



Article

“Sing the Bones Home”: Material Memory and the Project of Freedom in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*

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Abstract: M. NourbeSe Philip’s 2008 book-length poem *Zong!* represents maritime materialities below the sea’s surface in relation to aesthetic geographies of the sea in the aftermath of slavery as an abyss of loss, thereby extending modernist aesthetics while offering a strategic and revisionary response to male-centered modernist writing. Keen attention into the sea as an innovating and renewing source reveals that the poem imagines the sea as a literal, formal, and thematic agent for the “decontamination” of language—which, Philip maintains, is contaminated by imperialism—and of the received history about slavery. The poem focuses its investigation on the case of the 1781 *Zong* massacre and the *Gregson v. Gilbert* maritime insurance case that arose in its wake. *Zong!* mourns the massacre of 150 Africans who were thrown overboard so that owners of the slave ship could collect insurance money on lost “cargo”. In conversation with Caribbean poets and thinkers, such as Grace Nichols, and African oral traditions, the poem explores forms of memory that go beyond the non-history officially afforded to the enslaved and their descendants. Throughout the poem, the sea is a site of decontamination through which *Zong!* stages its attempt to recover the unrecoverable. While many scholars have understandably focused on the events aboard the ship, a small number of ecocritical readings have highlighted the poem’s engagement with the materiality of the sea. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and black feminist theories of the human, this article will discuss the sea as a material geography, going deeper to investigate the poem’s rarely discussed focus on biological and chemical materiality as juxtaposed to representations of black women’s flesh, arguing that it functions as a feminist provocation to both human exceptionalism and the racial boundaries of the human.

Keywords: geomodernisms; modernist poetics; Caribbean poetry; *Zong!*; M. NourbeSe Philip; black poetry; critical ocean studies; multispecies; materiality; ecocriticism

Our entrance to the past is through memory. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Notanda”

The sea has long held a storied place in the imaginations of poets and thinkers concerned with history. Take, for example, T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, in which Eliot works with fragments to illustrate that, while everything in his world has been ruined, he might preserve its beautiful pieces, which, though no longer authoritative, might be used to create something new and whole. As Pound opens *The Cantos* in the voice of Odysseus lost at sea—a figure for the Lost Generation poet who must find his way home through the writing of a poem—so Eliot invokes shipwrecks and drownings to represent cultural crisis marked by disruption and the broken promises of liberal modernity. Eliot aestheticizes the decomposing body of Phlebas, his drowned Phoenician Sailor—“A current under sea/Picked his bones in whispers”—as he imagines it restored in a new form that is much

like Alonso's body in *The Tempest* (Eliot 2006, p. 67).¹ When Ferdinand mourns Alonso's supposed death, Ariel attempts to comfort him with the promise of such transformation. Her song will become one of Eliot's fragments:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (Shakespeare 2008, p. 123)

In Eliot's poem, Phlebas, as other fragments, is made into "something rich and strange", like dead eyes turning to pearls. The sea holds the ruined past yet can wash away that past. Steeped in nostalgia, Eliot's poetic revolution meant to use the fragments of ruined Western high culture to "shore" against further ruin and to produce order and authority on a mythic scale as a guide for the early twentieth century. Though the desert wasteland is paramount in Eliot's vision of modernity, he can nevertheless imagine the paradoxically effacing and renewing function of the sea in the brief, lyrical fourth section "Death by Water".

Caribbean poets respond pointedly to the cultural authority of *The Waste Land* and Eliot in their explorations of the sea as a source of new formations and as a repository for history.² Extending modernism's aesthetic innovations, they reshape Eliot's formulation by responding to the Caribbean cultural situation (Pollard 2004, pp. 18–19).³ For example, Shakespeare's representation of a purifying drowning is taken up by Caribbean poets in their attempts to make sense of slavery and its legacy as they navigate through trauma and loss. In Césaire's *Une Tempête*, Ariel sings, "Ocean stream comes home/Nothing is, all becomes . . . This close, strange season/Living eye is precious pearl/Heart is coral, bone joins atoll/Ocean stream comes home, Bringing a sea-change" (Césaire 2000, p. 23). Césaire's rewriting of *The Tempest* imagines the decomposition of the dead in which they remain alive to haunt the present. This decomposition and the eventual recomposition into something new brings "a sea-change". Kamau Brathwaite's theory of "tidealectics" responds to this transformation by sea. He describes tidealectics as "like the movement of the ocean... coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding" (quoted in Jenkins 2004, p. 188).⁴ Similarly, new formations appear in Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History", in which bone is "soldered by coral to bone,/mosaics/mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow", and "white cowries clustered like manacles/on the drowned women" (Walcott 1986, pp. 364–65). Manuela Coppola notes the formal and thematic importance of the sea as a symbol of mourning and memory in Walcott's work: "the sea has been represented as the repository of the memory of the Middle Passage, as in Derek Walcott's famous lines:

¹ Melody Jue (2014) identifies in this same fragment of *The Tempest* the chemical makeup of seawater that makes it capable of transformation (p. 246).

² In Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017) explication of the "oceanic turn", she comments that during the spatial turn of the 1990s "the ocean became a place for theorizing the materiality of history, yet it rarely figured as material in itself"; however, "[i]n the Caribbean the ocean has long been understood as a material entity; it is an ecology for 'subtle and submarine' poetics in the words of Derek Walcott" (p. 243).

³ Complementary rather than derivative, Caribbean modernisms revitalize "the Eliotic version of tradition . . . as a much more fluid and radical formulation, where the new text extends, qualifies, and transfigures the tradition with which it conducts its dialogue" in order to respond to the complexities of the Caribbean experience (Jenkins 2004, p. 10; Pollard 2004). Further, while both reflect an ambivalence to modernity, European and Caribbean modernisms have distinct and important ideological, aesthetic, and epistemological differences (Pollard 2004). Modernism's aesthetic innovations are not bound to colonialism's ideology: "Forces of colonialism shaped modernism's initial vision, but leading postcolonial writers are reshaping its contemporary expression" (ibid.).

⁴ Jenkins also notes that Brathwaite's sister, Mary Morgan, described tidealectics as "a way of interpreting [Caribbean life] and history as sea-change" (quoted in Jenkins 2004, p. 188).

