

# Translating across Lines of Identity and Domination: The Case of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

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## Abstract:

This article examines the case of the recent 'unauthorised' translation of Caribbean-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) into Italian, which was at the centre of a heated debate on authorship and coloniality. The author unravels the rhetoric used in clashing arguments and identifies underlying values and assumptions to expose the system of power and the historical context in which this confrontation took place. Through an investigation of questions of authorship, authority and ethical posture, the author draws a distinction between a *legalistic* and a *relational* paradigm of translation. The article foregrounds the critical role of identity in the translation process and uncovers the enduring of colonial, racist and sexist structures embedded in the international publishing world, exposing both the limits and the creative potential of translation as a cultural practice that is deeply political.

**Keywords:** NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, Italian translation, decolonial ethics, authority, cultural appropriation

## INTRODUCTION

As translation connects different worlds of experience, what are the implications of translating across identity lines that are historically and politically charged with violence, oppression and erasure? In this article, I analyse a recent case of translation that sparked controversy and was at the centre of a heated debate on authorship and coloniality: the translation of Caribbean-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) into Italian.<sup>1</sup>

The case was brought to public attention by Philip in September 2021, when the Italian translation of *Zong!* came out, although the author had declared herself in fundamental opposition to it, as its rendition

altered what she outlined as the essential formal and ethical principles of her work. Philip protested that the Italian translation disregarded the core reparative function of *Zong!* and ignored her voice, thereby re-enacting racist appropriation and silencing of Black voices. The Italian publisher and editors replied arguing for their choices and rejecting Philip's request to destroy the book. This case raises important – and challenging – questions about power relations involved in the translation process, the politics of translation in relation to cultural differences that are racially connoted, and the perduring of colonial mindsets that may stand in the way of the very act of translation as cultural connection.

Through an investigation of questions of authority, I draw a distinction between two contrasting ethical postures in translation: a *legalistic* paradigm, which relies on a belief in universal, abstract and neutral principles, and a *relational* one, which is politically situated and affectively engaged. The article foregrounds the critical role of identity in the translation process and uncovers the perduring of the colonial, racist and sexist structures that underpin the international publishing world, exposing both the limits and the creative potential of translation as a deeply political cultural practice. In carrying out this analysis, I had to situate myself as a white Italian scholar (living outside of Italy for many years, in the UK and then in Germany) and sit with my own affective responses, going through a lengthy process of suspension and self-deconstruction, for 'decolonization needs to be an embodied practice of everyday resistance and psychosocial rehabilitation'.<sup>2</sup> This process was challenging, and it urged me to listen. For this reason, I have chosen to give ample space to direct words by the voices that were able to read deeply into the world of *Zong!* and into this controversy before me.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I unravel the rhetoric used in clashing arguments and seek to identify underlying values and assumptions, not in order to propose an allegedly neutral judgement, but rather with an aim to expose the system of power and historical context in which this confrontation takes place.

#### ON NOURBESE PHILIP'S *ZONG!*

M. NourbeSe Philip is a Black Caribbean-Canadian author, who was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1947. *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, published in 2008 by Wesleyan University Press, is a poetic text dealing with the massacre of enslaved Africans thrown aboard the slave ship *Zong* in 1781. The text is composed entirely of words taken from a legal pronouncement, *Gregson vs Gilbert*, emanated

by an English court in 1783. The legal case, well known to historians of the transatlantic trade, concerned an insurance reimbursement claim for damages suffered by the slave ship *Zong* as a consequence of navigation errors by its captain, Luke Collingwood. Such 'damages' consisted in the death of over a hundred enslaved African people who were thrown at sea for a commercial calculus. The exact number is not known; in scholarly accounts, it ranges between 123 and 150, with most historians agreeing on 132.<sup>4</sup>

In September 1781, the *Zong*, a British slaver, departed the West Coast of Africa, headed towards Jamaica, with 17 crewmen and between 440 and 470 enslaved Africans.<sup>5</sup> Due to navigational errors, the trip took longer than planned, resulting in a shortage in water supplies. In the meantime, over sixty Africans and 12 crewmen had died of illness. Captain Collingwood decided to throw overboard the weakest among the slaves, the sick, women and children, following the rationale of maritime insurance: enslaved people counted as 'cargo', and in the case part of it was jettisoned for the safety of the rest (which was Collingwood's argument), that loss would be compensated by maritime insurance, unlike in the case of 'natural' death onboard. As reported in Granville Sharp, the Captain's explicit rationale was that 'if their Slaves died a natural death, it would be the loss of the Owners of the Ship; if they were thrown alive into the Sea it would be the loss of the Underwriters'.<sup>6</sup> In the legal case that followed, which gave rise to the legal pronouncement *Gregson vs Gilbert*, the massacre was debated in terms of insurance liability, never referring to murder, effectively applying policies about cargo to human beings. The case suddenly drew public attention to the reality of the Middle Passage, giving impetus to anti-slavery movements. As Philip recounts in the postface to *Zong!*, '[i]n the long struggle in England to end the transatlantic slave trade and, eventually, slavery, the *Zong* case would prove seminal'.<sup>7</sup>

The poem is divided into six sections: 'Os', 'Sal', 'Ventus', 'Ratio', 'Ferum' and 'Ebora', followed by a 'Glossary of Words and Phrases Heard on Board the *Zong*', a short 'Manifest', and a postface, 'Notanda', in which Philip recounts the events of the slaver *Zong* and details the process of composition of the poem, its formal principles and its ethical orientation. In composing *Zong!*, Philip starts from a crucial question: how can the *Zong* massacre and its legal codification be told today? 'This story', reflects Philip, 'must be told by not telling—there is a mystery here—the mystery of evil' (p. 190). Instead of 'telling' the story, Philip uses the legal decision of *Gregson vs Gilbert* as a word

store, exploding the dehumanising language of the law, disassembling sentences, extracting words and clusters of words, and placing them on the page in visual compositions that break down grammar and defy meaning. Words, syllables, shrieks, sounds, letters whirl and accumulate, ‘forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray’ (p. 198), to the point of blurring and overlapping into indistinguishable grey ink shapes in the last section of the poem, ‘Ebora’ (originally a printing mistake which Philip preserved).

