



HAL
open science

Breaking the canons of legal discourse in Marlene Nourbese Philip's Zong! (2008)

Maroua Mannai

► **To cite this version:**

Maroua Mannai. Breaking the canons of legal discourse in Marlene Nourbese Philip's Zong! (2008). *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2023, Colonial, Postcolonial, and Decolonial Encounters in the English-speaking World: Rethinking the Other, 43. hal-04472706

HAL Id: hal-04472706

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-04472706v1>

Submitted on 4 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Breaking the Canons of Legal Discourse in Marlene NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008)

Maroua Mannai

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article revisite l'histoire du massacre du Zong en novembre 1781 à travers le livre de poésie *Zong!* de M. NourbeSe Philip (2008), dans lequel l'autrice réécrit la source documentaire juridique pour en faire un texte fragmenté et tourmenté qui souligne l'inanité des discours juridiques et économiques, liés au contrat d'assurance. En réponse à cet assassinat historique passé sous silence, Philip déconstruit l'archive juridique, coloniale et postcoloniale pour révéler l'injustice qui lui est inhérente. L'intention de l'autrice est de raconter « l'inénarrable histoire qui pourtant doit être narrée », mais en évitant « la langue corrompue, fatalement irrévocable » (Philip 2008, 199) ayant servi à la rédaction de l'archive. C'est ce projet de l'autrice qui fera l'objet de notre étude. Le langage fonctionne comme un outil et processus de décontamination par lequel *Zong!* met en scène, révèle ce qui ne saurait être révélé et dénonce l'injustice.

This article investigates M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem *Zong!* (2008), in which the author revisits history through a fragmented text confronting what she describes as the insufficiency of the discourses of law, economics, and insurance in capturing the 1781 Zong massacre. Responding to this "silenced" historic murder case, Philip deconstructs legal, colonial and post-colonial archives in order to uncover the injustice embedded therein. The poet's intention to tell what she depicts as "the story that cannot be told and must be told" in a language already contaminated, possibly "irrevocably and fatally" (Philip 2008, 199), will be further explored in this study. Language functions as a tool and process to be a site of decontamination through which *Zong!* stages its attempt to recover the unrecoverable and expose injustice.

Mots-clés

M. NourbeSe Philip, Zong!, archives, mémoire, discours juridique, esclavage, langue, poésie, déconstruction visuelle

Keywords

M. NourbeSe Philip, Zong!, archive, memory, legal discourse, slavery, language, poetry, visual deconstruction

I enter a different land, a land of language—I allow the language to lead me somewhere—don't know where, but I trust.

Water of want

Everything is here I tell myself- birth, Death, life-murder, the law, a microcosm- a universe.
(Philip 2008, 191)

Living in the "wake"¹ of slavery is living within the memories of the slave ship *Zong*,² a massacre that continues to haunt scholars, writers, poets, and artists, yet each with a different

approach. With reference to a broad range of scholarship³ on the *Zong* incident, this article joins the work of those scholars who have investigated the incident, but also looks into the consistency of the relevant legal discourse. It will consider the archive juxtaposed against the poetic and artistic contemporary responses with a focus on Philip's *Zong!* (2008), a book-length volume, ultimately composed of multi-segmented poems that recreate the imagined scene aboard the *Zong* slave ship. The story describes the crime committed by the captain who decreed the murder of 132 enslaved Africans.⁴ When the ship's owner sued to collect the insurance contract, the claim was initially upheld by a jury but remanded for retrial by the English Court of King's Bench in the published legal decision *Gregson Vs. Gilbert*. The poetic work under scrutiny was composed relying on the two-page court report which the poet accidentally discovered. Choosing to construct her poems exclusively out of the archive, Philip employs a method of constraint meant to deconstruct and subvert the archival legal document which appears to her "so modest, so fragile, so meagre" as a means to defend the enslaved Africans thrown overboard (Philip 2008, 194). *Zong!* presents itself as a response which allows us to break the silence embedded in this archival document, raising the issue of historical traumas enslaved Africans experienced during the *Zong* massacre. As a form of critique and commemoration, the poem seeks to bear witness to the reified and abjected bodies of the Africans aboard the *Zong*. In this experimental long poem in six sections, Philip draws on *Gregson Vs. Gilbert* as a linguistic matrix to generate her text, thereby constituting a performative address to the law that takes the form of citation. Citing, fragmenting, and recombining law formulas in one text aims at liberating the memory of the African Ancestors from the prison-house of language and mediates an alternative poetics of relationality that throws time out of joint, proceeding along the principle of dis/re-assembling sign-objects on the page.

I will begin with a brief overview of the legal case prior to further investigation of the textual and visual techniques used by the poet to commemorate the *Zong* slave ship. The aim of this analysis is to focus on the complexities of language and the specificity of using historical documents to create an alternative discourse. It can be argued that this disregard for boundaries between the archive and the literary text allows us to give voice to the silenced history of the event. This article seeks to further explore how the intersections of various disciplines such as legal texts, poetry, and visual arts can reveal connections between literary productions, legal texts and historical events. This interdisciplinary connection establishes a reconsideration of the Other, visibly neglected in the archive of the *Zong* murder.