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
 Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
 in that great vault. The sea. The sea
 has locked them up. (Walcott 1986, p. 364; Coppola 2013, p. 75)

Walcott locates the beginnings of history in the sea, where history is locked up but where it also breaks apart and merges into new forms and sounds. Through its vastness and tidal processes, the sea comes to signify memory. Working from Walcott and Brathwaite, as signaled by the two epigraphs to *Poetics of Relation*—"Sea is History" and "The unity is sub-marine", Édouard Glissant figures the sea as a "womb abyss", where memory of the past settles in fragments like "alluvium", signaling the fertile ground of the unknown (Glissant 2010, p. 7). Further, for Glissant, both the experience of the ocean on the Middle Passage and the very depths of sea represent an abyss. He imagines loss and trauma as the decomposition of "balls and chains gone green" at the bottom of the sea, "underwater signposts" that mark the drowned and "fugitive memories" of those thrown overboard (pp. 6, 7).⁵ These poets understand the sea not only as an abyss where the history of the people and place called "Caribbean" begins, but also as an innovating source that opens the future through emergent forms, not through reproduction and continuity. They put their figurative faith in the sea to purify the ruined culture, often by "picking away" the ruins and effecting a transformation into something new.

Mindful of this long conversation, M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 book of poetry *Zong!* explores the figure of the sea to challenge both the male-centered tradition outlined above and the historical record surrounding transatlantic slavery.⁶ Like Sycorax, black women's voices and experiences have been erased from these archives.⁷ The poem mourns the massacre of 150 Africans who were thrown overboard into the Atlantic in 1781 so that owners of the slave ship *Zong* could collect insurance money on lost "cargo" (Philip 2008, p. 189).⁸ It proceeds through a poetics of "decontamination", as Philip puts it, by which it imagines Glissant's drowned and "fugitive memories" of those on board the *Zong*. Those memories emphasize the experiences of black women, offering a strategic and revisionary response to male writers in the Caribbean. *Zong!* portrays the sea as a material geography: as the sea breaks matter apart and then pieces it back together in new configurations, so the poem breaks apart language and received history and reconfigures them, thereby decontaminating them, allowing other perspectives and experiences to be expressed. The poem focuses its investigation of the sea as an agent of decontamination on the case of the *Zong* massacre and the *Gregson v. Gilbert* maritime insurance case that arose in the massacre's wake, splintering the judicial report of the case in its formal staging of the archive's aesthetic potential to issue an anti-narrative against this account.⁹ Though the *Gregson v.*

⁵ Elizabeth DeLoughrey's essay "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity" (DeLoughrey 2010) reads Glissant's "balls and chains gone green" as making legible Atlantic modernity's "dissolution of wasted lives" (p. 703).

⁶ Philip's challenge to both colonial language and male-centered canonical formations joins her to a genealogy of black feminist poets that includes Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, and Audre Lorde, who have theorized gender as key to understanding the Caribbean (Neumann and Rupp 2016). For a comparative reading of Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip's work, see Myriam Moïse's article "'Ain't I a Woman?' Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip. Re-Membering and Healing the Black Female Body" (Moïse 2018).

⁷ Philip's revisionary response may extend to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, of which she asks, "what of the Black Woman?" (Philip 1997, p. 165). Sycorax "is present only by her absence" (p. 166).

⁸ In *The Zong*, James Walvin notes that the historic record shows discrepancies in the exact number of people killed: "One report suggested a total of 150 Africans had been drowned. James Kelsall [the ship's first mate] thought that 142 Africans had perished, but the legal hearings in London later accepted a figure of 122 murdered, in addition to the ten who had jumped to their deaths" (Walvin 2011, p. 98). Walvin's own research suggests that number was 134. I follow Philip in using the figure of 150, because that is what is given in the legal text from which she draws (Philip 2008, p. 189).

⁹ A large body of criticism has considered *Zong!*, focusing at once on the problem of writing histories of enslavement with the language and logic of the enslavers and the poem's experiments with form to deal with that problem. Most have argued that the poem seeks a form for "not telling", responding to Philip's notes to the poem that announce the story of the *Zong* massacre as "a story that can only be told by not telling" (Philip 2008, p. 191). Kate Eichhorn (2010) locates this dynamic in Philip's use of constraints, arguing that the use of constraints is not merely about extending established innovative writing practices but rather allows for Philip's central aim of "telling a story that cannot be told". Sarah Dowling (2011) too notes that

Gilbert account may seem resistant to revision, *Zong!* deploys disjunctive formal practices to disorder this found text, going beyond an aesthetics of fragmentation to one of decontamination, breaking the archive of enslavement's hold on this story. Thus, *Zong!* responds to historical, material, and aesthetic geographies of the sea. While the poem proper reduces the legal text to the status of a fragment, the book as a whole grants the legal document a qualified restoration through a textual apparatus that allows it to exist whole again at the end of the book, ironically and unexpectedly shoring that now fragmentary text against ruin.¹⁰ Looking at the sea as an innovating and renewing source reveals how *Zong!* imagines the sea as a literal, formal, and thematic agent for the decontamination of language and traditional forms of history polluted by imperialism.¹¹ Throughout the poem, the sea is a site of decontamination through which *Zong!* stages its attempt to recover what has been unrecoverable.

Many scholars have emphasized how *Zong!*'s formal innovation proposes an anti-narrative revisionary archive that highlights the *Zong* massacre as "a story than cannot be told", confronting conventions of language and history. Philip herself situates the poem as an interrogation of colonial language and accepted history. Yet, few scholars have read *Zong!* as a feminist challenge to women's erasure from established canons and historical archives related to transatlantic slavery.¹² Further, although a small number of critics have remarked on the poem's engagement with the materiality of the sea, even fewer have investigated the poem's attention to marine materiality—let alone its focus on the sea's biological and chemical materiality—as a feminist provocation to both human exceptionalism and the racial boundaries of the human.

