

EM FOCO

PERFORMING MEMORY AT THE MOVEABLE SHRINE

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RESUMO

O artigo investiga como a performance conceitual do longo poema-livro **Zong!** consegue transe/formar um texto escrito para um texto performativo enraizado na oralidade, sendo que essa transe/formação (trance/formation) segue um caminho que reindigeniza o trabalho em um contexto estético africano de performance. Este artigo também envolve uma variedade de abordagens e de influências incluindo a poética do fragmento, o papel da improvisação, o efeito do trauma histórico e sua performance, seu ritual, bem como o prolongado e repetido momento fantasmológico (hauntological), o Silêncio dentro e fora da Palavra e a tecnologia do sagrado. Este texto ilustra ainda o uso da poética aplicada, revelando **Zong!** como uma como ícone e portal para um lugar onde o que fora desvalorizado, a Negritude, restabelece a si mesma como lugar gerador de totalidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Zong. Performance.
Estética africana.

ABSTRACT

*The paper explores how the performance of the formally conceptual, book-length poem **Zong!** trance/forms from a written text to a performative text rooted in orality. This trance/formation follows a path that re-indigenizes the work in an African aesthetic context of performance. The paper engages with a variety of approaches and influences including the poetics of the fragment, the role of improvisation, the effect of historical trauma and its performance, ritual and the extended, but repeated hauntological moment, the Silence within and without the Word and the technology of the sacred. The paper illustrates the use of an applied poetics, revealing **Zong!** as both icon and portal to a place where that which was devalued, Blackness, reestablishes itself as a generative place of wholeness.*

KEYWORDS:

Zong. Performance. African
Aesthetic.

ARTISTS HAVE a profound and significant role to play in the healing of diasporic Africans from the pernicious and lingering effects of the transatlantic slave trade. The roots of art are archaic and much of what we recognize as art today are practices that would have been integrated into the daily lives of communities. Through ritual, ceremony and the spiritual; they would have been used in healing or balancing of the individual or the group. Given its archaic nature, when art has a spiritual function, it can approach ritual and become a powerful bridge between material and immaterial life or spirit. As such art can become a powerful, spiritual force which has the potential of balancing forces and energies that have been wrenched out of place through historical and/or traumatic events.

There are forms of spiritual reparations that only we, descendants of the Maafa,¹ can give to ourselves and our communities, and it is, I believe, our dancers, poets, writers musicians storytellers, painters, sculptors and other artists who are charged with this archaic, yet entirely contemporary, function of using art in restorative and reparative ways.

In African Caribbean cultures, as well as those of the Americas, language is fraught with historical issues and carries the freight and weight of history: having lost our mother tongues and being forced to work in European tongues, language and its accompanying Silence/s have become one of the issues that mark the space that is the Caribbean, an area marked by a history of massive interruptions, discursive, cultural, historical, societal and political. These are the axes around which my work circles and my exploration of language has resulted in my developing a poetics of the fragment, as well as using techniques of disruption to represent these cultural and historical disjunctures.

1 Kiswahili word that means horrific event or disaster that is used to describe the transatlantic trade in Africans.

My last publication in poetry, *Zong!*, (PHILIP, 2008) engages with these issues. The foundational text of this work is a two- page case report of the legal decision, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, based on insurance law. These are the facts: in 1781 the slave ship, *Zong*, captained by one Luke Collingwood, leaves the west coast of Africa for Jamaica with a “cargo” of Africans. As is the custom the “cargo” is fully insured. Instead of the customary six to nine weeks, this fateful trip will take some four months due to navigational errors on the part of the captain. Some of the enslaved Africans on board the *Zong* fall ill and die. The captain orders that some 150 Africans² be thrown overboard so as to reduce the losses that the ship’s owners, would incur. On the ship’s return to Liverpool, the ship’s owners, the Gregsons, make a claim against their insurers, the Gilberts, for the destroyed “cargo” – the murdered Africans.³ When the insurers reject the claim, the ship’s owners commence legal action to recover their loss. The latter are successful at trial, but the insurers, the Gilberts, appeal the decision and are successful in having a new trial ordered. The only extant, public document of this massacre, more colloquially known as the *Zong* case, is the two-page case report, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, mentioned above.

Through fragments of voices, shreds of memory and shards of silence, *Zong!* unravels the story that can only be told by not telling. It interrupts and disrupts the narrative even as it tries to not-tell the story of the events on board the slave ship *Zong*. The story that must be told, yet can’t be told and as such questions whether the story can ever be told.

