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Humes 103

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The Silence of the Text: Absence and Erasure in M. NourbeSe Philip's "Zong #26"

The facts of the Zong massacre are as follows: The year was 1781, and the slave ship Zong, captained by Luke Collingwood, set sail for Jamaica—a journey that should have taken somewhere between six to nine weeks but instead took four long months. The possibility of starvation and dehydration of the enslaved by this delay resulted in the slaughter of over one hundred and fifty enslaved people aboard the ship, sanctioned by Collingwood in an attempt to ensure coverage for the “cargo,” in which he was successful (Philip 189). Messrs. Gregson, owner of the Zong, claimed that the insurers were liable for the destroyed cargo under maritime insurance law, which exempted insurance claims for the natural deaths of enslaved people. The claim was disputed but ultimately upheld by a jury, affirming Collingwood’s killing of one hundred and fifty enslaved people to be advantageous to Gregson and endorsing the claim of “loss,” even though the loss was brought about by the insured. Yet, one might ask, “How can there not be a ‘loss’ when 150 people are deliberately drowned?” (Philip 190). *Gregson v. Gilbert* held the massacre of over one hundred and fifty enslaved people to be a clever disposition of property in a time of emergency—not murder, since what was destroyed was “cargo,” and therefore incapable of being murdered (Philip 191). In her poem *Zong!*, specifically “Zong #26,” M. NourbeSe Philip uses the words and the words missing from the text of *Gregson vs. Gilbert* “to not tell the story that must be told” (Philip 189) through her manipulation of the case as a “word store.”

Most noticeable in “Zong #26” is the absence of an initial subject. “What” or “who” was the “cause” first mentioned? The absence of this initial subject reflects the absence of what should be the objective of the entire case—the enslaved people aboard the Zong ship, regarded not as cargo, but as human beings. Rather than defending those thrown overboard, the case focuses purely on the technicalities of maritime insurance law and legalities surrounding property ownership. Continuing on with the rest of the paragraph without an initial subject feels unnatural, just as it shouldn’t feel natural to alienate another person as an insurance claim: “to recover the value of certain enslaved people thrown overboard for want of water” (Philip 210). The financial worth of those “certain enslaved people” whose names are missing from the case, decidedly not worth mentioning, is what is meant by “value”—not their dignity. Unnervingly, the same legal documents and foundational texts by which “the result was justified” (Philip 45) are still used today. Historically, the texts we venerate in the present day were both arbitrary and ambiguous in their application and used to justify unjustifiable actions—namely, the action of treating the enslaved as property while also protecting men’s right to property.

Furthermore, along with the absence of an initial subject, the antithetical statements help to reflect the nonsensicality of the application of “right to property” as inscribed in the U.S. Constitution and in the argument made in *Gregson v. Gilbert*. For instance, how can something be both a “mistake” and a “remedy” (Philip 45)? The massacre of over one hundred and fifty enslaved people was a mistake at best and an atrocity at worst, and for it to be described as remedial in alleviating Gregson of a financial upset is true, but not right. Or, how was the “want” in this case of a “particular circumstance” (Philip 45)? While the particular circumstance of an unforeseen delay in travel and the elimination of enslaved people by the “underwriters” are what made the insurance claim viable, the claim of enslaved people as property was widely accepted

and in no regard circumstantial. With such statements, Philip demonstrates the disorienting effect of the equivocal language used in arguing the case.

Perhaps the word store didn't have the proper subject included, and that is the reason for the initial subject's nonappearance; for "the evidence was overboard," and what was "destroyed was thrown" (Philip 45). The destroyed bodies, morale, and humanity of those enslaved people aboard the *Zong* cannot be evinced. It may be that precision here was not in preservation of her intent to use the text of the legal decision to uncover "the story that can only be told by not telling," through the "many silences within the Silence of the text" (Philip 191). If the case didn't yield the characters necessary to articulate the cause, perhaps Philip's omission of an initial subject was the most precise choice—a reflection of "the Silence" of the text.

In an effort to restore humanity to the text, Philip includes the names "Omolara, Chimaneya, Adekemi, Oke, Mowunmi, and Illiola" in the footnotes of "Zong #26" (Philip 45). The placement of the names mirrors the position of those bodies that now lie below the surface of the water—"a place of consequence" (Philip 200). This placement memorializes the irreversible harm done to those once aboard the *Zong* but also maintains the peripheral position of their personhood observed in *Gregson v. Gilbert* and in the business dealings leading up to the massacre.

The widely demonstrated failure to notice these names when analyzing *Zong!* and the unintentional exclusion of the names at the bottom of "Zong #26" by the author of the document of "pre-approved passages" assigned for this essay reveal the conditioned ignorance of the readership. Because the names are not made prominent on the page, doubled by the audience's primed navigation of page layout, those reading fail to take notice of the names, similar to the failure by those discussing this case to make the humanity of the disputed "cargo" prominent due

to the accepted normalization of enslaved people as property. Maybe those names included at the bottom are the intended subjects—right before our faces but not seen—much like the perceived blindness of those arguing the case of *Gregson v. Gilbert*.

In addition to the absence of an initial subject, the absence of punctuation contributes to the disorientation experienced while reading “Zong #26.” Without punctuation, the text is unstructured and unmarked. The flow of words is uninterrupted, much like the flow of water into the nostrils and lungs of those drowned. It cannot be slowed. There is neither a clear beginning to this drowning, due to the absence of an initial subject, nor an end, hence the exclusion of full-stop punctuation. This poses a question: When exactly did the mistreatment start and has it ended? Punctuation’s indication of pace, pause, similarity, and contrast serves the same purpose as personal identifiers: stability.

Personal identifiers, such as language and culture, and structures that provided security, like family, were removed when considering the enslaved people aboard the Zong. The destabilization experienced by enslaved people stripped of their language and culture and separated from their family is mimicked in “Zong #26” by the lack of stability normally provided by punctuation. Akin to the level of distinction between enslaved people aboard the Zong, there is virtually no distinguishing between ideas in the passage—identically structured phrases pushed together to form one giant block of text in which the meaning has become misconstrued. This configuration is comparable to how the captain and crew viewed the enslaved people aboard the Zong—units to be ordered and parceled by a metric that maximized the usage of space and left as little room for meaning-making as possible. The absences observed in “Zong #26,” including the missing subject, punctuation, and names of those aboard the ship, reflect the deficiency of righteous representation in the case of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Philip forces the reader

to make meaning within the confines created by the “inexorable concern with language” shared by both law and poetry through their usage of the “right” words and phrases (Philip 191). When the “right” words and phrases are those that exclude perspectives of parties relevant to the entire truth, it is our responsibility to retrieve those vantage points through careful excavation and interpretation. At face value, *Gregson v. Gilbert* fulfilled an insurance claim; at further glance, the case accounts for the widely accepted mistreatment of an entire population, approved of and perpetuated by processes carried out by our system of justice, illuminating stark contradictions within legal reasoning.

Work Cited

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!: As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

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