

# MULTIPLE REGISTERS OF SILENCE IN M. NOURBESE PHILIP'S ZONG!

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## *Zong!* # 11

suppose the law  
is  
not does  
not would  
not be  
not  
suppose the law not  
—a crime  
suppose the law a loss  
suppose the law  
suppose  
(20)

Like all of the poems in *Zong!*, the eleventh poem is comprised of words culled from a single two-page legal decision—*Gregson vs. Gilbert*, the only extant public document related to the massacre of 150 slaves aboard the *Zong* in 1783. Locking herself inside *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, M. NourbeSe Philip, a poet who trained and once practiced as a lawyer, occupies the judicial system that made the *Zong* massacre possible. As she explains in an essay concluding this 182-page long poem, “My intent is to use the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text” (191). In her confinement, Philip not only excavates the story of the *Zong*, described by historian James Walvin, author of *Black Ivory*, as the “most grotesquely bizarre of all slave cases heard in an English court” (as quoted by Philip, 189), but also raises a series of questions about the relation between regulatory discourses, liberty, testimony and silence.

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown emphasizes that in liberal discourses, liberty is understood as the opposite of will-lessness and/or constraint, but “A liberty whose conceptual and practical opposite is encumbrance cannot, by necessity, exist without it...some must be slaves so that others might be free” (156). When slavery is *not* cast as the opposite of liberty, we can more readily see how a state of immense subjugation may not necessarily signify a state of complete powerlessness nor silence. We can also more readily see how subjection and subject formation are linked, making subjection part of rather than opposed to the conditions under which one might exist, speak and be heard. This is part of the work carried out by Philip in *Zong!* Indeed, in *Zong!* constraints are precisely what enable the story that can only be told by not telling to be told, but *Zong!* by no means over-determines the liberatory potential of constraints. In contrast to Foucault’s nineteenth-century sexual aberrants who “were condemned... but...listened to” (39), in the history of slavery, such reformulations of subjection do not so easily follow. Africans forced into slavery had nothing to gain from being cast as slaves—to be enslaved is only to have one’s liberty violently taken away. After all, slavery was never a mere incitement to discourse. For this reason, any account of slavery, especially any account as grotesquely bizarre as the story of the *Zong*, requires one to pay even greater attention to silence, both as something discursively produced and as something that can and does function as speech or at least as an audible interruption.

Despite the fact that the reader may, at first glance, experience *Zong!* as an excessive text due not only to its length but the sheer density of words and signs that appear in its final sections, what marks *Zong!* most notably is its attentiveness to silence. Throughout *Zong!*, Philip challenges the assumption that the subjugated position lived out in silence is necessarily one marked by an absence of expression. She draws attention to the articulate nature of what she describes in *Looking for Livingstone* as the “hard kernels of silence” (8) that mark the history slavery. *Zong!*, arguably even more than her earlier works, is a text marked by multiple registers of silence. Focusing both on *Zong!*, the text, and on Philip’s performance of this text, the following discussion examines how Philip’s more recent work challenges readers and listeners to rethink the role of constraints and silence not only innovative poetics but the social world of their making.

The *Zong* was a slave ship that set sail for Jamaica from the West Coast of Africa in 1781 with a cargo of 470 slaves. Due to the captain’s navigational errors, a trip that should have taken six to nine weeks stretched to four months. Some of the “cargo” were lost due to illness. Other parts of the “cargo,” by order of the captain, were destroyed. As stated in the legal decision, the captain was “obliged to throw overboard 150 negroes” (Philip

189) The captain's rationale for destroying his "cargo" was simple: if the cargo perished of natural causes, he would be responsible, but if it they were destroyed to save the rest of the ship and minimize further losses, he will have acted in a responsible manner and hence, the cargo would be a loss of the underwriters (Philip 189). But how does anyone tell a story so horrifying? So unbelievable? So common? So rarely told?

There is only one choice and that is to tell the story that can't be told *through* its constraints. For nearly a decade, Philip would work to tell this story using only the words contained in the record of the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* decision and eventually, with words and names created by breaking open the words in this document.

