

## Against English: Conceptual Writing and the Multilingual Poem

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### Tenso Diagonal

Published: 29/12/2021

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*  
Skoulding, Z., & Robinson, R., (TRANS.) (2021). Against English: Conceptual Writing and the Multilingual Poem. *Tenso Diagonal*, 12, 155-174.  
<https://www.tensodiagonal.org/index.php/tensodiagonal/article/view/341>

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**Against English: Conceptual Writing and the Multilingual Poem**

**Abstract:**

The multilingual background of conceptual writing is reflected in the work of contemporary poets who use conceptual, documentary, investigative, or, to quote Michael Leong, “documental” methods that create friction and dissonance between English and other languages. Multilingual poetry reveals the importance of reading as an embodied critical practice, since the presence of different languages makes it less easy to “assimilate” a text, prompting a reading that recognizes difference rather than erasing it. A linguistic border within the text may be understood in the light of Lyn Hejinian’s response to Theodor Adorno in which she asserts: “Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities.” This claim for poetry as a border zone that is “addressed to foreignness” echoes the double face of Walter Benjamin’s much-quoted statement: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” While the word “document” has a particular aptness to conceptual poetry’s use of existing texts, “barbarism” is an onomatopoeic word relating to the sound of the unknown or foreign language; it is associated with speech, aurality and the body. Through discussion of poems by North American poets Harryette Mullen, M. NourbeSe Philip and Don Mee Choi, this article shows how sound and multilingualism are used to foreground strategic embodiment and assert the double-facing role of the poet-translator as central to the documentation and contesting of barbarism, especially barbarism associated with the English language and its implication in colonial and neocolonial relationships of the past and present. It considers the ways in which such work disrupts power relations, and how, as Evie Shockley has suggested, embodied forms of “conceiving” (with its implication of physically giving birth) might replace more abstract “conceptualizing” approaches in order to resist extractive or colonizing appropriation.

Key words: multilingual poetry; Lyn Hejinian; Harryette Mullen; M. NourbeSe Philip; Don Mee Choi

If twenty-first century conceptual writing has been especially visible in English, English has also been the language most contested by its appropriative or procedural techniques. While such contestation has been framed by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith as a move “against expression”, it might also be described as “against English”. The “against” might imply a confrontation with bureaucratic or institutional power in the clash of contexts and registers, but what also interests me in this article is how procedural or citational techniques can enable the sounding of different languages against each other to deterritorialize a dominant colonial language. The juxtaposition of languages in a poem resists conceptual assimilation, making reading more consciously embodied; it slows down reading, since meaning cannot be quickly absorbed, and it shifts attention to the signifier, whether visual or sonic, creating interruption, noise and encounter with otherness. This may seem to be at odds with an idea of writing in which the text produced is considered secondary to its originating concept, but this is the tension I want to explore. Following a brief discussion of the multilingual background of conceptual writing, I will move on to examine poems in which multilingual approaches become a means of resisting the weight of racist and colonial histories that inflect the English language and its contemporary presence in the world. In poetry that imagines English from the outside, or from border positions within English, conceptual approaches can enable the deliberate and strategic opacity of multilingualism. If the multilingualism of modernist avant-gardes made poetry made foreign to itself, what does this mean for the contemporary poet who contests colonial or neocolonial injustice? In tracing some points in a trajectory that links conceptualism with multilingual practices, I will consider the ways in which experimental, procedural approaches intersect with orality, and how texts and bodies interact.

The antecedents of recent poetic conceptualisms are not anglophone, but the result of encounters across languages, continents and art forms throughout the twentieth century, from dada and Oulipo to mail art, concrete poetry and Fluxus. Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology *Against Expression* reflects a close relationship between French and American poetic experimentation, but the earlier and visionary anthologizing of Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre

