

Unhousing the Archives Around the Zong, Again: Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* and Lawrence Scott's *Dangerous Freedom*

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The massacre on the *Zong* in 1781, during which slavers threw 132 captive Africans overboard, and the historical ramifications of such a horrendous event have exerted a genuine fascination on the authors of the anglophone Caribbean diaspora for quite a while. The best-known example of such a literary phenomenon might be *Zong!*, a long poem based on one of the very few official archival records of this tragedy, namely, the report of the court case that took place in 1783 around the notorious slave ship and her owners' insurance claims for their jettisoned "cargo." Written by Canadian-Tobagonian Marlene m. nourbeSe philip and published in 2008, this formally daring poetic work has been performed multiple times in different venues. It has gained notoriety as a text that, in the words of its author, "move[s] beyond representation of what the New World experience was" (philip 2008, 197) while mirroring, through its impressively creative dismembering of the legal document, "the fragmentation and mutilation that slavery perpetrated on Africans" (195).

For all her formal and conceptual innovativeness, m. nourbeSe philip was not the first nor the only West Indian artist to zoom in on this historical episode that shockingly encapsulates the extreme dehumanization inherent in the transatlantic slave

trade. In the preceding decades, at least three writers of Caribbean descent had already addressed the *Zong* tragedy, sometimes in relation to its alleged representation by J. M. W. Turner in his 1840 painting *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon Coming On)*. One of them is Jamaican Michelle Cliff, who includes a brief reference to the *Zong* massacre at the end of her first fiction, *Abeng* (1984), and devotes one chapter of her 1993 novel *Free Enterprise* to the contrasting effect that the troubling canvas by the famous English painter can have on Black and white people in nineteenth-century America. In a letter to the white American owner of *The Slave Ship*, Cliff's Black protagonist makes this striking declaration: "While you focus on the background of the Turner painting, I cannot tear my eyes from the foreground" (80). Guyanese David Dabydeen, too, engages with the infamous slave ship in different ways. His 1999 novel *A Harlot's Progress*, mostly set in eighteenth-century London, contains numerous allusions to the *Zong* affair and gives an idea of how it fits in with the mercantile society of the time. But it is probably Dabydeen's long poem "Turner" (1994, 1–40) that best conveys his almost obsessive preoccupation with the story of the *Zong* and its representation in *The Slave Ship*. As he writes in the preface to the collection in which "Turner" is included, his narrative "focuses on the submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner's painting. It has been drowned in Turner's (and other artists') sea for centuries" (1994, ix). Finally, Anglo-Guyanese Fred D'Aguiar, in his novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), provides a lyrical fictionalization of the events around the *Zong*, including the legal proceedings that came in their wake, without, however, directly mentioning the painting alleged to have represented it. Obviously, the aim of these four Caribbean authors was, in spite of their different generic and stylistic choices, to denounce the

general amnesia around the slave trade and slavery. To different degrees, they also meant to give a voice to the victims of this abominable, yet iconic, episode of British colonial history and thereby compensate for the abstract character of the sparse legal or visual archives that have come to us (Baucom 2005, 275).¹

The haunting quality of the events that took place on and around the *Zong* undoubtedly explains the pervasive and recurring presence of this slave ship in the field of anglophone Caribbean letters—not only on the creative level but on the critical one as well. This ubiquity testifies to an understandably compulsive need to rehearse such traumatic memories, or to borrow m. nourbeSe philip’s words, “to go over the same material time and time again, trying to find answers, trying to come up with different understandings of what this experience has been all about” (quoted in Lambert 2016, 118). This imperative to repeatedly deal with this episode of British history, the better to heal the wounds of the past but also understand the present, is corroborated by the publication in 2020 of two fictional literary texts covering related grounds: Anglo-Jamaican Winsome Pinnock’s play *Rockets and Blue Lights* and Trinidadian Lawrence Scott’s novel *Dangerous Freedom*. Pinnock’s teeming and dense dramatic text is built around the making of a film entitled *The Ghost Ship* and brings side by side the ghost of a slave who was aboard the *Zong*, J. M. W. Turner, and a Black family in Victorian England, as well as the twenty-first-century cast of the movie. This play problematizes the artistic representations of the slave trade, while demonstrating again and again that past and present are inseparable. Though less openly political, Scott’s biographical fiction addresses similar issues via its imaginary dramatization of the life of Elizabeth D’Aviniere, also known as Dido Belle, the mixed-race great-niece of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who judged the *Zong* case.