On the one hand, Philip's constraint-based poetic practice can be understood as part of a long history. In Oulipo's preliminary manifesto, François Le Lionnais argued that writing is always already about constraint. As he maintained, there are simply different orders of constraint: a minimal level in which language is simply written; an intermediate level which is related to the regularly practices of genre, literary norms and so on; and a maximal level—this, of course, is the one that concerns Oulipo (11). Warren F. Motte describes Oulipo as an "*consciously* pre-elaborated and *voluntarily* imposed systems of artifice" (11). No writer can avoid the first two levels, but the third, for Lionnais and his colleagues, is the only level of constraint that writers may choose. Paradoxically, maximal levels of constraint become associated with freedom. There is a liberating potential located within formal constraints, and the potentiality of constraint is repeatedly emphasized in Oulipo's manifestos and writings. For all these reasons, it may be tempting to locate Philip's *Zong!* as a form of "postcolonial Oulipo," but such a reading is one that only dares to read the text as an impressive procedural work when, in fact, it is doing much more and comes into being as a text and performance under radically different conditions.

In a 2008 interview, in reference to *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), Philip explained:

...people talked about [*She Tries Her Tongue*] as being a postmodernist text, and I didn't have a problem with that, but many of those people didn't understand the Caribbean and the postcolonial aspects of the area and the text. They also didn't understand how the Caribbean was postmodern long before postmodernism. Because in terms of things like bricolage and competing discourses, they were already there, and that is where that text comes from—it comes out of the Caribbean.

What Philip suggests here is that many of the markers of postmodern writing—the disavowal of the author, the decentralization of the subject, the fragmentation of narrative and so on—are always already the conditions upon which any writer from the Caribbean writes. In this sense, a text like *Zong!* may be read as a constraint-based text that extends established innovative writing practices, but to read *Zong!* simply along such lines is to ignore the conditions under which the work took shape.

Thus, while Philip may not necessarily dispute Oulipo's claims that writing is *always* constraint-based, she also does not fully align herself with constraint-based poets who choose to embrace maximal constraints. Nevertheless, when I asked Philip if she would choose to write within a constraint-based poetic practice if she could choose not to, her response was by no means purely and simply one driven by a desire to reject constraints:

In a word, no, but I have always been interested in the idea of limitation and its potential resources. But was that interest a result of my own history? Who knows? What is more interesting to me, however, is an insight about limitations or constraints I gained from the process of writing *Zong!* One of our founding cultural myths in the West is that of freedom—we can do or say anything (within certain constraints, of course); we are free to go out and find our constraints, poach on other cultures and so on. What I began to understand is that even when we think we are freest, if we lift—I want to say that veil of freedom—underneath will be found many unspoken constraints.

Yet, as Philip emphasizes, just as constraints cannot be easily cast as the counterpoint of freedom, freedom too is deceptive.

Beyond the fact that Philip, unlike most constraint-based poets, has not necessarily chosen to work within maximal constraints (or perhaps, more accurately, has chosen to work within maximal constraints for very different reasons), *Zong!* is a text as deeply marked by its constraints as it is by their breakage. At some point in the long and draining process of writing *Zong!*, Philip chose to break her own constraints. Although she would never move outside the word store of *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, she eventually felt the necessity to “break and enter” the text on a deeper level. In a journal entry included in her essay on *Zong!*, she writes:

“The text has exploded into a universe of words.”

- have given in to the impulse to fragment the words of the text—us-

ing it as a sort of grand boggle game and set to trying to find words within words. The text...is a matrix...a mother document. I did not come to the decision easily—to break the words open. For a while I feel guilt, as if I have broken my own rules, but that is where the impulse leads—to explode the words to see what other words they may contain...As I put the dictionary together, little dramas appear to take place in the margins of the text and so the poem continues to write itself, giving up its stories and resulting in four subsequent movements or books—I think about these poems as the flesh—the earlier 26 poems are the bones. (200)

Notably, the new words appear both in English and in African languages. The African words include a roll call of names that runs along the bottom of each page in the first section of the book. Of course, there is no record of the actual names of the men, women and children who were on board the *Zong* so these are names are merely evocative of the names these subjects may have held. As one might expect, the process of breaking open the stifling legal document that held Philip in its grip for several years was liberating. In our 2008 interview, she candidly explained that “when writing the last book of *Zong!*, as I was breaking those words open, I remember feeling, yes, finally, I am fucking with this language in a way I have wanted to do all my life!—my writing life, that is... I finally felt that for the first time I had my own language. True it’s fragmented and broken, but it is my own tongue. This totally ruptured, fragmented, dissonant language that is my mother tongue.” But the final section of the text—the section that Philip experienced as most liberating to compose and the section that contains the most words and signs—would ultimately also prove to be the section most profoundly marked by silence.