The Archival Return in *Zong!*

On 29 November 1781, the master of the merchant vessel *Zong* made the decision to jettison a portion of his cargo into the Caribbean. The *Zong* was a slave ship and the jettisoned cargo comprised 132 living men, women, and children. Yet despite their deaths, and the two court hearings of 1783, no criminal prosecution would ever result from the *Zong* incident. For this reason, the events of November 1781 came to play an important part in the rise of the anti-slavery movement in Britain. It is also for this reason that scholars and artists have continued to engage in a dialogue with the *Zong*. This section will consider contemporary poetry's approach to the archive, briefly referring to the passage of the *Zong* case through the courts in 1783. The poetry collection investigates the case of the 1781 *Zong* Massacre and the *Gregson Vs. Gilbert* maritime insurance case that arose in its wake. As Philip states, the intention lies in using 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, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. (Philip 2008, 191)

The poet fatally subverts the legal document to uncover its insufficiency and allow the poetic language to speak the truth, not only in pushing “against the boundaries of language, but in the need for each poet to speak in his or her own tongue” (Philip 2008, 197). In the same vein, in her study *Archives of the Black Atlantic, Reading Between Literature and History* (2013), Wendy W. Walters indicates that “Caribbean Black writers take us back to the archive exposing the instability of the archive’s truth claim to show how it is culturally constructed and open to hermeneutics” (Walters 2013, 2). Scholars such as Shown Smith, Carolyn Steedman and Ann Stoler, have shown the ways that archives are ultimately open to interpretation and how the references to archival documents in black historical literature can suggest a new methodology for the study of both the archive and related literature. Taking into account the concept of the archive as open to interpretation suggests that archival documents are fragments, traces from the past that do not necessarily lead to a firm understanding of the past. Rather, they serve a basis for constructing or reconstructing the past. This effort to give life by means of breaking up and re-creating language and the narration in both the voices of slave owner and enslaved Africans, can be seen as an engaging performance as it takes “the original text and creates disunity within it in order to create a multiplicity of meanings” (Barry 2009, 56).

In his essay “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” (1995), Jacques Derrida criticizes the power of archives which are generally considered as authentic, historical documents that reflect the truth thereby rejecting criticism and varied interpretation. Derrida describes the double meaning of the word “archive,” in terms of time and space, as a place of “commencement”, “where men and gods command” or the “place from which order is given” (Derrida 1995, 9). Derrida calls this mix of topology and power, or “*topo-nomology*,” “archontic power” (Derrida 1995, 10), a significant pun on the double meaning of the Greek word *arkhē*, which “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*,” origin and authority. This power play, especially where the State’s archives are concerned, also determines what is deemed “archivable,” and what is consigned to oblivion, or deleted.

Derrida traces the development and establishment of State power that finds its authority in the archive and the knowledge and authority that the archive creates for the State. He explicitly confirms that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (Derrida 1995, 9). According to Achille Mbembe, the archive, because of its political power, always functions “outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible” (Mbembe 2002, 21). If its function is that of evidence, and if all data cannot be integrated into the archive, then there will be a limit to the number and type of narratives it will permit. Mbembe underlines that “over and above the ritual of making it secret, it seems clear that the archive is primarily the product of a judgment, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded” (Mbembe 2002, 20). Philip visibly deconstructs the idea of the archive as a “source of truth” and creates a new discourse using the archive itself since she strongly believes that poetry should “tell the story that was not told” by the archive (Philip 2008, 191).

Philip locates her poetic project at the locus of this archival silence and the mystery regarding the Zong massacre. The insufficiency of the historical record, both because of the paucity of archival information and even more because of the absence of the victims' perspectives, offers a specific challenge to those wanting to acknowledge and honour the victims of the massacre through contemporary representations. Some critics suggest that literary accounts of historical events can "provid[e] insight [...] by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods" (LaCapra 2001, 13). One may even argue that a "highly fictionalized form of history" may offer a previously denied opportunity "to claim authority over the narrative construction of the past" (Spaulding 2005, 2). Nevertheless, 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. As Philip questions, "What did, in fact, happen on the *Zong*? Can we, some two hundred years later, ever really know? Should we?" (Philip 2008, 196).

Philip not only breaks free from the archives but also creates an intimate and effectual approach towards language. Although the poem's words are the results of breaking up and violating the legal text, it enables a breaking of the conventions that limit and hinder the communication of memory and human experience. In this context, the conventions of legal discourse may be seen as serving as a barrier to authentic communication. Perhaps the poetic text, inbreaking the conventions of the archival text, creates, not so much a "bridge," as a more permeable membrane allowing the archival text to communicate memory and experience more fully through its porous structure. Considering the term "membrane" as "a thin sheet of tissue or layer of cells, usually serving to cover or line an organ or part, or to separate or connect parts" (*OED*), the poem is structured as a membrane to filter the silenced archive, that of the slave ship murder, providing a text that evades boundaries and challenges the reader to reconsider the reliability of the legal text in history. The archival discourse is deconstructed through two major criteria, that of the textual structure and the visual representation of the text.

