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Anagrams of annihilation: The (im)possible writing of the middle passage in NourbeSe Philip and Édouard Glissant

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse how an event like the Zong massacre and its uncomfortable traumatic memories can be used to investigate and unlock the biopolitical nature of the transatlantic slave economy and its literary representations. Given the centrality of the slave trade in the development of modern capitalist societies, the article questions why and how recent theories of biopolitics – which underscore the ambivalent relation between power and life in modern societies – have avoided considering slavery and the plantation system as pivotal aspects in the genealogy of the contemporary forms of sovereignty and governance. Within this wider framework, the article considers how the specific engagement of several Caribbean writers with the unspeakable core of dehumanization and silencing produced by slavery is paradoxically capable – through a turbulent and painful confrontation with language, memory, 'bare life' and the historical unconscious – of developing effective responses to those overwhelming structures. In particular, the work of NourbeSe Philip in her poem Zong! *(2008) and Édouard Glissant's poetic and philosophical confrontation with the abyss of absolute loss show us how writing can specifically engage with the inherent ambivalence of biopolitics: the language of the Law, with its tremendous power of capturing and sometimes undermining or destroying life, and the creative power of language itself to reshape identities and subjects, both on a personal and on a collective level. These openings allow us to imagine and perform empowering and creative relations between life and its forms, which can be considered as attempts to inaugurate an affirmative biopolitics in our present.*

Keywords

biopolitics
slave trade
poetic language
bare life
Édouard Glissant
NourbeSe Philip
Zong

Résumé

Cet article vise à analyser comment un événement tel que le massacre du Zong, avec ses mémoires pénibles, peut fonctionner de manière paradigmatique pour révéler la nature biopolitique de la traite transatlantique et de ses représentations littéraires. Étant donné le caractère central de l'économie de plantation esclavagiste pour le développement des sociétés capitalistes, l'article se demande pourquoi et comment les théories biopolitiques les plus récentes – lesquelles s'interrogent sur la relation entre le pouvoir et la vie dans les sociétés contemporaines – ont évité de considérer l'esclavage et la plantation comme des aspects centraux dans la généalogie des formes contemporaines de la souveraineté et de la gouvernementalité. Dans ce cadre plus large, l'article examine comment l'engagement spécifique de plusieurs

écrivains antillais avec le noyau indicible de déshumanisation et de silence qui est au cœur de l'esclavage est capable – à travers un affrontement douloureux avec le langage, la mémoire, l'inconscient historique et la « vie nue » – de développer des réponses effectives à ces structures accablantes. L'impressionnant travail de NourbeSe Philip sur le langage dans son poème Zong ! *(2008) et l'affrontement poétique et philosophique de Glissant avec l'abyme de perte absolue du sens, nous montrent comment l'écriture peut faire face à l'ambivalence constitutive de la biopolitique : le langage de la Loi, avec son pouvoir de capture et parfois de destruction de la vie, et la puissance créatrice du langage, capable de refaçonner les identités et les sujets sur un plan individuel et collectif. Ces ouvertures nous autorisent à imaginer et réaliser des dynamiques créatrices entre la vie et ses formes, qu'on peut considérer comme des efforts d'inaugurer une biopolitique affirmative dans notre présent.*

> Alors le tourment se répandit alentour, s'alentit et dormit pendant des temps, rejaillit avec des éclaboussures de lumière et d'ardeur, disparut encore pour flamber à nouveau dans une poitrine ou une tête ou une foule exaspérée.
>
> (Glissant 1981b: 167)

> the ship sailed
> the rains came
> the loss arose
>
> the negroes are
>
> the truth is
>
> (*Zong!* # 14, Philip 2008)

The slave ship Zong: A biopolitical paradigm for Atlantic modernity

In September 1781, a merchant ship called the Zong sailed from West Africa with 470 slaves, bound for Jamaica. It was captained by Luke Collingwood and owned by a family from Liverpool, the Gregsons. The cargo was fully insured according to the standard marine insurance policies of the time. Instead of the customary six to nine weeks, the voyage took four months on account of the captain's navigational errors. By 27 November, 60 Africans and seven crewmembers had succumbed to a sickness that was ravaging the ship. It is believed that 40 other slaves may have thrown themselves into the ocean as a result of fear, suffering and lack of food. Captain Collingwood, realizing that the insurers would not compensate losses generated by sickness, decided to jettison, and thus murder, 132 slaves. He cited a 'lack of water' to justify his decision and was never accused or prosecuted for murder. This type of loss would be compensated under the insurance policy that secured the value of the human merchandise shipped by the Zong. In fact, the operating laws of property had conferred on each of the slave bodies a measurable and recoverable quantity of value, reducing their life to exchange value (Baucom 2005). The Captain was of the belief that if the slaves on board died a natural death, the owners of the ship would have to bear the cost, but if they were 'thrown alive into the sea, it would be the loss of the underwriters' (Philip 2008: 210), as stated in the report of the case that

followed, named *Gregson v. Gilbert*. When the insurers refused to pay out for the losses incurred in the Zong, the Gregsons appealed to the court. The captain Luke Collingwood was already dead when the jury found the insurers liable and ordered them to compensate the ship's owners for their losses: the 132 murdered slaves.

The legal report of the case is the only archival record of this tragic episode, which was destined to become exemplar and to play an important role in the abolitionist campaign in Britain and the United States. As James Walvin writes in *Black Ivory*, 'the line of dissent from the Zong case to the successful campaign for abolition of slavery was direct and unbroken, however protracted and uneven' (2001: 19). The case was followed by such abolitionists as Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharpe, who personally funded an appeal of the first verdict and attempted, without success, to open a case for murder by sending a petition to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. Sharpe also dispatched a stream of letters about the massacre to the London papers, and the abolitionist cause owed a great deal of its early energy to the outrage occasioned by the murder. The terrible story of the massacre soon assumed, as recounted by Ian Baucom, 'its canonical form as a monument to the horrors of the slave trade' (2001: 64): for example in William Wilberforce's speeches at the House of Commons or in William Turner's 1840 canvas *The Slave Ship* – which was originally entitled *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. The atrocious scene of the Zong soon acquired a universal and exemplar value, becoming a symbol of the intolerable violence and inhumanity on which the circum-Atlantic economy was based. Such a scene returns again and again as a spectral presence in contemporary Caribbean imaginary and cultural production: a sort of textual cenotaph to the paradigmatic figure of the *drowning human body* (the comparison is particularly fitting, as a cenotaph is an empty tomb or a monument erected in honour of a person or a group of people whose remains are elsewhere). We use the term 'paradigm' in more or less the same sense in which Giorgio Agamben interprets the Nazi concentration camp as a paradigm of the actual planetary biopolitical order. According to him,

> what the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment it exhibits and delimits it [...]. The example is truly a *paradigm* in the etymological sense: it is what is "shown beside", and a class can contain everything except its own paradigm.
>
> (Agamben 1998: 22)

In this sense, the drowning human bodies of the Zong 'step out' as a paradigmatic figure of the biopolitical apparatus of slavery and of the 'state of exception' composing the global capitalist modernity.

