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Vocal Flesh: the sinthomatic return of the repressed in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!

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Vocal Flesh: the sinthomatic return of the repressed in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!

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Introduction

The 1781 massacre of approximately 150 enslaved Africans being imprisoned on the Dutch-British slave ship 'Zong' by being thrown overboard and drowned forms the basis for M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), a collection of prose poems split into five parts. A two-page legal judgement (*Gregson vs Gilbert 1783*) ruled that the massacre was legal, and that the ships owners should be compensated for their lost 'cargo'. It is this legal text that constitutes almost the entirety of the written historical record of the Zong massacre and, in its austere, distant and ordered legal language forecloses the possibility of those murdered ever being able to tell its story in their own voices. The possibility of the slaves' speech is violently barred – theirs is a story which seemingly cannot be told. If any retelling is doomed to be possible only through the colonial language of *Gregson vs Gilbert*, how can Philip tell the story of the Zong massacre without repeating its initial violent erasure of the slaves' subjectivity? In response to this challenge, and in an attempt to tell this story, Philp wants her poetry to 'disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself'.[1] How does the creation of disorder lead to the story telling itself, and how does this allow for the telling of an otherwise unwritable story in *Zong!*?

Fundamental to her approach is Philip's claim that despite colonial language's erasure of black subjectivity, there is a remainder that it can never entirely remove. The text is haunted in its silences and omissions by those that were murdered.

> The Body African henceforth inscribed with the text of events of the New World. Body becoming text. In turn the Body African— dis place— place and s/place of

[1] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press), p. 199.

> exploitation inscribes itself permanently on the European text. *Not* on the margins. But within the very body of the text where the silence exists.[2]

I argue that, in *Zong!*, Philip tells a story which cannot be told by confronting the silences of the colonial legal text that are implicit but repressed, and by carefully deploying them through an embodied methodology to make them explicit on the page. By making the places where the legal text cannot dare to speak, Philip gives a form of voice to those murdered – a voice that returns as a haunting of the narrative set out in *Gregson vs Gilbert*. I advance this reading through a psychoanalytic framework, in particular that which Jacques Lacan sets out in his late seminar on James Joyce. Via a post-colonial reading of this seminar I further argue that what appears as 'disorder' in Philip's poems is better understood as a careful deployment of the legal text's silences and omissions which I will define as its 'symptom'. In her poetry, Philip channels this symptom through her own body where it is felt as a traumatic tension that she translates onto the page. Lacan labels the process of channeling the symptom to productive effect the creation of a '*sinthome'* (a defunct spelling of symptom). The *sinthome* constitutes a non-representational, embodied and practical deployment of the symptom that causes it to become meaningful. Philip's creation of a *sinthome* via her poetry allows for a form of meaning to appear as what Lacan calls '*j'ouïs-sens*'. Here, meaning is experienced by the reader in their body rather than decoded from the text's *logos* (meaning making which draws upon a lineage of black feminist work on embodied forms of knowing). Philip's *sinthomatic* creation of meaning allows those murdered on the Zong to take up a form of voice even where their representational speech has been rendered impossible by the colonial text.

Meaning as *j'ouïs-sens* cannot strictly exist, since those murdered on the Zong have been stripped of the capacity for holding everyday meaning both by their murder and by the further violence of *Gregson vs Gilbert's* retelling. They have been reduced to what Hortense Spillers calls the 'flesh'. The flesh, as opposed to the body which is constituted by discourse (used below in the Foucauldian sense), is that extra-discursive remainder which symbolic systems of domination can neither conceptualise nor master. (Below I only refer to that which is thoroughly denied being in language as 'flesh'. For the corporeality of Philip or the reader,

[2] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Dis Place— "The Space Between"', in *A Genealogy of Resistance* (Mercury Press, 1997), p. 95.

I use 'body'). Alexander Weheliye adds that the flesh represents the 'manifold occurrences of freedom… of the oppressed in the face of extreme violence', this freedom cannot be on the terms of colonial discourse but inexplicable to it.[3] Philip deploys this freedom through her poems to tell a story which cannot be told. Furthermore, because it is extra-discursive, the flesh does not have meaning through a *logos*, yet in its 'seared, divided, ripped-apartness,' it constitutes the 'primary narrative' of colonial discourse, its essential negative antecedent.[4] Importantly, therefore, the flesh is not a biological ground that exists apart from discourse but a creation of language that is excessive to it: the places where language cannot speak. Understood through the Lacanian lens, the flesh constitutes the repressed moment in colonial discourse through which it orientates and constitutes itself. This repression can be glimpsed in the silences of *Gregson vs Gilbert* which constitute its symptom. A symptom the Philip renders meaningful by deploying it on the page as a *sinthome*.