These recent narratives by Pinnock and Scott certainly remind us of how crucial it is to “unhouse” the archives around the *Zong* (again), to borrow a formula used by Steven Blevins in *Living Cargo* (2016), by which he means opening them up and drawing history out (1), a performance that he views as “necessarily provisional” (7–8). Pinnock’s and Scott’s texts simultaneously raise the question already posed by historian Jeremy Krikler in 2007: “Given the already formidable corpus of writings on the *Zong*, one might ask if anything more can be learned about it” (30). What I want to show in this essay is that beyond their many differences in tone, scope, and genre, Pinnock’s and Scott’s books, coming as they do in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement (which started in 2013) and the Windrush scandal (which was revealed in 2018), display epistemological commonalities that are bound to the time of their release, at least in the way they can be read by contemporary readers. Like the fictionalizations of the *Zong* that came before them, Pinnock’s and Scott’s works contribute to the understanding of the British implication in the slave trade and slavery by staging historical and visual archives. They also demonstrate the centrality of such documents in any attempt to draw a nuanced picture of the history of the nation, as fragmentary as these archives might be. However, these recent texts establish more forcefully than their predecessors that the story of the *Zong* “[maintains] a resonance right down to the present day” (Walvin 2011, 10). And they do so through enhanced references to the contemporary moment, which are explicit in *Rockets and Blue Lights* but remain implicit in *Dangerous Freedom*.

This is not to say that the novels and poems by Cliff, Dabydeen, D’Aguiar, and Philip already mentioned have nothing to do with the present and focus only on the past. Quite the contrary. As Ian Baucom has shown in his meaningfully entitled

monograph *Specters of the Atlantic*, “it is not the status of the past that is at issue” in what he calls “these ghost stories” but “the nature, the extent, the elasticity, the scope, the very existence of the present” (2005, 324). Clearly, as Stef Craps also points out, “Instead of clearing away the dead, [these *Zong* narratives] permit this traumatic history to live on as a haunting, troubling, foreign element within the present” (2010, 469). Or to use the very concise formula that can be found in Philip’s *Zong!*, also quoted by Baucom (2005, 332), “This is, not was.” Still, it is easy for narratives set in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries to be read literally as stories exclusively belonging to the past. It is probably to avoid such problematic misunderstanding that Cliff in *Free Enterprise* makes her narrator tell the readers, in a sudden projection into the present, that the (in)famous Turner painting now hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and that they should “Go see it. Take the kids” (1995, 180). Likewise, in the epilogue to *Feeding the Ghosts*, D’Aguiar has a spectral voice, perhaps that of one of the *Zong* victims, say “I am in your community, in a cottage or apartment or cardboard box, tucked away in a quiet corner, ruminating over these very things” (1997, 229), as if to shake the readers into realizing that the traumatic story that has just been told is still very much part of the world in which they live. Nevertheless, one can wonder in view of recent events—such as the forced removal from the United Kingdom of members of the Windrush generation in 2018, the murders of George Floyd in 2020 and of countless others in the last decades, and the treatment meted out to Black migrants during the Ukraine crisis in 2022—whether the message linking slavery and the slave trade to ongoing anti-Black racism does not need to be more plainly delivered, which is exactly what Pinnock’s and Scott’s texts do. In a 1996 text entitled “The Last Essay about Slavery,” D’Aguiar writes that “Each generation inherits an

anxiety about slavery, but the more problematic the present, the higher the anxiety and the more urgent their need to attend to the past” (132)—and, one might add, the more urgent the need to bring home that the past reverberates in the present.

