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**'The Power of Caribbean Poetry – Word and Sound' Conference**  
Homerton College, Cambridge University, 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> September 2012

### **Sounding Silence**

In the "Notanda" to *Zong!* (an afterword in which the poet explores and explains the creative process that gave birth to the poem), NourbeSe Philip writes:

"My intent is to use the text of the legal decision [of Gregson vs Gilbert] 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, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text. I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*...

In *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the story..." (191 & 196)

The published text of *Zong!* might be understood as a script for performance by which NourbeSe achieves a sounding of silence (in both sense of the word 'sounding' – plumbing the depths and giving voice). I was recently in the audience for such a performance, and thus a participant in this sounding, and despite my reservations about the degree to which *Zong!* works as poetry, I was moved.

If we think about poetry from an oral/aural perspective then the work towards 'understanding' or the generation of meaning, comes with/through a state of 'receptivity': we might think, from an English literary tradition, of Wordsworth's 'wise passiveness' or of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'Darkling I listen'). This is a receptivity to sound and silence that involves a stillness of being and an openness of body, heart, mind so that true 'listening' can begin. If we think about Gayatri Spivak's claim that 'the subaltern cannot speak' this might be not only because the subaltern has been silenced in a variety of ways, but because

when the subaltern does speak, s/he cannot be heard, again for a variety of reasons, one of which might be that the receptivity required to hear – the act of ‘listening’ – is absent. The means by which receptivity might be achieved is the topic of another paper, but in this paper I want to think about what it is that NourbeSe Philip asks of herself and of her audience in a poem like *Zong!* In this paper I want to think about the Silencing of a people and the means by which those people might be enabled to speak, and what the poet’s (and audience’s) role might be in this work towards enabling silence to be ‘voiced’ or ‘heard’. In order to do this, I have also chosen to work through my own experience as a teacher, a poet and a musician to think about the relationship between sound and silence; and to remind you of the theory and practice of a poet I believe to have been an enormously influential force in the development of a Black English Poetic – Kamau Brathwaite.

But, first I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude for those who formulated and have been involved in the Caribbean Poetry Project and this conference. It is wonderful to have the opportunity to attend a conference wholly dedicated not only to poetry but to Caribbean poetry. I have never been to the Caribbean, but I fell in love with Caribbean poetry when I was introduced to Mervyn Morris, Miss Lou, Dennis Scott, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of an English Degree at the University of Queensland, Australia. I have taught English literatures in universities for the last 17 years, and although I have never had the opportunity to devote a whole semester course to Caribbean poetry, have included Caribbean poetry in a large number of the courses I have offered to students in the UK, Denmark, Australia and most recently Japan. In his long essay, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, delivered in its earliest form as a lecture at Harvard University in 1979, Brathwaite averred that,

“The poetry [of the Caribbean], the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. Which is again, why I have to have a tape recorder for this presentation. **I want you to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it.**” (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 17)

As I too want you to ‘get the sound of it’ rather than the sight of it, I decided not to use visual material for this presentation, but to rely solely upon the development of an aural-based receptivity between you and me. I will begin each section of the discussion that follows with a short quote from *History of the Voice* to serve as a direction pointer and marker of each strand in the argument I will be developing.

**“The oral tradition ... demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community:”**, writes Kamau, “the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides... **people had to rely on their very *breath*** rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines. **They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves**, rather than the technology outside themselves.” (19)

John Agard’s poem “Listen Mr Oxford don” not only gives expression to, but performs this idea:

I’m not a violent man Mr Oxford don  
I only armed wit mih human breath  
but human breath  
is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me  
I ent serving no jail sentence  
I slashing suffix in self-defence  
I bashing future wit present tense  
and if necessary

I making de Queen’s English accessory  
to my offence  
(16)

The students in my classes don’t read John Agard’s “Listen Mr Oxford don” on the page, they listen to a recording of John performing the piece. It is a poem that never fails, by which I mean it is a poem that energises the room and creates a willingness to talk, discuss, explore – in fact to actively ‘listen’. I introduce first year students to postcolonial literature by playing a video recording of Kamau Brathwaite performing “Negus” to a noisy but appreciative crowd, and later, I play a tape-recording of Kamau reciting “Nametracks” and talking about *Mother Poem*:

