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Deborah Goldgaber

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On Recovering the Past

Textual “Reversibility” in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*

Deborah Goldgaber

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

ALL THE TALK, PRINTED AND SPOKEN, HAS HAD TO DO WITH SHIPS AND RATIONS; WITH SAIL AND weather; with ruses and piracy and balls between wind and water; with native kings and bargains sharp and sinful on both sides; with tribal wars and slave factories and red massacres and all the machinations necessary to stock a barracoon with African youth on the first leg of their journey from humanity to cattle; with storing and feeding and starvation and suffocation and pestilence and death; with slave ship stench and mutinies of crew and cargo; with the jettying of cargoes before the guns of British cruisers; with auction blocks and sales and profits and losses. *All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold.* The Kings and Captains whose words moved ships. But not one word from the cargo. The thoughts of the “black ivory,” the “coin of Africa,” had no market value. Africa’s ambassadors to the New World have come and worked and died, and left their spoor, but no recorded thought.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Barracoon*

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. The question is, first, whether any necessity existed for that act.

—*Gregson v. Gilbert*

And the story must tell itself.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*^a

INTRODUCTION: TWO SHIPS

Records of the transatlantic slave trade are full, Zora Neale Hurston writes, of “the words of the sellers. *But not one word from the sold.*”² This absence of testimony, of recorded thought, is not just an index of the Trade’s barbarism. It is, the poet M. NourbeSe Philip writes, itself barbarism.

Like a magic wand the law erases all ties—linguistic, societal, cultural, familial, parental, and spiritual; it strips the African down to the basic common denominator of man, woman, or child, albeit sometimes meagre. Without a history, name, or culture. *In life but without life.* Without life in life—with a story that cannot but must be told. (196)

The almost total absence of “the cargo’s” recorded thought is not simply due to *acts* of omission, as Hurston’s description suggests. The exclusion is itself constitutive, as Philip writes, of this mode of “life without life.”

The documents recording the thoughts of “captains and Kings whose words move ships”—along with the legal cases, writs of sale, notes of indemnification, actuarial tables, and ships’ manifests—are the material means for “disappearing” human beings and transforming them into property. One may isolate, Philip points out, the linguistic maneuvers dissolving what philosophers call “The Person” and producing, in their place, an object, a piece of cargo, a market value.³ Barbarism is impossible without

this linguistic performativity. As Walter Benjamin observed sometime earlier, barbarism is administrative.⁴

The administration of barbarism and the barbarism of administration are primarily responsible for the voluminous archival records of the transatlantic slave trade. But slim, “*meagre*” are the recorded thoughts of the captives.⁵ Zora Neale Hurston’s *Barracoon* is concerned with the last known slave ship to ply American waters—the *Clothilda*. At the time of its writing, 1927, she was specifically concerned with *recording* the thoughts and experience of a still-living, former captive of the ship, Cudjoe Kazoola Lewis (c. 1841–1935). Philip’s *Zong!*, for its part, is concerned with the *unrecorded* thoughts and experiences of the captives of a more notorious slaver—the *Zong*.⁶ The *Zong*, otherwise unremarkable in route, cargo, or dimensions from hundreds of other vessels of its day, is today remembered primarily for the grotesque massacre of its captives, many of whom⁷ were thrown overboard in an effort to collect insurance claims indemnifying this same “cargo.”⁸

A juridical and administrative *language* records the events of the *Zong*, as narrated to the court and deliberated upon by its magistrates:

Gregson v. Gilbert Thursday, 22 May, 1782. Where the captain of a slaveship mistook Hisaniola [*sic*] for Jamaica, whereby the voyage being retarded, and the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard, it was held that these facts did not support a statement in the declaration, that by the perils of the seas, and contrary winds and currents, the ship was retarded in her voyage, and by reason thereof so much of the water on board was spent, that some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest.
(210)

But, Philip underlines, this linguistic “recording” does not involve or imply a neutral medium. “The law uses language as a tool for ordering” (199). Generically, syntax and grammar are constitutive of content and meaning. But legal language is more constraining still. Its categories—indeed, its commas as Kimberle Crenshaw masterfully demonstrates—determine who can and cannot be represented.⁹

The record, then, must not only be read for *what* it says—for the meanings of the words uttered by “the sellers”—but for its performative dimensions and constitutive exclusions. Philip underlines: this *performative* dimension of juridical language ensured that, whatever disputes there might have been about the *literal* meaning of the insurance contract, it would never work out that any agent (the “good Captain Collingwood,” the crew, the owners) were guilty of murder.

An accurate interpretation of the contract of insurance, according to the owners of the *Zong*, that is, would result in great financial benefit to them: they would be paid for murdering 150 Africans. At the same time, it would mean that the deliberate drowning of 150 people was not murder, but merely the disposition of property in a time of emergency to ensure preservation of the rest of the “cargo”—a reasonable interpretation at that time given the law governing contracts of insurance. However, even if the courts had found against the owners of the *Zong* and ruled that they could not claim insurance compensation, given the law at that time, neither Captain Collingwood nor those who had helped in the massacre could be charged with murder, since what was destroyed, being property, was not capable of being murdered. (Philip, 191)

The same discursive activity transforming Persons into property ensures that the full, honest accounting of the massacre Philip seeks cannot be carried out. Records of the victims’ Personhood, identifying features—for example, name, age, country of origin—do not exist. “Purchasers are identified while Africans are reduced to the stark description of ‘negroe man’ [*sic*] ‘negroe woman,’ or more frequently, ‘ditto man,’ ‘ditto woman.’ There is one gloss to this description: ‘Negroe girl (meagre).’ There are many ‘meagre’ girls” (194). The story that Philip says “must be told”—and feels personally called to tell—“cannot be told.” What was *never* recorded, whether by constitutive exclusion or unprogrammed omission, stenographic failure or archival destruction, is thereby lost to living memory. Silences do *not*—as a rule—speak, and, it seems, they cannot speak here.

