Erica Scourti, *Lost to the Phosphorus,* 2017, performance at Somerset House, London. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Dan Wilton

The terms of this gesture take us back to Césaire's criticism of Sartre, which rests on the principle that social rules and the relations they dictate are embedded in language. The experiences of those excluded from that society cannot, therefore, be expressed in that language without distortion. The argument in favor of the literary mode that Césaire called *négritude* was that it better expressed the embodied black experience by upending conventional French syntax, thus slipping the racist categories allotted to it (Hélène Cixous would later call for an *écriture féminine* based on the same disruptive principles). Sartre's essay was written as the preface to a collection of black and Malagasy poetry, and seemed to Césaire to reframe black experience in Sartre's own language for the purposes of his own cause, both of which are presumed to be universal.

If language is an expression of identity, and translation is appropriation, then it follows that the most effective way to express support for another's cause is by amplifying words and sentiments that must remain foreign—in both the literal and metaphorical sense—to the speaker. This is an awkward position to take, and requires a willingness to relinquish control over the discourse: rather than seek to understand a grievance on his or her own terms, the speaker must be prepared to take the legitimacy of the cause on trust. That Merz looks faintly ridiculous is to his credit—these humiliations are familiar to those forced to express themselves in languages prejudiced against them—and illustrates that he understood the imperative of submitting himself to a cause rather than taking it over.

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I was reminded of the exchange between Merz and Davies when reflecting on an evening of performances entitled *Speak Through You* in Athens, a city that has recently been the subject of much dispute around the practicalities of speaking with—or learning from—others. Featuring performances by Ioanna Gerakidi, Juliet Jacques, Erica Scourti, Cally Spooner, and Jesper List Thomsen, the event considered how the "embodiment of different perspectives and voices" (as Scourti described it to me) might facilitate the formation of communities across physical and psychological boundaries.

Hosted by the project space Hot Wheels and organised by Gerakidi and Scourti, the event returned in different ways to the issue of how control is exercised through speech and text. For *Lost to the Phosphorus* (2017), Scourti moved through the darkened gallery space marking audience members with an "evil eye" that marked them as included/excluded from a group, all the while reciting a text in Greek, English, and a creole of the two. Addressing inequalities of access, the politics of belonging, and the relation between the sensible and the intelligible, Scourti's work seemed to me (who was by virtue of not speaking Greek excluded from much of it) to cut across languages in order to break down the hierarchies embedded in and enforced by them. Jacques' *Sertraline Surrealism* (2017), meanwhile, was delivered as a monologue. Encompassing different voices and states of consciousness, the recital ended with the acknowledgment that all writing demands that the author relinquish a degree of control over the characters and scenarios she represents.

Both of these performances considered what it means to lose oneself in language, and how we exercise power through (and are ourselves controlled by) words. In their attempts to slip between different registers and subjectivities they engaged in a creative strategy that Rachel Solnit has called "getting lost"—of entering a space (physical, psychological or linguistic) that is unfamiliar in order to forge a new path out of it.[4] An extension of the same principle is that in order to empathise with the experience of another you have to enter the space in which they live, without attempting to colonise, author or otherwise map it.

It is this entry into an unknown space, a language in which he is alien, that elevates Merz's gesture. The Italian artist does not attempt to translate or own Paul Davies's protest—does not issue a public statement of support, does not create a work of art bearing his own signature, does not organize a benefit concert—but instead, in an act of symbolic self-erasure, allows the artist's language to speak through him. Not knowing what he is saying, he acts on good faith alone, and in doing so leaves himself vulnerable. This surrender of power might, perhaps, serve as a tentative first step toward establishing the trust on which solidarity depends.

1. "Orphée Noir" was published as the foreword to a 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* [Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry in French], ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: PUF, 1997).
2. Aimé Césaire, cited in Souleymane Bachir Diagne's "Exile," in *documenta 14 Reader* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 405–25.
3. With the proviso that this reading of the photograph is an attempt to think through a problem rather than appraise the work or untangle the historical facts of the encounter.
4. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (London: Penguin, 2006)