But  
muh  
muh  
muh  
me mudda  
mud  
black fat  
soft fat man-  
ure

...  
muh  
muh

me muddah  
mud  
doan like what she see  
she doan like e  
she doan like e at all  
she doan light e  
she is wa/wa/wash she is watch e  
she is spit right into he all-seein eye  
that she draw wid she toe pun de grounn

an she spite/in an spite/in  
she spite/in an spit/in  
she curses upon him  
wid de sharkest toot o she tongue

the man who possesses us all  
who bek de heart o she husbann hann  
who wreck de lann o me faddah  
doan possess we at all, she is tell muh  
(56-7)

This is difficult material, but the students unerringly find it fascinating, moving and relevant. I begin the course I teach on Romantic poets with a video of Mikey Smith performing Shelley's "Song for the Men of England" in Westminster Abbey, and Linton Kwesi Johnson talking with CLR James about Romantic poetry and its relationship to the oral poets of the Caribbean. The course I offer 3<sup>rd</sup> year students on 20<sup>th</sup> century women writers includes Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Hewett, Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, and Olive Senior. They don't read Olive on the page, they listen to me recite "Meditation on Yellow" from *Gardening in the Tropics*. Most recently I have introduced Japanese students to Olive, Kamau and Grace Nichols – *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* were a great success and one of the postgraduate students chose to write her final essay on a single poem from that volume. I read, and insist all my students read, the poetry aloud. What doesn't make sense on the page, gathers meaning as listening becomes part of the process of understanding: listening demands a *receptivity* different to reading, and the spoken word conveys *feeling* to great effect.

I have always begun a discussion of poetry by reading the poem aloud and asking students in the class to read the stanza or lines before they are discussed. But recently I decided to include recitation from memory as part of the assessment for my course on Romantic poetry. The students had to learn 'by heart' a few lines or a stanza of their favourite piece of poetry studied during the session to recite in the last class of the term. It was

overwhelmingly successful – the students enjoyed themselves enormously and discovered the sense of accomplishment and power to be derived from poetic performance. But I confess I have not yet attempted to teach NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and in part this paper is a working through of why the work is important (the work on what difficulties it presents and how those difficulties might be overcome is work for another paper). What follows is an exploration of the significance and importance of poetry as sound and silence – or a sounding of silence, from the viewpoint of someone (that is me) who wrote their honours dissertation on Poetic Imagination and the central role of the Image. This shift might best be encapsulated in a move from an appreciation of poetry 'on the page, through the eye, in the head' to one that thinks about the ramifications of poetry 'on the tongue, through the voice, in the heart'. The two are not necessarily as distinct from each other as this separation might suggest, but sometimes the institutionalisation or an academisation (in schools and universities) of poetry can lead to a privileging of silent reading over listening, and silent writing over speaking; and a privileging of theorists over practitioners.

**“The hurricane does not roar in pentameters.”** (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 10)

When I was a child – from the age of 5 through to my early teenage years - I wrote poetry; and on a recent visit to my parents who are now close to 80, my father gave me a small booklet of poems I had written during this period that he had found among boxes of papers he was sorting and throwing away to minimise the clutter in the very small unit into which they have recently moved. It is quite an odd experience reading something written so long ago – it is strange and yet familiar – the words have been forgotten but not lost, and reading them some 50 years after their writing, is a realisation that word *is* made flesh. My father was an English teacher and a lover of poetry. Although he did not write poetry himself, he read and recited poetry to and with me as a very young child, he encouraged me to write poetry, and he fed my love of poetry with his love and knowledge of English, American and Australian poets. Most striking in my re-reading of my poetry written so long ago was the correspondence of rhythm and cadence with the Australian poet, Judith Wright, a poet whose words still sing inside me – they are part of me – word made flesh.

There are a number of things that I learnt from this moment of retrieval that are of relevance to this discussion of Kamau Brathwaite and M. NourbeSe Philip: First is the essential *music* of poetry that might be seen to take precedence over the *image* – so sound might be said to be more – I don't want to say more important, but let's say - more deeply ingrained than sight, the verbal quality more essential perhaps than the visual quality.

Reflecting on the potential of the “auditory imagination” in an essay published in 1933, T.S.Eliot wrote, it “is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the ... forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.” (*Auditory Imagination*, 1933) This is the sounding of silence.