Textual Deconstruction of the Archival Discourse

Philip's intention to create her poem as a response to the archive stems from her consideration of the legal text (the archive) as "meagre," "fragile," and "lack[ing] justice." Philip uses her skills as a lawyer and a poet, writing her poem to "defend the dead" (Philip 2008, 25). Conversely, her intentions appear quite contradictory since according to her, the legal text "parallels a certain kind of entity—a whole, a completeness which like African life is rent and torn. This time I do the tearing—but there is always this movement towards trying to 'make sense,' make it 'readable,' 'understandable'" (Philip 2008, 192). There is a certain ambivalence here, as the reader is caught between her intention to deconstruct the entire text because of its fragility and lack of meaning and at the same time her consideration of the archive as an "entity." Accordingly, one can also question the status of the archive, whether the archive seems to be a source of knowledge that should be completed by literature and poetry or a legal text that lacks something that only poetry can make sense of? Can we say that the archive and the poetry complement each other in some way? Philip's approach of urgent endeavor to make sense of what the legal case failed to convey, according to her, "must be resisted" throughout her text (Philip 2008, 193). The archive tells stories through their forms, structures, and relations, as well as its content. The order in which individual records accumulate in a file tells us something about the matter being documented and the

way it is being handled. *Zong!* deconstructs such documentation, establishing a new alternative.

Let us first expand briefly on the term “boundary” in terms of the poem’s textual analysis. Don Handelman, a British anthropologist and sociologist, interprets the term “boundary” in two ways: as a “discontinuity” and as a paradox... It is common to regard the boundary as a “discontinuity that divides and separates, just as it links and orders the phenomena that it compartmentalizes” (245). Handelman describes boundaries as follows:

Mention of discontinuity necessarily brings continuity to mind. Between boundaries, or through boundaries that are more permeable, the relationships among phenomena are continuous. That is, phenomena are brought into conjunction through analogy and metaphor that mute difference and accentuate similarity. (Handelman 1990, 246)

The boundary can be defined as that “in-between” or the “middle” of what is separated and combined. In phenomenological terms, the internal paradoxicality of the boundary is overcome by treating it as a “homogeneous unity” (Handelman 1990, 247). It can be argued that *Zong!*’s structure and overall form visually erases discontinuities between disciplines, creating a new paradoxical structure that combines attributes of archives, law and art and transforms this fragmented text into an amalgam. Although her writing suggests an in-depth understanding of the canon, Philip’s career undoubtedly helped to free her from the constraints of tradition and to nurture her social analysis and critique.

Breaking and trespassing the physical boundaries and limits of the frame and the page, the visual fragmentation and alternating repetition of words in the poems of *Zong!* depicts the struggle to articulate a personal language capable of communicating complex, often traumatic, experiences such as the slave massacre. Equal parts made up of song, moan, shout, oath, curse, and chant, *Zong!* as a whole excavates the legal text itself. Certain elements such as memory, history, and law are merged and transformed into a poetics of the fragment. On her official website, Philip admits that “through the innovative use of fugal and counterpointed repetition, *Zong!* becomes an anti-narrative lament that stretches the boundaries of the poetic form, haunting the spaces of forgetting and mourning the forgotten.”⁵

Philip describes her creative process as involving a contemplation of the court case document and “certain words leaping out at her, asking her to choose them” (Philip 2008, 195). Although Philip does allow the words of the document to explode like “a grand boggle game” (Philip 2008, 200), she still casts the formation of her poetry as a product of an ancestral voice. This deconstructed linguistic depiction of the massacre is especially significant, for it assaults language as a means of questioning the archive and representing the past through a fragmented discourse. It achieves this self-conscious questioning through its method of construction and subsequently through the qualities of its poetic form.

The poet repeatedly refers to *Zong!* as “the story that cannot be told and must be told” (Philip 2008, 196). This statement posits the poem as an amalgam of silence and language. The page enacts silence through the spatial relations between cat-cradled clusters and the blanks pocking the page. A text, therefore, has the potential to give way to a variety of meanings and interpretations, which Philip makes clear through her poetry. “Notanda,”⁶ an essay she includes in her poem collection, which is not common in poetry, states that she metaphorically mutilates the text to depict “the fabric of African life and the lives of these

men, women and children [who] were mutilated” (Philip 2008, 193). To do so, she employs a variety of techniques as she indicates:

I murder the text, 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, until my hands bloodied, from much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having scarified an animal for signs and portents of a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling. (Philip 2008, 194)

