Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!: There Is No Telling This Story, it Must Be Translated

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Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s Zong!: There Is No Telling This Story, It Must Be Translated
by Linda Barone, Roberto Masone

Abstract

Inspired by the text of the legal decision Gregson vs Gilbert, known as “the Zong case”, Marlene NourbeSe Philip develops in Zong! a chain of poems which tell the murder of 150 African slaves in order to collect insurance money. The unconventional layout of the book, the staggering structure and the whimsical writing strategies adopted by the author constitute a very challenging task for the translator.

In an attempt to translate this book into Italian, or into any language other than English, the translator becomes soon aware of the few chances to preserve the sound, form and linguistic coherence of the ST, losing the “postcolonial clash” between Standard English and African languages and the evocative attitude determined by wordplays and polyvocality throughout the book. The aim of this work is to show how a (not the, because it is only one among the many possibilities) translation/ transformation of this challenging textus, can lead or not to a text which successfully combines visual writing and creativity with historical facts, in order to broaden the geography of postcolonial experiences to whom postcolonial is not.

I

Introduction

Starting from the very general assumption that translation should aim at «the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)» and «reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message», some considerations on “equivalence” or “equivalent effect” and on the concept of “faithfulness” in translation are needed.

Nida and Táber argue that only a linguistic translation can be considered “faithful”, because it «is one which only contains elements which can be directly derived from the ST wording, avoiding any kind of explanatory interpolation or cultural adjustment which can be justified on this basis». Other types of translation which include more than just linguistic elements push the target text away from faithfulness and make the concept of equivalence more complicated. Nida distinguishes formal equivalence from dynamic equivalence and this binary classification bears a resemblance to the categorization of semantic and communicative translation made by Newmark. The former aims to «render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual
meaning of the original»6 while the latter «attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original»7. Newmark claims that semantic translation should be used for serious literature and authoritative texts in order to respect the source text and its author as much as possible. However, this respect often implies that many elements of the source language and culture could represent a hurdle for the target audience who is not familiar with the source culture and in these cases equivalence becomes very difficult to obtain. «The more cultural (the more local, the more remote in time and space) a text, the less is equivalent effect even conceivable unless the reader is imaginative, sensitive and steeped in the SL culture»8.

The equivalent effect is not easily attainable if a translator wishes to respect the original text and a communicative translation in the field of literature, especially in poetry9, is not advisable because it would entail significant changes to the source language and culture resulting in the creation of a different text which is no longer ascribable to the author. How should we treat those texts which are rich in cultural, “local” elements and display, for example, the use of different varieties of language, of puns, of sound effects which are the root of the source language text?

In brief, how can the translator preserve the sound, the sense, the rhythm, the variegation of a text in the transfer from the SL to the TL? Some would suggest a masterly use of the compensation strategy10 to balance losses and gains, some others would advocate the controversial concept of untranslatability which will be discussed at the end of this paper.

2

Approaching the text

Set to a background of racism, slave trade and violence, Zong! by Marlene NourbeSe Philip develops fascinating writing strategies and a continuous, silent bond with translation. The summary which appears on the book’s cover perfectly introduces the historical events, the sources and the writing strategies – the visible ones – adopted by the author.

In November 1781, the captain of the slave ship Zong ordered that some 150 Africans be murdered by drowning so that the ship’s owners could collect insurance monies. Relying entirely on the words of the legal decision Gregson vs Gilbert – the only extant public document related to the massacre of these African slaves – Zong! Tells the story that cannot be told yet must be told. Equal parts song, moan, shout, oath, ululation, curse, and chant, Zong! Excavates the legal text. Memory, history, and law collide and metamorphose into poetics of the fragment. Though the innovative use of fugal and counterpointed repetition, Zong! becomes an anti-narrative lament that stretches the boundaries of the poetic form, haunting the spaces of forgetting and mourning the forgotten.

The following pages will be dedicated to the analysis of NourbeSe Philip’s poems from the point of view of translation and to possible ways of translating the text while preserving its form, meaning and intentions.

