

***Zong!*: How to Un-tell the Story That Must Be Told¹**

Introduction

“*Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling”.¹ Thus concludes M. NourbeSe Philip’s essay that closes her book-length poem *Zong!*, published in 2008. In *Zong!*, the poet and essayist, born in Tobago in 1947 and living in Canada, challenges herself to un-tell the history of the massacre of the *Zong* ship: a story that cannot, but must be told. *Zong!* is divided into six parts composed of poems (“Os”, “Sal”, “Ventus”, “Ratio”, “Ferrum” and “Ebora”). The text includes a glossary of words that would have been heard aboard the ship, its imagined manifest, an essay titled “Notanda” where the poet describes and discusses the process of creating *Zong!*, and the complete transcription of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report, commonly known as the *Zong* case. Based on the words of what is the only surviving document that directly mentions what happened aboard the ship, *Zong!* presents itself as an attempt to find the untold story of the victims of the massacre through the legal text. Based on concepts such as violence² and massacre³, postmemory⁴, silence⁵, the violence of the language⁶ and nation language, I intend to explore how Philip represents the unspeakable violence of the massacre that happened on the *Zong* ship using the language in the case report (which is in itself a representation of the violent massacre), and how the language used by the poet functions as a form of counter violence, opening up space to enable the un-telling of the story that cannot yet must be told.⁷ Anchoring herself in a legal text that erases the humanity of the victims of the massacre, *Zong!* (2008) can be read, I believe, as a text that objects to the violence of the historical archive and defies its feigned objectivity. By doing so, Philip aims to honour the victims of the *Zong*, restoring their

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humanity from their forced legal objectification, lost in the inexplicable violence of slavery and its history.

Theoretical framework

My analysis and interpretation of *Zong!* is anchored in the concept of ‘un-telling’ that Philip herself suggests and introduces in “Notanda”, the essay that closes the book-length poem. This concept comes from Philip’s complicated relationship with the language in which the massacre happened and in which the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report was written. Apparently characterised by order and objectivity, this language is, in fact, disorderly, illogical and irrational. As such, Philip believes that it is only possible to share the story of the *Zong* victims by unmasking this language and exposing the disorder and irrationality it hides. This process will then lead to the ‘un-telling’ of the story of the victims of the *Zong* massacre, something which is only possible, as the poet tells us, through the fragmentation and mutilation of the text. The resulting poems are difficult to understand and require the reader’s full attention, implicating them in the ‘un-telling’ of this violent story.⁸

Because this is a violent event, I suggest using the concept of violence proposed by António de Sousa Ribeiro.⁹ Although violence is difficult to define, Ribeiro points out a few aspects which are relevant to my reading of the *Zong!* as the representation of the violence of a massacre and as a violent act against language. First, violence, according to Ribeiro, should be read in a transdisciplinary approach capable of including any specificities of the context in which violence happened.¹⁰ In this particular case, it is important to look at the events aboard the *Zong* through the concept of physical violence as well as institutional violence, a type of violence inflicted by institutions with the power to subordinate, structural violence (based on structures which rule ethnic, racial, cultural

and gender hierarchies, and which hinder the full development of a group) and cultural violence, present in concepts, in the language and in the symbolic systems that legitimise the use of power from a group on another.¹¹ This is particularly important given the text in which *Zong!* anchors itself, the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report, is an example of this latter kind of violence that mirrors the violence of slavery. As Saidiya Hartman explains, “[t]he archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power.”¹² In other words, the violence of the historical archive of slavery transforms people into mere objects to be disposed of or be exchanged for money, a kind of linguistic violence that persists today.

This concept of violence should be, in this context, used together with the concept of massacre by Roberto Vecchi.¹³ A concept that is difficult to define due to being an object without form and of infinite violence, a massacre presupposes, according to Vecchi, the exclusion, separation or isolation of a group by another which leads to the transformation of those who are excluded in a biological body bereft of a political body.¹⁴ Because it is difficult to define due to its characteristics, representing a massacre such as that which occurred aboard the *Zong* means that the way of telling this story must reflect its infinite and transformative violence. Philip knows this and, as such, she ‘un-tells’ the story of the *Zong*, fragmenting and destroying the words and sentences of the case report in an act that mirrors the shapeless and infinite violence that characterises a massacre. On the other hand, it is through this violent act of destruction that the poet attempts to recover the voices of the victims of the massacre, whose biological bodies were thrown to the water, returning their political bodies to them.

