



Giving Voice to a Portrait: The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Law in Belle

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Abstract

The 2013 feature film *Belle* presents an account of the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804). Belle was the daughter of Sir John Lindsay, a British naval officer, and Maria Belle, an enslaved African woman, and she was raised in the home of her great uncle Lord Mansfield during his tenure as Chief Justice of England. The record of Belle's life is thin, and her story might have been altogether forgotten had it not been for a 1779 portrait of her in which she was painted alongside her white cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray. The film was inspired by the portrait. The paucity of available facts left the filmmakers much latitude for fictionalizing, but even so the film makes significant departures from the historical record, for example, in its representations of Belle's eventual husband, and in its insertion of Belle into the unfolding of the *Zong* case, a case involving slavery that was decided by Lord Mansfield in 1783. In this paper, I consider the effectiveness and the ethical implications of the filmmakers' use of law to give voice to this historical figure.

Keywords: law, film, race, gender

Introduction

The 2013 feature film *Belle*, inspired by a portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804), gives a voice to this historical figure altogether denied to her in the historical record. What is known of her life is scant, beyond the fact that she was the daughter of Sir John Lindsay, a British naval officer, and Maria Belle, an enslaved African woman, and that she was raised in the home of her great uncle Lord Mansfield during his tenure as Chief Justice of England. The paucity of documented facts gave the filmmakers much latitude for fictionalizing, one aspect of which was their insertion of Belle into the unfolding of the *Zong* case, a case involving slavery that was decided by Lord Mansfield in 1783.

The film is very much preoccupied with giving voice to the voiceless, to Belle herself as a woman of mixed race in eighteenth century Britain, and by extension, once Belle's story intersects with the *Zong* case, to enslaved people in the courts and in British society prior to abolition. Through close attention to the choices the filmmakers made in representing the facts of, and inserting fiction into, the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle, I consider the film's effectiveness in giving voice to the voiceless. Further, I explore some ethical implications of their strategies for doing so by drawing upon life writing scholarship that suggests ways of reading life narratives through a postcolonial lens,¹ and also by considering the film alongside M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem sequence, *Zong!*, another artwork with a focus on voice that has the *Zong* case at its centre.

The Portrait

The film was inspired by a portrait that depicts Belle alongside her white cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray, who grew up with her at Kenwood House under the care of Lord and Lady Mansfield. Commissioned by Lord Mansfield, it is thought to have been painted in 1779. It was long misattributed to society portraitist Johann Zoffany, but was recently determined to have been painted by Scottish artist David Martin.²

It was painted at the height of the transatlantic slave trade with which Britain's economy was thoroughly intertwined, a context which makes the image it portrays particularly striking. Here are a Black woman and a white woman, apparently on intimate terms, appearing together more or less as equals. Certainly, there are other British paintings from that time period depicting Black subjects but nearly always peripherally in subservient roles.³

Some sources suggest that the painting was not displayed at Kenwood House even during Lord Mansfield's lifetime.⁴ If it was, it must have been taken down shortly after his death. Just three years later, in 1796, an inventory locates it unframed in storage. The descriptor provided is 'Lady Elizabeth and Mrs. Davinier,' Davinier being the surname Belle adopted when she married in 1794. A century on, her name no longer appears. A 1904 inventory describes it as 'Portrait of Lady Finch Hatton [Elizabeth Murray's married name], seated in a garden with an open book and a negress attendant.' A mere six years after that, Belle's presence is erased entirely, the painting now described as 'a portrait of Lady Elizabeth'.⁵

The painting was moved from Kenwood House to Scone Palace in 1922, and it was there that Misan Sagay, *Belle* screenwriter, first glimpsed it:

I was struck immediately when I saw the painting. It was this black woman staring directly out of the painting. She was vivacious. She was alive. She was painted in movement and yet the picture underneath the caption simply said, "The Lady Elizabeth Murray." Nothing else. I was intrigued by who this black woman was. Years later, when I went back and the caption had been updated to, "Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido, the Housekeeper's Daughter," I just didn't buy it. I didn't think that she was the housekeeper's daughter. I felt that there was a story here and so that's what captivated me. It was her herself and her presence and yet her silence. She didn't even have a name.⁶

Sagay resolved to tell that story, to give the subject of the portrait a voice.

