

A MOTHER TONGUE

BY AXEL KACOUTIÉ

[Old technology stutters into life. A machine begins to whirr - gathering momentum. Static crackles, distortion sputters between your ears. A high, thin line of sound shimmers into view...]

Axel Kacoutié: It starts with a feeling that swims and swells and rises from the root of the heart to the tip of the tongue.

[Pages of a book tumble down rapidly one after the other]

Axel Kacoutié: Flexing. Flicking. Hovering over silence.

[A swell of distortion rises and falls]

Axel Kacoutié: This conjuring brings to you a moon, a bridge, a child lost in the magic of words.

[The tumbling paper appears to take flight, like a bird]

Axel Kacoutié: Your language is a spell, an invocation speaking you into existence, rediscovering the contours of your morality, the fabric of your race and gender and how you relate to others and the world.

But as you become, you split between two tongue-crafts.

[A tree slowly sways, creaks and cracks in the wind]

Axel Kacoutié: A French learnt in childhood that never grew up and your English now bewitched into your adult bones.

[The tree continues to sway with the wind, small spider-thin cracks develop in its bark. As it moves the branches begin to burn, like they've been placed in a fire]

[Music rises and falls like waves beneath the swaying trees]

Irina Niculescu: *You could call it a nightmare because I woke up so upset because Romanian language was a character in my dream, it was a person, a female.*

[A storm rises in a dream. Wind blows, trees rock and sway. Music continues to rise and fall like a storm-blown sea]

Irina Niculescu: *And this person in my dream was crying and shouting and in a way it was as if they were grieving that they're losing me and that I've lost touch with them and I'm forgetting them... And that was such a scary and intense dream. I woke up being really upset that I'm losing touch with my mother tongue.*

I think that dream came to me because... after reading that night, I realised that my Romanian was getting quite rusty and that's apparently something that bothered me so much that I ended up having a nightmare about it.

[A low tone blooms for a second. The trees have disappeared. Wind blows through an empty landscape, held in a bed of music. Water begins to trickle gently through the scene]

Raymond Antrobus: *I do find that when there are days when I'm around Deaf communities or Deaf people and I'm communicating through sign more... my dreams change. Everyone can sign. Whoever I'm talking to can sign. Even people that I know - hearing people who are friends who*

don't know any sign who I speak with - when I dream about them, during certain times, I'm signing with them.

[Water laps at the edges of the landscape. Slowly evaporates]

Rachel Cheung: *It really depends on who I'm with or who I'm around. If I'm around a lot of Cantonese speakers... I guess, I'll start dreaming a lot in... in Cantonese.*

[Wind builds. Rolling and whistling over the surface of the landscape]

Rachel Cheung: *...but recently in English because I live and work in London. But then sometimes I don't dream in any language at all, it's just a very silent movie and there are a lot of unexplained actions so [laughs] maybe body language.*

[The dreamscape evaporates in an exhaled breath]

[Silence]

[Music begins to slowly bloom - golden and warm. The sound of cicadas and sticky heat behind it]

Axel Kacoutié: *You know English because your parents travelled to its home after pointing at a map saying, 'here we will settle, qualify and improve our prospects. Heads down, we will survive'.*

You know French because you and your family were born in a land where the French pointed on a map and said, 'here we will settle. Christianise, civilise, commercialise to improve our prospects and thrive'.

And therein lies the problem.

Your Blackness is English...

[Static crackles across the music, like an image on an old television set swallowed in distortion]

Axel Kacoutié: *...your Africanness is French and neither are words your ancestors would've used to describe themselves meaning there was an import...*

[A high tone, interference on the signal. Stutters and stops, like the end of a message conveyed in morse code]

Axel Kacoutié: *...meaning there was an interruption, knowing there was a violence at the end of ancient ways.*

[Music disappears.]

[Television static sputters and stops. A high, thin tone slices through]

Archive 1: *This was called the scramble for Africa. By 1914 Britain had seized the lion share of control. France had invaded Algeria in the 1830s, now after new wars of conquest she added more colonies to her empire south of the Sahara. The fate of the continent was utterly changed.*

[Technology stutters and breaks down. A new image comes into view]

Archive 2: ***[In French. Old orchestral newsreel music swirls underneath]*** *In numerous regions that used to be desert-land or belong*

to hostile tribes enduring a miserable existence, the civilising French brought them peace, work, prosperity and joy...

[Drumming rises up, the newsreel orchestra recedes...]

Archive 3: *[In French]* Here was the village of Palaka in Northern Côte d'Ivoire. February 27th 1949 at 5am, troops came. They surrounded the village. They fired, they burned, they killed...

[The drums disappear. A lilting unsettled waltz, played on a piano, dances underneath]

Archive 4: France didn't simply want to rule an area, they wanted to assimilate a population...

