

Forensic Listening: NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*, and the Contemporary Long Poem

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues that NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*—two complex, multipart long poems written, performed, and published in the last decade—can be read as poetic essays on the topic of precarity. They function as essays because they set out to test generally accepted forms of cognition; they are poetic because they do so through a structuration and destructurement of sound fundamental to poetry and especially salient in the long poem. The technique they use is a rich, dense, and sustained attentiveness to sound that might be called forensic listening.

The room was busy
the living were noisy
crowding out the place
the dead were marching through
noone was paying attention
thats when I started to

Bergvall, *Drift*¹

MY TOPIC IN THIS BRIEF ESSAY is two complex, risky, recalcitrant, and urgent multipart long poems written, performed, and published in the last decade as artfully printed, small-press books. Although the poets who conceived these projects surely knew of each other—both appear in prominent anthologies of contemporary writing; both present their work in gallery, university, and performance settings; both have been widely and generously

¹ Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (Brooklyn, NY: Nightboat, 2014), 101. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

reviewed—as far as I know, these poems have been composed, staged, and, as far as possible, explained without reference to each other.

Despite crucial differences in the poets' backgrounds and commitments, NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) and Caroline Bergvall's *Drift* (2014) are eerily similar in topic, strategy, and impact. My hope here is to use this coincidence—this simultaneous turn to sound-saturated long poems on the topic of disasters at sea—to think about what the long poem allows and/or abets at this moment of global insecurity, vulnerability, destabilization, and endangerment.

It is relatively easy to say what these poems do *not* do. Although they contain autobiographical elements, they are not importantly about the growth, trial, or triumph of a single consciousness. Although they move toward lyric, they ultimately veer away from lyric temptations and consolations.² Although they invoke diasporic dispersions from one or another homeland, they are not poems about preserving a tribe, founding a nation, or codifying a set of customs and traditions. And, finally, although they are crossed by apprehensions of cosmological forces, they are not interested in naming deities or tracing the evolution of world systems. These long poems are not, that is, in conversation with Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Pound's *Cantos*, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, or Zukofsky's "A."

This doesn't mean, however, that these two long poems talk only to themselves. Philip's *Zong!*, the title of which names the slave ship whose story it recounts, all but shouts the resonant long-poem word "song!," and Bergvall's *Drift* takes the anonymous tenth-century medieval quest poem *The Seafarer* as its "template" (130) and the contemporary Caribbean writer, poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant as its guide (154). This said, however, *Zong!* and *Drift* are hybridities, oddities, and provocations. They trouble the categories they invoke in ways that both challenge and extend the precedents they follow.

The hypothesis I would like to explore here is that *Zong!* and *Drift* belong neither to narrative, lyric, dramatic, epic, or encyclopedic versions of the long poem nor to the late modernist variants of these categories that Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies as works of seriality, "new realist sometimes-procedurals," or "odic logbooks of continuance," but to a category DuPlessis calls "the long poem as poetic essay or conceptual text."³

In discussing the strategies of *Zong!* and *Drift*, I will return to what it might mean to shape a long poem as a poetic essay, but the point I want to make here is that, like an essay, this kind of long poem is an extended investigation into an existing cultural object, process, or event.⁴ *Zong!* and *Drift* are, in some sense, documentary efforts: the events that ground them—the voyages, respectively, of the *Zong* and the so-called *Left-to-Die Boat*—happened. We can pinpoint the dates, we

² In a note on the composition of *Zong!*, Philip observes that the poems began to "move more towards the lyric and less towards language," a development she finds both surprising and suspicious. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 197. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "The Long Poem in Modern Times: Troubles, Numbers, Genres, Encounters," plenary address, Modernist Studies Association, November 7, 2014. DuPlessis's examples include serial poems by Gertrude Stein, George Oppen, and Langston Hughes; "new realist sometimes-procedurals" by William Carlos Williams, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Barrett Watten, and Bernadette Mayer; and "odic logbooks" by Robin Blaser, Nathaniel Mackey, bpNichol, Beverly Dahlen, and herself.