Throughout the book, it is possible to observe the translation from English into English, a canny strategy uncovered by Alonso-Breto11, the shaping of a collective memory through writing, the dismembering process of language and bodies, the rebirth, the loss and research for one’s own roots, the eternal rolling to the shore of past and present and other matters
which will be dealt with throughout this paper, whose main aim is to show how difficult it is to translate a text in which culture-bound elements, sounds, a staggering writing full of repetitions, overlapping words, switching, fading fonts and empty spaces play an essential role in fully understanding the writer’s intentions.

NourbeSe Philip works on the legal decision Gregson vs Gilbert and uses it as a word store to create her poems, a balance between law and poetry, a way of telling a story which is difficult to understand from reading the report which often displays silence, coldness and, at times, also cover-up features. She operates on the legal text by means of several procedures, namely erasure, overlapping, fading out of words and the cut-up technique. Discussing these techniques she states

That was when I decided I would rearrange the words as they appeared in the text to fashion the poems. It was as if I had locked myself in the hold of the ship with the “cargo” of bodies, words and memories – all erased by time, by history – the better to find the story that couldn’t ever be told, yet had to be told.

and she adds

that the intent of the transatlantic slave trade was to mutilate – languages, cultures, people, communities and histories – in the effort of a great capitalist enterprise. And I would argue that erasure is intrinsic to colonial and imperial projects. It’s an erasure that continues up to the present.

Letters, syllables, sounds, blank spaces – they draw, show and tell the events even though some parts appear meaningless, irrational and confused. In this regard, NourbeSe Philip explains that “the poems resist my attempts at meaning or coherence and, at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness [...] of a system that would enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits”.

3 The innovative writing in Zong!

Efficacy and preciousness of language are among the most distinguishing features of NourbeSe Philip’s writing. The unconventional nature of her writing reaches its climax in Zong!, as shown in the following excerpt, Zong #1, where repetition, form and sonority, imagination and fragmentation, seek to tell the untellable (fig. 1).

This stuttering writing acts like a slow-motion device. It makes the short journey of the drowning slave last longer. It becomes unhurried, dignified. Right there, in the circle on the centre of the page the body is lying still for a while, in a last battle for life, exhausted. Free at last, the body seems to explode, pouring out the last broken words from the mouth, which, even if “dubbed-dumb” by water, speaks. Death comes and the slave can join his grave, embraced by a foreign mother “l/and” on the seabed, right below the line at the bottom of the page.

As previously stated, visible, superficial themes and techniques are summarized on the book’s back cover. As it reads, the book is «relying entirely on the words of the legal decision Gregson vs Gilbert – the only extant public document related to the massacre of these African slaves – Zong! tells the story that cannot be told yet must be told.»
Let us pause for a while on how this story is told, on the non-narrative account of the Zong massacre. The non-narrative structure, a rearranging of the two-page account of the “slaves ledger”, is visible in the opening poem “Os” (from Latin, bone) from Zong #9 until the very last verse. Here, words are reduplicated in an attempt to fill the gaps, to humanize this cold list of “dicta man” or “meagre woman”: failing. NourbeSe Philip again comes across the limits of the English language used as a soulless, mechanical tool whose only purpose is to quantify and value bodies, arms, wombs. Only tears, silent tears are left to this cargo of “mechandising” to differentiate themselves from animals. This is another silent voice coming out from the empty spaces of Zong!, the suffocated screaming of a slave deprived of dignity, of roots, of language, even of his own name.

This is how the author attempts to tell a story about which there is no account, no accurate historical report – or, at least, about which not enough has been written or said. The effort is to create a narrative tissue out of a two-page accounts ledger, in which Africans were listed – deprived of any specificity – according to their market value: generally 30 pounds.
sterling. The first thing NourbeSe Philip achieves is the retrieval of the names of the slaves: lying under the line at the bottom of the page, just like buried bodies, they are written in a very small font as if the reader is looking at them from above, placed on the same level, equal in death. The resistance to any narrative structure, coherence and, thus, sense is expressed by the random rearranging of words here standing for the unnamed Africans listed in the logbook. This is the first of many paradoxes constituting the fundamental reading key of Zong!: the only logical connection found in the ledger is given by the indissoluble relation between the slave and its price.

