourgeoisies] never generated a revolutionary ideology like that of the Enlightenment. Its thinkers were confined by the cramped horizons of their class. […] it is for these reasons that there was never a theoretical sociology in nineteenth century Britain, the modern discipline which – in the continental European context – explicitly constructed a totalized conception of society (Hall, *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies* 370).

So, English classes became defined by works whose messages maintained distinct ideologies reflecting the values of the White upper-class. In the wake of the poststructuralist movement, liberal humanism or the literary "lyrical I" was criticized for elevating particular narratives and values projecting an exclusive and often problematic world view, which is why the rise of poststructuralism was so attractive for many scholars. Crystallizing in the 1960s, the poststructuralist movement, which of course is still the dominant mode of critical discourse across the West, aided in shifting the focus from the "lyrical I" to form and aesthetic. A complication arises, however, when historically marginalized writers are discouraged from privileging their voice, experience, or values in their works while the White bourgeoisie's values have dominated literary critical discourse and are still elevated as the pillars of literature and

culture. What arises is a problem of ‘presence’ versus ‘absence’ with regard to sociocultural, aesthetic, and racial implications.

Chapter I

I-mage Nations: Creation and Recovery

"A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." — Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Philip's essay "The Absence of Writing or How I almost Became a Spy", found at the back of *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*, conducts an investigation of the "role of language and the word from the perspective of a writer-resident in a society" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78)., which she states, "is still very much colonial; Canada; a writer whose history is colonial and continues to cast very long shadows" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78). In this essay, she posits that the image is fundamental to any artform (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78). The image in question, would be that which manifests or emerges from the artform; it can also be the form itself as per Marshal McLuhan's neologism, "the medium is the message" (Marchessault, *McLuhan: Cosmic Media* xi). By deconstructing[5] the orthography of the word "image" and coining 'I-mage', Philip opens up a conversation about the juxtaposition of the 'I' in a crafted poetic image, especially in the English language. Before I go any further, I will attempt to explain Philip's "image" versus her coinage 'I-mage'. "Image", posits Philip, "convey[s] what can only be described as the irreducible essence […]; it can be likened to the DNA molecules at the heart of all life" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78). On the other hand, Philip's 'I-mage' draws not

[5] "Deconstruct" here refers specifically to the Rastafarian literary practice of disassembling the "word" by inserting the 'I' within it, rather than the theory of deconstruction (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78).

from deconstruction theory, but from the Rastafarian practice called ‘I-talk’ or ‘dread-talk’ which involves “privileging the ‘I’ in many words” (Philip, she *tries her tongue. she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 78). To understand better the emergence of what I will refer to as ‘I-talk’, and its relevance to Philip’s poetic process, I will look to Vilma Pollard’s “The Social History of Dread Talk” (a scholar Philip cites). As Pollard has said, you cannot begin to understand “I-talk” without understanding the cultural and historical context in which it emerges. Pollard writes:

> The crowning of Ras Tafari as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in November 1930, served to invite 'certain Jamaicans of a Garveyite persuasion' to try to interpret Marcus Garvey's words, 'Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near' and to identify a number of texts in their bibles which seemed to point to Haile Selassie as the expected 'conquering lion of the tribe of Judah’ (Pollard “The Social History of Dread Talk” 17).

Notice Marcus Garvey’s language of protest and resistance “a black king shall be crowned” and “deliverance is near”; historically the Rastafarian movement was a movement of resistance against oppression; it is out of this resistance that “I-talk” is manifested. Pollard centralizes the importance of awareness and “seeing” (Pollard, “The Social History of Dread Talk” 21) to the Rastafarian people in conjunction with ‘I-talk’. She comments that “sie” or *see* appearing at the end of Emperor Selassie I’s name is because he is considered the beginning and the end, omniscient. His name, as a result, becomes Selassie *eye* or Selassie *I,* indicating that any matter is seen (Pollard, “The Social History of Dread Talk” 22). Pollard’s explanation speaks to Rastafarian pronominal use of the ‘I’ in “i-talk” in reflexive form; in other words, as she articulates, every oppressive matter is *seen* by God. In Jamaican Creolean syntax, ‘I’ functions as both the objective passive pronoun (me) and the subjective active pronoun (I). So, the coalescence of Jamaican Creolean syntax and its cultural

and historical context may manifest itself in the sentiment and proclamation against oppression, "God See I". To further establish the link between language and its historical and cultural context, Pollard quotes Theodor Adorno who claimed, "Social protest manifests itself in language change. For defiance of society includes defiance of its language" (Pollard, "The Social History of Dread Talk" 19). With this in mind, Philip's "I-mage" might be best viewed as operating in the spirit of the Rastafarian movement where an awareness of the I's relationship to language and craft is not ego or an attempt to revitalize liberal humanism, but rather a resistance, or an cognizance of English language's role in the fracturing of history, culture, and voices of a diasporic people. Where might a Tobagonian "resident of Canada" which Philip has called herself, or even a Black Canadian find herself in the English language? —a language that belongs to a Eurocentric culture, a nation that for colonized peoples, has a violent history?

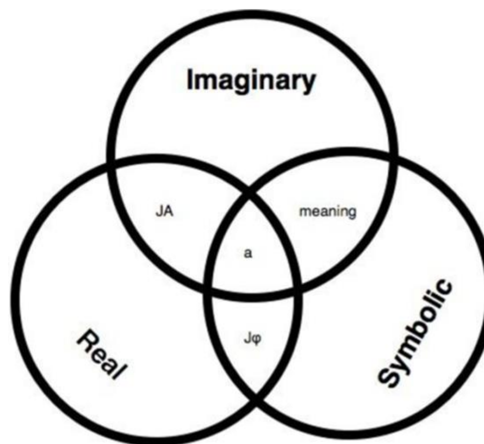
Robin Blaser's essay "The Practice of Outside" conducts a discussion about his friend, Jack Spicer's application of the Lacanian 'Real' as part of Spicer's poetic process. The idea that the 'Real' is a part of the poetic process, however, never quite leaves Blaser's essays or poetic works either. Composing the 'Real' for Blaser, involves a process of minimizing the presence of a lyrical 'I' in order for images to emerge. Blaser's 'Real' is not identical to Lacan's, yet he incorporates aspects of it into his own. In this section of my thesis, in an attempt to draw out Blaser's application of the 'Real', I will first do my best to outline Lacan's 'Real'. Blaser was reading Lacan's, *The language of the self: the function of language in psychoanalysis* translated by Anthony Wilden while he was writing "The Practice of Outside". For the duration of this section, I will be referring heavily to Wilden's translation of Lacan's text. Keeping in mind that when Blaser was reading Lacan in 1965, he would have only had partial access to Lacan's work (not much had been translated into English at the time), the aim is not to present Lacan's work

with elaborate detail and breadth; instead, I will be presenting a general outline of the central Lacanian ideas present in Blaser's works for the greater purpose of understanding Blaser's own creative process.

Lacan and Blaser, while undergoing very different explorations, were interested in the question of process. Lacan's symbolic application of Freudian psychoanalysis should not be thought of as a fixed theory, in a classical sense, but rather mobilizing ideas that illuminate process. It is in this spirit of process that I will be conducting this investigation of Blaser's 'Real'. In "The Practice of Outside," Blaser recalls Spicer telling a young poet that "one had to first learn to use the 'I' and then lose it" (Blaser, "The Practice of Outside" *The Fire*, 113). However, Blaser's position calls into question the role of marginalized poets who have not had a chance to use the 'I'. For Spicer, and for Blaser, respectively, losing the 'I' or the 'lyrical voice' becomes an integral part of composing a 'Real'. The 'Real' from what I can tell is the mediation and connection between the 'self' and 'other' once the poet rejects personal narrative; that is, loses the 'I'. Contrastingly, the African philosophy of Ubuntu maintains that "I am because we are". In other words, the 'I' cannot exist on its own, and is contingent its Other. Similarly, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Okonkwo's tragic destruction is shown by his movement from embracing 'we' to embracing 'me' as the White colonialists get the better of him. Not to mention, Rastafarian I-talk I mentioned above that centralizes the 'I' syntactically in order to be conscious of the 'I's positionality to the 'Other'. What might these examples of African heritage poetics and linguistics bring to bear on their consciousness of a "we" to begin with?

Turning back to Blaser, Lacan's symbolic[6] investigation into the nature of human experience largely involves three interwoven concepts: the 'symbolic', the 'imaginary', and the 'Real' (Blaser "The Practice of Outside" *The Fire* 41). To elucidate the interconnectedness of these three concepts, below I have included an image of the *noeud borroméen*, the borromean knot (Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 20). Rather than being a chronological system where passing through one stage leads to the other, each is interwoven and cannot exist on its own. 'J' stands for *jouissance* (physical or intellectual pleasure); therefore, 'JA' is *jouissance* of the 'Other' and the J^{φ} stands for phallic *jouissance*. Because Blaser does not rely too much upon these later Lacanian ideas (the *jouissance* algorithms), I will not be conducting an analysis of them; instead, I would just draw your attention to the figure insofar as it illustrates how the symbolic triadic structure is interconnected.

Figure 1.



I will begin by introducing the 'symbolic' because it is the realm of symbolic exchange where language is accessed, used, etc., and it shows up in Lacan's mirror stage, a concept that

[6] I use 'symbolic' here to emphasize Lacan's philosophical and linguistic extraction of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

Blaser writes about in his essays “Practice of Outside” and “Stadium of the Mirror”. According to Slavoj Zizek, Lacan saw language as dangerous as it is useful. He likens Lacan’s opinion about the danger of language to “a horse[‘s] danger to the Trojans” (Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* 11). The danger of the symbolic order of language lies in its role as translator of human consciousness; in other words, it is the primary system of rules we follow slavishly to communicate and give meaning to the world around us. According to *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis,* “The symbolic order is characterized by the fundamental binary opposition between absence and presence” (Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 25). So for example, Lacan would consider the ‘word’ to be “a presence made of absence because the symbol[7] is used in the absence of the thing, and signifiers only exist insofar as they are opposed to other signifiers” (Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 3).

With this in mind, I think of Blaser’s poetry collection “Image Nations” found in *The Holy Forest*; he described writing these poems as a “tentative effort […] to remove the syntax which had been a misapprehension— in order to let the image speak out of the absence the Other had become” (Blaser, “The Stadium of the Mirror” *The Fire* 27). The key here is that poetry is the freeing agent that allows the image to emerge out of the disruption of syntax. Of course, Blaser is speaking from a perspective of identifying with the English language, a Eurocentric perspective. African diasporic peoples who speak English often speak alternative creoles, disrupting the language of the colonizer. As I mentioned earlier, Philip’s coinage ‘I-mage’ illustrates the positionality of the ‘I’ in the creative poetic process; that is, the ‘I’s geographical, political, social, historical context. The ‘nations of images’ that emerge in the poems have

[7] “Symbol” being the word itself.

everything to do with the nation the poet is writing from and the poet's historical relationship to that nation. Some poets seek to understand or connect to the 'Other' while some poets are perpetually writing from a place of being 'Othered'.

The 'Other' is explained by Zizek as the "symbolic order [that] is not a kind of spiritual substance existing outside of individuals, but something that is sustained by their continuous activity" (Zizek, *How to Read Lacan* 12). Therefore, rather than a realm analogous to Kant's *noumena,* which exists beyond human consciousness, like a heaven, per say, the 'Other' can be mobilized by humans. Zizek's explanation of 'Other' resonates with what Blaser says of Spicer's poetic process; that is, that "the divine is resituated in a composition" (Blaser "Practice of Outside" 119). The divine, in effect, can be affected, moved, resituated by the writer. The divine emerges in Blaser's poetic process as the cosmic interaction between the 'self' and 'Other' that emerges in poetry when the poet minimalizes the presence of the 'lyrical I'. Divinity in Philip's poetics, on the other hand, emerges as a recovery of lost 'tongues[8]', languages, cultures, and lives destroyed by colonial violence and slavery. On the spirituality present in Philip's long poem *Zong!,* Richard Douglass-Chin explains that, "The gathering of the ebora (elevated spirits, mystic beings) further establishes this moment of mourning, memory, and historical chronicling of traumatic human loss as intensely sacred (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 15). Philip's aestheticizing the sacred in her poetics is related to the human trauma of slavery and colonialism. Her poetics act as living embodiments of memories lost with the transcending spiritual power, not to evade difficult and problematic material realities, but to recover the voices of lives lost, of 'elevated spirits'.

[8] 'Tongues', here, acts as both a metonymic stand in for languages and refers to the anatomic tongue, which Philip writes about extensively in *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*.

In "Stadium of the Mirror" where Blaser writes enthusiastically again about the removal of syntax to compose a 'Real', he complicates this similarity by positing an almost Platonic assertion that the symbolic order of our words belong "to a permanence in language that surrounds the impermanence of our words. It is older than we are and seated elsewhere" (Blaser, "The Stadium of the Mirror" *The Fire* 26-27). As I mentioned earlier, Blaser's re-imagines Lacan, widening the scope of the symbolic systems that defines Lacan's psychoanalytic abstractions to work through his own creative process. So far, with respect to Lacan, I have discussed the 'symbolic' and the 'Real', so now I will explain the final part of the tripartite scheme, the 'imaginary.' According to *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, the 'imaginary' is opposed to the 'symbolic' and the 'Real':

> The basis of the imaginary order continues to be the formation of the ego in the mirror stage. Since the ego is formed by identifying with the counterpart or specular image, identification is an important aspect of the imaginary order. The ego and the counterpart form the prototypical dual relationship are interchangeable. This relationship whereby the ego is constituted by identification with the little other means that the ego, and the imaginary order itself, are both sites of a radical alienation; alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order (Evans, *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 84).

The important part imbedded here is that during the mirror stage, the roles of the 'imaginary' and the 'ego' can be thought of similarly; both contribute to a kind of alienation, but more than an alienation from the 'symbolic,' both constitute an alienation from trueness, or the 'Real'. In Lacanian theory, during the mirror stage, the child begins with a limited perception of themselves as a subject; this perception involves a sort of deception. The child is

totally defined by the 'ego' until they see themselves in the mirror and realize that they are both subject and object. "The 'imaginary' is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure; the effects are such phenomena" (Evans, *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 84). Thinking back to Blaser's poetic process, you will recall I mentioned that Blaser spoke about an effort to remove the constraints of syntax to allow for images to come forward. He writes of the mirror stage in his "Stadium of the Mirror" where he suggests that "discourse […] cannot compose itself of closed words—the spatial capture of our words" (Blaser "Stadium of the Mirror" 32). Our words, in this sense, correspond to the lyrical 'I' whose narrative and consciousness is codified by linguistic structures, such as syntax. Along with disrupting syntactical order in his poetics to capture 'unclosed words', Blaser also experiments with open-parenthetic phrasing, such as, his titles, "Image-Nation 15 (the lacquer house" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 213) and "Image-Nation 6 (Epithalamium" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 156). For postmodern poets, lyrical 'I' is not too different from Lacan's 'ego' or the 'imaginary' insofar as the 'I' can act as repressive agent if it predominates. In other words, when the 'I' is paramount or central in a poetic work, it results in a kind of obscuring or repressing of truth(s). In an effort to coalesce these theoretical terms with the poetic terms, I will group the lyrical 'I', 'syntax' the 'ego' and the 'imaginary' as being associated with deceptive appearances. Therefore, to gain clarity and insight to truth(s), according to Blaser, a writer must minimize the presence of consciousness in their poetics, as well as diminish the lyrical presence of the 'ego' and the lyrical 'I' in their creative works. And, as I mentioned earlier, one way that both Blaser and Philip's poetry allows for this mobilization is by syntactical disruption and fragmentation.

While we are embarking on this journey of interpreting Blaser's poetic process through Lacan, who he wrote about often, it might be helpful to take a look at some criticisms of Lacan's work. Julia Kristeva is known for her radical critique of Lacan's theories, particularly his symbolic interpretation of the relationship between the linguistic and the unconscious. Shuli Barzilai explains how Kristeva challenges "Lacan's (in)version of the Saussurean sign [as] summarily stated in his well-known 'algorithm'S/s: the signifier over the signified'" (Barzilai, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan" 294). As you may recall, earlier I drew out Lacan's symbolic as the relationship between 'presences' and 'absenses' to the signifier and the signified; that is, the signifier (the word) is only present to the *chasm of the absence* of what is being signified; it acts as a replacement agent. In response to Lacan, Kristeva proposes the "concept of the 'semiotic'" (Barzilai, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan" 294). Her 'semiotic' is not to be confused with Saussure's 'semiotic'[9] or Lacan's for that matter. According to Barzilai, Kristeva's 'semiotic' is a "drive-affected dimension of human experience that disrupts (even as it interfuses with) the symbolic" (Barzaili, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan" 294). Without getting too wound up in Kristeva's deeply contemplative and dense work, as her work is not central to Blaser's poetic process, I will just draw out a few central ideas; firstly, Kristeva was intensely suspicious of the gendered terminology used in Lacan's theories such as, the 'phallus' as a "signifier of power and potency" (Barzilai, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan" 294). In other words, Kristeva's 'semiotic' is less a phase and more a mode of writing that is disruptive to so-called static systems of meaning and order; when poets rearrange syntax and order, for example, they

[9] As Charles Peirce states of Saussure's semiotic theory, the semiotic involves "a sign or *representamen,* is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity, a definition echoed in the selection from Charles Morris and which shows the internal complexity of semiosis" (Peirce, *Semiotics: an introductory anthology* 1). Lacan's 'semiotic' is a stage in development right before language acquisition.

are operating in Kristeva's 'semiotic.' Both Philip and Blaser's poetics can be read as disruptive, or perhaps resistant in this way; however, Blaser's resistance might be best understood as resisting strictly defined aesthetic regulations that preclude him from creating or 'translating'[10] freely. Philip's resistance, on the other hand, emerges out of a diasporic 'unrootedness'; that is, her poetics resist the colonial erasure of mother tongues, cultures, ceremony and practice by recovering them in her aesthetics, her poetic fragments, her body[11]. Disruption to systems and order, Kristeva argues, is primarily unwelcome because it destabilizes power. What results in response to this resistence is violence and even disgust, or what Kristeva calls, 'abjection.' Barzilai neatly outlines Kristeva's 'abjection,' a criticism of Lacan:

> Abjection entails an absence (the normative condition of the pre- mirror-stage infants) or a collapse (the condition of the borderline patient) of the boundaries that structure the subject. In the opening pages of *Powers of Horror,* Kristeva repeatedly posits a connection between abjection and the border. She defines abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules and explains that 'abjection is above all ambiguity'. This ambiguity develops under the impact of "ruptures" or in the collapse of self-limits. The abject is neither subject nor object, neither inside nor outside, neither here nor there (Barzilai, "Borders of Language: Kristeva's Critique of Lacan" 295).