Such a desire to be specific about the links between past and present is obviously one of the major motivations of Pinnock in *Rockets and Blue Lights*. In a 2020 interview she declared that this drama wasn’t “‘another slave play’” as it was “as much a play about our times as it [was] a historical one. I wanted there to be conversation between past and present” (“Interview with the ‘Godmother of British Theatre,’” *Alt A Review* 2020). The play—comprising two acts, seventeen scenes, plus a prologue—is made up of a nonlinear, looping narrative that relies on a complex interweaving of intersecting time frames, which sees its most extreme expression in Scene Thirteen, where past and present voices alternate and “flow into each other” at high speed (Crompton 2021). *Rockets and Blue Lights* takes its readers from 1781, when the *Zong* massacre takes place, through 1840, when Turner paints *The Slave Ship*, to 2006 and 2007, respectively, when the film *The Ghost Ship* is being made and the main actress, Lou, is awarded a prize. Meaningfully, 2007 is also the year when the bicentenary of the end of the slave trade was celebrated in Britain, a time of misplaced elation when, according to Lou, England had become “an abolition theme park” (Pinnock 2020, 11). Lou reads in a newspaper the unduly optimistic message delivered by then-Prime Minister Tony Blair:

I believe the bicentenary offers us not only a chance to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was—how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition, but also to express our deep sorrow that it could ever have happened and rejoice at the better times we live in. (62)²

In contrast to this confident and sugary assessment, the play itself provides countless elements confirming that the atrocities of the past do “[bleed] into the present” (Akbar 2021), for as Lucy, one of the nineteenth-century Black characters, says, “The past is branded all over my body” (Pinnock 2020, 34), which literally refers to the branding that she underwent when she was a slave. Yet her declaration should also be read to allude to her dark complexion, which keeps singling her out. Like all Black people in Britain, she is regarded as separate. Clarke, Lou’s grandfather, who belongs to the Windrush generation, confirms this “special treatment” on his deathbed: “You know how many laws there are these days to ensure that black people are treated as equals? . . . They used to have the slave codes and now they have equality guidelines” (61).

That a new beginning is impossible is confirmed when Lucy’s husband Thomas, a free Black sailor, is recruited in 1840 on a merchant ship called *The Glory* that eventually proves to “trade in flesh” (56). When the ship reaches Cape Coast, Thomas—like the other Black sailors and prisoners on board—is “chained and manacled” and has “a clamp [put] around his mouth” (56). His eventual fate is not quite clear. According to one version, he is thrown overboard like “waste” (68) when the British Navy approach the ship in pursuit of illegal slave traders. Yet we find him again in the very last scene of the play, now an enslaved person on a plantation in Brazil where slavery is still in full swing. Whatever the way Thomas ends up, what matters is that he is eventually presented as a survivor of sorts in a long line of Black people victims of racism, whose names he recites at the very end of the play (79 and 80). His list includes, among others, David Oluwale and Stephen Lawrence, whose racially motivated murders respectively occurred in England in 1969 and 1993. Symbolically embodying the tragic fates of Black people over

several centuries, Thomas defiantly declares: “I survived the slave castles at Bonny, the *Zong* and Baptist massacres. I was there. Witnessed all. Survived it. I survived the fires of New Cross and Grenfell; Death in custody, through all this I lived.... I have lived and died ten million times. And I will live and live again” (79–80). His survival is only made possible by an awareness of the past and how it echoes again and again in the present.

