

Katherine McKittrick.
Worn down.

NourbeSe Philip's long-cycle-poem *Zong!* (2008) has been swirling in my head. I was recently alerted to the award-winning art installation by Rana Hamadeh (*The Ten Murders of Josephine and On Proxy Bodies: A Script in Progress*, Rotterdam, 2017), a piece that attends to the Zong massacre—specifically the legal narrative, Gregson vs. Gilbert—and ongoing (historically present) racial violences. I was curious about the ways in which the work of Philip was, for the most part, not present in the images, ideas, and theories (those I could access from afar, to be clear). From what I understand, Philip's *Zong!* is given a momentary nod within the exhibit (as “phonic substance”) and is also noted to be an “inspiration.”¹ Reviewing the exhibit from afar, I wondered about how the intellectual effort of a black woman poet undergirds *The Ten Murders* yet is also, for the most part, removed from the visual and textual work that is presented. What is the work of citation here? And uncitation?

A scanning of an exhibit review, along with an interview, would lead one to think that perhaps the legal archives from the Zong massacre were sought out, reviewed, and studied by Hamadeh and then visually built into her installation.² However, a trip to the archives is not required. Gregson vs. Gilbert can be found within Philip's *Zong!* itself: it serves as the narrative through which her poetics emerges; the case is also reproduced within the book and is retold in the *No-tanda*. The legal case anchors Philip's 2008 long-cycle-poem and is intensified by the creative work she did *with and to* those legal narratives to produce *Zong!* in order to poetically express her political obligation to the black-unnamed who were murdered. In *Zong!* the fragments of the legal archive are reworded to reconceptualize the weight of unremembered loss. In *Zong!* the unnamed and the forgotten are named in trace. In *Zong!* poetics are the analytics of black life. In *Zong!* we learn to unread and reread unspeakability.

In 2017, just six weeks before the exhibition was launched, the Hamadeh contacted Philip and requested permission and blessings to use *Zong!* in her installation. In addition to detailing how *Zong!* would be presented and archived in the exhibit, Hamadeh wrote to Philip explaining that the book, long in her hands, was “a daily ritual that grew slowly throughout my working process into *becoming an important theoretical and affective scaffolding within the work*.”³ The artist intended to use Philip's work and ideas in the exhibit (and perhaps, even, the work and ideas were already integrated before permission was requested, given that Philip was contacted only six weeks before the launch...of course, tracking time is always unhelpfully awful).

¹ On being inspired by *Zong!* see: http://www.metropolism.com/nl/features/33989_rana_hamadeh. I viewed images of the exhibit that were shared by a colleague who saw it in Rotterdam in 2017.

² See: <https://frieze.com/article/rana-hamadeh> and <http://mousse magazine.it/rana-hamadeh-carolina-rito-2017>.

³ Email correspondence between Philip and Hamadeh. Emphasis in the original. Permission granted by Philip.

Philip did not provide permission. She did not agree with the conditions under which her work would be used and, as well, made clear that she was also very busy and worn out. Her sister was dying and needed care.⁴

Without permission and sweeping aside Philip's care-work and mourning, it seems Hamadeh reimagined the work of Zong with scraps of *Zong!* The brief nod to Philip within the exhibit itself is coupled to the kind of documents many, in theory, have access to (e.g. the legal archives from the original case, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, available in *Zong!* as noted above). But in some ways this coupling—the nod and the archive that is already there—establishes a kind of alibi for rewriting and forgetting the creative-intellectual work Philip expresses and exerted in *Zong!* In one interview the artist presents her engagement with the Zong massacre as her own intellectual work and theoretical intervention—Philip is not mentioned. Instead, she explains: “This archive of horror shall not be understood as the trace of the massacre, but rather as the fragmentary, unspoken, and unspeakable phonic materiality that is captured and trapped within the trace—that subsists *because of* and *despite of* that trace” and “I treat the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* document in the exhibition as a primary document that defines the notion of documentality as a whole.”⁵ Hamadeh also includes her own poetics in her exhibit:

*For, thought is made in the mouth. / Let's talk about the voice / of the record / as the record / Not of the captured, but of capture / Not of weight, but the modality of measure / The voice of the killer*⁶

The records, the mouth, the weights and measures, the voice. Bad made measure.⁷ Curious. It seems to me—from afar—that the Hamadeh is, at least in part, working and reworking the long-cycle-poem (not necessarily the original archival documents): scratching it out and then scraping it up. In the process of rewriting, the creative labour of Philip—the intellectual effort of her monumental rehumanizing black studies project, *Zong!*—wears down.

I will not reproduce *Zong!* in order to provide textual proof of Hamadeh's rewording and revising of Philip's long-cycle-poem. How Hamadeh understands and writes the Zong massacre is on her shoulders, as is Philip's clear, exhausted, unwillingness to be a part of the project. I ask, though, that we dwell on the politics of permission. I ask that we dwell on the politics of permission in relation to black women. And, I want to underscore and centralize and illuminate the effort Philip put into the long-cycle-poem. I was told to cite black women. We are told to cite black women. Sometimes the words and ideas of black women, when cited, become something else. Sometimes the ideas of black women wear out and wear down even though these narratives provide the clues and instructions to imagine the world anew. Often the words and ideas and brilliance of black women remain unread. The words and ideas of black women go uncited. The intellectual effort is unnoticed and stepped over. Worn down, sometimes the intellectual

⁴ Email correspondence between Philip and Hamadeh. Emphasis in the original. Permission granted by Philip. And: Personal communication with Philip. Permission granted.

