

Notes on

Mother Tongues

Mirene Arsanios

suspicious of his own tongue—a wretchedly lazy organ

—Frantz Fanon
(*White Skin, Black Masks*)

More recent claims of xenoglossy have come from reincarnation researchers who have alleged that individuals were able to recall a language spoken in a past life.

—Wikipedia

Language belongs to no one; it belongs to no one and I know nothing about anyone.

—Abdelkebir Khatibi
(*Love in Two Languages*)

My language has a baby whose language is without words. My language communicates affection to her baby by fluttering her lips, twisting her tongue(s), and babbling inchoate sounds, syllables her baby seems to understand. Her baby won't stop laughing; my language is hilarious.

My language is searching for a language capable of expressing in words the magnitude of the love she feels towards her son; soon he will demand words of her. This inevitable human expectation makes my language anxious.

My language is an anxious language.

Languages who become mothers typically pass down the language their mothers spoke to them, a so-called "mother tongue," but my language doesn't speak such a language. My language speaks many languages—French, Italian, Arabic, Spanish, and English—none of which she can call home. Like other languages originating in histories of colonization, my language always had a language problem, something akin to the evacuation of a "first" or "native" tongue—a syntax endemic to the brain and to the heart.

When she has time—my language barely has any time—my language wastes it googling etymologies. "Etymology," "analysis of a word to find its true origin"; Etymos: "true, real, actual." "Native" and "nation" share a common "etymology," from the Latin "nativus," "innate, produced by birth," but nations belonging to the nation-state system aren't innate; they are the outcome of ongoing territorial wars, man-made borders oblivious to pre-existing ecosystems in which language and land evolved symbiotically.