



Performing the Archive in the Americas

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Contents

PERFORMING THE ARCHIVE IN THE AMERICAS

- 1 Introduction: Beginning, Rupture, Redirection
Simona Bertacco, Delphine Munos, and Jason Wiens
- 13 “Breaking and Entering the Colonial Archive”:
A Conversation with m. nourbeSe philip and Simona Bertacco
- 37 Respite. Quiet. A House of Dreams.
Katherine McKittrick
- 57 Archiving Black Diasporas: Looking at Photographs with Saidiya
Hartman, Myriam J. A. Chancy, and Dionne Brand
Franca Bernabei

- 79 Theater of Ancestral Mediation: Vodou in the Performance Aesthetics of Miracson Saint-Val
Jason Allen-Paisant
- 103 Lose Your Father: Long-Suppressed Voices in Caryl Phillips's *Strange Fruit(s)*
Delphine Munos
- 119 "Liberty or Death!": An Archaeology of the Freedom Narrative in the Age of Revolution
William Boelhower
- 141 Unhousing the Archives Around the *Zong*, Again: Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* and Lawrence Scott's *Dangerous Freedom*
Bénédicte Ledent

Introduction

Beginning, Rupture, Redirection

Simona Bertacco, Delphine Munos, and Jason Wiens

Louisville, Kentucky

The starting point for this special issue was a pre-organized panel at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture that took place in 2018 and featured m. nourbeSe philip, author of *Zong!* (Wesleyan 2008), as the opening creative keynote speaker and Brent Hayes Edwards, author of *The Practice of Diaspora* (Harvard 2003), as the closing critical keynote. Postcolonial performances of the archive in the Americas seemed a compelling subject for discussion for a panel inspired by the work of the conference keynote speakers. In the area of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, in fact, this is an essential area of intervention, as the archive here extends beyond traditional definitions that associate it with an institutional and legislative body of authorized and authenticating documents. Working in and through the archive, artists from this diaspora have turned historical memory away from tropes of resurrection to ones of construction, redefining the archive as a performative site where the boundaries between past, present, and future, public and private, reality and fiction are renewed

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with each act of access. In the hands of writers, artists, and thinkers, the received archive ceases to be a heritage, an obligation binding us in perpetuity. It becomes rather a source of agency—resourceful and repeatable. To borrow a phrase by Jay Bernard, a Black British poet, archivist, and activist of Caribbean origin, the descendants of the enslaved might be “haunted” by history. And yet when Black artists and writers repurpose the archive, they “haunt it back” (2019, xi).

As Jerome McGann reminds us in *A New Republic of Letters*, “The records we have expose the absence of the records we don’t have, or records that never passed beyond an immediate (perhaps oral, in any case ephemeral) experience. Our problems with the meanings of the extant records are bound up, are sealed with, those that are not extant. They tell of relationships that, as we glimpse their absent presences, now reveal the presence of a dizzying network of further relations” (2014, 56). This inescapable archival situation McGann describes takes on a new critical urgency when considering postcolonial contexts. This is often the starting point for the retellings of diaspora narratives in contemporary postcolonial writing: a condition of disbelief in the colonial archive, matched with the need to create one anew, albeit ephemeral and immanent, for the sake of present and future generations. In her now classic *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor distinguishes between “archival memory,” which exists as “items supposedly resistant to change” (such as “documents, maps, literary texts, archaeological remains, bones, etc.”), and “the repertoire,” which “enacts embodied memory” through “non-reproducible knowledge,” as in “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance” (2003, 19–20). By contrast to archival memory, which “sustains power” and maintains the illusion that “the archive resist[s] change, corruptibility, and political manipulation” (19), the repertoire “both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (20) by tracing traditions and influences of embodied practices among transregional and transnational routes. A key aspect of Taylor’s “repertoire” is that it “allows for individual agency,” in that “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission” (20). The repertoire thus constitutes an alternative to the print archive, and one that more fully represents the memory of marginalized cultures and peoples.