The representation of violence: from massacre to legal text

The massacre aboard the *Zong* ship took place in 1781, in the heyday of the Transatlantic slave trade, the basis of the economic system of the European colonial empires.¹⁵ The Transatlantic trade consisted in the transportation and commercial trade of material goods and enslaved people between three points in the Atlantic: Europe, West Africa, and the Americas. The stage of this route in which enslaved people were transported from West Africa to the American continent became known as the Middle Passage. From there they were then transported to their final destinations. This stage became, throughout history, a symbol of the fight against slavery due to the extreme violence and painful trauma that marked the lives of its victims. The Middle Passage represents a continuum between Africa and the Americas, between past and present, and is part of the contemporary Afro-American imagination, as Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Carl Pedersen argue in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*.¹⁶ As such, *Zong!*'s attempt to uncover the violence of this massacre and of the historical archive is part of the continuum between past and present that is the Middle Passage, as it symbolises the struggle to deal with the insurmountable violence of the past and its consequences in the present. Philip firmly locks herself in the words of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, an object with the power to transform human beings into powerless objects, and grapples with its violence by mirroring it, destroying the text to fragments and finding the voices of its victims in its silences.

The violence of the massacre

The events of the *Zong* took place in the Middle Passage. In 1781, the *Zong* ship, properly insured along with its "cargo", set sail to Jamaica. Aboard there were 470 imprisoned Africans, constituting the ship's "cargo". The journey, which should have taken about eight weeks, was delayed due to navigational errors caused by the inexperienced Captain Luke Collingwood. Such delay was significant: about 100 enslaved Africans died for lack of food and water, according to the case report. Confronted with the possibility of not

having enough water for the crew and the remaining slaves, Collingwood ordered his crew to throw about 150 slaves overboard.¹⁷ After arriving at their destination, the ship's owners (the Gregsons) reported their losses to the insurance company, which refused to compensate them. After all, as Ian Baucom explains, "this was not a murder case but an insurance case" about the loss of speculative value attributed to the drowned Africans.¹⁸ In short, the legal case was not about the loss of lives, but the loss of monetary value, turning the victims into disposable objects at the hands of the law. The insurer's refusal led to a trial: first, the jury decided in favour of the ship owners. However, the insurance company appealed, and the case was re-evaluated; after finding incongruencies between the witnesses' testimonies, a new trial was called. The account of these events is in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report, which contains the summary of the decision of the Supreme Court Justices in favour of a new trial.

This document is, as Philip highlights in "Notanda", the only publicly extant document that proves the existence and massacre of these 150 Africans.¹⁹ Throughout the text, the phrase "the overthrowing of the negroes" is repeated multiple times, and this is the only textual proof of the massacre in the document.²⁰ The phrase does not have any artifices of language that alter its meaning; it clearly states what happened to the victims of the massacre: they were thrown overboard. This is, as stated before, a massacre, a violent act that is distinguished for being pure violence.²¹ An act of violence, however, is perpetrated by subjects against other subjects (but, as mentioned above, in the eyes of those involved in the *Zong* case, its victims were not considered subjects, but objects, and thus could never have been victims of violence). The perpetrators of this massacre are identified in the case report as "the master and mariners", as well as its victims, who are identified as "the rest of the negroes".²² The identification of the perpetrators is followed by an interesting detail: the use of the passive voice through the past participle of the verb

‘to oblige’ (“the master and mariners (...) were obliged”). Such detail refers to an important part of the concept of a massacre: it does not presume guilt for the elimination of life.²³ In fact, using the passive voice, as opposed to using the active voice, implies the elimination of the responsibility of the crew for the act, leaving it to an unknown subject. In the case of the *Zong* massacre, this is justified by the lack of supplies, which would put the lives of the crew and the remaining enslaved people at risk.