By constraining her language to that of the legal text of *Gregson vs Gilbert*, and by at the same time performing its destruction, Philip enacts the tension that exists between the colonial memory that is available – the text of the 1783 law –, and everything that the legal archive obliterated – the humanity of African people, their murder at the hands of white slavers. Words and silences wrest on the page: as Philip states in ‘Notanda’, ‘Within the boundaries established by the words and their meanings there are silences; within each silence is the poem, which is revealed only when the text is fragmented and mutilated, mirroring the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans, their customs and ways of life.’ (p. 195).

‘The not-telling of this particular story’ (p. 198) requires resisting the impulse to make meaning out of it, relinquishing order and authorial control:

- *my urge to make sense must be resisted*
- *have argued that there are always at least 2 poems – the one you want to write and the other that must write itself, and this work appears to be the culmination of that because am not even using my own words. Are they ever my own words, though?*<sup>8</sup>

Philip’s relinquishing of authorial control and her working from within the language of the legal text place her in the position of ‘un-author’ of the poem. This position is also manifest in the title: *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, the name of one of the enslaved Africans on board the ship who becomes a speaking persona in the poem, calling the voices of the ancestors into the very fabric of the text. This approach to history and to the Western archive of colonial violence responds to a profound ethical posture. In her own work, which is deeply congruent with Philip’s, writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman describes this ethical stance as ‘critical fabulation’:

Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law [...]. The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said [...]. It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a history written with and against the archive.<sup>9</sup>

The poetic text composed by Philip dismantles the language of European legal norms, which assert performatively the status of enslaved people as 'cargo'. In doing so, it performs the restitution of humanity to Africans. Humanity is enabled to come back in the gaps, in the spaces, in the silences, in the tearing apart of the language of the law. The reparatory function of the text is inseparable from its form: as Anna Quéma notes, in *Zong!* 'the medium is indeed the message'.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE 'UNAUTHORISED' ITALIAN TRANSLATION

The 'extremely fragmented and sculptural' visual form,<sup>11</sup> the situated speaking position, and the collective healing function of the poem make *Zong!* a particularly challenging work to translate (to this day, the Italian translation is the only published attempt).<sup>12</sup> The case of the Italian unauthorised translation of *Zong!* has generated a painful conflict between author, on the one hand, and translators, editors and publisher, on the other. The case deserves careful scrutiny, as it provides insights into the workings of hegemonic Western- and white-centric unaware modes of thinking and operating, even within the context of best intentions and good faith. The sequence of events that led to a public petition asking for the Italian translation to be destroyed is outlined on Philip's website, alongside the full 'Correspondence among all the parties involved in the unauthorised translation of *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*'.<sup>13</sup> In the following analysis, I draw on this material and on a number of articles that appeared on Italian and Canadian magazines and blogs.

In 2016 Renata Morresi, a translator, poet and scholar, contacted Philip expressing her desire to translate *Zong!* into Italian. Philip replied that she was happy about the project and advised Morresi to contact Wesleyan University Press, the book's American publisher, which owned rights to *Zong!*. As Morresi did not mention a precise publication plan

at the time, Philip did not engage further with her invitation to discuss the translation. The translator, on her part, interpreted this as a sign of Philip being busy or uninterested, and did not contact her again. There was no further communication until 11 June 2021, five years later, when Benway Series, a small Italian publisher, wrote to Philip announcing the impending publication of the Italian translation of *Zong!* and sent along a pdf of the proofs. This came as a surprise to Philip, who had not been informed by Wesleyan that a formal agreement had been signed, subsidiary rights had been transferred, and the translation had moved forward with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which had also approved drafts of the Italian text through a blind peer-review process.<sup>14</sup> While initially supportive of the project – ‘It is so important that this work reach European countries many of which are the ground zero of the trauma that is ongoing’ Philip writes to Benway Series<sup>15</sup> – upon visioning the proofs, on 15 June Philip emailed Benway Series to express her disapproval of the translated text. She stated that the translation was unacceptable because it did not respect the fundamental principle of composition of the text, consisting in a specific way of spacing out words on the page, and asked the publishers to correct the translation.

What followed is a series of exchanges in which Philip insisted on the non-negotiability of the organising principle of the text, explaining its importance for the reparatory function of *Zong!*, and asked Benway Series not to proceed with the printing and distribution of the translation in that form. The editors and translators at Benway Series replied explaining the rationale behind their poetic choices and defending the validity of the translation for the target context, Italy. The main translator, Renata Morresi,<sup>16</sup> declared herself willing to re-work the text in the future, but this option did not materialise, as Benway Series went into production with the translated text as it was. As the publication of the Italian translation of *Zong!* was announced in mid-July 2021, Philip demanded the publisher destroy the book. The editors at Benway Series, Mariangela Guatteri and Giulio Marzaioli, replied that they had acted in respect of the law, having bought rights from Wesleyan, and therefore rejected any interference by Philip. At this point, in September 2021, Philip went public, also supported by Wesleyan’s editor Suzanna Tamminen, who had been, until then, dismissive of the poet’s concerns. Philip openly condemned the Italian translation, first on the journal *Pree. Caribbean. Writing*, and then through social media and her personal blog, and provided a detailed account of her exchanges with the Italian publishing house, including the original emails. A petition was launched

to have the unauthorised translation recalled and destroyed, which was signed by 1,200 people but remained inconsequential.<sup>17</sup>

According to a recent article by Connor Garel on the Canadian cultural magazine *The Walrus*, Wesleyan managed to buy some copies in the attempt to remove the book from circulation (the entire print run was 200 copies).<sup>18</sup> In a public interview Philip reported that, to her knowledge, the translator Renata Morresi, who had by then partially distanced herself from Benway's position, attempted to buy the remaining copies of the work, but Benway allegedly refused to sell them to her.<sup>19</sup> The book is now out of print and translation rights have reverted to Wesleyan.<sup>20</sup>

#### 'POETICS OF THE BREATH' AND 'PROTOCOLS OF CARE'

In the unfolding of the conflict between Philip, the translator Morresi, Wesleyan University Press, and Benway Series, as well as in its interpretation by Italian critics, clashing rhetorical registers emerge, which reveal incommensurable ethical postures and power positions, leading to a painful failure of communication that inadvertently but fatally re-enacts violent colonial appropriation.

