

On Learning to Read the Silence/s: The Strange Case of CanLit's Disappeared Black Poet

(by Kate Siklosi, Ph. D.)

how does one

write

poetry from a place

a place structured

by absence

One doesn't. One learns to read the silences.

—M. NourbeSe Philip

Rana Hamedeh's recent operatic art installation at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art Rotterdam, *The Ten Murders of Josephine* (2017), sheds light on the missing testimonies overlooked in historical records of violence and loss. Her installation consists of several movements rooted in deconstruction and rearrangement of legal discourse; using the historical Zong slave ship massacre as a legal artefact and sonic word store, she investigates the erasure (and potential creative emergence) of subjecthood within legally sanctioned racism.

The work takes inspiration from the language and inherent gaps of the *Gregson vs Gilbert* insurance case, the 1783 insurance settlement 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, considered a critical "monument of absence," and "archive of erasure," has enjoyed much exposure, and won the prestigious Prix de Rome Visual Arts 2017. Mirjam Beerman, coordinator for Prix de Rome, writes that "[Hamadeh's] interpretation of the past and the intelligence with which she deconstructs and rearranges it is topical and important."

This would be all the less startling if a Black Canadian poet hadn't done it first.

In fact, we wouldn't even know about the Gregson vs Gilbert case if it weren't for the work of M. NourbeSe Philip and her long poem, *Zong!* (2008). *Zong!* is the product of a 7-year long archival project wherein Philip took the language from the insurance case, deconstructed it, rearranged it, and created a labyrinthine journey through the historical erasure of black bodies and their stories. So it is thus extremely ironic that there is a glaring lack of connection between Hamadeh's work and Philip's, despite the similarity in theme and material. Hamadeh uses this same archival material, the legal case, as its foundational artistic inspiration—but we wouldn't even be speaking of the case if it weren't for Philip's work before, during, and after *Zong!*.

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 Hamadeh's work “points towards an archive of erasure; a narrative that has never been, and never can be, attended to.” 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.” 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.” To speak of the “fragmentary, unspoken, and unspeakable 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.