Joris in their *Poems for the Millennium* shows how the procedural techniques that inform later poetry are predicated on even wider multilingual contexts. Early modernism, focused on Paris, that of Pound, Eliot, Stein and Williams, drew on French influence and particularly on Paris as the locus of international avant-garde exchange in the early twentieth century. Yet to imagine Paris as simply French is an oversimplification, since it was the site of linguistic encounter that would shape the visual and textual forms of twentieth century poetry. Guillaume Apollinaire, who spoke Polish and Italian as well as French, found in the form of his calligrammes a means of liberating language as visual material, a possibility subsequently developed by the Brazilian Noigandres group (Rothenberg and Joris vol. 1 119-131; vol. 2 302-319). Simultaneously, investigations were conducted by Vicente Huidobro, who arrived from Chile in 1916 with his idea of ‘creationism’ that emphasised the presence of the poem rather its referent (Rothenberg and Joris vol 1 185-189). The dada performance of Janco, Tzara and Ball’s ‘L’admiral cherche une maison à louer’ (Rothenberg and Joris vol 1 308-309), performed in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich the same year reflects, from neutral Switzerland, the multiplied languages of countries at war. Tristan Tzara’s folk heritage from Romania left its traces in dada; his poem recipe for a cut-up newspaper, a key source for later proceduralisms, is both a translation technique, in the sense of transforming text, and an approach informed by the dislocation of bicultural, multilingual experience (Rothenberg and Joris vol 1 302). Charles Bernstein’s “Wreading Experiments”, derived from Bernadette Mayer’s similar list, puts translation at the heart of language experimentation while asserting continuities with dada and Oulipo. The list could go on. The innovations of the twenty-first century are not drawn from any single anglophone or French tradition but from multiple points of connection between languages. Conceptual writing as a movement has been identified with a particular period in US and Canadian poetry dating from the late 1990s, while, as Michael Leong observes in *Contested Records*, its demise has been announced frequently in recent years (142). If something called “conceptual writing” persists, it is in part because its definition was always marked by conflicting theories and a range of practices. It has often been connected with a predominantly English language context, but its roots in previous avant-garde practice, across a range of art forms and linked across the Atlantic, reflect long histories of multilingual exchange.

The twenty-first century has seen conceptual writing reconceived from a number of vantage points. The poems that I will discuss by the US poet Harryette Mullen, the Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip and the Korean-American poet and translator Don Mee Choi respond to possibilities created by earlier avant-gardes, but also contest the colonial histories

that link continents in relation to the English language. Colonization posits the colonized body as resource, and material, and the colonizer as the provider of conceptual organization, and it is for this reason that Evie Shockley's argument for a more embodied view of conceptualism is so persuasive. In discussion of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, she points out with reference to the OED, that a "concept" is currently understood as pertaining to a mental understanding, but "a now obsolete definition of 'concept,' as a transitive verb, evoked the (female) body's reproductive capacity — 'to conceive (in the womb)' — which suggests a connection that the related word 'conceive' still invites us to make." While the techniques of what Goldsmith has called "uncreative writing" have certain continuities with avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, the twenty-first century reveals the urgent need to critique the mind/body split implied by making disembodied genius, original or otherwise, central to an argument about writing. By hearing language in bodies and spaces, and making different languages audible, conceptual poetry may be "reconceived" in anti-colonial or anti-neocolonial contexts.

I want to consider the kinds of encounter and opposition that are produced by the multilingual poem, which, by combining different languages in a single form, poses a question that might also be asked on a larger scale: how do languages and cultures in come together and make contact? Poetic forms and approaches migrate across languages and continents; so too do questions about poetry's relationship to culture and history, for example often-misquoted statement by Theodor Adorno: "Cultural criticism finds itself today faced with the final state of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" (182). This moment is described by the Chilean poet and critic Felipe Cussen as a "communicative crossroads", leading, on one hand, to the tortured syntax of Paul Celan, in which violence is turned against the language of atrocity, but a different response to this trauma, and the one with which Cussen is chiefly concerned, is the use of distancing strategies and the reworking of official documents. He takes the example of the US poet Charles Reznikoff, whose work forms an important precedent for the appropriative and citational approaches that followed. This crisis of language is one beginning (but not the only beginning) of conceptual writing, which can also be traced back to dada, another time of catastrophic war in which the links between signifier and signified were shattered. However, Celan and Reznikoff, in different languages, respond to the particular horror of the Holocaust through a poetics of estrangement, of making foreign. While retaining a powerful historical

role of complex witness, their work also points to subsequent framings of poetry as border work, as in Lyn Hejinian's reflection on the same passage by Adorno:

Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities... Poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured in another Greek word, *xenos*.... The *xenos* figure is one of contradiction and confluence. The stranger it names is both guest and host.... Every encounter produces, even if only for the flash of an instant, a *xenia* – the occurrence of coexistence which is also an occurrence of strangeness or foreignness. It is a strange occurrence that, nonetheless, happens constantly; we have no other experience of living than through encounters. We have no other use for language than to have them (Hejinian 326).