Postcolonial ecocritics attentive to materiality have tended to focus on the physical movement of the sea: its tides and currents. Yet, as Melody Jue comments, "the language of flow and fluidity is inadequate to describe what seawater actually does to things" (Jue 2014, p. 244). While Jue emphasizes seawater's transformational capacity, my argument attends to that same capacity in organisms that live in the sea. It considers biological and chemical processes in order to see how the sea asks us to rethink both "how human beings are formed by the ocean" and "how the ocean might be formed by human history" (DeLoughrey 2010, p. 707). Focusing on the movement of water, especially on the surface, overlooks the generative power of other important material aspects of the sea, namely, multispecies relations with fish and other beings that reside in the sea and the chemical processes of which they are a part. Elizabeth DeLoughrey maintains that "submersion may produce alternative knowledges and ontologies" (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 249). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo comments,

Thinking with marine life fosters complex mappings of agencies and interactions in which—for humans as well as for pelagic and benthic creatures—there is, ultimately, no firm divide between mind and matter, organism and environment, self and world. Submersing ourselves, descending rather than transcending, is essential lest our tendencies toward

Zong! is motivated by a historiographic problem, but she focuses on how Philip's poem attempts to write the non-person using innovative poetic forms and voices. Erin M. Fehksens argues that *Zong!* shows that the "epistemological crisis" of writing such a history requires a non-narrative epic mode of the catalogue.

¹⁰ In other words, due to the work the poem has done, the *Gregson v. Gilbert* archival document is no longer taken as a whole, stable account of the event but rather as one piece of the history that can be confronted in its entirety now that it has been decontaminated and recontextualized amid the other document(s) (*Zong!* itself) that the poem has put into the record.

¹¹ Kate Siklosi and Diana Leong both focus on the sea in their readings of *Zong!* Siklosi (2016) locates a resistant "submarine unity" in *Zong!*'s "submarine poetics" that contests the *Gregson v. Gilbert* account of history as "singularly authoritative" by fragmenting the language of the legal decision to release "a fugue of submerged voices, sounds, silences, and stories". Diana Leong positions the question of thirst at the center of *Zong!*, observing that the poem suggests "the manipulation of water is part of a long-standing strategy to police the human" (Leong 2016b, p. 799). Further, she comments that "*Zong!*... provides ecocritics with an opportunity to discover how the history of modern racial slavery and its afterlives is also the history of environmental politics and thought" (p. 800). Both highlight the centrality of the sea in *Zong!* and the conversations about history, memory, race, and the idea of the human that this focus makes possible. See also Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp's "Sea Passages: Cultural Flows in Caribbean Poetry" (Neumann and Rupp 2016) and Aaron Pinnix's "Sargassum in the Black Atlantic: Entanglement and the Abyss in Bearden, Walcott, and Philip" (Pinnix 2018), both in *Atlantic Studies*.

¹² Nicole Gervasio reads *Zong!* as a "radical feminist challenge to the erasure of women from most canonical formations and archival records surrounding atrocities like transatlantic slavery" through focusing on the character of Ruth (Gervasio 2019, p. 3).

Human exceptionalism prevent us from recognizing that... we dwell within and as part of a dynamic, intraactive, emergent, material world that demands new forms of ethical thought and practice. (Alaimo 2011, p. 283)

In what follows, I suggest that *Zong!* immerses readers in the materiality of the sea in order to call into question those tendencies toward human exceptionalism, thereby producing alternate ontologies including and extending beyond what DeLoughrey has theorized as “sea ontologies” (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 245).

If *Zong!* contests human exceptionalism by making visible the multispecies entanglements that constitute the living history of transoceanic slavery in the Caribbean, its contestation extends to the racial boundaries of the human, building on the work of black feminist theorists.¹³ This essay traces how the poem evokes the process by which black bodies, and black female bodies more specifically, are violently made into ungendered flesh, a process Hortense Spillers terms “pornotoping” (Spillers 1987, p. 67). *Zong!* relates the sexual violence that contradictorily reduces the captive body to “a thing”—flesh, thereby creating “a category of ‘otherness’”, whereby the captive body comes to embody sheer powerlessness that reverberates “through various centers of human and social meaning” (ibid.). Diana Leong has identified black female flesh as “the quintessentially productive site of modernity’s symbolic order, where the value and meaning of our conceptual categories are both challenged or renewed” (Leong 2016a, p. 22). Similarly, Philip’s poem locates black female flesh as the limit of the boundary between the human and the not-quite-human. *Zong!*’s exploration of the sea’s biological and chemical processes highlights black women’s becoming-flesh as a category of “otherness” outside the human.

1. “A Lively and Energetic Materiality”

This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

Zong! confronts the sea as a historical agent by exploring the materiality of the enslaved who were drowned there. This exploration manifests as sea creatures, bubbles, murmurs, and words that flow across the page as though pulled along by the tide: “sea fa/ns dance se a cre/atue res ride the b/ones” (p. 148). Oceanic objects and sounds populate the pages of *Zong!* in community with bones and broken memories. In this way, the poem depicts the sea “as a material space characterized by movement and continual reformation” rather than merely treating the ocean as a metaphor (Steinberg 2013, p. 156). *Zong!* considers this movement and continual reformation important to the story of slavery through its use of maritime images that evoke the vitality of the ocean through its nutrient cycle: “the process of organisms eating organisms” (Sharpe 2016, p. 40). Scholars including Erin M. Fehskens have read in *Zong!* a sublime encounter with the sea. In its vastness, the ocean is often the trope of the sublime (Lambert et al. 2006, p. 483). It has been read as a “space beyond representation” that evokes the fear of the unknown (ibid.). But *Zong!* registers another kind of encounter with the sea, one that focuses on the sea as a place where active processes fragment matter to produce new shapes and forms. As a physical geography, the sea breaks apart organic matter thrown into it. This organic matter circulates as nutrients to be taken up into new formations, such as the bodies of other creatures.

¹³ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2015) points out that appeals by some post-humanists and scholars of the new materialisms to move “beyond the human” can reintroduce Eurocentric transcendentalism as attempts to move beyond race, even though “blackness conditions and constitutes the very nonhuman disruption and/or displacement they invite” (pp. 215–16, emphasis in original). Bringing this insight to an investigation of blackness and matter, Leong adds that “one of the primary figures of the new materialisms—the material body—is defined by and through disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh that are linked to the global legacies of modern slavery” and argues against “against a misrecognition of black female flesh as a resource against the violence of hierarchical differences, rather than the site of their active production” (Leong 2016a, p. 6).

