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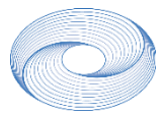
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“It’s all to do with the breath”: (Un)Sound in M. NourbeSe Philip’s “The Ga(s)p” and *Zong!*

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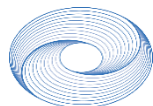
Abstract: Diving into the politics of radical hospitality, the acceptance of alterity, and the erasure of black women’s bodies in “The Ga(s)p” (2018), m. NourbeSe Philip demonstrates reciprocal breath as a thread of connection that is central to human existence. Throughout this essay, Philip counters prominent, male-centric theories on receptive bodies through the emphasis on the ubiquity of contingent respiration. Philip contends that this “process of shared breath ... and dependency becomes useful as a model of community and connectedness in a more female-centred, embodied symbolic universe” (36). Philip enacts this theory on the page in her book-length poem *Zong!* (2008).

Using the court report of *Gregson v. Gilbert* as a source text, *Zong!* grapples with the November 1781 massacre of 150 Africans aboard the slave ship *Zong* on its passage from Ghana to England. *Zong!* is an erasure poem of 173 pages with movements that Philip describes as “the bones” and “the flesh.” The linguistic material of the poem and its arrangement reflect corporeality and respiration; the textual fragments are physically separated on the page—leaving room for breath. The body and breath of *Zong!* extends beyond the page to performance. In theory and praxis, Philip uses challenging linguistic material and arrangement to inscribe the body on the page; consequently, she causes the reader to interrogate their positionality and their relationship to the body, to language, and to performance.



Keywords:

erasure, erasure poetry, body, performance, breath, respiration, reciprocity, positionality



“We all begin life in water,” M. NourbeSe Philip asserts, “until that first ga(s)p for air” (G 31). In the opening of “The Ga(s)p” (2018), Philip reminds readers that life begins in the element of water, but air is necessary for life; moreover, existence is contingent upon respiration and breathing, itself, is a reciprocal act. These concepts are inscribed onto the pages of Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), a book-length work of erasure poetry. Both “The Ga(s)p” and *Zong!* cause readers to question their positionality in relation to the text(s) as well as to re-examine their interconnection to the body, language, and performance.

Before diving into the poetics of erasure and the specific examples, there is a significant distinction to be highlighted between “erasure” as a politicized oppression versus an aesthetic act. Aesthetic “erasure” is a creative act that is most often ironic (although sometimes laced with satire). This dialogic act is one that juxtaposes past with present and recontextualizes temporal constructs in the process. Erasure poetry, specifically, involves fragmentation and amplification in its process. Political “erasure,” by contrast, is a matter of destruction rather than creation. Founded on entrenched inequities, political erasure employs practices of marginalization, disempowerment, and dehumanization. Erasure poetry, as a form, engages the aesthetic act of erasure for the purposes of critiquing and dismantling widespread political erasure.

Ironically, erasure, as a specific form of poetry, is absent from many literary dictionaries, yet critics such as Travis Macdonald, Edward Hirsch, and Cecily Parks have purposefully drawn attention to it. In *Jacket Magazine’s* 38th issue, Macdonald offers “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics” (2009). Reduction is foundational, he argues: “Over the past fifty years, spurred in no small part by similar gestures in the visual arts... a new form of reductive poetics has emerged, concerning itself with the deliberate removal (or covering over) of words on the page rather than their traditionally direct application thereto” (6–7). In *The Essential Poet’s Glossary* (2017), Hirsch reiterates that erasure “is a poetics of reduction and removal, of meaningful fragmentation” (104) and distinguishes it as a

form of “found poetry”¹ that “operates by selectively erasing words from a text that already exists. Using appropriation as a poetic tool, writers have found many ways in recent years to cut away at precursor works. They have deleted, crossed out, blacked out, redacted, and drawn over the words” (104).² In her nuanced essay “On Erasure” (2020), Cecily Parks uses measured language to address the act of erasure while also noting the pointed words that others use to characterize it: “the act of erasure rejects the permanence and authority of a source text in favor of fragmentation, re-appropriation, and, some might say, vandalism.” The impetus of the erasure poetry movement, according to Hirsch, “is to give a precursor work a decisive new set of questions and meanings” (104). Erasure poems call for a re-reading and a re-sounding of extant texts in new contexts; furthermore, such works of poetry ask readers to examine the intertextual relations between the established text and the newly created one(s). The question that animates this presentation: how do the sounds and unsounds affect the reading and interpreting of these texts—especially in erasure poems where un-sounding is so markedly political?