Hejinian claims poetry as a practice and a politics of encounter; it is a claim that resonates with the moments of rupture and crisis that have shaped modernist poetry and the poetics that have succeeded it.

Hejinian draws attention to the origin of the Greek word *barbaros* as “an onomatopoeic imitation of babbling”, the language spoken by foreigners, since the primary encounter with foreignness is in sound. One is face to face with the other; there is both recognition and distance. “Barbarism” is an outdated linguistic term for mixed languages and mispronunciation; it is associated with speech and orality, suggesting an embodied encounter in which sound is disorganised and unruly, exceeding the signifying system of a single language and its territorial boundaries. The resulting strangeness and ambiguity is a mode of sociality but also of resistance, of becoming foreign to one's own culture in the process or making an opening towards another. While Auschwitz has become a reference point for unrepeatability, its horror prompted a radical re-examination of culture of which Adorno's comment is a part, as are Celan's dislocations and renewals of the German language. English is linked with different atrocities in its capacity to absorb and appropriate other languages, which is both a legacy of colonial history and factor in the neocolonial exercise of power. While conceptual writing circulates in a transatlantic literary zone, the imagination of that space as purely or even predominantly anglophone involves problematic exclusions. It requires attention to the dynamics of colonialism, where the “border” is often internalized, war frequently undeclared and the “*xenos* figure” intensely contradictory.

Walter Dignolo argues that the decolonial task is not to accept Western values but to “plac[e] yourself in the space that imperial discourse gave to lesser humans, uncivilized and barbarians,” and ‘argue for radical interventions from the perspective of those who have been made barbarians, abnormal and uncivilized” (10-11). The multilingual poem offers this possibility, which in turn reveals the barbarism of imperial discourse.

Alongside Hejinian’s call to a poetics of encounter, Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation” offers a complementary perspective. Writing in the context of the French Caribbean, he looks back to the trauma of slave ships as the space from which new relations must emerge, a “womb abyss” that leads to shared knowledge of the world in its diversity. His allusive proliferation of images, which cannot always be reduced to summarized concepts, suggests, instead of conceptualizing, a mode of conceiving. However, the following observation is central:

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship’s space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day (Glissant 5).

It is the reverberating confrontation between text and body, rather than one or the other, that allows an understanding of and response to colonial oppression. Poetry is a medium that can mobilize both writing and sound, contesting the dehumanization of the account book while releasing the stifled cries, or creating silences in which the reader’s attention can be drawn to them.

Hejinian’s claim for poetry as a border zone that is “addressed to foreignness” echoes the double face of Walter Benjamin’s much-quoted statement: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (248). For Michael Leong, this makes what he terms “documental” poetry, or that which uses existing texts, an important means of reworking cultural memory (84). Documents mark space as well as history; the documents on either side of a border may be in different languages; a colonial language oversteps its borders as it carries ‘civilization’ and enacts atrocity. Documental poetry’s engagement with historical materials is crucial, but it also opens to an language an encounter with itself that is heightened by multilingual contexts that may not necessarily be

foregrounded in a macaronic text. Relevant to both Hejinian and Adorno is Reznikoff's *Holocaust*, which draws on transcripts of the trials of Nazis, as in this extract from "Research":

We are the civilized  
Aryans  
and do not always kill those condemned to death  
merely because they are Jews  
as the less civilized might:  
we use them to benefit science  
like rats or mice:  
(Reznikoff 9)

Cussen, commenting on these lines, notices: "Aquí se produce un choque entre la crudeza de estas declaraciones y su traspaso al formato de un libro y la disposición gráfica de un poema." This is certainly true, and the shock is heightened by the free verse technique through which each line operates as an ironic undercutting of the last. The effects are tonal as well as visual, as in the passive construction of "those condemned to death", with its distancing from culpability. However, these effects are also mediated by the processes of translation that shape the source material. The Nuremberg Trials in 1945-6 were an early exercise in simultaneous translation, and writing about the 1961 Eichmann trial, Hannah Arendt remarks that all the foreigners had to follow the proceedings, in Hebrew, through simultaneous interpretation, "which is excellent in French, bearable in English, and sheer comedy—frequently incomprehensible—in German." These trials were immense projects of interpretation and translation, and Reznikoff's carefully measured rewritings are a further layer of translation. The text is derived from translated reports, and first person accounts are frequently shifted into third person. In the lines quoted above, the use of the plural first person creates an additional shock in English, as the position occupied by the Nazi speaker becomes an inclusive "we" that involves the 1970s USA reader in the appalling comparison of Jewish people to laboratory animals. It is the work of translation, as well as textual reframing, that allows Reznikoff to make the poem both foreign and uncomfortably close.