To begin with, it is important to bring into focus Philip's reasons for opposing the translation, as she painstakingly outlines them in her exchange with all the parties involved. The crucial critical point for Philip is that the Italian translation does not respect what she calls the 'poetics of the breath'.<sup>21</sup> This is the structural principle of organisation of words on the page, according to which no word or cluster of words can appear immediately above another word or letter in the following line. This principle is explained by Philip in 'Notanda', the afterword to the poem in which the author recounts the long process of composition of *Zong!* and how she came to its final shape: 'the poem finds its own form, its own voice: It suggests something about the relational—every word or word cluster is seeking a space directly above within which to fit itself and in so doing falls into relation with others either above, below, or laterally. This is the governing principle and adds a strongly visual quality to the work.'<sup>22</sup>

The disposition of words on the page seeks air to breath, Philip explains; it is a formal architecture that is intended to allow the lives of the drowned Africans to breath. As Quéma notes, 'Philip herself sees in her text the "aesthetic translation" of slavery as legal containment and the escape from suffocation and enclosure.'<sup>23</sup> The poetics of the breath as it

concretises in the disposition of words on the page is thus inextricably intertwined with the ethics of collective healing that animates *Zong!*.

*The most important activity happening in Zong! are the silences on the page, not the words. [...] In seeking the breath in the space above, the words echo the actions of those who were thrown overboard the slave ship Zong. [...] It is in honouring the formal constraints on the page that we honour the history and memory of the massacre, and, most importantly, those lives de-named, erased, dismissed, and lost.*<sup>24</sup>

The poetics of the breath is linked to the oral and ritual dimension of the poem, for the blank spaces separating words on the page also correspond to the silences in between pronounced words in vigil rituals where *Zong!* is read collectively. For Philip, this element of the poem is 'non-negotiable'.<sup>25</sup>

In her correspondence with the editors and Morresi, Philip points out that the problems with the translation are a consequence of the fact that the whole process took place without consulting her. This manner of operating, Philip states, violates the 'protocols of care' and the responsibility towards the ancestors that *Zong!* embodies. The poem is embedded in a collective dimension, made of the relationship between the ancestors, the poet, and the community that takes part in the vigils, responding to a notion of authorship that is in fact irreducible to contemporary Western concept and regulation of individual creativity and intellectual property:

I wrote *Zong!* to honour the memory of the Ancestors. *Zong!* has become a sacred text, a lament, a mourning song of grief to those who, bereft of kith and kin, died unmourned, and while it remains a book, its non-material antecedents are embedded in what I call the Protocols of Care, which are an integral part of the book. Those protocols entailed my seeking permission of the Ancestors to bring those voices forward, which, in turn, resulted in the need to acknowledge another type of authorship on the cover of the book in the words: 'As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.' Some call this collaboration; I, an abdication of the ego. In addition, in moving into performance and the annual collective readings, *Zong!* throws its many-voiced voice forward into community and collectivity. All this by way of saying that the creation and unauthorship of *Zong!* was a laborious, careful and care-filled act of working with and listening to the Ancestors. [...] It is, therefore, beyond strange, astonishing, and confounding that that care didn't extend to consulting with me.<sup>26</sup>

During the process of composition of the Italian translation, which took several years, Benway Series and Morresi did not consult with Philip. This is unusual when working on the text of a living author, but can be

attributed to a misunderstanding, or perhaps also to the fact that Philip does not speak Italian. After Philip voiced her opposition to the proofs of the translation, however, a relation could still be recuperated, but there was no room for discussion on Benway's part. Rights had been bought, the text had been decided on, and it was no longer in Philip's hand to have a saying on any of its aspects. The caring relational aspect of *Zong!* did not feature as relevant in this picture. The fact that the parties involved in the translation did not participate in the 'protocols of care', Philip says, speaks of their disinterest in engaging with the world of the poem on its own terms, including its historicity, situatedness, and reparative ethical function.

#### THE LETTER OF THE LAW, THE SPIRIT OF RELATION

Philip's point about the editors' and translators' disregard for the 'protocols of care' and their unwillingness to engage with the world of *Zong!* on its own terms—in one word, their intentional refusal to listen—also describes their approach throughout the whole exchange and extends to how critics have interpreted the case in Italy. The editors at Benway offer well rounded arguments in support of the legitimacy of the Italian translation, all of which dispense with the need to engage with Philip's consideration of what is for her non-negotiable. In fact, they assert and put into practice their right to decide on the translation independently of its author and its source-context. In other words, they claim the right to operate exclusively on a legal basis. Concretely, they have the power to do so, as Philip's protestations are ultimately ignored—they can ignore her, and they do it. By declaring to abide by the law, but ignoring the author's request, they subscribe to a transactional paradigm that presumes the neutrality and equality of the subjects involved, mediated by the allegedly neutral regulatory function of the law. The editors at Benway are very clear about this:

In our experience translations require multiple revisions, but not the inevitable intervention of the author, whose contribution can be useful but also questionable. [...] Benway claims validity and legitimacy for the book, both in terms of poetic restitution and in terms of the graphic rendering of the text, which, moreover, has been elaborated and produced with the utmost care. The Italian edition of *Zong!* is the object of a publishing agreement between Benway, who bought the rights, and Wesleyan, who sold them. Doubts about the book's quality and graphic rendering must be brought within the scope of this relation.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the exchange, two incommensurable sets of values are at play. The Italian editors refer to criteria such as the acquisition of translation rights, the blind peer review by the Canada Council of Arts that funded the translation, and the notion of a translator's right to interpret the text and adapt it freely to the context of reception without any constraint. At no point in the discussion the 'protocols of care' and the ethical orientation of the 'poetics of breath' are taken into consideration as relevant – they are in fact dismissed as irrelevant for the target context.