Amma Asante, director of *Belle*, also emphasizes the portrait when speaking of the genesis of the film: 'You see a biracial girl, a woman of colour, who's depicted slightly higher than her white counterpart. She's staring directly out, with a very confident eye. This painting flipped tradition and everything the 18th century told us about portraiture. What I saw was an opportunity to tell a story that would combine art history and politics.'⁷ And a story that Asante later summed up as, 'about a character who develops a voice.'⁸

Dido Elizabeth Belle

It was not until the 1990s that research on the painting restored Belle's identity to it, by

which time local historians and genealogists had begun to unearth the few details now known of her life. Genealogists turned up the date of her marriage (December 5, 1793), information about the births of her children (records of the baptisms of three sons, twins Charles and John in 1795, and Edward William in 1800), and the date of her death (July 1804).⁹

An account book from Kenwood House offers some idea of how Belle was provided for when living there under the care of Lord and Lady Mansfield.¹⁰ She received a quarterly allowance of £5 (less than her cousin Elizabeth received, but more than household servants were paid), and was given additional sums of money on her birthday and at Christmas. Further, it seems that expense was not spared when her health demanded it. For example, she was provided with asses milk, thought to be a tonic, costing in excess of £3 when she was ill, and 5 shillings were spent to extract two of her teeth. The account book also reveals that she was accorded the relative luxury of having twelve shillings paid for her bedding to be washed and her chintz bed curtains re-glazed, and of having a mahogany table made for her.

This patchwork of detail gives an impression but not a concrete picture of how Belle lived at Kenwood. A 1779 diary entry of a visitor, Thomas Hutchinson, provides a supplement, albeit from an evidently hostile source. He wrote: 'Dined at Lord Mansfield's in Caen Wood [...] A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having her arm within the other. [...] She is a sort of Superintendant over the dairy, poultry yard, etc, which we visited. And she was called upon by my Lord every minute for this thing and that, and shewed the greatest attention to everything he said.'¹¹

Different Mansfield scholars have arrived at varying conclusions based on this scant body of information. Jeremy Krikler writes, 'Lord Mansfield and his wife were childless and there is little doubt that Dido Elizabeth Belle was for them something of an adopted daughter.'¹² An unnamed source cited by Krikler describes Belle as 'virtually a sister' to Elizabeth.¹³ Whereas Carolyn Steedman describes her merely 'as a kind of companion and personal attendant to her half-cousin,' though she concedes that 'Mansfield was, by all accounts, both extremely fond of and reliant on the services of his illegitimate great-niece.'¹⁴ Norman Poser lands somewhere in between: 'At Kenwood, Dido had an intermediate status: she was neither a full member of the family nor a servant.'¹⁵

Lord Mansfield's will provides further documentary evidence that is illuminating for more than just the details of Belle's inheritance: a one-time payment of £500 plus £100 per

year until her death. Again, though less than her cousin Elizabeth received, this was a substantial sum. But the will also contained the sentence, ‘I confirm to Dido Elizabeth Belle her freedom.’ This raises questions about Belle’s status throughout her lifetime. Some have taken the use of the word ‘confirm’ here to indicate that, though born enslaved because of her mother’s status, she had legally been granted freedom some time prior to Lord Mansfield’s death. Krikler finds this interpretation implausible: ‘[I]t is unlikely that a man so steeped in the law would have earlier conferred a new status without doing so formally, that is without discernable legal trace.’¹⁶ More likely, the inclusion of this sentence in Mansfield’s will ‘fulfilled a wish on his part to ensure in the slaveholding society that was England in the eighteenth century that there would be no doubt about her status on his death.’¹⁷ This is an important legacy but also a grim reminder that, though not treated as an enslaved person in the Mansfield household, this could have been her legal status.¹⁸

Belle’s father James Lindsay may also have provided her with an inheritance. In his will he left £1000 to be split between John and Elizabeth, his ‘reputed son and daughter.’¹⁹ The daughter referred to may or may not have been Belle.²⁰ However, his obituary in the *London Chronicle* does indicate that Belle’s blood connection to him and to Lord Mansfield was publicly known during her lifetime. In it, she is described as ‘a Mulatto who has been brought up in Lord Mansfield’s family almost from her infancy, and whose amiable disposition and accomplishments have earned her the highest respect from all his Lordship’s relations and visitants.’²¹

Finally, one of Lord Mansfield’s letters points us to a sample of Belle’s handwriting, in the form of some copying she did for him. Paula Byrne writes of it: ‘In May 1786 she wrote out a letter to Justice Buller. It reveals that she had a clear, neat hand.’²² But nothing in the historical record provides access to Belle’s voice.

The Film

The foregoing is all that we truly know of Belle. So thin is the record that the full-length biography by Paula Byrne released in tandem with the film is mostly comprised of context and speculation. This paucity of available facts left the filmmakers with a great deal of latitude for fictionalizing. But they went well beyond filling in gaps with fiction, making significant departures from the few known facts to serve their vision.