Zong! gives attention to the more-than-human world in its treatment of the sea, acknowledging that the sea is “something with a lively and energetic materiality of its own” (ibid., p. 482). The poem’s consideration of the “imaginative, aesthetic, and sensuous geographies of the sea” illustrates that “maritime worlds open up new experiential dimensions and new forms of representation” (p. 479). For example, four section titles point to the historical and material geographies of the Caribbean Sea in relation to slavery: bone, salt, wind, and iron. Bone relates to those thrown overboard for whom no bones can be exhumed in order “to return dignity to the dead” (Philip 2008, p. 201).¹⁴ It also suggests the ribs of a ship. Salt indicates the chemical makeup of the sea but also perhaps the sweat on the bodies on board as well as the sodium content of human blood, which Christina Sharpe notes may remain in the ocean for 260 million years (Sharpe 2016, p. 41). She imagines that the bodies of the drowned exist in the ocean today, because they would have been eaten by sharks, fish, and organisms and become part of the ocean’s nutrient cycle. Identifying (sea) salt as “the ‘bone’ of water” produced by dehydration, Diana Leong describes the jettisoning of enslaved people, given the salt in their bones, as “a salting or ‘boning’ of the seas”, thus making “salt also the medium for a kind of material memory that ensures that the slaves are not lost to the seas” though they have been lost at sea (Leong 2016b, pp. 812–13, emphasis in original). Salt inevitably suggests tears, of course, as well. Wind is necessary to move sailing ships. Finally, iron refers to the manacles used to hold enslaved people, irons “made of the same material as our fingers and hands” (Brathwaite 1994, p. 107). Thus, the iron section title may indicate the human body’s iron content, an element which endures in the ocean for just 500 years (Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute 2017). Elsewhere, *Zong!* invokes Ogun, Yoruba deity of iron and a figure of the iron revolution in West Africa, reflecting technologies of iron smelting tied to ritual and other cultural practices as well as the ironworking that “made the ships of Atlantic modernity possible” (DeLoughrey 2010, p. 710). A symbol of “terrible ambivalence”, Candice Goucher argues, associated with West African culture, enslavement, and resistance, iron is another vehicle for material memory (quoted ibid.).

2. Decontamination

Zong!’s exploration of the sea as an agent of transformation proceeds through a poetics of decontamination, with formal procedures derived from the liveliness of the sea itself. For Philip, decontamination is necessary for dealing with the logic inherited with English and other imperial languages. Decontamination—a formal procedure—disrupts imperial language by breaking it apart, dispersing it, and putting it into new configurations. Like Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison, and others, Philip seeks a linguistic and historical revolution to purify or decontaminate language so that it can be used anew to “reduce the gap between the experience and the expression of that experience” (Philip 2017).¹⁵ In a recent interview, she argues that imperial languages, such as English, Spanish, Dutch, and French, must be put through “a decontaminating process” in order to render them capable of expressing what she wants to express:

I begin from a position of complete distrust of language and do not believe that english (sic)—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A *decontaminating process* is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as english has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience. The only way I can then work with it is to fracture it, fragment it, dislocate it. And for me this is where

¹⁴ A fifth section title, *Èbọra*, meaning “underwater spirits” in Yoruba, signals a spiritual geography of the Caribbean (Philip 2008, p. 184).

¹⁵ For more on David Dabydeen and Lorna Goodison’s desire for the “cleansing and redemption” of language, refer to Jenkins’s *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression* (Jenkins 2004, p. 173). See, also, Grace Nichols’s poetry collection *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (Nichols 1987).

form becomes so very important, because part of the transformative and *decontaminating process* is also to find the appropriate form for what I'm saying. (ibid., emphasis added)

For Philip, “language represents a wound”, and *Zong!* submerges the wound in the form of a legal document, in a poetics that, I argue, means to decontaminate both language and history by actively decomposing it into constituent parts—words, letters, and sounds—and recomposing it into ruptured memories through which the past continues to haunt the present (ibid.). Philip breaks up the text as the sea breaks up matter, disperses it and reforms it into new things, including not only words (which produce new meanings), but also sounds and imagined memories that draw attention to the specificity of women's experiences of slavery.¹⁶ Once decontaminated, the language can then express Caribbean experiences and fugitive memories. Philip's urge to “fracture”, “fragment”, and “dislocate” language in order to decontaminate it results in the decomposition of the legal decision into sounds, letters, and words spread across the page, suggesting a form of rupture that, for Philip, characterizes the Caribbean and the abyss of loss associated with slavery: “The Caribbean is synonymous with rupture and break and hiatus and held breath. And death. And rebirth” (ibid.). While some might argue that decomposition is a passive process that occurs on its own, in actuality it involves multiple active processes by organisms in the sea that constitute new forms.

Thus, a poetics of decontamination can be understood as consisting of two parts that correspond to the materiality of the sea: decomposition and recomposition. Decomposition breaks apart the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, using it as a word store, and scatters it across the page, suggesting both physical decomposition and dispersal in water. Conjuring fluidity disrupts the gendered conflation between women and land, making room for fluid histories.¹⁷ In the first section of the book, the words and phrases in the legal text are broken up but remain decipherable. For example, “*Zong!* #1” fragments the words “water” and “good” into letters, phonemes, and syllables (see Figure 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

Figure 1. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 3).

The formal and thematic importance of the sea in decomposition becomes visible with this first poem, which emphasizes the significance of water and the sea to the collection as a whole and introduces the formal project of the poem with its decomposition of the words “water” and “good”, which mimics the material processes of the sea. The ship was surrounded by water, yet the central concern for those on board (and the justification for the murders) was lack of drinking water.¹⁸ Via decomposition, the speaker's words degenerate into regressive infant-like speech with “waa” and

¹⁶ Laurie Lambert shows that Philip “produces new and unexpected meanings” through fragmenting and reordering the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal decision (Lambert 2016, p. 122).

¹⁷ While the sea undoes notions of gender, gendered notions of the sea have always been unstable (Helmreich 2017; DeLoughrey 2009). The female body has been conflated with land, rootedness, stability, and stasis; however, gendered conflations of men with mobility invoke “feminized flows, fluidity, and circulation”, conjuring the female borderless body and in-betweenness (much as the sea is viewed as an in-between space) (DeLoughrey 2009, p. 5; Neumann and Rupp 2016).

