

Book Reviews

Empire of Language: Toward a Critique of (Post)colonial Expression

By LAURENT DUBREUIL

Cornell University Press, 2013, 239 pp.

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Laurent Dubreuil's *Empire of Language* examines the linguistic reality of colonial experience, analyzing the deeply embedded and stubbornly persistent forms of speech and thought constituted by what Dubreuil calls the colonial "phrase." First published in French in 2008 and translated by David Fieni in 2013, the study is rooted in an engagement with the length and breadth of the French colonial and postcolonial archives. Dubreuil ranges from the *ancien régime* to the present day, and his analysis includes colonial policy, novels, songs, anthropological essays, and overheard conversations, primarily but not exclusively in French. The book is divided into three sections: part I elaborates the book's concern with the colonial phrase of possession, part II develops an account of acts of speech that resist the colonial phrase, and part III explores the relationship between the (post)colonial phrase and the scholarly disciplines of anthropology, the so-called "colonial science," and postcolonial theory itself.

Rather than outlining the historical evolution of one or more colonial discourses in a Foucauldian manner, or giving an exhaustive account of any particular discursive configuration, Dubreuil aims to isolate a "phrase" that bespeaks a "phraseology" as and when it appears, here and there, now and then and, crucially, again and again. A phrase is a "syntax of thought created by language, . . . concretized into phraseology" (7). All societies are phraseological, Dubreuil asserts, as they transmit "statements and sets of ideas" within ordinary speech that think for us and speak for us. The phrase persists through time and space and yet marks a "stasis of enunciation" (14), exhibiting an invariance that the critic must trace across the phrase's variant manifestations. A phrase may be a literal phrase, such as the repeated refrain "Our ancestors, the Gauls," but Dubreuil generally conceives of it as a looser "way of speaking" (14), one that may be discerned in the repetition of keywords in different contexts, as well as in a set of connected ideas or logics of association. Dubreuil's primary interest is in the colonial phrase of "possession," which threads together logics and utterances about the possession of colonial land, colonial bodies, and colonial minds. Dubreuil also argues that the phrase of possession necessitates a recognition of the inherence of phenomena such as haunting and enchantment within a Western colonial project habitually interpreted as an unfolding of the *telos* of rationality.

Some of this book's most compelling insight comes in its second section, as Dubreuil interprets the task of speaking beyond the various mechanisms of censure

that define the (inter)dictions of the colonial phrase. If a postcolonial French language cannot simply be made from whole cloth, as Dubreuil rightly recognizes, then in what ways can the words that compose the deadly strictures of phraseology be reanimated into a living speech? Dubreuil traces the openings of a “rebellious francophonie” in imaginative and carefully qualified readings of figures including Toussaint l’Ouverture, René Maran, Bakary Diallo, and the entertainer Jamel Debbouze. These different, and often fraught, acts of speech are tied together by the concept of “speaking up,” a translation of the French *prendre la parole*, which means in everyday usage simply “‘to speak,’ or ‘to have the floor’” (translator’s note, 203). The emphasis on *taking* (*prendre*), here, captures the significance of speaking as an agential act within a contested sphere that would break with the prescriptions of speech or the injunction to be silent. Dubreuil cites Homi Bhabha’s work as an important influence, but whereas Bhabha ascribes the resistant power of any enunciation to the destabilizing nature of language itself, Dubreuil’s “speaking up” are politically infused and historically localized verbal performances, the full implications of which can be approached only by careful attention to textual and contextual specificity.

The strengths of this book’s readings are also symptoms of a theoretical schematization that sometimes appears too loose to add up to a persuasive account of the relationship between language and colonial power. The “phrase” especially, given that it is to be considered neither a discourse nor an actual phrase, seems a too malleable concept, and the readings that compose the first section of the book therefore appear as an idiosyncratic constellation of discrete analyses rather than a coherent (if internally differentiated) body. I also wonder whether Dubreuil’s implicit valuation of the disruptive and indisciplined powers of speech above its *sustaining* power requires further consideration. Dubreuil asserts more than once that one does not speak “once and for all,” but if the colonial phrase is defined by its staying power, might postcolonial speech not similarly aspire to compose a range of better and improvable, if always imperfect, phraseologies that would accrue a politically necessary durability?

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Voices of Negritude in Modernist Print: Aesthetic Subjectivity, Diaspora, and the Lyric Regime

By CARRIE NOLAND

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In the 1960s, the significance of Negritude was purportedly declared null and void. In the view of Wole Soyinka, the tiger does not proclaim his tigritude; he simply pounces. Other critics of Negritude, both before and after Soyinka, seemed to accept Negritude’s own proclamation that as an oppositional and anti-imperialist critique of francophone colonialism, its writers and its writing were the oral antithesis of Europe’s