[Technology judders, as if the speaker has briefly got caught in a repetitive loop]

Archive 4: A-a-a-a-a-and the more French a person became, the better their chances in life. It was an attitude to Africans that they were proud of. But even the gift of citizenship wasn't quite what it seemed.

[The waltz falls into nothingness. As if the television has been unplugged, the power taken out]

[A single hovering tone remains. Like a cold wind in an empty landscape]

Axel Kacoutié: There was no war of tongues within you between Abé, Agni, Attié, Baoulé, Bété, Dioula, Guéré, Guro, Lobi, Mahou, Sénoufo, Yacouba.

The etymology of your identity is European at its root.

Français. English.

And they have never just been a language to learn, but the weight of two civilisations that your throat now drags.

[Quietly an old family scene played from a VHS tape begins in the background]

Axel Kacoutié: *In your attempt to salvage what's been lost, they called your tongues broken...*

[A young Axel speaks hesitant French on the old recording. His mother chuckles warmly in response]

Axel Kacoutié: *Between the cracks you reside, grieving how much of you is lost when filtered through French...*

[Young Axel continues testing French lines]

Axel Kacoutié: *...and how much you are 'you' in English.*

[The VHS tape fades away. Only the hovering, vibrating tone remains]

Axel Kacoutié: *In this space, you ask yourself, can a language ever hold you whole?*

[The tone disappears into silence]

Rosel Jackson Stern: *I think all of my identity markers or vernacular, I can't express in Swedish as well. Like, I feel like my queerness is*

in English... which is weird [laughs]. Like, you would think that something like your identity would be with you in any context. That's not to say that I'm straight in Swedish but there is a kind of facet of my identity that doesn't carry through as much in Swedish as it does in English. And I think that's just to do with so many of my, like, formative queer experiences in recent years have been in English.

Mauricio Loseto: I think I am my Spanish persona and my Spanish persona tries constantly to come through in the English persona but I've always felt like my English persona sounds way too formal and a bit boring - and I'm quite cheeky and playful in Spanish. So that's a bit frustrating... but the more relaxed I am the better I feel. Because really the English persona is not natural to me.

Raymond Antrobus: One of the powerful things about Sign language I think is that its... its visibility. It commands attention. And it also... it asserts a presence in a place that can't really be ignored. It can be a theatrical thing but it can also be a statement if you want it to be.

Radhika Viswanathan: Often when I'm feeling very emotional, when I'm feeling very anguished or very hurt or I'm feeling extremely anxious or, you know, any kind of very, very strong emotion whether it's positive or negative - I sometimes find myself thinking and talking to myself in Hindi and it's only something that I became conscious of a few years ago. And it sort of marvelled my head at the same time that, 'oh! I didn't realise I was speaking to myself in Hindi and why is that?' and I think perhaps it's because... there's a very primal feeling of safety maybe? Of understanding that there are also some words in Hindi that are just... that you just cannot translate into English.

[A recording begins to play. Axel's grandma is teaching them Agni]

[The scene opens with Axel's Grandma telling them that "rice" in Bété is "sa-ka" and the variations in related tongues are mentioned ("se-keh"). She then proceeds to ask how fluent Axel is in Agni, and stresses how important it is to learn. Axel's Granddad challenges this by asking how should Axel learn? Axel's Grandma proceeds to teach the basics - how to introduce yourself, your name and where you're from.]

[Two plucked notes interrupt the scene]

Axel Kacoutié: You are with your family and your grandmother is teaching you Agni.

[The musical notes begin to ripple and flow into a fluid melody beneath the scene]

Axel Kacoutié: The cords in the mouth, tongue and throat tensed and relaxed in newer, unknown ways

But at the same time it feels like a resurrection of a truer form.

Unlike French, it doesn't feel cold and functional, this is alive with hot flesh and pumping blood.

But it's only a vision, a preview of a reimagination: broken bones setting, connections held true over a history that found another way.

[Grandma speaks in Bété to Axel's mum expressing how she can't believe how much Axel's grown. Based on the way they talk and

their physique, Axel's a "big man." No longer the baby she knew and raised till the age of one.]

Axel Kacoutié: *There is a world within your family that you can't quite see and in turn there are parts of you that will remain invisible to them.*

And you don't quite know how to feel about this. Or what it will mean in the near and distant future. Especially when the time comes when your mother can no longer bridge the worlds between her children and parents on different parts of the globe.

[The music blurs and blends with what follows - becoming an echo or a memory - the old VHS tape recording rises back into view. It's 2002, Axel is eating dinner with their mum, dad and sister. They're all speaking French]

Axel Kacoutié: *The reason why your French never grew up was because it never moved outside the walls of your home. Beyond, "how are you? I'm fine.", "how was your day? It was good.", beyond the reciting of certain prayers and the names of favourite dishes.*

It didn't need to teach you politics, you were too young. It didn't need to teach you history, you weren't in it.