⁵ See, again: <http://moussmagazine.it/rana-hamadeh-carolina-rito-2017>. Emphasis in the original.

⁶ See, again: <https://frieze.com/article/rana-hamadeh>.

⁷ M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 2008), 51.

work of black women is unmentionable. We must continue to cite their words and ideas well. We must read them well. I cite and site *Zong!* and NourbeSe Philip as brilliant intellectual effort. I want to engage this text as labour. It is not a nod, gesture, signal, or inspiration. It is poetic infrastructure—black women's work—that radically repoliticizes black life.

A couple of scholars who know my work:

The first is an excerpt from a longer article sent by the scholar Kate Siklosi, who knows my work. It's a draft and not yet published.

The second is an email response to reading the various materials about the show and the emails.

#1

Another recent example of erasure is Rana Hamedeh's recent operatic art installation, *The Ten Murders of Josephine* (2017) that won the prestigious Prix de Rome Visual Arts 2017. The work startlingly resembles Philip's project in *Zong!*, which is to view the historical massacre as a legal artefact, and as a word store to investigate the erasure (and potential creative emergence) of subjecthood within legally sanctioned racism. *Zong!* takes on the legal language of the *Gregson vs Gilbert* insurance case—another instance of historical erasure that we would not know of without Philip's archival work. To create her long poem, Philip uses the language from the 1783 insurance settlement case, in which the owners of the slave ship *Zong* threw a large number of slaves overboard in order to claim insurance money for the loss of “property.” The 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.

Hamadeh's work has enjoyed much exposure, but there is a glaring lack of connection (in her own words or by anyone engaging with the work) between her work and Philip's, despite the simi-

larity in theme and material. This is not only a glaring critical blindness—Philip and her work are now synonymous with the Zong massacre and it is unbelievable that anyone speaking critically about this work would not bring up her name or her work—but it borders on something greater in terms of erasure and appropriation. The only mention of Philip I have been able to find is a Visitor’s Guide to the museum where her installation was being held, which makes passing reference to Philip. But out of the many interviews Hamadeh has done, none link her work with Philip or speak of the 7 years of archival research Philip has done to bring the Zong massacre back into our contemporary imaginary.

The work also appropriates the poetic querying of the speakable and unspeakable lines of being that Philip carefully teases out from the thicket of legalese. The journal Art Radar suggests that Ramadeh’s work “points towards an archive of erasure; a narrative that has never been, and never can be, attended to” (<http://artradarjournal.com/2018/01/09/lebanese-artist-rana-hamadeh-wins-prix-de-rome-visual-arts-2017/>). This statement points, eerily similarly, to the centralized paradox at the heart of Philip’s poetic inquiry: “this is a story that must be told; that can only be told by not telling.” / “the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself.” (see Notanda 190). Speaking about her project’s interaction with the legal case, Hamadeh says, “This archive of horror shall not be understood as the trace of the massacre, but rather as the fragmentary, unspoken, and unspeakable phonic materiality that is captured and trapped within the trace—that subsists *because of* and *despite of* that trace.” (<http://moussemagazine.it/rana-hamadeh-carolina-rito-2017/>). To speak of the “fragmentary, unspoken, and un-

speakable phonic materiality” within the traces left behind by the legal case, without a mention of Philip or *Zong!*, cannot be excused as an oversight—it is blatant erasure. Philip and her work has not even had a chance to appear, let alone disappear, in this conversation—erased before she could disappear. Her 7-year labour silenced.

#2

From: Julie Joosten <julie.a.joosten@gmail.com>

Subject: Re: Request regarding Zong!

Date: February 2, 2018 at 6:15:14 PM EST

To: NourbeSe <nourbese@bell.net>

Hi, NourbeSe,

I've now read through each of the materials you sent at least twice and looked at Hamadeh's work. I'm shocked. I really don't know where to begin with my response. From my perspective, there is no uncertainty around her unethical use of your work. For me, there are at least two major issues:

1. That she asked for your consent, you didn't give it, and she used your work anyway.
2. That in using your work without your consent (though I would still be troubled if she had your consent), she presents your thinking and the language around it, that is, she presents your project, as if it were hers. I don't see how she's "drawing broadly on" or even using your work as "scaffolding" -- she seems merely to be re-presenting it. I would recognize your *Zong!* anywhere -- and as yours and the ancestors -- and that is what I see in Hamadeh's presentation of the Zong and her reading of Gregson vs. Gilbert: your *Zong!*.

I realize this email might be upsetting -- I've been very frank. But I don't think I've let my outrage cloud my judgment. Please let me know if you'd like to talk further about this. I'm available all day tomorrow, which I think is your birthday, happy early birthday.

Warmly,
Julie