I will be returning to Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' later on. But for now, its brief inclusion serves to highlight that Lacan's theoretical abstractions have been challenged by Kristeva, and to

[10] "I consider most of my work a kind of translation" (Blaser, "The Fire" *The Fire* 244).
[11] Of the colonial trauma and trauma of slavery, Philip writes, "the smallest cell remembers" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 37).

introduce 'abjection' as disruption to borders and rules often made by the ruling class of White men.

Presenting an additional argument for the infiniteness of language, insofar as it is impossible to access 'original meaning', Blaser calls his own language, finite, childish, and foreign (Blaser, *The Fire* 36) which I interpret as his position that even the words he utters are alien to him because they are not originally his. Even in Saussure's theory of semiotics, language transcends human will to the extent that the system we use to create meaning is part of what an individual inherits as a speaker. The idea that an individual can change an entire system of meaning, i.e., a new coinage, expecting it to catch on across all speakers of the language has been generally countered by cultural linguists. In "The Practice of Outside", Blaser conducts a discussion of the 'Real' (Blaser, "The Practice of Outside" *The Fire* 113) in which he writes that for Jack Spicer, "poetry is necessary to the composition or knowledge of the 'Real' […] rather than a discourse true only to itself" (Blaser, "The Practice of Outside" *The Fire* 113). Blaser's essay includes an excerpt from Spicer's *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1957) that describes the 'Outside' as "the thing you didn't say in terms of your own ego—in terms of your image, in terms of your life, in terms of everything" (Blaser, *The Fire* 116). Spicer includes a three-step process to writing poetry, the third step introducing the term 'the Outside'; he states that, "you get some idea that there's a difference between you and the 'outside' of you […] you know damn well that it [the poem] belongs to someone else" (Blaser, *The Fire* 116-117). I would be careful not to confuse Spicer's, and by extension, Blaser's 'Outside' to mean Romantic inspiration, often associated with the ego, or subjective indulgence. Instead, it would be better to think of the 'Outside' to describe the realm in which the subject[12] is not imitative, culturally-contained or

[12] The 'subject' here acts as a double entendre referring both to the subject or content of a poetic work, and the poet as subject→the agent rather than the 'object' or recipient.

constructed; in other words, it has less to do with the writer and their point of view than with the emergence of something belonging to a realm beyond the artist's consciousness. However, the tenability of this argument is called into question when we consider why Blaser is attracted to French Romanticism in the first place. Is he not identifying himself with the French Romantics and Symbolists, e.g. Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, etc?

I think of the Deleuzoguattarian concept, the 'thought of the Outside', which Keith Robinson astutely draws out by expanding on Deleuze's 'rhizome'. The 'rhizome', he claims, is "a precise example of an open system of concepts that no longer relate to essences (subjects/ objects)" (Robinson, "Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/ Deleuze Conjunction" 57). The rhizome, in short, functions as a totally different mechanism than Cartesian philosophy where all knowledge branches out from a central locatable source, in that all rhizomes stem from lines that are fundamentally "connectable in all their parts, across multiple registers and dimensions (linguistic, biological, political, economic, social, etc.)" (Robinson, "Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/ Deleuze Conjunction" 57). Robinson describes Deleuze's 'rhizome' instead as a "continual expansion of dimension, […], a logic of multiplicity" (Robinson, "Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/ Deleuze Conjunction" 58). In a sense, the Deleuzian rhizome involves the artist's resistance of contingencies that inevitably interfere with the creative process and often taints the artifact as representative of the contingencies. It is the artist's resistance that allows access to the 'Outside', the "zone of indiscernibility, proper to becoming" (Robinson, "Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/ Deleuze Conjunction" 58). The Deleuzian concept of the 'rhizome' is helpful for understanding Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser's 'Outside' which ultimately seems to describe the realm through which the poet can expand beyond their consciousness. In "The Stadium of the Mirror" Blaser describes the 'other' in similar terms, as

the “unrest given to thought” (Robinson, “Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/ Deleuze Conjunction” 28). The ‘unrest’ pertains to the instability of forms and therefore, renders our thoughts unstable, and perhaps, estranged from an intrinsic ‘I’ so to speak. Let me try to elucidate and connect these ideas by means of a syllogistic illustration. Imagine, for a moment, that there exists an ocean, vast and blue: the ocean of dreams (relating to the unconscious – and instability of forms; it is inaccessible. If a poet wishes to swim in this ocean, the ‘I’ must be minimized because the ‘I’ defines experience by itself; it creates a mirror of the self as ‘subject’ and ‘object’ across multiple dimensions, creating static categories of representation and meaning to orient the self in the world. These categories are totally contingent on consciousness, created by it and motivated by it, whereas the ocean of dreams exists in a realm of continual expansion and flux. If the ocean of dreams is defined by instability and is inaccessible to the ‘I’—the creator of contingencies, then the artist’s ‘self’ must be diminished from the artifact if its artist wishes to swim in the ocean of dreams. In my interview with Katherine McKittrick, she speaks of ‘unwakefulness’ in Philip’s poetics with particular attention to the poems in *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*:

> In my reading, Philip writes science as a brutal system of exclusion that opens up pathways for her to rewrite blackness outside scientific racism. Remember that her beautiful book of poems *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* cannot be read, fully, without paying attention to dream-skin (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 31). I mean, think of it: dream-skin. What does that give us!? It poetically writes what we are as a species physiologically (flesh/water/keratinocytes/tissue) that requires and holds on to and engenders a realm of ‘unwakefulness’ or disassociation—the dream. And then we can take this pairing (dream-skin, unwakefulness-physiology) and

tether it to neurobiology (dream, brainwaves) and other embodied processes that come with unwakefulness. This kind of complexity, the poetics of bios-mythois, unwrites or rewrites or rethinks enfleshement outside scientific racism. Across her creative works and essays, Philip imagines a clear suturing of biology (skin) and narrative (dream); she produces a poetic study of blackness and black poetics without dwelling on biological determinism. Imagine that. Dream-skin (McKittrick, "Interview with Serena Klumpenhouwer" (2020).

The *Holy Forest,* Blaser's collected poems spanning over 50 years, often referred to as a single long serial poem, is described by Charles Bernstein in the "Afterward" as insisting on "thinking beyond analogy and resemblance—that is, thinking serially so as to move beyond the epistemological limits of positivism and self-expression" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 508). Bernstein's summation is certainly in tandem with what Blaser has expressed is as desirable for a poet. I argue that Blaser's expansive works, at best, seem to complicate his quest for a diminished or re-situated 'self'. *The Holy Forest* whose title alludes to *Dante's Inferno*[13], opens with "Two Astronomers with Notebooks" which is fitting because it situates the reader in the realm of the *randonnee*[14], or the rhizomatic as it is set in a fictional realm. Two unnamed astronomers sit and write their observations of the sky. The first astronomer's records are technical and succinct over ten entries. The second astronomer's records are far more elaborate and focus more on the character's experience of watching the sky than the observations. The sky for the second astronomer acts somewhat like a mirror of the patterns of the human mind:

Notebook 4:

[13] I point this allusion out to situate *The Holy Forest* within Western literary tradition.
[14] Robin Blaser describes his serial poem *The Holy Forest* as poems that "follow a principle of *randonee*—the random and the given of the hunt, the game, the tour" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* xxv).

Intolerable

the mind's likeness

to the sky

as when

certain particulars

catch the eye (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 6)

The comparison of the mind to the sky has roots in Eastern Buddhist traditions. Carole Tomkinson's *Big Sky Mind* "brings together in one volume what amounts to an unrelenting testimony to the Beats' deep persistent interest in Buddhism" (Tomkinson, *Big Sky Mind* 8).

It is curious that Blaser would open with two dichotomous figures engaging in the same activity in totally different ways. The first speaker is an objective observant figure who does not use first person pronouns, while the second speaker uses first person at least three times – the 'I', not necessarily of Blaser, but of the second speaker is present. In a recording called, "Truth Flies Poem Talk #113" someone raised that Blaser was interested in cosmology – scientifically-- and that he thought of cosmology as a truth because of its perceived non-locality; that is, when you look at something such as a star, you are looking a portion of it, not the full part. "The Pause" is similar to "Two Astronomers" because of its perceived non-locality right from the opening line, "out and wonderous, there, where" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 266). Out of the nebulousness of setting and situation, emerges a series of unidentified figures who seem to be discussing the creative process. We get access to the second figure only by the speaker addressing them in moments such as, "O, it was you, was it! […] /warn-out   like you, I found them, a radiance, without cause" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 266); the speaker sometimes seems to address a specific

person, and other moments seems to be addressing a larger constituency, "[…] of everything, rising into other/ things   and 'things; are a desire/ big as you are" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 267). The broader address changes the overall tone of the poem from a personal address to public address. Once a public address or a vague plural 'you' is identified, it is hard not to read the poem as somewhat didactic. In any case, "The Pause" addresses a recurring issue in Robin Blaser's works, the presence of the 'self' in the creative process. The allusion to "Kubla Khan" presents the argument with the inclusion of a series of images:

> the gardens close and walls limit
> because they are paradise and untrue
>
> the wall around heaven is untrue, stings
> in all the political ferment where I
> found it, topsy-turvy, raggedy-ann of
>
> that deadly plaything, thought, the leading
> edge of the process, why will you
> try to find yourself finite and sure,
> the pleasure-dome, and then excuse
> its irrealism by futurity (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 266)

Not unlike the subject in "Kubla Khan", the subject in "The Pause" is the creative process. The 'gardens' and 'walls' represent barriers around heaven. Heaven is described as being surrounded by walls that are 'untrue'. The walls are both paradisiacal and untrue because they are conceived in human consciousness, which this poem suggests is limited. Drawing from

the psychological topographies of Jacques Lacan, Blaser alludes to him in the line, “deadly plaything   thought” (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 266) which inverts Rene Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* so that consciousness is not contingent on thought. Instead, consciousness or being is emerges *through* thought. That is, thought, here, can be understood as being an amalgam of incomplete parts by which we conduct explorations of a whole that resides outside us, in the ‘Outside’ so to speak. In a sense, then, what becomes apparent in Blaser’s poetics is that we experience ourselves as being present to things only across the chasm of their absence. Philip’s poetics, contrastingly, locate memory and thought in the anatomic particles of the body. In her poem “Universal Grammar” Philip writes of the trauma of slavery and colonialism:

> the smallest cell
>
> remembers (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 37).

Non-Western theories of consciousness are not the same as Western ones; for example, the Chinese locate thought, emotions, and consciousness in the body. When referring to the brain or to thought, the Chinese do so by touching their heart; in other words, they associate emotions and consciousness with anatomy, the body. *Xin* (心) or heart-mind literally, refers to the mind, which is not unlike Philip’s aesthetic locating of memory in anatomic and subatomic cells.

The ‘self’, in Blaser’s “The Pause”, insofar as a person can sense themselves, is seemingly ‘finite’ and ‘sure’ and thus, a hindrance to the creative process. He alludes to ‘pleasure dome’ in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” and it is described as ‘stately’, built in Xanadu; that is, intentionally constructed. In “The Pause”, Blaser associates ‘pleasure’ and ‘paradise’ with walls and surety finiteness, but the verb, ‘limit’ that describes how the walls function, suggests that he is critiquing pleasure in surety. When Coleridge wrote “Kubla Khan” in 1797, there was a great European interest in Asia. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s concept *weltliteratur* (world

literature) described the international circulation and reception of literature, including literary works of non-Western origin. John Pizer maintains that "Goethe was particularly aware of and open to the possibility of transnational literary modality. Goethe's resignation to the impossibility of creating a 'classical' (national) German literature may have made the formulation of a 'world literature' the only possible alternative to cultural fragmentation" (Pizer, "Goethe's 'World Literature' Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization" 216). The romanticization and exoticization of non-Western poetics soon became a trend in the early 1800's. Poet Daljit Nagra points out Coleridge's "deliberate use of exotic language and imagery to help him create a powerful sense of otherness. The poem's exotic qualities are present from the opening line, which is incredibly charged and emphasizes two Eastern names" (Nagra "*Kubla Khan* and Coleridge's exotic language" n.p.). The world context that Blaser evokes via the 'pleasure dome' remains unclear; however, seeing as Coleridge was a Romantic, it is not obvious to me that Blaser was not in fact engaging in his own Romantic quest; that is, his own journey of imagination. Blaser also suggests that the walls are an illusion, evidenced by the line, "the wall around heaven is untrue" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 266). We might think of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"; the cave is the 'heaven', the place where creation is an intentional expression of the self. The palpable presence of 'self', or conscious thought can be compared to the shadows on the cave walls. Whilst inside the cave, all the prisoners can see are the shadows and so they attribute all sound and movement to the shadows that they can see. Of course, we know that shadows are reflection of people, but the prisoners cannot see the people. Similarly, what we can perceive and understand of causation, creation, language, etc., is limited. Truth, is not necessarily inaccessible, however. It is fleeting; it is mutable; it is prismatic. "The truth flies" is the opening line in Blaser's "a bird in the house" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 359) as well as the talk I

mentioned earlier "Poem talk" #113). So, with regard to the creative process, "The Pause" seems to be building on an idea of changeability, and difference; that is, being open to different modes of constructing an artifact, namely, one in which the 'self' is minimized. In "Dialectics of the Real", David Marriott cogently explains the effect of Blaser's creative process by claiming that Blaser attempted to think and write himself out of the dualistic ontology of being and alienation, interiority and transcendental idealism thereby opposing the thinking that underscored phenomenological poetics, an approach to poetry that describes lived experience (Marriott, "Dialectics of the Real" 352). Marriott asserts:

> […] poetic consciousness is not in bondage to objects, but to its
> own disunion, its own non-identity of itself with itself. […]
> poetry itself becomes a summoning of the opacity and
> namelessness of being (Marriott, "Dialectics of the Real" 352).

Marriott's position that poetic consciousness "becomes a summoning of the opacity and namelessness of being" is in tandem with Blaser and the postmodernists' position that poetic consciousness involves a minimizing of personal narrative voice; however, the poet's implicit relationship to their society, and the world around them directly impacts the aesthetics of their poetics, indicated, for example, by the romanticization of East in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan". Philip's coinage of the 'I'-mage shows how locating and understanding one's positionality in the world, one's 'I' and allowing that 'I' to have a presence in poetics does not necessarily equate to egoism, and self-centered poetics. In fact, I would argue that understanding the 'I' in relation to the nation speaks about a more conscious understanding of one's own poetry, and participation in society.

Chapter II

Dissent into Madness: The process of translation in *Zong! she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks,* and *Les Chimeres*

"I am spoken rather than speaking" – Jacques Lacan

In this chapter I will discuss Robin Blaser and NourbeSe Philip's concerns with translation and process. I will be investigating how Blaser's translation of Gérard de Nerval's *Les Chimeres* and Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" and her long poem *Zong!* aesthetically treat the relationship of translation to madness. Literary traditions often involve the romanticizing of madness; for instance, the familiar love-as-madness trope or Dionysian madness. In *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought,* Louis Sass defines madness in literature as:

> rationality, a condition involving a decline or even disappearing of the role of rational factors in the organization of human conduct […]. The origins of these concepts has sometimes been located in the seventeenth-and-eighteenth century Enlightenment, time of the Great Confinement when madness, conceived as 'a total suspension of every rational faculty,' came to be sequestered behind the thick walls of the asylum (Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* 1).

Here, Sass elucidates how the historical and cultural state of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provoked writing of madness in literature, a cause-and-effect process resonating with Frantz Fanon's 'sociogeny' which accounts for the historical, cultural, and social factors in all things. Translation and madness intersect in Philip's poetics where African

diasporic peoples are forced to speak languages of other tongues, White slave masters cutting out enslaved Africans' tongues, when they are caught speaking their native tongues; in other words, the madness is speech enforced by colonial violence. In *Zong!* Philip's aesthetics of madness is centered on the insanity of drowning hundreds of Africans on board the Zong ship for insurance purposes, the insanity of the Seamen raping African women on board, and the insane bloody, pus-filled conditions on the ship. Douglass-Chin asserts that *Zong!* is both a "return and a returning. It is a return to the initial monstrous herding of millions of Africans aboard the slave ships—and a recognition that this act that Europe and the White Americas called 'sane'[15] was inherently insane" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!"* 3).

Blaser's translation of Gerard de Nerval's *Les Chimeres*, on the other hand, interrogates the idea of translation as a cosmic mediation between the 'self' and 'other'. Of his own poesis Blaser writes, "I consider most of my work a kind of translation" (Blaser ,"The Fire" *The Fire* 244). Like most postmodern poets, Blaser's sentiment is not unlike the postmodern idea that a poet's works are vessels by which something outside themselves is brought forward. Ted Byrne's reading of translation in Blaser's poetics is that Blaser's poetics are a "resetting or incorporation of voices […], the becoming other to remain oneself" (Byrne, "Introduction" *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honor of Robin Blaser* 16). As the 'translator', Blaser becomes less the subject and instead becomes an 'other' as the incorporation of voices is resituated. Norma Cole writes on translation in Blaser's poetics as "the space within the texts, the **distance.** The experience of translation becomes identical to the experience of writing, which takes place in that distance where the subject disappears. 'The translated men

[15] "The Latin 'sanus,' meaning healthy, is the root of our English words 'sanitary,' and 'sane" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong"38).*

disappear into what they have translated'" (Byrne, "Introduction" *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honor of Robin Blaser* 16). Cole and Brown observe that Blaser's translation is in some ways synonymous with Blaser's desire to minimize the presence of the lyrical 'I' in his poetics, a desire that is in tandem with the postmodernist writers and thinkers rejecting liberal humanism in the 1960's. Of the distance between the translator and the translated, Colin Brown writes that poets (including Robin Blaser) "want to shout down the walls that separate us from the world" (Byrne, "Introduction" *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honor of Robin Blaser 17.* According to Blaser and other postmodern poets, as the poet translates, they become less themselves and more of an 'other', and in doing so minimize the distance between themselves and the world. Translation, for Blaser, allows him to become a non-self, a part of the cosmos that mediates between the self and that which is beyond the self. This chapter will explore how aesthetics of madness manifest with regard to translation in Philip and Blaser's poetics.

Philip's poetics employ an aesthetics of translation where the speaker's presence is minimized which scholars including Richard Douglass-Chin and Katherine McKittrick have called Philip's 'untelling', particularly in *Zong!* While Philip's 'untelling' is similar to Blaser's attraction to a minimized lyrical voice, Philip's 'untelling' is located in the pursuit of recovering the haunting voices of the Africans who died on the slave ships and the lasting remnants of trauma of living diasporic peoples. Translation, as an issue in Philip's works, also raises a complex dichotomy between the role of the speaker as an 'unteller' and the issue of Black people being translated into anything by the language of their colonizers. For example, Philip's poetic works explore how a word in one language can carry a totally different sentiment, connotation,

or meaning in another. In her poem, “Meditations on the Declension of Beauty by the girl with the Flying Cheekbones” she writes:

In whose language

Am I

Am I not

Am I   I am yours […]

If not in yours

In whose

In whose language

Am I

If not in yours

Beautiful (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 27).

