

“the absolute / of water”

The Submarine Poetic

of M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*

What marks the spot of subaquatic death?

—M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

The unity is submarine

breathing air, our problem is how to study the fragments/whole.

—Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time”

Bajan poet and critic Kamau Brathwaite situates the surface fragmentation of the Caribbean islands as a matter of scope and perspective: from the surface of the ocean the islands appear separate, yet underwater they form a network of connected submarine mountain ranges. Brathwaite’s observation can also be taken into historical context. His reference to a “submarine unity” bifurcates the history of the transatlantic slave trade into two archival sites: that of the ocean’s surface, and that of its depths. Indeed, the Atlantic catalogues a historical power imbalance between the imperial ships crossing its surface and those overwritten human histories that lie below—the submerged narratives of those whose lives were lost to the project of imperial profit. These underwater narratives form a “submarine unity” that lies fragmented and dispersed beneath the surface of the water, linking lives that were lost in the passage in a submerged community.

Furthermore, by invoking the “submarine unity” of the ocean depths, Brathwaite calls for a literary engagement with Caribbean history: the forward slash between “fragments/whole” proposes a reading and writing process that neither privileges the fragment nor the whole, but the networks of underlying unity between them. M. NourbeSe Philip’s 2008 long poem *Zong!* takes up this call to explore the submarine unity of the Middle Passage by staging a confrontation on the level of language between the

logic of the ocean's surface and its poetic depths. Written over the course of seven years, Philip's constraint-based text uses the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, a 1783 insurance settlement case resulting from the Zong slave ship massacre, about when the owners of the ship threw a large number of slaves overboard in order to claim insurance money for the loss of "property." This decision of the court—the only public document in existence that testifies to the Zong massacre—cloaks the violence and injustice of the event in the logic of expense and proprietary loss. Equal parts elegy and revisionary archive, Philip's text dismembers the logic-locked rhetoric of the law into a fragmented word store that recovers and mourns its overwritten voices. As the language and logic of the legal decision break down and fragment over the course of the text, a fugue of submerged voices, sounds, silences, and stories surfaces in a visceral language of memory and affect. *Zong!* thus explores the crisis of the Zong slave ship by means of what I call a *submarine poetic*, wherein the maritime law of the ocean's surface is submerged within the deep of its own language. Under Philip's hand, the legal document is dis-membered and then re-membered in its fragments; in so doing, Philip interrupts the perceived wholeness of this surface account of history as singularly authoritative, revealing the voices of a resistant submarine unity beneath the waves of the surface's forgetting.

Indeed, the elusive history of the ocean, with its unfixed flows that seem to resist time, make it an apt metaphor through which to imagine new configurations of unity and community within the Caribbean historical imaginary and present consciousness. In critical discourse, Caribbean identity has been expressed through aquatic metaphors of fluidity in order to emphasize its alterity as the other, "long drowned" history of the Atlantic (DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters" 703).¹ Brathwaite's contributions to the subject are many; aside from the "submarine unity," his related concept of "tidalectics"—which I discuss in detail in the following section—describes an independent historiographic methodology rooted in a system of tidal logic. For Antonio Benítez-Rojo, the cultural milieu of the Caribbean is "not terrestrial but aquatic," since it is the "realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity" (11). Arguably, the most discussed aquatic metaphor of the ocean as an intervening space in modernity is Paul Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic." In his canonical work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Gilroy situates the ocean as a fertile space of historical and continuing signification. He analyzes the sea as a material and symbolic space that not only marks the atrocities of the slave trade but also

serves as a dynamic, “rhizomorphic” space of transcultural exchange (28). Such aquatic metaphors attempt to articulate the ocean within Caribbean consciousness as a site of both connection and disconnection, a space governed by flows and folds as opposed to a linear telos. My conception of Philip’s submarine poetic extends these critical discussions of the Atlantic by calling attention to the ways in which diasporic poets have rendered the submerged history of the Middle Passage as a reckoning with and within the flows of language.

Rendered poetically, the submarine poetic articulates the fragmented unity of Caribbean consciousness by means of poetic interruptions, which disrupt order and sense within language and within normative reading practices. Brathwaite’s effective “fragment/whole” imagery of the island archipelago, which appears fragmented on the surface but unified beneath the waves, is mirrored through Philip’s experimental poetic: on the page, the word store seems to exist in a vacuum of fragments separated from sense and syntax, unable to be captured by recognizable systems of order. However, as Brathwaite insists, the ocean’s underlying unity is a matter of perspective and gaze, and this manifests in *Zong!* as an uneasy reading practice wherein language is not culminative in meaning, but cumulative and reiterative. The reader must read the fragments according to the submarine logic of the text, which is unseated from the surety of left-to-right linear semantic control; re-membering the fragments produces a unified collectivity that is not readily perceivable on the text’s surface. The very “unreadability” of the text pays homage to the incomprehensible trauma and loss of the Zong massacre and of the slave trade generally; however, from the swash and backwash of Philip’s poetic logic, from the submerged fragments of narrative untelling, a unified community of voices emerges in *Zong!’s* watery scape.