The 2018 Louisville conference allowed us to participate in one such

event—through m. nourbeSe philip’s performance of her *Zong!* poem—and that collective experience of the “repertoire” cemented in us editors the idea that we ought to enlarge the points of view brought to bear on the discussion of the colonial archive for our special issue.

LOUISVILLE, MARCH 2020

On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old African American medical worker, was shot and killed by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky, during a raid on her apartment. Her death was one of the main drivers of world-scale demonstrations that erupted in the late spring of 2020 over police abuse of power and systemic racism in the United States. Although Taylor’s killing happened in March, the same week in which the city was entering the first lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests over her death started spreading in the streets of Louisville and across the United States only in May when an investigation on her killing was officially launched and, especially, after another horrendous killing occurred in Minneapolis on May 25, leaving the world speechless in the face of the images of George Floyd pleading for air. Unlike in the case of George Floyd, no officer has officially been charged with the death of Breonna Taylor. However, one of the officers who was dismissed immediately after her death was accused of showing “extreme indifference to the value of human life.” These words hurt and shame us.

In many cities across the world, not only in Louisville, the spring of 2020 was a time of civil and social unrest marked by daily marches, protests, incredible acts of solidarity, egregious acts of loitering, and a lot—a lot—of art-making in towns often under curfew, or surveilled by tanks, helicopters, or the National Guard. These events marked a profound rupture that affected our personal lives and our thinking, as several of the essays show, and forced us to change our original plan for the special issue.

SPRING 2021: REDIRECTION

As postcolonialist educators, the materials that we teach question the ethnocentric, racist, and sexist legacy of the humanities and force us to openly make

our location on the world map and the inevitable bias of our knowledge part of our educational experience. We insist on the importance of a rigorous self-reflection as learners as we approach texts, traditions, and forms of knowledge that are “unfamiliar” to us to build the basis for rigorous and inclusive scholarship, and this is the approach that we brought to this special issue and put at the center of the new direction it took in 2021.

Delphine, Jason, and I have openly discussed the discomfort we felt with the authorial position implied as white (and two European) editors of an issue that deals with the American and Caribbean archive and with a traumatic legacy that we do not share and cannot fully understand from within. Therefore, we decided to rethink the aim of the issue starting from our role as editors by putting us in the position of the receivers, the “clerks” rather than the “scholars” and “gatekeepers” of our fields. The decision changed our way of working on the issue: For instance, we have intentionally kept all editorial interventions to a minimum; have allowed the timeline to shift to make room for the many disruptions of the past two years; and have explicitly encouraged experimental pieces that pierce the boundary not only between disciplines but also between what is considered scholarly and what is creative and personal.

FALL 2022: THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Breonna Taylor and George Floyd’s stories are moving forward through the ramifications of the legal cases that are trying to bring justice to the families of the victims, but also through the many artworks that are weaving their memories and their legacies. Their stories also connect backward, and all too easily, with the events described in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal case of 1783, which forms the basis of m. nourbeSe philip’s *Zong!*, an important example of the power of art to shape an archive of resistance.

The issue, thus, opens with a long interview with m. nourbeSe philip, as an author who has used the archival material of this legal case to bring symbolic justice to the victims on the *Zong*. Using the legal text as word store, in *Zong!* philip embarks on the mission to set the archival record straight, which means, first and foremost, to call the “event” by its proper legal term, which is murder; yet the word murder is not—and could not conceptually be—contained in

the colonial legal text that serves as the archive because that archive speaks of cargos and goods and not of people. In her work, philip is faithful to the archival text but plays with its rules of inclusion and exclusion. If the archive is meant to record what was, then philip mourns the deaths of the people who were on board the ship and who were thrown overboard; she punctures the extant archive to exhume from the water all that she can retrieve: names, ages, sexes, words and languages. That is, she inscribes, in her own performative archive, the bodies of the departed in the poem by writing and giving them breath: the sighs, the gagging sounds, the shouts, the screams.