Zong! comprises seven sections: *Os, Dicta, Sal, Ventus, Ratio, Ferrum, and Ebor*. An essay, *Notanda*, a glossary and the case report, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, complete the book, which brought together for the first time my work as a poet and my experience as a lawyer. Formally innovative and conceptual, *Zong!* uses only the words of the case report, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, from which to make the poem. Fugal both in its polyvocal, counterpointed content, *Zong!* immerses itself in the amnesia of history and memory, particularly as it relates to diasporic Africans. Formally the erasures and amnesia of history are visually represented on the page by lacunae within the text itself, trance/forming the work into a hauntological, polyphonic anti-narrative that “untells” the story that can never be told yet must be told. The work has been received critically as a conceptual work. It both is and is not.

2 Depending on the source this number varies between one hundred and thirty-two and one hundred and fifty.

3 At that time English insurance law stipulated that if an enslaved died from illness, the insurer could not collect insurance, but if she was killed in a mutiny or, as in this case, by being thrown overboard, then the insurers were liable.

Modernity is haunted by the ferocious histories of murder, genocide, war and death that brought it into being, an integral part of which was the transatlantic trade. *Zong!*, the text, is itself haunted into existence by this history. The speculative financing we live with today, which in 2008 brought the world financial system to the brink of collapse, has its roots in the financing practices developed as a part of the transatlantic slave trade. It was possible for instance for someone living in Liverpool, as the Gregsons did, to purchase someone in West Africa, have that person shipped to the Caribbean or the Americas and sold there, and through a system of promissory notes, be paid for that transaction in Liverpool. Knowing this, the untold suffering unleashed on the world as a result of those practices becomes not an aberration but entirely understandable, expected and predictable. As argued by Ian Baucom in *Specters of the Atlantic*, (BAUCOM, 2005) the *Zong!* incident signified a recurring moment – a moment we continue to live with. The flip side of the haunting mentioned above, and perhaps one of its progenitors, is the amnesia that modern society is steeped in. This social amnesia (JACOBY, 1975)⁴ is an integral part of the warp and woof of modern society. I speak here of a cultivated amnesia, carefully nurtured by the media and western capitalist governments, which makes it easy to disrupt bonds of connections and relationships, which, in turn, hurls us into spaces where consumerism trumps all, even as we move irrevocably ever closer towards the destruction of the world as we know it. It is the amnesia that, in part, generates the haunting.

The erasures of the histories of Africans in the so-called New World generate a hauntological pedagogy and field, because we, the descendants of the *Maafa*, have been severed from our indigenous cultures, lost names, have had our spiritual practices outlawed and been made foreign to our very beings. There is a sense in which you could say that shorn of all those things that make humans human, we become ghosts of ourselves, haunted by all that we know we know but can't remember, as well as by what we know we don't know and, simultaneously, spectral beings – duppies, zombies, or jumbies, inhabiting a world that is not truly ours – aware that somewhere out there in a parallel universe there is another world where we could become truly embodied.

When I perform **Zong!** the distance between these two worlds becomes smaller. The bones of the undead **can**, indeed, find a resting place within us. Each time I

4 Jacoby develops the idea of social amnesia, "society's repression of remembrance."

perform **Zong!**, it manifests as Ceremony. In his brilliant essay, “The Ceremony of the Dead,” Caribbean novelist, George Lamming (1960), theorizes about the ceremony by the same name he witnessed in Haiti and argues that the living and the dead share an interest in the future, albeit in different ways. Within African cosmologies this is not at all unusual, since the Ancestors, albeit no longer alive, are a living force. When we engage with them they repay us by releasing their grip on us. The grip, I maintain, is because of the haunting, and when released we can be in a more playful relationship with them. They find a resting place with us not necessarily within us, and it is in the remembering that we give them peace.

Performance of **Zong!** takes place in different but related contexts: one in which I improvise along with a small group of musicians in the first half of the show, after which the audience participates in reading along with me and the musicians. The second method of performance is the durational performance. For the last 5 years I have organized durational performances on or about the anniversary of the start of the massacre, November 29th. These performances constitute collective readings during which the audience and I read the entire book over several hours.