I do not suggest that thus departing from the facts is necessarily a basis for criticism. The filmmakers do not purport to present a factual biography but rather a narrative 'based on a true story.' Screenwriter Sagay has been very clear in labeling her script as 'a work of historical fiction' and she has written in some detail about choices she made of when to cleave to the facts and when to depart from them in order to best serve the narrative she determined to create.²³ Director Asante has also addressed the intertwining of fact and fiction in the film stating, 'I hope that what it does is it inspires people to find out more about her because I had to build a lot of fiction around this story to hook it together.'²⁴

It is, Asante says, 'an unashamedly commercial movie,' and much of the fictionalizing serves the imperative to make it entertaining to a contemporary audience.²⁵ But she also notes that there is 'some historic responsibility attached to it.'²⁶ They strove to walk a careful line in order 'to make a Jane Austin-esque piece that really had something to say.'²⁷

Thus, I pay careful attention to the filmmakers' choices in this respect not to decry any departure from the known facts but rather to assess how effective those choices have been in serving the aim of imbuing the character of Belle with a voice the historical record has denied her. Further, I raise questions about some of the implications of their strategies to that end. The fictionalized narrative of Belle's life presented in the film could be regarded as literary testimony and, as such, illuminated by Gillian Whitlock's approach to examination of postcolonial life narratives through testimonial transactions. Whitlock highlights the interactive quality of testimonial discourse, 'which is generically rhetorical and dialogic: an appeal to an addressee, a text in search of a witness, a desire to invoke witnessing publics. We speak of bearing witness to indicate the weight of responsibility and affect that follows this transfer.'²⁸ She asserts that '[t]estimony can create a piercing and transformative "bearing" witness that triggers advocacy, responsibility, and accountability, which move the reader,' but notes 'an enduring concern that testimonial transactions reproduce the dynamics of colonization and dispossession.'²⁹

In analyzing the film through this lens, my primary focus is on the insertion of Belle into the *Zong* case, a case involving slavery that was decided by Lord Mansfield. This episode is central to the development of Belle's character and of her voice in the film. Asante explains, 'The Zong case gives her this glimmer of light into self-awareness, into self-fulfillment.' It 'is the perfect tool for her to be able to explore the world, her own political agenda, and herself, her own identity.'³⁰

How does the film position the viewer as witness in relation to Belle's voice and to the unfolding of the *Zong* case? How is affect deployed to this end? Does this testimonial transaction 'create intimate attachments through empathy and compassion'?³¹ Is the testimony of the fictional Belle apt to 'trigger advocacy, responsibility, and accountability' or to 'reproduce the dynamics of colonization and dispossession'?³²

It must be noted that the legal story is not the sole nor even the primary plotline of the film. It is presented as first and foremost a romance. Hilary Radner highlights this, stating: 'While taking its cues from an actual historical event, *Belle* follows a conventional narrative structure associated with the romance and what feminists in the 1980s such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Nancy K. Miller have termed "the marriage plot"'.³³ The primacy ultimately given to Belle's love story could be regarded as undercutting any political message emanating from the legal story.³⁴ But not necessarily, particularly given the way these stories are woven together. Radner explains that the filmmakers thereby 'attempt to tell a story in which what Heilbrun dubs "the old marriage plot" accommodates what she terms "another story for women, a quest plot"',³⁵ and concludes: 'This re-writing of the marriage plot as one that encompasses legal reform is significant in that it does not ask the heroine to choose between what might be termed the traditional feminine ambitions of marriage and family and those that seek to move women into the public sphere.'³⁶

My focus then is not on the marriage plot aspect of the film which has already been incisively analyzed by Hilary Radner, Sarah Hill and others. Rather, I will shine a spotlight on the legal plotline. But before turning squarely to the law, I begin with a quick summary of the film's portrayal of Belle.

A brief opening scene depicts Belle, aged six or so, being taken by her father to Lord and Lady Mansfield, who reluctantly but dutifully take her in to raise her alongside her cousin Elizabeth Murray, who already resided with them at Kenwood House. From there, the film quickly skips forward to 1783, the year the *Zong* case is to be decided. Thereafter, the viewer witnesses Belle and Elizabeth on the cusp of adulthood together.

Initially, the romantic plot strand centres on the search for a suitable marriage for Elizabeth, whose penniless state ultimately makes this a somewhat desperate undertaking. It quickly becomes apparent that, though the two young women have done pretty much everything together up to this point in their lives, Belle is not to accompany Elizabeth in this venture. This provokes a sudden realization for Belle, after a rather sheltered upbringing, that the colour of her skin and her illegitimate status mean that she

is not at all like Elizabeth in the eyes of society. No suitable suitor is apt to want to marry her even though, unlike Elizabeth, she is not penniless but is an heiress courtesy of her father.³⁷ While all this is underway, so too is the famous painting with Belle newly self-conscious about the colour of her skin and hence about being painted next to Elizabeth.