What you did learn, watered down to Franglais; a blend of English and French which resulted in a weaker potion when used. Effects included a dizzying confusion and frustration within yourself - the possibility of vacant eyes, polite nods or encouraging smiles in others regardless if they understood you or not.

[Music from the opening dream blurs back into the scene]

[Dinner scene: dad asks Axel why they don't speak French with their sister and Axel proceeds to say that they don't feel good in it]

Axel Kacoutié: But who decides when a language isn't working? Who declares it's broken?

[Discordant tones in the music, like technology glitching, before it suddenly stops]

Olivia Melkonian: I've recently come across the term 'Kitchen Armenian'. It's when people's level of fluency and degree of knowledge about the language is limited to the ways that they practice it - often within the home, often around the table. So I don't even know if I'm at the level yet of Broken Armenian? I think I'm still at Kitchen Armenian? But even broken is a goal for me at this point **[laughs]**.

Irina Niculescu: Thinking about this concept of a broken language, I really want to say that I think it's really hard for language to be broken. Because for me that comes with the assumption that a language is perfect, static, rigid and from the little bits that I know - or I studied in school - language is evolved through these moments of maybe sometimes being broken, being challenged by other languages that people... that maybe immigrants were speaking.

Derick Armah: Things that have survived enslavement, displacement and colonialism - anybody speaking Broken English is actually speaking an incredibly beautiful and nuanced language-form. Creoles, Pidgins, Patois...

Raymond Antrobus: You can also break Sign language. I think I was in Birmingham and I was signing with a guy and he asked me where I was from and I did the sign for Hackney... and the sign for Hackney, in

the BSL that I know, is basically your thumb and your little finger both sticking outwards, your three middle fingers down, so almost like a kind of Spider-Man web, kind of, handshape... but then your hand is pointing downwards and you kind of swing your hand side-to-side. It looks like your... you're going, 'waaaay! Ehhhhh!' Anyway, it's a sign for Hackney - that's the handshape of it - but the sign in Birmingham when I did it... they were really confused. They were like, 'wait, what do you mean that's where you're from?!' And it turned out that in Birmingham... or the sign that this man I knew, who I was talking to, he said, 'oh actually that's the sign for toilet'.

[Static sputters bringing with it the slow wash of water. A gentle stream carves through the scene. Music blooms warmly]

Axel Kacoutié: The crack between language and meaning is a place you find yourself again and again. It isn't banishment but an invitation to vast and wordless places.

[Paper flutters like birds' wings. Gentle music creates a warm landscape]

Axel Kacoutié: Invention, creativity, expression.

[Fluttering paper birds. A pulse underneath like a pumping heart]

Axel Kacoutié: This is where the possibility of sound, objects and feelings live before words can touch and dress them.

A realm of symbols and vibration, the subtle origin of where all mother tongues come from.

[A machine switches off, taking the scene with it. Silence]

Rachel Cheung: Cantonese has no alphabet. It just has pictures and the way you say them... there are so many different tones in the way that you say them that could mean something else. There's also a lot of logic in the language. So, for example, words like lake, sea, ice and river - they all have the same radical to show that they're all related to water. Same with love, I guess, all words that have the heart or a caring sincerity and love - they all have the radical of a heart because it's all to do with the emotion or the heart or care. And the really beautiful thing that I love about Chinese language is that each word has so much depth and meaning and it can sound like other words as well so that you can do a lot of puns and things like that with Chinese. And that's why Chinese poetry is so simple and direct but at the same time very complex as well.

Raymond Antrobus: The sign for a poem is a kind of motion in which you are reaching your hand - your most active hand, your strongest hand - down towards your heart and you are bringing it out of yourself... as if... as if the heart is an apple on a branch and you are picking it from the branch in your chest and then you are giving it to someone - you're handing it to someone. That's the action, the gesture, the movement of a poem or poetry in American Sign Language.

Radhika Viswanathan: A few days ago, I saw someone post a question and the question was, 'what's the most sensual word in your language?' So it's not a word about love but it's a word that you feel as the most sensual. And I scrolled through the answers and it was... it was quite amazing because so many words - and people sort of shared these words in their own languages and many of these languages I recognised - it was amazing because so many of these words were not associated with the idea of love or sex but they were very sensual. You know, a word for the sound of, like, a really thin curtain blowing in the breeze... And that word in their language... it was so sensual.