Philip registers this fact. But, if the law is a tool for ordering, she will use “poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem *so*

as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through nontelling, will tell itself (199). It is not entirely clear here what Philip means by releasing the story through disorder and by telling “through nontelling.” It may seem strange to be asking here—as I am asking—what makes it possible for these statements to be true. Philip is a *poet*, after all—to imagine that her language is, here, literal and assertoric rather than poetic and figurative might simply make me a bad reader. I think, however, that Philip herself suggests this reading, particularly in the long philosophical essay (“notunda”), which follows the poetry cycle. In what follows, I will argue that *Zong!* is forensic poetry, and we must distinguish the forensic work Philip undertakes from the work of imagination or fiction. *Zong!* demands its readers reconsider what they believe to know about the conditions for recovering the past.

“HISTORY IS A BUNDLE OF SILENCES”

The idea of “constitutive exclusions” seems to offer some hope to historians grappling with the silences of the archive. Power produces speech (“the words of Kings and Captains”), but power also silences. The repressive work of power, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, is legible. “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots” (Trouillot 2015, 11). Reading documents “against the grain,” *reversing* the analytic gaze so as to focus not on the present, manifest elements but on the white space, the margins, and the *spacing* may lead to historiographical breakthroughs.¹⁰

Trouillot is surely right. A historian must identify, where possible, the “omissions” or “silences”—the traces of power—that enter the “process of historical production.” But the proposed revolution in attention and attunement, Trouillot underlines, does not make the work of writing counter-history primarily the work of imagination supplementing facts. Recognizing that history is constructed does not mean we can remake it anything we like.¹¹ “The need for a different kind of credibility sets the historical narrative apart from fiction” (Trouillot 2015, 8). Note that Trouillot is neither denying that history is storytelling, nor that fictional narratives

too demand credibility.¹² He is underlining that *historical* credibility entails truth claims; “collectivities impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters to them whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction” (Trouillot 2015, 11). Thus, the methods one adopts for making the silences speak have to be distinguished from those of fiction.

The sorts of distinctions to which Trouillot draws our attention, I want to argue, are critical for Philip, who unfailingly distinguishes her own work, and its methods, from those of fiction.

In trying to tell the *Zong* massacre from the point of view of its victims, she might readily have attempted to fill in the silences through whatever imaginative representation came to her mind. This sort of imaginative work might well be undertaken by more or less tutored historical imaginations. Certainly, there is something like a *counterfactual* speech—speech that *was* not but could or should have been—and this speech would not be *merely* fiction. But such speech, as the work of imagination, would not *prima facie* have the sort of credibility Trouillot associates with historical accounts. Certainly, it would not count as anything like historical or juridical *evidence*. Philip knows this, and this is why she will content herself with neither the idealities of representation nor imagination—but only with “*the bones*.” She wants to bring the bones home (201).

Philip insists that the story of those silenced and murdered aboard the *Zong* *must* be told—and moreover that she experiences this as a personal, ethical demand (more on which below). But she cannot tell their story, for reasons both ethical and epistemological. It would be wrong for her to usurp their place by claiming to represent them, and it would be *incredible* to tell their story. It would have to be possible to remember, to recover their words and their thoughts. But not by placing their voices *in* the imagination. *If* their stories *must* be told, *then* they must be told in truth. *But*, it seems, they cannot be told in truth, because there is ostensibly no record, and hence no words, no thought, no cries to be retrieved. The link from the Dead, those massacred, to living memory, it seems, has been decisively severed. There were none to live to tell it, or those that lived did not tell it, or they told it but it did not survive, or they told it and it survived but we have

yet to find it. For one of these reasons, or some combination thereof, we have no access to it today.

These stories must be told, but cannot. They can, Philip seems to settle into the paradox demanded by the “must,” “be told by not telling” (189) The intent of Philip’s *Zong!* is not—though it might be tempting to read it so—to produce what I called above counterfactual speech. Philip does not graft imagined speech onto silence. She wards off this interpretation, in part by insisting that she is not the author of the anagrammatical poems/enunciations.

The antinarrative poems are constructed by something like a “recombinant” program or algorithm.

In allowing myself to surrender to the text—silences and all—and allowing the fragmented words to speak to the stories locked in the text, I . . . have found myself “absolved” of “authorial intention.” So much so that even claiming to author the text through my own name is challenged by the way the text has shaped itself. The way it “untells” itself. (204)

The series of poems are to be read not as counterfactual but textually “heterogeneous” speech, as mnemonic textual effects, which together demonstrate a more profound principle of textual “reversibility” than the one formulated by Trouillot. The “untelling” involves reversing the wefts of logic, rationality, grammar, all the structures, in short, which compel us to take up an authorial position within language (204). If Trouillot’s textual “reversibility” implies the possibility of making power’s constitutive exclusions visible and explicit (as much as this is possible), Philip’s textual “reversibility,” we will now see, implies a revisionary textual ontology. Unlike the relatively modest claim that “silences” are (also) constitutive of any text, that the archive can be read, in a certain fashion, recto-verso, Philip argues that the archive is—in some unheard of sense—complete and intact. The whole (of the past) will be *diffractionally* (more of which below) present in the part or extent fragment. The *linguistic* archive is constitutively heterogeneous—and in(def)initely dense—always containing more than itself—and, indeed, more than can be calculated.¹³

At least in principle, then, restitution and recovery of the past *is* possible—and this may be so even if this restitution and recovery is not possible for us. The formal ideas in *Zong!* imply a metaphysical and ontological revolution in the way memory and mnemonic traces are conceived. The credibility of the voices and narratives that *Zong!* retrieves cannot be certified by *historical-epistemological* conceptions of evidence but rather find their warrant in alternative, ontological registers.

Philip conceives of archival documents, Karen Barad has suggested, less like records or traces (of past events) and more as “diffraction patterns.” What are diffraction patterns? According to Donna Haraway, “diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. *Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals.*”¹⁴ Let us trace, then, Philip’s “diffractive” texts to confirm this reading but also to specify its philosophical significance.

