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Sonic Decoloniality: Listening, Orality, and Epistemic Disobedience in M. NourbeSe Philip's Discourse on the Logic of Language

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ABSTRACT

This study establishes a decolonial linguistic framework to examine the sonic form of poetic discourse in a qualitative and interpretive analysis of M. NourbeSe Philip's Discourse on the Logic of Language (1989/1997). Current scholarship has read the poem as a critique of colonial language and epistemic violence, but little has been explored about the poem's sonic architecture as a decolonial place of knowledge production. To fill this gap, the poem's sound patterns of stutter, repetition, phonetic mutation and vocal fragmentation are each engaged as epistemic interventions that question colonial logocentrism and literacy centered authority. The study introduces the notion of sonic decoloniality, inspired by decolonial theory, language ideology studies, and recent scholarship on sonic epistemology, as a means to conceptualize the acoustic disruption as a form of resistance against classificatory linguistics and colonial rationality. This study shows through close qualitative reading, that sound engages with alternative memory processes, embodied transmission and anti-fluency politics to reposition knowledge as relational and corporeal. The analysis also explores the poem's edicts and medical taxonomy where colonial classification is parodied and subverted, drawing structural analogies with decolonial critiques of metadata and description standards in archives. By analogy, the results extend decolonial linguistics into decolonial archiving, positioning listening and alternative memory practices as heuristic resources for community-controlled heritage governance.

Keywords: Decolonial Linguistics, Sonic Poetics, Language Ideology, Acoustic Resistance, Alternative Memory, Listening as Method, Decolonial Archiving.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Colonial power has historically worked not just in terms of territorial control and economic extraction, but also in the control of language, sound, and speech practices. The language of colonial governance instituted a linguistic hierarchy, ranking languages, accents, and forms of speech based on a racialized measure of rationality and civility. The concept of "standard" European languages was constructed as vehicles of reason, legality, and truth, while colonized languages of speech were described as broken, too much, emotional, or lacking (Quijano, 2000; Errington, 2008). Fluency, grammatical correctness, and accent mastery were used as criteria to assess human worth. In this regime language was not just imposed, it was acoustically enforced. Mission schools, plantation systems and colonial administrations not only determined what could be said, but also how things could sound (Mignolo, 2011). The use of silence, mispronunciation, or mother tongue was punishable. The history of colonialism is thus a history

of sonic regulation. The sonic aspect of colonial discourses of language authority continues to be under-theorized in linguistic and literary studies, despite this historical reality. Historically, textual analysis has focused on the semantic content of the text rather than acoustic, and has projected onto it the same literacy bias that was imposed by colonial language regimes. In M. NourbeSe Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language", she stages one of the most formally radical critiques of colonial language authority, which is not only deconstructed at the level of language but also at the level of sound. The poem enacts linguistic violence and resistance through the use of phonetic disruptions and repetitions, recursive repetitions, pedagogical parody, anatomical discourse, legal edicts, and rhythmic disruptions (Philip, 1997; Guttman, 1996). Instead of language as a neutral tool of meaning, it brings the reader to an understanding of language as a tool of classification, punishment and epistemic control. This exposure is not only in terms of the thematic content, but in terms of the acoustic structure and institutional parody.

1.2 Problem Statement

Most of the existing scholarship read the poem through a postcolonial lens, a lens of trauma, a lens of legal discourse analysis, and a lens of identity theory (Deloughrey, 1998; Kim, 2007; Kraus, 2009). These readings confirm this poem can be read as challenging colonial linguistic power and enacting the violence of language loss. Most analyses, however, are still basically semantic and textual. Theoretically, sonic features such as stutter, echo, phonetic mutation and rhythmic recurrence are often mentioned but not often theorized as epistemic acts. The poem's edicts (as if colonial legalese) and medical taxonomy (anatomical description and multiple-choice question) have been interpreted as parody, not however, as an attack on classificatory systems that transcend language beyond law, science and archives. This study addresses this gap by considering the sonic and classificatory disruptions of the poem as a unified decolonial epistemic practice.

1.3 Research Questions

This study contributes to filling the gap highlighted by the following operationally defined research questions:

1. How does Philip's use of stutter specifically the breakdown of the word "language" into "lang lang lang" and the phonetic transformation of "language" into "languish/anguish" performs lexical destabilization, and how does this destabilization challenge colonial fluency ideology?
2. What alternative memory processes does the refrain structure of the maternal tongue variants: "mammy tongue / mummy tongue / ma tongue" serve, and how does repetition in the poem allows for the possibility of recurrence over fixity as a means of knowledge preservation?
3. What are the ways in which the edicts and medical taxonomic sections of the poem parody the colonial classification systems (legal, medical, educational), and what analogies can be drawn to decolonial critiques of archival metadata and description systems?

1.4 Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives based on the research questions:

1. To analyze the stutter and phonetic drift in Philip's poem as anti-fluency politics.
2. To investigate the maternal refrain as an alternative memory practice.
3. To explore the poem's edicts and taxonomy passages as parodic classification with archival implication.