Furthermore, through Philip's careful *sinthomatic* deployment, I argue that the poems in *Zong!* successfully interpolate the reader as an active participant in reconstituting representational language and crucially implicates the body in its perpetuation, causing the reader to experience meaning in the poems outside of decoding their *logos*. This has the potential to perform a form of political work by causing the reader to acknowledge the potential fallibility of colonial linguistic, moral and economic structures because they ultimately find their root in the fragile symptomatic body.

It must not be forgotten that it is the flesh of black people (especially women) coerced into acting as foundation to discursive and economic structures (benefiting mostly white men) onboard the Zong, which is Philip's concern. Lacan is not himself attuned to this specificity despite unwittingly permitting a post-colonial reading of his thought. We must therefore be vigilant not to reduce Philip's work to a 'lifeless abstract universality' or ontological metaphor.[5] This would repeat the erasure of black female voices by taking up the false position that we might ascribe to canonical white language (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) poets of 'seeing everything from nowhere'.[6] Here, the specificity of the Zong massacre takes priority. I, however, follow feminist standpoint epistemologists such as Donna Harraway and

[3] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus* (Duke University Press, 2014), p. 2.
[4] Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17.2 (1987), pp. 64-81 (p. 67).
[5] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 252.

[6] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), pp. 575-599 (p. 581).

Patricia-Hill Collins not in shunning generalising theories (in this case, psychoanalysis) but understanding that they are useless unless they situate themselves in a particular place, time, discourse and body. Hence Lacan is here taken up as contemporaneous with, rather than prior to or explanatory of, Philip's *Zong!*.

Reading Lacan towards a decolonial '*sint'home rule*'

Philip is keenly aware that the language she uses in her poems 'comes tainted with a certain history of colonialism and imperialism'[7] and hence the possibility to translate her own fullness of self and experience 'into meaningful language for her audience' is diminished.[8]

Framing this in Lacanian terms, systems of representation (the symbolic) fail to capture our full selves. We are something excessive to the discursive structures through which we try to describe ourselves. Our ability to articulate ourselves in language is therefore lacking. Lacan is however not attuned to the way that, whilst all subjects are unable to fully articulate themselves in language, the denial of being in language is highly unequal and organised along racial and gendered lines. Here I therefore appropriate Lacan's universalising claim about a generalised inability to capture our full selves in language to consider Philip's concern with the particular colonial barring of the ability for marginalised peoples to articulate themselves through a language that has been violently imposed upon them. While I acknowledge the risk of inadvertently and falsely implying that the suffering on the Zong, and of colonialism more generally, is a metaphor for a wider universal suffering, I must stress that this is not my intention.

Part of what makes Lacan helpful to read alongside Philip's work is his refusal to reduce the subject entirely to its production by discursive power. If it were the case that all that we were was our positive articulation in language, then there would be no possibility for subjects systematically denied being in that language to take up agency in any form. Because the text of *Gregson vs Gilbert* has so comprehensively effaced the voices of those murdered, the story of the Zong could never be told. There would be no room for any form of being for enslaved people within a language that, according to Philip, 'merely served to articulate the non-being of the African', yet this is part of what her poems set out to achieve.[9] Philip's

[7] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Father Tongue' in *A Genealogy of Resistance* (Mercury Press, 1997), p. 129.
[8] M. NourbeSe Philip, 'The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy' in *A Genealogy of Resistance* (Mercury Press,1997), p. 43.
[9] M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks,* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015), p. 82.

poems implicitly insist that there is something left over, even in the most violent destruction of being−that extra-discursive substance which Spillers calls the flesh.

For Philip, that which remains in the silences of the colonial symbolic stubbornly haunts it. Similarly, for Lacan, the places where language lacks the ability to speak (the real) restlessly enters into our symbolic existence as an exhilarating but sometimes frightening embodied experience that he terms *jouissance*. The incursion of *jouissance* is organised and guided through the symptom, the unconscious repetition of the traumatic event e.g. the flashback, nightmare, nervous tick or sudden inability to speak. Because it represents the symbolic disciplining of jouissance, the repeated symptom is all that allows us to grasp (thinly) at the real. One might be able to be rid of particular symptoms but can never repress the real entirely, there will always be something extra-symbolic to the subject which exists outside of language and cannot be constrained or categorised by systems of discursive power. (I use 'repress' here in the psychoanalytic sense: the removal of something from the conscious or symbolic to the unconscious or extra-symbolic.)