HAUNTOLOGY, SPECTRALITY, EVIDENCE

Philip believes that a full and honest account of those who died on the *Zong* is locked inside the text.

My intent is to use the text of the legal decision [*Gregson v. Gilbert*] 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.* . . . I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong* (191).

But what could Philip possibly mean? How *can* she (or anyone else) credit that the unrecorded record of the massacre is somehow secreted—dumbstruck? spellbound?—in the text of the court case? Or, generalizing, that all the stories never told, all the memories lost to oblivion, are, nevertheless somewhere secreted, waiting to be retrieved?

Is it even possible to take Philip literally here? And (assuming that we can and do) how do we read *Zong!* as evidence in favor of this belief, whether in its narrow or generalized formulation? Certainly, it is no longer a question of historical credibility or evidentiary standards. But Philip makes it clear: *Zong!* is a “hauntological” project motivated by demands of mourning and restitution; this means that the evidence in question (the voices, the poems) is hauntological. The status of the text is spectral, in the Derridean sense, and so it is to ontology/hauntology and, indeed, to ethico-hauntology that we now turn.

In the epigraph to this paper, Zora Neale Hurston suggests that the experiences, the names, the lives of those people who lived the middle passage are effectively lost to posterity and are today irretrievable. “Spoors” but no words. This resounding silence makes Hurston’s *Barracoon* exceptionally precious. The latter presents itself as a record of the living memory of Cudjo Kasoola Lewis, one of the last African people forced to make the voyage to the United States on a slave ship. At the time of the ship’s sailing, importing African slaves to the United States was already illegal. Five years after Lewis came to the shores of Alabama, his captivity ended with the arrival of the Union Army. The specific circumstances of Lewis’s arrival and survival allow words and memory to enter where they had been excluded. His words had become desirable; eventually their market would come.¹⁵ But beyond the market for historical memory, Hurston’s record of Kazoola’s living memory claims a certain *redemptive* value.¹⁶

In Hurston’s text, Lewis’s narration redeems the past and its *victims* from the administrative and historical erasure of their lives and deaths. Here Kazoola speaks, in the first person, rather than being spoken of and for. Of course, his is just one voice, neither a substitute nor a stand-in for the more than 12 million voiceless. Nevertheless, the text’s redemptive value can only be measured against the demand for macro-historical redemption. Against the enormity of the demand for speech (and the enormity of the silence), Lewis’s testament appears both sublime and *meagre*.¹⁷

Its value is supernumerary precisely because, in comparison to the demand, it is so *meagre*, a fragment. The demand—Philip describes it as Ancestral, and hence as personal—to recover the bodies and the words—to

measure the suffering and the pain of those damned to death, drowning, torture, and enslavement—butts against the reality of irrecoverable loss.¹⁸ Against the *demand* for memory, if we are willing to credit it as such, Hurston's text and Kazoola's words measure the impossibility of the demand's fulfillment.

Doesn't the reality of the archive—with its cultural and natural limits, with its constitutive and programmed exclusions—require accepting the impossibility of fulfilling the redemptive demand? To call on Hurston's words again, the tumult of words from the sellers (none from the sold), the impossibility of fulfilling the demand for historical restitution, is an index of the scale of injustice.¹⁹ And, as with the justice meted out in this world, we must take what we can get, where we can get it—*meagre* as it might be.

From Hurston's hands, then, we accept Kazoola's life and words with gratitude, even as a small miracle.²⁰ It seems, moreover, just the sort of testimony that Philip laments is missing from the victims of the *Zong* massacre. No account such as this—first personal, testimonial, in view of living memory—will ever appear. Nothing with the same sort of historical credibility. Philip knows and accepts this much. However, she is undeterred.

In the section titled “notanda,” or field notes, which chronicles her search for a means or method to wrest history from Silence, Philip writes:

It is fall 2005: I attend a talk at Hart House, University of Toronto, by a young forensic anthropologist, Clea Koff, who has written a book about working in Rwanda and Bosnia identifying the bones of the murdered. It's important, she says, for bodies to be exhumed—in doing so you return dignity to the dead. What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a “liquid grave”? . . . [I] search for a word or phrase. . . that has as precise a meaning as the unearthing contained within the word exhume. I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not “ex-aqua.” Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you're underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never be “exhumed” from water? The gravestone or tombstone marks the spot of interment, whether of ashes or the body. What marks the spot of subaquatic death? Families need proof, Koff says—they come looking for recognizable clothing and say, “I want the bones.” I, too, want the bones. (201)

Philip, again, asks about the limits of the possible—about the limits of recovering the memory that can be put to work for mourning. She wants to do for the victims of the *Zong* massacre what Clea Koff, the forensic anthropologist, together with the families of the dead, tries to do for the victims of violence in Bosnia and Rwanda. To do this, she needs “the bones.” The bones will not just confirm the fact of the massacre and help establish the identity of its victim; they are necessary to the work of mourning.

“Ex-aquifying” the bones would “bring dignity back to the dead.” Whereas the impossibility of retrieval would mean that the dead—and therefore the living—could never rest. Of course, Philip might have actually undertaken the proposed ex-aquification project—she might have chartered a forensic, sea-faring vessel to find the bones, their remnants, or other evidence of the victims’ remains, and, through more advanced forensic methods, sought to “localize” the dead. She might have even—it is not too fantastical to imagine—sought to repatriate the remains to the likeliest closest living relations or natal land. But she is not, like Koff, a forensic anthropologist; she is a poet and a scholar. Albeit one who shares the former’s sense for credibility and evidence.

Philip believes, she writes, that the court case is a word store in which can be found the voices, the words, the stories, the bones of those massacres. The words must ex-aquafied, though not by her. The stories, spell-bound in the court case, must tell themselves. The word store, then, is the sea. The poems are the bones. Her work is that of memory and mourning.