Through what she described as her “murder” of “the text,” Philip explicitly challenges the language of law and transforms words into her own structure to fit her intentions. As illustrated in her essay “Notanda,” the story of the Zong ship caught her attention, and inspired her to literally take the legal archive apart and piece it back together. This set of poems, composed of the torn-apart and reconstructed words of the historical legal document, imitates the dehumanization and destruction of the lost African lives on the Zong. It is NourbeSe Philip’s attempt to leave a fictional legacy, but a legacy nevertheless, that speaks to the pain and darkness that those enslaved Africans underwent at the hands of a slave ship crew. In his study *Beginning Theory: An introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2009), Peter Barry, a literary critic, explains how “the deconstructionist practices textual harassment or oppositional reading, with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity” (Barry 2009, 56). This deconstruction can be clearly seen in *Zong!* as Philip tries to decompose the legal text that might reflect a sort of “disunity” and fragmentation of the original text itself. In this regard, Barry’s study points out that a text “reveals the repressed unconscious of the word”, exposing “the unconscious of the text through means of de-constructing language” (Barry 2009, 54).

Nevertheless, this explicit shattering of the text in terms of form and language reproduces a different text that exposes what cannot be told. Philip explicitly brings up the “disorder, illogic and irrationality of the *Zong*” (Philip 2008, 197) which is the story that does not tell since its “untelling” notion appears in its “fragmentation and mutilation of the text, forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray” (Philip 2008, 198). Philip converts this archival silence into narrative, giving a new form and adapting a textual strategy that deconstructs the norms of the language for the sake of giving voice to the silenced truth. This violation of the legal text produces a particular tension between law and poetry, which “both share an inexorable concern with language, the right use of the right words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation” (Philip 2008, 191).

The poet’s intent lies in using the legal decision as “a word store” which makes us question the clarity of the archive and the extent to which one can rely on legal conventions and discourses to inform an understanding of the past. Therefore, *Zong!* urges us to raise questions and build up this hidden connection between what the structure of the poetic text performs in relation to the story of the Zong ship. Using these words, initially aimed for legal documentation, unveils what the text says through what it doesn’t say. The Gregson Vs Gilbert report refers to the enslaved Africans who perished as “negroes” and died for “want of sustenance,” a qualification that dehumanizes them and renders them merely a lost cargo that could be replaced by money (Philip 2008, 211). The disorder, illogic, and irrationality of the *Zong!* poems can no more tell the story than the legal report masquerading as order, logic, and rationality (Philip 2008, 197). An analysis of a few examples can further illustrate this

visual shattering that conveys the sense of deconstruction. To give voice to those enslaved Africans, Philip collects the words of the original document to show the Africans' inability to speak. In their very disorder and illogic is the "not-telling of the story" and stems her responsibility to speak the truth falsified in the archival discourse (Philip 2008, 197).

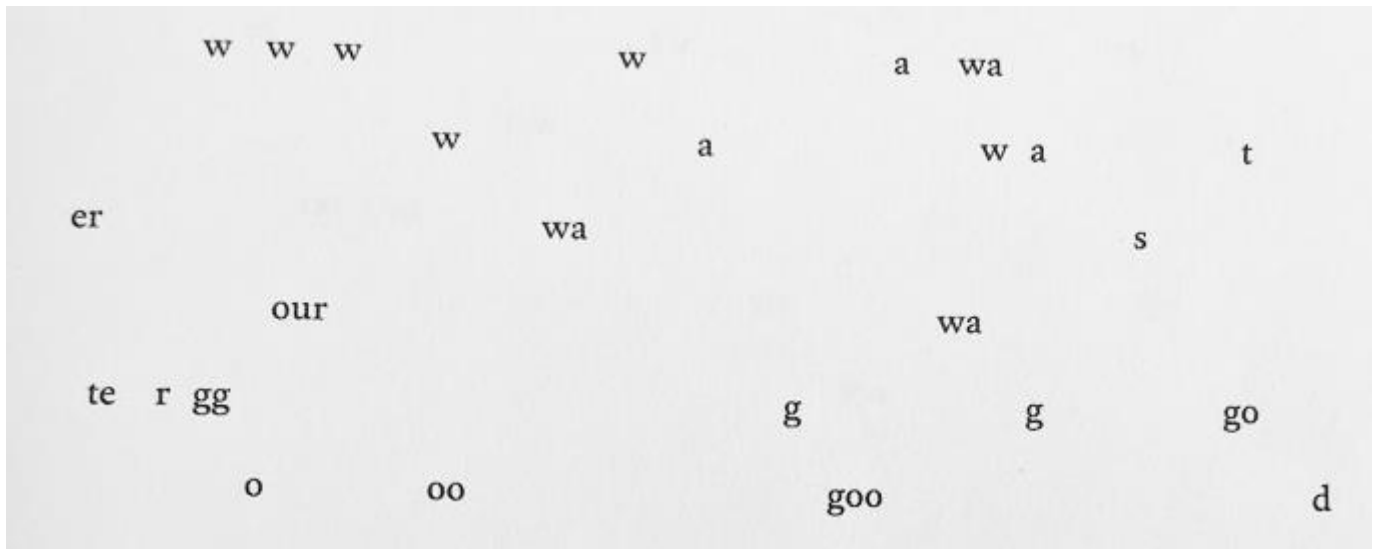
Visually, the poem's form reminds us of calligraphic writing as a modernist form suggestive of the dislocation of the language and its impact on visual art. This technique is reminiscent of French poet Guillaume Apollinaire's work. A "calligram" is a word or piece of text in which the design and layout of the letters create a visual image related to the meaning of the words themselves. The poem challenges the reader to distinguish the image behind its line. In other words, a first gaze into the entire selection of poems urges the reader to ask questions and try to find clues in reading the story "that cannot be told but must be told" (Philip 2008, 194).