This legalistic approach, which presupposes a neutral and equal subject of the law and dispenses with any relational duty, found ample support in the Italian press, where the whole episode has been read as an instance of 'worrisome recourse to identity politics'.<sup>28</sup> In a series of articles on the case of *Zong!*, Lorenzo Mari, a scholar of postcolonial African literature and Subaltern Studies in Italy, maintains that the scope of translation is entirely inscribed within the interests of the target context, to which Philip's voice and the reparatory function of *Zong!* would be irrelevant. In fact, Philip's reasons are dismissed and her protestations are depicted as an act of aggression:

The different handling of spaces and silences suggested the author the certainty of a violation of a 'sacred text', a form of cultural or 'supremacist' cultural appropriation and a suppression of the breath comparable to the one suffered by George Floyd when he was murdered, as she expressed in a series of comments characterised by clear and often violent aggressivity, as well as lacerating hyperbolic statements (sustained in the first place by the author's nearly complete identification with the text, on an almost ontological level).<sup>29</sup>

Mari's entire reconstruction employs a dominant rhetoric which shifts attention – and blame – from the violation done, which is minimised or denied, to the reaction generated by it, making a caricature of Philip's motivations, portraying her as overreacting, and twisting the relationship that she as an African-descended poet of the Diaspora entertains with the collective ethical operation carried out in *Zong!* by reducing it to a sort of blind personal attachment to the text.

In contrast, Elena Basile, an Italian scholar and translator based in Canada, is the only voice intervening in the Italian debate who identifies with great clarity the reiteration of violence that the Italian translation and the editors' arguments enact, as well as the terrible irony this represents in relation to a work such as *Zong!*:

Such a double move of valorisation of the letter of the law and marginalization of the voice of an author whose poetic work interrogates precisely what the *letter of the law actively excludes*, is the carrier of such a deep symbolic violence, whose terrible historical irony seems to be entirely lost on the editors of Benway and on those who, like Mari, defend their actions.<sup>30</sup>

Philip herself, in addressing Benway, articulates the underlying mechanisms of white supremacy at work, which operates by erasing Black voices while appropriating them, and by proclaiming a form of indifference to difference which is always in the service of a dominant subject position:

I cannot speak to your intentions but the results of your actions are racist and represent the white supremacist attitudes so prevalent in the publishing world. The most egregiously racist aspect of your behaviour, however, is your consummate and committed indifference to the rigour of the ideas and theories behind the formal constraints of the work, integrally tied as they are to the circumstances of the massacre.<sup>31</sup>

It is striking to see that while Philip was vocal about her disapproval, the Italian editors did not engage with her motivations, assuming for themselves the position of the neutral subject because they were following the law. As Basile explains, the situation resembles that of the lawyers who, in 1783, argued that it was a legal case of mass murder, not of economic damages to goods, and who were not listened to in Court. Nevertheless, the case gave strong impulse to the British movement against slavery, successfully instilling the doubt among the public opinion that the logic of the law, which considered human beings as things, was fundamentally wrong. In some ways, the case of the Italian translation of *Zong!*, Basile goes on to argue in a public conversation with Philip, sheds light on ongoing structural oppression in the cultural world: 'The case draws attention to the deep systemic and blithely unacknowledged violence at work in the legal regulation of contracts among publishers in Europe and North America which perpetrate a colonial legacy of careless appropriation of Black and Indigenous cultural expression.'<sup>32</sup>

The Italian edition fails to translate the ethics of the work and to listen to the author's voice. In the correspondence, the Italian interlocutors are not once shaken by the doubt that what is being discussed is not the abstract right to translate a text at one's please, nor the literary legitimacy of a specific translation choice, but an ethical relationship deeply embedded in a history of violence and silencing—a relationship with an Other whose lives and value system cannot be reduced to

Western legal notions. As Basile suggests, Benway's refusal to listen and their appeal to the letter of the law reiterates 'the performative violence of a Eurocentric perspective assumed as universal on a text which interrogates precisely that universality'.<sup>33</sup> Basile's argument is in line with Garel's, who concludes his article on *The Walrus* by describing the case in terms of a plainly colonial mindset: 'How else to explain Benway's expectation that, for \$150, they could buy the rights to a book about the slaughter of 150 Africans, usurp its form, and deny the poet any ownership over the result?'<sup>34</sup>

#### SOURCE CONTEXT, TARGET CONTEXT AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Within the frame of a neutral appeal to the law, the non-consensual interaction between Philip and the Italian editors takes the shape of cultural appropriation. While there is no question that a translation is always a creative act which necessarily transforms the source text, these abstract principles become alive in specific contexts that are rife with questions of power, identity, and history. The main difference in translational ethics is not between a generic freedom to translate a text as one pleases, on the one hand, and authorial property, on the other, but rather between an approach that is politically aware and cares for the source context and the power differentials involved in the cultural relations, and one that does not. The first describes a formal, universally applicable *legalistic* paradigm; the second describes a *relational* paradigm. Everything about *Zong!* is inscribed within a relational paradigm—as the 'protocols of care' elucidate. The book itself is not about words, sentences, plot, but fundamentally about relations—between words, spaces, and silences, between humans of the past and the present, and between the printed page and the oral ritual of collective healing.