This article aims to analyse how an event like the Zong massacre and its uncomfortable memories can unlock the overall biopolitical nature of the transatlantic slave system and economy. Given the centrality of the slave trade in the development of modern capitalist societies (Williams [1944] 1994), the article questions why and how recent theories of biopolitics – which underscore the ambivalent relation between politics and life

in contemporary societies – have avoided considering slavery and the plantation system as pivotal aspects in the genealogy of the biopolitical apparatuses regulating the global mechanisms of sovereignty and governance. Within this wider framework, this analysis considers how the specific engagement of some contemporary Caribbean authors with the unspeakable core of dehumanization and silencing produced by slavery is paradoxically capable – through a turbulent and painful confrontation with language, memory, silence and the historical unconscious – of developing some effective responses to those overwhelming structures. In particular, the creative work of NourbeSe Philip and Édouard Glissant shows us how writing can specifically engage with this multifarious relation between the language of the Law, with its tremendous power of capturing and sometimes undermining or destroying life, and the creative power of language itself to reshape identities and subjects, both on a personal and on a collective level. These openings may allow us to imagine and perform empowering and creative relations between life and its forms, which can be considered as attempts to inaugurate an 'affirmative biopolitics' (Esposito 2008) in our present.

The story of the Zong tends to repeat itself, to multiply, to accumulate and to recur. It refuses to remain confined in a delimited spatiotemporal frame and context. As we will see, repetition, accumulation and im/possibility seem to be the main tropes of this narrative on several levels. This is precisely what reveals its haunting and uncanny position inside the black Atlantic biopolitical modernity: its restraints and its unpredictable potentialities. It is a story that cannot be told and yet must be told and *un*-tells itself again and again. Like the tale elliptically narrated in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, 'this is not a story to pass on' (1987: 275). It is a story, many stories indeed, which have been abandoned to an underwater space of oblivion and annihilation. At the same time, those silenced stories ask us to find the language and the form to convey and relate them, to bear witness to this silence. It is a tale about a terrific and traumatic event that never fails to return: an abyss that haunts and disrupts every consequent narrative of progress, emancipation or development. It puts our temporality 'out of joint', collapsing the reassuring difference between the past, the present and the future. This essentially aporetic and asynchronous quality and the different strategies of engagement of literature with its im/possibility and its un/telling will be the main focus of this research.

Beyond its historical value and exemplarity and its dramatic impact, the Zong case stands out as a perfect example of the biopolitical nature of the legal, economical and racist device structuring the rise of the western capitalist economy, of which the Atlantic slave trade and the plantation system undeniably represent a constitutive element. As also noted by Ian Baucom, the tight bondage between sovereign power, law, exchange, life and death structuring the black Atlantic triangle renders this scene not only an apocalypse of death but also an 'apocalypse of money' (2001: 62). In fact, by pedantically following the contract of insurance, captain Collingwood had produced something of value in each of those moments in which a slave's body hit the surface of the sea: 'an apocalypse in which, through the metaphoric imagination of the capital, death and the money form name one another as literal equivalents' (Baucom 2001). Thanks to

the biopolitical and legal devices that allow and regulate the slave trade, a monetary value can be conferred onto human life, transforming it into 'property' and 'chattels', and thus into an object of economic exchange, value, loss and compensation. Moreover, as Baucom states in an important chapter of his *Specters of the Atlantic. Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*,

> the full catastrophe and evil of the slave trade included its ability not only to turn human beings into a form of property but to treat them as a species of money, to regard them, on the point of sale in the new world, as the account deposits for a network of interest-bearing bonds.
>
> (2005: 90)

As the literary work of NourbeSe Philip and Édouard Glissant shows, such an event turns out to be an apocalypse of *language* too. The act of writing must face this unrecoverable loss of meaning.

According to the operating protocols of property and profit, the captain of the Zong was not a murderer but someone who acted correctly to maximize profits at a moment of great risk for the interests of the owners and the investors. Irrespective of whether this implied killing the slaves or keeping them alive to be sold on a slave market in Jamaica, captain Collingwood acts as an executor of an absolute power of life and death: he holds the power to keep those bodies alive or abandon them to death. Without losing its specificity, this tragic and almost unbelievable event 'steps out' as a paradigmatic example of a more generalized and diffused space of exception, which configures the slavery system and the colonial order as a fundamental counterpart in the genealogy of the modern biopolitical space and model of sovereignty. The paradigmatic figure of the drowning human body, in its sublime tragedy, is perhaps the absolute zero point in the objectification and commodification of the human inside the capitalist order of modernity. In the colonial state of exception nurtured by the Middle Passage, the human 'qualified life' is reduced by the legal, economic and ideological apparatuses that compose the black Atlantic triangle, to an absolutely killable 'bare life' – to use Agamben's well-known concepts developed in *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). The biopolitical apparatus of slavery worked by capturing and marketing human beings on the coasts of Africa and by transforming them into 'chattels' to be sold on the slave markets. It is the real foundation of the plantation economic system and its continuous legacy of racism, segregation and destruction of life. For this reason, the transatlantic and Caribbean involvement in modern biopolitics is extremely evident and significant and its abyss of violence and terror is a foundational element of modernity. Colonial domination, deportation, slavery and the Middle Passage are not only a founding step in the genealogy of western capitalist modes of production, circulation and exchange. Through the massive development of slavery and the plantation system, modern biopower has developed and carried out some of its cruellest and most effective devices of capture, government, discipline, subjugation and negation of life. In a certain sense, it can be stated that slavery and colonial domination, with their practices of dominion and subjugation of the bodies, and also with

their legal formalization and their racist social and ideological structures, have constituted a veritable *laboratory* of biopolitics in the western modernity.[1]