This question is also present in the poems of the first section of *Zong!*, particularly in “Zong! #24”. The poem is composed of columns where the present tense of the verb ‘to be’ is highlighted, creating an equivalent relation between the different objects, people, and concepts relating to the massacre, which are in the case report since they are used by the Supreme Court Justices to justify the event (note that they do not call it a massacre). The first page ends with “the case/ is/ murder”, and the last word (“murder”) is slightly off centre in relation to the second column – the lyrical subject, that is, the speaker or “I” in the poem, in doing so, creates a new equivalence relation that does not exist in the original document, because the *Zong* case was not about murder, but about settling an insurance dispute. The case report says so: “[t]he argument drawn from the law respecting indictments for murder does not apply.”²⁴ By confronting the words in the case report, affirming the opposite (“the case/ is/ murder”), the poet exposes the cruelty of what this document hides: what happened aboard the *Zong* was, in fact, a massacre, a form of violent that, despite any kind of justification, cannot be justified.

Another characteristic of massacres is that they are based on the exclusion of bodies, on the separation of their biological, material bodies from their political ones.²⁵ Thus, the *Zong* massacre turns its victims into their material bodies, which are then turned into objects, whose value is abstract and subject to change, by the law. This is something featured in the case report: first, the enslaved Africans are separated from the crew and

identified as “negro slaves” or “negroes”, while the crew is identified by phrases such as “the master and mariners” or “the captain and crew”.²⁶ This is also an example of a different kind of violence: slavery and human trafficking. This is a kind of institutional violence, given that slavery and human trafficking was the basis of the economical system of European colonial empires, and therefore the massacre happens while not being considered as such.²⁷ The separation between the enslaved Africans and the crew aboard the *Zong* stems from this type of violence that also allows an extremely violent act to occur.

The dehumanisation of enslaved people

The central question of the *Zong* case was not, as mentioned, the massacre of 150 enslaved Africans, but the loss of the monetary value attributed to them and which the owners of the ship intended to recover.²⁸ In their eyes, this violent act was justifiable for the lack of supplies, which would endanger the lives of the crew and the surviving prisoners. As such, they were certain they would have the right to be compensated for this “necessary” loss. According to the law, this loss did not constitute a massacre, which meant that neither the captain nor the crew would be charged with murder – what was lost was the ship owners’ property. Therefore, the *Zong* case is an example of the kind of institutional violence that is slavery – a system based on the exchange of monetary value, in which a group of human beings is bereft of their humanity to be transformed into bodies whose value is abstract and speculative.²⁹ In other words, this system objectifies this group of human beings, effectively removing what makes them human and negating them their victimhood (which is why the *Zong* case was not a murder case), in a process that starts with legal jargon and with the violence that it perpetrates. According to Jean-Jacques Lecercle, the subjectification process happens in language and implies the imposition of a place for the subject in this language.³⁰ In the *Zong* case, what happened can be read as

the total elimination of the subjectivity of the enslaved and murdered Africans through the legal jargon, which sees them for their monetary value rather for their humanity. As Philip explains, the law erases any cultural, social and linguistic ties such that all that remains are the material bodies, mere objects to which monetary value is then attributed.³¹

The violence of the legal text is something that Philip discusses in “Notanda” and which is mirrored in her poems. For example, the poem “Zong! #11”, in “Os”, questions the authority of the law and the language which it imposes. It starts with the verse “suppose the law”, a phrase taken directly from *Gregson v. Gilbert*: “[s]uppose the law clear”.³² The word “clear” is not in this poem, however; this can be read as an invitation for the reader to imagine different possibilities for a law that, far from clear and fair, is based on the violent exclusion of human beings. This is highlighted by the repetition of “not” as it is interlinked with different verbs, symbolising a confrontation between poetry and historic archive (a legal text which erases any trace of subjectivity of the enslaved people aboard the *Zong*), in which poetry multiplies the possibilities of what the law could be and do. This idea is also present in the last verses, where the anaphora of the word “suppose” prevails, which suggests that, according to Laurie R. Lambert, the Atlantic slave trade is a never-ending cycle in which the subjectification of the enslaved would never be possible.³³ However, the anaphora is interrupted by the verse “– a crime”, whose separation from the rest of the verses beginning with “suppose” can be read as an attempt by the lyrical subject to challenge the authority of the law by stating that what happened on the *Zong* was a crime and not the loss of monetary value. With this interruption, the lyrical subject seems to be returning the subjectivity, lost in the legal text, to the victims of the massacre, as well as emphasising that what happened on the *Zong* was, in fact, a massacre.