Despite the relationship between psychoanalysis and post-colonial theory being fraught, as touched on above and further documented by Ranjana Khanna in her pathfinding book *Dark Continents*,[10] a range of elements in Lacan's work have recently been utilised in post-colonial studies. This has included work by theorists such as Derek Hook,[11] Michelle Stephens,[12] and Sinan Richards,[13] who have also documented the close interrelation between Lacan's thought and the early work of Frantz Fanon. Here I continue this project of putting psychoanalysis to post-colonial use via Lacan's twenty- third seminar on the *sinthome*. A *sinthome* is the productive deployment of the excess which would otherwise make itself painfully felt through a bodily symptom. Via their *sinthome*, rather than attempting to escape the inevitable incursion of the real, the subject redeploys the real's energy in a creative act. For Lacan, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is a paradigmatic *sinthome*; a skillful and careful deployment of language that pushes it to the limit of sense beyond which it can no longer speak and creates a form of meaning out of this limit (for example through homophone and polyphony). Whilst one might attempt to preserve language against the real's incursion and

[10] Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2003).
[11] Derek Hook, 'Fanon via Lacan, or: Decolonization by Psychoanalytic Means…?', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 51.4 (2020), pp. 305–319
[12] Michelle Stephens, 'Skin, Stain and Lamella: Fanon, Lacan, and Inter-racializing the Gaze', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 23.4 (2018).
[13] Sinan Richards, 'The Logician of Madness: Fanon's Lacan' *Paragraph*, 44.2, pp. 214-237

insist that it always make complete logical sense, this insistence is bound to fail because the symptom can never be fully eliminated. Instead, one might learn to utilise the instability that the real brings creatively by deploying the symptom as a *sinthome*. For Lacan, Joyce was able to avoid psychosis by deploying his bodily symptom into his writing. If the symptom is a destructive interjection of the real, then the *sinthome* harnesses its energy for productive use.

Joyce scholars have long acknowledged his writing as 'a potent critique of… ideological discourses (in the racialization and colonization of the Irish)' even given his complex and often disparaging relationship to Irish nationalism.[14] The Lacanian reading of *Finnegans Wake* emphasises the bodily, symptomatic trauma of language dispossession: 'for his own [tongue] is precisely a tongue that has been wiped off the map'.[15] This symptom represents that what Richards claims 'in decimating indigenous vernaculars in former exploitation colonies, a remainder/leftover is always created and persists… [the symptom] is that which withstands annihilation'.[16] The silences and omissions of colonial English, what it will not allow him to say, become manifest in the body of the colonised as a symptom. I argue that Joyce deploys his symptom by distorting the 'tongue of the invaders'[17] to its limit and implicating his own and the reader's body in the text. This allows for meaning as *sinthome* to appear through the body, to tell the story of language dispossession which is otherwise rendered untellable by that very act of dispossession.

For Lacan, meaning emerges in *Finnegans Wake* in the form of '*j'ouïs-sens*'.[18] This coinage links the embodied experience of *jouissance* with the physical act of hearing words sounded out (*ouïr* meaning to hear in French) and the experience of meaning (*sens*). It is no accident that meaning only appears in *Finnegans Wake* when one's body is invested in the text by reading it aloud, sounding it out and hearing it rather than when decoding its logic. I argue that the necessity of bodily investment causes the reader to feel (rather than decode) meaning in the text, allowing for a story to be told that is (in its narrative form) precluded by the logics of that language. By working within the colonial language (rather than claiming to take an impossible position outside of it), Joyce reveals its material underpinnings at the level of the letter and sound, and causes them to have a meaning independent of colonial *logos*. This is the

[14] Vincent Cheng, *Joyce, Race, and Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9.
[15] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, p. 146.
[16] Richards, 'The Logician of Madness', p. 232.
[17] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, p. 146.
[18] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, p. 58.

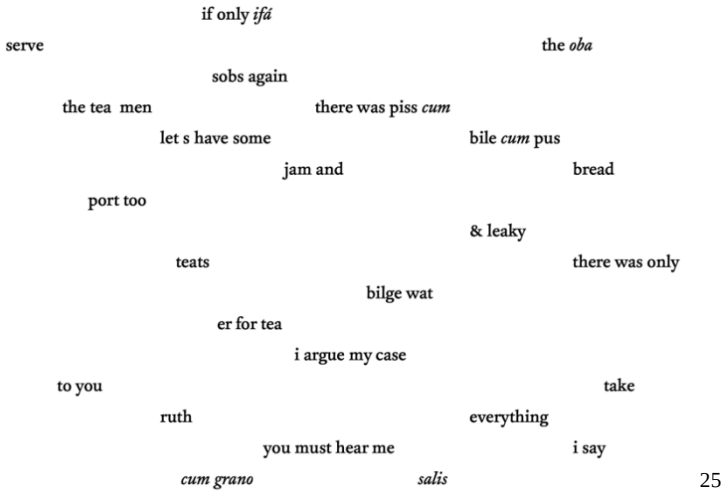
sense in which *sinthome* becomes *'sint'home rule'*.[19] In manipulating the embodied symptoms of colonial English to tell a story that it would otherwise prevent, *Finnegans Wake* initiates a kind of linguistic home rule through *j'ouïs-sens*.