As part of the durational events I have organized simultaneous readings or **Zong!**-related performances in other parts of the world. For instance, in 2014 a dance performance choreographed in response to **Zong!** was performed in Brazil. In 2015 there was a capoeira performance, also staged in Brazil, in connection with the durational reading. There have been “simultaneous” readings in Brazil, South Africa, New York, and Trinidad and Tobago over the years.

My interest in “globalising” these performances arises from the fact that the trade in Africans was the first attempt at globalising the world’s economy, at the heart of which was an international trade in the black body. The slave ship Zong, as all other slave ships, was itself a globalised, multicultural universe afloat on the swelling seas of capital and black bodies were the currency.

These performances are poetic and emotive and return the work to community and the collectivity of voices which suffered the initial rupture; they also animate a radical reversal of the initial fragmentation of community, which has been one of the most pernicious and lasting aspects of slavery.

Performing the text of **Zong!** demands an engagement with orality, utterance, silence, sound, music, movement and gesture within an African aesthetic approach. The result is a trance/formative embodied poetics of performance.

The following are areas that I have been exploring through performances of **Zong!:**

- the aspect of poetic utterance, speech and orality that is grounded in the sacred, spiritual and even the spectacular;
- the poetics of embodied utterance through its revelation of the archaic, which may offer a way of somatic healing of historical trauma for Africans peoples;
- the existence and persistence of orality within the context of literacy and the book;
- the relationship between audience and poetic text and how a text through performance may sculpt an audience and its receptivity;
- the nature of the sacred, the spiritual, ritual, art and ceremony within the context of African spirituality, both continental and diasporic and how it relates to performances of **Zong!;**
- whether and how **Zong!** becomes a sacred text through performance;
- whether animation and performance of **Zong!** trance/forms the text into a kinetic, moveable shrine – a hallowed place of memory;
- how and whether creating spaces in which audiences can engage with history, its traumatic legacies, and the historical archive documenting that trauma can become restorative, recuperative spaces;
- how embodiment and performance of historical trauma through **Zong!** can become a form of spiritual reparations;
- how the poetics of the fragment can become embodied and enlarged through performance;
- the relationship between the use of digital technology and embodied performances of the sacred.

These questions inform my exploration of the following areas:

Improvisatory performance: Improvisation is a significant way of being for the diasporic or Afrosporic African. From the moment of capture and enslavement, the enslaved person had to begin improvising, an activity that was both a way of managing the unmanageable and a way of continuing to create meaning in the world. The fragmentary nature of **Zong!** lends itself intensely to improvisation with or without musicians.

Ritual and the Sacred: African ritual theatre, Ousmane Diakhate (2017) writes is “at the crossroads of the sacred and the profane, orality and the written word, of inner roots and external adjuncts.” Given the historical rupture of African traditions, I have been exploring African ideas of ritual and ritual theatre addressing issues such as how ritual complements and differs from drama; the role of ritual gestures, movements and actions and their consequences; the effect of ritual delineation of spaces, and the effect of ritual on participants and observers alike. If **Zong!** is a sacred text, how does one perform such a work in a modern, secular society in which spirit and the sacred are hived off and become the property of organized religion? How does one, should one, work with African sacred/spiritual practices such as Ifa within a modern, secular context when such practices have been dismissed as superstition at best and demonised at worst? How can the participatory performance of **Zong!** be seen as creating a temporary, moveable shrine, even if we understand shrine in the plainest of senses as a “hallowed place of memory.” (OED)

Space, Location and Physical Position: One marked aspect of the African aesthetic is the kinetic, which is central to many African art forms. The slave ship, *Zong*, however, was a space of confinement – a profound denial of the kinetic. The reported case, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, also, in reducing the lives of 470 captive Africans to two pages of desiccated legal text, and removing all markers of humanity also represents an attempt to deny the possibility of movement into being across time. I have been exploring the tension between confinement and movement, between physical restriction and freedom and how this might impact on performance of the work. For instance, we were all seated when we performed the entire text in April 2012. What might change if we changed our positions; if

we all stood, for instance? What if readers sat or lay on the ground? Further, what if voices were divided spatially, or by gender or age, by race even?

What differences flow from staging performances outdoors, in churches or other sacred spaces? On a ship, for that matter? What happens if the static location of the shrine – the place hallowed by some memory – becomes kinetic, moveable, following the movement of Africans around the world?

Dance/Movement: I am particularly interested in the differences between improvisatory and repetitive movements and their links to ritual and trauma.

One aspect of ritual is repetition; It is also a marker of traumatic behaviour. What if any is the relationship between these types of movements?