The legalistic paradigm is well exemplified by the position of Andrea Raos, the co-editor of the Italian translation of *Zong!*, who in his 'Confessions of a co-editor', his final comments on the controversy, explains: 'Culture is made in order to be shared and used, by anyone and in any conceivable way. Culture by definition is contamination, appropriation, re-elaboration.'<sup>35</sup> Raos' non-political universalism is echoed by the critic Willer Montefusco, who intervened in the same debate as Mari and Basile. According to Montefusco, Philip availed herself of a dated notion of loyalty in translation, which 'presupposes the possibility of defining a nucleus, or specific elements of the

source text considered fixed and stable, which the translator should keep and reconstruct'.<sup>36</sup> He talks about the inevitable changes taking place in translation and makes an abstract and universal point that dispenses entirely with the material context and politics of translation: 'A translation can be considered lacking or imperfect, it loses elements and effects of the original only if one assumes that those are invariants that the translator must reproduce or transfer. [...] When the author is alive, their intention, even when expressed, is not determining.'<sup>37</sup> Aside from being plainly in contrast with the most basic deontology of translation practice, what is telling about these formulations is that they are articulated on a purely universal theoretical plane, as though the relationships they discuss were happening in a vacuum, unaffected by history and power. What is missing, in other words, is any notion of politics of translation and any relational affect.

By not entering into relation with the world of *Zong!*, the Italian translation selectively omits fundamental elements of that work. Yet, the translator and the editors incisively argue that they have proceeded with 'utmost care'<sup>38</sup>; the question then arises, what is the object of that care? As we can infer from their comments, they are not interested in the 'poetics of the breath' nor in the 'protocols of care', as they do not see these as pertaining to the target context. Care, thus, is directed entirely towards the Italian object book and the contemporary context of reception. And this is also where relationships of power and the direction of harm done get twisted: in condemning the translation, it is Philip who is not showing *care* for the target context, for the Italian book, and, as we shall see, for the contemporary migrant crisis in the Mediterranean to which the Italian translation speaks.

In a series of emails to Philip, Morresi articulates her motivations for translating *Zong!* and lays out how she proceeded to compose the Italian text. Morresi explains that she established a relation between *Zong!* and the current migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, which is in direct continuity with European colonial violence, and which has turned the sea once again into a mass grave. Wanting to act in the present circumstances, Morresi stresses the importance of this translation for tackling the Mediterranean tragedy amid rampant racism, right-wing forces and inhumane policies in Europe. There is no question – and Philip does not question it – that *Zong!* may speak also to the contemporary tragedy of mass drownings in the Mediterranean and its link to a history of colonisation. However, serious ethical problems arise when such a link

to the target context is made not alongside but at the expense of the spirit of the source.

In contextualising her visual rendition of *Zong!*, Morresi explains that she took inspiration from a shipwreck near the small Italian island of Lampedusa in 2013, in which more than 360 people died. The disposition of words on the paper, says Morresi, is meant to render the image of the floating bodies in the water as seen from above, from the helicopters involved in the rescuing operations. The replacement of one criterion, the ‘poetics of the breath’, with another one, the floating points seen from above, entails a shift in perspective that deeply transforms the performativity of the text. Putting aside Morresi’s intentions, which start from a place of human investment and care, Basile notices that the guiding metaphor of a floating body in the water assumes the point of observation of a rescuer from a helicopter, a perspective ‘from above, looking down, subjectless, and objectifying the words floating on the page, which tells a lot about the perspective, about the position from which we are looking at a catastrophe as witnesses’.<sup>39</sup> For a work such as *Zong!*, whose fundamental function is bearing witness and healing trauma through a specific poetic act, giving breath and entering a human relation with the drowned ancestors, that substitution is anything but harmless.

If we turn to the debate that the translation of *Zong!* sparked in Italy, we see that in the view of Italian critics there is no problem, neither theoretical nor ethical, with a recontextualisation that disregards the reparatory function of the original work as outlined by its author. As Mari states, for example, ‘translation always saves something, at least virtually, and at the same time it always loses something’.<sup>40</sup> What a terrible irony, again, that what is not saved in the Italian translation is precisely what Philip is symbolically restoring in *Zong!*—the memory of the murdered enslaved Africans as people, as human lives that cannot be disposed of as cargo for transactional reasons. In Mari’s reasoning, the memory of those lives is blithely traded for other more contemporary purposes, arguably of utmost importance, but which cannot come through the re-enactment of colonial symbolic violence. Similarly, Montefusco reduces the political issue at stake to the need ‘not to not hurt the sensitivity of those who write and fight against any possible racism’, and then adopts a universally humanistic approach, asking: ‘is it truly so irreverent to re-use the text in the service of a different context, [...] to name, honour and commemorate all victims of past and present fascisms and racisms?’.<sup>41</sup> The choice of words is significant here: discarding Philip’s

non-negotiable principles is rebranded as an act of 'irreverence', thus presupposing an inverted relation of power, with the translator being subjected to 'revering' an authority figure. In my view, the rhetoric used here is particularly insidious because it adopts the language of anti-racism and anti-fascism, while saying something to its opposite effect at the same time.