Of Reznikoff's work it is *Testimony : the United States, 1885-1915: Recitative*, which has had the most far-reaching influence on later conceptual poetry. Here, the found-text sources were historical court records in English, but they are still informed by a multilingual



context. Ian Davidson has explored the way in which Reznikoff inhabited English as one of a number of possible languages, having grown up with Yiddish-speaking Russian parents. Drawing on Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, Davidson shows how Reznikoff used English as a language that was "not his own" to reveal its power structures, and also to create distance from them, observing how *Testimony* focuses on "the way recent immigrants, often from non-English-speaking countries, are physically abused and killed by those with power over them" (Davidson 362). As a foundational text of conceptual writing, *Testimony* is concerned with the outside of English that shows the operations of power within it. Its poetics is also translatable to other languages, as Abigail Lang has shown in discussion of its influence on French poetry. For Emmanuel Hocquard, whom Lang cites, this is a work that opposes literature with literalism, opening up distance and foreignness in the use of appropriated text: "Au travers de la repetition, dans cet écart, cette distance qui est la théâtre même de la mimesis, *on voit soudain autre chose* dans le modèle qui perd dès lors toute valeur d'original, d'origine. Ce sont les mêmes mots, les mêmes phrases et pourtant ce ne sont pas les mêmes énoncés." [Through repetition, in this gap, this distance which is the very theatre of mimesis, *we suddenly see something else* in the model, which then loses all value of original, of origin. They are the same words, the same sentences, and yet they are not the same statements.] (Lang 77). While Hocquard's focus is on the written text and a readerly experience of it, the power of *Testimony* also comes from its being a "recitative", a text derived from speech arranged for musical performance. Its source is speech, and it is arranged for the ear in a musical context, as in the beginning of the section titled "Property", where the alternating rhythm of the lines reveals the coercive power relationship; 'they' are sonically foregrounded while "he" is diminished, the short lines emphasizing his physical weakness:

They held the light very close to him,  
but he could not see.  
They asked him to sign the paper,  
and someone put a pencil in his hand  
to make his mark.  
He could not take hold of it –  
even feel it.

(Reznikoff 24-25)

From each fragmentary vignette, little is suggested about the context, though here an ironic relationship with the title is implied. What property do “they” want signed over by this person who is no longer in possession even of his own body and senses, or his own name? The power of the legal ‘paper’ over the frailty of the body is distinct and dramatized. The poem makes a play of adopting the distant, bureaucratic tone of judicial process, but it is also full of song that mourns the violence and brutality enacted on individual bodies. It is an encounter with the effects of inequality as they are lived in language, yet it is Reznikoff’s ability to stand outside English that makes these audible in his writing.

In conceptual poetry, much attention has been focused on the process of writing, on erasure, copying and distribution of text. The massive circulation of texts in English has made the English language central to certain modes of conceptual writing, as described by Place and Fitterman:

Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—one does not need to ‘read’ the work as much as think about the idea of the work. In this sense, pure conceptualism’s readymade properties capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/generation of text and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture (Place and Fitterman 27).

However, the supposed negation of reading is also a negation of the distance that Hocquard describes, which is the effect of displacement on language, experienced in his case through the intensity of reading in a second language, which is, in effect, translation. It is also the negation of less ‘consumable’ forms of language. In procedures that foreground the concept over the resulting text, the sounding of foreignness is erased. In silent reading of a text, the inner ear is activated, but in a text that is not meant to be read, as Goldsmith has suggested in relation to his own works, even this inner voicing is silenced. Yet while he has denied the need for a readership of his works, claiming instead that he has a “thinkership” (which does not necessarily need to have read the whole work), it was, ironically, the dramatic failure of a live reading that ended this chapter of conceptual writing. The long controversy provoked in 2015 by his reading of the autopsy report of Michael Brown, a young black man murdered by police, marked the end of conceptual poetry as he had defined it, as a set of procedures predicated on writing and its rapid circulation. “Assimilation” of a quickly scanned text assumes a similarity, a forced conformity or biological incorporation, while “appropriation”

takes ownership of it, and both of these terms have disturbing resonances. A live reading, by contrast, is an unpredictable encounter in which multiple elements come into play, including sound, embodied presence, and encounter with others. It matters who is speaking, and from where; poetry's border zones become audible.

