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THE ARCHIVE AND AFFECTIVE MEMORY IN M. NOURBESE PHILIP'S ZONG!

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affect

archive

hauntology

**middle
passage**

**NourbeSe
Philip, M.**

Zong
.....

Trinidadian Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip fashions her poems from the only record of an infamous incident in which 142 African slaves were drowned at sea so that their owners might collect insurance. By fragmenting the language of maritime law, the book of poems, Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng, exposes its silences as spaces of affect, which are extra-linguistic spaces that contain the humanity of the drowned slaves and also allow for a deep connection with a traumatic past. The disembodied sounds and voices a reader sees and hears in the poems – words that do not conform to the grammar of language and sounds that evoke an intuitive response rather than thought and contemplation – constitute a more visceral form of memory than storytelling. An affective memory may lack the materiality of archival memory or the solidity of reconstructed lives, but its appearance in Philip's poems exposes the violence of an archive in which a slave experience is immaterial.

In 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' Achille Mbembe likens the archive to a temple and a cemetery: a religious space where relics are stored and a tomb for the fragments of lives enshrined within. The status and power

of the archive, he explains, lie in the monumental stature of its building and tangible materiality of records preserved. Although ‘not all documents are destined to be archives’, the collection in one place of those deemed worthy of preservation gives an illusion of coherence where only ‘fragments of lives and pieces of time’ exist (Mbembe 2002: 19–20). The desire to tell subaltern stories represents the need to give a body, a materiality so to speak, to the lives that appear as the smallest of fragments within official archives. In order to address this need, archival memory has been expanded to include non-authoritative sources such as dance, songs, oral histories, myths, folk tales, novels, poems, tattoos, murals and paintings. In her magnificent book *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, Anjali Arondekar calls the desire to fill archival gaps with missing stories an ‘additive model of subalternity’, which, she explains, maintains a faith in archival materials as source despite its mistrust of official archives (2009: 6). In view of her observation, I want to suggest a different relationship of literature to the archive than serving as a fictitious or imaginary source. What if a literary work did not fill archival gaps with stories but explored the meaning of silence instead? This is the approach Trinidadian Canadian M. NourbeSe Philip takes in *Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, which does not tell the story that is missing from the archives so much as indicate the limits of its telling.

The poems in *Zong!* represent Philip’s search for an adequate form to tell the story of an infamous incident in which transported African slaves were thrown alive into the Caribbean Sea. Unlike Fred D’Aguiar’s (1999) black British novel, *Feeding the Ghosts*, which supplements the official records with a diary written from the perspective of a survivor of the drowning, Philip’s poetic rendition conveys only the ghostly echoes of lost lives. She explains in the afterword called *Notanda* that she wanted to write a novel but soon discovered that there was too much telling, and, as she repeats again and again, ‘this is a story that can only be told by not telling’ (2008: 191). Her words echo the ending of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, that ‘this is not a story to pass on’ (1991: 337), a double entendre suggesting both the transmission of a story and its withholding, a simultaneous remembering and forgetting.¹

Zong! is an act of remembrance, but one which addresses a past that is difficult to recover since its archival remains are sparse. Since it was not standard practice to log slaves by name in the ship’s ledger, the names of the dead are unknown (Philip 2008: 194). Nor is the exact location of the massacre known. As Patricia Saunders observes in an interview with Philip, ‘There’s no marker. We don’t have the bones. We don’t have the tombstones’ (Saunders 2008: 69). The whereabouts of the ship’s log, where slaves would have been listed and the journey charted, is also unrecoverable. It is presumed that Commander Luke Collingwood took it with him when he

1 Saidiya Hartman calls this narrative strategy ‘a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history’ (2008: 11).

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2 The case was first heard in the Guildhall, London on 5 March 1783. *Gregson v. Gilbert*, notes for the second hearing on 21–22 May at the Court of King's Bench, are preserved at the National Maritime Museum under the reference REC/19 (formerly MS 66/069) (Shyllon 1974: 187–9). Since this document is reproduced in the end materials of Philip's *Zong!*, all further references to its text will be to this edition.

disembarked at Kingston, where he subsequently died (Lewis 2007: 367). The only preserved record of what transpired in the open sea is the legal case in which insurers (Messrs Gilbert) appealed the jury's decision that they should compensate the ship's owners (Messrs Gregson) for their loss. A manuscript copy of the court reporter's notes of the trial, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, is housed, along with other related papers, at the National Maritime Museum in London.² Philip declares *Gregson v. Gilbert* to be 'the tombstone, the one public marker of the murder of those Africans on board the *Zong*, locating it in a specific time and place' (2008: 194). Yet, as a metaphoric tombstone, the legal case does not contain the standard inscription: proper name and longevity of life, next of kin, and inscription of love and/or grief. For this reason it presents the poet with a conundrum: how to find the humanity of slaves within a document that negates it? How to tell a story for which the evidence works against its telling?

