

Persons and Voices

Sounding Impossible Bodies in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present. If slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom seems increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times. If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*

M. NourbeSe Philip's most recent book, *Zong!* (2008), is a dense, highly fragmented, and melancholic reflection on *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783), the only remaining document in an insurance dispute that resulted from 150 slaves being thrown overboard to perish in the ocean en route to the Americas in 1781.¹ Although it is written in English, Philip fractures and recombines this document anagrammatically, deriving words in multiple languages from it,² and creating the impression of myriad voices moaning, stuttering, and working to sing. The resulting poem, "this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history" (205), inscribes the violations of transatlantic slavery into its very structure: while certain voices are written according to lyric conventions and express interiority, others, the voices of enslaved Africans, are instead written as bodily emissions. In this essay, I argue that *Zong!* contrasts the voices of persons and nonpersons, using differences in poetic form to render slavery's dehumanization.

As Philip explains in "Notanda," the essay that closes the book, *Zong!* turns toward certain traditional poetic and philosophical concepts, relying strongly upon lyric modes and conventions, and on definitions of

personhood derived from classical liberalism. While these might suggest that in spite of its formal adventurousness—its fragmentation or its palimpsestic layering of light grey text—*Zong!* has certain less-than-radical investments, I believe that a preoccupation with formal and political radicalism misplaces the question of historiography that motivates this book. In order to maximize its faithfulness to the conditions represented by *Gregson v. Gilbert*, *Zong!* begins at the intersection of personhood and property. If “every man has a property in his own person” (Locke 20), and if self-ownership remains at the heart of contemporary human rights discourses, *Zong!* asks what kind of personhood remains for those who as “subjects of property” did not even have the right to be murder victims (*Gregson v. Gilbert* qtd. in Philip 211). What kind of personhood remains for slaves whose existence was recorded alongside limes, china, silk, and other commodities, in lists arranged according to the relative “perishability” of each item (Hartman 148)?³ Not merely “commodities for sale,” the eighteenth century’s nascent insurance industry treated slaves as “the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system” (Baucom 61). It was this development that gave the captain of the *Zong!* the incentive to massacre the slaves: “in doing so he was not destroying his employer’s commodities, but hastening their transformation into money” (62). “This was an action on a policy of insurance,” the *Gregson v. Gilbert* justices write, and “the argument drawn from the law respecting indictments for murder does not apply” (211).

Philip explains that her text accounts for the slaves’ transformation into commodities and into money, but that her ultimate goal is to “re-transform” them “back into human” (196). Placing the human at the centre of the work, Philip holds off on what might appear to be more politically radical critiques of liberalism, or of humanism, for example.⁴ However, to criticize her work from this perspective ignores the importance accorded to the body in *Zong!*, and the careful ways in which Philip disarticulates it from the legal person. *Zong!* re-imagines poetic voice as a bodily emission, but one that neither connotes nor corresponds to personhood. I read Philip’s project—both a formal and an ontological one—as the sounding of impossible bodies, slaves whose material traces have been fully lost, and as the sounding of the impossible communion with those bodies that she wishes to inaugurate. Philip’s poems contrast the self-possessive voices of unified subjects, legal persons, with the particulate, overlapping voices of legal nonpersons, the slaves whose bodies persist beyond and are shaped by their legal nonrecognition as persons. Reading these contrasting voices, I argue that the distinctions between models

of poetic voice—between expression and bodily emission, between presence and trace—signal the historiographic problem that motivates Philip's work: how to write the non-person, what textual forms are adequate to the representation of non-personhood.

