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Zong! Poems

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Prologue

The story of the eighteenth-century slave ship *Zong* is one that continues to haunt the imaginations of artists and writers. Among those who have engaged with the horrific events surrounding the *Zong* are the English painter William Turner, author and scholar Marina Warner, poet and novelist Fred D’Aguiar, and novelist and essayist Michelle Cliff, not to mention scholars Paul Gilroy and (more recently) Ian Baucom.¹ The slave ship *Zong*, while on a journey across the Atlantic with a “cargo” of slaves, was beset by illness, resulting in the deaths of slaves and some crew members. The captain decided that, in order to save the ship’s owners further loss, he would throw overboard some 130 Africans. This, according to insurance law at that time, would ensure that the owners could collect insurance monies for “mitigating” their loss by murdering their slaves, rather than allowing them to die a natural death. *Zong!* attempts the story that must be told that can’t be told—a story that can only be told through its untelling.

1. See William Turner’s famous 1840 painting *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*; Marina Warner, *Indigo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Fred D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997); Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2004); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

OS

The sea was not a mask.
—Wallace Stevens

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 rains

Zong! # 3

the some of negroes

over

board

the rest in lives

drowned

exist did not

in themselves

preservation

obliged

frenzy

thirst for forty others

etc

Zong! # 4

not was
this is
or
should be
this be
not
should be
this
should
not
be

is

Zong! # 6

question therefore
the age
eighteen weeks
and calm
but it is said...
-from the maps
and
contradicted
by the evidence...
question
therefore
the age

Zong! # 9

slaves
to the order in
destroyed
the circumstance in
fact
the property in
subject
the subject in
creature
the loss in
underwriter
to the fellow in
negro
the sustenance
in want

the arrived
in vessel
the weight
in provisions
the suffered in
die
the me in
become

Zong!#25

justify the could

the captain &

the crew

the authorize

in captain

crew &

could

could authorize justify

captain

&

crew

the

could

or justify authorize

could

captain & crew

authorize

the crew

the captain &

the could

the justify

in

captain

could &

crew

in authorize

justify

the could

the captain &

the crew

justify the authorize

the could

Zong! # 26

was the cause was the remedy was the record was the argument was the
 delay was the evidence was overboard was the not was the cause was the
 was was the need was the case was the perils was the want was the
 particular circumstance was the seas was the costs was the could was the
 would was the policy was the loss was the vessel was the rains was the
 order was the that was the this was the necessity was the mistake was the
 captain was the crew was the result was justified was the voyage was the
 water was the maps was the weeks was the winds was the calms was the
 captain was the seas was the rains was uncommon was the declaration was
 the apprehension was the voyage was destroyed was thrown was the
 question was the therefore was the this was the that was the negroes was
 the cause

SAL

Non enim erat tunc

There was no then

—St Augustine

water parts

the *oba* sobs

creed there is
there is
fate there is
oh
oh oracle
there are
oh oh
ashes
over
ifá
ifá
ifá i
fá
fa
fa
fall
ing over
&
over the crew
touching there
is fate
there is
creed
there is
oh
oh
the *oba* sobs
again *ifá*
ifá ifá i
the seven
fá over
seas
ora
this time
ora

within *ora* time
ora pro
this is but an ora
tion time sands
the loss within i am
lord
of loss visions over and
over the *o* *ba* sobs
no provisions how many
days how long where being is thirst & thirst
be being she falls rob
and rob her how i lost count fortunes
over she falls last from
there to here bring them from is
to wa s sow
the seas
with she
negroes ma
n negroes murder my lord
my liege lord
my *deus*
my us
my we my fate
my god sun
der crew
from captain own
from slave
under
from
writer from

mortality
mort
le mort le
mort le p tit mort
scent of mortality
she
falls
ifaifaifa
falling to
port
over
&
over
my fortunes
a sin you say
video video vide o who says i
say a
rose a rose
for ruth and for t
ruth sup pose truth
then find
ing a way
found a port
a rule ought
evidence
suppose then t
ruth a rose
over

over
 &
 with you
 she f
 found
 alls
 a rose fou
 nd africa
 un
 der water
 proved
 justice
 danger
 ous
 the law
 a crime she
 died es
 es es
 oh
 es
 oh oh
 es es
 oh
 es
 s
 o
 s
 s
 o
 s
 s
 o s
 s o s
 os
 os
 bone
 us us os
 save us os
 salve
 & save
 our souls tone
 & turn the bo
 nes
 &
 salve
 our souls u

s souls
 bo ne souls
 salve the slav
 e *salve* to
 sin *salve* slave *salve*
 and *ave* *ave*
 the rat the rat *ave*
 ah we cut cut
 cut the cost and serve where s the cat
 the yam no meat
 payment
 you say what for where s
 the cat got
 the rat could
 the crime cut the ear
 be absolute do
 you hear
 the lute sound
 to raise the dead
 the died out
 out i hear
 ring *ave* bell s out
 dear ruth
 this is a tale told
 cold a yarn
 a story dear dear ruth i
 woo time and you do
 i have y our
 ear there were aster s