But, what of the *Zong*? How in the midst of all this does Belle become entangled in the case? One John Davinier – mere son of a clergyman, so not a viable marriage prospect – turns up to study law under Lord Mansfield. He asks a lot of difficult questions about this case which we are to understand that Lord Mansfield has heard but not yet decided. It involves a slave ship and an insurance claim for a cargo of enslaved persons deliberately killed by the ship's owners ostensibly to safeguard the dwindling water supply for the rest of the ship's occupants. Davinier tells Belle about this case and all of its horrifying details, and this offers her another lens through which to consider race in Georgian society and hence where she fits within it.

But her engagement with the case also gives Belle a role in history, some agency as a potential influence on Lord Mansfield's decision and progress toward abolition of slavery in Britain. The forthcoming decision is presented as one that all of England is anxiously awaiting, one that could 'bring the slave trade to its knees' and thereby 'destroy the economic foundation' of England. Belle is radicalized by her growing knowledge of the case as it progresses, and eventually goes through Lord Mansfield's papers, where she finds a crucial bit of evidence that makes it clear that the ship owners' claim of necessity is a sham. She shares this with Davinier, now exiled from Kenwood House because of his interaction with Belle, hoping it can be used somehow to sway the decision. She expresses her hopes thus: 'If he does stand up, if he speaks the words and condemns the trade, the Lord Chief Justice of England, then it may be impossible for the slave laws of England and its colonies to remain absolute.'

The Law

What happened in the real *Zong* case?³⁸ The film's depiction of the basics of it are mostly accurate. 132 enslaved people were killed, in three different groups on three different days. The ship's owners asserted that this was done out of necessity in that water supplies were running out and there was not enough to take them all to Jamaica. Consequently, these enslaved people, this bit of the cargo, had to be jettisoned to save the rest. In the initial trial in March of 1783, a jury under Lord Mansfield's direction found for the

owners, holding that the killings were necessary. The new hearing in May of the same year depicted in the film was not an appeal of that ruling but rather a plea by the insurers for a retrial. In the course of the two days of hearings to decide whether a retrial should be ordered, new evidence arose that Lord Mansfield had not heard in the first trial, that is, it was asserted that the third group of enslaved people thrown to their deaths from the ship were killed following rain that would have replenished the supply of drinking water. If this was true, there was no necessity on which to ground an insurance payout. On that basis, Lord Mansfield ordered a retrial – a retrial which apparently never happened, perhaps because the ship’s owners were weary of the bad publicity and thought more of that was worse than going without the insurance funds they had sought.³⁹

A key point, then, is that Lord Mansfield, though he found against the ship’s owners in ordering a retrial, did not find for the enslaved people. Rather, he found for the insurers. It is clear from the basis of his decision that the killing of enslaved people would be regarded by him as legal if the conditions were right. As Krikler states, ‘the stress Mansfield laid upon the importance of murders *after* the rains served to imply that there was justification for the murders *before* them.’⁴⁰ And though the insurers used the word murder in their arguments,⁴¹ they did so strategically, not because they cared about the wellbeing of enslaved people. They were merely using whatever arguments they thought might be effective to get out of paying insurance monies. They were not anti-slavery. They made money hand over fist insuring human cargo and they would continue to do so. A win for the insurers was thus not a win for enslaved people or progress toward abolition.

In the film, Lord Mansfield does include a line in his judgment that appears to be a broad condemnation of slavery (just as the character Belle hoped). He describes it as odious. This is in fact not a line from the *Zong* judgment but rather something he said in an earlier case, the *Somerset* case,⁴² which came closer to playing the important role in the abolitionist movement that the filmmakers claim for the *Zong* case. Invoking that case would not have worked for the film’s purposes though as it happened in 1772 when Belle was only a child. And even that case does not make Lord Mansfield an abolitionist hero. Some interpreted his decision in it as a death knell for slavery at least within Britain, but Lord Mansfield insisted that ‘his decision went no further than preventing a master from compelling an alleged slave to leave England.’⁴³ Thereafter he continued to maintain and

even privilege a concern for Britain's economic wellbeing and thereby to resist making any sweeping judgments in slavery cases, up to and including the *Zong* case.⁴⁴

Ultimately then, the *decision* in the *Zong* case did not have an impact on the movement toward abolition, though the fact of the case did have an impact in that the horrors revealed through the hearings affected public opinion. It should be noted though that the effect of the hearings on public opinion was, for the most part, not contemporaneous. The case was not widely reported in the press and so not widely known until a number of years later when abolitionists began including the story of the *Zong* in printed tracts.⁴⁵ And insofar as reports of the case did spark abolitionist action, this reflects no credit on Lord Mansfield. For outrage was generated not only by the facts of the case but also by the legal response to them, in particular, Lord Mansfield's famous opening statement 'which reminded the court that the "case of Slaves was the same as if Horses had been thrown overboard"'.⁴⁶