4. To develop a qualitative listening methodology attentive to breathe, pause, articulatory challenge, and rhythmic disruptions.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study presents three original contributions. First, it applies decolonial theory into the language, showing that the phonetic and rhythmic level provides a site where epistemic resistance can happen. Second, it establishes the concept of “sonic decoloniality” as a bridge between sonic studies, language ideology studies, and decolonial theory. Third, by decoding the edicts and medical taxonomy of the poem along with decolonial archival critiques, it provides, by analogy, theoretical tools for reimagining community-controlled heritage governance.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Coloniality of Power and Language

An analysis of Philip’s work requires a postcolonial framework, particularly theories of coloniality and power. Quijano (2000) discusses the coloniality of power, which describes Eurocentric hierarchies that organized knowledge, labor, and social relationships. In this context, language is a means and a site of colonial authority, a mediator of access to epistemic legitimacy. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2013) also place language at the center of cultural hegemony, and social stratification. Philip’s interrogation of mother tongue vs. father tongue is illustrative of this dynamic, highlighting the role of colonial English as a medium of intelligibility and a control system.

Mignolo (2011) extends this discussion by considering the epistemic violence embedded in Western modernity and the importance of decolonial interventions in recuperating suppressed forms of knowledge. The idea of “epistemic disobedience” (refusing to obey the terms of dominant knowledge systems) has since been adopted beyond decolonial scholarship as a way of conceptualizing resistance from the borders of colonial epistemology. Maldonado Torres (2007) proposes the concept of coloniality of being, which implies that the European ontologies are not limited to material, linguistic, or affective aspects. Philip’s poetic devices (stutter, repetition, breath) can be understood as direct interventions on this coloniality of being, contesting the normativity of speech and intelligibility.

2.1.2 Language Ideology and Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology and language ideology analysis provide crucial resources in understanding the epistemological aspects of Philip’s sonic strategies. The term “linguistic ideology” was first used by Silverstein (1979) to refer to the beliefs about the structure of language that are linked to social and political interests. He stated that language forms never are neutral; they have indexical connections to social categories and power relations. This was further developed by Kroskrity (2000), who showed that language ideologies are mediating processes between social structures and communicative practices that can often naturalize inequalities. The ideology of Standard English as a symbol of intelligence and civility led to instances of linguistic surveillance and physical punishment in colonial settings, similar to the poem’s mention of cutting off tongues and the discipline of speech.

Errington (2008) gives a historical overview of how linguistics has been used as an instrument of the colonial project with missionaries and administrators documenting language in the service of colonial authority. In the context of Canadian literary criticism, Kim (2007) discusses how similar processes occur in literature, with a focus on the institutionalization of linguistic norms as instruments of institutionalized power. Philip’s work complicates these analyses insofar as language ideology is not only semantic but also phonetic. The repetition of syllables, the phonetic drift between maternal tongue variants, and the breath-based articulation are sonic critiques to

the colonial regulation, similar to Guttman's (1996) observation that the poem is an enactment of "disjunction of aphasia and myth".

2.1.3 Orality and Maternal Memory

In Philip's poem, Deloughrey (1998) foregrounds the importance of maternal mediation, stating that the articulation of the mother tongue serves as a corporeal vehicle of diasporic memory. In the sequences where the speaker embodies maternal oral transmission by "blowing" words into the child's mouth, the poem plays with the notion of language as lived and inherited, but also with the colonial language hierarchy and cultural knowledge transmission. Lugones (2010) further argues from a decolonial feminist perspective that the embodied, relational knowledge has epistemic authority over abstract, colonial epistemologies. Philip's poem is attentive to maternal and bodily transmission, a politics of sound that validates affective and intergenerational modes of knowledge. The maternal sequences also work at the prosody and phonetic level. Variants like "mammy tongue / mummy tongue / momsy tongue / modder tongue / ma tongue" represent micro-phonetic drift, which corresponds to historical, familial and diasporic articulations (Kraus, 2009).

According to Deloughrey (1998), these sequences are an alternative memory practice, a practice that is disruptive to colonial documentation, which places affective and oral registers ahead of textual normativity. Feld's philosophy of "acoustemology" (Feld 1996; 2015) suggests that sound is not just a means of communicating meaning; it is also an expression of knowledge in the context of listening to the environment and listening to others. According to Feld, acoustemology is a convergence of knowing and sound, of listening and sensing, and of voice and place. This system applies directly to Philip's poem, and the maternal refrain becomes a sonic epistemology (a means of knowing that does not rely on visual or textual representation). Historically, scholarship on oral tradition has shown that repetition, formulaic patterning, and rhythmic structure are memory technologies: that is, ways of preserving memory other than fixity.

2.1.4 Sonic Disruption and Decolonial Noise

Recent research has made significant strides in theorizing listening as a political epistemic practice, doing so under rubrics that evade traditional aesthetic categories. Voegelin (2018) in *The Political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening* argues that listening is not a passive act but an active and generative practice that can produce new political imaginings if it focuses on listening to sonic phenomena other than those of the visual and rational orders of perception. She argues that sound is invisible and is materially fluid and evades visual control, providing another means of relating to the world, one that is not fixed in place but resonates, vibrates, and relates. This framework is in direct resonance with Philip's exploration of stutter and silence as forms of acoustic refusal which escape colonial regimes of visual and textual legibility.