The speaker is a Black woman whose “flying cheekbones” and Black skin are not seen as beautiful; in Anglo Saxon culture; quite simply, White denotes beauty and purity, and Black, its opposite. African diasporic people’s relationship to English as the chief mode of translation of them and by them is, complicated to say the least. Walter Benjamin argues that translation “envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien” (Benjamin “The Task of the Translator” *Illuminations* 75-78). Philip’s poetic process reflects a similar sentiment to Benjamin; that is, for Philip too, translation can be ‘overpowering’ and ‘alien’. Etymologically, translation means to ‘carry over’ (Douglass-Chin, “Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip’s Experimental *Zong!”* 3), which begs the question, with regard to ‘alienness’, what is the translator carrying over as they translate? Edith Grossman

states that, “Translation […] permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live **outside** our own **skins**, our own preconceptions and misconceptions” (Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* 14). Grossman’s claim positions the translator as the agent choosing to carry themselves over to a different linguistic system in order to briefly live outside their own ‘skins’, to perhaps put on another skin. However, the implications and power dynamics at work in such aspirations are worth looking at closely, especially considering the nefarious history of the West’s treatment of peoples of different skins. I wish to conduct a close reading of Philips’ poetics with regard to their varied relationships to translation and from there, explore madness in their works within this context.

Philip’s *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks, Zong!*, and a few of her essays aesthetically and thematically explore the relationship between Black people and people of colour to the English language as colonial, and what implications develop as they navigate communicating through a language steeped in violence and madness. Edouard Glissant’s theory of creolization and ontology, which Clevis Headly has interpreted as the “creolizing of being” (Headly, “Glissant's Existential Ontology of Difference” 59), is the framework that I will be using to launch us into this discussion, as it delineates the linguistic and aesthetic complexities of translation. “Creolization of being” according to Headly, “connote[s] thinking being as existence, as resistance, as well as thinking being from the perspective of ‘the underside of modernity,’ which is the perspective of those formerly excluded from the universalist consciousness of European philosophy” (Headly, “Glissant's Existential Ontology of Difference” 59). The universalist consciousness across the West refers to the teleological[16] idea of being and

"Nature—as harmonious, homogenous, and thoroughly knowable" (Glissant*, Poetics of Relation* 77) that dominated cultural and aesthetic criticism prior to the Baroque period (1600-1750). The OED defines 'teleology'[17] as "processes or phenomena that are to be defined by intention or design rather than prior causes" (OED). *Whose* intention or design is not specified in the OED's definition, but it behooves us as readers not to lazily accept statements as disembodied or universal—which Frantz Fanon would say is antithetical to his theory of 'sociogeny'[18], again, accounting for the social factor in the development of all things, regardless of intention or aim. Fanon's theory of sociogeny is another term I will be coming back to throughout this text.

A carefully composed work, Philip's *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* alludes to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, more specifically, to the character Io who is raped by Zeus who consequently turns her into a cow so she cannot tell. Io's terror, having experienced the violence of Zeus' rape and her metamorphosis into a cow who cannot speak elicits similar sentiments in the West's colonial history and in slavery. Diasporic peoples are still impacted by the colonizing, the 'raping' of nations, cultures, and languages; having lost the languages of their mother tongues is a kind of silencing of that lasting trauma. In a tragic way, those who have been colonized are forced to translate their trauma using their colonizer's language, and by extension his consciousness—or what Tony Morrison would deem, his "gaze[17]" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 48). The contrasting openings of *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks,* and *Metamorphosis* serve as a symbolic

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[16] Teleological: referring to the branch of philosophical thought defined by the OED as a "theory or belief that divine purpose or design is discernible in the natural or physical world; the theory or belief that certain acts, processes, or phenomena are to be explained in terms of intention, design, or purposiveness rather than by prior causes. " *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/198710. Accessed 4 September 2020.

[17] 'his' is used artfully, alluding to the 'White man's gaze' in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and to the early colonizers who predominantly would have been men.

illustration of the ease of a speaker operating within his own tradition and language versus a speaker whose traditions and language have been unrooted from beneath her. *Metamorphoses* opens with the line, "*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora"*.There are several varying translations, but George Sandys (1628) translates it to, "Of forms to other bodies changed, I sing" (Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis* 30). Similar to Sandys' early translation, most later translations including John Dryden's, present the operative verb "sing" as a compulsion and an exultation, in contrast to Philip's "*she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*" which is fraught with apprehension, not unlike the "aphasia" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 7) of the African spirits in *Zong!*. The rhythmic simplicity in the iambic dimeter line, "*she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks*" is resonant of early language acquisition; it is a familiar rhythmic pattern seen in nursery rhymes such as, "there was a farmer had a dog and Bingo was his name-o" or in the second line of "Little Boy Blue", which is "come blow your horn". The trepidation in Philip's title, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* results from a strange duality felt by diasporic peoples, being translated and translating; that is, as I stated earlier, for those who have no mother tongue, they are forced to translate their emotions through their colonizer's language. African diasporic peoples adhering to the dominant cultural, political, aesthetic, and theoretical ideals of the West, therefore, often feel like they are being translated by a foreign entity, a violent foreign entity.

In her essay, "Audience and Language", Philip maintains, "in writing correct sentences, ending words with 'ing' instead of 'in' making my verbs agree with their subjects, I am choosing a certain tradition—that of John from Sussex (Philip "Audience and Language" *Frontiers* 37). Her poem "Questions! Questions!" interrogates the relationship between lost diasporic peoples and

their mother tongue by juxtaposing creole with Roman mythology. The poem opens with a short-italicized epigraph that reads, "*Meanwhile Proserpine's mother Ceres, with panic in her heart vainly sought her daughter over all lands and over all the sea*" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 2), setting up the context of the poem. The opening line "Where she, where she/be, where she gone?" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 2), disrupts the English syntax by omitting the verb 'is' similar to how creole is spoken. By the epigraphical introduction, we can deduce that 'she' is Proserpine, Ceres' daughter for whom she is looking. Ceres' daughter Proserpine is a metaphorical stand in for Black diasporic peoples, and Ceres represents the mother tongue.

From the word 'mother' in 'mother-tongue', Philip extracts, or rather creates and develops full narratives along with experimental linguistics to illustrate various lasting impacts of languages and cultures lost as a colonial consequence. One example is found in her poem, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" that associates language with childbirth –the emergence of the child from the womb or the matrix:

> WHEN IT WAS BORN, THE MOTHER HELD HER NEWBORN CHILD CLOSE: SHE BEGAN THEN TO LICK IT ALL OVER. THE CHILD WHIMPERED A LITTLE, BUT AS THE MOTHER'S TONGUE MOVED FASTER AND STRONGER OVER ITS BODY, IT GREW SILENT—THE MOTHER TURNING IT THIS WAY AND THAT UNDER HER TONGUE UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING ITS BODY (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 30).

These lines in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" are actually written sideways along the outer margin of the page; readers must physically turn the entire book sideways in order for

this passage to be legible. By designing the words on the page in this fashion, Philip's readers are required to make a physical effort to read this colonial narrative, not unlike the effort it takes to understand African diasporic history wrought with pain and suffering. In this excerpt, Philip expands possibilities of meaning of the term 'mother tongue' in a way that reveals the naturalness of a mother language or tongue. By anthropomorphizing the mother tongue, Philip provides a vivid image of a mother cleaning and caring for her newborn; the newborn totally depends on its mother, a biological (and some might say natural) experience. Severing the baby from its mother, therefore, is unnatural. I read the mother tongue as being African languages and the baby as African people. The implication, then, is that colonialism and slavery, too, violently separating many African peoples from their native tongues, is unnatural. The second epigraph in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" provides a historic account for the violent actions toward African people that resulted in mother tongues lost:

> *EDICT II*
>
> *Every slave caught speak-*
>
> *ing his native language*
>
> *shall be severely pun-*
>
> *ished. Where necessary,*
>
> *removal of the tongue is*
>
> *recommended. The of-*
>
> *fending organ, when re-*
>
> *moved, would be hung*
>
> *on high in a central place*
>
> *so that all might see and*

tremble (Philip, *She Tries her Tongue, she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 32).

Unnatural, indeed. Philip uses the intense physical imagery of a tongue being severed from a person's mouth to stress the violence of slavery and colonialism's erasure of African languages and cultures. What results generations later, are the diasporic African peoples with little to no lasting languages and cultures of origin. The unnaturalness of slave owners ripping out the tongues of Africans, directly contradicts the naturalness that the term 'mother tongue' connotes. When a severing of languages from African peoples occurs, it results in Africans and African descended peoples across the West feeling an estrangement, and even a traumatic relationship to the English language. Philip writes:

English is my mother tongue./

A mother tongue is not/

not a foreign lan lan lang

language

l/anguish\

--a foreign anguish" (Philip, *She Tries her Tongue, she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 30).

The phonetic shift from 'language' to 'anguish' requires the reader to associate anguish with language – a foreign language, more pointedly, an idea I will return to; that is, being the perpetual foreigner speaking a language that cannot ever be native to those who were colonized. While the speaker states that English is her mother tongue, the stuttering in the third line, "lan, lan lang" (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 30) shows the speaker's lack of confidence in this declaration; the stuttering illustrates the forced[18] alienation between the

[18] "Forced" by the unnatural linguistic and cultural erasure and diaspora of many peoples; the cruel lasting impacts of colonialism.

speaker and her own tongue. The African invention of creole as translation serves as a tool of recovery and liberation from the confines of English—a language with a violent and hostile history toward African and Indigenous peoples. Philip personifies the erased African languages as the mother Ceres looking for her lost child, interweaving Roman mythological traditions of the West with creole as a way to insert African consciousness and memory into Western consciousness. In short, a creolization of being.

Translation in Philips poetics occupies a complicated position; one on hand, translation is an act of violence: the English language of the colonizers as a foreign translator of diasporic peoples. On the other hand, creole and syntactical disruption as a mode of translation, serves as a tool of liberation, for recovering lost African cultures and consciousnesses. Strangely, Philip's poetry has been mistakenly associated with the postmodern L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, like Blaser; however, I argue that Philip's poetics not only fundamentally operate from historically, culturally, and spiritually different origins; Philip's poetics manifest as haunting living images inviting readers into frighteningly beautiful places located in linguistic fragments that defy the linearity of syntax and colonial order. In her poetics and in her poetic process is a space where voices, memory, and spirits emerge beyond the tongue, beyond the word. (I have not touched much on the spirituality which is deeply present in Philip's work; I will delve into the spiritual recovery of lost tongues and voices when I discuss her long poem *Zong!)*

Throughout my research and close readings of Philip's works, it occurred to me that her poetics might be best termed as 'recoveries'; that is, recoveries of histories, spirits, narratives, and voices forcibly eliminated and forgotten because of the West's colonial history. I posit that rather than being egocentric and self-interested, narratives carry with them histories that elucidate the development of theoretical and aesthetic ideas and their social and historical

contexts as being interconnected. I will borrow Franz Fanon's term, 'sociogeny' to further explain this interconnection. Historically, poststructuralism's evacuation from liberal humanism in the 1960s, similarly to Fanon's 'sociogeny', resisted the unilateralistic and exclusive nature of teleological modes of thought and critical discourse. However, Fanon's philosophical systems take a vastly different approach to this resistance. Poststructuralism, as a critique of structuralism and liberal humanism, seeks to liberate the artist from the limitations and constraints of identity with an emphasis on the plurality and instability of meaning. Ironically, not unlike teleological approaches to thought and criticism, poststructuralism prioritizes 'design' (the craft itself) over considering the global, historical, and societal factors contributing to art and language. Fanon, on the other hand, insists that artistic liberation, expression, and truth cannot be attained without contending with the histories and societies that orient our consciousnesses as we create. I would argue that the unrelenting concern for historical and cultural foundations of thought, aesthetics, and language is held primarily by those who are on a certain side of history; put simply, those whose cultures, liberties, and humanity were compromised by imperialism and colonialism, which has led to the cultural and aesthetic crystallization of certain ideas as unchallengeable, i.e. Eurocentrism and Whiteness considered the unspoken (and spoken) cultural and aesthetic standard of normalcy in Canada and largely across the West.

Philip's *Zong!* as an experimental long poem, according to Richard Douglass-Chin "employs an aesthetics of madness against the brutal insanity of 'rationalist' eighteenth century European philosophical, legal, and literary assumptions that denied the humanity of African peoples and that continue to inform the relations between diasporic Africans and the West today" (Douglass-Chin, ""Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 1). The poem acts as a spiritual and aesthetic retelling of the historical

events aboard the slave ship called the Zong. In the winter of 1781, during the period of the transatlantic slave trade, the captain of the ship decreed the throwing overboard of about 122 captive Africans (Burnard, "A New Look at the Zong Case of 1783" n.p.). The captain of the ship murdered the African captives so that he could later collect insurance on them as 'lost cargo' which was the subject of the infamous court case of 1783 (Burnard, "A New Look at the Zong Case of 1783" n.p.). According to historian Trevor Burnard:

> The *Zong* case became a pivotal moment in the development of a humanitarian sensibility. Lord Mansfield made a notorious comment adjudicating in the case when it came before the Court of King's Bench on 22 May 1783. He stated that 'The Matter left to the Jury was, whether [the mass murder arose] [...] from necessity [,] for they had no doubt (tho' it shocks one very much) the Case of Slaves was the same as if Horses had been thrown overboard.' His further comment that insurers had to pay up for dead slaves killed in an insurrection 'just as if Horses were kill'd' but that insurers did not have to pay up for slaves dying naturally just as 'you don't have to pay for horses that die a natural death' (Burnard, "A New Look at the Zong Case of 1783" n.p.).

Of course, the African captives did not die a natural death. I am put in mind of the unnaturalness of the slave masters cutting out the tongues of Africans caught speaking their native languages. *Zong!* recreates the missing voices of Africans who were murdered on the slave ships on their way to the Caribbean Islands. Much of the long poem incorporates disembodied voices whose words are slurred; they are what Douglass-Chin calls the "long-lost voices rusty with disuse and the salt of ocean depths, unaccustomed to verbal articulation. In the movement from trauma to transfiguration, this birthing brings to life African-diasporic women's

ways of (re) membering[19] history and myth" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 8):

> w w w w a wa
> w a w a t
> er wa s
> our wa
> te r gg g g go
> o oo goo d waa wa
> wa
> w w waa
> ter o oh
> on o ne w one

Haunting and bodiless, the African spirits' slurred paralinguistic voices expose the unnaturalness of the physical separation of voice from their bodies; in effect, the lost voices themselves an aesthetics of madness shown by their aphasia and syntactical disruption. "*Zong!*'s aesthetics of madness," posits Douglass-Chin, "is textual violence—a disruption of narrative certainty, a detonation of the word, a derailing of the sentence […] a seeing that subverts the Westernized paradigm of madness as metaphoric lack, and acknowledge[s] the trauma, the psychic violence that necessarily accompanies colonization and subjugation, that is its source" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 2). Madness, while illustrated in Philip's fractured placement of letters on the page. Note,

[19] Douglass-Chin inserts parentheses around 're' in remembering, deconstructing the term and thereby inserting a double entendre; that is, 'remembering' as a recollection of the violent trauma experienced by the massacred Africans on the slave ship, and 're-membering' as a mode of undoing the violent dismembering of African spirits (and voices) to their bodies.

Philip's poetic fragmentation is not coming out of deconstructionist or poststructuralist traditions, but rather a psycho-geographical tradition coming out of the Caribbean where the detached islands separated by ocean waters inspires the poetic aesthetic of many Caribbean-born African diasporic writers.

Below is a passage taken from *Zong!* where the spirits are stuttering 'one day's water':

W d d d
on

y

ey ah y

ne ay s
wa wa

Not unlike the passage from "Discourse on the Logic of language", the speaker(s) struggle to speak their thoughts through the English language; in this case the speakers are the enslaved Africans onboard the ship during the transatlantic slave trade, a historic and horrific event that involved wiping out African cultures and languages. According to Douglass Chin, this passage suggests a "rhizomatic web of possibilities: the stutter of the aphasic dead in the 'd d d'[…] [and] the transformation of the standard English word 'day' into the creole demotic 'dey'---signaling early in the text a strategy of creolization of that is used throughout (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 9). A strategy of creolization is to illustrate linguistically the Africans' horrific struggle to vocalize their pain through the language of their torturers. Notice the positionality of the letters on the white page: not one letter or phoneme falls directly over another. At a conference dedicated to her poetics at Oxford University (2015), Philip described her spacing as the letters needing that physical space to allow for what is beneath them to rise to the surface. In not so different words,

Philip's gaps of silence generate the space needed for recovering the lost voices of the murdered Africans; Philip's silence then, is not stagnant, but instead, is a mobilizer of spirits and a holder of visceral emotion, felt both by the voices in the text, and its readers. *Zong!* as an aesthetic translation of histories of horror, 'a poetics of transfiguration' (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 7), demands the attention of its readers, dragging them out of an anesthetic[20] complacency toward the West's violent and diabolical history. *Zong!* has been called by Philip, a breathing tomb; that is, a poetics of movement and of life. When read aloud, the shift from a written text to a spoken one elucidates the complex cacophony of voices, commanding a polyphonous collaboration of readers. The result is a powerful symphonic-like cantata that emblematizes a living artifact, communicating in the present, a breathing cenotaph of the countless African lives lost.

Turning to Blaser, now, I will conduct an investigation of translation as poesis and as madness in Blaser's essays and his own translation of Gérard de Nerval's *Les Chimères*. Earlier, I mentioned that Blaser has stated that he sees all of his work as a kind of translation. I interpret this as Blaser stating that rather than functioning self-expression, his poetics serve as a vessel for outside energies and images to be brought forward. While Blaser most widely known for his involvement in the San Francisco Renaissance (1950s) and the triumvirate of poets made up of himself, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer. Perspectives on translation, as an issue of poeisis and aesthetics, vary substantially between the three of them. Andrew Mossin posits:

> For Duncan, language inevitably involves a sense of 'numinous revelation'; it is the embodiment of 'immediate events' that reveal the universal as enacted in the particular.

[20] A term from Richard Douglass-Chin's "Madness and Translation of The Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" that he uses to describe aesthetics across the West and the troubling histories that have had a part in informing them; Douglass-Chin argues "Zong […] challenges the anesthetizing aesthetics of Euro- and Euro-American Empire"(Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation" 2).

> […] In this dance, language is logos, a source resonant with the godly presence that is central to all acts of human endeavour. […] By contrast, Spicer and Blaser share an affinity in their exploration of translation. The poet's task in translation is one of mediating those cosmic forces that exist outside the poet and allowing the poem and its language to become the dictated content of an encounter between Self and Other (Mossin, "In the Shadow of Nerval: Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and the Poetics of (Mis) Translation" 674).