I emerge from this exercise in comparison with concerns about the film's misrepresentation of the *Zong* case and Lord Mansfield's legal record. Admittedly, this is in part because I rue the missed opportunity for a bit of high-profile public legal education, the more so since encountering a number of commentators presenting the film's version of the *Zong* case as fact.⁴⁷

But there is a weightier objection which is that the film gives Lord Mansfield and John Davinier a heroic cast that their real-life counterparts did not earn and, in so doing, lets British law off the hook far too easily. Indeed, Kehinde Andrews asserts that the film effectively celebrates British law by presenting the outcome of the *Zong* case as a victory for it, reflecting a recurring distortion that he sums up as follows: 'In the psychosis of Whiteness, slavery happened elsewhere and is not part of Britain's legacy, whose role in slavery was to abolish it, something that the whole nation should be proud of.'⁴⁸ In line with this, the legal narrative of the film 'allow[s] the viewer to feel that slavery was wrong, but that it is in the past and Britain can be proud of its role.'⁴⁹

Whereas, as noted above, Lord Mansfield was no champion of abolition. He never entertained the idea that what had occurred on the *Zong* was murder and, throughout the hearings, adopted the lexicon of the slave traders, referring to the enslaved people aboard the ship as property and chattels and, as such, comparable to a cargo of horses.⁵⁰ As for the real-life John Davinier, Belle's eventual husband, he had no involvement with the *Zong* case nor indeed with the law. Rather, he was a French servant. And while I understand the narrative function served by the fictional Davinier's devotion to pursuing

the abolitionist cause through law, according him that role serves simultaneously to eclipse the actual contributions of historical abolitionists⁵¹ and to over-exalt the role of white abolitionists generally. Andrews makes the latter point forcefully, asserting that, though the central character in the film, Belle is ‘a passenger on the vehicle of abolition,’ with agency in that cause given not to her but to Lord Mansfield and John Davinier.⁵² He identifies this aspect of the film as a ‘white savior narrative [that] works to deny Black agency.’⁵³

Screenwriter Sagay was alert to the possibility of the character of John Davinier being read in this way and took pains to avoid it:

I was aware that Davinier might evolve into [a white saviour] if I didn’t control him as character. He was the one I most feared would be “Wilberforced” by white male development people. By that I mean whenever faced with the reality of the consequences of slavery, they want to look away. Slowly subtly every suffering black person is replaced by a white man making noble speeches. It achieves the same script point, but it is more comfortable viewing. It allows them to join in. They didn’t cause this, they stopped it. Davinier was the danger. So I made him the signpost, not the carriage. He points [Belle] the way to knowledge, but her decision to seek it and act on it is hers alone.⁵⁴

Evidently, the extent to which the filmmakers succeeded in this is debatable; different viewers have responded differently.

Jessica Taylor, highlighting the fact that the film’s ‘protagonist, director and screenwriter are Black women,’ asserts that it ‘marks an important cultural space, intervening in both the dominance of white and male screenwriters and directors in the mainstream film industry, while also providing a depiction of a Black female protagonist in a historical film who is neither a maid nor a slave, and whose concerns, desires and perspectives the audience are positioned to engage and identify with.’⁵⁵ The filmmakers set out to create an ‘empowering black female character,’⁵⁶ and many viewers have embraced the fictionalized Belle as such. This is underlined by some of the educational projects that have been inspired by the film, for example, a book for young readers titled *Fern and Kate Meet Dido Elizabeth Belle*, and *Fern Meets Dido—The Musical*, an intergenerational drama project mounted in celebration of Black History Month.⁵⁷

Thus, to an extent, the film's version of the *Zong* case has proven an effective device for giving Belle a voice, giving the character occasion to think about her own place in Georgian England, and also a measure agency in the unfolding of history, in particular in the movement toward abolition of slavery. But, as noted above, there is an argument to be made that the way in which the case is fictionalized actually undercuts rather than bolstering Belle's agency, handing it instead to the historically undeserving Lord Mansfield and the historically absent (from the legal realm) John Davinier. There are also ethical questions that arise in connection with speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

Giving Voice

There is a satisfying irony in seeing the *Zong* case, so well-known for denying any voice to the enslaved Africans aboard the ship,⁵⁸ used to provide a voice to a Black woman in Georgian England. My sense of the subversive potential of this move on the part of the filmmakers is heightened by considering it alongside another artwork with the *Zong* case at its centre, M. NourbeSe Philip's book length poem sequence, *Zong!*, but so too are some of the concerns raised in the foregoing discussion.