Gre, Meireles, and Rennie (2024) developed "endarkened listening" which focuses on the "relation, refusal, opacity and responsibility" in sonic encounters, directly confronting the colonial desire for transparency and legibility. They say that endarkened listening is a practice that is not focused on the extraction of information or transparent meaning-making, but on presence, accountability and openness to not knowing. The principle of "opacity": the right to remain not fully understood is implemented through Philip's strategic silences and fragmentary lines that do not resolve into definite meaning. Robinson (2020) suggests that Western systems of listening position Indigenous and non-normative sound as noise and error, not as legitimate knowledge. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson shows that "noise" (accent, stutter, nonstandard rhythms, strategic silences) is not a problem of communication but an act of nonconformity with standardized definitions of intelligibility that are imposed by colonial acoustic regimes. This

framework resonates with Philip's stutter in which acoustic disruption is not disorder but a deliberate decolonial gesture that disrupts the colonial desire for transparency and legibility. Ochoa Gautier, in her work *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Colombia* (2014), shows the centrality of listening in colonial knowledge production. She maps the colonial state's ability to differentiate between the "civilized" and "barbaric" voices with prosodic evaluation, assigning some rhythms and accents to be rational and others to be animalistic. In *A Ch'ixi World Is Possible*, Rivera Cusicanqui (2023) proposes the concept of "ch'ixi" as decolonial aesthetic category determined not by purity, but by contradiction, mixture, and opacity. She describes the ch'ixi as neither synthesis nor hybrid, but rather a parallel coexistence of opposites which cannot be resolved in a third term, a paradoxical simultaneity of being and not-being. This is the framework that aligns with Philip's rejection of linguistic purity, her adoption of "phonetic and semantic" contradiction (language/languish/anguish) and her advocacy for opacity instead of transparency.

2.1.5 Decolonial Archiving and Metadata Critique

Decolonial archival studies have investigated the reproduction of colonial authority in the metadata, description standards, and classification systems that parallel the critiques of linguistic classification. Note (2025) states that archival description is not neutral; for example, LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings) and standards like DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard) carry with them assumptions about authority, identity, and ownership that are based on colonial logics. Note also advocates for community-led description, multiple perspectives and relational metadata rather than single, authoritative finding aids observing that when a community's name is changed by a colonial power and the archival description reflecting the colonial name, this functions as an instrument of erasure.

Caswell (2014) offers a conceptual analysis of community archives as a means of resisting the erasure of institutional archives, showing how community archives can help to recover what she calls symbolic annihilation, the systematic exclusion of marginalized groups from institutional memory. This framework helps to strengthen the argument that archival return and rebuilding are more than technical fixes, and are essential forms of epistemic justice.

Caswell and Cifor (2016) build upon this framework by proposing a feminist ethics of care which, they argue, should underpin archival relationships, between archivists, records, and the communities that those records serve, privileging radical empathy over professional detachment, an alternative approach echoed in Philip's own refusal to address the detachedly institutional voice, but rather to transmit relationally and embodied through a voice that shares with its reader.

Comber, Järdeemar, Tsimba, Campo Woytuk, Murdeshwar, and Lunyanga (2025) address the return of unappreciated archival materials (glass negatives, films, documents) to communities as decolonial practice, advocating for archives "delinked from globalized and abstracted systems" of classification. They suggest adopting a methodological approach that they call "designing with decolonial intent" which prioritizes community values over professional standards. Their work shows that not only do these archives need to be physically restored but it also calls for a reconsideration of the ways in which archives are organized, described and accessed. Drake (2019) questions how black and decolonial archives might be reconstructed, repaired, or rebuilt instead of simply being diversified, as archives have historically failed black communities not by accident, but by design. Drake challenges the way archival systems read black historical absences as ontological lacks, rather than as an effect of violent erasure, and calls for the reconstruction, not the incorporation of marginalized materials into existing archival structures.

Bastian, Aarons, and Griffin (2018) situate these critiques in direct conversation with the Caribbean context in which Philip writes, arguing that the Caribbean continues to be archived by colonial logics of classification, ownership and erasure that Philip parodies, and that a decolonial approach to the Caribbean record demands the same shift in authority to community and description as the one toward which this study urges the reader navigate within the poem.

2.1.6 The Research Gap

Both existing and recent scholarship exhibit the same pattern: sonic features are described but not yet systematically theorized as decolonial knowledge practice. Repetition, fragmentation, stutter, are recognized by critics as aesthetic, psychological or expressive phenomena, but not as epistemic interventions. No study has yet worked with sonic structure as decolonial method, connects the act of phonetic disruption to epistemic disobedience, or situates listening as a formal qualitative analytic practice. Moreover, no study has read Philip's edicts and medical taxonomy as a critique of classification that extends, by analogy, to archival metadata. This study aims to address that gap by articulating a sonic decolonial framework and systematically executing this through close qualitative analysis.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three theoretical strands: decolonial theory, language ideology and sonic epistemology, as well as a bridge to decolonial archiving through the concept of the classification as colonial technology.