I include Mossin's breakdown of the different viewpoints of translation between Blaser, Spicer and Duncan because a conflict between Duncan and Blaser over Blaser's translation of Nerval's *Les Chimeres* centralizes my discussion on this topic. Gerard de Nerval was a French Romantic poet, often associated with Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and Stephan Mallarme. Titled a 'tradition of dissent' by P.M Jones, French Romanticism, beginning in the late 18th century was largely defined by revolt against the stringent regulations of neoclassicism. "For a long time" states Blaserian scholar Ted Byrne, "I thought I knew why Robin Blaser translated Antonin Artaud's letter on Gérard de Nerval's *Les Chimères*. It was intended as a belated, but definitive reply to Robert Duncan's criticism of Blaser's translation of that work" (Byrne, *"*là où il y a oeuvre, il n'y a pas folie*"* 1). Another question might be what oriented Blaser toward French Romanticism in the first place. The conflict between Blaser and Duncan with regard to translation, according to Byrne contained three facets: friendship, the theory of translating as process, and madness. The latter two, I will be discussing primarily in this chapter. Byrne posits that Blaser and Duncan's conflict regarding the theory of translating—the process, has much to do with fidelity (Byrne, *"*là où il y a oeuvre, il n'y a pas folie*"* 2); that is, faithfulness to the origin. Andrew Mossin's position that translation involves the task of

“mediating those cosmic forces that exist ‘outside’ the poet” (Mossin, “In the Shadow of Nerval Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and the Poetics of (Mis) translation” 674) begs the question: what are these cosmic forces outside the poet? How might the poet recognize these forces? And what role does the ‘other’ play in this cosmic mediation?

Madness is present in Nerval’s works and Philip’s works; in Philip’s *Zong!* is the aestheticized madness of the treatment of the Africans on the ship, while, Nerval sees madness as “rational, as a logical extension of his literary being, his theatrical being, as he displays it in the fable of Brisacier in his introduction to *Les Filles du feu*” (Byrne, *“là où il y a oeuvre, il n’y a pas folie”13).* Madness as a literary trope is utilized in various ways depending on the historical, cultural context of the text. Nerval was writing about 50 years after the French Revolution, during the evacuation of neoclassicism. Of French Romanticism arising out of the French Revolution, PM Jones asserts that “a notable feature of French Romanticism has been its inability to attain a formula that would satisfy more than a generation of adherents. Another is the violence of its internal reactions, which seem almost entirely motivated by the impulse to get further away from their origin, but which are actually tracing minor revolutions within a vicious circle whence they cannot escape” (Jones, “French Romanticism: A Tradition of Dissent” 295). In Byrne’s *là où il y a oeuvre, il n’y a pas folie”13)* he quotes Robert Duncan, a contemporary of Blaser, on madness and poetics:

> To recognize madness as a term of the ‘Real’ extends our life in What Is. This is the revelation of Goya’s *Caprichos* or of Gérard de Nerval’s *Chimeras* [sic], that what otherwise had been isolated obsession and hallucination is brought into the communal imagination to become mystery and mystic vision. – Robert Duncan (Byrne, *là où il y a oeuvre, il n’y a pas folie”*15-16).

While the Romantic writers are widely known for their mysticism and communal imagination, scholars have criticized their global fascinations and their idealizations of non-Western traditions. Edward Said writes, “On a visit to Beirut during the terrible civil war of 1975-1976, a French journalist wrote regretfully of the gutted downtown area that “it had once seemed to belong to […] the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval” (Said, *Orientalism* 9). The French Romantics’ exoticizing of the Orient had less to do with the culture, and more to do with it being the ideal place for their consumption. Said continues, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’” (Said, *Orientalism* 9). Even though, for many contemporary poets, poetry ‘transcends’ the bounds of history, society, and culture, the question of madness as aesthetics in French Romantic poetry as opposed to Philip’s poetry problematizes the route to the ‘Real’; exoticizing cultures and peoples in poetics for personal or artistic gain cannot ever lead to closeness to them, for the impetus for exoticization of cultures in poetics or otherwise is fundamentally shrouded in ignorance.

Chapter III

Presence and Absence as Poesis in Blaser and Philip

"I am because We are" –The South African Philosophy of Ubuntu

During my interview with NourbeSe Philip, she spoke briefly of Ubuntu philosophy and one of its core values, "I am because we are" (Serena Klumpenhouwer*, Interview with NourbeSe Philip*), a sentiment that I will be returning to throughout this chapter. The topic I wish to investigate is postmodern conceptions of presence, particularly how those conceptions manifest in Blaser's and Philip's poetics. The purpose of this investigation is to delineate how the performative collectivist aesthetic brings being into presence and what implications that argument has on the idea that presence emerges out of the chasm or the absence of the individual. In this chapter, I will be discussing presence and absence in Philip's and Blaser's poetics while looking to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and Julia Kristeva's writings on the 'abject' as theoretical frameworks.

Blaser describes 'Moth Poem' found in his serial collection of poems *The Holy Forest,* as "a translation of the record of burning light and death of certain presences. I believe that all men live in this realm, the serious, intense kingdom, funny as it is at times, with its passionate thought" (Blaser, "Poetics" *The Fire* 12). Because this chapter explores presence and absence, I will be looking closely at Blaser's "Moth Poem". The 'death of certain presences' in Blaser's poetics function as a mode of bringing other presences to life. While this is a sentiment widely and easily accepted by the dominant literary sphere, the specification of 'certain presences' necessitates an investigation into what constitutes which presences must die and which ones ought to be apparent.

One of the "Moth Poems", 'Invisible Pencil' exemplifies Blaser's experimentation with disappearing images right from the title. The words 'invisible pencil' evoke the image of a pencil and then transgresses against that image by its being invisible. The moth shows up when it flies onto the floor lamp:

> now a moth flies overhead to the floorlamp,
>
> stops my reading the *Death of Virgil,*
>
> *form fixed and mute*, one element ("The Moth Poem" *The Holy Forest* 76).

The moth here stops the speaker from reading Hermann Broch's *Death of Virgil*, but in the speaker's having stopped reading the book, the book becomes the item of focus, not to mention its being italicized. In short, the allusion becomes present, most present. This double allusion (alluding to Broch's novel and to the Roman poet Virgil) did not become present across the chasm of absence— however unromantic it sounds; the allusion became present by the author's decision to make it present. The allusion to Virgil brings into presence a constellation of literary and cultural contexts having to do with Rome's (and by extension, Europe's) divine destiny that resonates with particular readers. It is not obvious that the "death of certain presences", to use Blaser's words, results from humility or selflessness, rather than subjective aesthetic intention. Jean Paul Sartre puts this more clearly, explaining the complications of assuming that immanent presence or being results from absence:

> [….]how can non being be the foundation of being? How can the absent *expected* subjective become there by the objective? A great joy which I hope for. A grief which I dread, acquire from that a certain transcendence in immanence does not bring us out of the subjective. And it is true that each appearance refers to other appearances. But each of them is already in itself *alone,* a transcendent being, not a subjective material of impressions—

> a plentitude of being, not a lack—a presence, not an absence. It is futile by sleight of hand to attempt to find the *reality*[21] of the object on the subjective plentitude of impressions, and its objectivity on non-being; the objective will never come out of the subjective nor the transcendent from immanence, nor being from non-being (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology* 1xi).

Sartre's claim that each appearance […] "is already in itself alone a transcendent being, not a subjective material of impressions—a plentitude" resonates with what Douglass-Chin posits in my interview; he claims, "Nothingness is everythingness. Which is the ultimate presence. It is only out of an intricate and delicate interplay or *balance* between being and nothingness, presence and absence, rootedness and rootlessness, that we as poets and theorists of whatever culture may find the way" (Serena Klumpenhouwer, "Interview with Richard Douglass-Chin").

Borrowed from Buddhist traditions of the East, everythingness, in other words, is not simply brought forward by the chasm of absence; instead, ultimate presence incorporates a plenitude of contingencies central to the existence of all images, and all things. I would posit, then, that absence and presence remain unstable terms, and thus, the purpose and effect of modern poets' unyielding proclivity to centralize absence in their aesthetics is rendered dubious at best. Philip's *Zong!* privileges presence (and being) in sound, and in the performative. In my interview with her, Philip claims that she could not perform that piece on her own, she can only read it with another person accompanying her. In this way, the piece cannot 'be' unless it is performed by a collective of voices. Not unlike a classical concerto—the musical score exists whether or not there is an orchestra to play it, but the music does not exist unless it is being played, and rarely if ever is a concerto played precisely the same way each time. In this way,

[21] Refers to the "Reality" or the "Real" that Blaser discusses at length, as an ultimate goal of poetics.

Zong! is like a concerto whose existence or presence is entirely contingent on its sonic performance, and that its performative collectivist aesthetic brings it into being. *Zong!'s* aesthetic form allows for spontaneous improvisation, and in one moving performance of the piece, Philip begins quietly chanting, "Sum sum/ I am/ Sum sum. Sum sum/ I am/ Sum sum…" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 12); Philips melodic chanting emerges alongside singer Amai Kuda who begins to sing what Douglass-Chin describes as a "haunting African melody" (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 12). Douglass-Chin asserts that the "cacophony is punctuated by moments of stunning euphony. […] These moments of euphony evoke what George Lamming has called the 'Ceremony of Souls' or 'Ceremony of the Dead' (Douglass-Chin, "Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip's Experimental *Zong!*" 12). I would also posit that *Zong!* as performance, as ceremony, becomes a kind of spiritual recovery of African voices lost. The words *"sum sum* I am" evoke Cartesian dualism, but resist it simultaneously because the 'I' (the voice) in the case of *Zong!* comes into existence through a conduit of communal participation. Rene Decartes', '*Cognito ergo sum'* (I think therefore I am), on the other hand, recalls Western dualism separating mind from the physical body, locating 'being' in thought. I will borrow psychologist Matthew Gendle's summary of dualism for expedient purposes as the history of dualism is less important than Philip's aesthetic and philosophical resistances to it; Gendle states:

> Historically, Cartesian dualism played a fundamental role in wrestling the practice of medicine away from church oversight. The formal separation of the 'mind' from the 'body' allowed for religion to concern itself with the noncorporeal 'mind,' while dominion over the 'body' was ceded to medical science and the academic study of

physiology and anatomy (Gendle, "The Problem of Dualism in Modern Western Medicine" 141).

More recently, neuroscientists and philosophers including John Searle have been evacuating Western dualism arguing that "consciousness is a physiological process, just like respiration, circulation, and immune function" (Gendle, "The Problem of Dualism in Modern Western Medicine" 141). In short, the mind is not necessarily separate from the body. Instead, Gendle argues, "The notion of a physiological nonduality that is distinct from traditional mechanistic biological reductionism, other conceptualizations of physical monism, and Chopra's 'dualism-masked-as-nonduality' is not particularly radical or novel (for example, see Searle's proposal of biological naturalism), but it is a concept that has not been fully and intentionally embraced by either the mainstream medical or CAM communities" (Gendle, "The Problem of Dualism in Modern Western Medicine" 141). This evacuation from Cartesian dualism toward consciousness as a physiological process is in tandem with Philip's poetic explorations of memory, being, and language. Philip's poetics locate being in memories, which according to Philip are housed in the anatomic and subatomic particles of the body. In her poem, "Universal Grammar" she writes:

The smallest cell

Remembers (Philip, "Universal Grammar" *She Tries her Tongue, her silence softly breaks* 37).

Philip's poetics investigate memory, from the memory of the Africans on board the Zong to the memory of Africa, memories are housed in the physical cells of the body. The body becomes relevant as a marker of presence. While contemporary poets prefer to focus less on race or the body and more on aesthetic, the body for poets like NourbeSe Philip becomes central to the aesthetic, a vessel of linguistic and spiritual exploration. *Zong!* for example, forces its readers to

reject syntactic and phonic systems of the English language in order to perform what become utterances of the dead enslaved Africans on board. What results is a spiritual return to the ship; readers spontaneously call out names of drowned Africans, and impromptu chants such as, NourbeSe's "sum sum I am" spiral out from her tongue, a physiological exertion of the body. I am reminded of Shakespeare's sonnet 55, "Not marble, nor the guilded monuments of time" where the speaker writes to preserve the memory of his love interest in the poem. However, Philip's poem's aesthetics emblematize the subject of the memory. In other words, to perform poems such as *Zong!* is to call forth the memory of the dead, of bodies lost at sea; the figures become present by sonic and linguistic utterances of words and even phonemes, such as "w w w wa" (Philip, *Zong!* 3). Presence, in this way, emerges out of the minute, the particular, out of sound. Derrida argues against phonocentrism in *Of Grammatology* positing that the evidence for "originary and teleologic presence has customarily been found in the voice, the *phone"* (Derrida *Of Grammatology* lxviii). Derrida argues that reliance on the phoneme as a mode to presence requires an acceptance of voice as our "interior soliloquy" (Derrida *Of Grammatology* lxviii). How then, he might ask, can language be a means to presence when speech requires the individual to interpret their own words—the individual is centralized? He suggests:

> phonocentrism-logocentrism relates to centrism itself—the human desire to posit a 'central' presence at the beginning and end. […] The notion of sign… remains within the heritage of that logocentrism[22] (Derrida *Of Grammatology* lxviii).

While Derrideans might be skeptical about how Philip locates presence in poetics that adopt a phonocentric aesthetic, language as a bodily function is central to Philip; her poetics privilege presence (and memory) in the body, which disallows the ever-posed threat of cultural amnesia.

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[22] David A. White's Derrida on "Being as Presence" defines logocentrism as "the location of truth within the "privilege of an interior, self-present voice" (White, "Being as presence" 5).

The memories exist in the body. Philip elucidates the colonial violence of wiping out languages with visceral imagery of the tongue in her poem "Discourse on the Logic of language":

> The tongue
>
> (a) is an interwoven bundle of striated muscle running in planes.
>
> (b) is fixed to the jawbone.
>
> (c) Has an outer covering of mucous membrane covered with papillae.
>
> (d) Contains ten thousand taste buds, non of which is sensitive to the taste of foreign words
>
> Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamor-
>
> Phosis from sound to intelligible words requires
>
> (a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together
>
> (b) a mother tongue.
>
> (c) The overseer's whip
>
> (d) All of the above or none. (Philip, *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* "Discourse on the Logic of Language" 33).

Language is more than interpretation, signifiers, and signs; it is a physiological experience where energies, vibrations, etc. emerge from the body. The violence, then, of wiping out entire languages and cultures, is for Philip, like a violent physical alteration to the body. I would argue that Philip's aesthetics present colonialism as visceral and more importantly, unnatural. To further examine this idea, unnaturalness, I will return to Julia Kristeva's 'abject', a term she coined in *Revolution and Poetic Language* (1974). Julia Kristeva's 'abject', she claims:

> is related to perversion. The sense of abjection that I experience is linked to the superego. The 'abject' is perverse because it neither gives up or assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life—a progressive despot (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection* 17).

Earlier, Blaser described his poetics, or rather his poesis as the 'death of certain presences'; in other words, some components in his poetry, such as, linguistic structures, images, versification, etc., are more present than others. But it is not obvious that readers and writers will necessarily agree on what is in fact present and what is not. Each person is an amalgam of contingencies that impact our impressions. For instance, certain images and patterns in any given work might be more apparent to someone of colour than someone who is not of colour. The mention of Aryan features, such as blue eyes, fair skin, or even referring to women as blondes or brunettes, in any given work might be more defamiliarizing to someone of colour than someone for whom Aryan features are normal and standard. By the same token, mention of African features, such as dark skin might be more noticeable to a White reader. So, what is or is not present in a work does not entirely depend on authors' intentions[23]. References work the same way. When a work makes a reference or an allusion, such as Blaser's title *The Holy Forest* which is an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, or Philip's coinage, the 'I-mage' which is influenced by Rastafarian 'I-talk', the degree to which the allusion or reference is effective depends on whether the reader 'gets it' or even

[23] Note: reader-response theory: A view of literary interpretation associated with the American critic Stanley Fish (1938–). It holds that meaning does not reside in the text, but in the mind of the reader. The text functions only as a canvas onto which the reader projects whatever his or her reactions may be. The text is a cause of different thoughts, but does not in itself provide a reason for one interpretation rather than another (Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy 3rd Edition)*

notices its presence on the page. This is why absence is a slippery term, with regard to literary aesthetics – absent to whom?

Why does it matter? Well, the literary argument for absence in poetics usually involves an argument for the definition of poetics. For Blaser, the emptying of the 'I' simultaneously elevates others. Although, if the 'I' is indeed presence, then in order to empty the 'I' so it has the effect of bringing others forward, the writer must understand his or her or their 'I'; the writer must be conscious of it in order to locate it and identify it before they minimize or resituate it. If the 'I' is personal narrative, identity, context, biography, etc., and if its absence brings others forward, then 'Others' must first be convinced of its absence – if the 'Others' detect the 'I', then it is present and cannot possibly bring 'Others' forward in the way it purports to. There is an old saying, uttered by many including, Kevin Spacey in "Unusual Suspects" and Charles Baudelaire, "The greatest trick the devil ever played on us was convincing us that he doesn't exist"; that is, convincing people of his absence. The absence of narrative takes with it the absence of a historical trajectory of events, so that when a reader comes to a text, the thematic, aesthetic, philosophical, cultural, political, etc. components of the poetics are easily mischaracterized, misplaced, and misunderstood.

Absence, for contemporary writers, is functional; in other words, it minimalizes the self and brings others forward; it has a purpose, an aim. I would argue that contemporary postmodern writers' unchallenged acceptance of the functionality (not intentionality) of absence necessitates further investigation. I will turn to Julia Kristeva's term 'abject' that she first coined in *Revolution and Poetic Language* (1974) to facilitate this conversation. First of all, Kristeva "can be termed neither a formalist nor a structuralist […]. Kristeva takes into account the historical dimensions of literary and artistic works and also analyses the role of the subject, albeit a

heterogeneous one, in their production" (Roudiez, "Introduction" in Revolution in Poetic Language 3). While Blaser and Philp share a desire, in their aesthetics, to minimalize the presence of the 'lyrical I', their histories, gender, proximity to Whiteness, etc. colours the ways they think of 'presence', 'foreignness', and the lyrical voice. For Blaser, foreignness and absence are aesthetic constructions. He can become 'Other' through his poetic process of minimalizing the self; he can adopt an aesthetic foreignness in his poetics and return to being a White man in the West – accepted, normal, and *not* 'Other', though he was a homosexual. Philip, on the other hand, though having lived in Canada for many years, has never felt accepted as 'normal', as truly Canadian. Diasporic people of colour are generally always already seen as 'Other' across the West; if we consider Hallmark films with White families and friends, or commercials, or characters in novels—most people do not even think about including people of colour in the imaginary worlds they create because people of colour in the West are seen as strange, odd—other. To include Blackness, or Chineseness, or Indianness into those worlds is often an afterthought, or a duty to keep the 'social justice warriors happy'; sound familiar? Even though Canadian society is defined by many ethnicities, it still takes three or four steps to even think of including people who are not White in many artforms, including poetics. And representation is not simply a whiny 'inclusivity' issue. The majority of healthcare professionals in Canada, for example, are taught only to treat White bodies. Even in Canadian medicine, a rash or redness on Black or dark skin often goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, not merely because the markings are more obvious on White skin, but because markings look different on varied skin types. For Black infants and Black elderly, 'Whitewashed medicine' has had deathly consequences. Imagine the opposite. Medical centers with majority Black doctors taught only to diagnose on dark skin. How comfortable would you be racing into Emerge with your feverish and rash-

covered newborn in *that* Canada[24]? The invisibility of Blackness, or the *absence* of Blackness in Canada negatively impacts the way Black people and non-Black people exist in the world. So, absence in Philip's poetics manifests from being absent in what she has called a "colonial Canada" (Philip*, she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* 77). Absence in Philip's poetry fundamentally operates from historically, culturally, and spiritually different origins than Blaser and other postmodern poets; Philip's poetic fragments that defy the linearity of syntax and colonial order, open up, rather than an absence, a space where memories and spirits emerge beyond the tongue, beyond the word. I would posit that it is more attractive to enter non-being or absence in poetics when your colonial identity establishes you as being rooted and visible in society already. How then, can the postmodern aesthetic path to meta-existence be a tenable one when people are writing from different starting points of rootedness? Why in postmodern literary circles is there such an aversion to presence in poetics?