In “Zong! #23” this loss of subjectivity is also reflected when two words are separated from the rest: “was” and “is”, two forms of the verb ‘to be’ which split the time of the poem into a before (“was”), and a now (“is”). As Sarah Dowling suggests, this separation reflects the work of the justices of the Supreme Court: based on their interpretation of what “was”, these men must make a decision on what it “is” (the facts and proof presented in court by both parties).³⁴ Furthermore, the three last verses, when read together, highlight the dehumanisation and objectification of the victims of the *Zong*. Their subjectivity is nothing more than mere possibility (“the might have in existed”), interrupted by their imprisonment and murder. The only way they could become subjects would be through language, but this is a process which will never be completed since, from a legal point of view, they are merely evidence that the justices of the Supreme Court will consider to make their decision: “the evidence in negroes”.³⁵

The legacy of slavery

The extreme violence of the *Zong* massacre, of the Middle Passage and of a language imposed by a law that institutionalises the trafficking of human beings as an economic system had repercussions which are still felt today in today’s societal structures. The trauma that resulted from slavery is transmitted from generation to generation, persisting in the lives of the descendants of its victims and shaping their identity and their relationship with society.³⁶ The transmission of this traumatic legacy is based on memory. Philip, in *Zong!*, uses memory to un-tell the story of the massacre, using the memory in the historic archive and the memory of the massacre as told to her by Setaey Adamu Boateng, a fictitious character created by the poet who represents the voice of the ancestors. There is nothing in the archives that allows Philip to tell the story of the victims of the *Zong*; there is only silence. Hartman, in “Venus in Two Acts” is also confronted by this and concludes that “[t]he irreparable violence of the Atlantic slave trade resides

precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered.”³⁷ Both authors, then, turn to their imagination to bridge the gap between past and present, the archive and its silences. In Philip’s case, she begins by imagining Setaey Adamu Boateng as the ancestor responsible for transmitting their memories to her, the poet. This character personifies the concept of “postmemory” suggested by Marianne Hirsch.³⁸ Although the author applies this concept to the descendants of Holocaust survivors, I believe it can also be applied to the context of the creation of *Zong!*, since it is about the relation between the personal, collective and cultural trauma of a generation and their descendants.³⁹ This traumatic past is accessed, according to the author, not through direct memories (since the descendants have not experienced the violence that the generation before them did) but through imagination based on stories and images.⁴⁰ In *Zong!*, Philip accesses the memories of the victims through her imagination, creating a character that represents their voices. Furthermore, poetry can be read as a way to access the traumatic past of the Middle Passage and of the *Zong* case, since it is a project of the imagination, in which the poet unearths the imagined memories of these events from the historical archive. It is, as Hartman argues, “[t]he task of writing the impossible”, of trying to access a past only accessible through the imagination.⁴¹

The story of the *Zong* leads Philip on a journey to destinations connected with the memory and trauma of the Middle Passage. In “Notanda”, the poet recounts a trip to Ghana, during which she visits a shrine near an old port from where slave ships would leave towards the Americas.⁴² There she talks with the elders responsible for the shrine, who tell her of the impossibility of being a descendant of the victims of the *Zong*. She confesses that, until that moment, she had not thought of a possible personal connection to them; later, she discusses this with her daughter, who tells her that, in fact, she could be a descendant of those aboard the *Zong* if there were children among the survivors.

Although Philip states that, after these conversations, she did not look for a possible connection to the survivors of the massacre, she admits that there could be, in fact, a genetic connection. It is this possibility that connects her with the story of the *Zong* and that leads her to rescue the voices of the victims to un-tell the story that must be told. A story whose legacy still shapes our society, and the kinds of structural violence that rule the social, ethnic, cultural, and gender hierarchies.⁴³ The legacy of colonisation, of the Atlantic slave trade and of slavery remains in the memory that is transmitted from the victims to their descendants, and in the language still used today.