2.2.1 Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Disobedience

Language is not only communicative; it is also classificatory: it is a means of ordering and assigning authority. Such a classificatory tendency was carried over into pedagogy and discipline. Colonial schooling mandated grammar as moral order, and any deviation from the grammar was considered a lack of competence. In this context, a critique of colonial language cannot be exclusively semantic; it must also engage with linguistic form, and sound patterning, as these are sites where authority is encoded and enforced.

2.2.2 Classification as Colonial Technology

Decolonial archival literature describes metadata and description standards as colonial in logic, reasserting an idea of hierarchy in knowledge and authority. Likewise, Philip's strategies of "sonic disruption" (stuttering, drifting, silence) and classificatory parody imply principles of alternative archival practice: relational, multi vocal, and community-controlled.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive research design that draws on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) and decolonial qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The methodological assumption is that sonic patterning constitutes analyzable linguistic data which expresses ideology and epistemic structure. The research adopts an intensive, close reading approach that takes a single poem as paradigmatic case whose patterns are transferable to other decolonial settings.

3.2 Data and Scope

The data is the full text of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Discourse on the Logic of Language*. The poem is analyzed as a hybrid discourse field, in which the following genres are combined: poetic lyric, legal edict parody, pedagogical questionnaire, anatomical scientific prose, and refrain-based chant.

3.3 Listening as Method

Listening is conceptualized as a formal qualitative method as the research gap is focused on the sonic dimension. Passages are studied as vocal rather than as silent text. There is focus on mouth

feel of syllables, breath intervals, articulatory difficulty, rhythmic compulsion, and echo effects. The listening process involves five interconnected moves: preparation (repeated reading and recording), phonetic attention (acoustic effort and interruption), prosodic mapping (marking the rhythm and cadence changes), reflexive journaling (positionality of researcher's listening biases), and interpretation (linking the acoustic features with colonial language ideology).

It also aligns with Gre, Meireles, and Rennie's (2024) concept of "endarkened listening" as an act of relation, refusal, and responsibility. This principle considers the acoustic disruption as a signal and not an error (Robinson, 2020; Gre, Meireles, & Rennie, 2024; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2023).

3.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

In decolonial scholarship, researcher positionality is recognized as crucial. The analysis is conducted from the perspective of an academic scholar operating within Anglophone academic institutions, situated within the colonial histories of production of knowledge. The role requires reflexivity with regard to personal listening and interpretation styles. The researcher's positionality, trained in these institutional spaces, informs the questions and listening regimes to the poem. The study does not attempt to represent or speak of subaltern positions but rather to provide analytical instruments that enable identification of sonic resistance strategies that are already embedded within the poetic text. This is a reflexive stance, in line with decolonial methods that challenge extractive, universalizing arguments.

4 Analysis and Findings

The analysis is organized in three dimensions linked to the research questions, with two further subsections (genre-voice collision and silence) extending RQ1 and RQ2's sonic focus into adjacent textures the poem employs. Question 1 and 2 cover sonic and prosodic aspects; question 3 covers edicts and medical taxonomy, analogously to decolonial archiving. Findings are presented and interpreted in each subsection in relation to the theoretical framework.

4.1 Stutter as Anti-Fluency Politics

4.1.1 Findings

Phonetic disruption is visible in the opening lines of the poem, as the word "language" is broken down:

English is my mother tongue
A mother tongue is not a foreign
lang lang lang lang language
languish anguish
a foreign anguish

The repeated onset cluster /l/ + /a/ + /ŋ/ in "lang lang lang" creates a velar nasal closure that parodies a stuttered hesitation. Phonetically, this sequence involves the tongue's contact with the velum and subsequent release, done repeatedly. The reader who vocalizes the line perceives the physical energy involved in articulation. The shift from 'language' to 'languish' to 'anguish' illustrates phonetic drift, where a small articulatory change (the addition of "uish" after "lang") results in significant semantic reinterpretation. The progression from the neutral "language" to the painful "languish" to the intense "anguish" is all about the sound proximity.

4.1.2 Interpretation

The colonial linguistic standpoint equated fluency with cognitive and moral authority. Standard pronunciation and linear speech were considered signs of civility; disfluency was regarded as ignorance or emotional excess (Errington, 2008; Silverstein, 1996). Philip's stutter undermines this hierarchy, this hesitation is method, a deliberate critique of the norms associated with the idea that language should proceed without hesitation. Through extended articulations and by

highlighting partial phonetic units, the poem foregrounds the embodied work of speech, making language tactile and ethical.

Three main decolonial functions arise from this stuttered pattern:

Lexical destabilization: Words cannot be contained within their semantic zones and the violence of imposed vocabulary is revealed. The word “language” cannot be received in its entirety because it is historically violent. Philip’s phonetic analysis of the word (lang... lang... lang) has led her to conclude that the colonial language needs to be fragmented before it can be taken back.

Temporal elongation: The process of articulating is slowed down, leading to attentiveness to the phonetic construction and to a rhythm of reflection instead of efficiency. The stutter of Philip’s speech in colonial pedagogy demands that the reader take his time, linger on each syllable, feel the mouth make each sound. This is a politics of the time, an opposition to the fast, effective communication that colonial bureaucracy demands.