This visual deconstruction of the poem is also visible through its structure which suggests an innovative approach to the archive.

Visual Deconstruction of the Archive

Zong!'s first page evokes the imagery of drowning in water through the visual spacing and wording. The repetitive use of the letters "w" and "a" spread out across the page spells the word "water," but is also typed in a way that signifies sinking to the bottom of the ocean, where language is lost (Philip 2008, 1). In reading the "Notanda" essay prior to the rest of the poem, knowing its history, the reader recognizes and understands the comparison between the drowning of the enslaved Africans and the "sinking" of the words that produces a particular sound of dying voices trying to cry out for help. Philip clearly states in "Notanda": "I white out and black out words (is there a difference?)" (Philip 2008, 192). In so doing, she creates a connection between certain white and black words or phrases in order to expose this dual narration (Philip 2008, 193). The text forces the letters apart into words evoking the fact that there was not enough good water for the number of extra days at sea. "This was an action on a policy of insurance," begins Gregson Vs Gilbert, "to recover the value of certain enslaved Africans thrown overboard for want of water" (Philip 2008, 210). The counter-argument was that "there were three butts of good water, and two and a half of sour water, on board" (Philip 2008, 210). In the poem, water appears as an overriding theme because, not only is the sea the watery grave of people thrown overboard, the shortage of fresh water is also the alleged justification for Collingwood's orders (Philip 2008, 1):

Figure 1



(Philip 2008, 3)

Visually, the words appear as a series of letters bobbing up and down on the page like so many waves in a sea of monosyllabic utterances. However, the poem, read aloud, evokes the sounds of the voices of those who were lost at sea. The experience of hearing *Zong!#1*, when compared to seeing it on the page, implies hearing the silences in the legal case filled with ghostly sounds from the past: first the sounds of thirst and then of drowning. When vocalized, a breaking up of the words “water”, “was sour water”, “good water” and “one day of want”, creates a linguistic stutter that becomes an urgent request and a moan. Language falls apart as the spaces between letters open up, breaking the words and indeed language itself, to expose the empty spaces as places of sensations. At the same time, the sounds that emerge from *Zong!#1* are to be distinguished from literal recreations of slave ship sounds, complete with “the moans and groans of enslaved Africans, that can be found at slavery museums like the Wilberforce House” (Sharpe 2016, 11). Philip’s poetic memorial avoids filling a silence with enslaved African voices because it simultaneously wants us to remember why those voices are missing. When reading the poem, we may also refer to the distinction between silence, which is oral, and blank, which is visual. The visual blank that catches the reader’s eyes ought to be translated and transformed into a sound as a way to break the silence.