In her book, Philip uses the law against itself more explicitly than the film does. In an essay that accompanies the poem sequence, Philip describes Lord Mansfield's decision, the two-page summary subsequently published in the law reports, as 'the tombstone, the one public marker of the murder of those Africans on board the *Zong*,' and explains that she opted to limit herself to that text, using it as 'a word store' for the composition of her poems.⁵⁹ She literally deconstructed the decision, pulling apart the words of which it was comprised, then rearranging them to construct her own text. Through the alchemy of poetry, she also thereby reconstructed the African passengers, so present aboard the ship, yet peculiarly absent from the legal decision. 'In *Zong!*,' Philip writes, 'the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human.'⁶⁰

In Philip's poem sequence, the placement of the words on the page is of central importance. In the early poems, the words are spread thinly across the page, the spaces making visible the absence of African bodies and voices. But as the sequence continues, the poems become denser and denser, the words tumbling over one another, sometimes scoring one another out. Through its form, '*Zong!* bears witness to the "resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed" and transforms the desiccated, legal report into a

cacophony of voices—wails, cries, moans, and shouts that had earlier been banned from the text.⁶¹ The effect is disorienting, disturbing, and extremely powerful.

Philip continually questioned herself as she researched and wrote. What was she doing? ‘Giving voice—crying out?’⁶² What were the ethical implications of what she was doing? ‘What did, in fact happen on the *Zong*? Can we, some two hundred years later, ever really know? Should we?’⁶³ She feels a ‘need to seek “permission” to bring the stories of these murdered Africans to light—above the surface of the water—to “exaqua” them from their “liquid graves”.’⁶⁴ She expresses her distrust of language as a tool and raises the spectre of ‘doing a second violence, this time to the memory of an already violent experience.’⁶⁵ She speaks of ‘the story that can only be told by not telling’⁶⁶ and of ‘the story that simultaneously cannot be told, must be told, and will never be told.’⁶⁷ She struggles to ‘avoid imposing meaning.’⁶⁸

Veronica Austen asserts that ‘the ethical ramifications of assuming the right to imaginatively reconstruct a historical event should not easily be dismissed, not by those constructing historiographic accounts, nor by those creating literary depictions,’⁶⁹ and commends Philip’s negotiation of the ‘ethically fraught territory’ of ‘choosing to speak of/for others who have not been able to speak for themselves.’⁷⁰ In telling the story of the *Zong* massacre by not telling, Philip ‘respects silence.’⁷¹ Austen concludes: ‘As *Zong!* suggests, a so-called “difficult” poetic form, one that requires both the author and the reader to surrender, or at least persistently question, their control over the text may in part be the means through which to engage ethically with the traumatic past.’⁷²

Conclusion

The idea of law as a tool for providing a voice to the disenfranchised is a fairly conventional notion. But in the *Zong* case, the law did not operate in this way at all. It was an insurance case not a murder case. The enslaved people aboard the *Zong* were treated as chattels, not as human beings. So, there is something wonderfully subversive about artists turning to this very law, in M. NourbeSe Philip’s use of the words in the published report to make her book of poems, or in the representation of the case in the film *Belle*, to reconstruct and to honour voices lost to history, those of the enslaved Africans aboard the *Zong*, and that of Dido Elizabeth Belle.

Philip’s book and the film *Belle* are united by the centrality of the *Zong* case and by this impulse to accord a voice to the voiceless. Though very different undertakings both in

substance (a horrific event, an individual life) and in form (experimental poetry, a commercial film), it can nevertheless be productive to ask of the film questions akin to those Philip posed in the making of her book, questions that dovetail well with Whitlock's suggestion of ways of reading postcolonial life narratives.

Screenwriter Sagay writes of Belle the historical figure: 'She lived and she died silent, and we have given her a voice. That painting will never be labeled "Lady Elizabeth Murray" again!'⁷³ Indeed, the title beneath the portrait now reads: 'Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray daughters of Sir John Lindsay and David 2nd Earl of Mansfield,' and fans of the film regularly visit Scone Palace to view it. Director Asante has expressed the hope that the film, together with the painting, would help to cement Belle's place in British and world history: 'What happened in England with the *Zong* case had an impact on America. She didn't just help change England. She helped to change our world.'⁷⁴

But Belle's involvement with the *Zong* case was one of the film's fictions. And might providing Belle with this fictional voice elide the silencing to which the historical woman was subjected? Is it possible to tell her story without doing this? Telling by not telling and resisting meaning are not likely strategies for so narrative a medium as commercial film. But might there be ways even within this medium to respect silence and honour absence? Perhaps the best hope to avoid having one fictional rendering stand in for and potentially obscure the experience of a historical figure is a proliferation of artworks, different perspectives, multiple mediums through which to explore a complex life.