According to Debora Caslav Covino, Kristeva's view is that "human and animal wastes such as feces, urine, vomit, tears, and saliva are repulsive because they test the notion of the self/other split upon which subjectivity depends" (Covino*, Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 17). In other words, the concept of 'self' and 'other' become obscured when part of the body is no longer a part of the body, i.e. vomit. Repulsion results from the obscuring of 'self' and 'other'. In poetics, if the self is to be minimalized, or to have minimal presence in a work, the 'self' must first be identifiable, and by default, the 'other' must also be identifiable. The self might be best thought of as the lyrical 'I' and the 'other' is that which not

[24] Francine Small's "The Racialization of Disease: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Race and Ethnicity" states that "biomedical research publications often utilize racial groupings or categorizations that are not standardized, consistent or validated. Even though it has been demonstrated that definitions and groups change over time, the notions of race and ethnicity are still utilized as universal variables and related to measurable outcomes" (Small, "The Racialization of Disease: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Race and Ethnicity" 38).

reflective of the 'I'. It is not obvious to me that poets who profess to minimalize presence of the lyrical 'I' in fact do; and this is important because the presence of an ''I' is contingent on its 'other', that which is 'not I'. The Covino quotation above reads, the "self/ other split ***upon which subjectivity depends"*** (Covino*, Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 17). What a 'self' consists of, according to Kristeva, then, must be subjective, and the obscuring of the 'self' and 'other' ends with repulsion. I would expand upon this claim by positing that the presence of a 'self' in poetics, by the same token, is also subjective. For example, Blaser's "Image-Nation 5 (erasure" beautifully begins:

as the image wears away

there is a wind in the heart

the translated men

disappear into what they have

translated

rocking the heart a childish man

entangles an absence a still-life

at the edge of his body

erasing the body of those opposites

who are companions

and also horizons in one another's

eyes at the ends of the world" (Blaser *The Holy Forest* 149).

“Image Nation 5 (erasure” examines the journey of the poet as translator and translated. Translation, here is part of the creative process, in which the ‘I’ disappears into the creation. The argument is that the absence of identity in poetics (racialization, ethnicity, sexuality, class, education, etc.) which often embodies opposites (White-Black, male-female, gay-hetero), ultimately results in unity: “horizons in one another’s eyes” (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 149). While Blaser’s expressed sentiment is beautiful, it is rendered untenable because so much of “Image-Nation 5 (erasure” reflects the thoughts of a learned, White male. For instance, his continuous use of ‘he’ as the default poet suggests that the author is writing from a period where the default human was referred to as male, and White[25] as well. In short, the consciousness of the speaker, the speaker’s social context, etc. is present in the work, in a way that reflects the writer and resonates with a particular audience. Blaser’s frequent allusions to French Romantic poet Gerard de Nerval are no less revealing about the traditions and ideals he identifies with than a poet who frequently alludes to Maya Angelou. So, that which is Other to the self, is not necessarily Other to the non-self. The point is not that there is something innately problematic with one’s identity being present in their poetry; the point is that the terms ‘presence’ ‘absence’ ‘self’ and ‘other’ as poetic abstractions are rendered unstable at best when considering the positionality of different writers—especially their proximity to Whiteness if they are writing in the West.

In order to bring ‘others’ forward, one needs to understand the history of the ‘self’ and the self’s’ ‘other’[26], rather than erasing it or pretending that it does not exist—insisting that it

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[25] Across the West, the absence of the mention of race usually means White; White acts as a universal transparent signifier when there is no mention of race. In this way, the absence of race in poetics and literature serves to ‘Otherize’ African descended people as well as all non-White people. Michael Morris in “Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity” explains how “Whiteness as the racial norm […] White normativity is not confined to explicitly racial issues. Whites are not just the racial norm. In many instances, they also serve as the cultural, political, economic, physical, and scientific norm” (Morris, “Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity” 950).
[26] ‘Other’ is not a stable term. What is other to one ‘Self’ is not necessarily ‘other’ to another ‘self’.

ought to be absent from poetics. African diasporic writers in Canada are writing from a place of 'strangeness', of non-normativity, of 'abjection'. Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' emerges out of her distinction between the semiotic and symbolic in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 17). Covino writes:

> Kristeva claims that language of the outgrowth of certain drives and desires that are somehow 'presymbolic' or might we say prerepresentational. These drives and desires are semiotic and their life exists in the place or space of the *chora*[27] .[…] The *chora* is the place out of which being develops. […]. The *chora* is thus related for Plato, as for Kristeva, to the maternal" (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 18).

As stated above, Kristeva defines the semiotic as "the matriarchal aspect of language that shows the speaker's inner drives and impulses […] The semiotic aspect is repressed not only by society but also by the patriarchal aspect of language that Kristeva calls the symbolic" (Sedehi, "*Beloved* and Julia Kristeva's The Semiotic and The Symbolic" 1492). In this way, the pre-symbolic or the pre-representational, as Covino rightly puts it, might be best thought of as synonymous with the semiotic, existing in the realm of the *chora*. In the *chora* 'being' is developed and nurtured; Philip's *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks,* elucidates the colonial horrors of being stripped of one's mother tongue, and the estrangement of the English language to African descended peoples. Kristeva's adaption of the *chora* serves as a mode of understanding the effects colonialism has on the language of diasporic Black people; the severing of African diasporic peoples from their native tongues creates creole languages-- as I mentioned earlier, a

[27] Kristeva "adapts the concept of the *chora* from Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue between Socrates and Timaeus about the nature of material existence where the *chora* is usually translated into English as receptacle (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 17).

disruption of the language of the colonizer. For Kristeva, the *chora* is related to the maternal, not unlike Philip's poetics on the mother tongue—the *chora* and the mother tongue represent the origins where being develops and is nurtured. Colonialism, however, caused a violent break between the peoples and their languages of origin, uprooting them from their cultures, and what Philip would metonymously call, their tongues. Note, by the time colonizers were fighting for Africa, African languages were already practiced, and their cultures were thriving. My association of the *chora* with African mother tongues is not to suggest that African languages (and peoples) needed order, but to posit that slavery and colonialism violently ruptured Africans from their own languages which resulted in a disunity with other Africans and continues to violate their sense of belonging in the West to this day. Lacan's "semiotic phase (same as the *chora*)," according to Covino, "is followed by a rupture, which Kristeva thinks of with reference to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage" (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 18). The rupture severs that which is developing in the *chora* from the semiotic (maternal structure) and results in the formation of the symbolic— "in which language points at persons and things and gives them public meaning" (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 18). In other words, the symbolic stage "imprints its constraints in a mediated form which organizes the *chora* not according to a law (a term we reserve for the symbolic), but through an *ordering*" (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 27). Similarly, in colonial Western societies, diasporic Africans come into significance, visibility, and belonging once they adopt the language and culture of the West, through systemic or social ordering (education, media, etc.), but it comes at a grave cost, a loss of identity. Furthermore, colonialism creates a dubious relationship between African diasporic

peoples and the West, Western culture and language; ultimately, what results is the relentless othering of diasporic African descended peoples.

For Kristeva, the symbolic is oppressive paternal order by which language and meaning is defined; it is considered proper, clean, and ordered. Resistance to the symbolic results in shame and disgust which Kristeva has called 'abject'. I use Kristeva's term 'abject' to further illustrate the unnaturalness of colonialism—the unnaturalness of both 'othering' entire communities and destroying cultures to replace them with another. The abject or intolerable body, for Kristeva, "leaks wastes and fluids in violation of the desire and hope for the 'clean' and 'proper' body" (Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* 17). Philip's *Zong!* explores the concept of *sanus* meaning clean, pointing out the irony of the supposed 'cleanliness' and 'sanity' of the seamen who drowned all of the Africans on the ship. The 'abject' is the obscuring of self and Other; I would expand Kristeva's argument by claiming that the 'abject' is more so the obscuring of order. Order includes the delineation of self and Other; however, order can take many more forms—linguistic order, order of societal virtues, justice, categories of meaning, etc. When Black diasporic peoples reject or revolt against the colonial order (for instance, speaking creole, slang, Ebonics, etc.) they are met with disgust, and even condemnation. Black diasporic peoples are made to feel 'abject' in Western societies because their bodies, language, cultures, subcultures, etc. do not align perfectly with the ideals of the West. The 'abjection' results in the forced erasure of people of colour in these societies. Black diasporic writers are discouraged from being present in their poetics in any way that fundamentally objects to the aesthetic rules maintained by White people who are, in the West, present everywhere. Embracing absence in poetics in a culture where those who are always already acknowledged, dominant, visible, etc. in society, is not the same for those who are not.

For Black diasporic peoples, absence in culture was not brought about by aesthetic exploration, but by human violence. Philip's imagery of the repeated act of violence of the cutting out of the tongue in her poetics illustrates the 'abjection' of colonialism. Abdelfattah Kilito writes in *The Tongue of Adam*, "The tongue is needed for life, like air—its absence means death. Life and survival: both pass through the tongue" (Kilito, *The Tongue of Adam*). As I stated earlier, 'self' and 'other' are unstable terms aesthetically because peoples of colour (and their modes of aesthetic, cultures, languages, being, etc.) are not perpetually 'other'. And, people who are not of colour are not 'non-other'; before any poet can minimalize the presence of the 'self' in their poetics, they must understand their positionality in the world and they ought to question why that prescription for 'good' poetry ought to apply for all writers. How can the postmodern aesthetic path to meta-existence be a tenable one when people are writing from different starting points of rootedness? Rather than being egocentric and self-interested, the presence of narratives in poetics carries with them histories that elucidate the development of theoretical and aesthetic ideas as being interconnected; in other words, they are directly informed by the historical, social, political, etc. As Jung writes, social process is the idea that "in the cosmos everything is connected to everything else or nothing exists in isolation, that coincides with the 'first law' of ecology. Not only is the aesthetic a discourse of the body, but also the body is our anchorage in the world" (Jung, "A Prolegomenon to Transversal Geophilosophy" 83). Adopting a mode of aesthetics that rejects narrative with regard to our understanding of the interconnectedness, or 'interbeing,' of Western and non-Western cultures as key to the development of critical theory and discourse results in historical and cultural erasure.

Afterword

When I first began this project, I was inspired by the works of Robin Blaser and NourbeSe Philip because of their keen attentiveness to their respective poetic processes. Seeing that their respective poetics and essays address the lyrical 'I' but from different points of view, I saw an opportunity to extract from the 'very particular' (the works of two poets in Canada), a much larger conversation about narrative voice, aesthetics, absence, presence and race. One aspect that I noticed in their poetics was their concern with the term 'image-nation'. I found that ultimately Robin Blaser's deconstructs the word 'imagination' as 'image-nation' to illustrate how the imagination can create nations of images, "bring nations together, horizons in one another's eyes at the ends of the world" (Blaser, *The Holy Forest* 149). NourbeSe Philip's term 'I-mage' in a similar way, draws attention to the images that emerge in poetics; however, Philip emphasizes the positionality of the person doing the imagining; in other words, she shows how the writer's geographical and historical context impacts the creative process and the creation itself; that is, Philip elucidates the relationship of the 'I' to the image, and by extension to the nation. The term 'identity poetics', used by some to describe poetics where the speaker's identity is observable, is rendered problematic at best, mainly because the term seems to refer only to poetics that refer to poems about the experiences of those who are not the default norm. As the thesis developed, I began to see the problems with the focus on absence in postmodern poetics; mainly that the terms presence and absence are contingent on a number of factors including the so-called 'Other', a term that is also unstable. My hope is that this thesis serves to elucidate the need for a closer look at how postmodernism's aims are called into question when writers are writing from different positions of rootedness, and history.

Appendix

An Orchestration of Scholarly Voices from across Canada

When I began this project, I knew that I wanted to incorporate, in a rather atypical fashion, the varied voices of Canadian scholars of different literary backgrounds. That is, I wanted to include a myriad of scholarly voices who I knew held opposing positions about the topics discussed in this paper. Because this project deals with the issue of the lyrical voice and personal narrative, I decided to conduct a series of interviews in the form of pre-written questionnaires and phone calls to emulate this project's theme of interconnectedness— to brings voices together, capturing a myriad of thoughts compiled in real time, elucidating the 'interbeing' of criticism and poetics across the globe. I decided to place these conversations at the end of the thesis as an Appendix because in my mind they act as expansions of the concerns I address in the body of my thesis. As a result, in this section I have situated myself as the prompter and facilitator of these conversations. My voice primarily emerges out of the questions I raise, rather than my own additional interjections to the scholars' positions. I hope that my orchestrating these scholarly contributions this way creates the illusion of closeness, of almost conversational interactions. A humble and giant thank you to all the scholars who contributed their brilliance to this project, who kindly took time out of their busy lives to speak with me on these topics. Biographical introductions have been borrowed from various University websites and other biographical websites and books. They are not original.

The Scholars

NourbeSe Philip:

M. NourbeSe Philip is a poet and writer and lawyer who lives in the City of Toronto. She was born in Tobago and now lives in Canada. In l968 Philip received her B.Sc. (Econ.) degree from the University of the West Indies. She completed a Master's degree in Political Science (1970) as well as a degree in law at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada (1973). She practiced law for seven years in Toronto, first at Parkdale Community Services and then in the partnership, Jemmott and Philip. During this time, she completed two books of poetry. In l983, she gave up the practice of law to devote more time to writing. Although primarily a poet, NourbeSe Philip also writes both fiction and non-fiction. She has published four books of poetry, including *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* – 1988 and has been the recipient of Canada Council awards, numerous Ontario Arts Council grants and was the recipient of a Toronto Arts Council award in l989, and has been awarded the $50K PEN/Nabakov award for achievement in International Literature.

Richard Douglass-Chin:

Richard Douglass-Chin was born in Trinidad and moved to Hamilton, Ontario when he was 6. He is an associate professor of American and postcolonial literature at the University of Windsor and specializes in African and Asian influences on Western transcendentalism, modernism and postmodernism. His publications include *Preacher Woman Sings the Blues*: *The Autobiographies of Nineteenth Century Evangelists*, which investigates the literary connections between contemporary African American female authors and their eighteenth and nineteenth-century

predecessors. He is a friend and scholar of NourbeSe Philip and authored, “Madness and Translation of the Bones-as-Text in M. NourbeSe Philip’s Experimental Zong!” (2017).

Katherine McKittrick:

Katherine McKittrick research domains are in the areas of Black studies, anti-colonial studies, cultural geographies and gender studies. Her research is interdisciplinary and attends to the links between epistemological narrative, liberation, and creative text. Katherine also researches the writings of Sylvia Wynter. She is a member of the Royal Society of Canada (College) and the American Academy of Arts and Science. McKittrick was the first scholar to put forth the interdisciplinary possibilities of Black and Black feminist geography with an emphasis on embodied, creative and intellectual spaces engendered in the diaspora. McKittrick’s scholarship and publications often explore NourbeSe Philip’s poetics.

Miriam Nichols:

Friend and chief editor of Robin Blaser’s, Nichols has published widely on Canadian and American poets with particular attention to the writings of Robin Blaser, authoring *Even on Sunday: Essays, Readings, and Archival Materials on the Poetry and Poetics of Robin Blaser* (2002); editions of Blaser’s Collected Poems and Collected Essays (two volumes, 2006); *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (2010), and The Astonishment Tapes (2015), an annotated edition of talks on poetry and autobiography which Blaser made in 1974, *and A Literary Biography of Robin Blaser: Mechanic of Splendor* (2019).

Ted Byrne:

Edward (Ted) Byrne was born in Hamilton, Ontario, and moved to Vancouver in the late 1960s. His earlier writing appeared in publications like *Canadian Forum* and the *Fiddlehead*, and he is

the author of *Aporia* (1989) and *Beautiful Lies* (1995) and the co-editor of *The Recovery of the Public World: Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser* (1999). Byrne earned a master's degree in comparative literature at University of British Columbia where he still teaches one class each term in the Humanities 101 Program.

Charles Bernstein:

Poet, essayist, theorist, and scholar Charles Bernstein was born in New York City in 1950. He is a foundational member and leading practitioner of Language poetry. Between 1978-1981, with fellow poet Bruce Andrews, he published L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, which ran 13 issues from February 1978 to October 1981. Bernstein took an Emily Dickenson course under Robin Blaser in Vancouver. Bernstein has published five collections of essays including *Pitch of Poetry* (Chicago, 2016), *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago, 1999), and *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984.* Bernstein has written essays on Blaser and wrote the *Afterword* to Blaser's *Holy Forest.*

Conversations

On the Subtlety of Presence and the Lyrical 'I'

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Miriam Nichols:

A central tenet to Blaser's poetic process was his hopes of eradicating the lyrical 'I' in his poetry. I interpret his fascination with Lacan's "mirror stage" to be his own aesthetic application of the psychoanalytic, where the small child see himself for the first time as not only subject but object; in the same way, for Blaser, the writer undergoes a poetic process where the subjective voice is evacuated from the "subject" of the poem and becomes a passive object. Why do you suppose Blaser was so interested in minimizing the presence of a "self" in his works.

Miriam Nichols:

"Eradicate" is a strong word. I don't think that Blaser ever tried to get rid of the self or the lyrical 'I'; he did try to situate it temporally (through the serial poem) and spatially (in the world). This is what love of the world meant to him, and he did love the world. He wondered at it. ☺ Dante was a prime model. Think about *The Divine Comedy*: it is the tale of a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Dante is a small figure in that vast cosmos. This goes back to Blaser's sense of the Other and others. The ego has to shrink if the world is to come forward.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to NourbeSe Philip:

As I've looked at some of your past interviews, recurring questions you have been asked have to do with your Blackness and the complexity of your poems, the very first question Lemonhound asked you for instance. I find the nature of these questions nothing short of abhorrent. However,

they may reveal something quite interesting. A central concern I address in this paper, and one you address in your essay "The Absence of Writing or How I became a spy" is the issue of the subjective voice, its impact on language and the images or "i-mages" as you have coined, that emerge as a result. In the essay, you posit that the "i-mages [...] speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates" (78). Turning back to the questions addressing Blackness and the complexity of your poems, what do you suppose makes White people want to impose on Black writers limiting parameters and limited audiences whereas they seem to give themselves permission to take up the space of "transcendence" and "objectivity" in their own writing?