Interruption to authority: The stutter results in the refusal to allow the institutionally smooth delivery of authority, thus denying colonial norms of speech. Smooth delivery; associated with the voice of the colonial administrator, the teacher, and the judge, is refused. The stutter is not the problem of the speaker it is an interruption of the listener’s expectation of mastery.

The stutter is therefore anti-fluency politics; an opposition to the colonial articulation of smoothness, which turns stuttered speech into technique. Robinson (2020) considers such disruptions of acoustic to be “decolonial noise”, a conscious violation of colonial norms of clarity and intelligibility. When the colonized stutters, they don’t fail to speak, they refuse to speak in the voice that was demanded of them. It is a rejection of the colonial demand for fluency and transparency, which is an act of epistemic disobedience. Listening to sonic fragmentation can also create new political imaginaries outside rational orders of perception, as Voegelin (2018) argues: the fragment derives its power not from totality but from its incompleteness and its refusal of resolution.

This finding directly addresses the first research question: stutter and phonetic drift destabilize the lexical level in breaking the word into partial sounds, and letting the sounds drift into new and painful meanings. This destabilization calls into question colonial fluency ideology in turning disfluency from a sign of deficiency into a political resistance strategy.

4.2 Phonetic Drift and Semantic Shift

Starting from the stutter, Philip implements phonetic drift, which involves minute articulatory changes resulting in significant semantic changes. The shift from language to languish brings about a semiotic transformation: the phonetic continuity creates semantic tension and establishes the relation between the performance of language and historical trauma. The next mutation to anguish foregrounds affective experience, embedding colonial traumas within sound itself. The chain of words: language, languish, anguish, is no random pun on words, but a systematic deconstruction of the colonial perspective that English is a neutral, universal language.

In colonial linguistic traditions, phonetic variation is usually considered a systematic deviation from a standard norm (Errington 2008). Variation was compared to a presumed “correct” pronunciation and deviation was identified as error or dialect. By contrast, Philip turns this drift to epistemic revelation, uncovering the latent violence and affect in imposed language. The poem poses the question: “what if language always held languish within its sound”? What if the phonetic proximity is not coincidental but structural, and shows the colonial violence that exists in the very syllables of the colonizer’s tongue?

This challenges the lexical authority on two fronts. Firstly, it demonstrates that meaning is acoustically contingent and not stable. “Language” is not a stable, predetermined entity, but

rather a cluster of sounds that may glide into others forms of expression with only minor changes. Secondly, it shows that there is already a condition of suffering in the imposed language. The colonized speaker does not have to bring pain to English; it has pain built into its phonic system. Epistemically, from a decolonial perspective; this is about refusing the neutrality of linguistic sign systems and acknowledging their historical saturation. The poem thus performs Mignolo's (2011) "delinking" from universalist knowledge systems, not through argument, but through acoustics.

The phonetic series "language/languish/anguish" cannot be stabilized, insists on opacity and multiplicity rather than transparency and singularity. Rivera Cusicanqui describes the ch'ixi as a coexistence of opposites which cannot be synthesized into a third term. In a ch'ixi, language and anguish are together in the same sound, no one negating the other.

4.3 Refrain as Alternative Memory

4.3.1 Findings

Philip employs repetition and recursive refrain to generate an alternative memory practice. The sequence of the maternal language variants is:

my mammy tongue
my mummy tongue
my momsy tongue
my modder tongue
my ma tongue

This sequence acts as a diasporic phonetic spectrum. The onset consonants (e.g. /m/) stay fixed, maintaining meaning and the maternal referent, while the vowel nuclei (e.g. /æ/, /ʌ/, /oʊ/, /ɒ/, /ɑ/) shift slowly across the series. This progression is akin to oral memory techniques used in African and Caribbean tradition, where repeating a text with variations is used as a mnemonic device. These variants are not corrections to the preceding one, but additions: they are another layer of meaning, a different historical twist, a different familial, regional style.

The full sequence (the earlier one "mammy/mummy/momsy/modder/ma") also adds the later variant "meser" (from "mater", Latin for mother), extending the phonetic space even further. The whole effect is a refrain which is never the same twice. The oral refrain differs each time it is used, acquiring meaning through difference, unlike a written text where meaning is fixed at each iteration.

4.3.2 Interpretation

The term alternative memory refers here to knowledge stored not by fixing it in memory but by repeating it. Textual memory relies on static inscription, a document that is fixed in time. Oral memory must be 're-activated' by repetition, each time a little different, alive through use. The refrain's sonic qualities; parallel syntactic frames, rhythmic predictability with lexical variation, incantatory pacing, echoic closure lines, produces an alternative memory rhythm. The poem preserves knowledge through repetition, rather than writing. Memory is maintained in sound waves not documents.

From a linguistic point of view, repetition shifts processing of propositional meaning to pattern recognition. The listener expects structure and is more sensitive to deviations. That increased deviation identifies 'ideological stress' zones, particularly those involving 'mother', 'father' and 'foreign'. The refrain changes the pronunciation of "mother" from "mammy" (enslaved Black woman in the U.S. South) to "mummy" (British colonial) to "modder" (Caribbean creole) to "ma" (universal intimate) so that the listener hears not one mother tongue, but a diaspora of mothers, a plurality of maternal origins that colonial linguistics would reduce to a single standard.