Philip practiced law for seven years, so as both a lawyer and a poet, she possesses a keen attentiveness to the weight of words and the economy of meanings generated by them. She insists that both law and poetry share a common concern for the “precision of expression,” yet they work towards an oppositional telos. As she explains, “It must be told—that is the law—the compulsion; it can’t be told—that is poetry: it can only be told through its untelling” (“Re: Zong Query,” personal communication n. pag.). *Zong!’s* submarine poetic engages these competing logics of the law and of poetry. The text pits the compulsive rationality of the maritime law of the ocean’s surface, which depends upon order and balanced ledgers for profit, against

the fragmented submarine poetic of its depths, which seeks to untell this silencing logic and retrieve the voices of humanity lost within it. As Philip reveals in her “Notanda” to the text, the underlying reasoning or *ratio* of the legal decision in the *Zong!* insurance case is “that the law supercedes [*sic*] being, that being is not a constant in time, but can be changed by the law” (*Zong!* 200). Philip thus interrogates the law, “its order, which hides disorder; its logic hiding the illogic” (197). Such order is bent towards the preservation of profit and property; by bringing the concealed disorder of the language to the fore, she articulates a community of fragmented yet united human voices brought forth against their silencing.

As I will demonstrate in the sections to follow, the submarine poetic of *Zong!* thus imposes its own *ratio* to respond to and contest the law’s commoditization of being. As Philip insists, “where the law attempts to extinguish be-ing, as happened for 400 years as part of the European project, be-ing trumps the law every time” (200). Her use of experimental poetry provides the anti-logic that underlies this responsive *ratio*. Philip insists that her project must “avoid imposing meaning” and she does so through poetry that can “disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself” (199). Within the alchemy of poetic experimentation, with its recombinations, anagrammatic reformulations, and disjointed syntax, the submarine unity of these lost lives can be repatriated, recovered, rehumanized. Philip’s subjection of the surface language and logic of the law to its prolific poetic depths signals her reckoning with the problematic of historiography writ large: her experimentations provide a way of poetically recovering the living silences within the lacunae of historical language, while critiquing the narrative strategies of erasure and “forgetting” upon which colonial projects rely.

Submarine Tidalectics and the Law’s Untelling

Water—the source of suffering, deprivation, and death—becomes the only salve through which we can imagine and remember the lives of those lost in the passage. Within *Zong!*, the law’s “absolute / of rule” is confronted by this “absolute / of water” (39). It is therefore fitting that *Zong!* opens with an extended phonetic meditation on the word “water” as its first act of decentring the authority and logic of legal discourse. The opening poem of the collection submerses the reader in the decentring waves of the text’s watery matrix (see Figure 1).