¹⁸ The disintegrating language points to the difficulty of speaking from an experience of profound trauma compounded by the refusal to speak as a result of that experience. The initial “w w w” evokes the stuttering attempt to begin telling what

“goo”. The fracturing of the word “water” into individual letters suggests a stammering confrontation (“w w w”) with the vast expanse of ocean. In other words, decomposition of language allows the poem to explore other experiences and memories associated with the event beyond those conveyed in the legal report, working against the marginalization of female historical experience. It does so by evoking the breakup and dispersal of organic matter underwater.

Philip takes up the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report as one of the few documents related to the massacre extant in the archive of enslavement. The report recounts the massacre and the insurance claim that instigated the legal case: After serious navigational errors that extended an eight-week journey by ten weeks were compounded by leaking water casks, the crew of the *Zong* threw 150 abducted Africans overboard (Walvin 2011, pp. 88, 92).¹⁹ When they finally arrived in Jamaica, the owners of the ship submitted an insurance claim seeking to recoup the costs of their lost “property”, because the Africans were “thrown alive into the sea” instead of dying of natural causes. In the report, the ship owner’s lawyers claim that the issue “was a throwing overboard of goods” and could not constitute murder (Philip 2008, p. 211). Leong cites Ian Baucom to underscore how both the law and modern finance, via acts of insurance and speculation, rely on the violent erasure of black bodies “that is not only condoned but *anticipated*” (Leong 2016a, pp. 802–4, emphasis in original). Further, the legal text refers to all those thrown overboard as “negroes” or “negro slaves”, effacing gender (Philip 2008, pp. 210–11). Yet, a letter from abolitionist Granville Sharp suggests that women and children may have been disproportionately thrown overboard due to their lower sale value compared with men, at least before the trade was abolished: “& how many of the Slaves so thrown overboard at most were not Women & Children & Infants which would have been of no great value & what comparative value individually in proportion to a Prime Man Slave” (quoted in Gervasio 2019, p. 11). Responding to this letter, Philip writes in her notes to the poem, “*women’s voices surfacing in the text—which attempts to neutralize everything[,] suddenly references to menstruation and childbirth and rape—in contrast with the larger Caribbean text as it’s articulated at present*” (Philip 2008, p. 201, emphasis in original). The poem’s many references to blood and “bleeding memories” and the memory-work it depicts challenge the erasure of black female bodies (Nichols 1987, p. 5).

Zong!’s poetics of decontamination fractures the legal text to signal the break of the Middle Passage. In doing this, Philip both fragments the legal language (and its logic) and represents slavery’s rupture of history. She then disperses that language in the “sea” of the page to render it newly expressive of the experiences of the enslaved in order to “exaqua” the submerged histories of the incident (Philip 2008, p. 201). As Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp argue, “Philip retrieves an embodied, resonant, material memory: a memory of bones, cries, and wails of the Middle Passage” through “multiple references to material traces of the sea—salt, wind, the movement of water, the seabed as a liquid grave” (Neumann and Rupp 2016, p. 483). Taking the sea as a creative principle, decomposition produces a form for Philip to express the wound of language and of history, a wound Philip represents with memories that coalesce through recomposition, the second stage of decontamination.

Continual Reformation

Like the reconstitution of matter in the sea through nutrient cycles and energy flows, a process Philip E. Steinberg refers to as “continual reformation”, recomposition in *Zong!* builds up fresh yet ruptured forms from the decomposed parts of the legal report. Like continual reformation in the

“cannot be told”. At the same time, it registers difficulty and asserts the refusal of naming the thing that brought such terror: water. Fred Moten refers to the transatlantic slave trade as the “long history of water terror that stretches from the Gold Coast to the Leeward Islands, from Birmingham to Birmingham” (Moten 2017, p. 159). Christina Sharpe argues that, in the trauma of this moment, “[l]anguage disintegrates” (Sharpe 2016, p. 69). For her, this evokes the inability to speak because the mouth is utterly dry from thirst: “Language has deserted the tongue that is thirsty” (ibid.)

¹⁹ Walvin reports that the ship had taken ten weeks to reach the Caribbean, and then, once in sight of Jamaica, the crew made a serious navigational error: they mistook Jamaica for Cape Tiburon on St. Domingue, an enemy island, and steered away from it (Walvin 2011, pp. 88, 92).

sea, *Zong!*'s poetics involves creating new forms from the decomposed legal text in order to express what was inexpressible in the received language. In addition to breaking apart the phrases and words of the legal text, Philip's composition process indicates a process of continual decomposition and recomposition to produce new verbal formations:

Thus, every word of the twenty-six numbered poems (and the six unnumbered poems labeled "Dicta") in the first section of *Zong!*, called "Os" (Latin for "bone"), can be found in the *Gregson* decision. After working with (and working over) the legal discourse in this highly constrained manner, Philip has written the remaining four sections—"Sal," "Ventus," "Ratio," and "Ferrum" (Latin for "salt," "wind," "reason," and "iron")—with a word store composed of the words of the decision as well as any words to be found within each of those words (each word's imperfect anagram, that is). (Shockley 2011, pp. 807–8)

Philip does not simply break apart the legal decision into individual words used to compose the poems in *Zong!*, but she also creates new words from the letters within the legal decision's words. This composition process reflects the sea's capacity for continual reformation. To effect decontamination, Philip applies this capacity to language in the process, revealing both multispecies entanglements and the becoming-flesh of black female bodies through sexual violence.

Recomposition activates memory: *Zong!* seeks a form and language that can express the experience of becoming flesh by allowing the drowned to haunt the text. *Zong!* produces new formations that imagine the drowned and fugitive memories, stories, sounds, quiet, images, and languages of those on board the ship. These new formations are able to express the rupture Philip identifies as central to the Caribbean. Further, they allow the poem to convey what the contaminated imperial language cannot. What emerges at times in Philip's poem is a language for those who were trafficked, especially the memories of enslaved women. *Zong!* gives rise to new forms for imagining the experiences that the archive ignores and obscures. It offers glimpses of the story that the legal document fails to express. In doing so, the poem emphasizes how "black women's fleshly existence remains a structural vulnerability to violence, a condition that is also a 'grammar'—an unconscious system of rules—that marks black women as the 'zero degree of social conceptualization'" (Leong 2016a, p. 22).