Biopolitics and slavery: Facing the unspeakable

What does it mean to situate the transatlantic slavery and plantation system *inside* the modern genealogy of biopolitics and what kind of engagement does postcolonial literature establish with it? Before considering the kind of creative confrontation that literature is able to put in place with this biopolitical core of dehumanization and unspeakability, let us make more explicit the fundamental link between the 'seuil de modernité biologique' (Foucault 1976: 188), as it is described by Michel Foucault and further developed by such philosophers as Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, and the structural violence of slavery, colonialism and racism. As Foucault writes in a famous passage of *La volonté de savoir* (1976), the extension of power over biological life marked the emergence of modernity. He defines biopolitics as 'ce qui fait entrer la vie et ses mécanismes dans le domaine des calculs explicites et fait du pouvoir-savoir un agent de transformation de la vie humaine' (Foucault 1976: 188). What Foucault tries to point out with the biopolitical threshold is a shift in the art of government and in sovereignty that happened in Europe around the eighteenth century:

> Mais ce qu'on pourrait appeler le 'seuil de modernité biologique' d'une société se situe au moment où l'espèce entre comme enjeu dans ses propres stratégies politiques. L'homme, pendant des millénaires, est resté ce qu'il était pour Aristote: un animal vivant et de plus capable d'une existence politique; l'homme moderne est un animal dans la politique duquel sa vie d'être vivant est en question.
>
> (1976: 188)

This historical transition witnessed the increasing development of strategies and devices of government that focused on the objectification and normalization of the bodies and populations. Their aim was to forge a docile body, 'qui peut être soumis, qui peut être utilisé, qui peut être transformé et perfectionné' (Foucault 1975: 160). As both Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito have stressed in their recent studies, the twentieth century – in particular with the concentration camps and Nazi applications of eugenics – has brought about in the most brutal and definitive way this reversal from a politics of life or over life to a politics of death.

Contrary to Foucault's suggestion that biopower was a western modern innovation, this study argues that the very need to produce and accumulate life was itself engendered in the Atlantic world by the assemblages of chattel slavery. In the plantation system we can already identify some of the most specific implementations of the biopolitical 'droit de mort et pouvoir sur la vie' (Foucault 1976: 183): the pervasive and intimate control, surveillance and 'care' of the body to increase its productivity. For instance, in the *Code noir*, the legal text drafted in 1685 by Colbert regulating the slave trade and the plantation system in the French colonies, slaves are personal property (chattels) but paradoxically, at the same time, they do have a soul in a Christian sense: an infantilized soul conceived to better imprison and

1. For an in-depth reading of the relation between Foucault's work on biopower and colonial racism, see Stoler (1995).

enslave their bodies. This document could be read in its entirety as the ultimate example of what biopolitics means: the body is captured and reduced to 'bare life' through the legal apparatus, overlapping religious discourse, the instrumental and economic care of the slave's body, the most brutal physical punishment and, above all, its complete commodification, as stated in the infamous article 44: 'Déclarons les esclaves être meubles et comme tels entrer dans la communauté' (Castaldo 2006).

The concept of 'relation of exception' has been introduced by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (1998), relying on Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. With 'exception' the philosopher means a relation of articulation between space and power that is not based on the simple distinction between an inside and an outside, but on a 'threshold of indistinction' between the two, where 'what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to the rule' (Agamben 1998: 17). The mechanism of inclusion in the space of sovereignty paradoxically functions through exclusion and abandonment. Exception is a kind of 'inclusive exclusion' (Agamben 1998: 21), where the subject is included in the rule precisely *by* being excluded from it: 'what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule's suspension. *The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it*' (Agamben 1998: 17–18, original emphasis). According to Agamben, the modern genealogy of the 'state of exception' has found its most definitive and world-spreading accomplishment in the institution of the concentration camps, which he defines as 'the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet' (Agamben 1998: 45). As he claims in the third volume he devotes to the study of biopolitical sovereignty, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (G. Agamben, 1999), the Nazi concentration camps have pushed the original project of biopower towards its extreme limit: the complete separation, inside the human being, of the *living* and the *speaking*, of 'bare life' and the possibility of language itself. As far as writing is concerned, this split implies a fundamental confrontation of creative language with this absolute negativity: the impossibility and the necessity, at the same time, to bear witness for this abyss of violence and negation of life. However, a severe shortcoming of Agamben's theory of exception, and mainly of the biopolitical theory, is that it remains firmly Eurocentric, almost ignoring colonialism and its contemporary legacies in the globalized world system. Nonetheless, in his much-quoted article 'What is a camp?' the Italian philosopher refers briefly to colonialism while he retraces the genealogy of the camps:

> Historians debate whether the first appearance of camps ought to be identified with the *campos de concentraciones* that were created in 1896 by the Spaniards in Cuba in order to repress the insurrection of that colony's population, or rather with the *concentration camps* into which the English herded the Boers at the beginning of the twentieth century. What matters here is that in both cases one is dealing with the extension to an entire civilian population of a state of exception linked to a colonial war.
>
> (Agamben 2000: 38, original emphasis)

The Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire had already been very explicit in identifying the colonial genealogy of modern biopolitics. In a

famous and controversial introduction he wrote in 1948 to a collection of texts by the French abolitionist Victor Schœlcher, Césaire claims that the juridical mechanism of exception was already *the rule* in the European colonies, and that its extreme condensation in Nazi concentration camps only rendered the events that had happened for centuries in the colonial 'univers concentrationnaire' more explicit: 'l'Allemagne nazie n'a fait qu'appliquer en petit [*sic*] à l'Europe ce que l'Europe occidentale a appliqué pendant des siècles aux races qui eurent l'audace ou la maladresse de se trouver sur son chemin' (1948: 18). Such comparisons of different genocides must be undertaken with care not to conflate their specificities. However, Césaire rightly asserts that 'exception' as the biopolitical paradigm of government is the *nomos* of European colonial relations. Concerning the colonies, the state of exception has always been the rule: an apparatus of government aimed to guarantee and maintain the European privilege and interest through the differential inclusion of the Other through racism, segregation and dehumanization. This principle found its formal inscription in the French Republican Constitution of 1791, which established: 'Les colonies et possessions françaises dans l'Asie, l'Afrique et l'Amérique, quoiqu'elle fassent partie de l'Empire français, ne sont pas comprises dans la présente Constitution' (Godechot 1995: 67). The biopolitical regime of the colonial exception has certainly developed and transformed during the colonial and the postcolonial time, but it still structures the present forms of racist violence as 'exclusive inclusion' in our postcolonial societies, as explained recently by Sidi Mohammed Barkat in *Le corps d'exception*:

> Le colonisé [...] n'est pas à vrai dire un corps extérieur. Sa situation est une situation de dépendance, plus complexe donc de la simple extériorité. Le corps d'exception, enveloppe instituée qui recouvre tout un groupe que l'on n'admet pas dans la citoyenneté et auquel on attribue de manière arbitraire une homogénéité ethnique ou raciale [...] est encore un membre de la nation française. En effet, ce corps considéré comme indigne de la citoyenneté possède la qualité de français, de sorte qu'il est contenu dans cette société, inclus en tant que non compté, inclus en tant qu'exclu.
>
> (2005: 72)

Un-telling the abyss in NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008)

After the analysis of the biopolitical and thanatopolitical core of the black Atlantic historical experience, involving the relation between the Law and the bare life that it manages to produce, let us come back to the initial account of the Zong massacre and consider how literature deals with such a deep silencing: a story that cannot be told, yet must be told. Every attempt to bear witness for the victims and recover their true story must face its paradoxical impossibility: the absolute loss and the void that constitute the kernel of such an event. The Jewish poet Paul Celan, facing the dramatic experience of genocide and extermination camps with their absolute devastation of every language and meaning, wrote in his poem 'Aschenglorie' that 'no one / bears witness for the / witness' (Derrida 2000: 186): nobody can really speak for those who have definitely lost

every power to tell their own story. The account of the Zong massacre given above is not – and cannot be – its true story. The sea silenced the stories of the people carried and murdered every time the water, which became their grave, swallowed one of the 132 bodies up. This constitutive loss is irrecoverable.

In 2008, the Canadian poet born in Trinidad and Tobago, NourbeSe Philip, published an astonishing poem entitled *Zong!* (2008), which represents a perfect example of how the poetic work can deal with this abyss of silence and loss and with the paradoxical impossibility of testimony. There is another fundamental issue at stake here: the merely biopolitical confrontation between the language of the law and the body, and between the writing of the body and the body of writing – in an attempt to free or remove these lost bodies from that logic and language that has transformed them into an absolutely killable and exploitable bare life. As the author confirms in an interview with Patricia Saunders, this implies a creative and painful work inside the language itself:

> What I feel strongly is that we can't tell these stories in the traditional way, or the Western way of narrative – in terms of a beginning, a middle, and end. I think part of the challenge, certainly for me, was to find a form that could bear this 'not telling'. I think this is what *Zong!* is attempting: to find a form to bear this story which can't be told, which must be told, but through not telling.
>
> (2008: 72)

This is why she is compelled to avoid any temptation of producing linear and representative narratives or lyrical voices, which would risk neglecting the essential dimension of loss that constitutes the counter-memory of the event. Therefore, she is pushed towards a creative work that aims to subvert the language of law and dig into its silence, as she explains in the essay 'Notanda' that follows the last section of the poem:

> I enter a different land, a land of language – I allow the language to lead me somewhere – don't know where, but I trust. [...] My intent is to use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text, I would lock myself in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship Zong.
>
> (Philip 2008: 191)

The 500-words report of the trial, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, is included at the very end of the book as though to invert its dominant position in the archives. The entire poetic work of *Zong!* (2008) develops from this unique textual source and works through its language in an anagrammatic effort to unhinge its apparent order, logic and rationality, and to avoid and subvert every temptation to recover an uninterrupted narrative, a full voice or a decipherable meaning. 'It is a story' says Philip 'that cannot be told; a story

that in not telling must tell itself, using the language of the only publicly extant document directly bearing on these events' (2008: 199). The poet takes the letter of the archive and cuts, splits, rearranges and repeats words and phrases with a 'profoundly anti-narrative sensibility' (Fehskens 2012: 413). Every form of poetry and, more generally, of creative writing needs rules and formal boundaries with which to struggle in order to find its own effective and singular form. In this case, the author has chosen to limit herself to the legal text to avoid to be overwhelmed by madness, nonsense and intolerable pain. Lee M. Jenkins suggests that Philip's choice to use legal language makes the poem 'not *about* the event but *of* it, in a material sense' (2004: 172). Here, the form becomes the content, indeed: the form is the Thing itself that we, as readers, must deal with in an often disconcerting and disturbing experience of the impossibility of making sense of 'an event that eludes understanding, perhaps permanently' (Philip 2008: 198). The *Gregson v. Gilbert* report expresses in a language that is both utterly shocking and painfully direct the biopolitical and legal apparatus transforming human life into a 'subject of property': 'It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue' (2008: 211). The poet tries to unhinge precisely this language and the financial *Weltanschauung* it expresses. She does it by being attentive to its silences, in order to open the space for another language to emerge.

This becomes apparent from the graphical relation between the words, syllables or even onomatopoeic groups of letters and the white of the page. In the first poem, *Zong! # 1*, Philip starts from the phrase 'want of water' that she draws directly from the records of the trial: 'the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard' (2008: 210). She overturns it into 'water of want', a phrase that, as she writes, contains everything: 'birth, death, life – murder, the law, a microcosm – a universe' (Philip 2008: 191). She splits it into fragments, letters and syllables, and scatters them on the page. The word 'water' seems to struggle to be articulated across multiple lines. During a recording of the poem she performed in Toronto,[2] Philip read it with an increasing speed that seemed to mimic an echo and a babbling, a sigh and a scream, a groan and a rattle at the same time: a word that has to fight against its grave of water to be, as Philip says, 'exaqua', a neologism shaped on the homologous verb 'to exhume': to be resurfaced and be capable of speaking again. Both the sonic and the graphic dimensions become central in the composition of those poems. In *Zong!# 1* the disposition of the letters and syllables represents the waves whereas the white spaces, the silences, evoke the repeated falling of the bodies into the sea. The reader's eye is stimulated to move in every direction on the page, even moving inside these graphic choreographies, and to build connections and relations between words, fighting to make sense where all order and meaning has been destroyed. The intolerable violence and cruelty of the Zong slave ship is accordingly doubled by the measured and controlled violence operated by the poet on the legal text: 'I murder the text', writes Philip, 'literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning

2. http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Philip.php, accessed 10 March 2014.

adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting' (2008: 193).