The Italian translation is not the first case of non-consensual use of *Zong!*. In 2017, Lebanese artist Rana Hamadeh used the poem as a source for her art installation, *The Ten Murders of Josephine*, exposed at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Shortly before the exhibition started, Hamadeh wrote to Philip asking for permission, which was not granted. Hamadeh proceeded nevertheless, *The Ten Murders of Josephine* was greatly appreciated and won a major arts prize from the Dutch government. While in her private email to Philip Hamadeh states that *Zong!* was the main source of her installation and identifies its direct influence on her work, she does not acknowledge Philip's work publicly. The only mention of Philip is in a passing remark in the visitors' guide at the museum. 'Again, an irony', writes Kate Siklosi in an extended reconstruction of the episode and reflection on cultural appropriation: 'Hamadeh's work doesn't just take an archive of erasure as its subject matter – by erasing Philip's work, her work contributes to an ongoing archive of erasing Black presence and subjecthood that Philip's work, including *Zong!*, was and is resisting.'<sup>42</sup>

In her conversation with Basile, Philip—who alongside being a poet and a theorist has also written incisive essays on cultural appropriation—inscribes the issues with the translation of *Zong!* into a wider picture of simultaneous appropriation and erasure of Black voices:

There are so many layers to this, it's feeling unheard... You know, I speak as someone who comes from a culture that is, I would say, universally despised, let's get real here. But at the same time those of us who belong to it understand how so much of what we create and produce in the world is used, is beautiful, it's taken up.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, it is possible to read Philip's protestation as unjustified victim position and aggression—it is what the editors at Benway and Italian critics have done. But it takes substantial historical amnesia and unprocessed white entitlement to do so. Sadly, the debate on *Zong!* has revealed that there is no shortage of both in the Italian progressive cultural milieu, which speaks the language of postcolonial

studies and anti-racism while reproducing the very same old mechanisms of domination and erasure. As Basile summarises,

Recognising the specific importance of the ritual element of the text and the relevance of Philip's reasons *also* to the Italian context represents in my view a necessary steps towards nourishing not only a decolonial sensibility in contemporary translation practices, but also more broadly an anti-racist sensibility in Italy which goes beyond the obvious condemnation of fascist racism and realizes the need to give voice and listen to the voices of the African diaspora *at their conditions and on their own terms*.<sup>44</sup>

The Italian editors, and their opinion is shared by several critics, claim the right to decide the terms and conditions of translation, while only a conscious abandonment of that power position would enable a translation across identity lines not to re-enact colonial and racial violence. As Philip rightly concludes, 'this is bigger than me, this is bigger than them'.<sup>45</sup>

#### WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY SACRED?

One particularly heated point of contention in the Italian debate has been that of the 'sacredness' of *Zong!* The spiritual–sacred–dimension of *Zong!*, on which Philip insisted, proves incommensurable to Western notions of monotheistic and institutional religion. *Zong!* grapples with the performative power of poetic language and collective ritual to engage in a dialogue with the drowned Africans, in order to give them back their humanity. It seeks to revert the performative power of the law to decree that a human being was a thing. In 'Notanda', Philip describes that 'magic' conversion of human into thing and its reversal through acts of reparative justice embodied in poetic language:

In its potent ability to decree that what is not, as in a human ceasing to be and becoming an object, a thing or chattel, the law approaches the realm of magic and religion. The conversion of human into chattel becomes an act of transubstantiation [...] In *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human.<sup>46</sup>

The sacredness of *Zong!* lies in its function, mourning, encoded in its aesthetic form. '*Zong!* is a wake. It *is* a work that employs memory in the service of mourning—an act that could not be done before' (p. 202). Invoking the Ancestors, *Zong!* seeks to transcend historic time to enter dialogue with the murdered enslaved Africans and restore humanity. As Quéma explains, the poem

presents itself as a relay in this colonial chain of traumas and their reiterative violence. Both critique and commemoration, the poem seeks to bear responsibility to the reified and abjected bodies of the Africans aboard the *Zong*. [...] In its desire to bear witness to the past, the poem transforms the Western concept of the witness by speaking to and with the dead, not about the dead.<sup>47</sup>

Such a collective, reparatory and performative dimension of the 'sacred' remained fundamentally alien to Italian critics, who, speaking from a Western secular standpoint, contested that there may be a sacred element to the text. Mari writes:

If there is a sacred dimension to the text—a hypothesis that I would personally exclude, as an 'agnostic reader', but which remains anyway possible within an approach as decolonized as possible to *different* aesthetics and ethics—such a sacred dimension must nonetheless be clearly confined and practiced within the norms that are continuously produced by sacrality and towards sacrality (and which can be transgressed all the same). [...] Writing can take place in a mediumistic and sacred context, but its publication and translation are bound to a materiality and to a series of juridical devices which inevitably transform its existence.<sup>48</sup>

The point is articulated in very similar terms by Raos, who also draws a parallel between how Philip is asking to respect the 'sacredness' of *Zong!* and the historical violence exerted in the name of the 'sacred' texts of Christianity and Islam:

She says [...] that she has written a book that 'has become a sacred text' and that therefore, it needs to be treated with some special precautions in order to change the world—for the better, as all sacred texts are fully certain that they are capable of doing, usually to the detriment of the others. Such precautions are obvious among believers, but does this make it a universal principle? Do I, an atheist, have the right to study—or even just touch—the Bible or the Koran even if I do not belong to their religions? To which authority do I need to ask permission in order to *read* a book?<sup>49</sup>

The sacred, in these critics' view, is understood in terms of monotheistic and institutional religions and is synonymous with oppressive dogmatism, which has hardly anything to do with the kind of sacred function performed by *Zong!*. Here again, in Mari's and Raos' comments, a universal legalistic approach supersedes any element of relationality, which would require Western subjects to de-centre themselves and engage with an entirely different experience of the 'sacred' on its own terms. Instead, the hegemonic narcissistic habit of seeing oneself reflected everywhere blocks any engagement with the actual other, superimposing categories—such as the role of the Bible or the Koran in monotheistic religions—that have nothing to do with them.