Silence and Sound: For diasporic Africans Silence is writ large in the vast lacunae that surround personal, familial and cultural histories. Not to mention the Silence represented by the erasure of their historical presence in, and contributions to, the societies in which we have lived for long periods of time. Silence, however, is not entirely or always negative, and African cultures are replete with different kinds of silence – the silence of the proverb, for instance, in which what is said is not said; the silence of spiritual knowing; the silence of secret societies. One of the formal aspects of **Zong!** is the use of words and space to create pools of silence on the page. In my solo readings of the work, I respect those spaces, allowing the silence to linger before moving on to the next word or word cluster. Does the collective, group reading destroy that or does that initiatory silence linger and echo beneath the noise of History trapped in the voiced text? This process allows me to discover ways to translate this idea of Silence into more performative action.

I am particularly interested in making connections between this type of experimental work and Deaf culture. There is a sense in which the Africans on board the Zong entered a world in which they became deaf and dumb while retaining speech. No one understood them or cared to understand them. They often could not and would not have have understood each other. They would not have understood the language in which they were told to jump overboard. “‘Hearing’ across an unfamiliar pastiche of sonic and visual space – or even ‘hearing’ that we cannot

in fact literally hear – necessitates a third ear, an improvisational cross-sensory mode of listening. Listening with the third ear shifts our attention from the overt content of the performance to its nuanced forms of expression.” (KOCHHAR-LINDGREN, 2006) One of the remarkable aspects of reading aloud “together” is how quickly one begins to hear the other, to listen to the other; indeed, one quickly comes to recognize the impulse to sync one’s voice and one’s self with the Other.

Performing Trauma: “This happened there, back then, to them, by them...We are not implicated except to the degree that we can understand the information being transmitted to us...” writes New York University professor Diane Taylor in her article “Trauma as Durational Performance,” (TAYLOR, 2011) which describes a visit to the torture site, Villa Grimaldi in Chile. Reiteration and repetition are two of the signature marks of trauma which is “never for the first time.” Richard Schechner, who Taylor references, describes the “never for the first time” as “restoration behaviour.” Performing Zong! like many commemorative events such as the marches of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo “makes visible the memory paths that maintain another topography of place and practice, not of terror but of resistance – the will not only to live but also to keep memory alive.” (TAYLOR, 2011)

Participatory Performance: Within the context of African ritual and performance, the distinction between performer and spectator is often blurred. In the case of **Zong!** the audience becomes the performers. Is there a space for the spectator? Should there be? The audience/performer raises some challenges since rehearsals and preparation cannot be relied on as resources and every performance risks the unknown – the improvisatory. There is, however, a sense in which “being thrown” into the experience generates a sort of growing awareness that is important to the performance.

Music/ Noise: I continue to explore ideas of dissonance as it manifests in the collective, durational performances. I am interested in understanding how to bring the improvisatory performances into the participatory performances. In Spike Lee’s 2006 film on Katrina, *When the Levees Broke*, Wynton Marsalis the renowned trumpeter describes a New Orleans street dance: “The musicians are improvising; the dancers are improvising and they are doing something they have been doing a long time, so they have the feeling not only that the moment here is

something that has never happened, but it is a moment that has always happened.” What is the distance between what has never happened and that which has always happened. The work is fugal in two senses: in the musical sense of repetition but repetition with a difference and in the fugal sense of amnesia, which has resonances for African peoples in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Technology: There is a sense in which Zong!’s creation is linked to computer technology. I have read the text to the accompaniment of ring tones on a cell phone and am interested in developing an app for Zong!, so that performer readers can, if they wish, download the poem to their tablets or phones and read from that.

There has been a profound rupture for Afrosporic Africans from African traditions, particularly spiritual traditions. Indeed, fear of these traditions both for continental and Afrosporic Africans is still probably the dominant response as a result of colonialism. Is perhaps the journey of the text from the page to orality, despite reader performers remaining tied to the book the distance between that which has never happened and that which has always happened?

The text, **Zong!**, serves as an icon that is simultaneously a portal to another time and dimension – one of history, sorrow, mourning and loss, and also of spiritual reparations, potential redemption and restorative justice for all participants. The way through the portal is through the collective, communal performance, which is simultaneously a performance of the secular and the sacred. It is a process that offers us a form of spiritual reparations at a moveable shrine where the unsaid and unsayable are honoured and heard, where we can perform our memory and trauma and move towards wholeness.

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