⁴ In "The Essay as Form," a precedent DuPlessis may have had in mind, Adorno positions the essay "as speculation on specific, culturally pre-formed objects." Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:3.

can chart their routes, we can count the dead, and we can locate records of judicial hearings that ensued. What is crucial in these poems, however, is not the specifics of the events they recount but the set of concepts through which we as a culture understand these events and hold ourselves accountable—or fail to hold ourselves accountable—for the damages the poems describe.

Like David Antin, Charles Bernstein, Kamau Brathwaite, Steve McCaffery, and John Ashbery—the poets DuPlessis invokes to exemplify the category of “the long poem as poetic essay or conceptual text”—Philip and Bergvall turn the resources of poetic language to investigative use.⁵ *Zong!* and *Drift* are, in this sense, case studies: hybrids of poetry, storytelling, and criticism that allow them to confront a breach in the social order and, like a detective, ask questions, sift evidence, contemplate the legal and ethical principles involved, and, if possible, prepare a ground for judgment.⁶

THE TOPIC

At the center of both poems is a vessel packed with African bodies in transit through a zone outside the jurisdiction both of the port it left and the port it intended to reach. The *Zong* departed from the West Coast of Africa on its way to Jamaica in mid-October 1781 with a cargo of 470 slaves; the *Left-to-Die Boat* departed from Tripoli on March 27, 2011, with a cargo of 72 migrants headed for the Italian island of Lampedusa, at that time a primary point of entry into Europe. Of these totals, 60 Africans on the *Zong* died for want of water; 40 jumped overboard and drowned; and an additional 150 were thrown by the captain and his crew into the sea and abandoned. Of the 72 migrants on board the *Left-to-Die Boat*, 11 were alive when it beached on the Libyan coast nine days later, 2 of whom died shortly thereafter.

The bodies in both boats had been monetized. The *Zong*'s bill of lading lists its cargo not by name but by category—“negroe man,” “negroe woman,” “Negroe girl (meagre)” —and by a price carefully registered and preserved for insurance purposes (194).⁷ The migrants in the *Left-to-Die Boat*, also nameless, were Africans from Nigeria, Ghana, the Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Their value, already realized, was the sum they had paid the smugglers who provided them, in return, with a ten-meter Zodiac raft built to carry twenty-five people, a compass, a GPS, a satellite phone, and a thirty-seven-hp motor with some reserve gas but no food or water for the passengers on board.

Voyages such as these are, as Bergvall observes, “a symbiosis of the geographic and the symbolic” (147). Each, that is, stands both for itself and for a larger catastrophic social flow: in the case of the *Zong*, the Middle Passage, during which an estimated two million Africans perished; in the case of the *Left-to-Die Boat*, the contemporary migrant crisis, which according to United Nations estimates has to date forcibly displaced some 65.3 million people worldwide, 21.3

⁵ DuPlessis's canny addition of the phrase “or conceptual text” to the subcategory “the long poem as poetic essay” does not capitalize the word “conceptual”: as her examples suggest, she is pointing, that is, not to Conceptual Poetry as a school that flourished in the early twenty-first century but to the act of thinking—the agitation of ideas, notions, images, and other forms of cognition—that characterizes the long poem as a poetic essay.

⁶ “*The poet is a detective and the detective a poet,*” writes Thomas More, Philip remarks in “Notanda,” “*and that's what I feel like—a detective sifting the evidence, trying to remove the veil hiding the facts*” (196). More's words also appear as the epigraph for an earlier section of the poem (78).

⁷ In “Notanda,” Philip estimates a per-person price of approximately thirty pounds sterling (194).

million of whom are currently refugees. Of these migrants, more than seventy thousand crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in 2011 alone.⁸

FORENSIS; OR, THE POEM AS CASE STUDY

In addition to a satellite photo, charts, maps, and line drawings included in *Drift* and a glossary and notes included in *Zong!*, both poems contain information that might appear in a case study under the rubrics “Methodology” and “Documents.” Two long prose sections—Philip’s “Notanda” and Bergvall’s “Log”—not only establish Philip’s credentials as a lawyer and Bergvall’s as a student of languages but include journal entries that record decisions made during the compositional process. The strategies these sections reveal are, in several senses of the term, *forensic*.