The question of appropriation and erasure is tightly linked to the perceived and actual authority of the subjects involved, their power relation and public perception. In their final statement on the controversy, the editors at Benway portray Philip as a powerful author, writing in a 'close-to-universal language such as English', while they operate in a minority one such as Italian, and state that her request to destroy the Italian book (which, is important to remember, came only after she asked to revise the translation prior to publication) brings to mind 'the practices of authoritarian and fundamentalist regimes around the world'.<sup>50</sup> It is hard to see, however, how the request—promptly ignored—by a Black female author, with no formal power nor any institutional support, not to circulate a version of her work that she found disrespectful, could bring to mind the repressive actions of dictatorships such as Nazi-fascism burning books. The reference to the near-universality of English, furthermore, is particularly striking in the context of *Zong!*, which works precisely *against* English, the language of the coloniser. Philip has talked on several occasions about her wounded relationship to English, a 'father tongue', 'rogued with colonialism and patriarchal violence'<sup>51</sup>: '[English] spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I can now function'.<sup>52</sup>

The projection of Philip as occupying a powerful position is in line with the rhetoric that we have seen operating in Mari's characterisation of Philip's request as violent, aggressive and hyperbolic. Such a rhetorical move minimises the whole experience of a subject on the receiving end of violence and emphasises instead the seemingly disproportioned reactions generated by it (opening the way for considerations of 'reverse racism'<sup>53</sup>). What makes this reversal possible is the actual erasure of Philip's voice as a subject, so that she can be portrayed as violently powerful and practically ignored at the same time. As Lorraine York explains in her important article on Philip's status as a writer in Canada, she suffers from an 'a bedeviling combination of unchosen hypervisibility and disappearance, with the hypervisibility largely brought about by a radical misunderstanding and abjection of her work as a cultural activist. But this hyper-visible dislocation is a condition that many Black women face when they enter a public sphere, especially when the purpose for that entrance is to pursue social justice'.<sup>54</sup> This situation reflects 'the ways in which visibility may be both systemically denied and reimposed as

oppressive hypervisibility in the celebrity of racialised subjects' (p. 9). As Philip notes, it is hard to imagine a similar situation of marginalisation of the author's voice in the case of a male, white author:

Was it that they thought that... maybe that this wasn't this deep sort of consciousness and intellectual work in the text? I don't know, I don't want to go to those places, but I would wonder sometimes, would have they taken a work by E. E. Cummings and just sort of messed around with the shape of it, and said it was okay? I can't conceive of that happening.<sup>55</sup>

Authority is unequally distributed along the axes of gender, race and class, and the voice of Philip, as a Black female author, is more easily dismissed.<sup>56</sup> The intersection of gender and race in this context becomes especially evident in the declarations by the second translator of *Zong!*, Andrea Raos, as he speaks of 'Philip's refusal to endorse his work', stating that '[v]ery few things in life are more painful than an act of love that is refused, or misunderstood, or accused of being an act of violence'.<sup>57</sup> A question arises: if an act intended as love is being received as violence, should you not stop? Regardless of what you think is violence and what is love, if the other party in the interaction is saying 'no', is not this all that matters for the act to stop? Is this not the basic principle of consent? Philip contested the translation before it went to print. Why did not Benway consider simply revising the translation, so as not to violate the 'poetics of the breath'? I believe it is no coincidence that Raos resorts to 'amorous' language. It reveals the combined working of racial and gender entitlement, which assumes the accessibility and disposability of Black and female subjects. The hurt Raos describes, then, is not Philip's, who had to suffer a non-consensual use of her work, but his – the hurt of having encountered resistance when disregarding a boundary. With the important exception of Renata Morresi, none of the other subjects involved pauses to take into consideration that Philip's flagging of a non-negotiable principle may matter, that her hurt may matter, that her 'no' to the publication of the Italian translation may matter. And most importantly, not because the law says so, but because of a decolonial ethics and an affective relation of care.

## CONCLUSION

The case of the Italian 'unauthorised' translation of *Zong!* is an exemplary case of appropriation and erasure of Black voices, operating within a legalistic, allegedly universal paradigm which dispenses subjects from acknowledging their power position, all taking place within a

self-righteous narrative of good intentions. It is a case that prompts anyone willing to engage in translation across identity lines to consider carefully within which ethical paradigm to operate. Instead of the generic, universalistic and legalistic notion of a boundless freedom to translate anything and by anyone, abstracted from history and power positions, a decolonial and feminist approach understands ‘translation as a never-neutral or innocent act of disinterested mediation’,<sup>58</sup> and maintains that ‘[b]ecause our efforts to understand others and make ourselves understood occur within a world characterised by hierarchical power relations, as much as we might wish it to be otherwise, there are limits to what we can each see and say from our distinctive social locations’.<sup>59</sup>

The confrontation around *Zong!* has exposed a lack of will and tools to understand the ways in which colonial and racist violence still operates today, and how the structural dimension of racism as a principle of organisation of society, acting in a dynamic interaction with gender (and other axes of differentiation), impacts on the practice of translation. This case exposes the structures of power and interrogates the system of values within which a certain operation of translation is carried out. The case of the Italian translation of *Zong!* is a white failure, and an opportunity for naming problems, seeking other possible approaches to the creation of cultural connection across lines of identity and hierarchical positions. As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, ‘[w]ithin the politics of a decolonising world, translation is the glue that catalyses new knowledge that potentially grounds a new political praxis.’<sup>60</sup> But in order for a decolonial ethics in translation to develop, there needs to be first a recognition of the power inequalities in which cultural exchanges are enmeshed. A decolonial ethics of translation requires a willingness to abandon a safe and self-righteous position, leaving behind a legalistic paradigm and entering instead a relational paradigm. This is precisely the invitation contained in *Zong!*, in its ‘poetics of the breath’, which dismantles the language of the law to reinstate humanity, and in its ‘protocols of care’, which place mourning and healing firmly in a relational, communal space.

## NOTES

- 1 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); M. NourbeSe Philip, *ZONG! Come narrato all'autrice da Setaey Adamu Boateng*, Translated by Renata Morresi, Andrea Raos, and Mariangela Guatteri (Colorno: Tiellecti, Benway Series, 2021).