NourbeSe Philip:

I'm tempted to answer the question by saying that I'm not really interested in what makes White people tick, so to speak? I don't know. Okay. So, let me expand that a bit. I think that part of the problem, part of the challenge for groups that are oppressed and marginalized is that their existence is tied up with understanding how the oppressor works. So, women instinctively learn, as they grow from girls into womanhood and so on, to read the gestures and signs that men make with the aim of protecting themselves, right? Because their survival depends on that. And sometimes this stuff is happening at a very subtle level—at the micro movements... what does that mean? Okay. So, if we bring it now to African descended people, as I like to refer to us as well, we have always had to concern ourselves with what the dominant culture is all about because our very survival depended on that.

So, the reason why I started in at that place where I said, you know, in a way that I really don't care is because we spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out White folk and why is

they're doing what they're doing. And, it's a pretty simple answer. They're doing what they are doing because they belong to dominant culture and everything is seen through the lens of their perception. So, they're not able, unless they do a lot of work to see work from another perspective, you know? So, in terms of *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks,* you refer to" The Absence of Writing"; when that book came out a lot of critics talked about it as being a postmodernist work. I could understand why they would say that, but I also said I don't have a problem with them thinking that or interpreting it in that way. But if they not understand the Caribbean as a postmodernist space that is antecedent to postmodernism, then they miss, they will miss I think the most essential part of what the text is all about.

And what I mean by that is, is that the Caribbean people code switch, for instance, in terms of language because you have to speak "proper English", at the vernacular or the patois or the demotic. And so, you would switch in one sentence, you could switch from one to the other. Fragmentation… I have argued that the Caribbean is a site of massive interruptions and as a result, fragmentations; the islands themselves are these little tiny fragments floating in the ocean. Yes. And so fragmentation which is also a part of postmodernism, collaging and that sort of thing… that's *very* much a part of part the Caribbean psyche, the way Caribbean people function and so on. So, the work is deeply rooted, I think, in what that [geographical] area is all about. I just mentioned a second ago about the massive interruptions, right? So, you have all these different discourses, you have a European discourse, you have the African discourse, you have the Indigenous discourse, you have the South Asian discourse— and all these discourses are kind of mashing up against each other like tectonic plates. Then these powerful historical, social, cultural eruptions, and both eruptions and irruptions. And so, the text *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* —the poems actually reflect an aspect of that history in the sense …that you

have all these massive interruptions. So, you have the discourse that's running right through the poems. You also the discourse of the legal edict, which is the European historical legacy. You have the discourse of education where there are multiple choice questions, you have the medical biological discourse by the scientists who are also racist and sexist and so on; all those discourses come together in that poem. So, I felt there's no logical linear way to read that poem. There's no logical linear way to read what has happened, what is happening. There's a sense in which if you took "Discourse on the Logic of Language," if you'd read that poem, you can begin anywhere. It doesn't have to begin at the beginning. And I'm not sure that that is right, but in terms of something that we're living with, it's almost as if there is no beginning; it doesn't matter where you begin because it seems to have played itself out in this way where –to go back to your own quote: Why do they give themselves permission to take up the space of transcendence objectivity? Yes? That is where the beginning is "supposed" to lie. The beginning is to lie with European culture, European history, European language. But to go back to that poem, the only positive thing happening in that poem is the mother who was glowing words into her daughter's mouth. And what I did by running it down the side of the page like that— you have to make an effort to read that story. You have to turn the book. There's a sense in which that story is not legible unless you make that effort. And this is why I said, now I understand why I said it, there's more beginning because there's a sense I which that is the beginning—Of our lives as whole people, but in order for that text to become readable, you have to make the effort to bring the book around to begin to read that story. So that's, that's how I would answer that first question.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Ted Byrne:

I can't help view Blaser's "Image Nations "as opening up a world of "imagination". Many of his poems are localized domestically, and then expand into a realm of the mythical, and there's an undeniable presence of classical allusions and of homoeroticism. Readers who come to Blaser's work with some biographical knowledge will undoubtedly be able to draw connections between the writer and the different voices that emerge in his poetic works. Yet, Blaser's own voice is very humble and muted in his poetry. You couldn't read "Image- Nations", let's say, and leave understanding everything about him as a person – which he would be happy about, of course. But why do you suppose Blaser, as opposed to Duncan or Spicer who seemed to inhabit a more grandiose mode of expression, let's say, wrote with such a subtlety of presence? Upon reading his collection of essays in The Fire, particularly "Stadium of the Mirror" and "The Practice of Outside", that this was a conscious decision on Blaser's part. Do you have any ideas as to why that might be?

Ted Byrne:

In the "biographies" section of the anthology *A Controversy of Poets* (ed. Paris Leary and Robt. Kelly, 1965), Blaser's only comment is (in quotes) "Always resist the temptation to make biography important." Interesting construction – is it an imperative sentence, or is the first person subject just elided, and who is speaking? Well (resorting to biography), he was the junior partner. Duncan was several years older and already semi-established and tended to assume the role of master. Spicer was Blaser's contemporary, but he was a much surlier character, also surrounded by a coterie of young disciples. They both conducted classes, outside the institution. Duncan's ego was heroic, elegiac, and his poetry involved pronouncements emanating from a prophetic position, a subject-supposed-to-know. This was another way of emptying out the self,

evacuating the subject. In this instance it is poetry speaking, or exhorting, like Blake, Whitman or Pound. There is a scriptural element, of a text received, like the Koran brought by Gabriel to the Temple Mount. I don't mean to reduce Duncan, whom I admire most – there's also a marvelous humor, a bright accidentality, an endearing domesticity in what he does. And his actual writing practice is very close to Blaser's, as is Spicer's. Blaser said that, for a long time, he believed that they wrote his poems for him. Spicer's absenting of the ego happens by way of what he calls "dictation", a multi-referential trope, gathering in Yeats's ghosts, Cocteau's Orpheus, surrealist automatic writing, and the perennial poetic conceit of unwonted, unanticipated inspiration. All of this matters only if poetry matters, if poetry is the deployment of an operational language, as Blaser argues, and puts into practice. He was not humble. He was quite capable of dressing up in a gown and conducting a marriage ceremony (Image-Nations 6 and 10), for example. His arrogance comes across in that serial poem interview, especially in the way he keeps interrupting Gladys Hindmarch. No, he wasn't humble, but poetry must be or it ceases to be poetry and becomes counsel and wisdom. Maybe this is a "first world problem" as they say. Maybe the function of lyric, of the poetry we're concerned with at the moment, is to defrock the pontifical ego. Maybe this emptying out created the gap which a resurgent identity poetics is rapidly refilling. This may be a benefit – to the oppressed, but not necessarily to poetry. All the better perhaps. This is how I might answer question 5, if I get that far, or still have the need to. Take, for example, the Duncan/Levertov Streit. Can we say who prevails? With Duncan, poetry prevails. But with Levertov, the anti-war movement prevails. No contest really.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Richard Douglass-Chin:

A major part of this project involves looking deeply at the respective poetic processes of Robin Blaser and NourbeSe Philip as a concretized mode of investigating larger issues such as, the role 'I' in poetics by people of colour and White people. A sentiment held by many postmodernist poets maintains that minimizing the presence of a lyrical voice, an identity, helps to bring the world forward. How might understanding one's identity, their own position in the world, and locating identity aesthetically in poetics actually serve to do just that – bring others forward?

Richard Douglass Chin:

Marjorie Perloff writes that "the critique of voice, self-presence, and authenticity. . . must be understood as part of the larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject, a critique that became prominent in the late sixties and reached its height in the U.S. a decade or so later when the Language movement was coming into its own" ("Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo," *Critical Inquiry,* p. 406-7). My response to Perloff's observation with relation to your question "how might understanding our own identity, our position in the world, and locating identity aesthetically in poetics actually serve to bring others forward" is twofold:

First, I'm weary of these "critique[s] of voice, self-presence and authenticity" among White theorists, White men and (less often) White women. The deafening silence (to quote Henry Louis Gates in *Signifyin(g) Monkey*),[28] the glaring absence of Black, Indigenous, and people of color from these deliberations conducted in such *White* spaces—deliberations that serve as *the* theorizations from which all 'others' must then come smacks of something I don't

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[28] Here Gates refers to the absence of Black voices in writing of the 18th century. See pp. 136 and 156.

like the taste of. Dare we speak of something so quotidian as "taste" in our theorizations? Well certainly Plato, Aristotle, Addison, Hume, Burke, and Kant did—though not in terms of the gustatory. But what is the relation here, of the "brute reality" (Edward Said, *Orientalism,* p. 5) of the gustatory vs. White intellectual abstractions of taste? What is the relation between the brute reality of things and their intellectual abstractions, in general? That's the question I seek to answer—as you say, how might understanding one's *identity, position in the world,* one's locating one's identity aesthetically in poetics actually serve to bring *humanity* (rather than 'others') forward? We are all 'others.' We are often 'other' to ourselves. In fact, our whole life-journeys are an attempt to understand that 'other' who is our self. I might answer your question with a question: why are theories of aesthetics so often couched in the language and spaces of White theorists? What happens when we open up the spaces to consider, for example, the fact that Chinese poets of the Tang dynasty (6180907 CE) wrote poems so perfectly devoid of the lyrical 'I' as to rival the work of the White L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets centuries later? Consider:

A Cold Evening's Feast at Zheng Ming Fu's

Lucky first snow-fall, one foot high

Ease begins a half-hour measure of midnight

Array mat, invite wine companion

Trim candle to a verse-measure

Warm by fragrant ashes of stove

Beautiful lute-strings, jade fingers

Drunk comes just then, wish recline

Not aware bright rooster calls.

-- Meng Haoran (689-740 CE)

https://chinatxt.sitehost.iu.edu/EAsia-survey/Tang_Poems.pdf

This is the poetry that so mesmerized Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot at the start of the 20th century as they strove to "make it new"—to develop what Eliot called the "objective correlative," and imagism. These ideas come straight out of Chinese and Japanese poetry and world views.

Or consider the Malian epic of Sundiata, told for centuries by West African bards, about the famed King. In epics, the epics of Homer and Virgil included, the bard functions as kind of poetic unifier of the people in their sense of a common origin. There is no "lyrical I" here, only a griot whose purpose is to tell the story of the people. The great Muslim historian Ibn Battuta wrote of the epic of Sundiata or Son Jara: "They stand in front of the sultan… and recite their poems. Their poems exhort the king to recall the good deeds of his predecessors and imitate them so that the memory of his good deeds will outlive him…. I was told that this practice is a very old custom amongst them prior to the introduction of Islam, and that they have kept it up" (Ibn Battuta in McKissack and McKissack, pp. 71). Epics present the world view and identity of a people, in the same way that L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry also presents a world view and identity, even as it purports *not* to—the world view and identity of predominantly White people in the latter half of the 20th century.

Second, I'm deeply cognizant of the fact that poststructuralism was born at the very moment that the two-thirds world sought to claim their independence from the shackles of colonialism, segregation, and domination at the hands of the Western powers. This is a fact very rarely stated. We may refer to Pal Ahluwalia's "Out of Africa: Poststructuralism's Postcolonial Roots," for a description of this connection.

L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets such as Blaser, as well as the poststructuralists, coming of age in the time of postcolonialism, were deeply influenced by the Asian, African and Caribbean currents of that historical moment, even as they neglect to mention this fact. Thus, they are obsessed with the "lyrical I," with reducing the weightiness of its Western presence in poetry. They neglect to mention that this project is good for *them,* but perhaps not necessary for their 'others.' Identity does not necessarily reside in the lyrical I. As Philip demonstrates in her astounding long-poem *Zong!*, the lyrical I need not be present. Hers is the disembodied voice of the seer/griot who represents an entire people—the West Africans lost in the slave trade. There is no I here:

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od s story . . . . (*Zong!* 158).

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Charles Bernstein:

That brings me to another question, I'm skipping over a couple because you've addressed quite a few of my concerns, and answered quite elaborately so that's, that's great. Just while you're there, I've written Blaser's poetic process that was just, what many scholars call the limitations of the lyrical I…

Charles Bernstein: I think he [Blaser] is very, he's a very powerful poet, but he doesn't do it in a conventional way. But if you compare him to the mainstream poets, then it's just off the wall. He shared that [minimalizing the presence of the 'I'] with his other new American poetry group, groups that, you know, were not interested in that kind of, of very self-centered lyric poetry that dominated in that 60's, in the 60's. I agree, with what you said in your letter; I think that's very much the spirit, what Blaser writes. But certainly, a new way of being human is that humanism can be specific. It has a specific history which means different things to different people. Because, you know, nowadays, people talk about the post human, too; though, I'm not necessarily that, you know… I wouldn't use those terms myself but you don't want to bracket the human. You know, a poet who I think relates most closely to what we've been talking about with Blaser is a man named Larry Eigner, E-I-G-N-E-R, who is the same age as Blaser. I don't know what Blaser's relation to Eigner is, I should, but Eigner also very influenced by Olson, but Eigner grew up in Swampscott Massachusetts, while Blaser grew up in Boston.

On Mythos and the Concrete (the body, the tactile, and the public world)

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Katherine McKittrick:

Language of the Black diaspora is wounded; what Philip's poetics suggest is a collaborative language. Like Sylvia Wynter, Philip suggests that the artist solders together self, flesh, physiology, and the word—bios-mythoi, cognition-neurology-creativity, phylogeny-ontogeny-sociogeny—to newly describe an ongoing, but hopeful, struggle (31). Here, the indexical, the measurable, the death-dealing workings of scientific racism might not be understood through a discourse that clings to the "rightness" of the "pure sciences"; instead, the cognitive rupture of linear phylogenic narratives unveils the ways in which creative narratives point to the neurological, flesh, blood, and bones of humanness as these biologics are entwined with a racially structured discourse of condemnation. (155, loc. 3693). What thoughts have you derived from the discourse of Black scholars on these topics, particularly with regard to the concepts of "rightness", "pure sciences" and "humanness"?

Katherine McKittrick

From her work on "DNA molecules at the heart of all life" to the ecologies moving through her poetry cycle Zong! she clearly employs multimodal and interdisciplinary knowledge systems to interrupt prevailing positivist knowledge systems. Her work with narratives of science are studied interrogations that explode the insufferable human wreckage that is, in part, done through the coloniality of scientific racism. Philip shows, like many other Black creatives, that poetry conditions the natural sciences—which is the direction both Aimé Césaire and Sylvia Wynter as us to think about (the latter through her analysis of Césaire as well as her unique concept of bios-

mythois, the former through his essay "Poetry and Knowledge"). In my reading, Philip writes science as a brutal system of exclusion that opens up pathways for her to rewrite Blackness outside scientific racism. Remember that her beautiful book of poems *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks* cannot be read, fully, without paying attention to dream-skin (31). I mean, think of it: dream-skin. What does that give us!? It poetically writes what we are as a species physiologically (flesh/water/keratinocytes/tissue) that requires and holds on to and engenders a realm of unwakefulness or disassociation—the dream. And then we can take this pairing (dream-skin, unwakefulness-physiology) and tether it to neurobiology (dream, brainwaves) and other embodied processes that come with unwakefulness. This kind of complexity, the poetics of bios-mythois, unwrites or rewrites or rethinks enfleshment outside scientific racism. Across her creative works and essays, Philip imagines a clear suturing of biology (skin) and narrative (dream); she produces a poetic study of Blackness and Back poetics without dwelling on biological determinism. Imagine that. Dream-skin. Second, and Philip's work and words have the capacity to move us; her interlocutors, her readers, her listeners, are invited to read, hear, and therefore affectively responding to her writing. In her work, in poetry, we are not asked to passively consume the text. We are invited into the text, and as we inhabit the text we feel and respond to its aesthetics (form, sound, font, pause, stanza, sound, form, punctuation, stop). Notably, Philip often asks that Zong! be read aloud and that multiple people participate and co-read the poetry-cycle with her. This insistence, that we collaboratively live with, inhabit, speak and tell the story of Black loss does something to us physiologically—or at least it does something to me. It is a moment of difficult and relational storytelling and it is a moment where the story, the poem, are necessarily embodied.

Serena to NourbeSe Philip:

She tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks (1989) conducts a beautiful and painful investigation into the horrors and lasting spiritual pain of the colonizing aspects of the English language; that is, even the trepidation in the words "she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks" speaks to the anguish and fear that result from speaking a language that has been weaponized against Black people, and yet, as colonized people, we are somewhat forced to speak out our pain through words that are in a way, strange to us. I'm reminded of the powerful recurring words, "withered" (66) "petrified" (66) and "loss" (66) in the poem. I was drawn to the line "the body should speak" and have read it, perhaps erroneously, as a response to the violence of colonial Anglo-Saxon English, suggesting that spirituality, memory and truth can be found in the body, in the "smallest cell" (41) as you have put it. Is memory being in the body merely a tragedy, would you say? Or might there be liberation found in the Black body, in the anatomic particles that house our deepest memories? Might we be "found" let's say, in the spiritual, rather than the linguistic? Is this perhaps, one of the aims of Zong? And how is the spiritual linked to the linguistic?

NourbeSe Philip:

I think, I believe that for us, African descended peoples, also Black in terms of a certain political struggle and history… I believe that our bodies actually have become the repository of so much that we have "forgotten" or so much that we "un-remember"; maybe that's a better way to put it because I think our bodies remember. You know, in that poem "Universal Grammar", the question is if the smallest cell remembers, how do we lose a language? And I fervently and deeply believe that our cells remember. And part of our healing is, is trying to move closer from

the “un” to actually remembering, from the un- remembering to remembering. I think I see as a kind of peeling back a sort of rolling back off the layers of forgetting that we have been layered with, you know? For instance, I'll give you, I'm a tell you this little anecdote, there was a wonderful Caribbean academic Rex Nettleford. He was a road scholar he's passed away now. And he was also a dancer. In one of his articles, he wrote something to the effect that when the slave was dancing, when the enslaved was dancing, he was dancing for himself or herself; he wasn’t dancing for the master or anyone else. And I think it's that image that I remember when I read that many years ago. I was very taken with it because it really says something about where our memories are lodged, you know? But you’re asking if memory is found in the spiritual, rather than the linguistic?

Serena to NourbeSe Philip:

Well, wasn’t quite sure of when we say our memories are lodged in our bodies –what we mean; I think I'm extracting from this idea, a spiritual interpretation; but I'm realizing, just listening to you that, anatomically we do have a system of memories that obviously are physically embedded. Right. So, with regard to the linguistic, I’m thinking there about your poetics specifically, not so much in the performative sense, but just the words on the page, and the gaps that you talk about and fragmentation, both in the spaces on the page, but also the grammatical fragmentation --all of that seems to be recovering something, a trauma.