This interconnection between then and now is also conveyed through Lou, the actress, whose name happens to be an anagram of Olu, the slave from the *Zong* who appears in the film as a spirit haunting Turner.³ The symbiosis of sorts between the two women, suggesting that nothing much has changed in more than two centuries, occasionally leads to some confusion between the twenty-first century woman, Lou, and her eighteenth-century character, Olu. At some stage, for example, there is a violent scene in the film during which Olu is force-fed and brutally whipped by white sailors. All of a sudden Lou leaves the script and retaliates by turning the whip against her aggressor, “as though she is possessed” (44). Although Lou dismisses the incident as a joke, one understands that she has literally become the woman whose role she is supposed to play to the point that she actually bears bloody whip marks on her back (45), which makes her conclude that “they think it’s just history, but it isn’t” (46). Likewise, Lou argues with Trevor, the (Black) director of the film, because she realizes that “all the wonderful material about Olu’s life before she was captured” (37) has disappeared from the script, apparently to meet the “conditions for the grant from the Abolition Legacy Foundation” (38)—another reference to the way capitalism, and possibly white people, keep silencing Black history. Significantly, in the revised script, the focus has been displaced to Olu’s nakedness and the violence she undergoes at the hands of the slavers, in other words, to the “torture porn” (45)

that is often associated with representations of slavery. Olu is now just an apparition in Turner's story, which in turn makes Lou feel like a ghost two hundred years later and triggers this statement significantly uttered in the first-person plural, thus encompassing Olu and herself: "We're always playing ghosts in one way or another. We're not seen as real functioning people" (39). Ironically, it is only in a U.S. science-fiction television series taking place in a distant future that Lou can get a substantial role as the captain of a spaceship that captures rebellious androids and transports them to an island called Phobos—an intriguing reversal of the transatlantic slave trade.

This is only a selection of the numerous examples that could illustrate Pinnock's emphatic and straightforward approach to what she calls in her introductory note to the play "the ongoing legacy of the slave trade" (9). This tragic, but often ignored, inheritance is also suggested in the play's title but in a more oblique way. *Rockets and Blue Lights* is a painting by J. M. W. Turner that, like *The Slave Ship*, is claimed by Pinnock as an inspiration for her play (Pinnock 2020, 9). According to the audio description on the site of The Clark Museum, where *Rockets and Blue Lights* is now housed, the canvas represents a "steamboat in trouble," with flares "exploding in the sky to alert ships to the location of shallow (shoal) water," possibly recording "the use of a piece of new technology," the Manby apparatus. Interestingly, it "may have been intended as a companion to *The Slave Ship*," the cool blues and grays of the former contrasting with the hot reds of the latter ("Description": The Clark Museum, n.d.). As Baucom (2005) reminds us, both paintings were indeed exhibited in 1840 at the Royal Academy, facing each other, in such a way as to oppose "an emergent, modernized present," in other words, progress, to the traumatic past, "while indicating that there really is no choice, only an occasion for disinterested sympathy and

decent burial (of the dead, of the slave trade) that the living might live on unhaunted by these specters of the Atlantic” (282). That Pinnock selected *Rockets and Blue Lights* as the title of her play is therefore highly ironic, for it alludes to the tendency to privilege the myth of the “better times we live in,” to use Tony Blair’s words, rather than face uncomfortable historical truths. The play does not shy away from these—for example, through the tragic story of Meg, an old African runaway in London whose son was mutilated by her owner after she had herself tried to kill the child so that he would escape slavery. However, the painting *Rockets and Blue Lights* might have provided Turner with a possible distraction from such horrors. As Lou explains, “I imagine [Turner] found consolation in that blue sky after working on *Slavers*. He had to cleanse himself from the darkness of his vision” (Pinnock 2020, 72–73). Yet, in line with the complexity of Pinnock’s narrative, there is an extra twist to the deceptive idea that *Rockets and Blue Lights*, and indeed the emancipation of slaves, may offer some relief from the atrocities of the slave trade. For in the account of what happened to *The Glory*, the ship on which Thomas embarked for his last voyage in 1840, one realizes that when the Navy found out that the ship “took on living flesh” they “sent up their rockets and blue lights” (62), a possibly beautiful “explosion of blue light . . . like we are walking in the heavens” (78), which nevertheless leads to the slaves being thrown overboard, yet again.