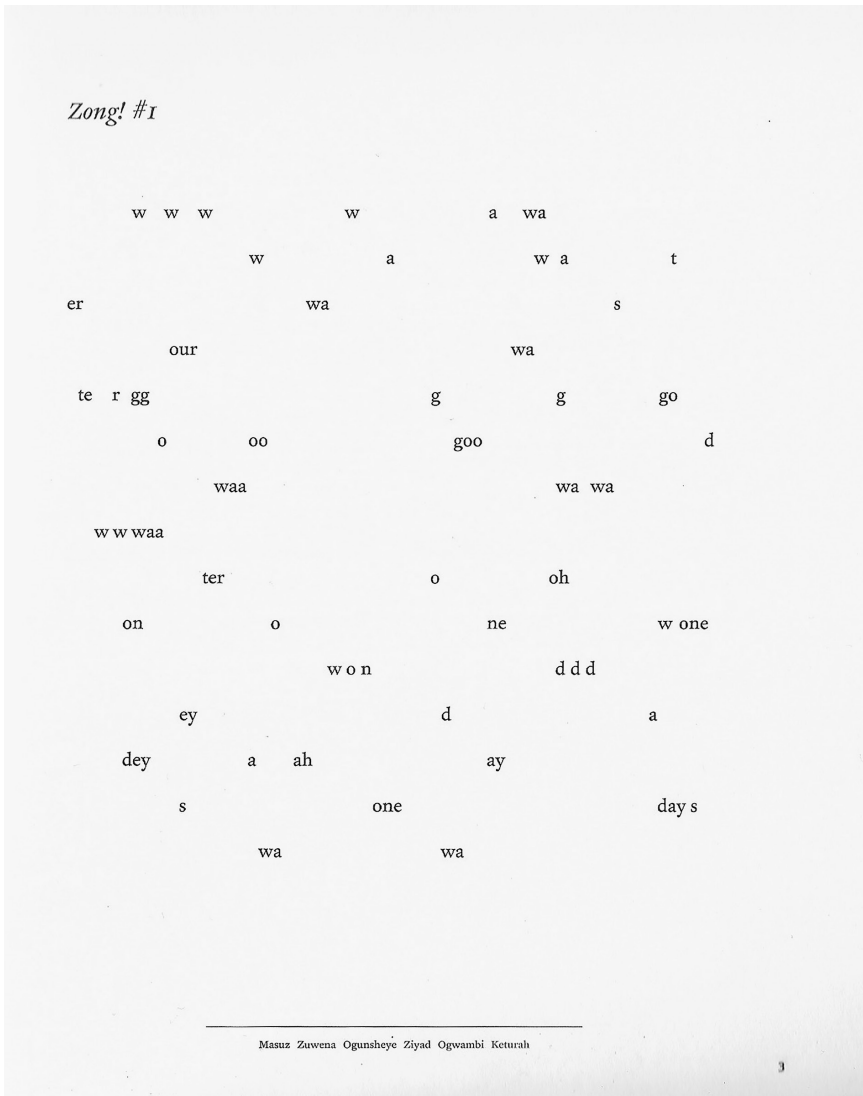


Figure 1
 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! #1* 3. Reproduced with permission from the author and publisher.

“Zong! #1” confronts the reader with the materiality of water—here, the word is de-composed and dispersed as flotsam and jetsam on the page, transforming the language of the law document into a stuttering, saturated pool of sounds. Not only does this watery confrontation signal the text’s reckoning with

language—its dismemberment of it—but it also signifies the text's reckoning with humanity and with loss: the text appears breathless to start, gurgling, and struggling for breath under the weight of water. In live performances of the text, Philip brings the sputtering and drowning imposed by the spatial dispersals of the submarine poetic to life, albeit uneasily.² She capitalizes on the persistent gaps and fragments as a vocal score; when she reads the first passage above, for example, the deferral of the word "water" becomes an unhurried meditation on the slave's torturous crossing of the Atlantic. The sonority of the sputtering fragmentation is painfully and mournfully delayed, with the letters and phonemes enunciated in long, drawn-out pauses. This prolonged meditation brings the body of the slave to the fore in a ceremony of communal witnessing: the fragments form prayers invoking the watery grave of the ocean's floor and the spirit of the lost souls who remain there.

Philip's text harnesses the flows and dispersals of water as a poetic model for confronting the authoritative "rule" of the law and its prolific underbelly of elemental language. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, "the ocean's perpetual movement is radically decentering; it resists attempts to fix a locus of history" (*Routes* 21). Since Philip's submarine poetic decentres the authority and cohesion of the law's language by subjecting it to the open drift of poetic permutation, I have taken a cue from Brathwaite's concept of *tidalectics* in order to situate Philip's poetic praxis as a resistant form of interruption. Tidalectics delineates a specifically local, Caribbean spatial imaginary; it defines an aquatic principle of fluidity and cyclic movement between land and sea that Brathwaite attributes to the Caribbean identity. Brathwaite describes "tidalectics" as "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion rather than linear" (qtd. in Mackey 14). By imparting an intervening logic of circulation and shift, tidalectics contests the racist ideological dialectics of colonial European consciousness—of which Hegel's master/slave dialectic is representative. Here, Brathwaite follows in the footsteps of writers and thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, who have interrogated the language and praxis of the dialectic toward the end of anti-colonial struggle. The term "tidalectics" revises the Hegelian teleological dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—which privileges linearity and forward progression—with a sense of circulatory, tidal logic represented by the back-and-forth movement of the sea's waves. As a "natural tidal procedure within a continuum rather than towards a fixed 'objective solution'" (Brathwaite "Caribbean Culture" 49), it serves as a fluid heuristic that undermines the linearity and fixity of teleological Western historiography.

Both Brathwaite's concept of tidalectics and Philip's submerged poetic are revisionary praxes; through poetic experimentations within the ordering and logic of language, Philip's poetic enhances the practice of tidalectics by means of resistant literary reversioning. According to British Columbian poet and critic Wayde Compton,

tidalectics describes a way of seeing history as a palimpsest, where generations overlap generations, and eras wash over eras like a tide on a stretch of beach. . . . Repetition . . . informs black ontologies more than does the Europeanist drive for perpetual innovation, with its concomitant disavowals of the past. In a European framework, the past is something to be gotten over, something to be improved upon; in tidalectics, we do not *improve* upon the past, but are ourselves *versions* of the past. (17; emphasis original)

For Philip, this versioning process is key, since her project “re-versions” the language and logic of the law—a key script that undergirds the European colonial project—with poetic interventions. It is in the text's versioning of the past through poetic fragmentation, repetition, and recombination of the original law document that the agency of those silenced by the forgetting of dominant historiography is recovered.