The difficulty of telling the story of the slaves aboard the *Zong* is evident in James Walvin's devotion of an entire study to the massacre. Based on the archival evidence at his disposal, he is able to provide biographies of the chief actors: Robert Stubbs, a passenger who commanded the ship when Collingwood became ill; Lord Mansfield, who presided over the trial; and anti-slavery activists Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp, who brought the massacre to the public's attention. But there is no amount of archival evidence that allows him to offer comparable biographies of the African slaves aboard the ship. Walvin charts out detailed descriptions of the circuitous voyage from the island of São Tomé off the West African coast to the Black River in Jamaica, as well as the twists and turns in the case between owners and insurers. Yet he struggles to tell the story of the drownings from the perspective of the slaves. He elaborates what he can from the shred of evidence provided by Kelsall that as news spread in the hold about Africans being thrown alive into the sea, a spokesperson pleaded for their lives (Walvin 2011: 157–8). As the title of his book indicates, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery*, the story Walvin tells is the massacre's historical significance in the effort to end the British slave trade and the effect 'news of the *Zong* killings' had on British people, including Africans living in England (2011: 174). Philip, on the other hand, wants to tell the story of the Africans aboard the ship, about which the archives are silent.

The only recorded eyewitness accounts, the sworn testimonies of Stubbs and Kelsall, are untrustworthy because they are from men who did not want to incriminate themselves in the deed for which they stood accused. The 'facts', as they are known, are as follows. The Dutch slaver *Zorgue* (renamed *Zong* after capture by the British) left the Guinea coast on 18 August 1781 with 442 slaves and arrived at Jamaica on 22 December 1781 with only 208. The transatlantic trip took sixteen instead of the usual six to eight weeks due

to the commander mistaking Jamaica for the hostile territory of Spanish Hispaniola and setting off leeward from the island. The navigational error forced the ship to sail against powerful trade winds on its return. This mistake led to a water shortage, or so the commander claimed, that forced him to throw 142 sick Africans overboard. On the evening of 29 November the crew pushed fifty-four women and children out of the cabin windows. A couple of days later, forty-two male slaves were thrown overboard from the deck. A final thirty-six were thrown overboard during the ensuing days, and ten jumped into the water to avoid being thrown (Lewis 2007: 361–4). In addition to these slaves, sixty-two died during the voyage across the Atlantic and thirty-six on the journey back to Jamaica.³

3 The numbers of the reported dead are rounded, which is why they do not add up (Lewis 2007: 364).

The trial concerned the slaves who were singled out for being thrown alive into the sea alone, and abolitionists seized upon 132 as the definitive number in their literature protesting against the massacre. However, as Stephanie E. Smallwood explains in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, mere statistics cannot measure the ‘cost for Africans of that crossing’, including the cost to those who survived, because any number of reported deaths aggregates individual lives, each of which endured the violence of the crossing (Smallwood 2007: 152).

In order to convey the total cost of the transatlantic slave trade to people of African descent, Philip constructs her poems from the inadequate and highly compromised language of the legal case. Since the hearings were intended to determine, not whether a massacre had occurred but, rather, who should suffer the loss of property, owners or insurers, she characterizes its language as ‘already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally’ (Philip 2008: 199). *Gregson v. Gilbert* refers to the drowned Africans, who are considered as property rather than people, only collectively as ‘negroes’ and ‘slaves’. The delicate task Philip faces involves using its language while refusing the sense of its meaning. In *Notanda* she explains that her poems resist forming words into sentences because grammar adheres to the logic of reason and rationality, which is the same logic underpinning a marine law that sanctioned the killings (Philip 2008: 199). For this reason she seeks in the document something other than the significance of its words. This is one explanation of her repeated refrain of not telling the story that has to be told. The other part of the ‘not telling’ is to allow the story to tell itself.