In the final section of *Zong!*, the text appears in gray scale and many of the words are superimposed. Here, paradoxically, it is an excess of words rather than their absence, an discursive explosion rather than a constraint, that reproduces the silence that marks the historical and judicial conditions of the *Zong*’s fatal passage. Silence is, in short, not a product of an absence, not even an absence of freedom, but rather silence appears as an unspeakable presence in the final section. Asked by a listener to read a poem from the final section of the book in spring 2009, I was not entirely surprised to hear Philip explain that she had not yet discovered a way to read the final section aloud nor to hear her admit that this section may simply be impossible to read aloud. Significantly, there was nothing to suggest that Philip saw the final section’s apparent refusal to be voiced as something she necessarily needed to overcome. Evidently, she also accepted this limitation as an integral part of the text.

Since *Zong!*'s publication in 2008, Philip has also incorporated another register of silence into the text or at least, into her performances of the text. When I first heard Philip read from *Zong!* in March 2005, her reading was, if anything, accelerated. At the time, her performance also included a short talk on the process of writing *Zong!* On occasion, Philip would even project images of the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* decision inscribed with her own marginalia in order to illustrate her ongoing process of attempting to break open the word store in which she was locked. Then, as *Zong!* was in press, Philip's performance underwent a drastic change. First, she eliminated any explanation of the work. Eventually, she began to honor the silences marking the text. By December 2008, only a few months after the book's publication, I attended a reading in which Philip read for nearly a half hour but only from four or five pages. Throughout the reading, there was a strained effort to remain as quiet, as motionless, as possible in the theater. Following the reading, the audience—in this case, primarily comprised of other writers, artists and literary critics—appeared polarized in their response. While some listeners felt unnecessarily “manipulated” by Philip's performance, other listeners deeply appreciated the performance as the *only* way to bring a text like *Zong!* off the page. After all, just as *Zong!*'s typography at times makes it impossible to fully enter the text, Philip's performance reminds the listener that this is not a story that can be told in its entirety or fully comprehended. There was, however, one other thing the audience was talking about on this particular occasion. It happened that as Philip read (or chose not to read), a snow storm was blowing in outside, so the long periods of apparent silence that marked her performance were in fact not silent at all but eerily filled by the sound of the wind howling just outside the theater where the reading was taking place. As more than one audience member and the author would later wonder, whose voices were screaming outside the building during that reading?

A few months earlier, Philip had given a similar performance of *Zong!*, albeit in a radically different location—at a historic site on a beach in Tobago. In this case, it was the voices of tourists on the beach that filled up the silences in her reading. But again, as she emphasized, this somehow seemed appropriate:

On the ship, while people were being thrown overboard, the life of the ship would have gone on....Usually, when you are doing a reading and you hear other voices or sounds, it's distracting, and you think that they shouldn't be there. But it felt right somehow—those sounds—and they underscored how other people's lives continued as this horrific act was unfolding.

And perhaps, it is here that the multiple registers of silence that mark *Zong!* are most palpable. Philip's minimalist performance may lock her listeners into the text forcing them to endure, however briefly, some degree of constraint, but more importantly, the performance permits some of the dailiness and banality that was the background to slavery to be part of the text as well.

In *Zong!*, then, constraints are not necessarily the counterpoint to freedom but neither is silence necessarily analogous with an absence of speech nor even an absence of words or signs. That the final section of the text—the section that marks a breaking of constraints—is also the section that remains least speakable and thereby, least audible is significant. Again, as Philip emphasizes, the story of the *Zong!* is ultimately a story that can only be told by not telling. So even in the sea of words that fill up the final pages of *Zong!*, the registers of silence that mark the text are resounding.

#### *Works Cited*

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