NourbeSe Philip:

The first thing I want to say is that I see, again, that European thought has made the split between mind and body: “I think, therefore, I am”. When I think of ‘body’, I'm also thinking of the ‘brain’ which is the engine that the generates the mind. So, there is a link to the body. And I think that split between mind and body beginning with Descartes has really had an indelible effect on the world. So that's one aspect in terms of spiritual linguistics that I want to address about language, but the other thing that I want to talk about—you know, they talk about genetic memories, right? Scientists did research with women who had been in, I believe world war one or two, I'm not sure one of European Wars, and found that children manifest that certain physical characteristics that could only have come from the fact that their mothers had experienced something. I don't know if you know the term it's called ‘epigenetic memory’. The actual genes, but it's almost like the genes have a memory. Right. So, there's that also, I think we also have to think about linguistics, which is what's in the subject in English language, which is very significant for me. Again, language was so fraught with so many outcomes— negative and positive; you have to speak properly, if you wanted a chance of having a job or getting into certain school and so on. But what is interesting is that what you have in, in all the places, one of the things I've argued in one of the essays is that wherever you have a European language coming together with an African language, whatever that African language is, you have a certain kind of kinetic energy that is produced. And so, I think the descendants of the enslaved and the slaves themselves did what they could do which is try and speak this language, but also marry it or link it to their own speech pattern. So,you have wonderful creoles, you have Jamaican Patois and things like that. You know, but it's really important again, to come back to this issue of the

body and music and culture non-linguistic manifestations of culture. Black folk did not have to prove their equality in their music or their cultural practices. Language was the arena in which they had to prove that they were equal. If you control the language, then you could get a good education and so on, you see what I'm saying? Language is the linchpin, you know? I grew up in a household where my father was a teacher and there was bad English and good English; good English was the Queen's English. Language is very, for me, is potent. And if, you know Kamau Brathwaite's work, the late Barbadian poet, he said, "we don't speak in iambic pentameters". Speech is like a machine gun. Right? And again, what it's trying to suggest is it's the sort of revolution and revolt and rebellion that is locked in the speech itself. And where does that speech come from? It comes from this combination of English or French and the African, whether it be Yoruba or a mix of them. When you say "we" what do you mean?

Serena Klumpenhouwer to NourbeSe Philip:

When I say "we" I'm thinking of Black people who are who are of the diaspora who are descendants of Africa. There's a sense of, and I, I certainly feel it myself having been raised in a White Dutch family, a sense of loss, a sense of an un-rootedness and a desperation for it.

NourbeSe Philip:

I would say that we have found it in the entire spectrum, in the spiritual development, as well as the linguistic; I mean, just think Jamaican patois. The Tobago patois is close to the Jamaican vernacular. If you listen, listen to that language and I see all those languages, right. Because it's where people do some of the most important work, loving, hating…loving their partners, loving their spouses, loving their children—people live in language. And so, when you analyze the way

many people have done, the structure of some of those patios, there are African structures there. Jamaicans have a way of saying, “hurry, go, come bring it”, right? There are four verbs linked together. And apparently that is very much linked to one of the African tongues-- putting a number of verbs together and so on. You know? So, I think that we are to be found in everything we do, both in the linguistic and the spiritual.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Miriam Nichols:

Robin Blaser's wrote very much about the Lacanian 'Other' and the 'Outside'; the terms never quite leave his poetic discourse. In your new Biography A Literary Biography of Robin Blaser: A Mechanic of Splendour, particularly chapter "Cher Maitre" you provide an outline of the philosophers whose usage of the terms 'Other' and 'Outside' and Blaser's abstraction of these terms. Why do you think Blaser was so captivated by those two ideas?

Miriam Nichols:

First, I don't think that Robin's use of the words 'Other' and 'Outside' is exclusively Lacanian. Robin read widely in philosophy and in the psychoanalytical "classics," but he always pulled his readings onto poetic territory, not the reverse—meaning that he did defer to philosophy or psychoanalysis on poetics. He was interested in fellow travelers, not masters from other disciplines, and he always considered poetry its own discourse, separate from philosophy or the social sciences and legitimate in its own right. We don't say that a chemist is wrong because she doesn't sound like a biologist.

The terms 'Other' and 'Outside' come out of Blaser's effort to secularize the sacred as the sacred had come to him through Catholicism in his adolescence. Like the pagan myths, Catholicism anthropomorphizes the divine; Robin worked to de-anthropomorphize it (see the

Boston chapter of the biography, "The Boston Poems"). Nature, too, comes in here. The traditional view of nature is anthropomorphic (check out Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* for a contemporary effort to de-anthropomorphize nature).

The point of de-anthropomorphization is to better situate humanity here on earth. If, with Nietzsche, we say that God is dead, then it is not such a big step to say that humanity is all. Otherness becomes mystery becomes mystification, to be debunked. Psychology, political science, sociology and the philosophies of language contribute to this step, because they tell us that the world is always mediated through the various means by which we apprehend it. How, then, could we possibly talk about an 'Other' or 'Outside' to our own psychological apparatus except as a statement of faith or (to recall the deconstructionists), an inverted metaphysics of presence? Such talk must surely be religious. Blaser disagreed. He thought that the situating of the world in the human was dangerous because it denied the possibility of relationships with what is really not ourselves (see "Image-Nation 9"). The social sciences situate the world in the human psyche or society or language or economic class; poetry situates the human in the world. This is also an important difference between philosophy and poetry. If there is only the human, the world will look just like us. It may have God or gods or tree spirits or the Great Void (absence that is the flip side of presence) or science or none of the above, but it will still be us. Yet the world is not us; it doesn't look like us or perceive like us. I'm talking, of course, from a secular point of view. When the Other loses anthropomorphic form, it becomes much stranger than it is in the world's myths and religions. The importance of this imaginative exercise is to maintain a relationship with what is not-I. A relationship (rather than a conquest or a denial) implies some degree of respect, and I know I don't have to tell you how badly humanity has handled that one historically. There is an environmental side to this as well as a social one in the story of 'others' as well as the Other.

In the “Metaphysics of Light” section of the *Astonishment Tapes* Blaser does say that he tends to turn the world into God. Try it as a thought experiment with the poetry. The “Other” capitalized, then, is all that we can’t think or haven’t yet thought or won’t think. Foucault’s “unthought” (from *The Order of Things*) is a better gloss than Lacan’s “Other.” Lacan does come into “The Stadium of the Mirror,” but please note that Blaser says that the phrase (“stadium of the mirror”) he takes for the metaphor it offers. The image of the “stadium” goes back to “The Fire” essay, where it is Frances Yates’s memory theatre in *The Art of Memory* that he has in mind (more on the memory theatre below).

The term ‘Outside’ comes into play in Blaser’s Jack Spicer essay, “The Practice of Outside” where Blaser refers to Spicer’s romancing of the unknown and his poetics of dictation (poetry coming to the poet from some unknown, outside source). Spicer liked to talk about the Martians dictating poetry or Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus*, the film in which a car radio broadcasts messages from the Underworld. His first Vancouver lecture really elaborates on the ‘Outside’ (*The House That Jack Built*, ed. Peter Gizzi, pp. 6-7 in particular). I think this Spicer lecture would be quite helpful with the term. It isn’t that long (44 pages). And then, of course, Blaser’s “The Practice of Outside.”

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Ted Byrne:

In your introduction to The Recovery of the Public World, you write “This book has many centers… I wondered for a long time if these seemingly discordant voices could compose themselves into a book at all”. Obviously you were referring to the multitude of scholars whose essays compiled the text, but I found how you phrased this very interesting as it calls to question the issue of voice and agency with regard to the poetic process. What do you make of Blaser’s

fascination with the term "image-nation" and minimizing the presence of a subjective voice, per say, in his poetics?

Ted Byrne:

My fascination has always been with the early serial poems – *Cups*, *The Moth Poem*, *Les Chimères*, etc. *Image-Nations 1 – 12* was published in 1974. When they were again published in *The Holy Forest*, in 1991, it became apparent that the first four were contemporary with *Les Chimères* and have the appearance of another set, another serial on the same model. Something changed at that point. Blaser is quite conscious of this. He addresses this change in "The Stadium of the Mirror". From this point on, the Image-Nations become, in large part, a treatise on method, a reading, a series of intertexts and translations – I refer to all the citations, including a "version" of Artaud in "Image-Nation 7 (l'air". Even the open bracket is a citation, of Olson, the master of the glib, but disturbing, directive on syntax and image. Blaser explicitly references this critique toward the beginning of "The Stadium of the Mirror". Olson famously said that Blaser could be trusted with image but not with syntax. Blaser, impressionable as he was, took this very much to heart. He says that he sees "the first 5 poems poised in a disorder – syntactically incomplete." He wants to bring forward their "troublesomeness". "Image-Nation 5" is an "erasure". Now, I think that Olson was wrong. Although there are strong images in these poems, their real strength is in their syntax. Syntax, Blaser says, is the "order of a man's words". (The use of the male-gendered terms throughout this and other early works, cannot be dismissed as innocently inclusive of women – his use of Dickinson and H.D., for instance, could be used to forward such a defense – but is rather both an instance of exactly how language is "older and other" than we are, is the Other, the treasury of signifiers, the master, and also a reflection of the

condition of young men in the post-war periods, with their troubled "manhood" – read Leiris's *Manhood* (*L'âge d'homme*), urged on me by Blaser, for example, or Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*.) The peculiarity of Blaser's images in the early serials is that they do not find a concrete representation in the mind of the reader. They are usually as unanchored as the words in their syntactic floating. This is all very Mallarméan, and consciously so. Take, for example, "Image-Nation 3 (substance". Image: "…the sense / of the word which draws amor / in a body his arrows leafless, shining / steel…" Arrows (eros) with leaves, like branches, would be a concrete image that could find a place in the internal sense of *imaginatio*, and hence in *memoria*. Leafless arrows are just arrows (eros), hardly even metaphorical. Syntax: "…his meaning in that meeting of / hands, tastes, bitter / filling fountain…" Here what is unanchored, syntactically, is the word "tastes". The (erotic) meeting of hands, in the external sense of touch and taste (kiss)…but we have to stop on "tastes", given the interruptive and linking commas: "meeting of…tastes" or "tastes…bitter". There is an irreconcilable oscillation. We're held in that oscillation, hovering there forever, in that sweet (kiss), that bitterness (amor, amer). Both of these examples of image-work and wordplay are accomplished by way of syntax, with which Blaser can be fully trusted.

"Image-Nation" is a pretty banal pun, isn't it? I have a picture of Mr. I. Magination somewhere (an early tv children's show, like "Howdy Doody"). Mr. I. Magination is explaining that there are nations, like America, or England, but there's also the imagi-nation, presumably a land for children. Blaser's "fascination" with this term points in two directions. First of all there's the birth (nation) of image, which is not the conjuring of the unknown (fantasy), but the stadium (*stade*) of our coming into being as subjects, always through the image of an other, in the mirror stage (*stade*). Blaser is quite conscious of "*l'imaginaire*", through Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, but

also, importantly, through Lacan, whom he got through Anthony Wilden. The I is instantiated in a process of wanting oneself to be whole, like the image of the other in the mirror (the *Ideal Ich*), like the image of oneself with the (m)other in the mirror. The I is an other (the *Je est un autre* of Rimbaud – cited incorrectly as *Je suis un autre* in that interview I sent you, which is useful momentarily on the serial poem, but which is also an embarrassment, Robin being so out of control in those years – the very early seventies, which is to say the sixties [the date could be established exactly through the reference made to a recent edition of *The Georgia Straight* which printed Ginsberg's poem "Please Master"]). Secondly, there's a gesture towards community, of world-making, always suspect I would say, like that amazing show last night of solidarity for the WHO. God damn, now we're imaging a world nation of generous corporations, helping hands, of all of us "in this together", including those who brought us to this awful pass. What an astonishing time of love and courage. Suddenly, we have a guaranteed income, enough beds for the sick and homeless, a safe supply of drugs for addicts, the forgiving of debt, and so on. Blaser's gesture is more modest, of course, offering a gathering of companions, a community of poetry. But his emptying out of the self ("the subjective voice" you say), his *kenosis*, is also gathering in of others, which betrays this avowed emptying. He apparently sees this himself, given that he conscientiously and thoroughly erases the personal when he rewrites these poems (especially 5 and 12) for publication in *The Holy Forest.* I don't think that he was simply unfriending his companions from these salad years, but rather being true to his belief that this is not a poetry of the lyric self, not a self-aggrandizement, an inflation of the ego, an assumption of the master's discourse.

Interview with Charles Bernstein:

(Beginning with a chat on Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher who had a great influence on Robin Blaser.)

BERNSTEIN: Actually, Hannah Arendt was, is a much, much bigger presence now among people interested in contemporary philosophy and social theory.

SERENA: Wasn't she always ...?

BERNSTEIN: She was huge, you know, with the book about the Nuremburg Trials. But then, because that was a real controversial thing; it was in the New Yorker, but then there was a time when she…there wasn't so much attention to her. It relates to the questions that you're interested in, though, as to what, what he's imagining as the world, what is the world that's not centered on the choices and the preferences of the individual.

SERENA: That's exactly what I was going to ask, essentially what I was going to ask you, yes. And then what would be the role of the poet's imagination in a concretized physical world? And you can rely upon, sort of, your interactions of Blaser, your readings of his poetry, or even yourself, with that in mind, what would sort of be the role of the poet in the public world when we're talking about, you know, I guess, I don't want to say, mobilizing, you could say mobilizing imaginations, or mobilizing different voices?

BERNSTEIN: There's a quote that I always used, that the point isn't to express imagination but to mobilize imagination, I've always loved that, mobilizing imagination.

SERENA: Yes, I got that from reading your works.

BERNSTEIN: Is that really? I mean that really gets to the distinction that I'm talking about, so you're right to bring that up. You know, the world of the poet very well is to roll, R-O-L-L, maybe rock and roll, roll with the punches is another thing I would say. I think that there are

multiple roles, the problem is that, the idea that there would be a single role for poetry. Which, you know, that's the problem, to resist the idea that there is a single role for poetry, any more that there is any single roll of thought or for art or for music. But, because musicians for example do many, many different things, different contexts, different, you know, you can't compare [36:00] apples, you can't compare musicians across the board. I think that Robin, the idea of the public role is very interesting, it's very different from mine, because he was so recessive. So I think there that you get an answer when he responds to, did you have a look at Astonishment?

SERENA: The Astonishment tapes? Yes.

BERNSTEIN: You really get a sense. But I mean, for reasons that he describes there, that Nichols describes in her autobiography, I mean he was not a public figure, he backed away from the public in a conventional sense. Even as he was most interested in the concept of public space, the aesthetics of poetics, it's an interesting aspect. I mean, people might say that Canadians, which I guess he is, are less public than Americans, in a way that would make Blaser more Canadian. You know, that concept of modesty or minor key, underplaying things.

On Aesthetics of Absence and Race

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Richard Douglass-Chin:

In your article, "Finding the Way: Chuang Hua's Crossings and Chinese Literary Tradition", you present a complex prismatic argument that defines "The Way" as an "affirmation (ken) and a negation (fei), a being and a Non-Being […]. Interestingly, the Chinese word "ken" also suggests "rootedness" while "fei" suggests "flight" or "unrootedness" (Chin-Douglass 56). Chuang Hua's Crossings as well as NourbeSe's poetics, and the aesthetics of many people of colour across the West, are concerned with rootedness and place. Another concern in this paper is of 'presence' as part of poetics with regard to the postmodern preference of absence to presence; a poet's absence serves as an aesthetic vessel by which the writer intentionally enters 'non-being' to eventually access what I would call 'meta-being', or what Blaser might call the 'Real', a term he borrows and adapts from Jacques Lacan. But one might say it is more attractive to enter non-being in your poetics when your colonial identity establishes you as being rooted already. Is the postmodern aesthetic path to meta-existence a tenable one when people are writing from different starting points of rootedness?

Richard Douglass-Chin:

Yes, we must first experience a rootedness in identity and place before we have the privilege of vacating that identity, that place, in favor of unrootedness, non-being, meta-being, or the Real in Lacan's and Blaser's terms. That said, the *Tao de Ching* (written in the 6th century BCE) begins: "Dao ken dao fei chang dao"-- The way that can be followed [wayed] is not the enduring [Real?]

way. For the Chinese, non-being is enlightenment. Non being is registered here in terms of "fei" or unrootedness; this is not the unrootedness of instability or self-doubt, but rather the opposite: it is the unrootedness of s/he who no longer needs stability or selfhood at all. This is the unrootedness of what the Western philosopher Schopenhauer mis-took for "nothingness." As Abelson argues, "Schopenhauer often put emphasis on Buddhism's pessimistic outlook on earthly existence, but compared to his world view, which is very severe, Buddhism seems almost cheerful" ("Schopenhauer and Buddhism, 255). Unrootedness is not nothingness. It is everything-ness. Schopenhauer's misapprehension of an Eastern philosophy is perhaps symptomatic of the Western propensity to borrow non-Western modes of thinking and aesthetics, and in that borrowing, significantly alter the Eastern, African, and Indigenous meanings.

As Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, there is a world in a piece of paper—the paper that we see before us and think of as a concept is in reality the result and a compendium of the sun and rain that helped grow the tree, the bark, the labor involved in cutting the tree, processing the pulp, cutting the strips, etc. that contributed to the final product of the paper. For Buddhism, nonbeing, the Real, unrootedness have nothing at all to do with the abstract, or with absence. In fact, they have everything to do with *presence.*

In the 1960s and 1970s Western philosophers such as Derrida became fixated on the rather Eastern idea of no-origins (as expounded, for example, by Thich Nhat Hanh in his deconstruction of the concept "paper"), which Derrida then extended to his notions of *absence* and deferral (différence) over and against a "metaphysics of presence" as what determines being. Derrida perfected his theory in the period during which Buddhism first began to come to the West in a big way, in the persons of two Tibetan monks: Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche fled Tibet for India and England in 1963 and

came to America in 1970 where he founded the Naropa Institute in Colorado in 1974. Here Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Robert Creely, Robin Blaser, Charles Olson, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and others all came at various times.
https://www.naropa.edu/academics/jks/publications/notenoughnight/fall-05/archive-project-discussion%20.php and http://explore.naropa.edu/kerouac-school/alumni.php
The 14th Dali Lama, Tenzin Gyatso fled Tibet for India in 1959 and developed a near-cult following in the West during the early 1970s and after. In fact, in terms of the "brute reality" of events, the Dalai Lama's administration has acknowledged that during the 1960s, it received $1.7 million per year from American CIA to support anti-China initiatives in support of Tibet ("World News Briefs," *The New York Times,* 1998 https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/02/world/world-news-briefs-dalai-lama-group-says-it-got-money-from-cia.html) In 1973, "eleven European countries were visited by the Tibetan leader. New friendships were built, the fate of Tibet was brought into the consciousness of people who may never have heard the word before, the interest in the country and its people. . . . [In 1978 the] Dalai Lama came [to America] in response to invitations given him by religious groups, universities, cultural societies. . . . A look at the schedule for the seven-week tour reveals visits to no less than seventeen universities and colleges. . ." ("The Dalai Lama and America," Jan Andeersson, *The Tibet Journal*, Spring/Summer 1980, Vol. 5, No. 1/2, pp. 50-51).