The terms “unsound” and “un-sounding” are likely unfamiliar; these are terms of my own creation. In my dissertation, I delineate three categories of sound: insound, outsound, and unsound. Briefly in the noun form, insound is the internalized phonemic material of language. Outsound is the externalized, audible content. Unsound is the “silenced” / “missing” elements of the literary work. These terms in verb form (in-sounding, out-sounding, and un-sounding) connote that action being

¹ “Found poetry” applies to texts that are “borrowed”: “a piece of writing that takes an existing text and presents it as a poem. Something that was never intended to be a poem – a newspaper article, a street sign, a letter, a scrap of conversation – is refashioned as a poem, often through lineation. The found poem works by changing the concept in a piece of writing, by distorting and appropriating its original intent” (Hirsch 115). Instead of shifting the context of an already published work to a poetic one, erasure is a more specific type of poetry that uses deletion / obscuration / redaction / reduction as a means to create the new work *and* shift its context and its subsequent interpretations.

² Hirsch uses the word “appropriation” (as do other critics, like Marjorie Perloff in her definition of found poetry), which is charged with political, and potentially negative, connotations. Yet this sometimes-adverse term is a compelling one for erasure poetry because the texts that I will focus on specifically in this essay, Philip’s “The Ga(s)p” and *Zong!* grapple with lives and identities that have been appropriated and even eliminated for the profit of those in power. Philip’s act of erasure is one of *reappropriation* in her decolonizing acts of re-claiming and re-imagining problematic texts.

taken—whether by “silently” reading (in-sounding), orally performing (out-sounding), or muting/enacting “silence” (un-sounding). The Theory and Method chapter of my dissertation outlines questions to ask a poem to identify and analyze these sonic elements, and Chapter Three examines these terms in relation to Erasure Poetry by applying this method to M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* and Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps*. This paper focuses primarily on unsound and un-sounding because of its intimate connection to breath and space on the page. Unsound and un-sounding in *Zong!* has dramatic effects within the text and upon the reader.

“Notably,” Parks asserts, “the most enduring and respected reference guide for scholars and writers of poetry, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), does not include an entry for erasure in its most recent edition and does not include erasure in its ‘Found Poetry’ entry.” This omission of erasure poetry is demonstrative of a perpetual dismissal: Parks explains that this absence “represents a kind of cultural erasure itself, though it has not prevented the term and the poems it describes from circulating with increasing abundance in the twenty-first century.” The exclusion of erasure poetry from most literary dictionaries³ compounds the elision of the influential women who initiated and developed the form. One need only compare Macdonald’s tracing of the origins of erasure poetry with Parks’ delineation in order to see this disparity.

Erasure is an artform that draws attention to the politics of absence. This profound act of un-sounding in erasure can be problematic for two reasons: (1) because this form, specifically, calls for one text to be silenced in the creation of another; and (2) this treatment raises questions regarding the power dynamic of that intertextual relationship. Relations between the source text and the resultant poem is most vivid in erasure poetry, and it deeply affects the interpretations of both

³ The term “erasure” appears both in Baldick’s *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2015) and Cuddon’s *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013); however, these entries explain this term only in relation to the theory of deconstruction, when a word or piece of text is “under suspicion,” and it is crossed out but still appears on the page. Neither dictionary entry addresses the poetic form of erasure poetry nor has entries for “found” poetry.

texts by future readers. With nuance, Parks weaves together a history of women who experienced self-erasure and yet still sought to sound out their literary work on the page. But women, men, and non-binary individuals of colour write from experiences of greater vulnerability and risk. The erasure within their works likely echoes the silencing that they experience off the page but made into art on the page. Philip, a Black Canadian-Caribbean poet, has a lived experience far different from my own, but I will be referencing what she has written and said regarding her life and works in order to let her works speak on their own terms.

Diving into the politics of radical hospitality, the acceptance of alterity, and the erasure of black women's bodies in "The Ga(s)p" (2018), Philip demonstrates reciprocal breath as a thread of connection that is central to human existence. She argues: "We begin life in a prepositional relationship with breath: someone breathes *for* us. We continue that prepositional relationship, breathing for ourselves until we can no longer do so, and it appears that this most fundamental of acts is always a contingent one—breathing for, with, instead, into" (G 31). Throughout her essay, Philip counters prominent, male-centric theories on receptive bodies through the emphasis on the ubiquity of contingent respiration. Philip elucidates that this "process of shared breath ... and dependency becomes useful as a model of community and connectedness in a more female-centred, embodied symbolic universe" (G 36).

The theories within "The Ga(s)p" are enacted on the page in Philip's *Zong!* (2008) with this model of community and connectedness through breath. In November 1781, the slave ship *Zong* was sailing from Ghana to England when the captain ordered that 150 Africans aboard be murdered by drowning to allow the ship's owners to collect insurance. *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the report following the court case, is the source text for Philip's erasure. *Zong!* is an erasure poem of 173 pages with

movements that Philip describes as “the bones” and “the flesh.”⁴ The linguistic material of the poem and its arrangement reflect corporeality and respiration; the textual fragments are physically separated on the page—leaving room for breath. The body and breath of *Zong!* extends beyond the page to performance. In an interview with Dzifa Benson, Philip explains that “there’s a sense in which when we read the text we breathe now for those people who could not breathe.” Philip uses challenging linguistic material and arrangement to inscribe the body on the page; consequently, she causes the reader to interrogate their positionality and their relationship to the body, to language, and to performance.