This discovery validates Deloughrey's (1998) assertion that the poem is an alternative to colonial documentation, and it extends that argument to the acoustic processes by which this alternative memory works. Feld's notion of acoustemology (Feld, 2015) is relevant here: knowing is a sensory and sensual engagement with the world, with sound offering an immediate, immersive, and relational mode of knowledge. The refrain is not a record of memory but an enactment of memory, each repetition is the act of remembering, not merely a reference to a past event.

This finding directly addresses the second research question (RQ2): Does the refrain structure carry out alternative memory, with a focus on recurrence rather than fixity? The poem does not keep storing the mother tongue in a fixed, written form, rather it keeps it alive by means of variation in sound, for the poem changes at each iteration, but at the same time it is also continuous, with stable onset consonants and rhythmic pattern. This alternative memory calls into question colonial documentation practices that require fixity, transparency, and a single authoritative version.

4.4 Genre Collision: Institutional vs. Embodied registers

The poem shifts between institutional discourse (legal edicts) and lyric chant. Institutional passages have a declarative syntax, impersonal tone, and an enumerative cadence. The lyrical passages, on the other hand, use repetition, breath driven pacing and vocative forms. Voice collision occurs as a result of acoustic contrast.

Institutional passages have a bureaucratic reading tone when read aloud. For instance, "Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that the slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible", the staccato rhythm is imperative and breathless, with multiple 'shall's and a proliferation of noun clusters. The sentences are long, but the rhythm is not flowing; rather it is mechanical like a voice reciting a rule and not telling a story about it.

The lyric sections, in contrast, have a breathing rhythm, especially the maternal refrain. "My mammy tongue / my mummy tongue / my momsy tongue" each line is short, each repetition a new exhalation. The poem invites pausing between lines, taking a breath. The decolonial implication is that the institutional voice is not only semantically violent (it orders the removal of the tongue) but also acoustically violent: it does not allow the body of the speaker to set the pace, it does not allow the breath, it does not allow pause.

The sonic juxtaposition is a criticism without argument. Ideological difference is heard in the cadence, alone. This shows that the prosodic authority markers (rhythm and cadence marking institutional power) are not neutral carriers, but instead are ideological signals. Ochoa Gautier (2014) also shows that the colonial archive made distinctions between "civilized" and "barbaric" voices by looking at prosodic evaluations: prosodic features such as rhythm, accent and intonation were regarded as markers of 'racial' and 'civilizational' status.

4.5 Edicts and Taxonomy as Parodic Classification

4.5.1 Findings: Edicts

There are two explicit legal edicts in the poem. Here they are explored fully as parodic classification systems, unlike the brief quotation in Section 4.4.

Edict I: "Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot then ferment rebellion and revolution".

In many ways, this edict parodies the logic of colonial law. First, it shows linguistic diversity as not tolerated but weaponized. The colonial administration aggressively worked to divide slave populations and to make them unable to communicate and cooperate with one another. Secondly, the language of the edict is tautological and repetitive: "shall wherever possible shall ensure". The power of the edict lies in the repetition of the authoritative formula, so the

language of the edict resembles that of legal documents. Third, the edict specifies exactly how control was exercised: through ethno-linguistic difference as a means of counter-revolution. The violence is not in what is prohibited (the edict does not ban anything) but in the structuring of social relations. This constitutes classification as governance.

Edict II: “Every slave caught sleeping his native language shall be severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ when removed should be hung on high on a central place so that all may see and tremble”.

This edict goes from linguistic disintegration to physical violence. The term “sleeping his native language” metaphorically characterizes language as something that can be snared in the act of intimacy. The punishment, removing the tongue, is a literalization of colonial project of silencing. The final picture of the tongue removed is hung “on a high central place”, parodying the colonial display of punished bodies as a deterrent. The edict reveals that colonial law has nothing to do with justice, it is a spectacle, and the tongue is a trophy, a warning.

The two edicts together demonstrate colonial classification ranging from the subtle (engineering linguistic diversity) to the brutal (amputation and display). Both are means of classification which are means of control through separation, surveillance and punishment.

4.5.2 Findings: Medical Taxonomy

The poem also contains a passage of medical taxonomy naming phrenologists:

The parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are named after two learned 19th century doctors: the eponymous doctors Broca and Dr. Vernicer respectively. Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence. He devoted much of his time proving that White males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than and were therefore superior to women, Blacks and other peoples of color.

This is a parodic rendition of scientific taxonomy to reveal the racist basis of seemingly objective medical expertise. “Broker” is a deliberate misspelling of Broca (Paul Broca, the French anthropologist who claimed brain size correlated with intelligence and race); “Vernicer” is a misspelling of Wernicke (Carl Wernicke, who studied aphasia). The misspellings themselves play with the authority of the eponymous naming; can the names be misspelled so easily, perhaps can the authority that they carry be unstable as well. Philip reveals that the way brain regions are classified is not objective but rather part of racial hierarchy: Broca’s racism is not peripheral but intrinsic to naming and mapping the brain.