Zong! tells the story which cannot be told through the embodied meaning of a *sinthome*:

Joyce undermines English not by taking a combative position outside of it but by moving *into* it. Philip also 'locks' herself into colonial logics via the legal text of *Gregson vs Gilbert*, from which she takes all the words in *Zong!*.[20] As Kate Eichorn argues, 'constraints are precisely what enable the story that can only be told by not telling to be told'.[21] This is for two, interrelated, reasons. Firstly, subject formation is inextricably linked to the imposition of constraints through language. For Philip, grammar is a 'violent and necessary ordering'.[22] Imposing English onto African peoples created new kinds of subjectivity, which cannot easily be escaped. The total disavowal of one's formative language and the logics that it entails could only mean a disavowal of self: she affirms 'I have no other language but English'.[23] This is not to imply that language is totalising, on the contrary the second reason Philip locks herself within this specific legal text is to reveal its violent silences. Philp does not need to add material, since the story which cannot be told is already implicit but repressed in the text. It is only via this negative space that the story can be told, and this can only be discovered by the embodied trauma of locking oneself into the colonial text to feel its symptomatic silence and ultimately channel it meaningfully onto the page.

Philip, like Joyce, charts a path beyond colonising logics without taking up the impossible position outside of them. This is what Patricia Saunders calls 'dis-forming the discourses which have instituted [master] narratives'.[24] Only through 'dis-forming,' i.e. working within rather than transcending the language, can its repressed fleshy underbelly be revealed and caused to take on meaning. This is particularly apparent in the following passage from 'Sal'(a prose poem comprising the second of *Zong!'s* five parts*)*:

[19] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, p. 6.
[20] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 191.
[21] Kate Eichorn, 'Multiple Registers of Silence in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!' *Cross Cultural Poetics*, 23 (2010), pp. 33–39 (p. 34).
[22] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 193.
[23] Philip, 'Father Tongue', p. 129.
[24] Patricia Saunders, 'The Project of Becoming for Marlene NourbeSe Philip and Erna Brodber' *Caribbean Cultural Identities*, ed. Glyne Griffith, (Bucknell University Press, 2001), pp. 133–159 (p. 138).



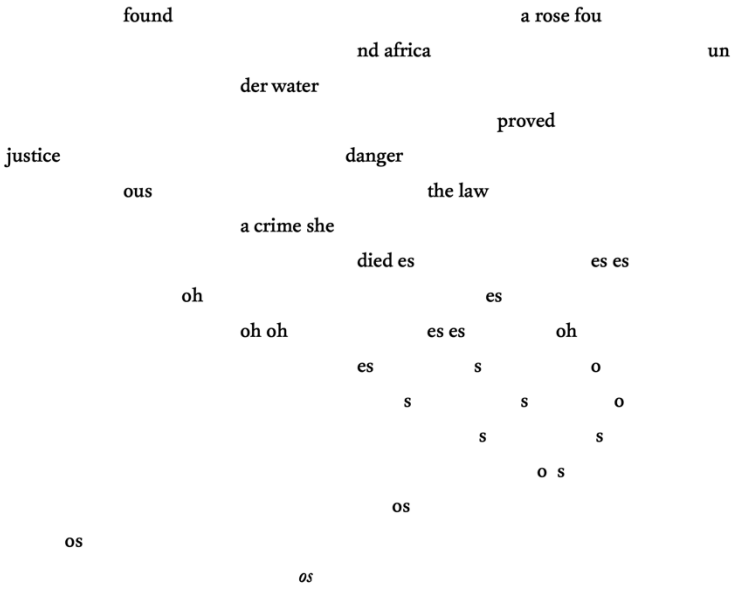
When the words from *Gregson vs Gilbert* are split apart, the flesh, which Diana Leong calls 'the quintessentially productive site of modernity's symbolic order' that is repressed in the legal text is revealed.[26] The consolidation 'cum pus' conjures a compass, used for achieving mastery over the sea, traveling in a straight line, colonising more land and trading enslaved people. Yet here it is broken into words that suggest bodily fluids, semen and pus, markers of physical and sexual violence. Furthermore 'bile' is interchanged with 'bilge' (the area at the bottom of the hold where water gathers). Symbols of mastery and colonialism are shown to be comprised of and implicated in the flesh. One effect of this is to reduce the enslaved woman (Ruth) to an object, as Nicole Gervasio argues.[27] But importantly, deploying Spillers, we can add that black female flesh is also shown to be a foundational node in the symbolic structure. Philip writes 'I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs'.[28] She cuts away the phallic illusion of self-satisfied disembodied mastery in the legal text to reveal its basis in the flesh of enslaved people. The white masculine illusion of mastery that comes with wielding the compass is reduced to the level of, and shown to be dependent on, black female flesh no matter how dearly it would like to repress it. Ultimately the male voice in the poem cannot achieve this repression and commits suicide: ironically revealing the supposedly invincible colonial symbolic as mere mortal flesh.