Philip likens her treatment of the legal report to a sculptor who chips away at a block of stone until the figure locked within it reveals itself (2008: 198). She also admits that the analogy is flawed because language will only reveal ‘what is commonplace’ (Philip 2008: 198). Philip chipped away at *Gregson v. Gilbert* for seven whole years. During this time she visited the site on the African coast where the *Zong* set sail for the Caribbean, as well as the city where the legal battle between owners and insurers was fought. She travelled in the summer of 2006 to Ghana, where she conversed about the *Zong* with

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a priest at a traditional shrine of the Ewe people adjacent to a slave port. On her return, she stopped off at the port in Merseyside, Liverpool, where she poured a libation for the spirits of the dead into the chilly Atlantic waters (2008: 202–3). While in Britain, she immersed herself in the archives, examining Granville Sharp's letter to the Lords of the Admiralty and the paid account books of the Jamaican agents who traded with the owners of the *Zong* (Saunders 2008: 76–7). I would argue that Philip does not journey to historical sites and archives in search of new evidence, as would a historian, so much as to gain a 'feel' for the past. Her relationship to the sources of history can be characterized as affective, which is a term that does not simply designate the poet's feelings or emotions.

Affect studies emerged as an effort to dislodge the epistemological primacy of thought, reason and 'the individual' in theories of 'the social' (Clough 2007: 2). There is little consensus on the meaning of the term 'affect', which is explained in a variety of ways ranging from Sianne Ngai's aesthetics of negative emotions or 'ugly feelings' to Brian Massumi's insistence on affect precisely not referring to emotions but 'bodily impulses' (Ngai 2005: 1; Massumi 2002: 27–8). My own interest in the term has to do with its ability to address both the body and the mind, reason and the passions (Hardt 2007: ix). As such, affect provides access to forms of representation that do not necessarily conform to a western logic of language and writing. The dualism of body and mind belongs to a philosophical tradition that is not universal, being spread across the globe primarily through European colonization. Despite the logic of the master's language being imposed on slaves through a suppression of their native tongues, they continued to express their 'communal identity and memory' through dance, music, sacred rituals and other embodied, non-verbal practices (Taylor 2003: 18). 'When the African came to the New World', writes Philip, 'she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which that body could contain' (1996: 22). However, she adds: 'I use body here to include mind which is, in my opinion, very much a part of *and* an extension of body.' Philip's characterization of the mind as an extension of the body captures the idea of affect I want to introduce into archival knowledge.

Affect can be understood as a potentiality for memory existing in places and things, which is a potentiality that lacks the tactile and tangible quality of material archives. When Philip visits the sites of the transatlantic slave trade and immerses herself in its archival records, she is seeking, to use Morrison's words, an 'emotional memory – what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared' (1987: 119). This memory is not simply the personal memory of the poet but a collective one already formed through a transmission of stories and a way of being in the world indelibly marked by slavery and its legacy. Through a social relation of affecting and being affected, Philip's poems convey this memory to people who may not have the

strong feelings of kinship with the dead that she does. Her poetic fragmentation of *Gregson v. Gilbert* delivers a slave experience through emotive sounds, tone and mood, as language itself progressively breaks down in each section of the book. The disembodied sounds and voices a reader sees and hears – words that do not conform to the logic of language and sounds that evoke a more intuitive response than thought and contemplation – constitute a more visceral form of memory than history or storytelling. An affective memory lacks the materiality of archival memory or the solidity of reconstructed lives, either real or imaginary, because its power lies elsewhere.

Zong! suggests that silences in official archives are not only holes to be filled with meaning – missing pieces of a counter-history – but also spaces of an affective relationship with the past. At the same time, its poems demonstrate that affect is not universal or free-floating even if its potential for realization happens across geographical space and historical time. ‘The affect is independent of all determinate space-time’, explains Deleuze; ‘but it is none the less created in a history which produces it as the expressed and the expression of a space or a time, of an epoch or a milieu’ (1986: 99). Philip’s creative act belongs to a Caribbean present in which tourism preserves for the pleasure and enjoyment of expatriates and tourists a memory of plantation life that ‘equalled death for the African’ (Philip 1997: 170). Her milieu could not be any more different than the one belonging to the earliest memorialization of the *Zong* killings, J. M. Turner’s *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On)* (1840), to which *Zong!* can be considered a poetic response.⁴

4 Although the slave ship is not identified in Turner’s painting, Marcus Wood explains that the *Zong* served as its ‘narrative trigger’ (2000: 63).