Bridges between past and present are less obvious in Scott’s *Dangerous Freedom*, which, unlike Pinnock’s sprawling play, is set entirely in the past and contains a single narrative thread: the fictional story of Elizabeth d’Aviniere, a British historical figure who has remained mysterious in spite of having been famously portrayed with her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray by David Martin in his 1778 painting and represented in *Belle*, a 2013 film by

Amma Asante and an eponymous tie-in novel published in 2014 by Paula Byrne. Illegitimate daughter of Scottish naval officer John Lindsay and an African slave called Maria Belle, Elizabeth was born in 1761 (on board her father's slave ship, according to Scott's fiction) and died in 1804 in London, where she had lived most of her life. Scott's biographical novel alternates between the narrative present, the very beginning of the nineteenth century, when the protagonist lives with her Black husband John d'Aviniere and her children in Pimlico, and her obsessive reminiscences of her mother and her traumatic early life, largely spent in Caen Wood, the prestigious residence of her great-uncle, Lord Mansfield.⁴ There, she was known as Dido Belle, a name that encapsulates both her African origins, via the famous Queen of Carthage,⁵ and the fact that Black women have often been seen as "belles," that is, as sexually accessible individuals. Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth rejects this discriminatory patronym that is evocative of the slave status legally inherited from her mother and that means that she is just "property" (Scott 2020, 184) or "cargo" (186), a point that is acutely brought home to her when she overhears conversations about the *Zong* affair in her great-uncle's drawing room.

Despite its apparent anchorage in the historical past, Elizabeth's slow-paced and introspective narrative abounds in clues that suggest associations with more recent events and therefore confirm the indefectible links between the institution of transatlantic slavery and contemporary racism, even in its more recent expressions.⁶ As a young child, Elizabeth travels from Pensacola in Florida to England with her parents, and the description of her arrival in London via the Thames is strangely redolent of the accounts of the migrants from the Windrush generation. Like most of them, the little girl is at first struck by the surrounding daytime darkness and by the falling snow, whose

whiteness and coldness announce the exclusionary treatment that awaits her there, to conclude that in the new country “Everything was new and different” (39). Once in England Elizabeth is separated from her Black mother to be brought up by her white father’s family, allegedly for her safety—a decision that smacks of the institutionalization or adoption imposed on mixed-race children in many former colonial countries like Canada, Australia, or Congo in the twentieth century. But instead of getting recognition as a member of her father’s clan, Elizabeth is faced with recurrent instances of exclusion due to her illegitimacy and above all the color of her skin, a difference perceived as a form of ultimate otherness. For example, she is not allowed to share meals with the members of Lord Mansfield’s household but has to eat in the pantry by herself or with the servants. She also has a room in the attic (73), a possible connection with the situation of the white creole in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. And in spite of genuine intellectual intimacy with Lord Mansfield, whose amanuensis she eventually becomes, she is not given her financial fair share in his will, which nevertheless stipulates that she is finally free (205).

It is probably the comparison with her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray, aka Beth, that most glaringly reveals in Scott’s novel the double standards that prevail in the way the mixed-race girl is dealt with by her entourage. The two girls are indeed taken in by their respective father’s aunt and uncle at an early age. Both children are immigrants of sorts, have a foreign mother—Polish in Beth’s case—and have an unusual accent when arriving at Caen Wood.⁷ Yet Beth finally manages to unproblematically blend in—incidentally very much like Lord Mansfield, who took elocution lessons to get rid of his Scottish accent when he arrived in London from the north (83). As a consequence, white Beth is treated in all respects like a lady, a status that her Black cousin can never

imagine to achieve because of her dark complexion. She is indeed “both in and out, neither one thing nor another” (99), “in the family and not of the family” (221). Similarly, Elizabeth’s kids are ““kind of cousins”” (124, my emphasis) to Beth’s children, corroborating the enduring impact of “this colour, the human stain [her father’s family] thought she had upon her skin” (242).