- 2 Tavleen Purewal, 'Holding It Together: Indigeneity, (Settler-) Postcolonialism, and M. NourbeSe Philip', *Ariel*, 51.2 (2020), 95–123 (p. 101).
- 3 I wish to thank Elena Basile for her insightful interventions in this debate, where she stood out as an isolated voice, her careful feedback on an earlier draft of this article, and her generosity in exchanging her views with me. Further to her interventions in the Italian debate, she also presented a paper with title 'Notes on Breath: Towards Cultivating a Decolonial Sensibility in Translation' at the 2023 ACLA Annual Meeting in Chicago.
- 4 Nicole Gervasio, 'The Ruth in (T)ruth: Redactive Reading and Feminist Provocations to History in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*', *differences*, 30.2 (2019), 1–29 (endnote 3, p. 24).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 6 Granville Sharp, cit. in Gervasio, 'The Ruth in (T)ruth', endnote 2, p. 23.
- 7 Philip, *Zong!*, p. 189.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 193 (italics and bullet points in the original).
- 9 Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 26.1 (2008), 1–14 (p. 12).
- 10 Anne Quéma, 'M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*: Metaphors, Laws, and Fugues of Justice', *Journal of Law and Society*, 43.1 (2016), 85–104 (p. 103).
- 11 Valérie Loichot, *Water Graves. The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2020), p. 177.
- 12 This information was provided to me by Elena Basile in a private email exchange on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2023. I contacted Suzanna Tamminen at Wesleyan to inquire about any other existing or planned translations of *Zong!* but did not receive a reply.
- 13 M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Outline of Events Related to the Unauthorised Translation of *Zong!* as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng by Renata Morresi and Benway Series Press', *Set Speaks*, 11 October 2021 <<https://www.nourbese.com/outline-of-events-related-to-the-unauthorised-translation-of-zong-as-told-to-the-author-by-setaey-adamu-boateng-by-renata-morresi-and-benway-series-press-2/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]; 'Correspondence among all the parties involved in the unauthorised translation of *Zong!* As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng', *Set Speaks*, 11 October 2021 <<https://www.nourbese.com/correspondence-among-all-the-parties-involved-in-the-unauthorised-translation-of-zong-as-told-to-the-author-by-setaey-adamu-boateng/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].
- 14 As rights were owned by Wesleyan, the author's consent was not needed in the agreement among the Canadian Council of Arts, the American publisher and the Italian publisher. Philip protested that, although not legally bound, Wesleyan should have kept her informed. See also: 'Copyright Conversations: *Zong!* The Politics of Translation', *Pacific Legal Education and Outreach Society*, 15 April 2022 <<https://www.pacificlegaloutreach.com/news/zong-the-politics-of-translation>> [accessed 9 September 2023].
- 15 Philip, Email to Benway Series, 11 June 2023, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 16 Morresi was responsible for the translation of all sections except 'Notanda', which was translated by Andrea Raos.
- 17 Petition: 'A public call for the immediate destruction of the unauthorized translation of '*Zong!*', *Change.org* <<https://www.change.org/p/benway-series-a-public-call-for-the-immediate-destruction-of-the-unauthorized-translation-of-zong-as-to-a310152-f535-4cc1-97e5-6ff856fdc593?signed=true>> [accessed 5 February 2023].

- 18 Connor Garel, 'Why This Poet Declared War on Her Own Book', *The Walrus*, 27 October 2022 <<https://thewalrus.ca/why-this-poet-declared-war-on-her-own-book/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].
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- 20 Garel, 'Why This Poet Declared War'.
- 21 Philip, Email to Suzanna Tamminen, 13 July 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 22 Philip, *Zong!*, p. 203.
- 23 Quéma, 'Metaphors, Laws, and Fugues of Justice', p. 99.
- 24 Philip, Email to Benway Series, 15 June 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 25 Philip, Email to Benway Series, Renata Morresi and Suzanna Tamminen, 1 September 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 26 Philip, Email to Suzanna Tamminen, 13 July 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 27 Mariangela Guatteri and Giulio Marzaioli, Email to Philip, 9 September 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 28 Lorenzo Mari, 'La traduzione non è un pranzo di gala', *Pulp*, 18 October 2021 <<https://www.pulplibri.it/la-traduzione-non-e-un-pranzo-di-gala/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Elena Basile, 'La traduzione non è un pranzo di gala. Né tantomeno un buffet', *Pulp*, 8 January 2022 <<https://www.pulplibri.it/la-traduzione-non-e-un-pranzo-di-gala-ne-tantomeno-un-buffet/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].
- 31 Philip, Email to Benway Series, Renata Morresi and Suzanna Tamminen, 1 September 2021, 'Correspondence among all the parties'.
- 32 Basile, 'LTAC, A conversation'.
- 33 Basile, 'La traduzione'.
- 34 Garel, 'Why This Poet Declared War'.
- 35 Andrea Raos, 'Confessions of a co-editor', *Benway Series*, 18 September 2021 <<https://benwayseries.wordpress.com/2021/09/18/the-italian-translation-of-zong-must-be-destroyed/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].
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- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Mariangela Guatteri and Giulio Marzaioli, 'In response to NourbeSe Philip's public criticism of our work, Benway Series makes clear that', *Benway Series*, 18 September 2021 <<https://benwayseries.wordpress.com/2021/09/18/the-italian-translation-of-zong-must-be-destroyed/>> [accessed 5 February 2023].
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- 48 Mari, 'La traduzione'.
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- 57 Raos, 'Confessions'.
- 58 Olga Castro and Emek Ergun, 'Introduction: Re-Envisioning Feminist Translation Studies', in *Feminist Translation Studies. Local and Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Olga Castro and Emek Ergun (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1–11, (p. 1)
- 59 Patricia Hill Collins, 'Preface. On Translation and Intellectual Activism', in Castro and Ergun, *Feminist Translation Studies*, pp. xi–xvi (p. xi).
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. xii.