Philip re-forms the pieces of the legal text to create a rich soundscape with visual effects that concretize the sea's materialities as useful resources for decontamination. In this example from the section titled "Sal", "she" refers to a woman held captive on the *Zong* (see Figure 2):

The words fracture out of English into phonemes—the diphthong "o" and the unvoiced fricative "s"—and then recombine into the Latin word "os". As the bones of "os" fall down the page, the o's rise like bubbles of air. The sounds "oh" and "es" become the letters "o" and "s" that also graphically suggest the shape of an angelfish or butterflyfish, the rightmost o, o, and s forming its pointed snout. Whereas *Une Tempête* reconstitutes the drowned as coral and pearls—hard substances that are precious, *Zong!* visually reconstitutes its drowned words in the form of a fish. The fish also contains the letter s, o, s repeated three times, indicating the Morse code "SOS"—an appeal for help used by ships at sea.²⁰

Moreover, the space between words and letters resists containment, opening up breathing room. This breathing room both aspirates the dead, allowing them to speak, and suggests underwater spirits,

²⁰ Here, the poem may gesture to Amiri Baraka's "SOS":

Calling black people
 Calling all black people, man woman child
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
 you, calling all black people
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come
 on in. (Baraka 1971, p. 181)

Èbora, that can breathe underwater.²¹ In addition to the “o” air bubbles, such visual breathing space floats around words and individual letters. The poem increases its breathfulness with repetition of the diphthong “oh” and the unvoiced fricative “s” sounds that produce what Christina Sharpe has called “audible breath” (Sharpe 2016, p. 109). Readers are meant to feel the puff of air that follows their pronouncing of the “oh” or in the slow exhale of the “s”. This white space of decomposition and recomposition breaks the words of the legal text into breath, the breath denied to those drowned in the sea.

Philip’s recomposition gives rise to decontaminated language in a form akin to Brathwaite’s “nation language”, language that can express Caribbean experiences. For Brathwaite, English is the language of a colonial education, of the official, and of the planter. The poems he learned in school explain snow, but he seeks a language that can describe the experience of a hurricane, for example. He defines nation language as “the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and laborers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors” (Brathwaite 1984, pp. 5–6). Characterized as “submerged” and emergent, nation language bears the traces of ancestral languages, including Asian, Amerindian, and African languages, and constantly transforms itself into new forms.²² Though it may include English words, its rhythms, timbre, and syntax are markedly not English. Brathwaite argues that nation language began to surface in mainstream Caribbean poetry when it broke the pentameter: “The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?” (p. 10, emphasis in original).

a crime she
died es es es
oh oh oh es es oh
es s o
s s o
s o s
os
os
bone
us us os
save us os
salve & save
our souls tone

Figure 2. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 63).

The urgent appeal in Baraka’s “SOS”, a poem that calls “all black people” in, echoes *Zong!’s* own plea: “save us”.

²¹ Some Afrofuturistic works imagine new beings who are the descendants of drowned Africans and who have created their own communities on the floor of the ocean. See, for example, clipping.’s “The Deep” (Sub Pop 2017).

²² Brathwaite explains that “imported languages” such as the languages of “Ashanti, Congo, Yoruba, all that mighty coast of western Africa” had “to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples—the Spaniards, the English, the French, the Dutch—insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages. So there was a submergence of this imported language. Its status became one of inferiority” (Brathwaite 1984, p. 7).

Notably, nation language breaks down one form (the pentameter) through its own form, a move Brathwaite explicitly attributes to Eliot's influence (pp. 17, 30).²³

Indeed, as words, shapes, and sounds recompose in *Zong!*, the enslaved's voices rupture the text as nation language. These ruptures tell of—"dem cam fo mi in/de field me run/run"—and describe the enslavers actions—"sit dem/seh dem eat beef dem/have beer dem lav a/lav a" (Philip 2008, pp. 104–5).²⁴ They also share aspects of Yoruban spirituality: "ba ba am beg you/do ebo fo mi", which asks a father "baba" to offer a sacrifice, "ebo", for the speaker (p. 105). Further, an enslaved man asserts his personhood/humanity when called and treated like a dog: "good dog he pats it me/I be man me man" (p. 109). When these fragments of nation language first appear, they are in italics, but as the poem progresses, they appear in roman type, which indicates that the process of breaking through the legal text is becoming a new norm. The poem uses nation language to express the experience of those who were kidnapped and forced to migrate on the Middle Passage across the sea.

Nation language, in turn, allows *Zong!* to pull black women's memories from the decomposed legal text. These memories include the moment of capture, as above. Early in "Sal" and across the remaining sections, the poem repeats "she falls falling", referring to a memory of a woman falling into the sea from the ship, one of many repetitions in the poem that evoke ocean waves. This woman often appears in reference to "a rose", which further compares her with Africa, as in the line "she f alls falling/found a rose fou/nd Africa" (p. 63).²⁵ The memories also illuminate black women's experiences at the hands of the captain and crew on board slave ships during the Middle Passage, particularly continual instances of sexual violence that highlight how "race is constituted by a repeated sadistic white pleasure in black female suffering" (Nash 2014, p. 52). *Zong!* relates some of these experiences through the point of the view of the crew. The white male speaker details how he wins sexual access to a particular enslaved woman in a poker game for "forty days nights" and how "she bend s/over the pain" (Philip 2008, pp. 106–7). The poem refers to the sexual assault of enslaved women throughout and often in the same breath as the speaker addresses the woman to whom he writes, the "Women Who Wait" per the Manifesto appearing in the book's textual apparatus: "dear/ruth dear dear ruth I won her was/wont to bed her bet/ten then forty/guineas first an/ace/of spaces the deuce it was that/got me her forty days nights" (ibid.). For Philip, focusing on violence against black women's bodies is vital to remembering the realities of the Middle Passage. Like rupture, women's experiences are paramount to the story of the Caribbean, and Philip's reading of the Caribbean is gendered for this reason: "Hold the image of the woman's body—the Black woman's body—as central to all that is happening in the Caribbean. Because when we think of the Caribbean we have to think of cut—as in wound—and cunt into which Columbus, emissary of the Old World, would penetrate on behalf of his master" (Philip 2017). In this gendered reading of the Caribbean and the history of colonization, Philip links the rape of the Caribbean, a colonial metaphor for the extraction and exploitation of its resources and people, to the rape of black women.