Language as counter-violence

M. NourbeSe Philip uses the words from the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report and locks herself in this document to un-tell the story of the *Zong* massacre. Aware that the violence of the massacre is represented in this document and in its language, the poet destroys it in her attempt to find the silenced voices of the victims of the massacre. Writing about violence means, according to Lilian Munk Rösing, dealing with the violence inherent to language and Philip knows this.⁴⁴ Language is, in Lecercle's words, material, not only because of the physical process that produces sounds and speech, but also due to the nature of words.⁴⁵ As the author explains, words carry the violent emotions and desires that are born in the body of those who speak.⁴⁶ As such, language is violent, both in its materiality (the words that leave the body as sound) as in its immateriality (the effect of words on the listener). If language is violent, so is the representation of violence through language. In *Zong!*, by anchoring the language of her poems in the case report, Philip commits a violent act against the language of the report, fragmenting sentences and making collages from the words to form her poems. This act exposes the violence of the original text and the violence of the English language. At the same time, the fragmentation

of the case report allows the poet to rescue the voices silenced by this text and by history, destroying the legal language to create space for other voices to talk about the story of the *Zong*.

The violence of the English language

The *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report is written in English, the language of the coloniser which is imposed on the colonised and the slave.⁴⁷ This imposition is accomplished using violence which, according to Lecerle, is based on the structures of language and excludes a minority which does not speak it.⁴⁸ In the context of the Middle Passage and of the *Zong* events, the linguistic minority were the enslaved Africans, on whom an unknown language is imposed. The contact between this language and the mother tongues of the enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas, namely to the Caribbean, originates the concept outlined by Kamau Brathwaite of “nation language”, “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 labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors”.⁴⁹ This language, although similar to the English language in its lexicon, is otherwise different from English and, because of this, has an inferior status. The inferiority of the nation language is reflected, therefore, in the inferiority of those who speak it. In contrast, the English language, by exercising its power over nation language, perpetrates the kind of violence that, according to Ribeiro, is based on concepts, language, or symbols which legitimize the use of power by some over others.⁵⁰ Since English is the official language in the Caribbean, Africans who live there are forced to use a foreign language which expresses a way of life unknown to them and that portrays them in a negative light.⁵¹ Philip, as a poet, is aware of the brutal violence inherent to the language she uses and of the challenge that is to write about experiences foreign to the English language. In *Zong!*, this challenge leads her to lock herself in the words of the

case report to expose the brutality of the English language without erasing this document. Through the book-length poem, Philip fragments and destroys the words in the text but, in the end, the latter is reproduced in its original form. Although she tries to expose the cruelty of this document, in the end it remains intact. In the end, the violence of the legal text and, subsequently, the English language can never end. Despite her attempts to counteract it, Philip includes the text at the end to ensure that the readers of *Zong!* do not forget that English is a language that carries with it the violence of slavery.

The section “Sal” in *Zong!* exemplifies the relationship between the English language and nation language. The pages of “Sal” are full of loose words, some complete, others fragmented by white space. These words are from the case report and from a letter to “Dear Ruth”, possibly from the wife of a member of the crew.⁵² In “Sal”, the poet repeats the vocative “oh”, uses the first person “I” and words from several languages (namely, English, French, Latin, and Yoruba) to symbolise the multiplicity of voices aboard the *Zong*. Although the words and syllables are scattered throughout the pages, it is possible to identify a lyrical subject, who is recounting what happened on the ship: Captain Collingwood’s mistake that led to lack of water (“thirst and thirst”) and his decision to throw people overboard (“n negroes murder”), whose voices haunt the lyrical subject (“to raise/ the dead/ the died/ i hear”). Besides this violent episode, there is another violent act that happens against another woman in the poem, identified only by the words “she” or “my queen”.⁵³ The act being described is the rape of the woman who the lyrical subject calls “my queen”. She is also one of the victims of the massacre (“she/ falls/ falling”) whose voice is heard through the use of nation language (“*de men/ dem cam fo mi*”), interrupting the voice of the lyrical subject to tell her story, which ends in “a falling”.

⁵⁴ The inclusion of the representation of sexual violence and the voice of the enslaved

women highlights the existence of Black women aboard the *Zong* and the horrors they were subjected to for being women.

In this section, the violence of the English language is represented by the voice of the lyrical subject, who, as a crew member, is a white European man. It is a voice that is distinct from the other since it is the only one with subjectivity. According to Dowling, this “I” of the poem is the only voice among the others that reflects about what happened on the ship (“if only/ murder made us”)⁵⁵, while the rest (represented by the other languages in the poem) simply express action words or phrases (“*ifá*”, “*mort*”).⁵⁶ The use of several languages can be read as an attempt by the poet to expose the power and the violence of the English language: by fragmenting the letter to Ruth, the poet inserts words and phrases in different languages to interrupt what the lyrical subject is saying in English. This is, in fact, a violent act caused by the language used by the poet and which functions, at the same time, as a kind of resistance against the violence of the English language.