As the issue came into being, another legal case around *Zong!* started unfolding. In September 2021, a polemic around the Italian translation of philip's epic poem took on social media over the author's exclusion from the translation process and, most importantly, the betrayal of a crucial conceptual and formal principle behind her work, and a petition was circulated asking for the destruction of the unauthorized translation.¹ While a discussion of the case of the Italian translation of *Zong!* is not included in the essays for this special issue—but will certainly be discussed in many special issues to come—it needs to be mentioned in these pages. Not only does it color the interview and explain the distress mentioned by the author during the interview, but, most importantly, it signals one of the “lessons to be learned” in academia, publishing, teaching, translating, and editing that this issue, collectively, wants to highlight.

The year 2021 might indeed be remembered as the year in which translation went “viral.” Starting from the controversy surrounding the identity of the European translators of Amanda Gorman's poem “The Hill we Climb,” which was read during Joe Biden and Kamala Harris's presidential inauguration ceremony, to the writer Sally Rooney, who decided to withhold the translation rights for the Hebrew translation of her latest novel due to her stance on the Israel–Palestine conflict, to the open letter written by translators Jennifer Croft and Mark Haddon asking for the translators' names to be added on the book covers, to the petition calling for the destruction of the Italian translation of m. nourbeSe philip's poem *Zong!*, what can be said with a fair degree of certainty is that translations and translators have been visible, their work discussed and revered as well as contested, but, in any case, shown to be vitally connected to

the political movements that are shaking the foundations of social, cultural, and educational edifices throughout the world.²

Thus, this is where, appropriately, the issue begins: with an open acknowledgment that we are all implicated in the operations of making, sharing, and revising knowledge and should bear our responsibility along the process. m. nourbeSe philip offers an important insight into her operations of “Break and Entry” into the colonial archive in her writing, into the historicity of her writing, and the intellectual tradition in which she has inserted herself. Central to her discussion are an expansive notion of time and “the weight and freight” of history, and an essential sense of place, which are both reflected in the way in which the received archive of history, literature, language is parsed in her writing. In the interview, philip describes her decision to break up the words when writing *Zong!* as “a massive felony against the archive” and discusses the courage but also the vulnerability that the process entailed. The linguist and the poet become one in her understanding of her role, both spiritual and social, as an artist in today’s world and inform her ongoing struggle against all permutations of the colonial archive.

Katherine McKittrick writes at the receiving end of such an archive of resistance and offers a poignant and engaging trajectory through three archives of Blackness: m. nourbeSe philip’s poem *Zong!*, Charmaine Lurch’s charcoal drawings *Being, Belonging, and Grace*, and Sylvia Wynter’s critical oeuvre, reflecting on the “capacious pedagogy” that is shaped by these three artists and intellectuals. Her essay moves backward and forward along experiences of learning and unlearning in traditional educational contexts and takes the readers along an intellectually challenging path that rejects the logic of “rampant textuality” of “monohumanism” and, instead, claims the time, the space, the silence that accompanies deep, personal, impactful learning.

Another tripartite archive is at the heart of Franca Bernabei’s important and timely essay on the optic unconscious of photographs. The archive analyzed is composed of photographs either reproduced in the text or evoked by figurative language by, respectively, Saidiyia Hartman, Myriam J. A. Chancy, and Dionne Brand in their works. Like philip, Lurch, and Wynter, mentioned by McKittrick, these women thinkers belong to different areas and generations of the Black diaspora. Taken together, however, they show strategies that debunk the racist

scripts and topology of the white “patriarchive.” By paying close attention to these authors’ work, Bernabei describes practices of looking that are learned from the texts themselves: They are complex and multidirectional and enact a distinct and important repertoire of embodied memory that can change the way we look at photographs.