Philip's work, with its dispersals and fugues of language, visually bears resemblance to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. However, as she explains in her “Notanda” to *Zong!*, she sees her project as radically different in intention: the strategies of the text, she explains, “signpost a multifaceted critique of the European project” (*Zong!* 197). Whereas L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry can be considered political in its dispersals of hegemonic ordering in language, Philip links this practice in her work to historical erasure under the colonial project. Her dispersal of the archive of law in the text's fluid cartography signifies a tidalectic engagement with the past by recirculating the language of the law in order to reversion it anew. By subjecting the knowledge of the law to the uncertain tides of poetic variation, she dismantles this linguistic system of power and oppression meant to de-subjectify black bodies and keep them “in place” in the historical gaze.

The emergent gaps of the text thus signify an epistemological break between the “authoritative” legal decision and the tidalectic untelling of it. We see these competing logics forming a contrapuntal rhythm in “Zong! #II,” wherein Philip constructs a poetic ledger—as she does repeatedly throughout the first section of the text—in an attempt to balance objective truth versus the “supposition” of truth imposed by the will of the law (see Figure 2). The workings of tidalectics in Philip's work are manifest most clearly in her recasting of the capitalist ledger of the slave ship as a poetic

Zong! #II

suppose the law

is

not

does

not

would

not

be

not

suppose the law not

— a crime

suppose the law a loss

suppose the law

suppose

Nomble Falope Bisuga Nuru Chimwala Sala

20

Figure 2

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! #II* 20. Reproduced with permission from the author and publisher.

tool of untelling. Philip imports the ledger from the maritime logbooks of slave ship owners and appropriates its form as poetic discourse in order to better its instruction—her poetic form mimics the form of the ledger, but undoes its reliance on balanced closure, instead leaving the ledgers open to gaping silences. In these ledgers, the language of law and of poetry compete as two oppositional systems of knowledge production.

Here, in “Zong! #II,” the ledger forms an argumentative structure to interrogate the “supposition” of law. The repeated refrain of “suppose the law” is interrupted on the page by the counter-refrain of “not” that is repeated down the left side of the ledger, and the words “is,” “does,” “would,” and “be” along the right side. This repeated call-and-response interrogation of the law forms a back-and-forth rhythm on the page. In this way, the ledger emphasizes the oppositional logic of tidalectics in terms of narrative and knowledge; whereas the language of the law purports to know and tell what “is not, does not, would not, be not,” the tidalectic poetic seeks a different (un)telling. As Erin Fehskens has rightly pointed out, the ledgers “remain blatantly unbalanced and unbalanceable” (413). Philip subjects the capitalist ledger to its dreaded nemesis: the gap, the imbalance. Her poetic wounds the sure logic of the ledger by refusing its desired equivalence in debits and credits, thereby making it account for the historical losses it overlooks. As she notes in her “Notanda,” the ship’s manifest would have listed the slaves as taxonomic property: “‘negroe man’ [*sic*], ‘negroe woman,’ or more frequently, ‘ditto man,’ ‘ditto woman’” (194). Philip’s poetic disorients the structure of the ledger so that its gaps between and across are starkly manifest; this unbalancing act points to the irrevocable loss in this capitalist archiving of human lives as unspecified commodities.

Philip’s counterpointed repetition of “suppose the law” becomes a refrain that guides the methodology of the entire text. As a response to the presumed authority of the law, an alternative voice of logic emerges to question the law’s very foundations and intervene with waves of unauthorized interruptions. In “Zong! #19” this tidalectic logic continues:

There is no evidence
in the against of winds
the consequence of currents
or
the apprehension of rains
the certain of value
or
the value in certain (34)

As in “Zong! #11,” language is encountered in a contrapuntal, back-and-forth structure. However, rather than simply interrogating the language of the law with interlocutory words and phrases, here the language of law is altered in form and in semantic output. The poem’s ledger narrates the confrontation between tidalectic logic and the teleological language of the law that determines value. For instance, the line “the certain of value” is subject to recirculation by the oppositional “or,” resulting in the alternative semantic arrangement of the line as “the value in certain.” The ledger’s method lies in its repetition: its structure imposes a call and response rhythm wherein two voices fight for authority yet respond to one another in a manner that mirrors the rising and falling of the sea tide upon the shore. Like the waves of the tide, the words of the passage fold back onto themselves, into that which came before, adding to the newly created surge of meaning. In this way, the language of the legal document is made to rewrite itself, to untell its own singular logic with plural possibilities. These unauthorized interruptions of the poetic voice rework the original text in ways that refuse the relegation of colonial violence to the past; in so doing, Philip’s text reconfigures historical time and space in the present of the writing and reading process. The text’s refusal of closure and ordered balance serves as a consistent reminder that the past is, in fact, not *passed*—that “this is / not was” (7).