A "barbaric" poetics is one that makes itself foreign to state violence through the sounding of language, and especially the languages of those that the state is trying to exclude. For Glissant, sound suggests a relation that does not require the visual conformity of sameness: "In Relation analytic thought is led to construct unities whose interdependent variances jointly piece together the interactive totality. These unities are not models but revealing *échos-monde*. Thought makes music" (Glissant 93). While the state is bound together by models of unity, the interactive relation he describes depends on the complexity and variance of a sound wave rather than the assimilation of concepts, and the thinking music of poetry is a mode in which this may happen. Conceptualism, reframed by Leong as "documental" poetry (34-70), is not at odds with sounding or embodiment. Documents are part of the same material world as bodies, and procedures may be embodied, generative actions. In the remaining part of this article I will consider the work of three poets for whom the sound of multilingualism is allied with conceptual approaches.

The US poet Harryette Mullen grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, and describes hearing Spanish as soon as she went outside her neighbourhood. In a 1990s interview with Calvin Bedient, Mullen articulates the connection in her work between race and multilingualism

One of my elementary school teachers when I was still in a little segregated black school was a man from Panama, who was a native Spanish speaker, bilingual, so I identified Spanish also with black people as well as Mexican Americans. The Spanish is there partly because I think it's a beautiful language and partly because I associate it with people who were a part of my life. I use it in a political way, because I think we should all have more than one language. People in Africa routinely speak three or more languages.

[M]y text is deliberately a multi-voiced text, a text that tries to express the actual diversity of my own experience living here, exposed to different cultures. 'Mongrel' comes from 'among'. Among others. We are among; we are not alone. We are all mongrels (652).

This sense of being among others is resonant in Mullen's 1995 long poem *Muse and Drudge*, which is densely physical in its punning and performative in its citation of song lyrics. Citation of song is a form of 'documental' usage that quotes and repurposes text, but also operates in the ear, as poetry has always done, and, importantly, as the often unattributed words of Black singers have circulated through the blues. Recognising these multiple channels is important, as Shockley observes: "Mullen's experimentation is sometimes portrayed as indebted to Stein, Oulipo, and Language poetry in ways that downplay or distort important legacies of African American innovation upon which she draws." Playing on sound allows Mullen to explore the sounds of different languages as they co-inhabit the page, for example with a first stanza in Spanish, before continuing in English: "mulatos en el mole / me gusto mi posole / hijita del pueblo moreno / ya baila la conquista" (67). The Spanish is not italicized, but enters the poem unmarked, to co-exist with English. Food is the point of connection between people inhabiting the same space, so this is the vocabulary that travels into the poem. "La conquista" is a hybridizing of tradition ritual forms to tell the story of violent colonization: the use of Spanish is not an expression of Mullen's "own" identity a sounding out of what it means to be among multiple voices. These include glancing reference to the lyrics of "Baby Won't You Please Come Home", a blues song first made famous by Bessie Smith but also performed by Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald among others. For Mullen, the circulation of lyrics becomes a parallel to the articulation of multiple identities in the poem: "yes I've tried in vain / never no more to call your name / and in spite of all reminders / misremembered who I am"(67). Mullen's allusive method works against any monolithic identity, a means of situating encounter through the jostling of registers in a "state of flux". While Mullen draws on a European avant-garde tradition, this interacts with performative modes of music and spoken language that relocate it within a non-European context of Black experimentation.

Mullen's 2002 collection *Sleeping With the Dictionary*, influenced by Oulipian techniques, is more obviously related to conceptual writing. While the concerns of this later book might seem more congruent with the interests of a mainly white avant-garde, it needs to be read in relation to her earlier work and its sounding out of multilingual public spaces. It also needs to be read aloud, partly for the disruptive humour of her Shakespeare versions, which destabilize the notion of English as a single coherent language by using variants of the Oulipian N+7 technique to substitute nouns from the dictionary. "Bilingual Instructions", anthologized in Dworkin and Goldsmith's *Against Expression* needs to be read aloud for a different reason, which is for the way in which it comments on the politics of language in public space by

