

(E)raising History: An Exploration into the Experimental Techniques of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Jordan Abel's *Injun*

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Language can be liberating or restrictive and often feels insufficient for the task of articulating aspects of human history that are problematic to bear witness to. However, it is language, the same language that enables division and whitewashing, that we are restricted to when attempting to tell the stories of those whose voices have been silenced. Wayne Koestenbaum argues that 'only language can free us of language... fresh vocabularies are required, oddly angled adjectives and surprising sentence arrangements to startle us out of complacency' (2020, p. 1). Recovering or retelling the stories of those elided or obliterated through colonial expansion has been a recurring project. Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, for example, utilises Western poetic traditions to construct a new history for the one all but erased. Boyagoda describes Walcott's epic as 'the classic story of postcolonial community formation, the story of a people reclaiming their ancestral rituals and customs in an effort to assert a cultural identity independent of the colonizing culture' (2007, p. 79). In Walcott's adoption of the Western tradition, however, it could be argued that there is a problematic complicity in the reassertion of the dominance of the culture of the colonizer. More recently Kei Miller has addressed similar notions of cultural imperialism in *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*, a work that targets the fallibility of the map and the erasure that occurs when one mode of knowledge collides with another. Both of these works can be described as using a traditional mode of formal poetry for their explorations into past wrongs and cultural dislocation. This essay will explore two texts that are engaged in similar projects of articulating the unspeakable through experimental methods that may more readily fit with Koestenbaum's call for a language that may 'startle us out of complacency' (2020, p. 1). *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip and *Injun* by Jordan Abel both use pre-existing texts to subvert language and address historical injustice. This essay will examine the way in which Philip and Abel disassemble and reassemble pre-existing texts to bear witness to histories that could otherwise be obliterated.

In terms of technique, both works may be loosely termed texts of 'Erasure poetics' although this is reductive and, as Cooney points out, 'while serviceable as an umbrella term for a technique, it tends to elide essential differences among a number of distinctive works to which it is applied' (2014, p. 17). The difficulty in defining the particular forms of the texts emphasises the experimental nature of their construction and perhaps such rigid definitions are counter to the conceptual mode of writing. After all, as Tom Chivers argues, 'the boundaries of what constitutes a poem have always been porous' (2012, p. 11). Porous may be an ideal critical description that links both the texts and the history that they are contesting. If the poem is porous, then so too is a history that allows voices, individuals and cultures to slip through it into oblivion. In taking the legal documentation of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case, Philip is weaponizing the language of a dominant historical culture against itself. This, Philip argues, is a work of renewal as she explains, 'If you have something that is dried, when you put it in water, the water restores the dried fibers, and if you think about this, this two-page account of *Gregson v. Gilbert* that I found, squeezed out the lives that were at the heart of this case' (2008, p. 66). The crucial irony here is that water is where those individuals thrown overboard from the vessel, *Zong* were lost and it makes sense that

Philip should use water as a key theme in the presentation of the text and as a catalyst in its construction. In 'Zong #1' the legalese of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision has been stretched and pulled apart to create a mimesis of the ocean. The text is difficult to read as the eye is made to continually seek out connections in a manner counterintuitive to traditional modes of reading. The language seems to sway, wave-like, across the page before settling into the single word 'water' and it is not the expected water of life but instead, 'water of want' (Philip, 2008, p. 4). The search for meaning as the eye scans across the splayed text mirrors the search for meaning in the historical event; the scattered black letters mimetic of the scattered black lives lost to the ocean.