Wanting the Bones

Philip provocatively contends that the answer to the dehumanization enacted through legal ownership, slavery, is metaphorical ownership in the present, a claim made through the investment of affect and the establishment of legacy—a form of affective possession. Thus, the slaves' "re-transform[ation]" is accomplished via tactical deployments of two discourses: a rhetoric of desire in which affective investment is understood as a type of ownership and a lyric discourse that attempts re-animation of its object through apostrophic naming. Before I turn to Philip's "retransform[ation]" of the slaves, though, I want to hesitate on the word "back," so crucial to her phrase "back into human." Her project is precisely located in this word, which signals the fact that the 150 Africans killed in the *Zong* massacre came to be considered as other-than-human at a particular and traceable historical moment. The word "back" reminds us that the definition of "human" can be historicized, that it is dependent upon the rise and fall of specific discourses, and that its universality has always drawn a boundary.⁵ When Philip expresses her impossible desire to possess the slaves' bones, as she so frequently does in "Notanda," she signals the fraught status of possession at work in *Zong!*: if it was being possessed as property that stripped enslaved Africans of their status as humans, paradoxically, it is in being possessed affectively that they will become human again. The word "back" evokes both a past and future beyond the dehumanization of slavery.

In "Notanda" Philip narrates her struggle to justify her relationship to the slaves and to their story, frequently turning to moments when she encounters challenges to or confirmations of her claim. She describes the feeling of needing "to seek 'permission' to bring the stories of these murdered Africans to light," and so undertaking a trip to Ghana in the summer of 2006 (202). She meets with an Ewe priest and discusses her project with him, at which point the priest assures her that "none of [her] ancestors could have been among those thrown overboard," otherwise she "would not be there" (202). Shocked at these comments, Philip states that she had "never entertained the thought that [she] may have had a personal connection to the *Zong*," and further, that she had never "sought to

understand why this story ha[d] chosen [her]” (202). However, Philip’s shock is renewed when her daughter reminds her that “those who were thrown overboard” could have “left . . . offspring,” making a genetic connection to the victims possible (202). This prompts Philip to remember an additional detail: that “only some of the African slaves were drowned” (202), and that she could therefore be descended from those who survived.⁶ Although Philip acknowledges that these genetic connections are unlikely, her assertion that they are nevertheless possible bolsters her claim to affective property in the drowned slaves. The strange and remote possibility of familial relationship justifies her “want[ing] the bones” (201), and suggests that her desirous attitude constitutes an appropriate claim to these bones, that legacy is an acceptable form of ownership.

The question of possession in *Zong!* is complicated not only by the unlikelihood of Philip’s familial connection to the victims of the massacre, but also by the impossibility of ever making that possession literal by retrieving the victims’ bones from the ocean. Indeed, this impossibility is not only a practical one; it is also conceptual. Philip reveals that there is no “word for bringing bodies back from water,” nothing that “has as precise a meaning as the unearthing contained within the word exhume” (201). Within a chain of earnest questions, she proposes the term “exaqua” (202), a neologism whose necessity provokes sympathy both for the unburied slaves and for Philip, their dispossessed legatee. When Philip states that she “want[s] the bones” (201), she does so in recognition of the impossibility of ever receiving them, and one of the premises of *Zong!* is that affective investment will always be made in the absence of an actual, physical object in which to invest; as much as the slaves are affectively possessed, they will never literally be held.

Thus, Philip brings into conflict the desire to hold the slaves as affective property and the more literal questions of ownership that also occupy her text. When she “lock[s] [her]self into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape” (191), the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, Philip restricts herself to the legal discourse that stripped the murdered Africans of their humanity even before they were stripped of their lives. Indeed, she locks herself within a document that makes explicit its refusal to recognize these murders as murders. “The drowning of 150 people,” Philip explains, was “merely the disposition of property in a time of emergency to ensure the preservation of the rest of the cargo,” the remaining slaves (191). Although “all the justices [in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case] agree[d] that the action of the ship owner

was wrong,” their legal objection was not to the killing, but to the owners’ contention that the underwriters should pay them for the sacrificed property (193). Against this cruel logic her poem’s wager “is simply the story of be-ing which cannot, must, be told” (200).