[25] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 70.
[26] Diana Leong, 'The Mattering of Black Lives: Octavia Butler's Hyperempathy and the Promise of the New Materialisms' *Catalyst*, 2.2 (2016), pp. 1-35 (p. 22).
[27] Nicole Gervasio, 'The Ruth in (T)ruth: Redactive Reading and Feminist Provocations to History in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!' *Differences*, 30 (2019), pp. 1–29 (p. 6).
[28] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 193.

In Philip's poems, it is only the voice of the white male overseer that can enact representational speech, just as it is only through the legal text that we glimpse at events on the Zong. Ruth is 'cleaved from atrocity's rib' and 'vanishes whenever men cease calling her name',[29] and yet she haunts these men with what they must repress: that her flesh underpins their own sense of coherence, order and purpose (represented by the compass). It is through this structure that Philip 'complicates the question' of voice as Sarah Dowling claims,[30] and paradoxically allows for Ruth to obtain voice and agency even whilst colonial English renders Ruth a non-being. The precise mode of this agency is important since as Weheliye argues 'resistance and agency assume full, self-present and coherent subjects'.[31] We cannot ascribe to Ruth the same type of agency as a speaking subject. Philip does not falsely put English words into the mouths of murdered slaves; this would, at best, distort and falsely redeem their position and at worst, cause them to inadvertently justify the colonial regime. However, the inability for Ruth's personhood to be expressed in language does not mean that she is outside of it; her voice can be heard in the silences of the text and is fundamental to it. Ruth can (in this sense at least) speak through what colonial language fails to fully repress: its gaps, silences, stutters and omissions, or, in psychoanalytic terms, its symptom.

Ruth's voice comes through in the below extract (also from 'Sal'*)* where the male voice tries in vain to use legal reasoning to make sense of what he has done, but fails because he is interrupted by another voice, swirling up to meet his, both visually and sonically. Ruth takes up what Dowling calls 'enfleshed voice' which is 'conceptualized as persistent material traces of historical anguish' and 'heard on the page as inarticulate cries, fleshy moans'.[32] The sounds 'es' and 'o' contort and exaggerate the readers mouth without cohering into narrative meaning. At the limit of the male voice's representational capacities, we find an absence which can only be filled with the symptomatic bodily contortions that signal the haunting return of what has been repressed. In these contortions the reader finds '*j'ouïs-sens*', Ruth's actions come to have meaning via the reader's body even when their narrative meaning is foreclosed.

[29] Gervasio, 'The Ruth in (T)ruth', p. 6
[30] Sarah Dowling, *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), p. 86.
[31] Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus*, p. 2.
[32] Dowling, *Translingual Poetics*, p. 86.



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Philip's own personhood is defined by that which has been passed down and imposed upon her through her inculcation in colonial language. She terms this her 'father tongue' (or in Lacanian terms, the 'law of the father').[34] Where the 'father tongue' of white, Eurocentric models of knowledge legitimisation prioritise claimants that 'distance themselves from the values, vested interests, and emotions generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation',[35] Philip is however more concerned with the 'mother tongue'. This mother tongue pertains to a different mode of meaning making and knowing, which, following Collins, we might label a 'black feminist epistemology'.[36] It draws upon a long tradition of centering the body and concrete experiences in meaning making, for example Sojourner Truth's 'Look at my arm… And aint I a woman?'[37] which Collins describes as 'invoking concrete practical images from her own life to symbolize new meanings'.[38] Philip echoes this in a diary entry from 1988 where she details her embodied methodology:

> *I can point to the exact place on my anatomy, the abdominal area, which I sacrificed for those poems—the kinopoesis of African languages. Tongue, lips, physiology of speech, dismemberment— the body erupted forcibly in* She Tries*... careful choreography— these images of the body are rooted in that experience— the*

[33] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 63.
[34] Philip, 'Father Tongue', p. 52.
[35] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Routledge, 2000), p. 274.
[36] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 251.
[37] Sojourner Truth quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 276.
[38] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 276.

> *foundation of language is the body— my body. I am finding this out after the fact— seeking out the silences.*[39]

Philip begins her exploration of this in the poem 'Discourse on the logic of Language' from her earlier collection *She Tries Her Tongue – Her Silence Softly Breaks*, referenced in the above diary entry:

> my father tongue
> is a foreign lan lan lang
> language
> l/anguish
> anguish
> a foreign anguish [40]

