

## Radio Zong: Sounding Atlantic Afterlives

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In March 2020, in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry bodies UK Theatre and The Society of London Theatre announced the closure of all their member theatres – amounting, in effect, to the cessation of live theatre in the UK. Two works affected by the closure took as their subject or inspiration one of the most enduring and troubling reference points of the eighteenth century: the 1781 massacre of captive Africans by the crew of the slave ship *Zong*. Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* had premiered at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, on 12 March, while a planned theatrical run at the Bristol Old Vic for Giles Terera's *The Meaning of Zong* was abandoned. After their cancellation, the two plays were recorded and broadcast by BBC Radio 3. *Rockets and Blue Lights* was heard as part of the station's Lockdown Theatre Festival. Works broadcast as part of the festival were not adapted for radio: rather, actors recorded their parts at home and were asked to recall and recreate their most recent theatrical performance when doing so. In 2021, a reworked version of *The Meaning of Zong* was broadcast as part of the same station's Lights Up/Culture in Quarantine programme, which showcased plays unable to be performed live because of the continuing restrictions. Reconfiguring such works as sound-only pieces adds a new, primarily aural, dimension to the afterlife of one of the most horrific events of the eighteenth century, challenging the predominantly visual registers habitually used to remember and confront Atlantic slavery. Centring on an analysis of these two radio productions, my proposed contribution explores the role of sound as a medium through which the eighteenth century resonates in and is propagated through our present.

The *Zong*, as Bénédicte Ledente notes, is a 'pervasive and recurring presence' in twenty-first century culture, repeatedly realized in visual art, poetry, fiction and film. Thanks generally to the bias of our culture towards seeing, and specifically to J.M.W. Turner's painting *Slave Ship* (1840) this presence has manifested overwhelmingly as visual – often in ways that privilege silence and immateriality. Spectrality, a discourse of visible haunting and apparition, has become a central but hackneyed way to think about such events. Such ubiquity is protested by a character in *Rockets and Blue Lights*, who exclaims of her role in a film inspired by Turner's painting, 'you've got me playing a fucking ghost [...] A ghost for fuck's sake. We're always playing ghosts.' The aural offers an alternative realm of vocality and activity. As Martin Muro writes in *Listening to the Caribbean*, sound is 'a potent form of social energy' offering 'expressive resources that have registered, manipulated, distorted, and created collective and individual identities.' Alongside Terera and Pinnock's recent work, my proposed contribution discusses a small but influential body of radio drama on the afterlives of slavery by Jackie Kay and Caryl Phillips, as well as the soundtrack to Lubaina Himid's installation *Naming the Money* and M. NourbeSe Philip's sung/spoken performance of her poem *Zong!* This last work, as Andrea Brady writes, 'confronts readers with the question: what more we can do than witness?' My proposed contribution responds: we can listen.