Zong! (2008) is divided into six sections, whose titles, five in Latin and one in Yoruba, refer to different aspects of the massacre: Os, which means 'bones' and refers to both the necessity and the impossibility of retrieving and identifying the bones, to localize the dead, which is an essential gesture in every mourning (Derrida 1993); Sal and Ventus refer to the meteorological aspects linked with the experience of the deported people, to their physical suffering, dispersion and loss of meaning; Ratio, which means 'reason' but also refers to the legal language, where *ratio decidendi* indicates the central reason for a legal decision; Ferrum, 'iron', immediately brings to mind the chains that imprisoned the slaves on the ship, but also the iron bullets that were sometimes used to overthrow their bodies into the sea; and Ebora, the title of the final and almost unreadable session, which is the Yoruba name for the spirits of the sea. Whereas the first session retains an almost vertical disposition of the words and phrases, even if every syntactic and logical order is completely deconstructed, in the subsequent sections we shift to an almost horizontal flow of words and clusters, where the anagrammatic procedure of cutting and pasting words, syllables and sounds from the legal text becomes increasingly more challenging. New words, sentences and stories arise from the text and from its silences. Words are de-constructed and re-constructed to generate new words, pushing the reader in a veritable glossolalic and polyphonic maelstrom made of fourteen languages other than English: Latin, French, Italian, Arabic, Dutch, Shona, Yoruba, etc. This incredible work of fragmentation and recreation of language, revealing 'the chaos that is already there' (Philip 2008: 205), becomes for the poet the only way to cope with the biopolitical and epistemic violence of the language that structured the Zong massacre and the slave trade: 'for the very first time since writing chose me', concludes Philip, 'I feel that I *do* have a language – this language of grunt and groan, of moan and stutter – this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history' (Philip 2008, original emphasis).

NourbeSe Philip employs a large variety of techniques to upset and recreate a language that can bear witness, by means of its fragmentariness, to this irrecoverable loss. As readers, we experience this epistemic and emotional disorientation and we try to find a meaning, a narrative, logic or syntactic order: we act like detectives trying to recompose the fragments of this poetic puzzle. Philip is inspired by this drive towards creative recovery, as indicated in her choice to quote Thomas More: 'The poet is the detective and the detective the poet' (Philip 2008: 78). In the following passages from the first section we can experience how the legal language is at the same time exposed in its brutality and subverted by these poetic operations. Legal language is fragmented and brought back to an opposite function, that is, to substitute the biopolitical reduction and annihilation of humanity with the human necessity to bear witness to suffering and loss and to 'defend the dead'. This is what Baucom defines as a 'melancholy counterdiscourse of humanity' (2005: 207), whose task is 'to render the unseen visible, to bear witness to the truth of what has not been (and cannot have been) witnessed. Melancholy may constitute an

inability to forget what cannot be remembered, but it also comprises the obligation to see what has not been seen' (Baucom 2005: 218). Its epistemological shift consists in identifying 'an affective, interested, and imaginary investment in the traumas of history as a truthful form of knowledge' (Baucom 2005: 222).

The following excerpt from *Zong! # 15* shows how the typifying, iterative and conventional language of the law and of actuarial and financial reason works by transforming human life into property, literally legalizing murder or better transforming it into a reasonable action motivated by the circumstances (is necessary / to murder / the subject in property / the save in underwriter), by assigning it a monetary and financial value of exchange. Adjectives such as 'usual' and adverbs like 'etc.' are converted into verbs and they describe the absolute subsumption of life into the norm of finance discourse ('to usual &/etc'; 'where etc. tunes justice/and the *ratio* of murder'). Stereotyped catachresis, such as 'weight of circumstance', regain metaphoric potentiality as they are isolated by silence or recomposed into new clusters ('the usual in occurred'; 'the just in ration'), whereas the melancholic language of suffering seems at times capable of interrupting the monologic discourse of the law (the suffer in lost):

defend the dead
weight of circumstance
ground
to usual &
etc
where the ratio of just
is less than
is necessary
to murder
the subject in property
the save in underwriter
where etc tunes justice
and the *ratio* of murder
is
the usual in occurred
the just in ration
the suffer in loss

(Philip 2008: 25-6)

In another excerpt from *Zong! # 17* the reader is directly exposed to the Thing of the event itself, to its absolute singularity ('the this / the that / the frenzy') and to the impossibility for the language of reason to rebuild a meaning of the event. Some words or phrases refer to the experience of the people carried on the ship: their physical and moral pain ('the frenzy'); their destiny and the impossibility for them to understand their situation, to situate themselves and make sense of what they were enduring ('negroes of no belonging'). Some clusters refer to what happened during the passage ('leaky seas & / casks'; 'came the rains'; 'came the perils') and to the choices made by the captain and the crew ('on board / no rest'; 'to murder'):

there was
the this
the that
the frenzy
leaky seas &
casks
negroes of no belonging
on board
no rest
came the rains
came the negroes
came the perils
came the owners
masters and mariners
the this
the that
the frenzy
(Philip 2008: 29)

All those fragments, phrases and clusters, separated by silence and scattered on the white of the page, cannot match with one another and every desirable meaning or explanation, every '*ratio*' is time and again collapsed and dispersed. What kind of emotional and cognitive participation does this text demand of the reader? The formal work through language that the author achieves shapes an implicit reader, who is far removed from the liberal tradition of the impartial spectator, the position still partially implied by Turner's canvas *The Slave Ship* (Baucom 2005: 265–96). The author asks the reader to look directly into the horror of the event and to share the cognitive loss of the victims, running the risk of being petrified by it. At the bottom of the page, beneath a line dividing them from the rest of the text, a stream of proper nouns flows. These are not the names of the people jettisoned and murdered on the Zong. Their names were never registered on any official document as their humanity and singularity were obliterated at the very moment they entered the biopolitical circuit of exploitation. The logbooks usually reported the quantity of bodies carried by the ship and their monetary value as if they were any other commodity. The names of the people carried on the Zong and thrown overboard are lost forever or they keep floating in an underwater world of distant echoes. The names that we can read on the margins of NourbeSe Philip's poem are the only words that are not taken or derived from the legal text: they are created or dreamt or heard by the author herself, and they bear witness to those lost names of the murdered.