The Slave Ship, painted thirty-three years after Britain ended its participation in the slave trade, expresses what Ian Baucom characterizes as a romantic melancholy from the perspective of a Victorian milieu that is ‘after the age of sail, the age of slavery, and the age of interest’ (2005: 292). Visually, the explicitly affective painting is a confusion of light and dark, motion and stillness, the purpose of which is to elicit an emotive response of guilt, horror and sorrow. The horror of the slave trade is conveyed less through the slave’s nightmarish journey towards death than it is ‘embodied in a sky made of blood and a sea convulsed with pain’, which is how Marcus Wood describes the painting’s personification of the sea as both brutal executioner and suffering victim (2000: 62). The viewer’s eyes are drawn to the centre of the scene where the blood-red light of the setting sun illuminates the only portion of the sea that is devoid of drowning slaves.

Although in the foreground, the dead and dying of the painting’s title are rendered practically indiscernible by the flash and fury of the storm. They are, both visually and metaphorically, in the shadows of the painting. As African-American anti-slavery activist Mary Ellen Pleasant expresses in Michelle Cliff’s novel, *Free Enterprise*, in response to the painting’s Anglo-American woman owner’s focus on the storm’s aesthetics: ‘I think the

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5 Black British David Dabydeen's poetic response to Turner's painting also focuses on the drowning Africans in the foreground (1994: ix).

6 Philip describes her reaction as one of being 'startled' to hear the Ghanaian elder say that her ancestors did not die during the passage over (2008: 202). Her response is an indication of the closeness she feels to the drowned, which is an intimacy that is not necessarily based on actual kinship but a shared history.

difference between us may be reduced to the fact that while you focus on the background of the Turner painting, I cannot tear my eyes from the foreground. It is who we are' (1993: 80).⁵ Her statement of identity – 'who we are' – stands in stark contrast to a romantic identification with the suffering Other through feelings of pity, compassion and benevolence, which are sentiments that reinforce the spectator's superiority (Sharpe 2003: 79). As Baucom (2005: 288) explains, by transforming fact into affect, Turner paints the contemplative mind of romantic liberalism rather than the massacre of African slaves.

While both Turner's painting and Philip's poems are expressions of sorrow, Philip's creative act is formed through a deep and personal connection with the drowned slaves, who could not possibly be her ancestors, as she is informed by an Ewe elder (2008: 202).⁶ She considers her poems to be a wake for those who died without receiving proper burial rituals and also an act of mourning. *Zong!* shifts *The Slave Ship's* affective state from the moral judgement of a furious nature to the life before death of drowning slaves, from the past temporality of an immoral trafficking of people that ended in 1807 to a shifting temporality that fluctuates between the middle passage, West Indian plantation life, and the reader's own post-slavery present.

Unlike Turner's melancholic expression, the exclamation point added to the name of the slave ship in Philip's title is intended to emphasize her poetic expression as a chant or song, since Africans sing on the occasions of births and deaths, to express sorrow and joy. 'Why the exclamation mark after *Zong!*?' she queries in *Notanda*. '*Zong!* is chant! Shout! And ululation! *Zong!* Is moan! Mutter! Howl! And shriek! *Zong!* is "pure utterance." *Zong!* is Song!' (2008: 207). As song, her book is written in the spirit of the African women who sang laments on their voyage over from West Africa. Through their recollection of the families they left behind and creation of songs about their condition of exile, the women served as griots for the shiploads of displaced Africans journeying towards an unknown future (Rediker 2007: 284). The cries of their laments, if not their stories, can be hauntingly heard in the lilting rhythm of the poems.

Philip's kinship with Africans who endured the middle passage offers a way into understanding the poetic function of Setaey Adamu Boateng. The book spine presents Philip and Boateng as co-authors, and Boateng is described on the book jacket as 'the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the *Zong!*' The fictitious Ghanaian ur-ancestor can be searched (and found!) on the Internet as the book's 'author'. Is this a literary ruse of the same order as Daniel Defoe claiming that he is merely transmitting the true story of a shipwrecked sailor called Robinson Crusoe, or Charlotte Brönte's assumption of the pen-name Currer Bell, presented as the male editor of an English governess's diaries? I

would contend that *Zong!* works against the history-telling function of European realism as well as the creative function of its invented worlds. Either a literal or metaphoric reading of Boateng as co-author would subject the formally innovative book of poems to traditional codes of European realism. ‘The voice of the ancestors’ alludes to those silent spaces of history, yes, but not as a space of ‘submerged stories’. To see the book as the recovery of lost stories would be to make its ghosts reside within the house of archives, by regarding silences only as absences to be filled with stories. Philip, on the other hand, characterizes silence as inhabiting the margins of the text as ‘a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning’ (2008: 201). Her use of the word ‘anti-meaning’ rather than ‘non-meaning’ suggests a language in silence.