The contrast between Philip’s desirous, expository “I” and the non-personhood of those whose stories will be “told by not-telling” (191) is very sharp, and part of her project is to reduce this extreme distinction through her stated goal of “re-transform[ation].” *Zong!* employs lyric modes such as apostrophe, seeking to reanimate the lost slaves and to endow them with some degree of lyric if not legal personhood by giving them names. Lyric poetry, as Barbara Johnson has argued, negotiates the relationship “between the ‘first person’ (grammatical ‘I’) and the ‘constitutional person’ (the subject of rights),” such that “what comes to be at stake” in lyric poetry “is lyric poetry itself as a poetry of the subject” (164). Turning to lyric modes in order to demonstrate the differential distribution of legal personhood, *Zong!* makes the relationship between the lyric “I” and the legal person a key question of its poetic form.

The first lyric mode that works to bring the murdered slaves “back into human” in *Zong!* is the use of apostrophic naming that occurs throughout “Os,” the first section of the book. Although many forms of actuarial listing took place on slave ships, slaves’ names were never recorded. Countering this loss, Philip uses procedures of fracture and anagrammatic recombination to find West African names within the legal text and includes these names as footnotes to her poems. Below the main body of text on each page in “Os” is a thin black line, and under this line is a handful of names: “Masuz Zuwena Ogunsheye Ziyad Ogwambi Keturah” (3), “Kesi Modele Mtundu Ibunkunle Adeyemi” (18), “Akilah Falope Ouma Weke Jubade” (25), “Bomani Yahya Modupe Jibowu Fayola” (43), and so on. These names endow the slaves, whose real names have been lost to history, with some form of distinctness, of identity. The names are reminders of their linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, and the fact that Philip places the names in small groups is suggestive of societal and familial ties. This naming is not an address exactly, but it undoes the slaves’ anonymity, calling them into some form of lyric personhood.

However, the names that Philip gives the slaves and their placement in the footnotes also demonstrates the slaves’ extraneous position in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* trial and its documentation. Drawing on her experience as a lawyer, Philip explains that “the basic tool in the study of law is case analysis,” which requires that the student isolate the core legal principle, the *ratio decidendi*,

or the *ratio*" (199). Having isolated that, "all other opinion becomes *obiter dicta*, informally referred to as *dicta*. Which is what the Africans on board the *Zong* become—*dicta*, footnotes" (199). The Africans' position as "footnotes" in the *Zong* case is literalized in "Os," and in this section the diction and syntax of Philip's poetry is closest to the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. The poem "Zong #23" illustrates the strange interaction between the legalistic poems and their footnotes:

was
 the weight in being
 the same in rains
 the ration in loss
 the proved in fact
 the within in is
 the sufficient in indictment
 the might have in existed
 is
 the evidence in negroes

Moleye Maideyi Ibeyemi Nobini Olonade Bunmi (40)

The body of this poem uses only words from the original legal text, without breaking them apart or recombining them into other languages. The poem refers clearly and specifically to elements of the case: the problem of insufficient water on board the ship is alluded to through the mention of "rains," the "loss" under consideration is present in the third line, the burden of proof at trial is referenced in the words "proved" and "sufficient." Each word can be located easily within the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, and the repeating syntax of the "was" section endows this short poem with the logical consistency commonly associated with legal proceedings, or with double-entry bookkeeping.

The implications of the case are referenced in the word "existed" and in the two controlling terms, "was" and "is," that give the poem its shape. Essentially, the work of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* justices is to interpret what "was," and on the basis of that interpretation to rule on what "is." This division of the poem into temporally distinct sections demonstrates that being changes over time according to changes in the law: the diverse pieces of evidence, implications, and modes of argumentation listed in the

“was” section are translated into legally admissible evidence that “is.” The consistency of the poem’s interrogative syntax across both sections, however, suggests that the slaves’ “being” remains in question throughout; they are merely “the might have in existed.” While Philip states that her aim is to “exaqua’ them from their ‘liquid graves,” (202) it is only below the surface that the slaves have names, that they are distinct individuals with a value beyond their circulation in networks of global finance.