The second point I would draw from this personal experience is the significance of literary influence – for Kamau Brathwaite, the poet of most influence in the early stages of his career was T.S. Eliot. Kamau observes in *History of the Voice* that “What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. This is what really attracted us to Eliot.” (30) The poet with whom I felt most affinity and clearly had most impact upon the poetry that I wrote and with which I could still feel reverberations of correspondence was an Australian poet, and a woman poet – a poet who not only wrote about the natural world with which I was familiar as an Australian, but whose poetic *music* best corresponded, or struck a chord, with the rhythm of my life experience, my body, and its affective connection to that natural world – that world being at its most essential, the sights, smells, sounds and rhythms of the Australian bush with which so much of my early emotional life was associated. The inheritance of English lyric and ballad can be heard in Judith Wright’s poetry as it can in early Brathwaite, but as in Kamau’s poetry (or Olive Senior’s for that matter) the hurricane does not roar in pentameters, neither do cockatoos or kookaburras sing like Shelley’s skylark or Keats’ nightingale in Wright’s poetry. They are given a poetry – a rhythm and a music – befitting – and so I followed suit (unconsciously) in my own poetry.

“...a very necessary connection to the understanding of nation language,’ Kamau asserts, ‘is between native musical structures and the native language. That **music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language which comes out of it.**” (Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 16)

Closely related to this discussion of my early life as a poet, is music. So let me now put my Mother with my Father. My mother was a musician (a singer and pianist) and a music teacher, and it was under her influence that I developed a skill, knowledge and love of music. In particular I learnt the piano from the age of 5. It was a practice that went hand in hand with reading and writing, listening and speaking poetry. My favourite composer was Chopin. I loved Chopin for the melodic singing quality of the music and for its emotional power. I also loved Chopin’s music for the freedom it allowed me to express what I felt. What this meant

in practice was the employment of *rubato* – the permission to play with time, the power to slow and speed the tempo – and the use of huge dynamic range – from *sotto voce* to *fortissimo*! There are two things I learnt that have relevance to this discussion of Caribbean poetry: the first was my discovery of the importance of silence – I realised that the spaces between the sounds – their relative length – was what enabled you to draw the listener to you, and what enhanced the music's emotional impact. The second discovery was how to bridge these gaps or spaces, how to connect them effectively – how to stretch the elastic of silence to a point of high tension and then release, without breaking it, or without deflating the emotional bubble ... and finally, I learnt that the performance of a piece lasted beyond the final note into the space where sound was diminished but still reverberated, and ultimately where silence both completed and broke the shape or structure – freeing it and the audience - audience or perhaps congregation.

So to Kamau again: **“A full presentation of nation language would of course include more traditional (ancestral/oral) material than I have done (shango ... spiritual (Aladura) Baptist services, foundations ... tea-meeting speeches etc ...”** (48)

The third element in this story is the impact of Religion – in my case, Christianity and the influence of the King James Bible and the Wesley hymn book. I am now neither a practitioner nor a believer, but I attended church with my family (Anglican – or what we called, Church of England - and later Methodist) every Sunday of my childhood, along with Sunday school. And for 4 years of primary school I attended an Anglican Grammar School. What I loved about the Church service and weekly School assemblies was the emotional power of the language and music of prayer, sermon and hymn. They are also word made flesh. The Religion of my childhood certainly had an impact on my moral being – my sense of responsibility and obligation to think of self in relation to others, but of greater impact than the “lesson” (at least in terms of this discussion of poetry) was the sonority of the Word. This was related to the structure of buildings, service, sermon, prayer and hymn in which words were sounded, and to the powerful silence into which preaching, singing and prayer were received: a silence that preceded, interrupted and completed the sound of Word. Out of darkness and silence God speaks:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.  
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.  
**And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.**

[Genesis 1]

What is emphasised in the Old Testament is the *creative* power of God – a power to form and to *transform* - and the associated *creative* power of *spoken* word.

We can see this at work in Kamau's poem "Negus":

it  
it  
it  
it  
it is not

it is not  
it is not  
it is not enough  
it is not enough to be free  
of the red white and blue  
of the drag, of the dragon

it is not  
it is not  
it is not enough  
it is not enough to be free  
of the whips, principalities and powers  
where is your kingdom of the Word?

(Brathwaite, 'Negus', Islands, *Arrivants*, 222)

The New Testament emphasises Word/God made flesh – the human divine; and an *affective* relationship is developed between god, word, body, feeling.