at tea time eclairs & you
are my liege
lord of nig nig &
nog my *doge*
there are
stars in
sidera
as there is
ratio
in rations
but why ruth
do the stars shine if only
murder made us you were by my side
os os
bo ne men
misfortunes
very new
and we map
uncommon the usual
to me to the vessel winds & currents
we ground upon
i pen this
to you
when i am her
able paps her
dugs her
teats
leak in necessity there
was sin a good supply of

ply the negroes with
 toys lure them
 visions of l ace for a queen
 my queen
 there is pus
 tempt all night ride dire visions me *dis moi*
 do you
 ruth might you
 and i perils
 notwithstanding we
 seek the *ratio* reason
 & negroes too
 in afric *de men* *dem cam fo mi*
 for me for
yo for je
pour moi & para
mi flee
 the field s gun gun it was
 oh oh a falling
 my fate
 come to term murder
 in lies grounds justice
 the noise in lives
 a discharge him touch
 ing might you and might i
 ruth
 oh the noise
 nig nig nig
 & nog

nag
nag
all night
it is the age of guns
gin & rum of
murder rimed with sin
her sex
open all night rain
a seam of sin &
to market to market tin
such
to trap a fat pig
a fat nig as never be
fore seen
lords of reason
all we were a lace cap for my
and sane men too queen
for my lady sapphire too
gold
el son a
song at vespers
she rides
my nights the bell the good ship
vedic visions no
gongs provisions
niger sum nigra *sum ego*
sum i
am ben
am gin
rum make the mast

teak men
 who can cure
 me the cur
 drag the seas
 seven miles
 seven deep
 days
 weeks for *ius* sing a song
 months for us of water
 for *os* in bone
 for bone a deep
 wa ter water
 deep bo
 ne son g to cradle
 her where the sun
 sink s
 under throw them
 the rim crusts lost verses
 of sky circe the seer
 appears
 lip s in rictus there is an art
 to murder
 with rant and curse but the tense
 is all wrong rum
 rain and more
 rum ah but it s a rum
 tale ruth murder & rum they sang &
 sang
 &
 she negroes sang
 mean *le sang*

red verses
cam fo mi
here & there
a line i
write to
you of
mortality s
lien on l
ife
on the
ro
se
on
bo ne on
ne groes
such drab necessity
murder
here we re negroes
like ants
sow the sea
seed the seas
with es & oh es os
us &
got our pig got with n
n captain pai our nig too egroes
pai
n
tha

t hat
that hat
the rat mi lord
my plea is negligence
to her i
say *te amo*
her name
she smiles
will be es
se to be
i smile
and i
am
fall
am
falling
am *sum*
into
of all
murder
am
am
ame
if
if
if
if only *ifa*
serve
the *oba*
sobs again
the tea men
there was piss *cum*
let s have some
bile *cum* pus
jam and
bread
port too
& leaky
teats
there was only
bilge wat
er for tea
i argue my case
to you
take
ruth
everything
you must hear me
i say

cum grano *salis*
with a grain of salt there was in
surance again
st sun not sin
hum hum hum him him
& him too
a hero he was and a negro
we dare
the deed
act the part he cut
the cards i won the throw one
deuce two aces
cut
her
open her
shape tie her
ripe toes
round
and firm
the cord it is
dead she went over &
under
she
put ashes on was
wet the
her water s cord
leak oil her and bring
her
to me no god
no i should

cut the cord of this story
i rest
my case in negligence my plea
ignorance *ave* to *àse*
to *ilé ifè* *salve*
to cain to abel
we need must
meet with the east &
the west kings be queens
slaves too
slip lip over nip the rose she spin s
in the bud once
once
more
falls the *oba*
sobs
again & again the
tense the time
is all
wrong what will
mend
my mind i cede all good
in the span of pain
lisp my
longing she falls i will
loan her
to you ration the yam and
the facts pain
cap'n pain ma ma pat
pat she s done for

rêve master
he s done for
mad *je rêve je*
dong
aide moi i ration the truth
ruth
and the facts
whore
there was zen in frenzy
lave the slave invest in
tin in
rum in
slaves in
negroes serve the preserve
the jam and jamaica
rum i remain god s jest
rimed
with sin rest master rest we
have the ram is it
just or just
us i *rêve* of aster s
éclair s
and ruth such a good
dog pat pat nig
nig nig
nog
nag the man

ran the slave ran ma
ma *mma mai* *mai* bard sing
stir my thirst for song a ruse
run ruth run
from me & my sin mea
sure the ease
of
over
board all
fled the lair
as if
on wing how
such a thin mite he
was just
seven
de man him
cam fo mi a fez
pon his head row row row the raft
how *orí*
orí
omi omi
omi
oh
wa wa
a deuce it was an ace and
pen my nig *ter j'ai soif*