“Writing breath” is a powerful concept discussed by m. nourbeSe philip in the final part of our interview as an obligation that she feels as a poet toward the ancestors she honors in *Zong!* This notion that ties together body and word becomes central in Jason Allen-Paisant’s essay as he focuses on what happens when the historical archive turns, on stage, into an embodied and sacred event. Jason Allen-Paisant describes writing in “breaths” as “unarticulated utterance,” as opposed to the reasoned arrangement of speech, and discusses it in relation to the play *Chemin de fer*, by the Congolese playwright Julian Mabilia Bissila, on the civil war in Congo-Brazzaville. Jason Allen-Paisant’s essay, however, focuses on the performance put on stage by the Haitian director and actor Miracson Saint-Val at the Festival Quatre Chemins, which took place in Haiti in 2017. The stage production becomes, Allen-Paisant powerfully argues, a palimpsest that allows the audience to think about the daily tragedies in Haiti while witnessing an embodied performance of the tragedies of the Congolese civil war. What the two “plays” (Bissila’s text and Saint-Val’s Haitian stage production) convey through their use of “speaking in breaths” is the unspeakability of the traumas of war, but each play does it in its own embodied way. Using this play in two different contexts as a case study, this essay, like Bernabei’s, develops an important theoretical framework to understand the anthropological, aesthetic, and political entanglements of African and Afro-diasporic dramaturgies as “theatre of the state of war.”

A similar preoccupation with the subjugated yet persistent forms of knowledge of the performed repertoire animates Delphine Munos’s discussion of the 2019 stage performance of Caryl Phillips’s early play *Strange Fruit* (1981). “Punching” is a verb that recurs throughout the essay to convey the sudden violence and the shock that the staged play generates in her and in Caryl Phillips himself, who is also in the audience. Transposing that physical experience of pain and discomfort to the intellectual level, Munos rethinks the relation between knowing and not-knowing in academic scholarship. *Strange Fruit*,

the title of Phillips's first play, recalls the piercing song by Billie Holiday about the horrors of lynching in the American South of the 1930s. However, the song does not truly relate to the main concerns of Phillips's play, and Munos explores in fine detail how it is possible to negotiate affiliations within a mutual and respectful acknowledgment of loss and distance and the extent to which this distant commonality can sustain the emergence of long suppressed voices—voices of pain, but also voices of hope.

The transatlantic affiliation made explicit by the discussion of Caryl Phillips's "appropriation" of Billy Holiday's song leads to a much-needed and timely exploration of the anticolonial archives of resistance in the two concluding interventions. In a powerful and encyclopedic essay, William Boelhower invites all of us to rethink, restudy, and reread the *freedom*—rather than *slave*—narrative as the first discursive genre in U.S. literary history to challenge the legitimacy of a federal constitution that shielded Black slavery throughout the nation. By approaching the fugitive/freedom narrative as a site of mnemohistory and resonance chamber for the Black Lives Matter movement, Boelhower argues, we can resurrect "a larger history peculiar to the genre's biopolitical purpose: making Black lives matter." Boelhower's invitation is to start closer to home and engage not only with traditions of "writing from below" but also, as critics, in "an interpretation from below," and this essay is a supreme example of what this study may look like.

The closing essay by Bénédicte Ledent chimes beautifully with Boelhower's call to action through her treatment of recent fictionalizations of the *Zong* massacre—respectively in *Winsome Pinnock's Rockets and Blue Lights* and *Lawrence Scott's Dangerous Freedom*—in light of two momentous contemporary phenomena: the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and the Windrush scandal in the United Kingdom. These two works of fiction invite the readers to go back to the other existing archives and narratives on the topic, whether novels, poems, paintings, or film, and to what they mean for the present because the labor of resuscitation remains perpetually unfinished and collective. Not only do the stories need to be told again and again; they also need to be told *differently*, again and again.