inviting the reader's participation. While apparently constructed from found text, it is constructed with a formal, rhetorical elegance in two lists of three. In the first part, we read that Californians "say No" to bilingualism in schools or on ballots, but "Yes" to Spanish on "curbside waste receptacles", a euphemistic circumlocution that heightens the poem's mordant irony. In the second part, three instructions are given in Spanish with their English translation following: "*Coloque el recipiente con las flechas hacia la calle [...] No ruede el recipiente con la tapa abierta [...] Recortes de jardín solamente*" (Mullen 10). Writing in Wales, an officially bilingual country, I encounter this poem through an entirely different daily politics of shared space and translation, one where languages are often in tension, but neither is relegated, as here, to waste or its disposal. One can see at a glance how the poem comments on the status of Spanish as related to particular forms of labour, but reading it aloud is what reveals Mullen's appreciation of living alongside the language and hearing it. As always in her work, the use of sound is finely pitched, not only through the patterns of assonance and alliteration that give the text its musicality, but also through the effect that Spanish has next to English, where it corresponds to heightened Latinate registers in English that are historically derived from Latin-speaking and francophone ruling classes. The ending, "Yard clippings only" (three English words of down-to-earth Germanic derivation), is flat and full of bathos, in a reversal of linguistic power relations. For anyone not used to code-switching, the alternating languages of the poem are a physical challenge, likely to cause a stumble. This is a poem that announces itself as an English-language text, but in order to read it, the anglophone reader must physically inhabit the rhythm and sound of Spanish, thus becoming "barbarian" to complacent forms of racism at its intersection with class structures.

Multilingual citation positions the reader among different times as well as different languages. The Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, born in Tobago, reflects Glissant's sense of the Caribbean's archipelagic relationships in *Zong!*, which memorializes the dead of an infamous massacre at sea. Here, the text cited is a legal document in English, which is broken apart to release the multiple sounds of the languages that would have been spoken on the slave ship from which 150 Africans were thrown overboard, murdered in a fraudulent attempt to claim compensation. Leong comments that "rather than treating death as a personal, subjective point of concern—the lyric tradition is rife with such poems—late conceptual poetry employs extreme citation to engage with historically specific, and often wrongful, deaths within the political public sphere" (143). *Zong!* becomes a collective lament, exceeding not only personal subjectivity but also the boundaries of any single language. In her commentary on the text, Philip describes her process of cutting up and processing language (191-194). She says that it



While the process of writing is influenced in part by Philip's analytical legal background, this is more than a deconstruction of a legal text to reveal its human implications; its performance on the page and in the voice locates it through the body. Mandy Bloomfield describes how "exploited African bodies constitute a material foundation of imperialist modernity and their traces are palpable within its documents, even if only as the unwritten underside of the text" (183). In drawing attention to the lived languages of the ship, and the physical connection between destroyed text and destroyed body, this is, as Bloomfield observes, a remaking of an oceanic history that has often been figured as a blank space. Philip's poem, through its broken vocables, allows the unwritten to surface. The Atlantic Ocean emerges as a space in which English is not only multilingually diffracted, but also freighted with the murderous implications of capitalism. Multilingualism may be taken for granted as a normal condition of being in the world, but it is also a means of making visible the pressures that exist at the join between languages within a space that is shared on violently unequal terms.

This written text is a score not only for the reader's navigation on the page but also for Philip's performances, which foreground the ritual aspects of song as a means of speaking and listening to the reverberating presences of the dead. The opening sequence of 'Zongs' or songs, are powerfully read by Philip as solo pieces from 2010, and the text has gathered many new performances alongside its steady critical acclaim over the past decade. A collaborative online performance, *Zong! Global 2020*, makes use of Zoom to create a virtual ritual space with a group of speakers reading simultaneously. The text has accumulated new resonances through Black Lives Matter and through the deaths in the Mediterranean, so this subsequent collective performance of *Zong!* is multi-layered: we read or hear what floats to the surface but the poem also contains unreadable depths. Languages here are unbounded, inhabiting each other at the point of horror and loss. They contain human experience – in the singing of blood, or the cry for a mother – that is both shared and unique. *Zong!* can be understood as a conceptual project, but as Shockley points out, this diminishes the sense in which it is keenly attuned to the ritual space of African cultures. Philip's meditation on the poem, "Wor(l)ds Interrupted", is formally interrupted through the use of line breaks in prose and the linguistic vitality of "a talking back anywhichway byanymeansnecessary". In this essay, she comments on the backgrounds of music and writing in Caribbean: "enslaved africans did not have to prove their personhood through music indeed europeans often dismissed their music as noise proof of their subhuman qualities it was in language and through language that they would have to prove *english is my mother tongue/is my father*

*tongue*<sup>1</sup> if they could control the language speak it write it”. It is at the point that English breaks down into other languages that music becomes a possibility through the ritual forms that are preserved through the African diaspora. The recorded Zoom performance now makes this aspect of the text fully audible anywhere in the world; speakers read across each other and the disembodied virtual space becomes a channel for the ancestral voices of ritual practice. In this moment of encounter between history and technology, the multilingual poem is an imperative to listen not only to the dead, but to a future that lies beyond the dominance of English.