Emphasizing black women's experiences, *Zong!* takes a revisionary approach to male-authored writing from the Caribbean. It responds to Brathwaite's use of feminine symbolic language in figuring Barbados as Mother in *Mother Poem* and Walcott's "mer [as] both mother and sea" in *Omeros* (Walcott 1990, p. 231). More pointedly, *Zong!*'s revisionary response offers a "contradistinction to male-authored literary versions" of the *Zong* massacre, such as David Dabydeen's ekphrastic "Turner",

²³ Brathwaite continues, "What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here [Claude McKay, George Campbell, John Figueroa, Derek Walcott] have been influenced by him, although they eventually went on to become part of their own environmental expression" (Brathwaite 1984, pp. 30–31). He further claims that it was Eliot's actual voice heard on recordings that drove this shift toward breaking the pentameter. Notably, T. S. Eliot is the only European influence on his poetry that Brathwaite will acknowledge (Pollard 2004, p. 2; Jenkins 2004, p. 95).

²⁴ Per the glossary that appears at the end of *Zong!*, "lava lava" is West African patois for "talk" (Philip 2008, p. 184).

²⁵ (*Zong!*)'s use of "rose" to refer to an enslaved African woman recalls Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" in which "That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest/of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins; that there was one they called The Guinea Rose" (Hayden 1985, p. 50).

a poem “steeped in maternal imagery” that fails to consider women’s experiences (Jenkins 2004, pp. 127, 191).²⁶ In contrast, in *Zong!*, *Gregson v. Gilbert* is decomposed and recomposed into stories that give prominence to women’s experiences of sexual assault. These imagined memories also show the agency of black women. One white male speaker, in a letter home, tells of putting a string ring on the finger of an enslaved woman whom he had raped, as though they were engaged. The black woman throws the string he has tied on her finger overboard and waves her hand to show that she has replaced it with a red string “for *san go* she says/and dives... smiles/and dives ruth pray for me” (Philip 2008, p. 118). The syllables “*san go*” refer to Sango, an Orisha, a god of thunder and lightning and anger who is associated with the color red (Shujaa and Shujaa 2015). The woman angrily rejects the crew member’s fantasy of engagement and its assumption of consensual sex. Then, she commits suicide, diving overboard, with a smile, in an act of resistance. Citing Adrienne Davis, Nicole Gervasio comments that “history has all too frequently elided the possibility that enslaved women could have been ‘gender activists operating independently of feminisms’s official white foremothers or, even more radically, as their predecessors in recognizing and resisting gender subordination’” (Gervasio 2019, p. 3). *Zong!* challenges such elisions through a poetics of decontamination.

Moreover, in *Zong!*, these imagined but fugitive memories become entangled with representations of historical and material geographies of the sea. That is, the poem juxtaposes representations of black women’s flesh with imagined historical texts that could very well be part of the archive of enslavement. In the disruptive underwater environment, the book imagines the crews’ letters home floating amid sexual activity and fish life, as in this example from “Ferrum” (see Figure 3):

ye ab ye ye i ro de the ma
 re to me et you th at da
 y on the da le fi sh sup a
 fin ger her e a le
 g there ma ke the ir ho
 me in bone o racle bones ah wo o

Figure 3. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 140).

Here, the poem envisions a crew member’s letter home—“I rode the mare to meet you that day on the dale”—interrupted by “fish sup a finger here a leg there make their home in bone” (ibid.). Fish have begun to eat the drowned thrown overboard, and the black female flesh is literally decomposed into parts—finger, leg, and bone—which becomes a home for the fish. The dispersal of the fragmented words on the page also allows “a finger here” to collide with “finger her”, producing conflation between beloveds and victims, acts of love and sexual violence—conflation that appears throughout the book.²⁷ More to the point, “fish sup a finger here/finger her” aptly conveys the contradiction between the captive body’s “simultaneous thingness and sensuality” (Weheliye 2014). Violently revealed as flesh, black women stand outside the proper “mode of being Human” (Wynter 2003, p. 263).²⁸ As the book progresses, the stories, speakers, and species become more entangled, with the text switching more rapidly among speakers, as if memory were supplanting the historical record through interruptions that come in the voices of the enslaved. Speaking back to Eliot’s reconstituted whole and to the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text’s historical authority, the poem’s decontaminated history produces something incoherent and uncertain, partial and abyssal, springing from memory and loss.

²⁶ For a more extensive comparative reading of Dabydeen’s “Turner” and Philip’s *Zong!* refer to Ellen Howley’s essay “The Sea and Memory: Poetic Reconsiderations of the Zong Massacre” in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Howley 2019).

²⁷ For a brief analysis of “the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence” in the archive of enslavement, see Hartman (2008) “Venus”, pp. 5–6.

²⁸ Wynter’s category of “Man” is emblematic of the proper “mode of being Human” (p. 260). In Leong’s reading of *Zong!*, she explains that “mechanisms of ‘Man’ have concentrated on establishing black populations as inferior” (Leong 2016b, p. 807). In other words, “to be ‘Man’ means to be non-black” (ibid.).

Through decomposition of the legal document, *Zong!* also evokes the sonic aspects of the marine world marked by quiet rather than silence.²⁹ Not only the memories, but also the quiet of the enslaved break through the record. In *Zong!*, quiet is an expressive sonic disturbance that does not aim to fill the gaps from missing stories so much as to underline them.³⁰ The poem's quiet dwells at the limit of meaning both to refuse the historical record's violent abstraction of slavery and to undermine the purposes of conventional language. Expanding what can be said, this sonic quality arises by way of formal innovation: the spacing of the words and letters on the page that inserts breath into the poem. In *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, Anthony Reed argues that black experimental writing expands what can be thought and said through form (Reed 2014, p. 18). Reading *Zong!*, he proposes that Philip practices "broken witness", which is not "giving voice" but "voicing the silence" (p. 28). Reed's choice of the word "voicing" suggests that the blankness of the white space in *Zong!* is not silent. Again, the poem's breathing space is quiet rather than silent. It is a vibration, hum, or pulse that exceeds words and the expressiveness associated with language to offer another form of expression, a faint "black noise" through which Philip rethinks the past (see Figure 4):

n de vi ta bread of li
fe fo r bo nes to e bon
e he el b one l eg bo
ne hi p bo ne ha nd b

Figure 4. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 137).