In the narrowest meaning of this term, both poems are based on materials prepared for use in a court of law. Philip’s poem reproduces in full the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, a ruling by Great Britain’s Court of the King’s Bench on the issue of whether the *Zong*’s owners could be reimbursed for the cost of slaves thrown overboard; Bergvall’s poem reproduces information and graphics from a formal report entitled “Forensic Oceanography: The Deadly Drift of a Migrants’ Boat in the Central Mediterranean, 2011,” a document drawn up and published by an interdisciplinary team of researchers for the use of NGOs, activist groups, and prosecutors seeking to hold vessels accountable for the flaunting of international protocols that mandate rescue of passengers in distress.⁹

In a second, more expansive sense, however, the term “forensic” implies an active, open-ended process of investigation. “The forensic principle,” as Bergvall notes, is the assumption “that every action or contact leaves a trace” (134).¹⁰ The poets’ work starts with the inconclusiveness of relevant legal maneuvers: the decision in *Gregson v. Gilbert* stipulates only that the case should be retried (189); proceedings against individuals or organizations thought to have been aware of the *Left-to-Die-Boat* have, to date, failed to hold any party accountable for the migrants’ deaths.

In an important sense, then, the documents prepared in these cases mark the origin rather than conclusion of the poets’ efforts. If an essay is, by definition, a trial, test, or proof, it is important to note that the evidence both poets bring to bear on these events is linguistic. “Law and poetry,” Philip explains, “both share an inexorable concern with language—the ‘right’ use of the ‘right’ words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both” (191). *Zong!* and *Drift* proceed by scrutinizing language used to describe these and other voyages on the open seas.

⁸ The International Organization for Migration’s 2014 report “Fatal Journeys—Tracking Lives Lost during Migration,” puts the number of migrants killed trying to reach Europe at nearly four thousand in 2013–14. See <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/30/world/migrant-deaths/>. For more detailed regional figures, see the UNHCR chart “Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response—Mediterranean” at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> and an article in the *Telegraph* entitled “How Many Migrants Take the World’s Deadliest Route?,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11299518/How-many-migrants-take-the-worlds-deadliest-route.html>.

⁹ Written by Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, and SITU Research, this report is published as a case study in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (London: Sternberg Press and Forensic Architecture, 2014), 637–55. For the full report on the *Left-to-Die Boat*, see <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/publications/report-on-the-left-to-die-boat/>. For the obligation to rescue passengers in distress, see article 98 (1) of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, quoted in *Forensis*, 655n2.

¹⁰ Bergvall’s observation echoes the definition of the term “Forensic Imagination” in the lexicon at the end of *Forensis*: “In forensic science,” the contributors write, “every contact is perceived as leaving a trace. In forensic imagination every encounter is capable of being retraced” (746).

In restricting the lexicon used in sections 1–26 of *Zong!* to the five hundred words employed in *Gregson v. Gilbert*, “[m]y intent,” Philip explains, “[was] to use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies . . . is locked in this text” (191). In an analogous manner, Bergvall’s intent in *Drift* was to conduct “intense research” (143) into the word hoards of ancient Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Icelandic seafaring poems.¹¹ “This is not a translation project,” she observes, “yet it feels as though I’m working it that way.” If “the historical language . . . [is] the red thread of the entire project, [h]ow,” she asks, “can I find an archaeological and forensic method that will help me generate a way of writing that can both speak to today and safely point to tagged and numbered teeth items in the ground[?]” (143). As befits the labor of a long poem as poetic essay, the challenge these poets set themselves is to follow the remnants of language toward concepts and principles more ample, just, and humane than the precedents that guided the relevant juridical procedures.