Exaqua: Unmanageable Salvage

While the structure of the slave ship ledger attempts to control the bodies of the slaves as capital, Philip’s tidalectic undoing of the ledger’s balance renders it unmanageable. Throughout her poetic oeuvre, Philip has harnessed such “unmanageability” as her resistant poetic praxis. In reference to her previous work *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), Philip has stated that she “set out to be unmanageable” by means of “making the poem unreadable” (“Managing” 296, 298). She sees management as a tactic of the colonial project, defining it as “putting the unmanageable into preordained places within society so they can be more easily controlled” (295). Thus, she renders her texts “unreadable” in order to better register the experience of slaves as “managed peoples” (298). In *Zong!*, Philip continues this resistant tactic of unmanageability by means of her experimentations that interrupt normative reading practices with poetic unreadability. Her poetic techniques of dis-membering and re-membering go beyond poetic experimentation to become critiques of colonial order, “so that the ordering of grammar, the ordering that is the impulse of empire, is subverted” (*Zong!* 205). The

expanse of the text's matrix. However fleeting, these glimpses of sense become sedimented over time; the reader who struggles to make sense of the fragments endures a process not unlike the sedimentation of silt built up from the recursive ocean waves. With each re-remembering within the text, traces of meaning layer together to reflect the submarine unity that is sedimented below, across, and between the linguistic salvage.

Philip's submarine poetic refuses the surface order of communication; just as she refuses the ledger the order upon which it relies, so too she refuses the reader/witness the comfort of linguistic cohesion. Such refusal marks the story of the *Zong!* as one that "cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling" (*Zong!* 207). This uneasy transport of meaning is intensified in the oral performance of these latter sections of *Zong!*. The staccato gaps and absences of syntactic connections make passages illegible not only for the eye, but for the mouth that desires cohesion and sense in the telling. During a performance in Toronto in October 2015, Philip passed around fragments extracted from the text for the participants to read throughout the performance.³ The text's refusal of a comfortable and cohesive reading practice was intensified by the initial discomfort of the participants as they struggled at first to adapt to this new form of speaking language with absented logical connections. In the audibly nervous sputtering of the participants, the uneasy crossing of the slaves on the *Zong!* was reckoned with in the present moment of its untelling.

While the difficult reading practice of Philip's text and her performance conveys the sheer *senselessness* of loss in the *Zong!* tragedy, it also reveals the ongoing tension in the text between the attempted articulation of memory and its suppressed silence by master narratives. Despite the disjointed syntax of these latter sections in the text, there nonetheless exists a submerged poetic of sense beneath the chasms of non-meaning (or resistant meaning). For instance, Philip's broken utterance, "this is me / ant for y / our eyes" (160), seems to directly address the reader left adrift in the difficult reading process. If the line breaks are held to their articulated pauses (as is evident by Philip's sustained refusal of linear enjambment throughout these sections), an individual "me" surfaces with a collective "our" to offer a minute consolation of communal witnessing across the voids of the text. Since "eyes" is a homophone of "Is," the reading/witnessing process becomes a collective practice that unites individuals together.

Whereas the earlier sections of the text retain a loose left-to-right reading pattern, in the latter sections the reader is left unanchored in their reading, often unsure as to whether the sequence is vertical or horizontal, or both:

cradles our longing the ship
our lust our
loss all
that is old in this
new age
the time the
date of (81)

Whereas familiar Western reading practices often proceed dialectically—following from one premise or word to the next linearly, leading to a semantic synthesis of the two—here the seascape of the page initiates a tidalectic reading practice. There are a myriad of ways in which the above passage can be read and interpreted out of the text’s fluid grammar. It could be read left to right across the surface of the page as “the ship cradles our longing our lust . . .”; or the eye of the reader could follow the downward flow of the text, reading “the ship cradles our loss that is new . . .” as the first configuration of the fragments. Alternatively, the reader’s eye could register the collage all at once, picking words like random objects out of the matrix. The text’s spatial arrangement defies authorial authority and linear logic in that the reader decides reading order and the priority of word arrangements. The networked interpretation of these fragments is circulatory and requires a consistently mobile reading practice across multiple directions of reading.