The poem then poses a series of multiple choice questions, mocking educational and medical discourse.

A tapering, blunt-tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy organ describes

- a) The penis.
- b) The tongue.
- c) Neither of the above.
- d) Both of the above.

This question makes the reader aware of the anatomical and metaphorical similarity between the tongue and the penis. Both are described by the same terms: “tapering, blunt-tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy”. The correct answer (“Both of the above”) collapses the distinction between speech and sexuality, the organ of language and the organ of reproduction. However, the question also suggests: why is the same terminology used for these two organs? What does this tell you about speech gendering? The tongue, like the penis, has been an organ of patriarchal power: the “father tongue” of colonial English.

In man the tongue is

- a) The principal organ of taste.

- b) An organ of articulate speech.
- c) The principal organ of oppression and exploitation.
- d) All of the above.

This is the most explicitly political type of question. The first two options are standard textbook answers. Option (c) “the principal organ of oppression and exploitation” is the disruption. The right answer (d) requires the reader to believe that the tongue is at once biological, linguistic and political. The tongue that tastes and speaks is the tongue that gives orders for punishment, names the slave, recites the edict; no neutral anatomical description of the tongue.

Air is forced out of the lungs, through the larynx where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamorphosis from sound to intelligent word 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.

This question has a devastating impact. The physiological response is (a) Option (b) introduces the maternal, language acquired through love and intimacy. Option (c) introduces the colonial language acquired through violence and punishment. The answer “All of the above or none” resists easy resolution, insisting that all three is true: Speech requires the body, the mother, and the whip. The colonial subject’s speech is produced at the intersection of these three forces. The “or none” acknowledges that for some, speech under colonialism is not fully achieved; it is stuttered, fragmented, and refused.

4.5.3 Interpretation: Classification as Parody

These passages parody three colonial classification systems: legal, medical/scientific, and educational each revealing a different type of control. Multiple choice testing, this technology of objective assessment, is disrupted by the inclusion of violent, absurd, or politically charged choices along with “correct” anatomical facts. The form seems to be neutral (a, b, c, d; only one correct answer) but the content causes the reader to realize that neutrality is impossible. The tongue cannot be confined to the status of a mere biological organ; it is also a political tool. The reader who selects (b) “an organ of articulate speech” but not necessarily (c) “the principal organ of oppression” is not mistaken in his choice of biology, but he is mistaken in his choice of history.

Bridge to Decolonial Archiving Literature

The following connection is not causal or historical, but rather a structural analogy: Philip’s poem does not work through dialogue with archival science, but it is a parody of classification systems that illuminate the same logic that decolonial archivists identify. Decolonial archival scholars have contended that metadata and description standards function similarly to the colonial classification systems. Note (2025) states that archival description is not neutral and that archival subject headings, including LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings) and DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard) carry with them the assumptions of authority, identity and ownership that are embedded in colonial logics. As with Philip’s multiple-choice questions, the archival description is not neutral but community-led: relational metadata and multiple perspectives are preferable to single authoritative account.

The poem’s medical taxonomy also condemns pseudoscientific schemes such as phrenology and eugenics, which categorized humans according to their brain size and race. Decolonial literature also challenges the language of classification systems, such as Library of Congress Subject Headings, which historically employ racially hierarchical terms, such as ‘Blacks’, ‘Whites’, and ‘Colored persons’. Philip’s revealing of Dr. Broker’s racism is an obvious comparison to critiques of colonial metadata; the classifier isn’t neutral because the classification system carries the

biases of its creators. Parodies, by analogy, provide theoretical resources for decolonial archiving, relational over fixed metadata, multivocal over single voice description, recurrence over fixity, opacity over transparency.

4.6 Maternal Breath as Sonic Epistemology

One of the most significant elements of the poem is a description of a mother blowing words into a child's mouth: She touches her tongue to the child's tongue and holding the tiny mouth open she blows into it hard... Her words her mother's words those of her mother's mother and all their mothers before her daughter's mouth. Language here is conveyed by breath, touch, and tongue contact and rhythm; a sonic epistemology of relational embodiment in which knowledge passes not by text nor by rule, but by air and flesh. The acoustic imagination of this scene puts focus on the bursts of exhalation and soft consonants, fostering a quiet, intimate reading voice. The sonic environment is very different from the stark statements found in the colonial edicts of the rest of the poem. The decolonial notion is that language is not institutional, written, but rather, it is relational, oral. This resonates with Lugones's (2010) decolonial feminist focus on relationality, affective transmission and non-hierarchical epistemic flows. Similarly, the notion of "endarkened listening" (Gre, Meireles, & Rennie, 2024) emphasizes the collaborative, embodied sound as a way of story-keeping: knowledge is created in the space between bodies, in breath, in vibration, in the shared act of sounding.