Using a similar etymological strategy, Eyal Weizman, a member of the research group behind the *Left-to-Die* report, gives the term “forensic” yet another nuance by linking it to the Latin *forensis*, meaning “pertaining to the forum,” thereby situating it firmly in “a multidimensional space of politics, law, and economy.”¹² In this sense, finally, the case studies in *Zong!* and *Drift* raise issues more complex and persistent than those framed by the legal proceedings, issues contemporary cultural theorists have explored under the rubrics *precariousness*, *precarity*, and *the grievable life*.

In introducing her essay collection *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), published a year after *Zong!* and five years before *Drift*, Judith Butler begins with the numbness generated by 24-7 breaking news of disasters across the globe. “We read about lives lost,” she writes, “and are often given the numbers, but these stories are repeated every day, and the repetition appears endless, irremediable. And so, we have to ask, what would it take not only to apprehend the precarious character of lives lost . . . but to have that apprehension coincide with an ethical and political opposition to the losses?”¹³

Of the three related categories at play in Butler’s thinking here, *precariousness* is characteristic of all life, human and animal, by definition—transient, impermanent, indefinite, and provisional. Precariousness is existential; it cannot be avoided. *Precairity*, by contrast, is a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.”¹⁴ Although political scientists, sociologists, and cultural theorists have developed numerous ways to describe these populations, in general they consist of those who have become the *other* because of race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, or sexual orientation; those who have been evicted, expelled, displaced, or otherwise pushed not only out of their homes and villages but out of larger, more comprehensive realms of human interdependence and social responsibility; and those, finally, who have been

¹¹ In “Log,” Bergvall notes that part of this research was enabled by a fellowship from Cambridge University’s English and Anglo-Saxon Studies departments (142).

¹² Eyal Weizman, “Introduction: Forensis,” in *Forensis*, 9.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 13. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,” *AIBR* 4, no. 3 (2009): ii, www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf.

lumped through a variety of economic, social, and political factors into the category of human waste, excess, redundancy, or superfluity.¹⁵ These human beings are most often nameless, much of the time faceless, often homeless, and more and more often stateless, but the identifying mark of precarity, as Butler and others define it, is the fact that the lives of these people do not matter: they cannot be mourned—they are not *grievable*—because they are not understood to be fully human.

The enslaved Africans thrown overboard to lighten the load of the *Zong* and the sub-Saharan Africans left to die in the heavily surveilled waters of the Mediterranean are paradigmatic examples of lives that are not grievable. “[N]oone,” as Bergvall puts it, “was paying attention / thats when,” she continues, “I started to” (101). To make the precarious character of these lives visible—to bring it to the attention of a world too “busy” or “noisy” to grieve—might seem an easy, perhaps even a safe or self-serving task, but as these two long poems demonstrate, it requires sustained poetic labor to break through the weariness, indifference, or despair that, in Bergvall’s terms, “crowd[s] out the place” (101). We have some sense of the kinds of pressures journalists, lawyers, social justice activists, and cultural historians can bring to bear on cases like the *Zong* and the *Left-to-Die Boat*. What critical or oppositional resources do poets bring to the table?

FORENSIC LISTENING

Philip opens her account of the composition of *Zong!* with a paradox that undergirds both poems: “*There is no telling this story*,” Philip writes; “*it must be told*” (189). This means that to tell the stories they are compelled to tell, Philip and Bergvall must rethink the categories through which the culture narrates, remembers, and adjudicates the incidents they record. *Zong!* and *Drift* function as essays because they set out to test generally accepted forms of cognition; they are poetic because they seek to do so through a structuration and destructuration of sound fundamental to the genre of poetry and especially salient in the long poem.¹⁶ The technique these poets use to tell what cannot be told is a rich, dense, and sustained attentiveness to sound that we might call forensic listening.¹⁷

What makes the stories Philip and Bergvall want to tell impossible to tell is a culture of precarity unable or unwilling to recognize designated outcasts such as slaves and migrants as fully human beings. As Butler argues in *Frames of War*, “[T]here is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality [of an object or event] from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation” (29). To tell these stories, it is necessary to evoke the terms that make them comprehensible to the culture