While writing the text, Philip notes that the words in the poems “need a great deal of space around them . . . as if they need to breathe” (*Zong!* 194). As such, the broken words and phrases in the later sections of the text are situated on the page such that no word comes directly below or above another, as seen in the passages quoted above. Whereas the law compels the narrative to cohesion and order, the poetic voice untells it. The fluid spaces surrounding the words give agency to the salvaged language by forming complex and unpredictable semantic linkages and networks. These collages of undoing form “unmanageable” spaces of meaning, aleatoric paths along which the reader chooses how to encounter the text, how to *confront and rupture* its underwater history.

Zong!’s submarine poetic thus initiates a process of linguistic cumulation, but it refuses the closure of culmination—as in the waves of the ocean, words, letters, and phonemes in the text cumulate momentarily in collage, only to be dispersed back into the word store to become such flotsam and jetsam for another burgeoning wave cycle. As Philip writes in her “Notanda,”

“As the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always” (*Zong!* 201). The prolific and ongoing archive created by the text demonstrates that memory itself is tidal, as the field of the page suggests. The reader must work to place the fragments together, to re-member the text and then subsequently interpret the newly re-membered words. Creating unpredictable collages in the spaces of the text opens passageways of chance encounters with meaning; in this way, both poet and reader are able to decide how they will re-member the event in the present immediacy of the poem. The shifting nature of memory and meaning in the text disrupts the fixity of the traditional archive that is housed in a permanent site and remains unchanged, unaffected by time and by environment.

Reflecting on the writing of *Zong!*, Philip argues that the text “is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present” (*Zong!* 201). Accordingly, Philip has suggested that one of the driving forces behind the text is her felt need “to defend the dead” (200), whose humanity was overwritten as chattel. The disjunctive fugue of the text, then, becomes a pragmatic method of “heal[ing] the original text of its fugal amnesia” (204). By manipulating its very language, she overwrites the source document’s rhetoric of loss and property with spectral, yet human, voices. Therein, she constructs an alternative archive of the historical event not only on the level of tidalectic language and logic, but also by exhuming ghosts: while the names of the victims are absent from the original case document, Philip restores humanity to these victims by naming them along the bottom of each page in the first sections of her work, referring to them as “ghostly footnotes floating below the text” (200). This footnoting acts as a gravestone to remember the dead, to mourn their erasure by honouring their undeniable presence. The names appear separate with no punctuation between each; as such, they form a chain of unbroken utterance, an undercurrent that persists throughout the opening sections of the poem. Significantly, Philip submerges these names on the page—they are separated from the rest of the poetic text by a thin line, suggesting their sustained vigilance and presence just below the surface of the text’s undoing. Conversely, this line emphasizes the fact that the names, histories, and humanity of these individuals are “unmanageable” by the law—indeed, they exist *outside* of the law, since Philip broke her poetic constraint by creating the names outside of the legal word store. The break here lends a beauty and dignity to the names lost in the ledgers of colonial capital; they cannot be

site of the overthrowing as a particular setting in time, a specific site of memory. By means of the slaves' song, "singing a praise song that is africa under water," Philip reimagines the slaves reckoning their passage in the sea with the memory of their homeland and its cultural traditions. Indeed, the ocean is the only repository to which Philip can turn to mark the histories and memories of those lost. We don't have the bones; indeed, we can never recover them. However, her poetic attempts to pause time at the moment of the overthrowing in order to meditate on this loss and lend it the space-time reverence it is due. By invoking the night, the surface of the water, and the underwater space, the text halts the passage of the ship and holds it in a moment of time—in so doing, the text ceremonializes the submarine as a haunting site of remembering in the present.

Although Philip acknowledges the impossibility of retrieving bones from the ocean floor, she nonetheless views her aesthetic interventions upon the law as an attempt to "re-transform" these bones "miraculously, back into human" ("Notanda" 196). The collages of the text register the mayhem and disorientation of the tragedy, but they also reveal submerged human spaces of love and community. The voices of the families, friends, and lovers that speak to each other surface throughout the text to form a powerful, collective untelling. Moreover, they serve to illustrate the "submarine unity" that Brathwaite identifies within the relationship of the fragment to the whole. Celebrations, incantations, and laments undulate within the seascape in many different languages, and in the section "Ferrum," a family emerges (see Figure 3).