**John 1:**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

(God is usually understood here to mean JESUS CHRIST – the son of GOD) This is a GOD who gave his only begotten son to the world of men so they could be saved, that is, so they could be redeemed into the world of eternal light. The message is one of Love:

**John 3:**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If we put aside for the moment the message of 'everlasting life', what is being asked for of the disciple or the believer is a particular kind of *receptivity* (what the Romantics called 'Imagination' or a capacity to enter into the life and the feelings of another being and to



empathise). We are being asked to 'listen' and to 'act' in accord with our sympathy (and our sense of gratefulness or obligation).

Negus' response to the damage wrought by the coloniser's Christian God is violent:

fling me the stone  
that will confound the void  
find me the rage  
and I will raze the colony  
fill me with words  
and I will blind your God

but it is a violence that lies in the power of word:

I  
must be given words so that the bees  
in my blood's buzzing brain of memory  
  
will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,  
will make sky, will make heaven,  
the heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano and the un-  
folding land.

The call for the creative power of word is accompanied by a request to the African gods and the African peoples of the Caribbean to listen – to be receptive:

*Att*  
*Att*  
*Attibon*

*Attibon Leba*  
*Attibon Legba*  
*Ouvri bayi pou' moi*  
*Ouvri bayi ou' moi*  
(224)

Open the door for me, open the door ...

Many of you from the Caribbean will recognise and feel some affinity with the elements that made up my childhood in Australia – it is of course a British colonial inheritance of literature, music and religion that we in all likelihood share something of. Our differences lie in the specificity of the 'other' cultural traditions that jostled against or with that British inheritance. But what might be seen as the major difference is the absence of trauma either in my personal life or in my family history – a trauma related to violence and loss: loss of life, of language, of culture, of history associated with the African diaspora. But Kamau Brathwaite was

foremost among those who believed that although the losses were great, they were not entire; that *survival, syncretism, creolisation* and *creativity* were the key markers of the Caribbean – not the black hole of nothingness so infamously espoused by V.S. Naipaul; and that the people and the poets of Afro-Caribbean descent needed to sound the depths of trauma and loss, signified by The Middle Passage - they needed to *sound the silence*. This might best be achieved through groundation and the religious state of possession – being possessed by a god is also to come into possession of the self – the ‘I’ (both personal and communal) denied by slavery and colonisation. Kamau’s poems “Caliban” and “Shepherd” perform this sounding:

“Shepherd”:

Dumb  
dumb  
dumb

there is no face  
no lip  
no moon

the tambourine tinkles  
the room rumbles  
clouded with drums

a crack ascends the silence  
soles of my feet are tall  
are tall

...  
Dumb  
dumb  
dumb

now the drum speaks  
flat palms open their lips  
give light to the tight eyes

the tambourine wrinkles  
white shrieks as the messenger whirls  
faster

and faster  
lips curl into old shapes  
thick gutturals

red heavy consonants furl

on the dry tongue  
and the god is near.  
(‘Islands’, *Arrivants*, 185-7)

For Kamau and for NourbeSe Word, in the form of Poetry, is central to personal and communal retrieval, recognition, valorisation, healing, dream and vision. In the “Notanda” that tracks the course of the *Zong!*’s gestation, NourbeSe writes of the need to tell a story without telling: “I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself;” (199) and she writes of a form of a fragmentation and mutilation of the text that forces the eye “to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray”, and the effort of the reader ‘to make sense’ of an event that “eludes understanding, perhaps permanently.” (198) But let me at this point return you to Kamau’s remark that, “**The oral tradition ... demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community.**” The word must be spoken, must be heard, must be taken in, must reverberate and echo back. Then, some kind of understanding will be achieved – the kind of understanding that is related to sympathetic connection. Further into “Notanda” the language NourbeSe uses to describe the composition of *Zong!* shifts from something writerly to something oral – something requiring articulation - sounding: “Clusters of words sometimes have meaning, often do not – words are broken into and open to make non-sense or no sense at all, which, in turn, becomes a code for another submerged meaning. Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound – grunts, plosives, labials – is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?” Her words recall Eliot’s words on auditory imagination: “the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the ... forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.” “Why the exclamation mark after *Zong!*,” asks NourbeSe of herself and anticipating a reader/audience inquiry, to which she replies: “*Zong!* is chant! Shout! And ululation! *Zong!* is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* Is ‘pure utterance.’ *Zong!* Is Song! And Song is what has kept the soul of the African intact when they ‘want(ed) water ... sustenance ... preservation’ *Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling.” (207) *Zong!* is a script for performance generated through spirit possession. The poet is the medium through which lost and silenced voices speak. It is a poetic ‘sounding of silence’.

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