¹⁵ See, e.g., Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (New York: Verso, 2015); Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown, 2016); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Perloff opens a collection of essays on the topic of poetry and sound that she coedited with Craig Dworkin with the proposition that “*poetry* (the word comes from the Greek *poiesis*, a making or creation; in Medieval Latin, *poetria*, the art of verbal creation) inherently involves the structuring of sound. As Roman Jakobson put it,” she continues, “Poetry is not the only area where sound symbolism makes itself felt, but it is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely.” Marjorie Perloff, “Introduction: The Sound of Poetry,” in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁷ In the field of critical forensics, the term “forensic listening” describes a scientific approach to issues of identity profiling and voice authentication; my use of the term here, by contrast, pertains to a field the contributors to *Forensis* identify as “forensic imagination” or “forensic aesthetics” (745–46).

that lives them, but the use of these terms means that the complete story, the full story, does not and cannot exist.

The categories that constrain the legal reasoning in *Gregson v. Gilbert* and condition contemporary responses to the migrant crisis function through similar hypotheses. In the first case, if some human beings are commodities to be bought and sold, they are no different under the law than any other form of cargo: for this reason, as eighteenth-century judicial precedent had determined, it is reasonable to seek reimbursement for financial losses incurred in the act of throwing these people into the sea. In the second case, if some human beings belong to the category Zygmunt Bauman describes as “the waste of globalization,” it is predictable that passersby will note their plight without feeling an obligation to aid or rescue them.¹⁸ Within these frames, neither the jettisoning of slaves nor the neglect-to-the-point-of-death of migrants can register as murder.

To tell these stories differently, Philip and Bergvall must first dissolve the cultural categories that define them. In both the printed and the performed versions of *Zong!* and *Drift*, the agent of this dissolution is the manipulation of sound. Both versions of these poems use literary conventions to fragment, pulverize, and recombine syntax through strategic use of dashes, line breaks, stanza breaks, vocal syncopations, and other segmentivities. They stretch or prolong sounds across the boundaries between words to create the effect Garrett Stewart calls a transegmental drift, cut semantic units into constituent phonemes to multiply their meanings, and use visual or sonic patterning to interrupt, twist, or tangle syntax.¹⁹ Both poets exploit puns, translinguistic slides, and lateral associations to mix and complicate lexicons. “I pretend,” Bergvall says, “to . . . possible one-to-one sound-to-sound assimilations, indulge in false friends and fake slippages, flatten out etymologies and historic developments. In this manner,” she continues, “I make some progress” (144). For both poets, progress means the shaking and shattering of the premises of the story.

The print version of “Zong! #11” is a concrete poem that illustrates the possibilities latent in the lexicon of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. “I murder the text,” Philip explains, “literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem” (193). The altered version reads as follows:

suppose the law	
	is
not	
	does
not	
	would
not	
	be
not	

¹⁸ For Bauman, see his *Wasted Lives*, 58.

¹⁹ For a virtuoso reading of such effects, see Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

suppose the law not

—a crime

suppose the law a loss

suppose the law

suppose (20)

In these fourteen lines, the fivefold iteration of the imperative “suppose” generates enough force to push against the juridical definitions, regulations, precedents, and penalties compressed into *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Stacked on one side of the middle of the poem is the conjunction “not,” repeated four times to generate a range of alternatives: suppose, we begin to hear, the law a knot; suppose the law a naught; suppose the law *is* not, suppose the law, itself, “—a crime.” Opposite this vertical line of negatives is a line of verbs—“is,” “does,” “would,” “be”—all of which would not, in fact, be without the possibility of their opposite. The space that separates these two lines of speech—a syntactic middle passage—is a no-man’s-land, a limbo, a place into which and from which nothing moves: the stalemate of binary opposition. Suppose, the poem picks up, the law is not, does not exist; suppose the law is no more than “not”; suppose the law is a loss, an airy nothing, an assumption we take to be the basis of an argument; suppose it is a pose. Suppose.

In spoken renditions of *Zong!*, Philip’s voice is forceful, even hypnotic.²⁰ When the printed page turns into a script for rich, dense, collaborative, and/or multimedia performance, the aural-ity of these long poems intensifies, becoming, in Bergvall’s words, “a more substantial and collaborative form of vocality, [a] more sustained and extended physicality and musicality” (128).