A different history emerges in the weaponized border of Don Mee Choi’s *DMZ Colony*, which takes its name from the Demilitarized Zone that separates North and South Korea. This political fault line, integral to US politics while geographically remote from it, is reflected in the fractured form of the book, for which Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* is a significant precursor. Seen in this context, the problematizing of language is not just an issue for the Korean speaker in the USA, but is also charged with the earlier history of the Japanese occupation, in which the Korean language was suppressed. Choi’s family fled South Korea despairing of the US-backed military dictatorship under which she had grown up, Choi moving to the US to pursue degrees in art. Her background as artist and translator is key to an approach in which word and image are often held on the cusp of signification. *DMZ Colony* explores both the circumstances of leaving South Korea, and her later return to Seoul, its form engaging not just with the foreignness that produced by the migratory experience of being between states, but also a specific and deliberate foreignness towards forms of state repression that construct nationhood, and which link the USA and South Korea. Her pamphlet *Translation is a mode = translation is an anti-neocolonial mode* draws on use of mirrors by Ingmar Bergman to describe translation as a zone of doubleness and mirroring. While this is in many respects a conceptual work, Choi, like the other two poets I have discussed, foregrounds the physicality of a reading experience, putting the reader in the position of the translator.

Interviews with survivors of state violence form a central element of Choi’s documentary poetics, but rather than offering “objective” evidence in a legal mode, they draw attention to partial processes of understanding and the complexity of coded language. The recollections of Ahn Hak-sop, a political prisoner from 1953 to 1995, are reported in fragments, separated by ellipses. The introductory note explains that the interview was

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<sup>1</sup> The italicised phrase here from Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue* (26).



recorded, but that the poet also scribbled in her notebook, and a heavy bold font is used to separate transcription and translation of Mr Ahn's words from Choi's own interpretation, commentary and echo. The effect of the gaps in the speech is both to suggest the hesitant speech of an elderly survivor and to foreground the process of listening and recording in a located, physical context. There is a detailed recalling of brutalities, but also a space to draw back from what cannot be fully represented in language: "...I won't say what they did to me ... I'll leave it up to your imagination..." [ellipses in original]. Choi returns to South Korea "in the guise of a translator, which is to say, I returned as a foreigner" (18), but in Mr Ahn's account, divided Korea is a country foreign to itself. He describes his resistance to learning English as a resistance to US occupation from the 1940s onwards, and yet this is the language in which his account appears. Choi's treatment of the text reveals a process in which the Korean language is maintained as a site of resistance. Mr Ahn recounts that one reason why prisoners may be beaten is the suspicion that they may be communicating with each other, the guards demanding: "What's that signal?... What's that code?" (24) The "impossibly coded", becomes, in the translator's visual notation, an "anti-neocolonial code" of indeterminate signs that will not settle into one language or the other (25). In "Ahn Hak-sop #3", a transliteration of the Korean word for "terror", the translator's "messy handwriting" – the trace of her embodied listening – leads her to initials from which she derives "Toward Global Humanity" in English (29). This is followed in "#4" by a brief text describing an army lieutenant who, despite torture, "refused to change his political view" (30). Pressure on the body is onomatopoeically produced through a reworking of the words "convert", "change" and "view" into clusters of consonants as a visual/sound poem that suggests spluttering or choking:

water torture

???

C N C

N V H

V R N

R T G

T ??

C H V

H N W

N G ?

G ?