The space between the words evokes a pulse that undulates between syllables and letters, a vibration that interrupts the words and letters of "toe bone heel bone leg bone hip bone hand b[one]". Indeed, Philip's oral performances of *Zong!* exhibit the expressiveness of this sonic element through pauses, breaths, and the lengthening of letters into soft moans and murmurs (BeguilingAcronym 2010). The decomposition of a word like "water", along with the repetition of individual letters, as in "*Zong!* #1", creates this sense of the sound persisting and echoing underwater, as though the sounds of the drowned continue to echo underwater: "w w w gg d d d" (3). Philip's poetics of decontamination both helps the hum to persist and invites a practice that allows for hearing it. Philip supports this reading of quiet in *Zong!* when she considers "the idea of sound never ceasing within water" and wonders "whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater" in "Notanda" (p. 203).³¹ Sensing these sounds memorializes those whose stories were left out of the Gregson decision.

²⁹ This brief discussion of quiet is in conversation with Kevin Everod Quashie's theory of black quiet. He understands quiet as "a quality or a sensibility of being, as a manner of expression" of the interior, or the inner life (Quashie 2009, p. 333). As such, quiet offers a frame for understanding black culture in a "richer, fuller, more complicated [way] than a discourse of resistance can paint" (p. 339). In so doing, it "honors the contemplative quality that is also characteristic of black culture" (ibid.) In contrast with silence, which "implies something that is suppressed or repressed", quiet, he argues, is "presence" and "can encompass and represent wild motion" (p. 334).

³⁰ A distinguished scholarship explores the poem's formal effects in relation to the gaps and silences in the archive of enslavement, arguing that the poem seeks to tell the story of the *Zong* massacre while highlighting the missing voices from the archive. See, for example, Jenny Sharpe's "The Archive and Affective Memory in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" (Sharpe 2014) and Evie Shockley's "Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage" (Shockley 2011). In particular, Manuela Coppola (2013) explores how the poem "engages history rather than merely representing it" through its use of gaps and silences that "explode" language complicit in oppression and that question traditional representations of memory (pp. 67, 72).

³¹ In a brief reading of *Zong!* in *Black and Blur*, Moten registers Philip's echoing "phonic remains" of "the shipped" as a quiet that is "barely audible, given only in distortion" but ongoing: "Her cryptanalytic immersion in the exhausted, mute, mutating language of animate cargo muffled by socially dead captains marks and extends this persistence" of sound in water (Moten 2017, pp. 160–1).

3. Shoals

In order to understand *Zong!*, we must see how it depicts the sea as a material space characterized by movement, multispecies relations, and continual reformation, not merely on the surface but below the surface as well. Engaging with the biochemical, physical, historical, and imaginative geographies of the sea, the poem enables a reading practice by which these new sonic and imaginative formations might be imagined as shoals. In her book *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King identifies black thought, study, and aesthetics as shoals that “disrupt the time and space reflected by Western disciplinary formations and their seminal texts” (King 2019, pp. 1–2). Shoals, she explains, are oceanic formations, such as coral beds, rock formations, and sandbars, “that cause one to pause before proceeding” and “create a bar or barrier that is difficult to pass”: “Materially, it is a site where movement as usual cannot proceed” (pp. 2–3). Shoals are also large groups of fish swimming together. In addition to these meanings, “shoal” is “used in the form of a verb to describe how a ship or vessel slows down to navigate a rocky or rough seabed” (p. 3). I want to repurpose King’s use of “shoal” to apply it to the products of continual reformation that emerge from *Zong!*’s decontaminating process. I argue that the new forms produced through this process—the bits of nation language, glimpses of black women’s experiences, and the entanglements within multispecies assemblages—might be thought of as shoals. These imagined memories and sonic seascapes *shoal* our usual reading of the legal text.

Reading *Zong!* in this way also enables us to encounter the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report anew, newly able to cope with its legacy. Such an argument helps to account for the reprinting of the entire 500-word *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report at the end of Philip’s book. While Fehskens argues that this full reproduction of the legal decision represents the “open-ended yet rational presumptuousness of the Law” (Fehskens 2012, p. 422), I read the restoration of the original text differently, applying Hartman’s notion of inheritance in her discussion of enslaver Thomas Thistlewood’s meticulously kept diary: “what is more difficult [than ‘recovering enslaved lives from the annihilating force’ of Thistlewood’s descriptions] is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling into the pages of his journals” (Hartman 2008, p. 6). Thistlewood daily detailed graphic accounts of physical and sexual violence against the enslaved, the latter of which he recorded in simple Latin abbreviations: “a.m. About eleven o’clock, *Cum* Ellin, an Ebo, by the morass side, *Sup. Terr.* toward the little plantain walk” (Hall 1999, p. 29), meaning he raped Ellin on the ground (*Sup. Terr.*). Hartman signals that we inherit this violent history along with the difficulty of telling the stories of those who lived through such violence using the languages in which it was recorded. Further, Hartman charges that narrating such a history is essential to understanding how the afterlife of slavery licenses violence in the present: “narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of the present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of an ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and gratuitous acts of violence” (Hartman 2008, p. 4). Her point is that efforts to rewrite the past involve rewriting the aftermath of the past on the present. Philip takes up this mantle by allowing the legal document to exist whole again at the end of the book, because one legacy of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text is the violence it sanctions in the present. But, through the decontaminating process staged in the poem that precedes the legal text in the book, *Zong!* invites a radically transformed encounter with this text. The poem shoals our reading of the reconstituted *Gregson v. Gilbert* text via decontaminated formations. We might even say that this last concluding fragment of *Zong!* “shoals” us against ruin by allowing us to confront it word for word, acknowledging it at once as inheritance and as a provocation.

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