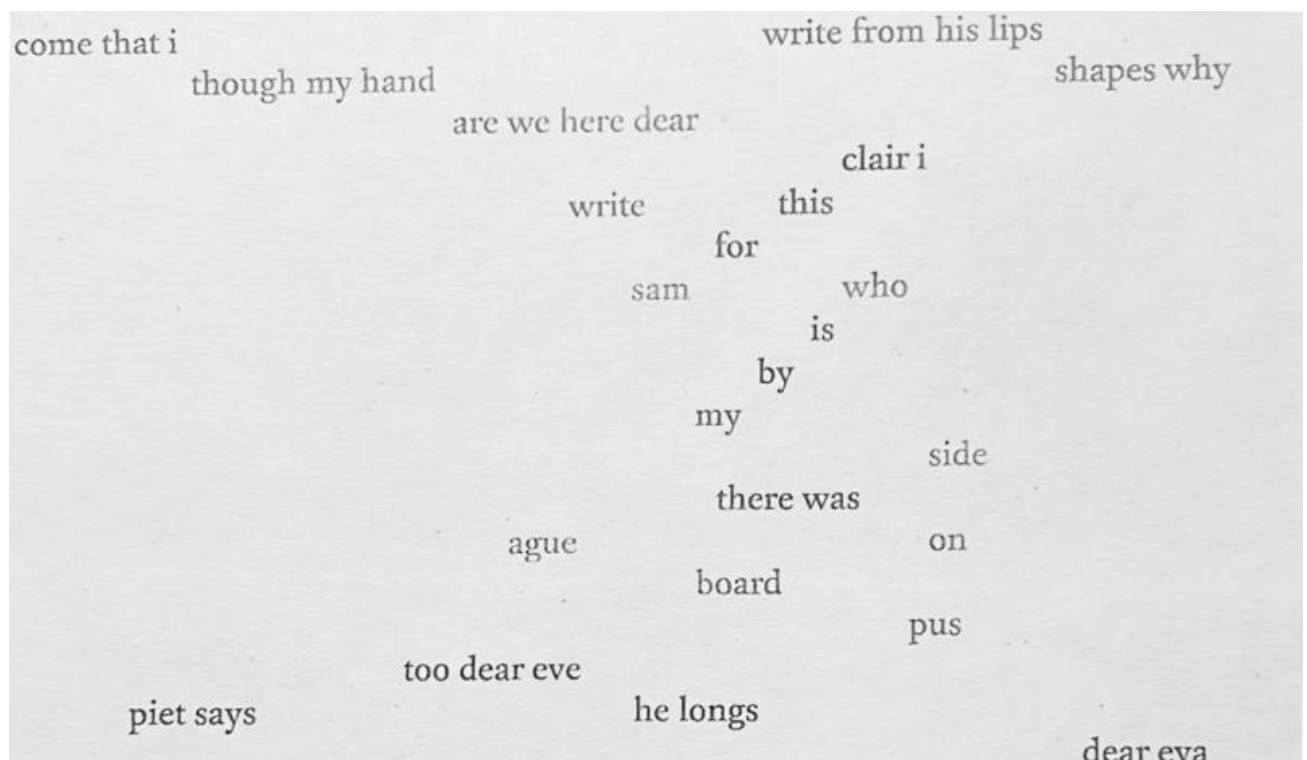
Similarly, those voices are well represented in Joscelyn Gardner’s *Omi Eborá* (2014), a multimedia video and sound installation featured in *After the Flood*, an exhibition curated by Holly Bynoe and Tessa Whitehead for “Transforming Spaces,” an annual art tour in Nassau, Bahamas. The piece is described by Gardner as “an immersive environment” which takes place in a completely dark room. The installation presents a wide-angle view of the high seas shot from above, with a spinning effect added post-production. The sea goes from calm to stormy and back to calm with a changing pattern of light and shade. In her article, “A Caribbean Hauntology: The Sensorial Art of Joscelyn Gardner and M. Nourbese Philip,” Guillermina De Ferrari suggests that, in *Omi Eborá*, in the dark room, we hear:

the vocalization of agony, but fail to see any bodies. Disembodied voices call on the spectator, demanding to be heard and, as their urgency increases, perhaps pleading to be saved. Perhaps nothing spells humanity like the sound of a human voice. We are trained to respond to people’s voices, whether in the form of screams, moans, or fully articulated sentences. The floating letters, which suggest speech, are complex yet thinly veiled substitutes for human

bodies with language and consciousness—that is, for subjects. When the letters surface and disappear in the water, the words seem to be drowning like bodies. The dark room and the vivid projection enhance the sense of proximity, making the spectator feel that she is indeed at the edge of the water or on the deck of the slave ship. The absence of the bodies whose voices she hears interpellates her. They are invisible, but they are there, they are drowning, and she is letting it happen. (De Ferrari 2018, 279)

Philip suggests the metaphor of “the grand boggle game” to explain the poetic process she underwent as she sought to create the patterns on the page. In the poem itself, one comes across the metaphor of sailing creating a cat’s cradle on the sea (Philip 2008, 85), which can be interpreted as a self-referential statement. It articulates for the reader what her eyes have been doing throughout the pages: weaving imaginary lines of connection from one cluster of words to another, vertically, horizontally, and crossways. Through this ceaseless game of metonymic combination of units of meaning, the words extracted from the Gregson Vs. Gilbert report are liberated and morph into polysemy and polyculture. In fact, the very act of citing the poem cannot do it justice, as it destroys the relational quality of the clusters. Relentlessly anti-linear, the writing process defies not only the language of law, but also the language of the critic, a word that shares with law the etymologies of reading and judging:

Figure 2



(Philip 2008, 85)

The focus on silence, the lack of words, the uncertainty and mystery of the scene feature prominently in these lines to break the linearity of language and give a space to the poet to construct a new discourse of freedom and justice for the enslaved Africans. Nevertheless, this

anti-linearity is also challenged since the poem's structure reflects a visual linearity where after all, sections are numbered in the most conventional of ways.

By wedding silence and language, Philip creates another linguistic structure as she had previously in her selection of poems *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks*: "Discourse on the Logic of Language" (5) is a poem that—although sculpted out of the colonial experience, the exploitation of peoples, and the destruction of mother tongues—manages to reconfigure poetic conventions. It breaks free from the notions of objectivity and universality. Philip discovers that she cannot challenge history without challenging the language she has inherited, and ultimately "without challenging the canon that surrounded the poetic genre" (Philip 1988, 295). Her redefinition of the word "margin" as frontier, for instance, indicates precisely the struggle Caribbean writers face at decolonizing self, language, and history. "And when we think of ourselves as being on the frontier," she writes, "our perspective immediately changes. Our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead which we are about to uncover — spaces in which we can empower ourselves" (Lima 118).

