

A Note on the Translation

It took ten years to translate *Zong!* into Italian. It was Andrea Raos who first encountered this book and was struck by its power. As a talented poet, a translator himself, and a dedicated promoter of foreign poetry in Italy, he sent a copy as a gift to me, thus starting the long conversation that led to the decision to translate it into Italian, to look for a publisher brave enough to believe in the project and an institution that could help with the costs of such a complex typographical work. We received the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, a key cultural institution that provides funds for the translations of outstanding works by Canadian writers. Thanks to Benway Series, who purchased the rights from Wesleyan University Press, and to the tireless work of Mariangela Guatteri, the Italian version of *Zong!* has now become available. It is a beautiful book, a large blue object, spacious, with a 'mobile' cover that allows you to open it all the way and fully appreciate the visual dimension of the written text and its relationship with the blank page. Of course, like all translations, it is perfectible, temporary, belonging to its time. It can't lay claim to the same inspiration that moved the author, yet it is the result of a work of service to that inspiration. A long period of study, reflection, and experiments was needed to devise a process that would make *Zong!* resonate in Italian. Nothing was taken for granted: Italian, an inflected language, as opposed to English, which tends to be isolating, posed a series of grammatical and syntactical problems in the creation of the horizon of expectation that each break opens up, for example. The challenges were many: recreating "this language of grunt and groan, of moan and stutter—this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history," welcoming the non-sense and the ambiguous as codes for submerged meanings, opening language and languages where they collide and break and then unexpectedly speak to each other, 'telling' when even telling surrenders and the otherness of saying comes forward, that excess which goes *almost* unheard from a precise point in history to our very modern ears, and exacts listening. The circumstances around which *Zong!* originated have not really passed, even more so in Italy, in the Mediterranean, in 2021. The reading of an Italian version of *Zong!* belongs to the future as much as to the present: it can, I hope, contribute to the writings and translations to come.

Sometimes I think that poetry writing itself is a form of translation: the translation from a language that doesn't yet exist, the antieconomical language *par excellence*, the *dialektos* of transition, the long detour capable of raising sudden awareness, the language that contains many languages – all things *Zong!* knows so well.

I did this work in the name of service, without expecting anything in return, least of all financial reward, with the only aim to make *Zong!* accessible to Italian-speaking readers of any race, ethnicity, religion or nationality.

NourbeSe Philip did not bless this book as we had hoped, and recently she has questioned my motives and my background. I am very sorry about the lack of communication between us, which I have tried to re-establish on several occasions. I am not sure what credentials I should show. I have always been keen on, have written and have studied 'difficult' poetry and cross-cultural poetics. I myself am the result of a *métissage* I eventually made peace with. My grandma was illiterate, she sang me songs in her own invented language and spoke with an accent all over her life. How come that I became passionate about experimental writing? There are no straight lines sometimes. As there are no readymade recipes to translate poetry. One of Philip's objections is about spacing, whose original layout she deems non-negotiable. Yet, the different morphology of a translated language inevitably leads to a reconfiguration of the blank page. The silences are as important as the words, the parts of words, the sounds and the letters, and they have been translated in the same way, without aiming for fixed equivalences and without disrupting the structure of the original page. I think the significance of this work lies in the interplay of rhythm, translingual phenomena, design, intertextuality, and poetics: translating it requires a negotiation

among all these elements. But translation is a form of reading, and as such it is subject to a number of interpretations. This makes another, hopefully many other translations of *Zong!* still possible, as creative and intellectual possibilities for non-English speakers, as reflections on past and present history, as expanded readings of Philip's work and as conversations with her work, which can play a part in shaping the readers to come – as I hope mine, ours, will be, for those who care to read and consider it.

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