Rosel Jackson Stern: *I love you in Swedish meaning, yeah, 'jag älskar dig' is way more serious, like, it's funny... 'I love you' I can say casually in English but I can say that, 'jag älskar dig' casually in Swedish it just... it doesn't translate. It means different things.*

Olivia Melkonian: *If you say, 'kezy ge garodnam' it means more, 'it's you that I miss' not anybody else and there's actually a noun, 'garodnakht', which is the sickness of missing somebody also can be a mental condition - it's something that you feel and you can't get away from, like, it's almost eating you away.*

[A warm, golden melody begins, as if it's playing from a slowly turning mechanism inside a child's music box]

Raymond Antrobus: At the time of recording this my son is three and a half weeks old and... all of his expressions are reflexes **[laughs]** at the moment. So, when he smiles it's really beautiful... but I don't know if he's actually communicating anything except, 'I'm alive and it's ok!' **[Laughs]** Right now he has a language of the body, a language of the face, and it's getting him fed and it's getting him sleep.

I've already been thinking about how... when I'm going to teach him a word when he's hungry, I'm going to build on Makaton - so Makaton is baby sign - but I want to keep that going. Typically people teach baby sign - Makaton - for the first couple of years of a baby's life and then they stop.

[Music Ends]

Raymond Antrobus: And that, like, elementary idea of sign language - that it becomes less useful once the child has accumulated spoken language - is one that I want to subvert.

[A baby begins to test sounds out on their tongue]

[Chords play on a piano - slow, tender and full of love]

Axel Kacoutié: *This is where you start again. Curating new bonds with a new apprentice...*

[The baby gurgles, a mouth reverberating with playful delight]

Axel Kacoutié: *...your one year old son.*

[In the background the voice of the baby's mother, 'is that a bubble?' A gentle laugh. The baby gurgles. 'Bubble? Is that a bubble?' The baby lets out a slow, pleased 'ahhhhh']

Axel Kacoutié: *In the early stages of your workshops, you see how he gets to know the craft - integrating it by measuring, weighing and marrying a word with a feeling before making use of it, preserving it and storing it into a syntax that will eventually become English, Farsi, French.*

[The baby begins to mouth, 'bub-ble. Bub-ble. Ah ah ohhh']

Axel Kacoutié: *Whether he'll learn more tongues will be up to the both of you.*

['Where's fish gone? Where's the fish gone?', the baby's mother asks]

Axel Kacoutié: *Whether they'll stay will be down to him.*

[Baby cries, 'no, no, noooo' folding into the rising and falling piano chords.]

Axel Kacoutié: *Regardless, his world will slowly expand with the nuance of needs and the naming of all things.*

Axel Kacoutié [in the recording]: *Can you say, 'star'?*

Baby: *geaah!*

Axel Kacoutié [in the recording]: *Can you say, 'moon'?*

Baby: *Moaaan.*

Axel Kacoutié [in the recording]: *Can you say, 'sun'?*

Baby: *Th-sun!*

Axel Kacoutié [in the recording]: *Yeaaaah!*

Baby [agreeing]: *Hmm*

Axel Kacoutié: *The bridges that will eventually form will connect him to both sides of his family tree*

[Baby, 'da da da da da!' His Aunty, 'no, not da da da, it's na na na!' She chuckles warmly, 'Na, na, na, naa!' The baby replies, 'na na na na!'. 'Yeah, na na na na']

Axel Kacoutié: *...praying his roots will grow deeper than yours.*

[Baby, 'ah! Da da da!' Aunty, 'No, not da da da - na na na!']

Axel Kacoutié: *Praying him more visible to his loved ones than you ever were.*

[The baby is being lovingly, theatrically, kissed over and over again. Kisses on kisses on kisses]

[The baby begins to babble alone. A machine starts to whirr, as if coming to life. Distortion stutters in and out of half-formed words]

Axel Kacoutié: *Through his eyes you learn that inheriting a language is more than teaching him how to speak.*

Your French and English and the imperial weight your throat knows all too well now becomes the lead that you must use to transform and weave both your worlds golden.

[The mechanical sound is washed away by slowly lapping waves. The baby continues to babble. Eventually the babbling is also washed away into the water. A high pitched tone cuts through the scene, shimmering]

Axel Kacoutié: *As you stand on the other side of history's banks, honour the tongues that you never got to know.*

[A book flaps like the wings of a bird]

Axel Kacoutié: *Use what you have to find the gaps between language and meaning to break, gather and conjure your existence in the many ways it decides to manifest.*

[A gentle wind blows across the scene. The wings continue to beat]

Axel Kacoutié: *A language can never hold you whole - it never had to.*

[Trees start to sway and creak in the wind]

Axel Kacoutié: *Its spells are designed to point to things that the hand and mouth cannot say but the mind and body knows.*

[The tree bends in the wind, it doesn't crack]

Axel Kacoutié: *It's in this you trust when you speak to your family, when you learn your cultures and how you decide to be in this ever-changing world.*

[The landscape begins to fade into the slow bloom of the music.
Until, eventually, it all disappears]

END