All these examples vividly conjure the rejection experienced by twentieth-century Caribbean migrants to England, who were made to feel that they did not belong to the so-called Mother country. Elizabeth’s story as told by Scott thus suggests that things have not fundamentally changed since the *Zong*, as also confirmed more recently by the forced repatriations that members of the Windrush generation were threatened with in 2018 and that were actually enforced in some cases. Unsurprisingly, it is possible to draw clear parallels between this recent scandal and the truly pervasive presence in *Dangerous Freedom* of slave catchers who capture Black people living in England, whether free or not, and sell them to slave traders. This constant and terrible threat of capture, also evoked in *Rockets and Blue Lights* via Thomas’s story, mars Elizabeth’s life as a child and as an adult, as she is keenly aware of “history repeating itself” (94) and fears for the safety of her own sons, one of whom actually manages to escape from the clutches of a kidnapper. Interestingly, these kidnappings recall the greed animating the owners of the *Zong* and confirm the words of Elizabeth’s mother, that “Trade, the trade is everything” (114), which is also evidenced in the different legal decisions made by Lord Mansfield.

Rockets and Blue Lights and *Dangerous Freedom* amply establish that what happened long ago with the *Zong* is “not finished with” (Scott 2020, 122), to borrow Elizabeth’s words in Scott’s novel. This implies the need for vigilance, for, as Caryl

Phillips writes, “History has taught me that for people such as myself the rules will change” (2001, 308), and freedom will always be provisional or even dangerous, as the puzzling title of Scott’s novel makes clear. However, these two recent texts do not limit themselves to updating the *Zong* affair and demonstrating the enduring circularity of history. Their topicality also resides in their complex exploration, notably via their ekphrastic dimension, of burning questions that concern identity politics and that have been recently debated, notably in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Both *Rockets and Blue Lights* and *Dangerous Freedom* give center stage to famous paintings and interrogate the relevance of these enigmatic pictures as visual archives able to inform us about the *Zong* case and the slave trade in general. As already mentioned, Pinnock’s play revolves around Turner’s painting *The Slave Ship*, and in a more marginal way *Rockets and Blue Lights*. As James Walvin (2011) writes about the first of these two works, it “poses troubling questions about what it depicts, as well as why it was painted” (3) and is “a mosaic of perplexing issues” (4). Pinnock approaches these undogmatically and without trying to impose closure on the debate around Turner’s infamous masterpiece. She does not use it as a mystery to be solved, but rather as a stepping stone for further reflection about the historical amnesia surrounding the slave trade and the politics of artistic representation, as shown in the introductory scene where two twenty-first-century Black women share their diverging views of Turner’s reproduction of the *Zong*. Their conversation underlines not only the ambiguity inherent in *The Slave Ship* but also the peculiar fascination that the intriguing canvas can exert on anyone looking at it, not only because of its striking beauty and rich colors but mostly because of the nightmarish massacre that it represents and the invisibility of its victims. While one

character, Essie, a teacher, views the painting as a work of art bearing witness to the notorious carnage and obliging the viewer to imagine what actually took place, the other one, Lou, the actress mentioned earlier, believes that it “contributes to the abolitionist narrative of white saviourism” (Pinnock 2020, 11) while it was actually made for the enslaved (72).

No clear conclusion can be drawn about Turner’s intentions in painting the eighteenth-century killings. The play presents the English artist as a tortured individual with mental issues and domestic problems of his own and questions whether he can validly be a spokesperson for the drowned slaves that he represents in the margin of his painting. Not only does Pinnock depict Turner as a man who invested in sugar works when he was young but she also suggests that an unconditional solidarity with Black people on the part of white people is all but impossible, thereby undermining the myth of “white saviourism.” For example, Thomas and the character of Turner in the play are both recruited on board *The Glory* and start up a friendship on the grounds that “Men of our class must stick together” (Pinnock 2020, 26), but Turner eventually betrays his alleged new friend by participating in his enslavement when he is made to think that the latter is preparing an insurrection. When Thomas is fettered, Turner declares in a cowardly fashion, “Leave me out of it. It’s got nothing to do with me” (56). Likewise, Roy, the actor playing Turner in the film at the heart of the play, claims that he has suffered as a working-class man, that his ancestors were “as good as slaves” (71), and that he is therefore an ideal ally for Lou. Still, he does not really defend her when she is partly written out of the film, simply because he wants the film to be made at all cost. Again, Turner’s disloyalty in the nineteenth-century narrative is mirrored in the contemporary plot to make the point that mentalities have not truly evolved and that white people’s

interests eventually take over when they are expected to act or stand up for Black people in critical situations.