The destruction of *Gregson v. Gilbert*

Zong! is only possible due to the existence of the case report, since the words it contains leads the poet to destroy the text with the aim of, from its fragments, un-telling the story that must be told. This destructive act begins in the fragmentation of phrases and words of the historical archive, something which is necessary for the rescuing of the voices of the men, women and children who were victims of the massacre. As mentioned earlier, the case report recognises the existence of enslaved people in the ship; however, their existence was recognised only numerically – much like the history of slavery.⁵⁷ As Philip explains, the text is a violent tool that effectively eliminates the lives of the victims, seeing them as mere proof to be considered by the Supreme Court justices.⁵⁸ However, the poet sees in this an opportunity: by fragmenting the historical document and turning the

fragments into poems, the original text is transformed through the poems, which create space to fill the silence present in the former.⁵⁹

In “Notanda”, the poet describes her process of writing the poems in *Zong!* and the journey that she went on since reading about the story of the case. It is curious to note that, during the first stage of fragmenting the historical document, Philip is confronted with the impulse to make sense of the fragments. She quickly realises, however, the impossibility of the task, because, like the victims of the massacre, she will never understand what happened on the ship and, as such, will never find the order amid the chaos of the fragmentation of the case report.⁶⁰ Thus, she decides to keep the disorder created by the de(con)struction of the text. It is also relevant to discuss the way in which the poet describes this process: the passages transcribed from her journal are full of words of violent connotation, highlighting the violent act she is committing against and through language: “I murder”, “I mutilate”, “cut into pieces”, “castrating”, “suffocating”, “murdering”, “throwing”, “jettisoning”.⁶¹ Philip creates semantic chaos.⁶²

However, this chaos is indispensable for the creation of *Zong!*, because it is impossible to tell a story of such incomprehensible violence. Studying the book-length poem, the process of fragmentation of the case report undergoes several phases: the first section, “Os”, features single words and fragmented phrases from *Gregson v. Gilbert*. The following phase is characterised by the fragmentation of words from the text: in “Sal”, “Ventus”, “Ratio” and “Ferrum”, the poet scatters the words, syllables and letters taken from the archive and interlinks them with words and phrases from several languages. Finally, in “Ebora”, the phrases and words from the previous sections are dispersed in the pages and overlap each other, frequently making it impossible to read this section. This process of fragmentation of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text can be read not only as a violent act against the language in which it is written, but also as the

representation of the incomprehensibility of the massacre of the *Zong* ship. After all, the only way to tell this story is by un-telling it: the disorder in the *Zong!* poems is the vehicle through which the story is told. Through the fragments of the language of a historical document which silences and erases, the poet opens space for the voices of the victims of the *Zong* massacre to sing.

The silences that challenge the historical archive

The absolute destruction and reconstruction of the historical archive exposes the absences it features. After all, this document tells only part of the story of the *Zong*: the story told by the perpetrators of the massacre. In this text, the victims appear as numbers and, because of this, Philip will attempt to rescue the voices in the silences of the text, fragmenting it to do so. As Angela Naimou argues in *Salvage Work*, the historical archive of slavery is, on one hand, a record of the existence of enslaved people and, on the other, a record of the violence inflicted upon them.⁶³ This is because, according to the author, the historical archive works as a space of absences. In other words, the historical archive of slavery is, at the same time, the history of slavery and its erasure, since it excludes the voices of those who were its victims.⁶⁴

Silences are an intrinsic part of the historical archive, and they have a tense relationship with the words of the latter. Eni Pucinelli Orlandi argues that silence is not just a mere complement of language, that it has its own meaning.⁶⁵ Words create silence, according to the author, since what is said is accompanied by everything that was not said. This tension can be found in the historical archive: what is said in this text implies that something was not said and, consequently, was not recorded in the written language. However, since language is inseparable from silence, the unsaid is present in the absences of the text.