Philip emphasises the significance of the sea by stating that 'it is ironic, isn't it, to think that the very sea that took the lives of those Africans now performs the task of reconstituting those dried facts—the water in the ocean has filled this case with all of the bodies, all of the stories of those bodies that were squeezed out of this case to arrive at this two-page report' (2008, p. 66). The repeated use of the word 'bodies' is also significant as it draws attention to the dehumanising process of both the slave trade and the legal language that enabled it. Anne Quema argues that 'the practices surrounding slavery revolved around a key metaphor that is both appallingly simple and politically complex: slavery rests on the notion that a human being is a thing, and that as such it can be owned and shipped as cargo across the Atlantic' (2016, p. 89). The original text is entirely focused upon a legal argument that defines the discarded human beings as objects and this reification is brought into focus in Philip's merging of the original language into a singular body:

...bodydeadbodiesmurderedbodiesimportedbredmutilatedbodiesoldbodies
esboughttheEuropeantraf.cinbodieshattellingsomuchaboutthemanandwh
ichhelpingfueltheindustrializationofthemetropolizedbodiesbodiescreating
wealththecapitalfeedingtheindustrialrevolutionsmanytimesoverandoveran
dovertthebodies... (2008, p. 94).

In a sense, every poem in *Zong!* can be interpreted as an attempt to address a mode of thinking and a language that has allowed the definition of black bodies as inhuman objects. Laurie Lambert points out that 'documents such as the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision serve as records of black bodies but not of black lives, creating a historical narrative of physical and discursive dislocation of Africans' (2016, p. 108). Central to Philip's project is the notion of justice being based upon an unjust language, a point returned to and merged with notions of sin and freedom, for example: 'my once queen/ now slave/ there be/ no free/ on/ board/ under/ writers/ tire/ of writs/ writ fine/ with sin' (Philip, 2008, p. 86). The writ as an authorial command is aligned with sin. The language of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* document authorises the abuse and sanctions the defining of black bodies as cargo.

This revival of history based on existing language is also at the root of Abel's *Injun*, however instead of an authoritative legal document, Abel utilises what might be termed as the popular word. While not a legal text that reveals the complicity of language and culture in the subjugation of a people, Abel's use of pulp Western novels reveals the inherent racism of the everyday. If we take Quema's suggestion that Philip is 'stirring law's use of language... transform[ing] the poetic page into a heterotopic site for an event where a process of metonymic dis-assembling takes place' (2016, p. 97), then Abel can be said to stir the

popular usage of language. In both texts, the process of dis-assembling is key. Rather than tackling the systemic racism of institutional language, Abel's focus begins with a single word: 'injun'. He explains that:

My first reaction upon seeing that word is one of confrontation and difficulty. The western novels that I was looking at are really problematic. That word is loaded with racism and hatred. But I had a sense of curiosity and an impulse to understand and to deconstruct how that racism comes together. Also I had an interest in exploring the contours and mechanisms of racism itself (2017, np).

Where Philip stretches and dis-assembles language leading to a desperate search for meaning, seeking a coherent word like a drowning person seeking a breath of oxygen, Abel utilises the repetition of single words across texts to draw the focus upon that singular unit of meaning. Words such as 'injun', 'whitest' and 'frontier' (Abel, 2016, np) become loaded with meaning and significance as their multiplicity of usage is made stark within the many lines. Each poem stacks a word and places it central and bold, a monolith against the grey neighbouring text and white background. Every chosen word's loaded meaning becomes a mantra of racist intent. The dis-assembling of a text and reassembling by Abel and Philip both rely upon repetition. The repeated 'silence' (Abel, 2016, p. 37) evoked in '#7' of *Injun* works by drawing attention to the elision of culture and a culture's many voices, and Philip finds repetition in the textual linkage between similar words. For example, in '#15' of *Zong!* the words ration and ratio are woven together to emphasise the reduction of humanity, of life to mathematic equations in the name of justice: 'where the ratio of just/ us less than/ is necessary/ to murder/ the subject in property/ the save in underwriter/ where etc tunes justice/ and the ratio of murder/ is/ the just in ration/ the suffer in loss' (2008, p. 25). Both texts, through this reassembling of language, attempt to embody a history of people whose voices and stories have been obliterated.