In this passage, from the tides of the text's undoing, the Yoruba names "wale," "sade," and "ade" surface in the fragmented store. Given the wealth of permutations in the text, these names are relatively concealed and are "hard to find" in the text's expanse. However, it is this very concealedness that lends these stories of love their autonomy: by remaining "hidden," they remain "unmanageable" by any totalizing gaze. Towards the end of this section, the collaged words form a broken narrative of Wale, the African male, in the process of composing a letter to his wife: "*me me wa / le you wr / ite for m / e such an un / common man me i s / ay you write / e on pap / er i wri / te de / ear sade you b / e my queen e / ver me i mi / ss you and a / de al / l my lif / e*" (172; original typography). The following lines then describe Wale consuming the letter before being thrown overboard: "*i a / m do / ne he ta / ke s the pa / per e / ats it the / n he fa / ll s on his li / ps ... he fa / ll s to the we / ight & wa / it in w / ater*" (172). In an act of final resistance, while "fall[ing] to the weight & wait in water," Wale consumes his love letter to his

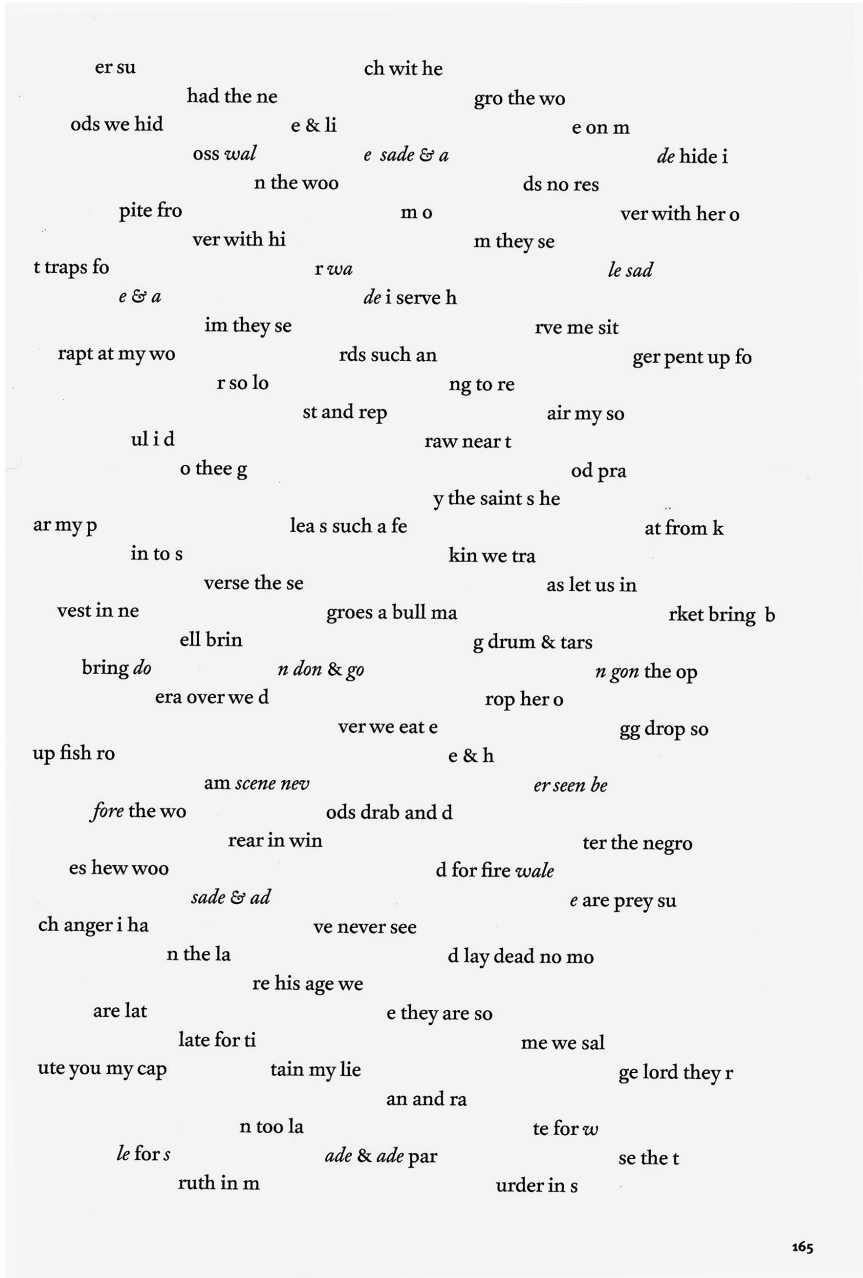


Figure 3

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* 165. Reproduced with permission from the author and publisher.

family before drowning; this concealed love will be carried with him to the depths of the ocean, where it cannot be touched by the violence of the law. Philip's inclusion not only of voices carried to the deep but also of the slaves' hidden documents and testimony illustrates the submarine archive as one that remains untouched, unknowable, and thereby unmanageable by the law at the surface. As Philip writes in *A Genealogy of Resistance*, "To love! is to resist" (29).