For Philip the official English 'father tongue' becomes a tension felt in the body, and 'language' becomes 'l/anguish'. This tension constitutes a form of knowing that exists as excessive to, but not separate from the colonial 'father tongue'. I argue that in *Zong!* Philip builds upon this earlier work by confronting the silence of the 'father tongue', which I label its symptom. She allows its symptom to manifest in her body as a felt tension of intergenerational trauma: 'the anguish that is english in colonial societies'.[41] She then deploys this trauma productively in her poems by forcing the reader into a mode of meaning making that also implicates the body. By being brought to have meaning as *j'ouïs-sens*, the flesh takes on meaning despite its status as extra-symbolic. As Anthony Reed notes, in the legal text, 'The drowned Africans appear only as abstractions'.[42] Colonial language seeks to erase the flesh of the enslaved into perfectly interchangeable signifiers and therefore commodities (hence the stripping of names in account books). However, this operation is one of failed repression, the flesh cannot be fully erased and always returns via the symptom. The symptom is felt in the legal text as an absence. It is the silence that follows the panicked attempt to force events that exceed rationalisation into a logical order and shows itself by what is labelled extraneous to present discussion: 'It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property.'[43]

[39] Philip, 'Dis Place— The Space Between', p. 103.
[40] Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, p. 32.
[41] Philip, 'The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy', p. 42.
[42] Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 50.
[43] *Gregson vs Gilbert* in Philip, *Zong!*, p. 211.

The poet makes this symptomatic silence concrete by passing the text legal through her body. Philip not only locks herself into its words but physically immerses herself in it, something that she describes as traumatic. Writing *Zong!* was an embodied process, for example she must turn her back on the room to be able to write.[44] By allowing the absences of the legal text (its symptom) to show up as the bodily tension of intergenerational trauma, she redeploys them by making them concrete in her poems (by cutting words and leaving physical space between them). This embodied redeployment of the symptom is the formation of a *sinthome*. Dowling is partly correct that the voice in *Zong!* is the 'persistent material traces of historical anguish' but by understanding Philip's writing process alongside Lacan's reading of Joyce, we can better uncover the implication of the poet's own body in telling the story which cannot be told.

The story of the Zong cannot be told by a masculine ego that insists that he is master of his symptom, and can use language to capture and exclude at will. The personhood of enslaved people is excluded in colonial English so no amount of mastery could represent them positively via its logic. Furthermore, this mastery is always an illusion; language cannot ever be entirely put to one's conscious ends since the symptom always enters into it. In order tell this story, Philip lets go of the attempt at mastery over meaning, which is involved in producing a legal text, and thereby allows the extra-linguistic symptom to take on meaning. Philip practiced litigation law for seven years but found she wasn't 'hard-nosed' enough and turned to poetry. Reflecting on this transition, she observes that 'law and poetry share a hyper concern with language',[45] to which we might add that lawyers must repress language's tendency to run to excess whilst poets often invite this excess through an equally precise operation. Philip further recalls that, as a child, she understood the power of language and 'wanted to taste' that power.[46] The attempt at mastery over language's symptom involved in being a lawyer is one form of this, but we can come to read the poems in *Zong!* as demonstrating power of a different kind.

Philip indicates her approach in *Zong!*'s subtitle: 'As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng', a fictional ancestor. This has a decentering effect, but her intention cannot be to disavow the work. Instead, she acknowledges that *Zong!* is a product of the careful

[44] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 194.
[45] Dzifa Benson and M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Breath and space: m nourbeSe philip interviewed by Dzifa Benson', *The Poetry Society* (2021), <www.poetrysociety.org.uk/breath-and-space-m-nourbese-philip-interviewed-by-dzifa-benson/> [accessed March 2025].
[46] Benson and Philip, 'Breath and space'.

deployment of the tension in her body. Boateng stands in for the haunting of intergenerational trauma which Philip deploys as a *sinthome*, the trauma in this case being legacies of slavery and racism showing up as silence in *Gregson vs Gilbert*. Philip does not attempt mastery over the text by repressing this symptom but allows it to flow through her onto the page and take on meaning as '*j'ouïs-sens*'. This is, I argue, what Philip means when she tells us that 'the story will tell itself'.[47] *Zong!* is therefore not about 'taking the dead bodies and making them signify',[48] which would constitute an operation of mastery over them, but giving them meaning in a different way, by allowing them to speak via the body in '*j'ouïs-sens*'.

In addition to this, Lisa Fink argues that the motif of the sea in *Zong!* is a 'feminist provocation to both human exceptionalism and the racial boundaries of the human'.[49] The Lacanian extension of this claim sees the sea as challenging the illusion of a white and masculine conscious ego that initiates and masterfully controls an omniscient narrative. One does not control what is washed up or resurfaces from the sea, and its waves incessantly threaten to destabilise a fragile and always illusory mastery; the swelling of the sea represents the repressed unconscious, and the haunting of intergenerational trauma. In the below excerpt from 'Zong! #1' (the first poem of the collection's first part: 'Os') a voice bubbles up from and can increasingly be heard as consonant with the waves, which are shown visually by the repeated shape of the letter 'w' and audibly by the lapping sounds of its repetition.

w w w w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa
te r gg g g go
o oo goo d
waa wa wa
w w waa
ter o oh [50]

[47] Patricia Saunders, 'Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip' *Small Axe*,12.2 (2008), pp. 63–79 (p. 73).
[48] Saunders, 'Defending the Dead', p. 70.
[49] Lisa Fink, '"Sing the Bones Home": Material Memory and the Project of Freedom in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!', *Humanities*, 9.22 (2020), p. 1.
[50] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 3.