Although Myriam Moïse describes Philip's *Zong!* as an attempt to "transcend her traumatic past and overcome silence to (re)map new horizons" (Moïse 2010, 24), the poem, in fact, questions whether or not silence can, or even should, be overcome. Moïse associates *Zong!* with Philip's earlier stated desire "to make the black hole (w)hole" (Philip 1997, 101), but consideration should also be given to Philip's persistent questioning of wholeness. Her figurative playfulness with the two concepts of "hole" and "whole" serves as a metaphorical exploration of the profound and universal dimensions of Blackness. This wordplay points to an ongoing effort to address historical voids and rectify injustices, symbolically bridging the gaps in the narrative and history to forge a complete, united identity that resonates with the present. Henceforth, while Philip's poetry, which often tries to recover previously lost or maligned perspectives, is rooted in "mak[ing] silence speak" (Moïse 2010, 24), it also respects silence by acknowledging that someone with the power of voice cannot speak of, or for, the silenced without the ethics of such an endeavour remaining in question. In the same vein, locking herself within the text of the Gregson Vs. Gilbert legal case, Philip radically "transforms the words there into multilingual poems encompassing a wide range of actors and subjects who are all a part of this history" (Walters 2013, 9). Likewise, she challenges the impossibility of telling the story which is reflected through her language. Paradoxically, perhaps, by urging the reader to return to the past and mine for the truth within the archive, she tries to provide a complex text that reflects upon the reliability of archives as a source of truth. The inclination to revisit historical legal texts and recontextualize them finds resonance in other contemporary fiction pieces, such as Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and David Dabydeen's *Turner* (1994). This tendency becomes particularly visible when these works delve into themes of historical retrospection, reinterpretation, and re-imagining. Philip tries to re-visit the text, shaking the words out and looking at them from another angle in order to recapture their meaning in a different light. The *Zong!* case has equally inspired several works of literature, among which Ian Baucom's (2005) *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, and Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). Each new iteration includes traces of the previous text. These works distinctively embody the *Zong!* massacre as the legal proceedings become novelized prose, then scholarly analysis, then poetry, then as inarticulate sounds in Gardner's *Omi Eborá* multimedia installation (2014).

Nevertheless, some continuities persist: both poetry and law are equally concerned with words. In her notes on her readings of the legal case, the Black Tobago-born Canadian reflects on this parallelism: law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language, the “right” use of the “right” words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is a shared goal. In Gregson Vs. Gilbert the material and non-material would come together in unexpected ways (Philip 2008, 191). For instance, Philip’s glossary, an imagined list of words and phrases heard on board the *Zong*,⁸ enacts such unexpected convergences. Words in Spanish, Portuguese, Yoruba, and Dutch, languages associated with the slave trade, offer culturally nuanced perspectives on a similar experience. In her *Omi Eborá* multimedia installation (2014), Jocelyn Gardner attempts to lift the poet’s words from the page and visually submerge them in water, imbuing them with life through the use of haunting sounds. She adds that we can hear the living presence of enslaved African people, but we cannot see them.⁹

Philip’s work intimates how unlimited and unbound diasporic spaces are, as the diaspora constantly displaces home and away, defining the limits of its horizon, whether it be imagined, metaphysical or material. The problematic fragmentation and gaps in language that shape Philip’s poetry reveal the limits of legal texts. The poet still casts the formation of her poetry as a product of some mystical happenstance, or even as an ancestral voice—Setaey Adamu Boateng—as the poem’s cover suggests using her as a conduit. The cover of *Zong!* proclaims Setaey Adamu Boateng as the conduit for ancestral voices, bringing to light the submerged narratives of all those who suffered on board the *Zong*. In Philip’s form of ethical reconstruction, she demands a “let[ing] go” (Philip 2008, 195) so that she can “allow the language to lead [her] somewhere” (Philip 2008, 191).

This article endeavoured to highlight the importance of deconstructing the discourse of law through literature and how Philip’s poetry provides an alternative through its fragmented form and visual creativity. The study shows how the poem attempts to reveal the truth behind the silenced discourse of law offering at the same time a comparable prospect of bodily remembering and processes of healing and renewal through language and words. This re-examination enables us to posit and imagine a past that transcends material documentation represented here by 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 and how this may in part be a means of engaging ethically with the traumas of the past. I have analyzed the ways in which poetry revisits the archival text, reworking the image of truth in the archive and producing a visually fragmented text to remember the past.

The poem, therefore, walks a fine line between complexity and fragmentation, for it relies on an understanding of the past as present. Embedded in a visual archive, it suggests another interpretation of archives and opens the conversation around the authenticity of the legal text through its provocative visual text. Philip opposes the archive and proposes a new reference, engaging the reader to envision a range of possible interpretations and refiguring of the archives in contemporary literature and art. The poet assumes her inability to work with the appropriate grammatical structures of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and through her use of fragmented verbs and nouns, she expands the notion of deconstruction and reinterpretation of the whole story, thus providing an alternative to the language of law both literally or metaphorically.