Philip’s experimental poems do not tell a story so much as convey the ghostly presence of lives within a document that treats those lives as immaterial. They summon transported Africans caught between life and death, filled with humanity and also drowning in its negation. By maintaining the fragmented stories in the official records as fragments, her poems evoke a spectral past: both as presence and absence, what is remembered and what is forgotten, what has and has not been recorded. Alluding to Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which calls the status of existence between the living and the dead, being and non-being, a hauntology (in French pronounced the same as ‘ontology’), she characterizes her poems as hauntological (2008: 201) and the spectral quality of the *Zong!*’s elusive memory as tidal. ‘As the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements’, writes Philip, ‘so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always’ (2008: 201). Like Derrida’s ghostly event that appears for the first time but only as a repetition, each wave that washes ashore appears to be the first but follows the one that has gone before. The idea of a memory that is tidal – appearing to be stationary but always shifting – unsettles the presumed stability of an archival memory suggested through the fixity and solidity of its temple-like building. *Zong!* is not the first memorialization; nor will it be the last. The *Zong!* will continue to haunt because its traumatic afterlife cannot be washed away. Philip’s book of poems stages the disjointed and dislocated time of the afterlife of slavery, thereby demonstrating how the silences of the past continue to haunt our present.

Formally, *Zong!* consists of six smaller books of poems, a glossary, a fictitious ship’s manifest and the poet’s notes on the writing of her work. The smaller books of poems all have Latin names, since Philip considers Latin to be intimately connected to the language of law and also sees it as a father tongue for European languages (2008: 209n). The first twenty-six poems in the section called *Os*, which is Latin for bone, are constructed exclusively from the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, whose words Philip chops up and

rearranges on the page. At the bottom of the pages are possible names for the dead, which are located below the poems, as if underwater, as 'ghostly footnotes' (Philip 2008: 200). As a missing text that exists outside even the margins of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the names are the closest Philip comes to a creative act of recovery, although they include names from regions that did not participate in the transatlantic slave trade. Six additional poems constructed from the language of the legal case are collected in *Dicta*, the title of which alludes to judicial opinion that is immaterial to a case. Although Philip's original intention was to restrict herself to the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, she found that when she began to fragment the words, 'these little stories are surfacing in the text' (Saunders 2008: 73).

The subsequent books – *Sal*, *Ventus*, *Ratio* and *Ferrum* – displace the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert* with European and African words and phrases belonging to the transatlantic slave trade as well as the plantation life it engendered. Philip characterizes these latter poems as 'a translation of the opacity' of the first twenty-six (2008: 206). They work through their own logic of association, word play and sliding signification of words and syllables, whose meanings change with the insertion of a different letter or transference into another language or through alliteration. Words and letters join momentarily to create a sensation, touch off a memory, perhaps even an image, but they do not cohere into a story or sequence of events. The listener/reader is able to hear/read partial stories spoken by a multiplicity of voices from above and below the deck, voices that are difficult to unravel into individual perspectives and narratives. Despite the appearance of 'little stories', Philip maintains her fragmented form of broken words and sentences through what she calls a 'poetics of fragmentation' (2008: 202). When taken in its entirety, the book of poems draws attention to the silence spaces of history, while making silences in the master's language audible and visible.

By refusing the logic of language and narrative, Philip's poems present a problem for the reader. How are we to interpret the words and letters on the page? Do we read them from left to right, top to bottom, or even diagonally? Or are we not supposed to derive a meaning from them at all? Perhaps we should read the poems for their shapes and metaphoricity. Water appears to be an overriding theme. The words of one poem spiral downwards as if caught in a liquid vortex (Philip 2008: 94), while others bob up and down like waves on the open sea (106–7). Still others sink to the bottom of the page under the weight of their signification (19).