Like *Rockets and Blue Lights*, Scott's *Dangerous Freedom* relies on a visual archive—David Martin's well-known but enigmatic portrait of the two cousins raised by Lord Mansfield and his wife—to generate a number of questions about the white representation of Black lives. Chapter 14 of the novel is almost entirely devoted to the depiction of the two girls, which is evoked via Elizabeth d'Aviniere's recollections of her childhood as Dido. She is twenty when she reluctantly agrees, on her great-uncle's insistence, to "be fitted in" (Scott 2020, 171) and "added for effect" (172) to the portrait that was originally meant to be just Beth's. The finished painting, which is one of the very few traces of her left in history, shocks her. Her fake, orientalized look—achieved thanks to the accessories that her own father brought back from India—angers her, because she feels they turn her into a "performing monkey" (177).⁸ The portrait not only creates in the young woman a feeling of intense betrayal and helplessness, but it also engenders in her an identity crisis expressed via a long string of questions: "Who was she? . . . Who was this turbaned, bejewelled, bare-chested, dusky, tawny woman being ushered forward by Lady Elizabeth Murray's gentle coaxing hand? . . . Was she being ridiculed, subtly?" (176-77). The way the painter represents her—in fact, "capture[s]" (163) her—somehow comes as a confirmation of the unreliability of the white people around her and the fact that her relationship with them is bound to be conflicted. She stands on her own, for if Beth is "her first real friend" (67), she is also her rival and cannot be trusted, for she is unpredictable—"All in the twinkle of an eye it could be one thing, and then quite another" (122). In the same way, Elizabeth describes Lord Mansfield as both "goaler and liberator" (208), both "her Master and champion protector, an uneasy

combination” (239). Elizabeth realizes the full extent of her white entourage’s duplicity when she is told by Beth that they have withheld the many letters that she sent to and received from her mother over twenty-eight years, allegedly “for [her] own good” (133). This long-lasting deception, whose revelation corroborates Elizabeth’s long-standing bondage and constitutes a turning point in her endeavors to understand herself, is a compelling metaphor for white people’s silencing of Black voices and their obliteration of Black archives, the better to impose their own vision of the world and hence their authority.

No doubt Scott had this issue in mind when he finalized *Dangerous Freedom*. One of the questions asked him during the online interviews that coincided with the launch of his novel was whether it was a problem for him, as a *white* writer of Caribbean descent, to tell the story of a *Black* woman. Couldn’t he be accused of appropriating a history that was not fully his? Significantly, Scott revealed in answer to such questions that he had changed the narrative perspective of his text, from the first person used in the early drafts to the third person in the published version, a narratological distance supposedly meant to avoid accusations of misappropriation. The novelist still provides direct access to Elizabeth’s fictional voice, and that of her mother, via the inclusion in the narrative of the letters exchanged between the two women—which constitute a “contrasting [archive]” (192) to the portrait. Still, he has obviously taken great care to approach his protagonist with respect and nuance—not speaking for her or on her behalf, but giving voice to her story. Unlike Asante’s film *Belle*, which, according to Ulrike Pirker in an article on the movie’s politics of representation, compensates for the “dearth of records” (2020, 209) by insisting on “Belle’s exceptionality” (212), *Dangerous Freedom* counters the exclusionary treatment meted out to Elizabeth by her white family by focusing on the “quiet