Another technique implicitly mentioned is the “cut up”. On page 192 of Zong!, NourbeSe Philip writes: «One approach was literally to cut up the text and just pick words randomly ». Refined by William S. Burroughs in the 1960s, the cut-up technique gives new life to poetry by cutting poems into pieces and rearranging them so that something new is said17. In Zong!, this stylistic device gains importance from a translation viewpoint and examples of this will be provided in the following paragraph.

4
There is no telling this story, it must be translated

*Love is drowning, in a deep well, all the secrets, and no one to tell.*
U2, *Love is Blindness*18

The polyvocality of the book is also achieved through polyphony, a fugal structure that turns the poetry into a song. Just as many songs, written with a clear historical reference, have become universal anthems of peace and non-violent politics (e.g. Imagine or Blowin’ in the Wind, written mainly against the Vietnam war), so Zong! acts as an anti slave-trade/racism/violence composition.

In an attempt to translate Zong! into Italian, the book presented some insurmountable problems, concerning its untranslatability. The idea of untranslatability came along little by little: the more we tried to translate it into Italian – in the etymological sense, trying to translate both language and experience across the postcolonial borders – the less we felt at ease translating a book that does not want to be read. We felt challenged when we tried to grab this language and catch a minimal sense in order to achieve a coherent translation into Italian.

The title of the paragraph reveals the paradoxical nature of the book, the challenge for the translator: the more we tried to find the matching words, the more we found ourselves diverted by the images that the book reveals, the echoes of past overlapping stories, the fundamental importance of what is not written in the text/accounts ledger: the stories of families killed off and dreams destroyed the humiliation of being unnamed and, also, pages full of empty words displaying a loss of sound and images.

More importantly, if we respected in translation the random rearrangement of the legal decision using the same words, we would certainly preserve the incoherence and nonsense NourbeSe Philip wanted to put at the forefront, but, at the same time, we would conclude with a denial of that strategy, given that many English words, e.g. “that” metamorphose...
themselves into many different Italian words. Thus, the wordplays found in the first part of the book would be totally lost.

The above considerations allow the cut-up technique to be brought back into the analysis. Let us pause for a while on the choices a translator could make to find the Italian equivalent of the word *that* in the “Os” and “Dicta” sections which are the ones in which the legal text is cut up and rearranged.

The following example taken from Zong! #17 shows the untranslatability – into any language other than English – to which any book featuring this kind of writing technique is subjected (FIG. 2).

The following list shows the contexts in which *that* appears in *Gregson vs Gilbert* (FIG. 3).

Once the legal text is translated, this list could help the translator choose the word according to the context. But, actually, this is impossible because of more specular reasons. In the case above, Zong! #17, translating *that* into the Italian conjunction *che* would be the right
thrown overboard, it was held
statement in the declaration,
the water on board was spent,
ater. The declaration stated,
spent on board the said ship:
c, and on divers days between
at the trial, appeared to be,
by mistake got to leeward of
l was obtained on the grounds
e negroes overboard, and also
uch a measure: and it appears,
g, though she might have made
ands. The declaration states,
ge; but no evidence was given
is necessity. The truth was,
sely is not now the question,
her any necessity existed for
een weeks instead of six, and
n three weeks; but it is said
the evidence. It is also said,
en obtained at Tobago; but at
ot occurred. With regard to
to that mistake, it appeared
selves suffered so severely,
he rains. Nor was it the fact
as been taken, and it is said
is stated in the declaration
Here it sufficiently appears
rest weight in the objection,
hip being foul and leaky, and
as proved, is not the same as
as effected be different from
edency. Suppose the law clear,
the defendant could not raise
that these facts did not support a
that by the perils of the seas, and
that some of the negroes died for w
that by the perils of the seas, and
that before her arrival at Jamaica,
that day and the arrival of the ss
that the ship on board of which the
that island, by mistaking it for Hi
that a sufficient necessity did not
that the loss was not within the te
that at the time when the first sla
that and other islands. The declara
that by perils of the seas, and con
that the perils of the seas reduced
that finding they should have a bad
that a portion of our fellow-creat
that act. The voyage was eighteen w
that in consequence of contrary win
that (234) other islands might have
that a supply of water might have b
that place there was sufficient for
that mistake, it appeared that the
that the currents were stronger tha
that seven out of seventeen died af
that the slaves were destroyed in o
that this is not a loss within the
that the ship was retarded by peril
that the loss was primarily caused
that the evidence does not suppos
that certainly was not the cause of
that stated in the declaration, and
that laid. It would be dangerous [2
that a loss happening by the neglig
that point. Rule absolute on paym
The visual impact is not affected at all. Zooming in on the pages, plenty of problems are revealed, mainly concerning the performance:

a) Translating water into acqua, produces a change from the choked sound of the voiced labial-velar approximant \( w \), to the clear sound of the open (low) central unrounded vowel \( a \), less suitable, if not inappropriate to the image of drowning given to me by the page;

b) Accordingly, the ratio water/acqua, our/la nostra, good/buona, day/giorno, is contrary to this image;

c) Finally, observe the phonetic wordplay in the source text (FIG. 5).
Dismembered words are here fading one into the other. The $w$ of water turns one into won, the lost $e$ breaks into dey, whose $a$ explodes into repeated sounds on the same line. And then we see that $h$, the voiceless glottal $h$, a single letter for the last breath of the slave, one in the middle of the page, the other at the bottom, before the body can rest voiceless, dead. Phonemes that dismember and rewrite the words, the text, supported by a polyvocal melody, produce a phonetic balance which is totally lost if translated into Italian (FIG. 6).

Finally, let us turn to the strange case of the weight in want, in Zong! #21 (FIG. 7).

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**FIGURE 6**

```
a a a a

equa u uh

un u un a un

aun ggg

iono gi o

giomo o oh orn

i un giorn i
```

**FIGURE 7**

```
Zong! #2

the throw in circumstance

the weight in want

in sustenance

for underwriters

the loss

the order in destroy

the that fact

the it was

the were

negroes

the after mins
```

---
Out of any canonical translation strategy, the following example of translation allows the book to achieve the previously mentioned aims of sonority and uncovering of this historic and historical moment, while, allowing the telling of sub-stories featuring their own characters, such as Eve, Grace, Ruth, Sue and all the other «women who wait».

An intuition achieved by translating *the weight in want* according to the scheme [(ENG-ENG)-ITA], as explained below:

“the weight in want” / ðə weɪt in wɒnt/ 
↓

“the waiting womb” / ðə ‘weɪtɪŋ wʌm/ (sub-story disclosed through assonance) 
↓

“il ventre in attesa” (literal translation into Italian)

The English into English translation, actually a play on word, is grounded on a “slant rhyme”. «Slant rhyme (sometimes called imperfect, partial, near, oblique, off etc.) is a rhyme in which two words share just a vowel sound (assonance – e.g. “heart” and “star”) or in which they share just a consonant sound (consonance – e.g. “milk” and “walk”). Slant rhyme is a technique perhaps more in tune with the uncertainties of the modern age than strong rhyme».

Such a transformation opens itself to further implications: the weight of a desire or a need, a lyrical burden, is shifted to another desire, another burden: the foetus of a pregnant black woman. Or, as the accounts ledger reads, only a “ditto woman” on board the Zong. Thus, the static nature of the text gains dynamism through this particular kind of translation. Philip’s “urge to make sense”, from lexical and systemic points of view, demands that forgotten stories be uncovered, history revisited and unheard words shaped.

5 Closing remarks

Before concluding, it is important to reflect on the way translation is involved, at different levels, in *Zong!* To do this, it is useful to quote, verbatim, NourbeSe Philip herself who kindly replied to some questions we asked her. The first point concerns the translation of “non-meaning into meaning”:

I was interested in how one, I could translate non-meaning into meaning. What do I mean by this: the massacre on board the Zong has meaning as a legal case but what meaning would the victims and the descendants of the victims assign it. What is the meaning of the transatlantic and trans Saharan slave trade in African bodies? Did the world need this enormous horrific sacrifice of human life? And to what end? It seemed ultimately meaningless to me and I set out to explore whether there was any meaning to meaninglessness. In other words, how would I translate the non-meaning of the Zong case? Could I? Should I? Because isn’t that what we do when we try to find meaning? We are carrying
over ideas, understanding, perceptions from one place, dimension to another. It’s something I think we humans are cursed and blessed with, the desire for meaning, to find meaning in all around us. Translation is the carrying over of meaning from one language to another – in its most basic sense.