Philip's poetic style exhibits the concrete imagery and epistemological enquiry of Language poetry. Comparing Philip's work to that of American Language poet Susan Howe, Lee M. Jenkins explains that "for both, the ruptured text is a way of bearing witness to and formally reproducing a ruptured history (2004: 170–1). Yet Philip describes her poems, which address

the traumatic afterlife of slavery, as starting from a different place – one she characterizes as ‘the wasteland between the terror of language and the horror of silence’ – than Euro-American Language poets (Philip 2003: 198). Her *Zong!* poems occupy that wasteland by shuttling between a language that designates African people as property and its silence about their lives. In cutting up the text of a document that designates slaves as cargo to be disposed of at will, Philip’s poems open up wide spaces between words and even the letters of words to suggest that silence is not an empty space even if it does not deliver language as such. How does turning away from the logic of language force one to confront its unspoken underside, namely silence?

Philip has long been interested in exploring the space of silence, particularly as it relates to herself as an African Caribbean woman. Silence is the site of a linguistic wound due to the violent uprooting of African people and active suppression of their native tongues as a means of social control. In ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’ the poet shuttles between the father tongue and mother tongue, which is also the father tongue because for her both are English. However, there is another reference to the mother tongue that runs vertically along the margins of her poem. This mother tongue is not a conventional interpretation of language in the sense of words that form into meaning. It exists in the sensation of a mother’s tongue passing over her baby’s skin, touching her tongue, and forcing her breath into her mouth:

THE MOTHER THEN PUT HER FINGERS INTO HER CHILD’S MOUTH – GENTLY FORCING IT OPEN; SHE TOUCHES HER TONGUE TO THE CHILD’S TONGUE, AND HOLDING THE TINY MOUTH OPEN, SHE BLOWS INTO IT – HARD. SHE WAS BLOWING WORDS – HER WORDS, HER MOTHER’S WORDS, THOSE OF HER MOTHER’S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE – INTO HER DAUGHTER’S MOUTH. (Philip 1989: 56–8)

Philip is suggesting through this marginalized discourse on the mother tongue that linguistic memory is transmitted from one generation to the next even if language itself is not. In other words, the mother tongue is not a space of loss if one sees it as a space of affect: the sensation of touch and a silent breath that passes from one mouth to another. Inasmuch as the transmission of linguistic memory occurs between mother and daughter, the space of affective language, when coded as silence, is also female-gendered.

To accept silence as a missing text or absence begins from the premise that diasporic black women have not left their imprint on language. In ‘Dis Place The Space Between’ Philip begins from a different place, which is that ‘women have, in fact, left their mark on the many silences that surround

language' and the problem is more one of learning to read those silences (1997: 85). To enable this reading she draws attention to silence as sounds between words and temporal pauses that enable meaning. In this manner, she moves black women's linguistic absence (dis place) from margins to the body of the text: 'silence is / the sound, the very sound; between the words, / in the interstices of time divided by the word' (Philip 1997: 85). Without the pauses in time and empty space between words, we would have a cacophony of noise and gibberish. Silence is as much a part of language as words. While the grammar of language establishes boundaries between sound and silence, ghosts, whose immateriality gives them the ability to traverse boundaries, can help us see that the space of silence is not nothing even if it lacks the materiality of words. Philip's earlier meditations on silence offer a way into understanding how *Zong!* makes visible – and audible – the silences in the language of maritime law.

Zong! # 1, the first poem in the collection, sets the tone for Philip's dismemberment of an archival record by demonstrating its silences as spaces of affect. The poem forces apart the letters in words belonging to the statement 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 v. Gilbert*, 'to recover the value of certain slaves thrown overboard for want of water.' 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, but also a shortage of fresh water is the alleged justification for Collingwood's orders. Visually, the words appear as a series of letters bobbing up and down on the page like so many waves or driftwood in a sea of monosyllabic utterances (Figure 1). However, listening to the poem elicits the uncanny sounds of the voices of those who were lost at sea.⁷ The experience of hearing *Zong! # 1*, when compared to seeing it on the page, is to hear 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 one day of want – creates a linguistic stutter that becomes a plea, a gurgle, a chatter 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 spaces of sensations. The utterance of this poem evokes a visceral response in listeners more like goose pimples on the skin rather than an image in the mind's eye. 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 slaves, to be found at slavery museums like the Wilberforce House. Philip's poetic memorial avoids filling a silence with slave voices because it simultaneously wants us to remember why those voices are missing. It constitutes what James E. Young calls a

7 Philip's readings of her *Zong!* poems are available online at PennSound: Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing (<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Philip.php>).