Philip resists the 'seduction of trying to cleanse [the story] through ordering techniques and practices, for the story must tell itself',[51] the voice of those murdered must be felt in the body rather than decoded. As a result, meaning in *Zong!* is not the product of a masculine ego that claims mastery over its symptom but emerges from '*j'ouïs-sens*', a way of telling without telling. Crucially, it is not only that black female flesh can come to have meaning in Philip's poems but also that this fleshy (non)existence is necessary for the colonial regime to function. The text of *Gregson vs Gilbert* and the wider colonial symbolic is built upon racialised flesh. In 'Os' Philip gives names to those murdered and places them in a footnote at the bottom of the page, for example here in 'Zong #24':

evidence
is
sustenance
is
support
is
the law

the ship
is
the captain
is
the crew

perils
is
the trial
is
the rains
is
the seas
is
the currents

jamaica
is
tobago
is
islands

the case
is
murder

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For Dowling, this is 'reflective of the status of racial nonpersons as cargo',[53] which is true but misses the further fact that the names physically hold up the words above it. In this

[51] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 199.

[52] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 41.
[53] Dowling, *Translingual Poetics*, p. 81.

extract, the legal system ('the law', 'the trial', 'the captain') is stacked one word on top of the other: a phallic shape but also a tower (or a ship's mast and sails) that seems to wobble precariously, at risk of falling without enslaved people as its foundation. Relegated to what will not fit in the text, the excess of the footnote, the slaves hold up the supposedly self-sufficient white, masculine colonial symbolic order. Concepts such as 'order', 'reason' and 'the mind' cannot exist without black female flesh to operate as their antithesis. As Spillers writes, 'before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization',[54] it is the antecedent without which the body cannot be conceptualised. Furthermore, those who are forced into the hold of the ship, or are kept impoverished by racist structures today, provide the material basis for a capitalist economic system that would like to have us believe it operates entirely on the abstract genius of those whom it benefits, and the disembodied flashing lights of the stock exchange.

The embodied meaning created by Philip in *Zong!* has political import:

The final element of my argument asks how the reader themselves can come to experience meaning as regards the events of the Zong despite Philip 'not telling' and furthermore, how her cultivation of this experience might constitute a kind of politics. This is important to address because Philip claims that 'the political… is very much at the heart' of her writing.[55] How might the *sinthomatic* deployment of a symptom constitute a form of politics within her poetry? Given that the question of the political usually implies engaging within discourse on its own terms and that such an engagement has been violently barred by the erasure of the subjectivity of those murdered, how might Philip undertake political work in *Zong!*? Presenting the voice of the enslaved as giving a competing *logos* would be both, legitimising of the colonial and a further reappropriation of enslaved flesh. Hence ascribing the political here is delicate terrain. Instead of engaging on the same terms as colonial discourse, however, I argue that Philip puts forward a different form of politics by causing the reader to experience meaning in their own body. Despite her commitment to 'not telling' the story, she allows its repressed silences to speak in a way that undermines colonial language from within.

Lacan tells us that a language survives to 'the extent that one creates it from one moment to the next',[56] by which he means that it cannot subsist without being constantly and

[54] Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 67.
[55] Philip, 'Father Tongue', p. 130.
[56] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, p. 114.

actively reproduced by embodied work in the here and now. *Gregson vs Gilbert* presents the narrative of the Zong as neutrally reported from an immutable and self-evident reality. In claiming this, the legal text hides the constructive work it performs to make narrative and therefore disavows any responsibility for this work as well as the possibility of it being made differently. It tries to present narrative in a disembodied universal voice whose sense can remain fixed in perpetuity, unchallenged by the entrance of the bodily symptom. However, if we follow Donna Haraway in insisting on 'the embodied nature of all vision',[57] we can see that behind the legal text's pretense of infallible universality is the situated and embodied investment necessary to create and uphold colonial *logos* from one moment to the next. Without the constant investment of bodies to ground its meaning and enforce its ruling, the legal text fails to have any significance. Philip's achievement in *Zong!* is to show the text of *Gregson vs Gilbert* to be secretly reliant upon the fallible body, specifically the repressed flesh of enslaved people whom it tries to nullify into interchangeable and commodifiable signifiers. The poet achieves this by causing the reader to experience an awareness of their own embodied responsibility for constructing and upholding narrative meaning from one moment to the next.