This is what happens in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case report: the story being told is about the legal dispute between the ship owners and the insurance company. The story that Philip wants to tell, the story of the victims of the massacre, is not in the words of the document, but in the silences they produce, continuing the process of objectification of its victims – they cannot speak, therefore they are not considered human. It is necessary, therefore, to fragment the text to access the silences produced by its words. It is through silence, Lambert argues, that Philip completes her mission of un-telling the story of the massacre, a story of such cruelty that the only way to tell her is to reproduce its incomprehensibility through the silences of the historical archive.⁶⁶ Silence represents, here, the inability of the English language to tell a plural story and, at the same time, to let other voices speak. One of the examples of Philip's use of silence in the *Zong!* poems is the inclusion of African names in the first section "Os". As the poet explains in "Notanda", the existence of enslaved African people in the *Zong* is marked, in the historical document, by phrases such as "the negro slaves" or "the negroes".⁶⁷ In other archives, the description is similar: "negroe man", "negroe woman", "negroe girl (meagre)".⁶⁸ As such, Philip draws a horizontal line at the bottom of each page in "Os", separating the poems from the 228 African names. According to Erin M. Fehskens, the names appear as singular entities, separated by blank spaces; however, because they occupy the same space in every page, they create a chain of names that pierces through the poems composed of words from the case report.⁶⁹ These names are added by the poet to fill in the absences of the case report: naming the victims of the massacre, even if an exercise of poetic imagination, restores their subjectivity which the case report erased. Furthermore, according to Fehskens, adding these names to the poems in "Os" is an act of remembering the victims of the massacre and objecting to their dehumanization and,

through this, an attempt to heal the scars left by the traumatic legacy of the Middle Passage and of slavery.⁷⁰

On the other hand, adding the names to the inferior margin of the pages of “Os” and separating them physically from the poems, Philip highlights the inferior status of the victims of the massacre in relation to the text and, by extension, to the history of slavery. This is further emphasised in the last part of “Os”, called “Dicta”, where the names disappear from the margin, but the horizontal line remains. The sharp contrast between the presence and absence of these names emphasises the constant tension between the words of the case report, the silences they hide and the transgenerational trauma that stems from this objectification, which affects both victims and their descendants. The disappearance of the names symbolises the power of the historical archive, which does not include anything pertaining to the subjectivity of the enslaved people. However, as Lambert adds, the invention of the names can be read as a bridge between the historicity of the archive and poetry’s ability to expose and fill the silences left by the former.⁷¹ Philip uses the silence of the historical archive to counteract the violence of the language of the case report. By searching for the voices of the victims in these silences, the poet looks at the historical archive as a space of absences that need to be exposed and, through poetry, filled to remember and to honour the victims of the *Zong* massacre and of slavery.

Conclusion

Starting from the fragmented words of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, M. NourbeSe Philip composes the poems of *Zong!*, a book-length poem that ends with the full transcription of the case report. To tell the story of the massacre, the poet challenges herself to un-tell the story of the victims of the *Zong*, a story that must be told, even though it cannot. To achieve this, she destroys the text of the case report to reveal the story, once silenced, of its victims.

From the fragments of phrases and words, Philip builds a collage of concepts, people, and objects aboard the *Zong* ship to confront the absences of the historical archive, the violence of its language and of slavery as an institution whose traumatic legacy still haunts the descendants of its victims. Poetry confronts and defies the feigned objectivity of the historical archive, and *Zong!* is an example of this: a violent act perpetrated against the language of the case report to counteract its violence and the violence that transforms people into objects, effectively erasing the possibility of their stories being told. This is the only way to un-tell the story that must be told, to object to the violent transformation of human beings into objects, to remember and honour the victims of the *Zong* and to attempt to heal the trauma caused by the extreme and inexplicable violence of slavery.

¹ Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 207.

² António Sousa Ribeiro, *Representações da violência*, 2012.

³ Roberto Vecchi, 'Massacre, Horror e Biopolítica: Técnicas Das Narrações Identitárias', *Cartografia afro-lusa de Cultura, Língua e Artes*, 2017, https://estudogeral.sib.uc.pt/bitstream/10316/79966/1/Massacre_Cartografia%20afro-lusa.pdf.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁵ Eni Pulcinelli Orlandi, *As formas do silêncio: no movimento dos sentidos*, 3. reimpr (Campinas, SP, Brasil: Editora da Unicamp, 2013).