Zong! #1

w w w w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa
te r gg g g go
o oo goo d
waa wa wa
w w waa
ter o oh
on o ne w one
w o n d d d
ey d a
dey a ah ay
s one days
wa wa

Masuz Zuwena Ogunsheye Ziyad Ogwambi Keturah

Figure 1 Philip, *Zong!*, p. 3

‘counter-memory’, which he distinguishes from commemorative forms that encourage forgetfulness by doing ‘our memory work for us’ (1999: 3).

Since affect establishes social connections involving the reciprocity of affecting and being affected, *Zong! # 1* connects listeners to the slaves who are dying from thirst or swallowing salt water as their bodies sink to the bottom of the sea. We hear the gasp for water in ‘w w w’, the chatter of cold water on the skin in ‘d d d’ and the choking and shudder of water filling the lungs in ‘g g go o o o’. It is not simply the case that the words from the legal hearing are being dismembered. Rather, through the repetition of syllables that prolong their utterance, language is being slowed down to its breaking point. A stutter, murmur or stammer that slows down language until it

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borders on silence, draws attention to silence as its anti-meaning. ‘*When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer . . .*’ declares Giles Deleuze, ‘*then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence*’ (1997: 113; italics and ellipses in the original). Halting the smooth operation and normative function of legal discourse, *Zong! # 1* makes the ‘language [of *Gregson v. Gilbert*] tremble from head to toe’ (Deleuze 1997: 109). The trembling of the English language is interrupted by the names of the dead as a verbal litany that inserts a different kind of order into the document’s linguistic breakdown. The proper names of the dead in Kiswahili, Arabic, Akan, Shona, Yoruba, Tiv, Ngoni and Luganda, among other languages belonging to the diverse peoples of the African continent, interject alternative linguistic intonations into the formal legal language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*.

The effect of Philip’s cutting up the words and sentences of the legal case and rearranging them on the page is to destabilize the archive as a record of the past. The document itself begins to crumble as the equilibrium of its words – which is achieved through a balance between language and silence – is set in motion.⁸ As Michel Foucault reminds us, the archive is not simply a tangible document housed in an official building but also the ‘law of what can be said’ (1972: 129). *Gregson v. Gilbert* does not simply document factual evidence. In the effort to determine who was liable for the loss – owners or underwriters – it lays out the rules and regulations that form the condition of possibility for the drowning to take place. In fact, what happened aboard the *Zong* was not a singular event. Since African slaves were transported as property, they could be thrown overboard if such action resulted in saving the ship, much like the jettisoning of goods during a storm. This is one of the legal arguments that is considered in the *Zong* case and, as such, belongs to the rational language of maritime law. ‘It has been decided’, argues one of the justices, ‘whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue. The question is, first, whether any necessity existed for that act’ (Philip 2008: 211). Through a postponement of the question of their humanity (‘whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question’), *Gregson v. Gilbert* contains African slaves’ ‘thingness’ but not their personhood; an ontological state of being that denotes the facts – *what* is or was – but not identity – *who* is or was. In the alternating columns of words in *Zong! # 14* (Philip 2008: 24) there is symmetry to factual evidence both in the past and present. The truth that was established in the case still is: the ship sailed, the rains came, the loss arose. But the symmetry of the stanzas is disturbed by the singularity of the phrase ‘the negroes is’, an ungrammatical phrase that is not intended to demonstrate the ontological being of ‘the negroes’ so much as to introduce that absence as a haunting presence of what is left unsaid.

8 ‘As long as language is considered as a system in equilibrium, the disjunctions are necessarily exclusive (we do not say “passion,” “ration,” “nation” at the same time, but must choose between them), and the connections, progressive (we do not combine a word with its own elements, in a kind of stop-start or forward-backward jerk)’ (Deleuze 1997: 110).

Zong! #14

the truth was

the ship sailed

the rains came

the loss arose

the truth is

the ship sailed

the rains came

the loss arose

the negroes is

the truth was

Nkrumah Ato Nobanzi Oduneye Opa Fagbulu

Figure 2 Philip, *Zong!*, p. 24

Several of the poems appear on the page as columns of words that mimic neatly written ledgers that transformed Africans into commodities. ‘Through their graphic simplicity and economy’, writes Smallwood about slave records, ‘invoices and ledgers effaced the personal histories that fuelled the slaving economy’ (2007: 98). An effacement of unique identities is evident in the recording of slaves, where the movement down the column from one individual to the next is marked only by a slight shift in term: ‘negro man’, ‘negro woman’, ‘negro girl’, ‘negro girl meagre’. Imitating the layout of such ledgers, the last poem of *Dicta, Zong! #* (2008: 55–56), lines up in three columns diverse combinations of the phrases – ‘uncommon case’, ‘great weight’ and ‘new trial’ – used by Lord Mansfield to describe the unprecedented nature of the legal case (Figure 3):⁹