At this point it would be perfectly fair to ask about the relationship between Philip’s *desire* “to have the bones” and her belief “that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies. . . . *is locked in this text*” (of the court case). Doesn’t the desire—*illicitly*, from an epistemological perspective—determine the belief, making it no more than wishful thinking? One might say Philip rejects reality and refuses its limits, submitting instead to a fantasy about memory that restores in imagination what is lost in this world. This submission to desire is the price of the poetic fiction: *Zong!*, where the massacred dead speak through the medium of the ancestral narrator, Setaey

Adamu Boateng (authorial credit on the cover). Is this wish and desire grounded in something other than subjective fancy?

E X - A Q U A

The names, sounds, events, persons—the massacre on the ship—are not spoken of. They make up, Philip writes, no part of the manifest *meaning* of the document, which hinges upon questions of insurance and of a paradoxical indemnity. There is nothing, apparently, in and of the document that could or would yield the sort of memory or record that Philip seeks. The written record—in no small part due to its language, the formalistic grammar of the law, with its Latin writs and stock phrases—repels the work of mourning. The law has played a double de-substantializing trick—it has transmogrified the persons brought to the ship into *cargo* and their massacre-murder into the offloading of ballast. The court case is an attempt by the ship's owners to gain restitution for their loss. The restitution Philip seeks is not for this crime—the crime where murder was never on the docket, for the captain or his subordinates, nor charges of accessories to the crime for the insurance companies, their actuaries and accountant. The restitution she seeks is of the record—a full and honest record—*itself*. The record that this (extent record) excludes.

If the text does not record—cannot yield the meanings—what procedure or methodology could do the work of restitution?

The task of the poet would be to save us from reality, by imagining a way that the demand on us could be discharged. Such a reading would preserve common sense—that living memory not recorded is lost forever, that memory not (in the final instance) tied to a living memory is no memory at all—while granting Philip the poignancy and power of her desire for justice. On this reading, Philip goes as far as one can in poetic acts propelled by *moral* imagination—by bending and rending language as much as is possible to dramatize and rail against the black box of language—against the injustice of an impossible restitution.

Philip does not wish that restitution were possible, while recognizing the impossibility of the desire. Nor does she irrationally deny the impossibility by

retreating to an imaginary space safe from the limits of the possible. Instead, she insists that it is possible—and this possibility or rather this impossible possibility (as she defines it) is the premise of the project, which then dictates the search for the means and the methods—wholly unknown to her and to us at the outset. So, despite the absence of manifest content and meanings, despite the lacuna, gaps, and diagnosed textual exorcisms—the names, events, and sounds that the text will never yield—Philip sets out for her readers a remarkable project of restitution.

The relationship of Philip's belief (about the text) to her desire (that the dead could speak) is not genetic.²¹ This belief—that the text contains another text, the sought-for story—does not refuse the disjuncture between desire and reality but rather acknowledges the real force of the demand for restitution: a demand that for her has become personal, even individualizing. *She*, and not another in her place, is bound by a categorical imperative, to do the work of mourning. “The Ancestors have bestowed the responsibility of this work on me” (xii). The demand for restoring the dignity of the victims is the duty of the descendants, the heirs of the past. But Philip says, elsewhere, that the Dead are *also* bound by a duty “to give an honest and full report of their relations to the living.” Both the present and the past have a shared interest in an “eternal Future.”²²

The Dead need to speak if they are going to enter that eternity which will be their last and permanent Future. . . . Different as they may be in their present state of existence, those alive and those now Dead — their ambitions point to a similar end. They are interested in their Future. (Scott 2019, n.p.)

Let us leave aside for just a moment the question of the temporal relations between the Dead (past) and the Living (present) and the relations both have to the future. For now, I want to ask the question of whether the moral demand itself counts as credible evidence for the possibility of its fulfillment.²³ When demand and reality, as the sum of what is possible, seem to diverge, what does good epistemic sense require? Kant, though on different philosophical grounds, insisted that “ought implies can.” The demand for restitution, as categorically binding, would, in this case, offer

indirect evidence (or at least rational grounds for hope) of what is possible. At least it motivates the speculation that we have misunderstood reality altogether.

the truth was

the ship sailed

the rains came

the loss arose

the truth is

the ship sailed

the rains came

the loss arose

the negroes is

the truth was²⁴

To take this demand for restitution seriously might also be to assume that the recovery of the past *is* (metaphysically) possible—that the loss arose (but) “the truth *is*,” survives, persists (24).²⁵ Perhaps, there can be no *categorical imperative* that is impossible. Or, less stringently, at least we may have a duty to believe (where it cannot a priori be proven otherwise) that retrieval is possible.²⁶ Thus, to formulate the point propositionally, there can, in principle, be no essential misfit between the (ethical) demand for restitution and what is, in reality, possible.

If, speculatively speaking, any genuine categorical demand entails its metaphysical possibility, then Philip’s belief that the remains *can* be ex-aquified is justified. But even granting this much, what could justify the belief that this retrieval could be achieved “*by locking [herself] into “this particular and peculiar discursive landscape” (191) of the record of the Zong legal decision (Gregson v. Gilbert)? This seems to require believing in the frankly incredible mnemonic capacities of this word store. But what does it mean to believe that? To answer these questions, we have to return to the problem of the “relations the Dead have with the living” (Scott 2019, n.p.).*

TRANSLATING THE DEAD

Perhaps the conditions of remembering the (Dead) past are not, as we thought, linked to the conditions for living, human memory. Perhaps because the demand for memory and its retrieval is not, in principle, indexed to *human* capacities, we also experience the demand as *too* demanding, as beyond our capacities for fulfillment. The mismatch, then, is not between an ethical “desire” and a reality indifferent to our moral projects, but rather the mismatch, as Philip suggests, is between the past *and* the present, conceived in terms of a simple present (“to be”) and the Future infinite(ive).²⁷ The demand for retrieval is indexed to *this* infinite(ive)—and not the mode of finite being. Thus, ought implies can even if the *can* is not (necessarily) for us. Before turning to the question of the form of the infinite(ive) and its relation to memory, on the one hand, and language, on the other, I want first to turn to the question of the limits of the *humanly* possible. In what will likely appear to be a digression, I will pose the question of metaphysical versus human possibility (and the way either is linked to a categorical demand) by considering what Walter Benjamin, in “The Translator’s Task” (1921), had to say about “translatability.” Translatability (and translation) might seem essentially different from “retrievability” (and remembering) but, as I will argue, they are essentially related ideas.