Whereas the lists of names appear below the dark line in the first section of “Os,” its second section, “DICTA,” maintains the dark line, but no names appear below it. In this section, the slaves’ status as *dicta* is more literal: because they are, emphatically, not the *ratio*, they are absented even from their position as footnotes, and do not appear in the text at all. Philip gives these names in order to demonstrate the power of the law, for their erasure shows that “the law supercedes being” and that being “can be changed by the law” (200). Thus, the specificity and individuality of the Africans, the lyric personhood implied by their names, is annulled by the legal discourse in which “negroes” are only “the evidence,” not the victims. The legalistic and actuarial logic of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* source text negates the possibility of the slaves’ personhood, and accordingly their names vanish, just like their bones.

The Lyric Person and the *Oba’s Sobs*

Philip’s affective possession of the slaves directly counters this formation, and her apostrophic naming stakes a claim to what is immaterial and irrecoverable—to the bodies that legally do not, and literally are not matter. The challenge that *Zong!* answers is how to create various different kinds of poetic voices that, in their combination and contrast, demonstrate the differential distribution of personhood imposed by the law.⁷ “Sal,” the section following “Os,” intensifies the use of lyric conventions, particularly those of traditional elegies, such as the vocative “O” or “oh,” the preponderance of the first person “I,” and the use of apostrophe to address an absent figure. However, “Sal” is not strictly lyric, as the text is dispersed across the page, and includes instances of demotic English and other languages, which interrupt the dominant voice, seeming to come from other sources. The main voice in “Sal,” Philip explains, belongs to “someone who [is] white, male, and European” (204) and who addresses his discourse primarily to “dear ruth” (64), a figure who is listed in the “Manifest” at the back of the book under the category of “WOMEN WHO / WAIT” (186). While this voice represents the thoughts and feelings of a single and unique person

conforming to the categories that Barbara Johnson has called “the lyric ‘person’” and the “the legal ‘person’” (158),⁸ the utterances in other languages are brief, limited, and difficult to parse. These utterances are not sufficient to signify personhood either lyrically or legally, and the most striking effect of “Sal” is its structural differentiation between these contrasting models of poetic voice.

The “white, male, and European” voice illustrates the problem of lyric personhood: because he is clearly identifiable as a person, narrating and reflecting upon his experiences, and protected (so we presume) from the violence that he describes, this voice offers a certain measure of relief from the relentlessness of Philip’s difficult text. Identification with this murderous voice, however, can only be perverse, and in this perversity, Philip demonstrates that the lyric can deploy emotions such as grief and remorse in order to garner sympathy even for the most heinous crimes. This voice delivers a broken narration of a sexual assault which he has committed: “she / falls / fortunes over / board rub / and rob her / now i lose / count i am / lord” (61), “gin / & rum of / murder / rimed with sin / her sex / open all / night rain / a seam of sin & / to market to market / tin / such / to trap a fat pig / a fat nig” (67), “cut / her / open her / shape / tie her / ripe / toes / round / and firm” (71). He speaks in extremely racist terms, rhyming “nig” with “pig” throughout the section: “our pig got / with n / got / our nig too / egroes” (69). His narrative of sexual assault is intertwined with descriptions of throwing someone, probably the victim, overboard: “dead she went / over & / under she was / wet put / ashes / on her water s” (71), “whore they laid her / to rest she died” (73). Finally, the voice also describes the deaths of children: “over / board / all / fled the lair / as / on wing / such a thin / mite he / was just / seven” (74).