Each essay in this issue can be read as a learning lesson to rethink the very terms and methods of our disciplines. Each essay shows how to be engaged

as readers, learners, scholars, and educators. This introduction has served as our project archive, a map that marks the places, the events, and the trajectory that we have followed and the decisions that we have made along the way as our own effort to tell these stories again and differently in what we feel is one of the most important historical moments for our societies, our communities, and our scholarship and that we have had the honor to bear witness to and participate in.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, we want to thank m. nourbeSe philip, whose work has been a source of inspiration for this issue and who agreed to be interviewed when many public interventions around the Italian translation of *Zong!* were taking place. The time and intellectual generosity she gave our project at, perhaps, the worst of times are not lost on us, and for this we are extremely grateful. We would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Commonwealth Center for the Humanities and Society at the University of Louisville for a subvention fund in support of this publication.

To our contributors go our deepest respect and our sincerest appreciation for their commitment to our project and their willingness to bring it to completion despite personal and institutional interruptions. Without their intuitions, creativity, bravery in facing their academic vulnerabilities in the service of the common goal, this issue would not be here.

Finally, our thanks go to the wonderful team at the *New Centennial Review*, and to David Johnson, for giving this project the home that we wished for it from the very beginning.

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NOTES

1. A polemic around the Italian translation of NourbeSe Philip's epic poem *Zong!* exploded in September 2021 over the author's lack of involvement in the translation process and a betrayal of the formal principle of her work, and a petition was circulated asking for the destruction of the unauthorized Italian translation: <https://www.change>.

org/p/benway-series-a-public-call-for-the-immediate-destruction-of-the-unauthorized-translation-of-zong-as-to-aa310152-f535-4cc1-97e5-6ff856fdc593?utm_content=cl_sharecopy_31017569_en-US%3A3&recruiter=1229325854&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copypink&utm_campaign=share_petition;https://www.change.org/p/benway-series-a-public-call-for-the-immediate-destruction-of-the-unauthorized-translation-of-zong-as-to-aa310152-f535-4cc1-97e5-6ff856fdc593?utm_content=cl_sharecopy_31017569_en-US%3A3&recruiter=1229325854&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copypink&utm_campaign=share_petition.

2. The translation of Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill we Climb" into other languages went viral on social media when a controversy emerged about the identity of the European translators. The Dutch translator resigned from the job after criticism on social media, and the Catalan translator was replaced because his profile was not compatible according to Gorman's literary agent: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-03-22/amanda-gorman-hill-we-climb-translation-backlash-sparks-controversy>. The Irish writer Sally Rooney refused to sell Hebrew translation rights to her latest novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* due to her stance on the Israel–Palestine conflict: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/12/sally-rooney-beautiful-world-where-are-you-israeli-publisher-hebrew>. Jennifer Croft and Mark Haddon, both accomplished translators, circulated an open letter entitled "Translators on the Cover" in August 2021 to ask for the recognition of translators' names on the covers of translated books: <https://www2.societyofauthors.org/translators-on-the-cover/#add-name>.

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2022); *The Relocation of Culture: Translation, Migration, Borders*, with N. Valorani (Bloomsbury, 2021); and the special issue of *The New Centennial Review: Translation and the Global Humanities* (vol. 16, no. 1, 2016).

DELPHINE MUNOS is senior lecturer in Anglophone postcolonial literatures at the University of Liège, Belgium. She is the author of *After Melancholia: A Reappraisal of Second-Generation Diasporic Subjectivity in the Work of Jhumpa Lahiri* (Brill/Rodopi, 2013), and the coeditor (with Bénédicte Ledent) of *Minor Genres in Postcolonial Literatures* (Routledge, 2019). She coedited journal issues for *South Asian Diaspora* and *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, and she specializes in Anglophone postcolonial literatures and US ethnic literatures, with a special focus on “minor-to-minor” interactions between different postcolonial places and minority histories. She is currently working on two research projects. The first one looks at born-digital literatures and online book talk in the global South and the global North; the second one investigates the intersection of affect theory and postcolonial literatures.

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