Distinguishing between two senses of the word “translatability,” Benjamin notes that the first, less pertinent, sense of translatability would ask whether something “will ever find, among the totality of its readers, an adequate translator?” (Benjamin 1997, 152). However, the second, more pertinent sense of the term asks “whether something by its very essence allows itself to be translated, and hence—in accord with the meaning of this mode—also calls for translation” (Benjamin 1997, 152). The latter is more pertinent for Benjamin because it answers the question (of what makes translation possible) not with reference to the (human) translator, but with reference to the objective structure or essence of what is translated. Only the latter (form of the) question can be answered “apodictically”—that is, by appeal to what is necessarily the case by virtue of the logic of this “structure” and “relation.” It is also more pertinent because it

links the call or demand (the necessity) of translation to an objective rather than subjective structure, grounding the demand beyond the human.

In this context, Benjamin formulates an important principle, one that disputes the sorts of critical concepts that are the legacy of a Kantian, transcendental framework. If what we are trying to understand is a *relational* concept—and all questions of ‘-ability’ are relational in the relevant sense, we must be mindful that:²⁸

certain relational concepts gain their proper, indeed their best sense, when they are not from the outset connected exclusively with human being. Thus we could still speak of an *unforgettable* life or moment, even if all human beings had forgotten it. If the essence of such lives or moments required [logically] that they not be forgotten, this predicate [“unforgettable”] would not be false, it would merely be a demand to which human beings had failed to respond, and at the same time, no doubt, a reference to a place where this demand would find a response. . . . The translatability of linguistic constructions would accordingly have to be taken into consideration even if they were untranslatable by human beings. (Benjamin 1997, 152)

Translatability is just such a relational concept for Benjamin. The demand and possibility of translation is not linked to human “success” conditions but rather to the objective structure of the original.

Benjamin argues that if the “original” text is *translatable*, then it must be the case that it is *already* the effect or product of a translation. Translation and translatability are the proper, essential, and constitutive properties of texts. Our present conceptuality, which considers translatability as structurally inessential, fails to factor an original “textual” entanglement (of source and target text). The “original” is “traced” in the target text, or the “original” resonates in and through all of the translations. The “entanglement” of the “original” and “translated” text helps us to understand how the question of remembering and forgetting came to be linked up with that of translation.

How, then, is what Benjamin calls “unforgettability” linked to “translatability”? The answer, for Benjamin, is that *what* we translate, in each case,

is not the “original” text but what “unforgettable[y]” resonates in each translation or heir. This “unforgettable” carries over each time, in each translation, without being graspable in its originality and propriety. Its ontological modality is *spectrality*, or what Derrida has called the trace structure. Each translation bears within it this “original” text, retrievable through a kind of “reverse” translation, though it may always be the case that the demands for retrieval are not ones to which we can adequately respond.

Benjamin—though apparently making reference only to literary *remains*—makes the point that the demand for restitution—or what he calls “translation”—is *inhuman* and tied to the a priori structure of the original (see Benjamin 1997). This frame of the a priori “unforgettable” sheds light, I have suggested, on Philip’s speculations on what she calls “the infinite(ive) of to be” (199).²⁹ Being, though individuated and localized, is not, for that matter, limited or recorded in a single time and place. The mode of being of “to be”—of those massacred, or perhaps their remains—is infinite, dispersed, and diffracted. Its survival in(def)inite. The past persists, it survives, in the form of the infinite(ive).

Derrida, in his (diffractive?) reading of Benjamin’s “The Task of Translation,” referred to this spectral mode of persistence or survival as sur-vival, where, the “-” remarks the double duty that “sur” (over) is doing in French. Sur- means surviving *beyond* in a double sense, *beyond* any particular human life—as a text survives its author and its contemporaries—and surviving beyond the human such.³⁰ The demand for memory, I believe, is linked to this double beyond, which corresponds neither to the finitude of human *life* nor to that of *living* memory.

Philip notes that *Zong!* is a work of hauntology, of spectral survival. She links this observation to her reading of Jacques Derrida, and in particular the *Specters of Marx* (1994). As she glosses, for Derrida, “the hauntological” refers to where “the spectres of the undead make themselves present” (201). To believe in the demand for memory, to do the work of mourning, one must also believe in the spectral, in sur-vival, that the dead makes themselves present. “It [*Zong!*] is a work that employs memory in the service of mourning” (202). What is the work of mourning, the demand

motivating it? “We must identify the remains and localize the dead” (202). Philip’s “infinite(ive) of being” is Derridean “sur-vival”; both specify a (spectral) form of in-(de)finitude. We can also call it memory, provided we do not index this term, as we usually do, to the finitude of the human but rather to the form that makes the work of mourning *possible*.

REVERSIBILITY AND RESTITUTION

I recall hearing a radio interview with Gavin Bryars, composer of “The Sinking of the Titanic,” in which he discusses the idea of sound never ceasing within water, an idea that he suggests Marconi believed, since water is a much more “sound-efficient medium” than air. I have often since wondered whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater. In the bone beds of the sea. (202)

Let us assume for a moment, then, though this is certainly a fiction, that there were no genetic survivors of either the captive persons or the crew of the *Zong*. Moreover, let us assume that there were no papers, no records, no artifacts left behind at all. No recoverable trace of the ship itself, or its holds. No recordings, no memoirs, no diaries. No attestation. Absolute silence. The harrowing events of the *Zong*, the agony of the victims and the guilt of their executioners, the tallies of profit and loss, the names, both the victims and the perpetrators, the dates, would—we presume—like almost all of what has past, be absolutely lost to posterity. Lost without a trace. Forgotten, then, even the demand to remember. No imaginable forensic practice could, in principle, recoup or recall the *Zong* or the terrible events its name condenses.