Philip expertly manipulates the expectations of the lyric tradition, and also makes this voice a figure of sympathy. In addition to the preponderance of the anguished O/oh, this voice laments “the loss within / how many / days how long” (61), begs “ruth” or perhaps God to “save us *os* / salve / & save / our souls” (63), and declares his fallen status: “who can cure / me the cur” (67). He ponders the contradictions of his role: “as there is / *ratio* / in rations / but why ruth / do the stars / shine / if only / murder made us” (65). He states that “my plea is negligence” (69), and attempts to justify his actions: “our aim / to rid the good / ship of dying” (74). He also seems haunted by what has happened on board: “*rêve* the she negro / he s done for / drives me / mad *je rêve je / rêve* him him / him & him / her” (72). Further, he is aware of the slaves’ fragile physical condition, and often refers to their “scent of mortality”

(62), “pus” (65), “sang” (68), “piss” and “bile” (70), and suggests his own role in their injury: “torn we sear / & singe the rose / of afric a” (76). Thus, the lyric modes taken on in this poem not only construct a “white, male, and European” speaker, they encourage a perverse identification with this voice by making his thoughts available and demonstrating his grief and remorse.

While the use of lyric modes allows this voice to atone for his sins, his lamentations do nothing to diminish the distinction between the personhood that is accorded to him and the debased or illegible status of the interrupting utterances. In addition to the words in French and in Latin contained in the quotations above, many of these utterances take the form of words in Yoruba. Rather than phrases that evoke psychic interiors, single words in Yoruba tend to be repeated over and over. For example, the word “*ifá*,” which means “divination,” occurs frequently in proximity to the English word “if.” Like all of the words from languages other than English, “*ifá*” is always italicized, and thus is immediately apparent as a fragment of another language. However, this fragmentariness makes it difficult to parse: if “*ifá*” is divination, should this repeated word be read as a series of frustrated attempts at divination made by the “*oba*,” the king or ruler, whose “sobs” begin this section of the poem (59)? The word “*ifá*” transitions into the nonsense syllable “fa,” and then into the English phrase “fall / ing over / & / over the crew” (60), which might be spoken by the dominant voice. Thus, the *oba* and the “white, male, and European” speaker are put into contact and contrast: while the latter speaks, narrates, and conforms to the formal structures of lyric personhood, the former “sobs” inarticulately. His affective state is apparent, but this does not fulfill the formal requirements of either legal or lyric personhood.

Because Philip is an influential theorist of demotic English and its uses and position in literature, it is striking that *Zong!* uses so little of it.⁹ However, in addition to the English-language lyric voice and the words in other languages, there are a few instances of demotic English in “Sal.” Unlike the single words in Yoruba and other languages these are brief phrases, but they too work in counterpoint to the “white, male, and European” voice. Highly localized and extremely brief, when these phrases are combined they suggest a narrative of capture: “*de men / dem cam fo mi / for me for / yo for je / pour moi & para / mi flee / the fields / gun bam / bam*” (66), “*de man him / cam / fo mi a fez / pon his head*” (74). The voices in demotic English do not carry the same implication of interiority as the dominant voice’s lyric “I”: they only narrate actions, never thoughts. Unlike the dominant voice, whose reflections and remorse characterize him as a lyric person, these demotic

utterances stretch only just beyond the single words in other languages and still do not attain this normative form of personhood.

And yet, the utterances in demotic English share a formal feature with that dominant voice, which is that both are interrupted and intensified by words in other languages. In her playful essay “Interview with an Empire,” Philip describes the significance of interruption in her work, explaining that she views the Caribbean “and the entire New World as a site of massive interruptions” (200). These include the fatal interruption of “Aboriginal life,” “the traumatic and violent wrenching from Africa that slavery entailed,” the “indentureship of the Asian,” and even the “interruption of another sort” faced by European colonists who attempted to create continuity with their former lives and cultures in their new environment (200). She explains that the use of disjunctive syntax and formal disruption in her poetry is intended to recall these violent interruptions, and that these techniques create a poetic form rooted in Caribbean history. Reading *Zong!* in the context of this statement of poetics, the book’s pervasive multilingualism makes an implicit claim about the multilingualism of the slave trade; *Zong!* suggests that any writing about this horror must take into account the multiple languages in which it was experienced and carried out. The interruption of one voice by another, of one language by another, recalls the violent interruptions of this “traumatic and violent wrenching from Africa” and the interruptions in personhood that made it possible, that were a part of it, and that followed.