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Notes

- ¹ Whitlock, Gillian, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- ² 'A Double Whodunnit', *Fake or Fortune*, BBC One, 2018, Television.
- ³ Card, Jane, 'The Power of Context: The Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and Lady Elizabeth Murray', *Teaching History* 160 (2015) 8-15 (11).
- ⁴ Jeffries, Stuart, 'Dido Belle: the Artworld Enigma Who Inspired a Movie', in: *The Guardian* (27 May 2014), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/27/dido-belle-enigmatic-painting-that-inspired-a-movie>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ⁵ 'A Double Whodunnit'.
- ⁶ 'Writer Misan Sagay Talks "Belle"', in: *The Source* (27 April 2014), <https://thesource.com/2014/04/27/her-source-i-writer-misan-sagay-talks-belle/>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ⁷ Jeffries.
- ⁸ Wiseman, Andreas, 'Asante: women still crave a voice', in: *Screen Daily* (28 October 2013), <https://www.screendaily.com/news/asante-women-still-crave-a-voice/5062946.article>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ⁹ Minney, Sarah, 'The Search for Dido', in: *History Today* (October 2005), 2-3 (3).
- ¹⁰ Adams, Gene, 'Dido Elizabeth Belle: A Black Girl at Kenwood', in: *Camden History Review* 12 (1984), 10-14 (12-13).
- ¹¹ Idem (10).
- ¹² Krikler, Jeremy. 'The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice', in: *History Workshop Journal* 64 (2007), 29-47 (40).
- ¹³ Idem (42).

- ¹⁴ Steedman, Carolyn, 'Lord Mansfield's Women', in: *Past & Present* 176 (2002), 105-143 (108).
- ¹⁵ Poser, Norman S, *Lord Mansfield: Justice in the Age of Reason*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013 (299).
- ¹⁶ Krikler (41).
- ¹⁷ Ibidem.
- ¹⁸ Some scholars have recently concluded that Belle was born free and that Mansfield in his will was simply confirming this fact. They arrive at this conclusion based on a belief that, contrary to the account of a shipboard birth passed down by Mansfield's descendants, Belle was born in England and hence would have taken her legal status from her father rather than her mother. This belief rests on assertions of the aforementioned Thomas Hutchinson, recorded in his diary, that Mansfield had told him that Belle had been born in England. Gerzina, Gretchen H, 'The Georgian Life and Modern Afterlife of Dido Elizabeth Belle', in: Gretchen H. Gerzina (ed.), *Britain's Black Past*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, 161-178 (167-168).
- ¹⁹ Byrne, Paula, *Belle: The Slave Daughter and the Lord Chief Justice*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2014 (210).
- ²⁰ Prior to his marriage, Lindsay had four more children out of wedlock in addition to Belle, and one of them was also named Elizabeth. Gerzina (163-164).
- ²¹ Byrne (210).
- ²² Idem (208).
- ²³ Sagay, Misan, 'Bringing Slavery into the Heart of Jane Austen', in: *Huffington Post* (2 May 2014), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bringing-slavery-into-the-heart-of-jane-austen_b_5255127, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ²⁴ Myers, Scott, 'Interview [Part 6]: Amma Asante, Director, "Belle"', in: *Go Into the Story* (3 May 2014), <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-part-6-amma-asante-director-belle-5e1b6baefe48>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ²⁵ Myers, Scott, 'Interview [Part 4]: Amma Asante, Director, "Belle"', in: *Go Into the Story* (1 May 2014), <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-part-4-amma-asante-director-belle-594c45f9d3db>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
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- ²⁸ Whitlock, Gillian, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 (8).
- ²⁹ Idem (9).
- ³⁰ Myers, Scott, 'Interview [Part 5]: Amma Asante, Director, "Belle"', in: *Go Into the Story* (2 May 2014), <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-part-5-amma-asante-director-belle-5c425743c549>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.
- ³¹ Whitlock (6).
- ³² Idem (9).
- ³³ Radner, Hilary, *The New Woman's Film: Femme-Centric Movies for Smart Chicks*, London: Routledge, 2017 (162).
- ³⁴ Hill, Sarah, *Young Women, Girls and Postfeminism in Contemporary British Film*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020 (172).
- ³⁵ Radner (162).
- ³⁶ Idem (166).

³⁷ Here the filmmakers depart from the facts to serve their story, depriving Elizabeth of her real-life inheritance, quadrupling Belle's inheritance, and advancing the latter's father's death by five years.