4.7 Silence and Acoustic Refusal

Acoustic refusal is performed by pauses, line breaks and fragmentary sequences. The colonial interrogation and pedagogy requires a response; silence is punished. In the poem silence is refusal, limit. Acoustic absence represents locations where the colonial language can't come to fully inhabit subjectivity. The line "I have no mother tongue" is followed by a space, a pause, before the list of maternal variants begins. The pause is not empty but a pause of refusal, a space in which the speaker doesn't provide the answer expected. Pause, from a sonic point of view, is an opening for interpretation. It provides for no continuous authority flow. It demands the listeners' involvement. Here silence is an act of acoustic refusal, a decolonial act, a method that is coded into silence. Gre, Meireles, and Rennie (2024) conceptualize refusal and opacity as key elements to endarkened listening practices: refusal is not the absence of communication but rather the communication of the right to not be fully known, not to be transparent to power. Rivera Cusicanqui (2023) also defends the political usefulness of opacity rather than transparency: the colonized subject has no responsibility to make them legible to the colonizer. The poem denies the colonial demand for textual and phonetic compliance, and not everything that is resisted has to be voiced.

5 Discussion

5.1 Implications for Language Ideology Theory

The anti-fluency stutter of the poem shows that fluency isn't just the efficiency of communication but an ideological expectation, a claim this study makes in its interpretation of the literary text and not as sociolinguistic data. Acoustic stutter is stigmatized; the poem exposes the political not natural source of fluency by treating 'stutter' as a technique. Anti-fluency practices (deliberate disruption, slowing down, repeating) could be included in sociolinguistic models as communicative acts, not deficits. The ideology of standard language can link repetition to redundancy and/or lack of sophistication. In the oral knowledge systems, repetition is considered to be memory infrastructure. The poem demonstrates repetition as an alternative memory practice, a way of preserving and transforming knowledge outside textual fixity. There is no failure in lexical economy in repeating with variation, as in the maternal refrain, but rather a high-level mnemonic technology.

5.2 Implications for Decolonial Theory and Archiving

Sonic decoloniality refers to practices that challenge colonial acoustic normativity by means of disfluency, phonetic drift, rhythmic recursion, embodied vocality and strategic silence. These practices are not against language, they are reshaping the sensory hierarchy, putting value on 'hearing' more than 'reading', 'voice' more than 'text', 'relation' more than 'rule'. Philip's strategies: relational variation (maternal refrain), refusal of fixity (stutter), opacity (silence), offer theoretical principles for community-controlled heritage governance: The use of relational metadata instead of taxonomies defined in a fixed hierarchy. Communities may structure knowledge around networks, associations, and emergent categories rather than using a top down classification tree, such as LCSH, multi vocal description instead of a single finding aid. Annotations, corrections, and alternative narratives might be given by several community voices, rather than one archivist. Access based on recurrence, rather than static preservation. In lieu of the archive being a static collection, communities may be able to revisit the archive through performance, storytelling, and the iterative return, memory as reactivation, not storage. And the right to opacity already modeled by the poem's own silences. These are analogies and not empirical statements. The poem does not contain ready-made archival solutions. However, it offers a heuristic, theoretical approach to thinking about classification, authority, and memory that can guide decolonial archival practice. As Note (2025) claims, decolonizing the archive is not a technical issue (improved metadata), but a political one (who gets to name, classify and give or deny access). Philip's poem is a rephrasing of the political problem in acoustic terms: Authority is not only in the name, but in the sound, the rhythm, the breath.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on a single poem as intensive case analysis. While this allows theoretical depth and the development of a detailed qualitative listening protocol, broader comparative work is needed. The analogies to decolonial archiving are theoretical and need to be tested practically in the community-led heritage projects. Future research directions include:

1. Comparative sonic analysis of Black Atlantic and Indigenous poetics (e.g. comparing Philip's stutter to Anzaldúa's code switch between English and Spanish; Brathwaite's nation language; Harjo's breath-based prosody).
2. Research in collaboration with community archives to experiment with the ideas of "recurrence over fixity" and "opacity as method" in the creation of metadata and access strategies. For instance, can a community archive develop a finding aid that is iterative and users can add new descriptions over time? Could it adopt a consent-based access that is based on the right to opacity?

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study has argued that the sonic architecture of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Discourse on the Logic of Language* constitutes decolonial epistemic practice. The poem defies colonial language authority at the acoustic level by using the repetition, stutter, phonetic mutation, genre voice collision, anatomical articulation, maternal breath transmission and strategic silence. Its edicts and medical taxonomy mimic legal, scientific, and educational classification frameworks, revealing their historical saturation, false neutrality, and violence. These critiques provide theoretical tools to decolonize archival metadata and description norms, which this study suggests, by analogy, carry colonial logics.

6.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

In practice, this research proposes a shift from a focus on fluency and standardization in language instruction to a focus on attentive listening of phonetic variation, breath, and rhythm as valid

communication tools. In the context of language documentation and archival practices, sonic recordings are not simply containers of data; they are indeed epistemic performances that invoke listening protocols that are relational and decolonial. This brings us back to the initial statement in this study: if colonialism has been a history of sonic regulation, then decolonial practice must entail a sonic resistance that hears and legitimizes acoustic disruptions through which alternative knowledge practices speak. This study has shown that listening, like all forms of epistemic action, is not a simple transmission but an active process that listens in the stutter rather than failure, in repetition rather than redundancy, in silence rather than absence but in the right to opacity.

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