The Song of the Flesh

Zong! does not constitute a reparative historiography that seeks to discover and prioritize disappeared voices, inserting words in Yoruba or in demotic English to let the victims speak. Instead, Philip creates a contrast between different types of vocal utterance in order to break the association of voice with personhood. While more traditional lyric modes express personhood that is recognizable as such, particulate, fragmentary, and often very physical utterances evoke a form of existence severed from the protections and rights afforded to the person, a form of existence in need of being “retransformed . . . back into human” (196). For the sake of clarity I have used the terms “utterance” and “interruption” to distinguish the speech of non-persons from the more traditional uses of poetic voice in *Zong!*, but scholarship in contemporary poetics has, of course, already made the term “voice” multiply significant. In his essay “Voice in Extremis” the Canadian poet-critic Steve McCaffery summarizes “two distinct scenarios presented for the voice in

poetry” in the twentieth century (163). He argues that the first voice “serves . . . as the unquestionable guarantee of presence—when heard and understood through its communication of intelligible sounds this voice is named conscience” (163).

The second scenario that McCaffery describes originates in high modernist vocal experimentation, and “requires the voice’s primary drive to be persistently away from presence,” and instead toward “its own dispersal in sounds between body and language” (163). This second scenario for the voice emphasizes its “intense corporeality,” which he “insist[s] on calling a community,” (169) even though it never quite succeeds in establishing one (163). Philip also emphasizes corporeality and failed community in her implicit theorization of poetic voice, but the unique challenge of *Zong!* is to consider non-presence historically, to enter into an impossible communion with historical non-persons. Thus, poetic form follows the dictates of historical necessity: Philip’s concept of poetic voice emphasizes corporeality rather than interiority because it refers to non-persons to whom such interiority was not considered applicable. *Zong!* emphasizes the enfleshed voice, as its cultural work is to create a “code” that is adequate to the representation of the “cacophonous . . . babel that was the *Zong!*” (207). However, in tying poetic voice to the historical bodies from which that “babel” issued forth, her attempt to constitute community must fail: Philip demonstrates the impossibility of communing with bodies that have been absented or silenced, with bodies that have disappeared beneath the ocean.

Especially in the later sections of *Zong!*, such as “Ferrum,” voices are conceptualized as persistent material traces of historical anguish, so that the hurt and killed bodies of the slaves inhere in their utterances.¹⁰ “Ferrum” begins with two epigraphs, the first from Ezekiel and the second from St. Augustine. Both emphasize the physical persistence of historical bodies that might otherwise seem to have disappeared. The epigraph from Ezekiel (37:4) is particularly interesting:

*There was a noise and behold, a shaking . . . and the bones came together;
bone to his bone . . . the sinews and flesh came upon them . . . and the skin
covered them above . . . and the breath came into them . . .
and they lived, and stood upon their feet.*
(qtd. in Philip, *Zong!* 126)

In the Book of Ezekiel, God gives Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with dry bones and commands Ezekiel to prophesy to them. Ezekiel does so, and the bones come to life as newly living people with flesh and breath; inert matter

is “re-transformed . . . back into human” (196). In her citation of this passage, Philip eliminates all of the content of the verses that makes it clear that Ezekiel is receiving a vision from God, and instead suggests that the bones are miraculously coming to life in real time, not in a remembered dream. By quoting a passage in which “hear[ing] the word of the LORD” brings the dead back to life, Philip demonstrates the extraordinary power of the voice, particularly when it speaks testimony (*King James*, Ezek. 37:4). The crucial relationship of voice to flesh is furthered through her second epigraph: “*Praesens de praereritis. / The past is ever present*,” from St. Augustine (qtd. in Philip 126). In the juxtaposition of these two epigraphs, Philip argues that the dry bones of the past are never fully gone; rather, the past waits to be revived and en fleshed by the voice.