Physical gaps on the page are a central technique by which poems in *Zong!* interpolate the reader as implicated in the upholding of representational narrative since 'we have to work to complete the events'.[58] Our eye must dart around the page in an effort to reclose the symptomatic silences and omissions that Philip has made formally concrete through the use of physical white space and the breaking up of words. Moreover, as with *Finnegans Wake,* much of the meaning in the poems in *Zong!* only emerges when they are physically read aloud and heard. As opposed to the legal text, *Gregson vs Gilbert,* where precise meaning has the appearance of being already existent and waiting to be passively understood, in Philip's poems, the reader feels the truth of the necessity of their own embodied participation in the construction of narrative. Meaning emerges not from the text's *logos* or 'sens', but from the bodily effect of trying and failing to construct a narrative: '*j'ouïs-sens*'.

Because meaning emerges in *Zong!* through the bodily investment of the reader, they are caused to become aware that symbolic structures (though often appearing to slip past the body unnoticed) are held up by continuous embodied remaking. It is the great repression of

[57] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 581.

[58] Philip, *Zong!*, p. 198.

white and masculine colonial modernity that the fabric of the western metropole must extort the flesh of the enslaved and racially marginalised as its sustaining foundation. The possibility for the Zong's voyage, the legal text of *Gregson vs Gilbert,* and the whole economic and moral system that they represent and uphold is predicated on the flesh of those that it simultaneously appropriates and represses. The slave trade could not operate without slaves, and colonial discourses of 'purity', 'order' and 'rationality' could not operate without designating an impure, disordered and irrational antecedent in the black body. By having the reader try, but ultimately fail, to uphold narrative meaning, Philip intends for us to feel by showing (rather than by decoding an explanation) that black female flesh is at the foundational root of our supposedly disembodied shared symbolic (and economic) system. If the legal and cultural logics that encouraged the massacre on the Zong (and continue in altered form today) appear untouchable through their conjuring trick of disembodiment, then Philip's poems expose the process by which they are frantically kept erect: constant sinuous exertions of the flesh. Official English's otherwise convincing imposture as an invincible, self-sustaining logic is shown to be a mirage because, just like the flesh is frail and 'divided,' so is the 'Grammar Book' of racist discursive structures.[59] Because our own fragile bodies are implicated, a decolonial possibility is opened up in the poems in *Zong!* to remake these structures towards the acknowledgment of language's enfleshment. Acknowledgment that colonial *logos* is underpinned by fallible symptomatic bodies constitutes the potential to acknowledge that these logics are also fragile and could, therefore, be different (without diminishing the way that they might appear to us as inescapable). This is not a combative politics that operates on colonialism's own terms but an internal undermining of its implicit assumption of disembodied perpetuity via a return of that flesh which it finds inexplicable, and has repressed but nonetheless relies upon.

Conclusion

Philip allows a story that cannot be told to tell itself. The colonial English of *Gregson vs Gilbert* denies subjectivity to those that were murdered and forecloses the possibility of the story of the Zong being told. In the face of this impossibility, Philip deploys a methodology that takes the silences of the legal text, which I have argued can be understood as its symptom, and immerses herself in them so that they become felt in her own body. Philip then carefully channels the felt trauma of these silences and onto the page as a *sinthome* that

[59] Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 67.

allows for them to become meaningful. It is therefore in the silences of the legal text, the places where it cannot dare to speak, that the flesh of those murdered might be able to return to us. In this return, the story of the Zong can, in the specific sense I have outlined, be brought to tell itself. Furthermore, I have suggested this telling has political import because it undermines the implicit claims of the colonial legal text to be a disembodied and immutable arbiter of narrative, and opens up the possibility for the symbolic structures it represents to be refashioned.

In constructing my argument, I have put Lacan's concept of *sinthome* and Spillers' 'flesh' into productive dialogue with Philip's *Zong!*. Placing Spillers' and Lacan's conceptual apparatuses in conversation has shown that whilst they are far from identical, they can usefully draw out elements of each other that might otherwise go unacknowledged. Philip produces *j'ouïs-sens* by implicating both her own body and the body of the reader which, as I have argued, can cause the flesh to come to have a form of meaning. Equally, Spillers' concept of flesh makes patently obvious Lacan's own failings to fully face the racial implications of his theorisation: it is not any interchangeable body at the root of western symbolic structures but specifically the exploitation of enslaved black (in particular female) flesh. My argument seeks to expand upon a growing body of work that puts Lacanian psychoanalysis to post-colonial use. Whilst Lacan fails to acknowledge such applications, they remain latent in his unique theorization of the relationship between linguistic disciplinary structures and the body, which can be a site of their symptomatic excess. Philip's attunes herself to these symptomatic excesses, the silences and stuttering of the legal text, and causes them to have meaning. I have used a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to show that her achievement in *Zong!* lies in the deployment of these symptoms to make them meaningful in terms not reducible to a colonial *logos*. A Lacanian approach to Philip's poetry is significant because it emphasizes the careful, precise and skillful operation required to transform the extra-symbolic excesses of colonial language into poetry that has meaning beyond sense.

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