Philip performs *Zong!* as a chant, a ritual, a mutter, a howl or shriek, a sheet of sound whose recent elaborations are complicated by percussive instrumentation, ensemble improvisation, and simultaneous polylingual recitation. Bergvall, in her turn, collaborates with Norwegian drummer Ingar Zach, digital programmer Thomas Köppel, and dramaturg Michèle Pralong to present immersive events that re-create both “the skaldic, shout-out traditions of poetic delivery” (128) developed by cultures that store information orally and the immersive, flowing, flickering, machine-mediated forms of poetic delivery developed by cultures that store information digitally. In Bergvall’s description of these live performances, Zach’s percussion provides a resonance and vibration through which her voice rises and falls, while, behind her, the “projected language-mass” of Köppel’s electronic text, “the visual accumulation of the entire finished textual material . . . laid out, then overlaid, set in motion and activated through a generative pattern of sequences . . . turn[s] the text into a deep-moving, slow-changing multi-dimensional hypnotic wave. A vast open syntax” (140).²¹

These performances are not augmentations, ancillary interpretations, or supplements to the written text but events of equal power and primacy.²² The active, focused aural attentiveness

²⁰ To date, four aural versions of “Zong! #11” are archived on Philip’s page at PennSound.

See <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Philip.php>.

²¹ Numerous full and/or partial recordings of *Zong!* and *Drift* are archived on the Internet at PennSound, YouTube, and the authors’ official websites. Köppel’s programmed flow of the linguistic mass of *Drift* can be seen in a video trailer that shows Bergvall performing in front of a large digital display screen. See <https://vimeo.com/75406238>.

²² Here, I agree with Bernstein, who introduces his essay collection *Close Listening* by noting his intent “to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem—that is, the written document—is primary and

such soundings induce in audience members, however, alters and enriches subsequent silent readings of the text by bringing the articulatory stream of language Stewart calls “the phonotext” more vividly to the reader’s inner ear.²³ In this sense, the relation between text and performance is reciprocal.

Whether performed or printed, what is required to process sound in these long poems is neither the absorbed or entranced listening Walter J. Ong and Eric A. Havelock Jr. posit for the oral epic nor the “regressive” listening Theodor W. Adorno posits for popular culture but something closer to the concentrated, self-reflexive critical listening Charles Bernstein advocates as a way to bring archived recordings of performances into contemporary poetic discourse.²⁴ If the sonic profusion of *Zong!* and *Drift* requires the active, rather than passive, reception of forensic or investigative listening, what might it entail, to return to Bergvall’s poem, to start to “pay attention” (101)?

As we saw in “Zong! #11,” Philip positions an engaged reader or listener to trace an almost alchemical series of semantic and syntactic proliferations in which the lexicon of *Gregson v. Gilbert*—a lexicon that countenanced the throwing of slaves into the sea—yields to a language that makes room for the lives the law occluded. At the bottom of the page, in small type, below a line that separates it from the rest of “Zong! #11,” is a string of names Philip pronounces with great care in her performances: “Nomblo Falope Bisuga Nuru Chimwala Sala” (20). These names are not, cannot be, the names of the Africans thrown from the deck of the *Zong!*—names now forever irrecoverable—but they open toward a world in which those lives were known to be fully human.²⁵ In this inversion, Philip notes, “the ordering of grammar, the ordering that is the impulse of empire is subverted” (205): stories that could not be told begin to be remembered.

An analogous tactic in *Drift* is a method of subversion that gives the title to a cluster of fourteen poems. In performance, “Shake”—a verb, a noun, perhaps an imperative—takes form as an improvised agitation.²⁶ In print, “Shake #5,” which ends with the lines “noone was paying attention / thats when I started to” (101), segues directly into “Shake #6”: “... thats when ...”

that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the ‘poem itself.’” Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

²³ For a definition of the term “phonotext,” see Stewart, *Reading Voices*, 27–32.