Édouard Glissant: Towards a polyphonic and shared 'mémoire de la communauté Terre'

Many Caribbean writers have faced the abyss of silence and muteness that constitutes the core of slavery, its aftermaths and tormented memories, the babble and the scream to which all language and subject become reduced.[3] In his magisterial essay *Le Discours antillais* (1981a), the Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant proposed fundamental

3. See also Johnson (2009). For recent Francophone narratives on the Middle Passage, see Kanor (2006) and Deslauriers (2000).

concepts – such as 'tourment d'histoire', 'mémoire raturée' and 'névrose historique' – to reflect on the extreme difficulty for the people of the Caribbean, and especially of the French Antilles, to face their own traumatic past and get rid of the silence and oblivion that had been settling for centuries. For Glissant, quoting his fellow Martinican Frantz Fanon, the fundamental task for the descendants of slavery is to overcome any historical determinism, ceasing to be 'esclave de l'Esclavage' (Fanon 1952: 186). Glissant strictly links this primary epistemic loss to popular and literary language, both marked by fragmentation, ellipsis, repetition and accumulation, and he speaks of slavery as a 'combat sans témoin, d'où nous vient peut-être le goût de ce ressassement des mots qui recompose s'il se trouve les chuchotis raclés au fond des gorges, dans les cases de *l'implacable univers muet du servage*' (Glissant 1981a: 472, emphasis added). When the slaves were captured on the coasts of Africa, before being embarked on the slave ships, they were separated from comrades speaking their own language, so as to prevent every attempt at communication that could lead to rebellion. However, the lack of language was even deeper and ontological. As Agamben has demonstrated, the modern biopolitical apparatus is based on the complete separation of the living and the speaking inside the human being, that is, on the complete dispersion of the possibility of language itself. The financial and biopolitical logic dominating 'the long twentieth century' (Baucom 2005: 3–34) has reduced human bodies to their ultimate commodification, to a nameless, untestifiable condition that anticipated their effective drowning, either in the ocean or in the belly of the plantation. Glissant has neatly and repeatedly summed up this absolute alienation of the body and the speech:

> le corps aliéné de l'esclave, au temps du système servile, est en effet privé, comme pour l'évider entièrement, de la parole. S'exprimer est non seulement interdit, mais comme impossible à envisager. [...] Dans cet univers muet, la voix et le corps sont la poursuite d'un manque.
>
> (Glissant 1981a: 405)

His representation of the mute universe of slavery is close to Agamben's treatment of the figure of 'der Muselmann' in the concentration camps and of the paradoxes of witnessing for this absolute loss of humanity and language. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), the Italian philosopher has deeply analysed how every testimony, and literature *as* testimony, is based on a fundamental lack or loss. Indeed, the 'complete witness', the one who has fully experienced the absolute dehumanization of the camp, is at the same time the one who cannot speak not only because he has not survived, but because he has been completely captured and annihilated by the biopolitical apparatus of desubjectification governing the camp. Agamben's analysis of the aporia of witnessing and its links with the language of literature is extremely effective and particularly in tune with Glissantian critical and creative work:

> The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of complete witness, that of who

> by definition cannot bear witness. [...] The value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be born witness to [...]. The 'true' witness, the 'complete witness', are those who did not bear witness and cannot bear witness.
>
> (Agamben 1999: 19, 33)

Glissant's incessant engagement with such a historical abyss of untestifiable violence and 'délire verbal' is essential to understanding the development of his poetics of 'Relation' and 'creolization', and the ethics and politics of memory that are connected with it. Moreover, his philosophy of relation and more generally the epistemic dimension of his writing operate as a kind of creative reversal of the sublime dimension of slavery, moving from the unspeakable to the polyphonic and pointing to us some possible alternatives to rethink the biopolitical abyss of modernity in an *affirmative* way. This means finding new creative ways to think and imagine the relation between life, its forms and its potency. On the side of the literary creation, this unending exploration of the abyss brings to a fundamental 'opacity' and 'chaos' of writing and the impossibility to hold to the traditional temporality and narrative conventions of the western realist novel. This is the case of such atypical counter-novels as *La Case du commandeur* (É Glissant, 1981b) and *Tout-monde* (É Glissant, 1993), carrying the reader into a fictional maelstrom and inspiring them to try new ways of reading the text and the world (Corio and Torchi 2006: 114). As he wrote about William Faulkner, who is the main model and source of inspiration for his fictional universe, the novel does not point any fundamental truth, but is engaged in an incessant process of deferral and unveiling of meaning through fragmentation, accumulation and ellipsis: 'un suspens de l'être [...]. Par ce processus continu d'une écriture diffractée, qui projette vers des réponses sans cesse différées' (Glissant 1996: 141). Almost in the same years, the Cuban writer and scholar Antonio Benítez-Rojo developed a similar postmodern vision of the Caribbean text as a 'supersyncretic' and 'polyrhythmic' performance that escapes western binary patterns in his well-known *The Repeating Island* (A. Benítez-Rojo, 1996). His vision is characterized by an even more utopic turn, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's 'nomadology' and by the theories of Chaos:

> If we look at the Caribbean's most representative novels we see that their narrative discourse is constantly disrupted, and at times most annulled, by heteroclitic, fractal, baroque, or arboreal forms, which propose themselves as vehicles to drive the reader and the text to the marginal and ritually initiating territory of the absence of violence. [...] The result is a text that speaks of a critical coexistence of rhythms, a polyrhythmic ensemble whose central binary rhythm is decentered when the performer (writer/reader) and the text try to escape 'in a certain kind of way'
>
> (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 25, 28)

Glissant's intellectual and artistic trajectory has dealt with such an abyss and vertigo in a continuous and steady manner, as he confirms in a key chapter of *Le discours antillais* entitled 'La querelle avec l'histoire', where he writes that 'l'histoire a son inexplorable au bord duquel nous errons

éveillés' (Glissant 1981a: 229). This important essay was actually part of a wider debate that took place during the 1970s on the meaning and the modalities of history and memory in the Caribbean. The debate, which anticipated some of the main issues developed later by other cultural movements such as the *créolité* in the 1980s and the 1990s, involved many of the most important Caribbean writers and intellectuals, such as V.S. Naipaul, Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott with his fundamental essay of 1974, 'The muse of history' (Walcott 1999), and Edward Baugh, whose essay 'The West Indian writer and his quarrel with history' (Baugh [1976] 2012) was the fuse that ignited the debate.