¹ See Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake, on blackness and Being* (2016).

2 The name of the ship was the *Zorg*, meaning “care” in Dutch. An error was made when the name was repainted.

3 The following references include detailed analyses about the slave trade: Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the...*

4 Gregson v. Gilbert, Dougl. 233. The case mentions 150 slaves killed. James Walvin in *Black Ivory*, 131, others 130 and 132. The exact number of...

5 See the information in: Marlene Nourbese Philip, official website. “A haunting Lifeline between archive and memory, law and poetry”, *Poetry*, 2013....

6 “Notanda” is an essay written by the writer where she decided to keep a journal on the writing of *Zong!*, recording her thoughts and feelings about...

7 See the documentation clip in : Joscelyn Gardner, “Omi eborá” (documentation clip), 2014. <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/omi-ebora>.

8 Some of the words and phrases overheard onboard the *Zong* exist in different languages such as Arabic, Greek, Fon, French, Hebrew, Latin, Portuguese...

9 See also Joscelyn Gardner, *White Skin, Black Kin: ‘Speaking the Unspeakable’*, exhibition catalogue, St Michael, Barbados: Barbados Museum and...

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2009.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Duke University Press, 2005.

De Ferrari, Guillermina. “A Caribbean Hauntology: The Sensorial Art of Joscelyn Gardner and M. Nourbese Philip.” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, Fall 2018, p. 271-293.

Derrida, Jacques. “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.” *Diacritic*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1995, p. 9-63.

Gardner, Joscelyn. *Omi Eborá*. 2014, <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/omi-ebora>. Accessed 15 July 2021.

Handelman, Don. *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Lima, Maria Helena. “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Contemporary Critical Perspectives on Caribbean Women’s Literatures.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1995, p. 115-128.

Mbembe, Achille. "The Power of the Archive and its Limits." *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton et al. Academics Publishers, 2002, p. 19-26.

Moise, Myriam. "Grasping the Ungraspable in M. Nourbese Philip's Poetry." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, p. 23-33.

OED, Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/>. Accessed June 2023.

Turnbull, Joanna, editor. "Membrane", *Oxford Dictionary*, English edition., Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 977.

Philip, Nourbese M. *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015.

Philip, Nourbese M. *Zong!* Mercury Press, 2008.

Philip, Nourbese M. "A haunting Lifeline between archive and memory, law and poetry", *M.Nourbese Philip*, 2013. <https://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/>.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake, On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Sharpe, Jenny. "The Archive and effective memory in M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* Interventions." *Interventions*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2014, p. 465-482, DOI: 10.1080/1369801x.2013.816079, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mf9q3xx>.

Spaulding, A. Timothy. *Re-Forming the Past History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. Ohio State University, 2005.

Walvin, James. *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire*, Blackwell, 2001.

Walters, Wendy W. *Archives of the Black Atlantic: Reading Between Literature and History*, Routledge, 2013.

NOTES

¹ See Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake, on blackness and Being* (2016).

² The name of the ship was the *Zorg*, meaning "care" in Dutch. An error was made when the name was repainted.

³ The following references include detailed analyses about the slave trade: Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005); James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery* (2011); Anita Rupprecht, "Excessive Memories: Slavery, Insurance and Resistance" (2007).

⁴ Gregson v. Gilbert, Dougl. 233. The case mentions 150 slaves killed. James Walvin in *Black Ivory*, 131, others 130 and 132. The exact number of African Slaves murdered remains a slippery signifier of what was undoubtedly a massacre.

⁵ See the information in: Marlene Nourbese Philip, official website. “A haunting Lifeline between archive and memory, law and poetry”, *Poetry*, 2013. <https://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/>.

⁶ “Notanda” is an essay written by the writer where she decided to keep a journal on the writing of *Zong!*, recording her thoughts and feelings about this journey. ⁷ See the documentation clip in : Joscelyn Gardner, “Omi ebora” (documentation clip), 2014. <https://www.joscelyngardner.org/omi-ebora>.

⁸ Some of the words and phrases overheard onboard the *Zong* exist in different languages such as Arabic, Greek, Fon, French, Hebrew, Latin, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, shona, Yoruba, twi and other languages.

⁹ See also Joscelyn Gardner, *White Skin, Black Kin: ‘Speaking the Unspeakable’*, exhibition catalogue, St Michael, Barbados: Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 2004, p. 54. The artist’s aim in the installation was to expose the telling gaps, silences, and omissions in regard to black and white kinship and inter-racial relations in artistic productions of the colonial period. This exhibition is another representation of the silences of the past that Philip is trying to reveal through her poem.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 (Philip 2008, 3)

<docannexe/image/165/img-1.jpg>

Figure 2 (Philip 2008, 85)

<docannexe/image/165/img-2.jpg>