9 Lord Mansfield is best known for his judgement in the Somerset case,

This is a very *uncommon case*, and deserves a reconsideration. There is *great weight* in the objection, that the evidence does not support [*sic*] the statement of

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whereby he ruled that slaves who escaped from their West Indian owners travelling to Britain could not be returned to the West Indies against their will. He was also the guardian of the mixed-race daughter, Dido Belle, of his nephew, who was a captain in the Royal Navy, and an African slave woman, about whom little is known. Dido appears in Philip's poems.

Zong! #



Figure 3 Philip, *Zong!*, p. 55

the loss made in the declaration. There is no evidence of the ship being foul and leaky, and that certainly was not the cause of the delay. There is weight, also, in the circumstance of the throwing overboard of the negroes after the rain (if the fact be so), for which, upon the evidence, there appears to have been no necessity. There should, on the ground of reconsideration only, be a *new trial*, on the payment of costs. (Philip 2008: 211; emphasis added)

The poem's shifting of terms follows the logic of the slave ship's ledger: 'uncommon case' becomes 'uncommon weight' becomes 'great weight' becomes 'new weight' becomes 'new trial', and so on. When applied to the language of law, however, the ledger form appears pointless or meaningless. The missing text of the lost ship's ledger, which itself acts in the place of the

lost African names, is the silence behind the *ratio decidendi* of Lord Mansfield’s testimony to the singularity of a case concerning an action that was relatively common. Philip’s poem recodes the silences in *Gregson v. Gilbert* not as an absence so much as the boundary of a signification indelibly marked by the master–slave relationship.

I want to end by briefly touching on the last book of poems, *Ferrum*, which is Latin for ‘sword’, because it is the book in which Philip claims finally to have possession of language, although she calls it a ‘language of the limp and the wound’ (2008: 205). The section begins with comprehensible phrases but increasingly becomes incomprehensible as dismembered English words and sentences stagger across the page to meet the words of other languages, also broken. As the English language becomes fragmented and interspersed with African words, the sound of patois emerges from its interstices:

from *omi* *iyè we be* *ébóra àki* ash
 es and sa It for the bo die s of kin un
 der the sk in of s ea whe

(Philip 2008: 168)

The glossary lists *omi* as Yoruba for ‘water’ and *ébóra* for ‘underwater spirits’ and, unlike the English, these words appear unbroken. In the context of a transatlantic slave history, Yoruba is not a colonizing language like English, which was spread, as the narrator of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* informs us, by those ‘bearing the sword, and often the torch’ (2006: 5). Caribbean patois or creolized speech is a linguistic process of the colonized, but one which, like Philip’s poems, breaks apart the master’s language by mixing it with various European and African languages and grammar. Creolized speech does not appear among the diverse languages listed in the book’s glossary as ‘words and phrases overheard on board the *Zong*’ (Philip 2008: 183) because it belongs to the aftermath of the middle passage – namely, the arrival of transported Africans in the Americas. Yet what transpired in the open seas far away from land, with no historical marker or material evidence from which to constitute its memory, has left its unacknowledged, because silent, imprint on both sides of the Atlantic: Europe, the Americas and Africa.

What I am calling an affective relationship to the archive does not involve unearthing new historical data so much as understanding silence as a haunting limit of what was recorded. In suggesting that a silenced past lives on in the present, Philip’s poetics forces us to rethink the presumed stability of the enduring records. *Zong!* not only questions the ability of language to deliver the meaning of ‘the ineffable’ – scenes of massacre, terror, displacement and dislocation. It also constitutes the search for a new and

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different kind of speech/language for speaking/writing the memory that silence holds. Its poems destabilize the written record by fragmenting its words, sending them spiralling across the pages, exposing their missing text as spaces of affect and anti-meaning. They open wide gaps between words and even the letters of words to suggest that silence and emptiness can elicit a verbal expression if not language as such. The empty spaces of language unleash the emotive force of thirst, sickness, hunger and drowning that are inaudible and undetectable in *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Within the dismembered spaces of European languages, the mute grammar of African languages is to be detected. Seen/heard in this way, silence can also be a form of expression rather than a puzzle of history to be solved.

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