The high degree of fragmentation in “Ferrum” makes the relationship between voice and flesh more clear, as the body’s work in producing sound is evident. Words are broken into letters and syllables, a stuttering text that is barely legible on the level of content. Evoking the physical processes of speech, Philip demands that we read poetic voice as bodily emission, and not as an expression of inferiority. It is only through this intense and painful physicality that the names of the slaves reappear.¹¹ Unlike in “Os,” where the names are a series of vanishing footnotes, in “Ferrum,” the names appear at the end of the section, still below a black line, but placed in the middle of the page and rendered in a font resembling handwritten cursive script. Centred on the page, caressed by the stroke of the pen, the twenty-two names and the twenty-two people to whom they refer are no longer mere “dicta,” but have been presenced by a hoarse throat and a shaky hand. Significantly, the next section of *Zong!*, which begins immediately after these names, is “Ebora,” whose title means “underwater spirits” in Yoruba. This title, the only section title in a language other than Latin, steps away from the legalistic associations of the others and instead evokes the ongoing but submerged presence of the enslaved Africans.

Although the enfleshment of the voice is most evident in the final sections, it is clear from the very first poem in the book, “Zong #1,” where words are broken into their component sounds and scattered across the page. If these were gathered together to constitute a more standard text, it might read something like, “water was our water, good water, oh one dey/day, one day’s water, water of want” (3-4). Even this unpoetic translation emphasizes repetition, but in Philip’s drawn-out rendering, each phoneme roils and stutters so that the first line of the poem contains only the letters w and a,

barely completing the first syllable of the first word. The only word in this poem that is never broken apart into its constituent sounds is the word “our.” This pronoun signals the choral nature of the poem; rather than a single voice stuttering “wa wa” and wailing its want of water, in “Zong #1” different voices begin and then begin again, layering their wants together. Poetic voice, then, is not only bodily, it is collective.

Flesh is the nodal point, the place at which Philip crosses all of the complex philosophical issues with which *Zong!* is engaged. The slaves were considered as flesh but not as persons, and it was their flesh that persisted in spite of their legal non-personhood. Contemporaneously, however, the absence of their flesh and of their bones is what makes the literalization of affective possession impossible; retrieving their bones from the ocean, “exaqua,” can never be accomplished. And yet it is affective possession that makes the murdered slaves appear as more than mere flesh, as persons and as communities. It is therefore through reference to the flesh that Philip explains the title of *Zong!*:

Why the exclamation mark after *Zong!*? *Zong!* is chant! Shout! And ululation! *Zong!* is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* is “pure utterance.” *Zong!* is Song! And Song is what has kept the soul of the African intact when they “want(ed) water . . . sustenance . . . preservation.” *Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling. (207)

The very title of this devastating work indicates the fleshiness of what is spoken. The list of sounds, “chant,” “Shout,” “ululation,” “moan,” “Mutter,” “Howl,” and “shriek,” elaborates upon the exclamation point in the title, listing the sonic components of the voice that the page has trouble indicating graphically. The exclamation point in Philip’s title gathers into itself the corporeality of the voice, what the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero calls the “song of the flesh” (15). It indicates the specificity of the voice, what is material, unique, and unrepeatable about each utterance, the trace of the physical body that marks every vocalization. Divorced from interiority, these utterances are not individual, but indicate a transhistorical community in which voices from the present and the past sing together, simultaneously but not in unison: unevenly, imperfectly, and painfully, but also beautifully.

Taking literally the notion of *voice*, this vibration of flesh, Philip proposes a body in contradistinction to a person or a subject, foregrounding the distinctions between “experiences [that] count as life or one of its parts” and

those that “don’t” (Freeman 57). Her attachment of poetic voice to physical body indicates just how impossible these bodies whose wants are sung in *Zong!* really are, just how impossible it is to commune with those who have been violently absented from the historical record, “whose activities do not show up on the official timeline” (57). Unlike Ezekiel, who stands in an imaginary valley of bones and revivifies them through the power of his voice, Philip stands at the edge of a real sea, in which there are no longer any bones, and tests her voice, wondering what, if anything, it can do. Philip’s fleshy voice confers personhood upon the immaterial trace of the murdered slaves; what we can hear of her body, of their bodies, in the voices of this text signals the ongoing problem of existences within and “*outside* of the law,” “the law it was that said we were. Or were not” (206-07).