my pig then
 they came
 for me *mes*
rêves our aim
 to rid the good
 ship of dying
 & death
 of them
 the pig got
 got
 am i
 a man
 of wit
 ruth i hear
 you say
 some see
 the dove
 on wing
 the red
 cove
le sang le
 sing *le* song
le son el
 son hug
 and tug she
 ran he ran
 the cat got gut
 are we thugs
 all
 if you hear
 dogs hide the gods
 are gone done
 for hey
hola
 run round &
 round
 sound of dog
 of song there is
 pus it rains
 sin sip sup
 and doze a dose
 of the clap
 suppose the hat
 rode the rat round
 and round
 herd them
 the crew does
 my bid no sound
 lure

her to the rim she dives
round
and round the hat rode the rat
the rot oh the rot we
sort them new
rules state the test
man for men
& for t ruth ask rome
fist to the head mis fortunes tune pain
turn &
turn a round the globe
bill the bell
bell
the cat she was torn we sear
& singe the rose
of afric a mole
on her nape a bill of sale flap
flap
in the wind the sail seal
the sale sad
sail night falls so far
to afric & the dog
star

Ferrum

There was noise and behold, a shaking . . . and the bones came together, bone to his bone . . . the sinews and flesh came upon them . . . and the skin covered them above . . . and the breath came into them . . . and they lived, and stood upon their feet.

—Ezekiel 37:7–10

o clam s the tr is now b ones to sand t
 y is *de tro* ope that is tro *p* my limb s a
 ad i wish yo che so too my he u were he
 re to sap i ease my m t with rum t
 ind the crew c all them *bens*
cosa s coi sa s thing s t
 hey live with the e
 el s now *op* es to his ans *en neer* piet writ
 up and do wn *op en ne*
 er they ru n *ik ben* y ou rs ever at the e
 nd of tim e go is they call on *d*
anh the rain se ld tun rpent of ti
 me they call *ai*
do we d *do hwe*
 ant fo r died n raw straw s w
 egroes b
 y f are arsed the
 all the d
 gis with stu hows set sa ff and sla il from tin
 ves each g
 rain in s and each dro p in water *or*
i oh he al the sk in of sin
 the sin of s kin sing
 e the feet o nly water with sc
 um the s
 hip lies id le its bones gro
 an to b e with y ou i
 dle in our e den sh h hear *de*
de mi o *bel* a sp ear in his si
bi mi ob

i it is but a ru in of a sto
 ry a rune to found the f
 ind in r ome to fin
 d the fou nd in qu est in
 their d
 ebt ever use her as you
 will they c all his n
 ame fall into t he blue nig
 ht they bra ve the wa
 ter sing a p
 raise son g that is a
 frica un
 der water a d aft boy sim
 ple in the he ad one
 grain of s alt under *t*
ong in my mi nd gr
 ants of l and to gr
 ow cane & g row ri ch ruth
 can you no t hear the s
 ound of s and on san d on b
 one water be ar s the t
 ruth i run fro
 m a run e of a stor
 y to turn o ver lose find in a gain she w
 ear s but her s kin what a f
 eat this t
 ear fate grow s f at with fe
 ar this st ory can not b
 e my only s on a lad po
 our water o n this s
 in aga inst time
 we se rve them ru
 in wring the s tory dry in
 sure feet fus tic be
 ads can dleslipsearse yes even go
 d and *les an ges orí o*
ri oh wa le come s h o
 me *orisa* de
 af to their cri
 es can we m end this m
 en this ma n this we g
 ive them *le m*
ort the sea li fe they as
 k for wat er bread & l
 ife for *ilé*
ifê a fa
 ir trade i

faim for ruth for t
 us
 bad they sail
 on a red tide o
 t of bad y
 our water so
 me be me
ju hold it sa
 t is *ius*
 ty the s
 h her scent can
 t of you ru
 oceans *dans ma c*
 y noir e how i pet h
 t to the ma
 they sang i
 ce were w
 we come be m
 ng my bon
 den a sun r
 sere *dis my ju*
 urds *gate fo*
 iss they shi
sang runs we
 on the qu
 then s
 dence now he
 you no
 od or gold s
 phire come be
dicta their li
ius is just
 the yams were
 n a die
 am and s
 me fish co
 for one day *lève*
 fe for i i
 & just *how i m*
 he negro ent
 ices me wit
 a bat how ab
 th wafts across
 out a rat the scen
hambre le code
 noir my lad
 er *ifa i*
 fa *ifa* the r
 am tie i
 st *le san*
 sang of grace he
 g *le sang*
 longs for gra
 e *ewe lu*
 a or *fon* could
 e this my bo
 d y my *sa*
 e a rose bu
 sh in the gar
 ose in my ede
 n *iye i*
 ye *iye* the rose is now
 ju you no
 take me o
 bi round go
 ju *ju and ob*
 i they p
 t in the ed
 dy of time *le*
 row out to the ves
 sel you ruth
 ay my l
 ust rode her
 he was go
 ne was no
 troy the evi
 lap *me lua*
 lua to voy
 age thro
 ugh the age *sin*
 deo without g
 in or sap
 me it was all
 ve s they soap
 the negroes rin