³⁸ *Gregson v. Gilbert* 3 Dougl. 233. I have taken most of the details presented here from James Walven's book, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. But see also the various documents related to the case recently reproduced in Lyall, Andrew. *Granville Sharp's Cases on Slavery*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

³⁹ Walven, James, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011 (155).

⁴⁰ Krikler (38).

⁴¹ Walven (147).

⁴² *Somerset v. Stewart* 98 Eng. Rep 499 (1772).

⁴³ *Idem* (133). See also Poser, Norman S, *Lord Mansfield: Justice in the Age of Reason*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013 (297).

⁴⁴ Poser; Walven.

⁴⁵ Swaminathan, Srividhya, 'Reporting Atrocities: A Comparison of the Zong and the Trial of Captain John Kimber', in: *Slavery & Abolition* 31:4 (2010), 483–499 (483-484); Rupprecht, Anita, 'A Very Uncommon Case: Representations of the Zong and the British Campaign to Abolish the Slave Trade', in: *Journal of Legal History* 28:3 (2007), 329-346.

⁴⁶ Rupprecht (329).

⁴⁷ This is true of the *Fake or Fortune* episode devoted to the portrait, and also of some reviews of the film.

⁴⁸ Andrews, Kehinde, 'The Psychosis of Whiteness: The Celluloid Hallucinations of *Amazing Grace* and *Belle*', in: *Journal of Black Studies* 47: 5 (2016), 435-453 (447).

⁴⁹ *Idem* (451).

⁵⁰ Krikler; Walven.

⁵¹ For example, Granville Sharp, the abolitionist who was in fact behind most of the legal cases that furthered the cause (Sharp; Lyall), is all but erased from the narrative to make way for this Jane-Austen-esque love interest.

⁵² Andrews (444).

⁵³ *Idem* (446).

⁵⁴ Myers, Scott, 'Interview [Part 4]: Misan Sagay, Screenwriter, "Belle"', in: *Go Into the Story* (12 June 2014), <https://gointothestory.blcklst.com/interview-part-4-misan-sagay-screenwriter-belle-c9a414032bd1>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.

⁵⁵ Taylor, Jessica, "'How Can I be Too High in Rank to Dine with the Servants, but Too Low to Dine with My Family?': Intersectionality and Postfeminism in Amma Asante's *Belle*", in: *Gender & History* 30:3 (2018), 769–785 (773).

⁵⁶ Sagay, 'Belle Director Amma Asante Explains Why She Wanted to Tell a Jane Austen Story with a Black Protagonist', in: *Women and Hollywood* (1 May 2014), <https://womenandhollywood.com/belle-director-amma-asante-explains-why-she-wanted-tell-a-jane-austen-story-with-a-black-protagonist-afb81a183cc/>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.

⁵⁷ 'Community Comes Together For Black History Month Musical', in: *The Voice* (10 October 2018), <https://archive.voice-online.co.uk/article/community-comes-together-black-history-month-musical-0>, date accessed: 17 August 2021.

⁵⁸ There is only one place in the legal record that offers a hint of the voices of enslaved people aboard the *Zong* and that does not occur until after the hearings before Lord Mansfield are over, in another related legal proceeding brought in a Court of Exchequer hearing brought by the insurers against the ship owners. James Walven reports that one of the crew 'recorded a brief, distressing exchange of words with one of the Africans about to be killed [...] One of the Africans spoke some English, and told Kelsall that

the people shackled below decks “were murmuring on Account of the Fate of those who had been drowned”. Rumour had spread among the shackled Africans that they were being killed because the ship’s supplies were running short: “they begged they might be suffered to live an they would not ask for either Meat or Water but could live without either till they arrived at their determined port”. This unknown African was pleading for every surviving African on the Zong, all of whom knew that they were under a death sentence. All asked to be spared, despite the inevitably grim privations that would follow. They had seen shipmates marched on deck at dusk, had watched as their ranks below decks thinned out, and had heard the shrieks of the drowning. Anything – hunger and thirst – seemed preferable to the horrifying fate awaiting them in the dark waters west of Jamaica’. Walven (157-158).

⁵⁹ Philip, M. NourbeSe, *Zong!*, Toronto: Mercury Press, 2008 (194, 191).

⁶⁰ Idem (196).

⁶¹ Idem (203).

⁶² Idem (194).

⁶³ Idem (196).

⁶⁴ Idem (202).

⁶⁵ Idem (197).

⁶⁶ Idem (191).

⁶⁷ Idem (206).

⁶⁸ Idem (199).

⁶⁹ Austen, Veronica J, ‘Zong!’s “Should we?”: Questioning the Ethical Representation of Trauma’, in: *English Studies in Canada* 37:3-4 (2011), 61-81 (63).

⁷⁰ Idem (64).

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ Sagay.

⁷⁴ Myers, ‘Interview [Part 6]’.