In her essay “Still After,” Elizabeth Freeman describes and justifies a “longing for form, even for the hyperintelligibility of a form so ordinary that it has been discarded,” a “willingness to be warmed by the afterglow of the forgotten” (498), but without imagining “a prior wholeness locatable in a time and place we ought to ‘get back to’” (499). To long for legal personhood—impossible in the past, irreparable in the present, uncertain in the future—within a text in which personhood is brought into violent contrast with other forms of life is to demonstrate that we have an ongoing debt to these dead nonpersons. Indeed, the end of legal property in persons has not come to pass, nor have we managed a more equitable distribution of personhood. If Philip returns to these traditional forms within her astonishing text, she does so because their promise remains unfulfilled, and because the forms that have replaced them, more often than not, have replicated their failures.

NOTES

- 1 Following the number listed in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision, Philip states that 150 slaves were killed in the *Zong* massacre. However, in *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom claims that 132 slaves were killed; in *Black Ivory*, James Walvin puts the number at 133; and in “Slavery, Insurance, and Sacrifice in the Black Atlantic,” Tim Armstrong states that 134 were killed. As Philip’s book is my focus, I use the number 150.
- 2 Philip’s glossary lists words in Arabic, Dutch, Fon, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, Shona, Twi, West African Patois, and Yoruba (183-84).
- 3 John Weskett’s *A Complete Digest of the Theory, Laws, and Practice of Insurance* (1781) provided exactly such a list, as Saidiya Hartman recounts (148). For descriptions of Weskett’s transformation of maritime insurance, see Armstrong and Baucom.
- 4 We might think of Hannah Arendt’s various critiques of human rights, some already more

than seventy years old, and of the ways in which they have been received in contemporary philosophy. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben's essay "Beyond Human Rights," which takes as its starting point Arendt's 1943 essay "We Refugees" and considers the chapter "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" from her book *Imperialism*.

- 5 The blurring of the terms "personhood" and "human" here is intentional, as Philip's work does not make a clear distinction between the two. By "personhood" I intend at once the legal person who enjoys the rights and privileges of citizenship, and a set of literary effects that combine to produce a speaking subject. Philip's use of the term "human" seems to have a similar valence; however, I have adopted the term "person" for its more precise legal definition.
- 6 According to Baucom, a total of 470 slaves were incarcerated on the *Zong*.
- 7 Elizabeth Freeman offers some clarification of this idea in her essay "Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography": "some human experiences count as life or one of its parts, and some don't. Those forced to wait or startled by violence, whose activities do not show upon the official timeline, whose own timelines do not synchronize with it, are variously and often simultaneously black, female, queer" (57).
- 8 Johnson describes the distinction between "a lyric 'person,'" an "emotive, subjective, and individual" entity, and "a legal 'person,'" who is "rational, rights-bearing, and institutional" (158). She points out that law and lyric, two highly rule-bound discourses, have provided us with differing "instantia[tions] of what a person is," and argues that "these two 'persons' can illuminate each other" (159).
- 9 For a discussion of Philip's views on demotic English in the context of Anglophone Caribbean literature, see her interview with Kristen Mahlis. Philip's essay "Interview with an Empire" also provides explanation of her views on literary uses of demotic English, drawing on Caribbean history as context and rationale.
- 10 I am thinking of Fred Moten's contention that the voice inheres in even entirely visual African American art forms, for example, that the cries of Emmet Till and his mother can be heard even in the photographs taken at his funeral.
- 11 See Philip's recent reading from *Zong!* at "North of Invention: A Festival of Canadian Poetry," available online at PennSound.

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