Indeed, below the surface of the law, these voices within the "weight & wait of water" construct a submerged archive out of the "unmanageable" testimonies scattered in the ship's wake. In her discussion of the uneven voices of personhood in *Zong!*, Sarah Dowling examines the voices that surface in the text—mainly the "dominant" English voice in the narrative and the demotic English voice of the slave—in the context of personhood. In her "Notanda" to the text, Philip identifies a "dominant" voice in the text as the voice of "someone who appears to be white, male, and European" (204). Dowling attributes this dominant voice to "the lyric 'I'" (47) that persists throughout the text, one to whom she associates clear personhood, for the voice is reflective and expresses thoughts, desires, and even remorse for the murders. Dowling then notes Philip's "little" use of demotic English as a counterpart to this English voice; she argues that when Philip uses the demotic, the voice is marked by a lack of interiority compared to the dominant "I" voice:

The voices in demotic English do not carry the same implication of interiority as the dominant voice's lyric 'I': they only narrate actions, never thoughts. Unlike the dominant voice, whose reflections and remorse characterize him as a lyric person, these demotic utterances stretch only just beyond the single words in other languages and still do not attain this normative form of personhood. (51-52)

In light of my discussion above, however, it is clear that the demotic voice expresses a clear interiority through familial connection as well as expressed wants, desires, pains, and losses. Moreover, the scattered, sparse presence of these affective human fragments submerged within the "dominant" voice of the text serves to further resist the singular authority of the English "word" metonymically expressed through the law. While one cannot necessarily fault Dowling for missing or overlooking these other narratives in the prolific expanse of the text, her oversight serves to prove my point: these voices are purposefully submerged within the text—they are hidden from "view," and it is this very concealedness that makes these persons unmanageable by any gaze. The bodies of overthrown slaves, as Édouard Glissant reminds us, "sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence" (67). From the depths of Philip's maritime poetic, these fragments of love emerge from within

the law itself, revealing the hidden yet omnipresent bonds of a dignified love within a language that dispossessed human subjects of their humanity.

Philip's epigraph outlines the major question at the heart of *Zong!*'s poetic labour: how to mark the spot of subaquatic death, in the face of a language that erases history and waves that diminish the evidence of bones. The submarine, then, becomes the site and ceremony of her poetic experimentation—it is through her dis-membering and re-membering of language, and through her saturation of the legal text with depths of linguistic possibility, that a means of marking the subaquatic death of the lost slaves is witnessed. Only the recursive currents of the ocean's tides bear witness to the ongoing inscription and erasure of histories, the passing of epochs and empires—the waves hold the best key to understanding these passages in the present. With the impossible task of bringing the actual bones to the surface of the ocean, Philip chooses instead to work within language—that great tomb of history—in order to lay the souls of the dead to rest. Philip's attempt to “exaqua” these submerged inventories of language brings these uneasy narratives and forgotten voices to the surface of our present consciousness. The dispersive currents and overlapping streams of *Zong!*'s submarine poetic produce a resistant hermeneutic of memory and experience that suggests that the voices and humanity of the slaves are not lost, but are submerged in a unity below the surface.

NOTES

- 1 The examples here are many. Aside from the works discussed herein, see also Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), Iain Chambers' *Mediterranean Crossings: the Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (2008), as well as the anthology *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (2004) edited by Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun.
- 2 Over the years, I have attended many of Philip's performances of *Zong!* in Toronto. They have taken place in a variety of locations and with different modes of improvisation between herself and the audience. For many performances, she also invites musicians to perform the text to enhance the sonorous score of *Zong!*'s soundscape.
- 3 This particular performance, entitled “Dead Reckoning,” took place at the *b current performance space* at Artscape Wychwood Barns in Toronto, Ontario, on October 8, 2015.

WORKS CITED

- Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. 2nd ed. Trans. James E. Maraniss. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Print.

- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms." *Missile and Capsule*. Ed. Jürgen Martini. Bremen: U of Bremen P, 1983. 9-54. Print.
- . "Caribbean Man in Space and Time." *Savacou* 11-12 (September 1975): 1-11. Print.
- Chambers, Iain. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Compton, Wayde, ed. *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2001. Print.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity." *PMLA* 125.3 (2010): 703-12. Print.
- . *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2007. Print.
- Dowling, Sarah. "Persons and Voices: Sounding Impossible Bodies in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" *Canadian Literature* 210-211 (2011): 43-58. Web. 3 Feb. 2016.
- Fehskens, Erin M. "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and the Catalogue." *Callaloo* 35.2 (2002): 407-24. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993. Print.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989. Print.
- . *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997. Print.
- Klein, Bernhard and Gesa Mackenthun, eds. *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite." *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*. Ed. Stewart Brown. Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales P, 1995. 13-32. Print.
- Philip, M. NourbeSe. *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: Mercury, 1997. Print.
- . "Managing the Unmanageable." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux, 1990. 295-300. Print.
- . "Re: *Zong!* Query." Personal communication. Email message to the author. 14 May 2015.
- . *Zong!* Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print.