The starting point of this 'quarrel with history' was Naipaul's provocative statement that 'History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the Caribbean' and Walcott's assertion that 'In the Caribbean history is irrelevant [...] because it has never mattered'. Glissant firmly disagrees with every Hegelian-like, dialectic and universalist philosophy of History. Nevertheless, he admits that in the Caribbean region every historical conscience suffers from a serious epistemological deficiency, that is an impossibility to build a coherent and continuous historical narrative that can provide the basis for a communitarian and national consciousness. Caribbean history, indeed, is inexorably fragmented, discontinuous and traumatic. It is made of ruptures, negations and oblivion that prevent the individual and the group from building a symbolic order for the community. Glissant defines this fundamental impossibility and lack as a 'non-history', whose constitutive disorder requires creative exploration through the arts:

> Les Antilles sont le lieu d'une histoire faite de ruptures et dont le commencement est un arrachement brutal, la Traite. Notre conscience historique ne pouvait pas « sédimenter », si on peut ainsi dire, de manière progressive et continue, comme chez les peuples qui ont engendré une philosophie souvent totalitaire de l'histoire, les peuples européens, mais s'agrégeait sous les auspices du choc, de la contraction, de la négation douloureuse et de l'explosion. Ce discontinu dans le continu, et l'impossibilité pour la conscience collective d'en faire le tour, caractérisent ce que j'appelle une non-histoire.
>
> (Glissant 1981a: 223–24)

This does not mean that nothing happened in the Caribbean or that everything that happened was just a consequence of the European domination. Both in his novels and essays, Glissant is very careful to point out that resistance and revolt were incessant, but either they were isolated in a sort of ideological embargo, as in Haiti and later in Cuba, or they were silenced, forgotten and removed from the popular memory, as was the case of the rebellion of the colonel Delgrès in Guadeloupe in 1802 (Nesbitt 2003: 49–75). Another important assumption he points out in 'La querelle avec l'histoire' is that the task of the writer and the artist is to explore this opaque and dispersed region of non-history, this painful and unspeakable past that resists every attempt to be translated into a linear and homogeneous narrative, creating what Walter Benjamin ([1983] 1999: 463) would have described as a *constellation* of past, present and

future and that, for Glissant, needs to be explored through a 'prophetic vision of the past':

> Le passé, notre passé subi, qui n'est pas encore histoire pour nous, est pourtant là (ici) qui nous lancine. La tâche de l'écrivain est d'explorer ce lancinement, de le 'révéler' de manière continue dans le présent et l'actuel. [...] C'est à démêler un sens douloureux du temps et à le projeter à tout coup dans notre futur, sans le recours de ces sortes de plages temporelles dont les peuples occidentaux ont bénéficié, sans le secours de cette densité collective que donne d'abord un arrière-pays culturel ancestral. C'est ce que j'appelle *une vision prophétique du passé*.
>
> (Glissant 1981a: 226–27)

To face this silenced and tormented chronology made up of traces and fragments, the writer should avoid the language and the formal structures of the western realistic novel. The process of writing will be compelled to find new forms, to deconstruct the canonical literary genres and to reveal the creative desire that lodges in the folds of this traumatic past. This is a constant aspect, although in evolution, of all Glissantian literary and narrative production. However, his novel *La Case du commandeur* (1981b), published the same year of *Le discours antillais* (1981a), is particularly relevant in this trajectory. Its central part, entitled 'Mitan du temps'/'the middle of time', is exemplary of his repeated consideration that the only way to represent the opacity and unspeakability of the historical experience of slavery and its traumatic aftermaths is through the allusive and elliptic language of poetry. As he stated so many times, and more recently in *Mémoires des esclavages* (2007), the exploration and knowledge of the historical truth of slavery needs to be approached through the epistemic instruments of a poetic reason and language:

> nous restons convaincus que les phénomènes de l'esclavage, de cet esclavage-ci, ne seront jamais vus, ni visibles ni perceptibles ni compréhensibles, par les seuls méthodes de la pensée objective, [...] mais à partir aussi de points d'exposition particuliers, où le *risque* de la compréhension [...] engage et force à affronter l'obscur et le différé. [...] ces *figures* nous servent [...] à considérer ces *histoires transversales*, qui sont une manière de désigner ou de suivre dans leurs dessins secrets des histoires cachées, lesquelles *se disent sans dire tout en disant*.
>
> (Glissant 2007: 41–42, 60)

This is exactly what happens in the narrative section of *La Case du commandeur* (1981b) entitled 'Mitan du temps'. As Dominique Chancé (2001) has demonstrated, the central part should function as the symbolic core of the novel, the point where both the reader and the characters are supposed to gain access to the source and to understand the meaning of their lost origins. This reconstitution of a myth of origins should allow the reader to build a sense for the enigmatic genealogy of the Celat family, narrated in the first part, and for Marie Celat's own itinerary through madness and enigmatic revelation, narrated in the last section of the novel. What happens is exactly the opposite. The 'middle of time',[4] which clearly evokes

4. The word 'mitan', meaning 'milieu', comes from the ancient Occitan. It has passed into Martinican creole through the ancient French spoken by mariners and settlers during the slave trade and the colonial plantation.

the middle passage, explodes in a myriad of fragmented and unconnected stories, where the narrative focalization jumps '*de roche en roche*' into different and undefined moments of time, into different characters (men, plants and animals) and stylistic registers, going from the picaresque to the epic and the tragic. The supposed symbolic and mythic centre reveals its emptiness, generating a chaotic narrative whirlpool, 'le cyclone du temps', that forces the reader to confront the impossibility of building a linear and consequential chain of events and to recover a lost origin that may legitimize a homogeneous community:

> Le cyclone du temps noué là dans son fond: où il s'est passé quelque chose que nous rejetons avec fureur loin de nos têtes, mais qui retombe dans nos poitrines, nous ravage de son cri. Voici le moment venu de connaître que nous ne continuerons pas à descendre en mélodie la ravine ; qu'arrivés au bord de ce trou du temps nous dévalons plus vite en sautant de roche en roche.
>
> (Glissant 1981b: 137–38)