(31)

Following further description of torture, the text switches from the bold font used for Ahn Hak-sop into the font used for the translator's commentary: "then I heard the vowels from my own mouth" (32). Whose mouth is this? The vowels that follow, still derived from the same three words, suggest both the cry of the prisoner roused from unconsciousness and the affective response of the translator, but remain outside the language of either. Choi's position as "a daughter of neocolony" is one that she counters through an articulation of foreignness to the militarized state:

The language of capture, torture, and massacre is difficult to decipher. It's practically a foreign language. What a nightmare! But as a foreigner myself, I am able to detect the slightest flicker of palpitations and pain. Difficult syntax! (43)

Choi's notes on the text assert the specific role of poetry, despite scepticism about its efficacy: "Even though his friends hoped that I would write an article about Mr Ahn for prominent newspapers, I believe poetry is more effective as a language of resistance. Poetry can defy erasure" (132). What is not erased here is the strength of poetry in exposing the barbaric foreignness of state oppression, and translation can be an "anti-neocolonial mode" only by entering its friction. Choi's poetry does not describe suffering, placing it at a contained distance from the reader, but uses translation to enact the complex relations of the border.

Poetry as "resistance" may be understood in terms of its noise rather than its transmission of information, as I have argued previously in relation to the work of Greg Hainge (Skoulding 46). He defines noise as resistance within a system, a relation like the resistance in an electrical circuit (Hainge 17). In a related vein, Cole Swensen's comment on noise shows how this perspective relates to the border and the poetics of the frontier described by Hejinian:

If poetry can be an 'effective part of civic life' and 'bring the news in a way that no other form can,' then 'its ability to do so must be bound up with poeticity (defined here as the poetic function in Jakobson's sense – putting the focus on the message for its own sake – along with figurative language, image, ambiguity, and juxtaposition).

This amounts to bringing language as art into the heart of the language of information. This tension alone accomplishes something by positing an incommensurability at the centre of the work, an irritant that demands attention and refuses complacency (Swensen 55).

That is to say, the barbarian poem is one that has borders at its centre: the tension between art and information is critically enabling, creating a space and a role for poetry as well as a friction within it. Swensen's nuanced statement makes use of Jakobson to avoid pitting the "uncreative" text against lyric expressivity. Rather, the poetic function is what makes us see language, rather than see through it, and this is often literally the case in Choi's work.

Choi's work is striking for the spectrum of different approaches that she brings to bear on this dynamic, and it stretches the definitions of documentary and conceptual poetics. "The Orphans" looks, at first glance, like a verbatim poetry of witness, accompanied by childish handwritten texts in Korean. The introductory passage informs the reader: "I decided to translate the stories of eight girls who survived the Sancheong-Hamyang massacre", and the accounts of this 1951 atrocity have the starkness of Reznikoff: "They set fire to our house. It burned fast because the roof was made of straw. The soldiers herded us into a ravine and shot us" (53). On closer reading, patterns of dreams emerge: "Months later I saw Mommy and my sister in a dream. Water. I couldn't stop the water." This shift in register along with a string of references to the Milky Way, creates an undercurrent in the text, revealing its means of construction. The stories, while based on Ahn Kim's research and the transcribed oral testimonies of survivors, are "poetry of the unconscious" (126), in which the documentary material has been processed, Choi claims, through the collective unconscious of language:

My decision to translate the girls' stories wasn't entirely mine alone. It can take billions of years for light to reach us through the galaxies, which is to say, History is ever arriving. So it's most likely that the decision, seemingly all mine, was already made years ago by someone else, which is to say, language – that is to say, translation – already always arises from collective consciousness. Be factual, you say? As I mentioned, foreigners simply know (49).

The handwritten pages, written by Choi herself, draw attention to poetic function, but also to the expectation of unmediated authenticity that they contest. Like Reznikoff's poems of

testimony, they are shaped by the conscious and unconscious effects of language, inhabiting both sides of the border between information and poetry. The foreigners who “simply know” are those who are able to create the necessary distance to speak back from galaxies against the closed and mendacious language of the state.

The opening up of English to other languages in the text creates a space where semantic meaning cannot be contained, and where the force of the unknown pushes back against it as sound, or as visual noise. The poems I have discussed are strategically addressed to the foreignness of English, making it foreign in order to reveal barbaric structures of power. Processual techniques balance authorial control with other agential possibilities in the materiality of signage in public space, the legal text, or the interview transcript; these also become points at which multiple voices and perspectives flood in through song, ritual or the voices of the dead. Drawing on a range of innovations that reach beyond anglophone conceptual writing, it is poetry in which bodies and texts conceive each other, resisting extractive or colonizing appropriation. It invites a reciprocal openness on the part of the reader to encounter the alienness of English and the closeness of other languages as intrinsic to the poem, which is in turn a “thinking music” through which other worlds can be made audible.

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