Philip’s method of erasure is self-described as “untelling.” Elucidating that she aims “to use the text of the legal decision as a word store,” Philip locks herself “into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text” (Z 191). Through deliberate erasure/ redaction/ disassembly, Philip breaks the case into words, syllables, and fragments. She works through the mutilation and fragmentation of the text to force the reader “to wrest meaning from words gone astray” (Z 198). Philip struggles with how to recuperate meaning from an incomprehensible event described in a compromised language. Employing erasure and arranging the textual material with a *mise-en-page* that foregrounds unsound,

⁴ *Zong!* has five distinct movements: *Os*, *Sal*, *Ventus*, *Ratio*, *Ferrum*. Translated from Latin, these section titles are Bone, Salt, Wind, Reason, and Iron. Following the five movements that comprise the entirety *Zong!*, there is an extra section, *Ebora*. This title is a Yoruba word which translates to “underwater spirits,” according to *Zong!*’s glossary. In a book on *Ifá* theology by Falokun Fatunmbi, *Ebora* are “those Spirits who assist in the search for effective medicine” (14). The latter is not solely for physical illness but for mending or repairing anything that is broken. (To see excerpts from each section, see Figures 36–41.) (Philip explains in *Notanda* that *Ebora* was generated through a computer printer error and is not considered part of the work but included it in the collection for the reader’s reference.) Following the *Ebora* section, there is a glossary, a manifest, a *Notanda*, and the written ruling of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case (the original text).

Philip creates a semantic puzzle: “The resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of the poems demands a corresponding effort on the part of the reader to ‘make sense’ of an event that eludes understanding, perhaps permanently” (Z 198). How can a reader examine sound and unsound in a work like *Zong!*? Moreover, if the reader is told that meaning is elusive from the outset, and if the poetry itself works to keep meaning constantly in abeyance, what can be gained from soundings, analyses, and interpretations of the text? This story can never be told, as Philip claims, yet she attempts an “untelling.” Philip suggests a possible outcome of such work by writer and reader: “As beings who are human, we want, we need to remember and to heal” (Benson and Philip).

The intentional spacing on *Zong!*'s pages directs the reader's pacing and breath in any sounding. Philip explains to Benson that *Zong!* is “all to do with the breath with the words, seeking space.... One of the most important things happening in *Zong!* is not the words. It's the spaces between the words – the breath” (Benson and Philip). In my method for examining unsound, I list three means of un-sounding: (1) space in and around the poem, (2) removal of text by means of erasure or redaction, and (3) absence of expected content. *Zong!* utilizes each of these methods in unique ways. Firstly, in terms of the space in and around the poem, Philip makes it clear that the space provides the governing principle and structure. No phrase appears directly on top or over another. Secondly, *Zong!* is an erasure poem, which has redacted and reimagined a previous text. One could argue that Philip's method so dramatically erases the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case that, even though all of its elements are there, it would be nearly impossible to reconstruct that legal document from the *Zong!*'s material. There is even reduction at the level of words; the fragments on the page are erasures of full words. Consequently, there is an absence of expected content in how the poem purposely subverts meaning, embraces fragmentation, and invites the chaos. Each reader's expectation will vary; however, arguably, readers approach a poem with some assumptions of the poem's readability and interpretability. The complexity of *Zong!*'s linguistic material (in its polyphony

and polyglotism) and the intricacy of the text's arrangement may make a reader feel that this closely designed text must be similarly as logical and ordered in its semantic content. But there is an absence of a singular "meaning" as the reader attempts to connect disparate fragments. Philip addresses the problem of meaning in *Zong!*: "I come—albeit slowly—to the understanding that *Zong!* is hauntological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present. And only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it's not told—literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning" (Z 201). "Meaning" is absent in *Zong!*; instead, Philip opts for "anti-meaning" because the horrific massacre cannot be fathomed nor told in the pages of *Zong!*.

The reader becomes tangled and, to a certain degree, complicit in the narrative; consequently, they need to assess their own positionality and role in *Zong!* and its telling. In sounding *Zong!* and breathing the unsounds, the reader becomes intrinsically linked to the text. But readers must consider their own identity in relation to it. Where do they fit in to this narrative (observers, witnesses, participants)? In what ways are they co-conspirators with the perpetrators? By taking up the breath on the page compassionately, readers and performers may be able to be a part of that reciprocal respiration—sustainers of the lost—if even for the reading's duration. Philip closes the *Notanda* section by asking and answering why *Zong!*'s title has an exclamation point. "*Zong!* is chant! Shout! And ululation!" Philip declares, "*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.'" (Z 207). When readers sound *Zong!* and breathe its unsounds, they can understand in some small way the healing power and preservation of that Song.

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