domesticity” (Scott 2020, 177), the normality, of its protagonist’s life. Moreover, while the plot of the film romanticizes the life of Lord Mansfield’s great-niece and suggests at the end that “they lived happily ever after” (Pirker 2020, 215), the novel constantly draws attention to the ambiguity of the people surrounding Elizabeth and ends with her death from a long-lasting lung disease when she is only forty-three. This deglamorizes Elizabeth’s story, even if she is eventually able to establish some epistolary contact with her mother, who now lives on the other side of the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, there are two white figures in Elizabeth’s story on whom she can count, unlike in Pinnock’s play, which rules out any possibility of such solidarity between the two different racial groups. The first one is her faithful white housemaid, Lydia, who is significantly Irish, and thus an outsider like her mistress. The other white ally for the protagonist of *Dangerous Freedom* is Mr. Bridges, the tutor of her children but also a Quaker involved in the abolitionist campaign. As his name indicates, this man is a passer, a facilitator, who works hard with Elizabeth to ensure the (posthumous) publication of a book “compiled of fragments of her story put together with the letters to and from her mother” (Scott 2020, 275), “not in any way tampered with for publication” (265). Mr. Bridges, who might be regarded as an alter ego of Lawrence Scott, contributes to giving a voice to Elizabeth and her mother, two women whose narratives had originally been obliterated by the Mansfield family. Unlike other abolitionist figures—for example, Mr. Pringle in Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress*—Mr. Bridges is not intent on interfering with the stories he helps to bring into print, just like Scott, whose novel provides us with a carefully empathetic imaginative rendering of Elizabeth’s life.

As m. nourbeSe philip writes in “Notanda,” a nonfiction prose section in *Zong!*, there is a tidal quality to the way memories of

the *Zong* (Philip 2008, 201) come back again and again, which is linked to their persistently haunting character. *Rockets and Blue Light* and *Dangerous Freedom* undoubtedly belong to the latest wave of narratives around this massacre but are by no means the last ones. Remarkably echoing the spirit of the twenty-first century, 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, while adding other layers of understanding to what this now well-known tragedy, and the historical figures linked to it, mean for the present. In that sense, Pinnock's and Scott's insightful explorations of the legacy of the slave trade confirm Baucom's conclusions to his *Specters of the Atlantic*: that "the labor of resuscitation remains perpetually unfinished and unending" (2005, 332), history "[coming] to us not only as flash or revelation but piling up" (333).

NOTES

1. For a more detailed account of the literary and film production relating to the *Zong*, see, for example, James Ward, "Memory and Atrocity: Representing the *Zong*" (2018).
2. In *Living Cargo*, Blevins (2016) comments on a slightly different version of Blair's 2006 declaration (34 and 36), describing it as "joyful presentism" (36).
3. There is also a minor character called Billie, who appears in both the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century narrative threads. In both cases, he meets with a tragic fate.
4. Caen Wood is an early spelling of the better-known Kenwood House, which, in a sense represents another type of archive that Scott is working with in this novel. The

Mansfields' country house is an important symbol of national belonging from which Elizabeth is excluded because of her complexion. Scott's focus on what happened in this "great house" is also another way of understanding the "unhousing of the archives." For more on the English country house and the Black presence, see Fowler (2020), especially Chapter 4.

5. In a section of *Zong!* entitled "Notanda," m. nourbeSe philip explains that the name Dido surfaces in her poem in reference to the African historical figure and that she was only later made aware of the links with the *Zong* via Lord Mansfield's great-niece (philip 2008, 206).
6. Lawrence Scott has said in an interview that the writing of the novel predated the Windrush scandal and the Black Lives Matter movement, but his intention had always been to "add to our understanding of a pain that remains just below the surface of contemporary life" (Lancastre 2021).
7. The two girls are also given the same name when they are baptized, Elizabeth, but one is nicknamed "Dido," with all the prejudices and defamiliarization this implies, while the other is called Beth, a shortened form of her original name that suggests familiarity and thus belonging.
8. Elizabeth can be regarded as a "sort of a pet" (Scott 2020, 127) in the Mansfield household, a role often played by Black children in the eighteenth century. Like a dog, she is described as "ready to fetch" (196); she sits "at [Lord Mansfield's] knee" (203) and has to sleep "on the floor at the foot of the bed" (215) when Lord Mansfield wakes his sick wife. Mungo in Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* is also a kind of pet in Lord Montague's household and can be viewed in James Ward's words as a "regendered version"

of Lord Mansfield's great-niece (208).

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