But surely this image of traceless loss is a priori false—impossible. What terrestrial goods *could* disappear without a trace? Ships and their records and logs are discovered, sometimes ex-aquafied. Records of agony, scratched on wood, traumatic wounds evidenced on bodily remains, survive long after the tormented and their tormentors have ceased to count among the living. Today, with the tools of forensic anthropology, shards of bone, for example, are discovered and used to individuate the remains.

Faces—a face that no one in living memory has seen—can appear on computer screens, risen from fragments of cheekbones via complex calculations and algorithms (see Kirby 2011). Strands of the DNA of long-extinct animals formerly frozen in the tundra appear and hold out the promise (or threat) of their resurrection.³¹ Ancient scrolls, long since rendered “illegible” charcoal, are reconstructed— via interferon microscopes, which can read the still “legible” differentials of carbon decay (see Marchant 2018). More traditional documents are found, stolen away in the back of a library or the corner of an attic, unnoticed for centuries. These instances of retrieval, through increasingly technical forensic practices, require us to question, as does the work of Philip and Benjamin, the essential link between *living* memory and the possibility of recovery and restitution. Even if Philip did not have recourse to the court documents of Justice Mansfield’s court (she did), “records” of the *Zong* and its victims, and therefore the “demand” for restitution, would persist in some “unforgettable” form. The question is still, however, how this possibility, even if granted, warrants Philip’s specific belief that the “unforgettable” residue of the *Zong* massacre can be found “stored” in the court document.

“The story that cannot be told”—it is nowhere present—will, Philip writes, nonetheless “tell itself” (199). It would be *as if* entirely unbeknownst to the writers and the readers of the courtroom document, to its contemporaries and its posterity—the document also recorded not only the manifest proceedings of Lord Mansfield’s Court, on that day in the year 1783, but also *an entirely different set of proceedings*, namely and especially everything that the manifest text excludes and censors. This alternative “recording,” which Philip calls a “word store”—would preserve, albeit on a different “register” than the manifest one—the “voices” of the massacred and the world they inhabited, *somehow* in the same way, Philip suggests, as Guglielmo Marconi believed that the sea “stores” sound.

On the speculations of Marconi, pioneer of radio transmission, sound never ceased to *resound* in water. In principle, then, *if this were right*, Philip suggests, the cries of the murdered African captives of the *Zong* would persist there still. What if this text, this document, the language in which it is written, its word store, then, were also like the seawater? What if language

too were as “sound-efficient”—one might also say mnemonic, un-forgetting—as seawater? Lacking the right sort of equipment or technical aptitude for actual ex-acquafication, Philip, the poet, considers the matter *de jure*.

Then let us first imagine that the sea were like what Marconi believed, an ideally sound-efficient medium. If “the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater,” then they could be, in principle, retrieved (203). If this were so, the historical record would be, in principle, indefinitely larger, incalculably denser than we imagined. Let us imagine, second, that the documented record of the court case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, were *like* the sound-efficient sea, and that beyond what appeared, beyond the noise of the manifest or explicit text, there were, indelibly there, a legible signal of all that the text appears to exclude. The courtroom *that* day, all of the witnesses and everything they said, including the words of Captain Collingwood, who had ordered the massacre, preserved and continuing to resound in the document, just as sound resounds in the sea. *If* this analogy held, then it would make sense to “lock oneself in” the word store to find a way to “hear” or “retrieve” those traces.

Philip, I believe, does not wish to hide that this is a big “ask,” speculatively speaking—to move from sea and the memory of water, to the court case, its language and the memory of language. Why should we grant it? The analogy relies for its sense on a naturalistic speculation (Marconi’s): that water is “sound-efficient,” where sound-efficiency—apparently—refers to some sort of mnemonic property of the medium in question. Marconi, we recall, was interested in the transmission of sound waves, their propagation through a medium, and their retrieval. Water is sound-efficient relative to air, it seems, because sound waves are amplified in water, but it seems also that sound dissipates less in water, remains legible longer—perhaps indefinitely. It seems to me that what is relevant here and what the analogy brings out is less the efficiency of the medium than the mnemonic qualities of water or sound. If sounds continue to reverberate and resound, then it is not just propagated and transmitted through water (as a medium) but the medium is “hysteretically” altered by the propagation (“it resounds still”). “Repetition drives the event and the memory simultaneously, becoming a haunting, becoming spectral in its nature” (201). Perhaps nothing, once

sounded, is ever forgotten or destroyed, even if we cannot imagine a forensic apparatus to retrieve this sound.³²

If the first term in the analogy—that of a sound-efficient sea—is roughly explicable in the terms just laid out, does it shed light on the second term in the analogy, that of the court document as “word store”? What sense does it make to conceive of language as a medium that is mnemonic and spectral like the seawater so described? What sense does it make to try to construct and operate a forensic apparatus—on the basis of this analysis—that would then allow the poet to retrieve (as if from the sea) the diffracted sounds, thoughts, and lives of those massacred? What claim is Philip making about language—and the linguistic medium?

The poetry cycle *Zong!*—Philip tells us—involves both “censorship” and “magic.” Philip, the operator of the forensic apparatus she constructs, bespoke, for the task at hand, both “censors” the text as given, silencing or “untelling” it, and “conjures” the *other* sounds, texts, traces that resound there. “As censor, I function like the law whose role is to proscribe and prescribe, deciding which aspects of the text will be removed and which remain. . . .As magician, however, I conjure the infinite(ive) of to be of the ‘negroes’ on board the *Zong*” (199). The image of censorship can be translated back into the prior analogy Philip gives: that of waves and transmission. If we normally think of reading a text as distinguishing between signal (marked, differential elements) and noise (unmarked, undifferentiated background), Philip instead urges and pursues a “reverse” reading. In this case, we must reduce the signal to read the “noise.” We must reverse the relationship between noise and signal. The noise appears as the still-structured spaces or silences in the text, and Philip seeks the silence or rather the structure in the silence (191). Having set out the mnemonic model, the poet seeks now the means and the methods to receive the “reverse”-signal, or the “reverse-text.”