Sarah Dowling suggests that such attempts at embodying or resurrecting the voices elided by history are ultimately doomed projects as she argues that 'Philip demonstrates the impossibility of communing with bodies that have been absented or silenced, with bodies that have disappeared' (2011, p. 57). This evokes Gayatri Spivak's questioning of the futility of an authentic subaltern voice. Spivak warns that 'the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual's stock-in-trade' (2010, p. 27), suggesting that to speak for those whose opportunity to speak has been taken away only serves to silence them further. Joe Maggio explains that 'the two traps, speaking for or pretending that they can speak on their own, are always waiting for the well-intentioned intellectual' (2007, p. 427). Spivak's questioning seems to lead to a dead end in terms of how to recover silenced or lost voices but experimental techniques of poetry, such as those used by Abel and Philip, may offer the potential avenue that John McLeod argues Spivak fails to provide, as he states:

While Spivak can expose how speaking about can quickly morph into speaking for and hence silencing the subaltern, she seems to offer hardly any resources at all for dynamically undoing the old colonialist ways and opening new modes of engagement or discursive strategies which might take us beyond such an impasse (2010, p. 224).

While the subaltern figure, or the figure lost to history in these cases, may not be able to speak, the reassembling of existing texts can at least draw focus back to the figures who are unable to articulate their own story. Another shared point of significance for Abel and Philip is the focus upon the female and this is crucial to any work of critical recovery as Spivak suggests that if 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow' (2010, p. 41). Abel's repeated use of the word 'mother' without giving the term the status of central 'monolithic' word in any of the poems draws attention to the word through paralepsis. Instead, the female focus is given to the racist term 'squaw', highlighting both the racial and gender implications of the problematic original texts. Philip also emphasises the significance of gender in terms of the reification of the black body. If the black individual is reified into object, the black female is doubly objectified. Philip focalises this objectification on the reproductive potential of the black female body: 'between the legs thespace/ within the womb thespace/ colonized like place and space/ thesilenceof/ thespacewithin/ the womb' (2008, p. 94). The space between legs, the void where a womb should be, is a stark reminder of the lack of rebirth and the loss of a culture, their passage arrested in history but brought back on the page. The flow of the black marks on the page an attempt at movement but ultimately still and immobile.

The void left by a people and the silence where the stories and voices should be are represented visually in both texts through the use of white space. Corio notes the significance of the void by arguing that 'every attempt to bear witness for the victims and recover their true story must face its paradoxical impossibility: the absolute loss and the void that constitute the kernel of such an event' (2014, p. 334). Glyn Maxwell describes the importance of the white space in poetry by suggesting that poets should 'regard the space, that ice plain, that dizzying light. That past, that future. Already it isn't nothing' (2016, p. 3). The space around the text is jointly a void but also loaded with its own meaning. It represents history and the future. As absence it speaks of the elision of a people and their stories. As a presence, it can serve as backdrop of history upon which the unspeakable is inscribed. In Abel's *Injun*, the white space becomes part of the ombre of the aesthetic work. The bold, black central pillar words give way to the grey of the surrounding line before fading into the white space. In Philip's poems, the white seems representative of the ocean. Each mark of text seeming like a falling body into the vast abyss of the sea. The same kind of interpretation can be made of Abel's text, the white space mimetic of the frontier. The bold lettered words mark the frontier indelibly, inscribing a geography loaded with the self-importance of the white man.

Both poets are engaged in works of renewal that critique wrongs of the past. Michael Leong describes *Zong!* as 'a ritualistic elegy [that] necessarily requires an engagement with dead zones' (2009, p. 109) and 'dead zones' could also be a way to describe the space around the text. While loaded with meaning and significance, to be lost in the white space is to lose one's voice, to accept being silenced in the waste of the frontier or the water of the ocean. The original texts utilised by Abel and Philip could also be described as textual dead zones, dormant until reassembled and weaponized by the authors. Abel's use of Project Gutenberg may be read in this context also: a dead zone of literature, books out of copyright and devoid of ownership. The use of these texts gives new life to dormant writing and provides a potential language to articulate the unspeakable. The experimental techniques used suggest

a potential avenue through which to further explore the issues around giving voice to the voiceless or to those silenced by historical violence or systemic prejudices that have been enabled by language. To return to a quote from the beginning of this essay, 'only language can free us of language' (Koestenbaum, 2020, p. 32). Within an original text's destruction and reassembling, new attempts to bear witness can be articulated.

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