⁶ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, 'Nation Language', in *The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 10th ed., vol. F, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 861–65.

⁸ Philip, *Zong!*

⁹ Ribeiro, *Representações da violência*.

¹⁰ Ribeiro.

¹¹ Ribeiro.

¹² S. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (1 January 2008): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

¹³ Vecchi, 'Massacre, Horror e Biopolítica: Técnicas Das Narrações Identitárias'.

¹⁴ Vecchi.

¹⁵ Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Diedrich, Gates, and Pedersen.

¹⁷ Philip, *Zong!*

¹⁸ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 96.

¹⁹ Philip.

²⁰ Philip, 211.

²¹ Vecchi, 'Massacre, Horror e Biopolítica: Técnicas Das Narrações Identitárias'.

²² Philip, *Zong!*, 210.

²³ Vecchi, 'Massacre, Horror e Biopolítica: Técnicas Das Narrações Identitárias'.

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- ²⁴ Philip, *Zong!*, 211.
- ²⁵ Vecchi, 'Massacre, Horror e Biopolítica: Técnicas Das Narrações Identitárias'.
- ²⁶ Philip, *Zong!*, 210.
- ²⁷ Ribeiro, *Representações da violência*.
- ²⁸ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- ²⁹ Baucom.
- ³⁰ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*.
- ³¹ Philip, *Zong!*
- ³² Philip, 210.
- ³³ Laurie R. Lambert, 'Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*', *The Global South* 10, no. 1 (2016): 107–29, <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.10.1.06>.
- ³⁴ Sarah Dowling, 'Persons and Voices: Sounding Impossible Bodies in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*', *Canadian Literature*, no. 210–11 (2011): 43–58, <https://doi.org/10.14288/cl.v0i210-11.192798>.
- ³⁵ Philip, *Zong!*, 40.
- ³⁶ Abigail Ward, ed., *Postcolonial Traumas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137526434>; EVIE SHOCKLEY, 'Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage', *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 4 (2011): 791–817.
- ³⁷ Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 12.
- ³⁸ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.
- ³⁹ Hirsch.
- ⁴⁰ Hirsch.
- ⁴¹ Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 14.
- ⁴² Philip, *Zong!*
- ⁴³ Ribeiro, *Representações da violência*.
- ⁴⁴ Lilian Munk Rösing, 'Writing as Violence and Counter-Violence in Paul Celan's Poetry and Elfriede Jelinek's Prose', in *The Aesthetics of Violence*, ed. Hans Jacob Ohldieck and Gisle Selnes (S.l.: Spartacus Forlag AS / Scandinavian Academic Press, 2020), https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/spartacus.no/production/attachments/02955_The%20Aesthetics%20of%20Violence_OA.pdf.
- ⁴⁵ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*.
- ⁴⁶ Lecercle.
- ⁴⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, 'Nation Language', in *The Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 10th ed., vol. F, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 861–65.
- ⁴⁸ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*.
- ⁴⁹ Brathwaite, 'Nation Language', 862.
- ⁵⁰ Ribeiro, *Representações da violência*.
- ⁵¹ Marlene Nourbese Philip, 'The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy', in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).
- ⁵² Philip, *Zong!*
- ⁵³ Philip, 62, 65.
- ⁵⁴ Philip, 62, 67.
- ⁵⁵ Dowling, 'Persons and Voices'.
- ⁵⁶ Philip, *Zong!*, 60, 61, 65.
- ⁵⁷ Lambert, 'Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*'
- ⁵⁸ Philip, *Zong!*
- ⁵⁹ Philip.
- ⁶⁰ Philip.
- ⁶¹ Philip, 193.
- ⁶² Philip, *Zong!*
- ⁶³ Angela Naimou, *Salvage Work: U.S. and Caribbean Literatures amid the Debris of Legal Personhood*, First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).
- ⁶⁴ Naimou.

⁶⁵ Orlandi, *As formas do silêncio*.

⁶⁶ Lambert, 'Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*'

⁶⁷ Philip, *Zong!*, 210.

⁶⁸ Philip, 194.

⁶⁹ Erin M. Fehskens, 'Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* And the Catalogue', *Callaloo* 35, no. 2 (2012): 407–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2012.0043>.

⁷⁰ Fehskens.

⁷¹ Lambert, 'Poetics of Reparation in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*'