This section of the novel delivers enigmatic episodes of resistance and escape to the biopolitical order of the plantation, such as the archetypical death of the 'unnamed woman' and of the self-named maroon 'Aa', or the attempts of 'l'homme oublié' to build an alternative and autonomous order of production on the margins of the plantation: 'L'homme oublié est l'homme démuni, dont la machine était un rêve, démoli. Les hauts de bois l'ont convoqué dans la furie; en haut tout là-haut il se consume et crie. *Nous sautons la roche*' (Glissant 1981b: 142). The entire novel is indeed one of the clearest expressions of Glissantian conception of a spiral-shaped 'order of time that does not pass but accumulates' (Baucom 2005: 305). Anywhere, exploring this epistemic and cognitive disorientation through the means of language and imagination is not sufficient. Literature in its relation with the abyss of history must not only be diffracted and allusive. It must also be *shared*. This is the second element that forms the basis for his poetics of Relation.

In the final section of 'La querelle avec l'Histoire', Glissant quotes a phrase from Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite: 'The unity is submarine'. Some years later, he would put this sentence as epigraph in another fundamental essay, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), together with another quotation from Derek Walcott's famous poem, 'The sea is history', both of which refer exactly to this kind of scene we have evoked before. The paradigmatic figure of the drowning human body repeats itself again, but this time it is capable of opening a new direction and a new poetics, to which Glissant refers here as 'transversalité' and later as 'Relation':

> Je ne traduis, quant à moi, cette proposition, qu'en évoquant tant d'Africains lestés de boulets et jetés par-dessous bord chaque fois qu'un navire négrier se trouvait poursuivi par des ennemis et s'estimait trop faible pour soutenir le combat. *Ils semèrent dans les fonds les boulets de l'invisible.* C'est ainsi que nous avons appris, non la transcendance ni l'universel sublimé, mais la transversalité. Il nous a fallu bien du temps pour le savoir. Nous sommes les racines de la Relation.
>
> (Glissant 1981a: 230–31)

In this excerpt, the powerful reversal of the colonial biopolitical abyss into something else is quite evident. As Baucom states clearly, it is 'a reversal that replaces an image of terror with an image of promise, a knowledge of endings with a knowledge of beginnings' (2001: 67). What risked becoming a source of isolation and a melancholic deadlock shows up as a transversal and shared memory that can activate new cultural and political possibilities for a future of cross-cultural relationships.

The figure of the drowning human body is then central to Glissant's work; like an uncanny haunting element, it persists inside the discourse as a hole or void, troubling every realistic staging of characters and the linearity of the prose. He further elaborates this fundamental passage from the muteness of slavery to the polyphonic and shared memory of the 'Tout-monde' in the chapter opening *Poétique de la Relation*, significantly entitled 'La barque ouverte' (Glissant 1990: 17–21). In a powerful allegoric displacement, the opacity and muteness of the terrifying abyss of suffering is reversed into a new form of shared knowledge, which may inaugurate a different temporality for the humanity-to-come:

> Le terrifiant est du gouffre, trois fois noué à l'inconnu. Une fois donc, inaugurale, quand tu tombes dans le ventre de la barque. Une barque, selon ta poétique, n'a pas de ventre, une barque n'engloutit pas, ne dévore pas, une barque se dirige à plein ciel. Le ventre de cette barque-ci te dissout, te précipite dans un non-monde où tu cries. Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Génératrice de ta clameur. Productrice aussi de toute unanimité à venir.
>
> (Glissant 1990: 18)

The devouring and annihilating belly of the slave ship, the abyss of the bodies drowned into the sea, is reversed into an *open boat* that symbolizes the possibility to share this pain with the others, and so to pass from the exceptionality and isolation of suffering to the sharing and exchange of the differences and memories, of all those histories and voices that were previously marginalized and silenced. This is the complex network of intercultural contacts, transformations and mutual opacities that constitutes what Glissant calls 'creolization':

> Car si cette expérience a fait de toi, victime originelle flottant aux abysses de mer, une exception, elle s'est rendue commune pour faire de nous, les descendants, un peuple parmi d'autres. Les peuples ne vivent pas d'exception. La Relation n'est pas d'étrangetés, mais de connaissance partagée. Nous pouvons dire maintenant que cette expérience du gouffre est la chose le mieux échangée. [...] Nous nous connaissons en foule, dans l'inconnu qui ne terrifie pas. Nous crions le cri de poésie. Nos barques sont ouvertes, pour tous nous le naviguons.
>
> (Glissant 1990: 20–21)

The tragic fight between the collective search for meaning, the artistic and symbolic work and the unspeakable Real of slavery is, indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of Glissantian poetry and philosophy. It would deserve to be compared with the work on myth and community by such

philosophers as Jean-Luc Nancy in *La communauté desœuvrée* (1986) or, perhaps more surprisingly, by the Italian historian of religions Ernesto de Martino. Only by moving across this collective 'crisis of the presence' (de Martino [1956] 2012) thanks to the act of writing and the poetic imagination is Glissant able to contribute to the poetic and political productivity of what we may call an 'affirmative biopolitics', namely, 'a politics that is no longer over life but *of* life' (Esposito 2008: 11, original emphasis). What was supposed to become the docile, dehumanized and commoditized body of the slave shows up as 'a body in insurrection against the disciplinary regimes that seek to produce it' (Baucom 2001: 68). The allegorical scene of renewal opening Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) confirms the painful reversal of the scene of the Zong and its shift towards an opposite scene of polyphonic sharing of different memories: a transversal and nomadic subjectivity rejecting every exclusivist or universalist appropriation of the past and of collective suffering, and pointing towards what he defined as '*mémoire culturelle de la collectivité Terre*' (Glissant 2007: 23, original emphasis). This transversal, rhizomatic and anti-genealogical dimension of memory supplements the more traditional and potentially dangerous forms of the tribal memory ('la mémoire de la tribu'), always risking to be appropriated and essentialized, so as to become an instrument of recrimination, exclusion and racism. On the contrary, the task of the writer is to go through the abyss in order to avoid becoming its prisoner and to overthrow it into an opening towards the unpredictability of a worldly community to come: 'la mémoire de la collectivité Terre est prospective, à partir de nous, de notre présent. Une mémoire du futur' (Glissant 2007: 165).

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