In Abstracting Buddhist ideas of no-origin from, well, their Buddhist origins, Derrida then went on to challenge attempts to physically and geographically locate his own origins in place and time:

NO [an interviewer]: Just now you spoke about Algeria, where it all began for you. . .

JD: Ah, you want me to tell you things like 'I-was-born-in-El-Biar-in-the-suburbs-of-

Algiers-in-a-petit-bourgeois-Jewish-family-which-was-assimilated-but. . .' Is this really necessary?

NO: How old were you when you left Algeria?

JD: Please, now. . . I came to France when I was nineteen. . .

(Pal Ahluwalia, "Out of Africa: Poststructuralism's Colonial Roots," 143).

Ultimately as writers engaging in aesthetics, we cannot *not* acknowledge our rootedness *somewhere.* Evidence of that rootedness emerges in our metaphors, our tropes, our theoretical references and our discussions about who our influences were. If they were all White and male and European, that says something about your rootedness, regardless of how unrooted you profess to be. If you want to *abstract* your origins, your roots, from your theory, well, you can do that, but (French) intellectual abstraction is not the same as rootlessness or nothingness. Nothingness is everythingness. Which is the ultimate presence. It is only out of an intricate and delicate interplay or *balance* between being and nothingness, presence and absence, rootedness and rootlessness, that we as poets and theorists of whatever culture may find the way.

Blaser and his peers of the 1960s and 1970s were preoccupied by these ideas of being and non-being, presence and absence, the Real—very Buddhist concepts and very popular in the West at that time, as well as was the postcolonial movement challenging the former colonial masters. Blaser, Duncan, Spicer, et al are all White men writing in this period, but mainly rooting themselves in their Western predecessors; you see this in the names they mention—Lacan, Nerval, Dante, etc. NourbeSe Philip finds her roots in *both* Western and African antecedents. You can see it in her poetry, for example, in the way she uses Greek myth or the

work of Robert Browning in *she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks.* Or the way she references Rastafarianism or the Yoruba pantheon of deities. It seems to me that Philip explicitly works to establish that intricate balance in ways that Blaser and company don't. But we are all writing from points of rootedness in our search for un-rootedness, the Tao, the Way, the Real. It's just that this seems more evident and explicit in some works (e.g. the postcolonial poets such as Philip) than in others.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Miriam Nichols:

As a black woman, I have been drawn perhaps more than many of Blaser's readers, to his "Otherness" as a gay male writer. I was happy to see even some small presence of homoeroticism in his poetry, in "Cups" for instance, but he really strives to transcend the boundaries of a subjective presence in his works. Do you think this is a tenable aspiration?

Miriam Nichols:

Well, I don't think Robin does transcend a subjective presence or pretend to. He situates the "I" among others and in relation to the Other. Have a look at the first two pages of "The Irreparable" (pp. 98–99 in *The Fire*), where he talks about parataxis: "The marvel of our delicate, pronominal *I* needs also to be honored. It stands or sleeps alongside things, in fact, alongside the whole world of its garnering" (98). I'm with Robin on this point: one doesn't escape subjectivity, but one can cut it down to size. Strictly speaking, we can't get away from anthropomorphism either, but we can do something about anthropocentrism.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Katherine McKittrick:

What are the scholarly challenges revealed when we notice connections between black creative texts and scientific knowledge? (150, loc. 3594 of On Being Human as Praxis). To reveal "a new contestatory image of the human" and therefore disclose otherwise unacknowledged political and intellectual narratives that differently imagine the scientific workings of emancipatory knowledge" (150). What do you make of Black intellectuals and Black writers privileging presence and the body over absence and the mythical?

Katherine McKittrick:

Black scholars have always worked with multimodal and interdisciplinary texts and ideas. If we read across black studies, from slave narratives to the present, we notice that black intellectuals thread together the arts, the sciences, and the creative, history, sociology, music, and math, ecology, architecture, dance, and economics. In bringing together multiple sets of ideas these thinkers and artists challenge the hierarchical organizing of knowledge. In some instances—as in Sylvia Wynter's work, as well as her analyses of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire—they pair the sciences with poetics. This pairing (what Sylvia Wynter calls bios-mythois), asks that we think relationally about humanity and the figure of the human; this allows us to glean how the corporeal—the body—is not purely biological; the body, the very biologics of our flesh, is produced through story-and-physiology. Put otherwise, biology is narrated (we tell stories about what biology is, we tell and retell each other biology is natural) and stories are biologic (we feel stories, stories move us physiologically and affectively). This pairing, this simultaneity, challenges the fictive narratives such as "survival of the fittest" (and IQ scores, craniology, and so on), because it exposes how we narrativize the sciences (we make science what it is—biology

is not purely biological because “purely biological” is a narrative account describing biology!). At the same time, the pairing, the simultaneity of biology and narration, displaces scientific racism without abandoning biology; it removes the idea that some people (e.g. white) are more evolved than others (e.g. black) because it messes with the teleological hierarchy of Darwinian thought while also honouring that we are flesh and blood and feeling (biological) beings. This is a rewriting of scientific knowledge that offers, at least momentarily, relief from prevailing systems of knowledge that rely on the racist (seemingly natural) hierarchical categorization of humans.

On Mediating between self and Other: The 'Real' path to Understanding

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Ted Byrne:

Considering some of the items discussed, in 2020, how would you define the poet's role in public society?

Ted Byrne:

In Godard's great film *La Chinoise*, there is a scene where one of the Maoist students approaches a blackboard full of names of writers and slowly erases them one by one, until only one name remains. Bertolt Brecht. Brecht has always been the (inimitable) paradigm for me. He manages to write poems that are not calls to action, but parables that leave no doubt what is to be done. And he does this without, for the most part, writing pure propaganda (except, for example, "Ode to Stalin"). He does it, one might say, through acts of translation, through his use of the Bible, classical Chinese poetry, the newspaper, Shakespeare, the language of the streets. Here's what he has to say about Mallarmé:

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>
> olsoni the bookseller brings along a literary historian who is working on mallarmé. he shows some of the famous poems which are attacked or worshipped because they 'have no meaning'. of course, they have meaning, even if it is very unstable. the way he dislocates normal connections produces little shocks, that's all. it is a mistake on mallarmé's part to mix the words (the seeds of association) too evenly too often, with respect to abstract and concrete. his fear of the banal often results in banalities. he constantly has to accept that certain words or groups of words will be understood in

> concrete terms, but then he demands in other cases in the same stanza that the readers should not do this. i tried to explain to them how the lyric can be switched over to the gestic. one problem in this undertaking is that the new gests are not theatrical enough (nor carefully enough chosen). then the fall of the drapery is missing – difficult to achieve in the case of overalls.
>
> – from Bertolt Brecht's journal (my translation)

Interview with Charles Bernstein on the role of the 'Outside' in Blaser's Poetics'

BERNSTEIN: Complicated issues. It depends of whether you would value that as positively or negatively, is that, but you cross the fear of poetics, right, it's the passivity versus activity. You follow what I'm saying without being more explicit, right?

SERENA: I think so, but—

BERNSTEIN: I'm just talking about this passivity versus activity, control, the idea of letting somebody do something to you rather than being in control.

SERENA: I see.

BERNSTEIN: That is a very non heteronormative way of being. I think there are ways that you can think of what Robin is talking about there, on those lines, and you know, that's an interesting, you know. That's something you should think about the imaginary … in the Lacanian sense, what is going on, you know, where is the 'self'?

SERENA: Yes.

BERNSTEIN: Are you obliterated in that situation? Probably not, I would say.

SERENA: I suppose not.

BERNSTEIN: I think it just…it suggests a tangle between the 'self' and the 'outside'…completely disintegrated the self.

Interview with NourbeSe Philip:

Serena Klumpenhouwer: *I've interviewed another scholar named Ted Byrne, he's a Blaser scholar, and he says that identity poetics are rapidly filling the space, and that it may be good for the oppressed but he's not sure if it is good for poetry. He spoke about poetry becoming like a 'counsel' which he says is not poetry. It's interesting when we talk about getting healing from art and from poetry… with the postmodernists, there seems to be a disdain for telling our stories in poetry. I'm reminded of the top of our discussion… I loved when you said you don't care about what makes White people tick, ha-ha. But, I'm also mindful of the fact that there's this great tradition; it seems unless we reconcile with this tradition of poesis that the contemporary poets have defined quite rigidly, without reconciling with that there is no space for us.*

NourbeSe Philip:

The lyric voice. I remember writing on this desire or need to destroy the lyric voice. And the reason why that became important to me was because that was the poetry that was imposed on us in the Caribbean. White and male; we were supposed to understand daffodils never having seen daffodils, write dissertations on these phenomena. What does a little Black child in Port of Spain know about that, you know? And your future depended on these things. To go back to the idea of Eliot who felt that you had to remove all the extraneous stuff in the poem, so that anybody anywhere could—the objective correlative I'm talking about—anybody anywhere could relate to

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and all that other stuff. I like Eliot's work. My journey took me to a place where I wanted to put all the messy stuff back into the poem, and that is what created, *she tries he tongue.* I was going to go in the reverse direction from where Eliot was going. I didn't know anything about postmodernism; I didn't know I was being a postmodernist. As I said, I was coming out of this colonial tradition in the Caribbean. But, I think the zeitgeist was kind of happening all around the world. Although, I was not embedded in theories of postmodern and so on, my work appears postmodernist. What I find interesting is that it's coming from a totally different point of view. Also, some people thought my work was L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry—totally different. Totally different starting points, from which I'm working. Having said all of that though, one of the things I believe very strongly, and I actually learned this in writing my young adult novel, and this is in response to what this person [Ted Byrne] is saying—I think the only chance you have of being universal—people from different places being able to accept your work and to understand it, is to be exceedingly particular. I think what White culture has done and what White culture wants us to think, is that they are not being particular when they are doing their work. You know? That somehow their work is objective, it's neutral—that it does not have any identity. That's a kind of default Whiteness. Now, a poem stands and falls on 'is it succeeding on what it's doing?' You can have very 'bad', I know I shouldn't say 'bad', but you can have very 'bad' so-called neutral poems that are supposedly not about identity. I think that is the mistake that these scholars make; somehow when we [non-White writers] do it, it becomes identity and when they [White writers] do it, it somehow becomes absent of identity. And I dispute that profoundly.

Serena Klumpenhouwer: So do I.

NourbeSe Philip: You know, it's like Blake talking about seeing the universe in a grain of sand. That's what I'm talking about when you can launch yourself in that kind of specificity, I think it's almost a sort of operation of physics—the principles of physics; you sort of apply the pressure to it, and it explodes into something else; it explodes into something that other people can relate to. It's like even working with *Zong!;* it's this two page document, which I thought 'how can I make a poem from this?' And it just…

Serena Klumpenhouwer: And it became almost like a small experimental novel, haha.

NourbeSe Philip: And I could have gone on! It just explodes into this universe, of all these voices. I think the person who wrote about that gentleman [Ted Byrne], has to be challenged on what is it he means by the opposite of identity politics [and poetics].

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Miriam Nichols:

If Robin was alive, and knew that some 30–year-old Black woman found his poetry beautiful, his essays difficult and fascinating, and the tenets of his poetic process gripping, how do you think he would respond to my positing that there is a strength many voices and that his voice, his own unique combination of axiomatic identities, doesn't necessarily have to be seen as a limiting aspect of the creative process at all?

Miriam Nichols:

I think he would be thrilled that you have become a reader. He would also agree that the poet's voice is both unique and one among many voices. However, Blaser did not sign on to gay identity politics. This is to say that he did not wish to speak out of a socially assigned identity

because he felt that any person is much more than such an assignation. "Particles" is an early essay (1967) in which he takes on the implications of this in the context of Marxisms then current. "Even on Sunday" (in *The Holy Forest*) is a later piece in which he deals with outsider identities. One contemporary argument suggests that if a writer does NOT account for identity (class, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, ability) that writer has either failed to acknowledge social privilege (and is therefore falsely claiming universal applicability for his or her limited perspective) or politically suspect (authoritarian, classist, racist, sexist, and so on). This question then leads immediately to the relationship between poetry and politics. Here is Blaser in "Particles":

> It is a peculiar circumstance that in the discussion of politics and poetry, we are faced on the one hand with the view that poets are removed, delicately so, from public events and on the other with the view that poets may be used by wiser men to propagandize and support either the status quo, which the poet by the nature of his work will know to be a lie, or the revolution, which the poet by the nature of his work will try to understand. (*Fire* 16–17)

Blaser also liked Alphonso Lingis's *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*. Another way to think about this issue of identity in Blaser's work is that he was not focused on himself but on the world. Certainly his identity impacted what and how far he could see. That is true of anyone. He also thought it was a poet's job to see as far as possible through scholarship and hard work. He liked to refer to Yates's memory theatre for an image of that. The memory theatre was a means by which classical and early modern orators could remember what they had to say. They imagined a place, maybe a house with many rooms; they arranged objects in the rooms to correspond to their talking points and then walked through this imaginary space as they

recited. The imagined objects would help them remember their speeches. This is the "stadium" image in Robin's work. You stand on a stage and look out at a stadium, filled with mnemonics. As I've mentioned above, Robin did this quite literally in his household, not so he could make a speech, but to hold onto the world that he was always in the process of expanding.

* * *

The short version of all of the above is that I think your sense of the lyrical 'I' in Blaser's work may need some adjustment. I do remember how stressful it was to be a busy graduate student and I'm not trying to hang you up with loads of reading. The following might be helpful in thinking about subjectivity in this poetry and they won't detain you long: "Particles," "The Irreparable," "Even on Sunday," the first Jack Spicer lecture in *The House That Jack Built*. I have done an interview with Paul Nelson on *Mechanic of Splendor*. it is to be found at paulenelson.com under "interviews." It isn't essential to your project, but it might be a relatively painless way to think about some background to Blaser's work.

And finally: I began to write about Blaser as an MA student. I never asked him how to interpret his work and he never commented directly on anything I had written (and yes, I gave him a copy of everything). Instead, he would say something like, "Oh! how marvelous! Did I really say that! Oh my!" So now I think he had the wisdom to let me find my own way through it all —which is what you, too, will have to do, whatever I have written or said.

Serena Klumpenhouwer to Richard Douglass- Chin:

"Interbeing", one of many things you have taught me, is a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk. It's similar to Indigenous ideas of "all my relations"—that we live in a world where everyone and everything is dependent upon everyone/everything else. In Susan Buck-Morss' Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History (2009), she argues that Hegel could not have developed his theory of the master-slave dialectic without observing closely the late 18th century freedom struggles of Black peoples in the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Given that the French Revolution and the American Revolution were happening around the same time, it is curious that Hegel uses the term "master-slave" when he is talking about Euro-feudal serfdom. It seems to me that rather than being egocentric and self-interested, narratives carry with them histories that elucidate the development of theoretical and aesthetic ideas as being interconnected; in other words, they are directly informed by the historical, social, political, etc. What is lost when we adopt a mode of aesthetics that rejects narrative with regard to our understanding of interconnectedness (or 'interbeing') as key to the development of critical theory and discourse?

Richard Douglass-Chin:

What we lose is authenticity. Honesty. Clear seeing. Deep looking. It's kind of like what the Surrealists and the Dadaists were trying to do in the 1920s in order to disrupt the smoke-screen of realism—the idea that realist theatre is reality unadulterated. Incidentally, Surrealism and Dadaism arise in that post-WWI moment, just after Europe has descended into devastating carnage and chaos over its various countries' scrambles for power in the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres and the subsequent horrors unleashed by that greed. I am reminded of Kurt's words, "The horror. The horror" in *Heart of Darkness.* Of Belgium in Congo. Of the French in

Vietnam. Of the beautiful innovations of Western modernism that arise out of the brute reality of the Western plundering of these Southern and Eastern civilizations. Picasso in the Musée Trocadero as he finds his cubist path after first seeing the West African masks jumbled together in a dusty back room, the plunder of French "pacification" missions in Africa. Rimbaud crying, "You are a sham nigger!" ("Seasons in Hell," 1873). To deny our interconnectedness is to make Whiteness and Western-ness a faux norm which by a sleight of hand, appropriates all of our global contributions and discoveries to its "genius" alone. Modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that refuse to acknowledge their deep debt to Asia and Africa are deeply problematic in that, while poets such as the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets claim to want to disrupt the status quo, their very modus operandi *upholds* it. The infrequency with which they reference the global events and artistic movements and the Eastern and Southern philosophies and epistemologies that gave rise to modernism and postmodernism suggest our need in the present moment-- as we watch the West imploding from the cumulative results of its earlier depredations-- to acknowledge our histories, both geopolitical and aesthetic, as histories deriving from the globe, not from the West alone. The theorists we reference when we speak of our aesthetics must reflect such an acknowledgement. We need to disrupt the smoke-screen of Whiteness and Westernness that dominate our theoretical and aesthetic landscapes. To change our points of analysis completely.

As you rightly point out, Hegel *knew* about the events in Haiti, because all the while that he developed his master-slave dialectic, he was reading daily the newspapers that spoke of the Haitian developments— "horrors" for the European masters. How could he *not* bring these developments to bear on his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)? The whole "New" world was in a tumult; the 13 States of Britain's American colonies were just coming into their

Independence through revolutionary war beginning in 1775, and then there was the resistance of Toussaint L'Overture against Napoleon's army in the French colony of Haiti (1791).

I had the thought last night that the "Dark Ages" were dark only for northern Europe. From the 5th to the 14th centuries, the globe flourished as culture and civilization, begun in China in the Far East, and in the Mediterranean basin in places like Egypt (papyrus), Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon (our present day alphabet), India (the Vedas, the mathematical concept of zero), and later Crete, and Greece and Rome, spread from Rome to Istanbul in Turkey, was taken up by the Muslim Caliphates, and finally arrived in Europe during the so-called Renaissance beginning in 14th century in Spain and Italy. We think of English literature as beginning with Petrarch in Italy as he came into contact with the Troubadours. The word troubadour is actually an Arabic derivative, from the word *tarab* meaning song. It's not insignificant that by the 14th century, the crusades had allowed the benighted countries of Europe to come into contact with the advanced countries of the Muslim caliphates, and so to develop philosophy, poetry, mathematics, science which had been in circulation long before. It's just that these things had not yet touched Europe as we think of it today—England, France, Spain, Holland, etc. The Renaissance was really a Naissance. There was no global Dark Ages. England, France, Spain, Holland, Germany, etc. came very, very late to the global party. The lights were on and the music playing all the time.

To understand and truly acknowledge global interbeing and all our relations is to be in a really, really exciting place. To see with the lights on. That is the work of the young scholars and poets of today. To articulate that interbeing, those relations, to create a new aesthetics, and new theories founded on these things.

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