The presence of this reversed or spectral text is revealed to Philip anagrammatically. Philip “breaks into” the text, forcibly cutting and splicing, particle-izing and rearranging it. It is useful to recall, at this point, Ferdinand de Saussure’s deeply unsettling discoveries of the anagrammatical features of text. This surfeit of structure over sense, Saussure, quite

naturally, took to be evidence of intentional, secret communication. However, the prevalence of these structures led him to reconsider this hypothesis. As Vicki Kirby tells the story, Saussure was, at first, convinced that the texts in which he found these anagrams were coded, and that these messages were intentionally placed there to be read by those who knew how to look. But, as he began to see these anagrams everywhere, he also began to doubt himself. The secret, cryptic messages could not have been disseminated so thoroughly. Perhaps *he* was imagining things, finding structure and signal where there was none? He could not conceive *what* the presence of these nonintentional patterns and associations, which seemed to contribute no part to the meaning of the text, could possibly tell us about language and the linguistic medium. Saussure reached “the point of wondering whether all possible words [in any language] could not actually be found in every text?” but then seemed to lose courage, conceding that “the system of nonlinear, extratemporal correspondences” he had found might be nothing more than a retrospective illusion (Kirby 2011, 42).

Kirby, here quoting Sylvère Lotringer, *remarks* that

a completely different conclusion might have imposed itself: not a panicky reclaiming of the whole, but a presentment of the productive function that devolves on any reading as soon as it escapes from the constraints of linearity and the snares of meaning. The recognition of other modes of significance *alien to the subject-sign matrix* could then be reached, and the semiotics freed from the tyranny of speech. (Kirby 2011, 44)

Here, Lotringer, Kirby argues, does not go far enough. We should stop seeking “the motivational resonance and complexity of language within the enclosure of a specifically human capacity” (Kirby 2011, 45). *This* is the lesson of Saussure’s anagrams. Saussure’s sense of “units living underneath the word” or his apprehension that all possible words could be found in every text might have motivated, recalling Benjamin, an account of linguistic and textual structure that do not reference the human as such. This sort of account is precisely the one that Philip assumes and produces.

“I did. ‘Break and Enter’ the text to release its anti-meaning”

M. NourbeSe Philip work asks us whether *credible* memory can only be construed on the basis of an individuated record, originating and localized in a particular time and place and passed down to us in an unbroken thread of living memory. Instead of this model, she offers an image of memory that would be refracted and diffracted, dispersed—resounding—and at least sometimes, though by no means always, humanly retrievable. The past (in light of the future, infinitive), is Unforgettable. The sur-viving dimension is, a priori, untouched by human death or failure. The manifest text becomes the medium in which the trace is propagated, and Philip invites us to listen to a world in which the “silences” and “absences” of the court documents begin to appear and speak—of their own accord. Translate themselves.

Insofar as we are concerned with the conditions of a *successful* reading, of understanding and interpreting a court document, Philip’s project and its meaning are illegible to us. Philip is *not* attempting to “understand” the legal documents relating to the tragic and criminally abhorrent events on the *Zong* or their “meanings”—not even those meanings that are contested or the subject of ongoing, lively scholarly debates. Indeed, as she puts it, her aim, with respect to the text, is to break it apart. To do violence to its structure and coherence—not in the name of an *incoherent* rage or *inarticulate* grief—but to make the document *speak* differently and otherwise. To release, as the heading to this section says, the text’s “anti-meaning” (202). Like the status of hauntology vis-à-vis ontology, the anti-meaning is not the opposite of meaning or signification—it is closer in sense, though I would not like to insist on this analogy too much, to the meaning of “dark matter” in scientific discourse. Dark matter refers to that posited, speculative entity that is the intangible counterparty to visible matter. Crucial to the analogy in question, “dark matter” accounts for the structure and coherence of the (visible-manifest) material world without, for that matter, appearing itself. If a text’s meaning, in the accepted, everyday sense of the term, were “matter,” the “material” that Philip seeks to make indirectly visible is the “dark” matter that structures—or *infra*-structures—linguistic matters.

On Vicki Kirby's inspired reading, Saussure's attempt to account for anagrams was an attempt to get at the "dark matter" or the "dark structures" of linguistic texts. What he, Saussure, failed to consider is that "language" might not be indexed to the human but rather, as both Benjamin and Philip indicate, to the Future, to sur-vival and to the infinite(ive) of to be. The demand for memory, the work of mourning, requires us, as Derrida argues, to accept the a priori of the unforgettable, that which remains untouched by our failures to remember. "The requirement of the unforgettable—which is here constitutive—is not in the least impaired by the finitude of memory" (Derrida 2010, 116). The great power of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* is the way it testifies both to the finitude of human memory and to the requirements and demands of the unforgettable.



NOTES

I wish to thank historians Elizabeth Manley and Thomas Jessen Adams for their enormously helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript, particularly in the area of historical epistemology. The work has benefited greatly from their erudition.