Thus, the clash makes sense because the “under-floating languages” are English-based creoles. The question is: what language should we choose to translate the African words contained in the poems?

The second point concerns the section of the book called *Ebora* which is intentionally written using a fading font and overlapping English and Creole words which make the text illegible (FIG. 8).
How should we translate it? Should we simply replace the English and Creole words with Italian terms? Quoting again NourbeSe Philip, «how do you translate the overwhelming silence – as a non-communication mode – that exists on board the Zong, Babel personified? Do you find another way of rendering silence, are words the only means of translation?».

To sum up, is an effective and respectful translation always possible? We stated previously that translation can be defined as «the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)» and perhaps the transfer of textual elements aimed at a mere linguistic equivalence is easily attainable, but things get harder and the equivalent effect becomes a utopia when aspects such as musical coherence, deeply rooted cultural elements and the coexistence of different languages are utterly lost in translation.

Of course, many of these problems might be overcome by means of an effective compensation strategy in which the inevitable losses are balanced by gains in other parts of the text, but ignoring some parts while “improving” others may result in the creation of a new text greatly different from the original.

These considerations entail the – often ill-treated – concept of untranslatability theorized by Catford, Mounin and Popović, among others.

A masterly balance of losses and gains is not always possible because many times losses are total, absolute as Eco points out:

As far as poetry is concerned, Jakobson, highlighting musical and rhythmical features, goes even farther when he claims that

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) – in short, any constituents of the verbal code are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pull, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting.

The concept of untranslatability has here been called “ill-treated” because recent trends tend to ban it claiming that everything is translatable, that both linguistic and cultural barriers in translation can be wiped out by a skilled translator, but what we claim is that maybe some texts have the right to untranslatability and despite the awareness that everything can be translated, we are, at the same time, conscious and convinced that not everything can be
correctly translated if we want to respect the author’s and the source text’s communicative intentions.

Notes

1. Linda Barone is author of paragraphs 1, 2 and 5, Roberto Masone is author of paragraphs 3 and 4.
7. Ibid.
12. The techniques used by NourbeSe Philip will be discussed in paragraph 3.
14. Ibid.
17. The Dadaist writer Tristan Tzara invented the technique of the cut-up in 1920s, giving the following instructions in order to create a poem: «Take a newspaper. Take some scissors. Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem. Cut out the article. Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag. Shake gently. Next take out each cutting one after the other. Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag. The poem will resemble you. And there you are – an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd».
Then other writers made use of this technique, in particular the Beat William S. Burroughs who, together with his friend and colleague Brion Gysin, refined this method and used it to write novels, among which worth remembering is *The Soft Machine* (1961), http://www.openculture.com/2011/08/william_s_burroughs_on_the_art_of_cutup_writing.html.
22. Ivi, p. 186.
25. Quotations are taken from an email exchange we had with Marlene NourbeSe Philip.

30. In this regard the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) of New York University has organized a conference whose title is *The Right to Untranslatability: Multilingualism, Translation, and World Literaricity* which aims to discuss what we tried to highlight in this paper. Here are some interesting considerations made by the organizers: «This concept of a right to untranslatability requires us to think beyond the technical, the institutional, and the market-pragmatic affordances of translation, and towards a newly vigorous line of thinking about literature, signification, and language as such, whether that thinking be global, planetary, or neither. How for instance in recent debates on World Literature has the right to untranslatability been so seamlessly eclipsed by a charismatic, neoliberal right to translation, translatability, translatedness, and communication? Why are the latter considered virtuous, convivial, populist, and progressive, while the former present as vicious, self-indulgent, elitist, and recalcitrant? What does this symbolic division of labor reveal about modern/postmodern/postcolonial conceptions of monolingualism/multilingualism? This seminar invites case studies about literary texts and other symbolic artifacts/constellations that may help us to flesh out, situate, and conceptualize what it means to claim a right to untranslatability in 2014». www.acla.org.