²⁴ For more on these forms of listening, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982); Eric A. Havelock Jr., *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 270–99; and Bernstein, introduction to *Close Listening*, 3–26.

²⁵ In a reading of *Zong!* available on her YouTube page, Philip explains this act of naming as an act of grieving: “I felt I had to name these people who passed away. These were names I chose myself. They float like footnotes.” See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCx2eYgKXXb6Xv9qvw-nMrwg>.

²⁶ In an email of December 15, 2016, Bergvall explained to me that this twenty-minute section of the poem assumes, in live performances, a flexible or improvised structure that “uses what became Shake and also some earlier phrases I have kept from the first performance. . . . I have never so far read Shake as it is in the book at a reading either as it is so connected to the playing with my musician and also the release at the end of an hour’s performance work.”

I started to shake
 ok ok when I started to
 scook push sharken churn
 ok wander ok scacan
 thats when I started to shake (102)

In the *Drift* trailer, Bergvall gives this part of the poem a truncated phonemic churn: “that’s when,” she says, “...that’s when... **sh sh sh sh** okok.”²⁷

This particle of sound—**sh**—carries an array of meanings that ranges from an injunction to silence or a percussive exhalation to the start of a series of words such as “shudder,” “shatter,” or “shiver” that rattle any sense of the foundational linguistic stability that Philip posited as supposition in both law and poetry: “the ‘right’ use,” as she put it, “of the ‘right’ words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation” (191).

The lines that follow in the poem’s print version take the common English word “shake” back to its roots in Old English *scacan* and Old Norse *skaka*, words that signify, variously, to pass or depart, to quiver or vibrate, to flourish, flutter, or wave—to move, in short, from one state into another. The list that follows includes the words “push” and “wander,” opposite valences of the process produced when a word is taken back to its resonances in ancestor languages, languages that might contain buried remnants of other forms of thought. “When the shaking starts,” “Shake #7” begins,

let the shaking
 when the shaking starts
 whats a safe place
 whats a safe place (103)

The basis of this linguistic archaeology is not certainty but the rise and fall of meanings, the ephemerality, the precariousness, that allows for change.

POETRY AND PRECURITY

In 2007 the University of Iowa Press published a slim volume of poems composed by detainees at Guantánamo, passed on to lawyers and human rights workers, translated by Flag Miller, and edited by Marc Falkoff. It contains only twenty-two poems, none of them long, because, as Falkoff tells us, the bulk of the poetry written at Guantánamo had been either destroyed or confiscated by the US Department of Defense on the grounds that “poetry ‘presents a special risk’ to national security because of its ‘content and format.’”²⁸

When Plato expelled the poets from his Republic, he too acted in the name of national security: the effect of poetry, he argued, is nothing less than the crippling of the mind. As Havelock and Ong were the first to point out, the bards Plato expelled belonged to an oral lineage—Bergvall’s “skaldic, shout-out tradition”—in which poems were received by audiences as waves of sound, flows of thought, and elusive repetitive cries, all of which pose a “special risk”

²⁷ This series of sounds appears 1.33 seconds into the video at <https://vimeo.com/75406238>.

²⁸ Marc Falkoff, “Notes on Guantánamo,” in *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak*, ed. Marc Falkoff (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 4. Judith Butler brings this passage into her discussion in *Frames of War*, 55.

to cultures founded, regulated, and preserved by the rational and analytic traditions associated with the printed word.

As Butler and others argue, the opposite of precarity is a social world constructed to value and preserve relationality and interdependence. The long poems written and performed by Philip and Bergvall are not and cannot be poems of primary orality, but both set out, nonetheless, to use the affordances of sound to dissolve and, as far as possible, reconceive the premises of legal, political, military, economic, and ethical stories in which some lives matter and others don't. What these long poems as poetic essays contribute to discussions of social justice is a sustained acoustic environment in which it is possible to imagine, at least for a moment, an alternative mode of being. In this mode, Bergvall proposes, "[r]esonance is contact ripple. Everything is connected in the vast chamber of the world, beyond the callous, brutal politics. Everything ripples at contact" (135). A