1. Philip (2008) is hereafter parenthetically cited with page number.
2. Of course, this is not quite right. Hurston is drawing attention to the exceptionality of the narrative that follows, the narrative of Cudjo Kazoola Lewis (whose "African" name is Oluale Kossola). Kazoola was the "third to last known survivor of the Atlantic slave trade." See Hurston (2018).
3. Hannah Arendt wrote similarly about the *administrative* disappearance of the German Jews, where Jews entered as citizens and persons and left the (administrative) building stateless. See Arendt (2007).
4. This both recalls and alters Walter Benjamin's famous comment in "On the Concept of History" that "any document of civilization is also a document of barbarism."
5. Philip writes of her initial shock over the "thin" descriptions: "Very early on I develop a need to know the names of the murdered and actually call James Walvin, author of *Black Ivory*, in England to ask him if he knew how I could locate them. 'Oh no,' his tone is commiserative, 'they didn't keep names.' I don't—cannot believe this to be true, but later on, as a result of correspondence with a colleague who is researching and writing a book on the *Zong* case I receive a copy of a sales book kept by one Thomas Case, an agent in Jamaica who did business with the owners of the *Zong*. It is typical of the records kept at that time: Purchasers are identified while Africans are reduced to the stark description of 'negroe man' [*sic*], 'negroe woman,' or, more frequently, 'ditto man,'

- 'ditto woman.' There is one gloss to this description: 'Negroe girl (meagre).' There are many 'meagre' girls, no 'meagre' boys. This description leaves me shaken—I want to weep. I leave the photocopied sheet of the ledger sitting on my old typewriter for days. I cannot approach the work for several days" (193).
6. This paper is inspired by and grows out of Karen Barad's substantial reflections on Philip's *Zong!* during a plenary address to the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) in 2014 (New Orleans). Central to Barad's approach, as I recall, was insisting on the philosophical, indeed metaphysical, import of Philip's project. The philosophical kernel, Barad underlined, was the idea of treating the document of the court case *Gregson v. Gilbert* not as a *record* or representation of the events that took place that day in the courtroom, in particular the records of words, thoughts, and intentions, but rather as a "diffractive pattern." Barad has confirmed my recollections of this still-unpublished talk (via private correspondence).
 7. Consider—as Philip asks us to consider—that we do not even have a credible account of the number of souls who died in the massacre. "'130 or 131.' The common number is rounded to 150 souls lost or thrown overboard." (208 n. 3).
 8. For an extended discussion of the relationship between the slave trade and insurance, see Levy (2014).
 9. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," her seminal work on "intersectionality," Crenshaw demonstrates how U.S. antidiscrimination law, because it limits representations of tort to one dimension of harm and presupposes as default the unharmed "whole" individual, creates a false image of harm as "but for X, Y would be 'whole.'" Her work masterfully makes visible the "activity" of law as a construction of social reality. See Crenshaw (1989).
 10. Here, the reference points are undoubtedly Derridean; Derrida gives the most expansive theoretical sense to the notion of traces and spacing of any Western philosopher. As we will see, Philip expresses and affirms a particular affinity with Derrida's work, and particularly his notion of specters and hauntology.
 11. "I also want to reject both the naïve propositions that we are prisoners of our pasts and the pernicious suggestion that history is whatever we make of it" (Trouillot 2015, xix). On my reading, Trouillot's aims are actually more deconstructive than this formulation suggests. The "constructivist" view of history, insofar as it rejects positivistic view, would refuse the opposition between fiction (qua narration) and reality. But Trouillot seems interested in deconstructing the opposition between positivism and constructivism.
 12. On the question of history as narrative, Trouillot is primarily in conversation with Hayden White's account in "Interpretation in History" (1973).
 13. It is worth considering the difference between indefinite and infinite [especially because Philip uses the term infinite(ive)] to characterize the being of the Dead, the Past, Memory. Indefinite, roughly, is what goes all the way down (it will not bottom out in simple or localizable x). The infinite is also irreducible, but this by reason of its totality.
 14. Donna Haraway as quoted in Barad (2007).

15. Hurston wrote that the records of the thoughts of the enslaved were not kept because unlike their labor and their bodies, their words and thoughts had no “market value.” If we look at the publication history of the Hurston’s book *Baraccoon and* use this publication as an index of “market value,” one would surmise that these words and thought had no market value until 2018.
16. By redemptive, I primarily rely on the weight and sense that Walter Benjamin gives this term (in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”). The past waits for the future to redeem it (remember it). The demand for this redemption comes from the past and past generations and, as Benjamin writes, the claims of the past “will not be settled cheaply” (Benjamin 1969, 254).
17. Here I remark Philip’s emphasis on this descriptor for a captive—a girl, 14 years of age, “meagre.” Philip subsequently refers here to the “meagre ones” easily forgotten. They were the children onboard, those who may, indeed, have survived and lived on and therefore would represent a living link to those massacred off-board the *Zong*.
18. As with “meagre” and its appearance, so with “butts.” Both of these terms are central to *Zong!*’s word store, appearing in the “original” court document.
19. “November 25, ’03, Caledon, Ontario. I cannot say when I first conceive the idea but once it has taken hold I know that I must honour it. “Defend the dead.” The Africans on board the *Zong* must be named. They will be ghostly footnotes floating below the text — “under water . . . a place of consequence.” Idea at heart of the footnotes in general is acknowledgement—someone else was here before—in *Zong!* footnote equals the foot-print” (200).
20. Zora Neale Hurston recognized and took it as a matter of course that she had to justify the text before the standard of perfect testimonial justice. The text is not a transcript of his words, it is a narrativization of his narrative as it appeared in response to her questions. There is, Hurston emphasizes, an unmistakable literary, artifactual dimension to the work, but this is not necessarily in tension with its evidentiary value. She neither denies the constitutive value of her participation nor affirms that it is a taint against the objectivity of the account. Nonetheless, it seems here that the demand for some ideal of first-personal living presence as testimony plays a part in the sense that the demand for memory is beyond human capacities.
21. It is this genetic claim about the belief, that it is rooted in a rejection of the reality principle, that helps ground the judgment that it is false.
22. Here Philip is describing a ceremony called the ceremony of the Souls, performed in Haiti. See Scott (2019).
23. There is at least a minor tradition in Western philosophy that affirms this view. Benjamin (at least on Derrida’s reading of him) affirms this view, as we shall see. John Rawls’s reading of Kant suggests that the moral law, or “fact of reason,” enjoys its facticity on account of the recognition of it as subjectively obligating. Finally, Levinas’s view of responsibility and self-accounting as spontaneously arising (as if elicited) in everyday life (“transcendence”) is evidence for Plato’s “Good beyond Being” (see Bergo 2019)

24. *Zong!* #14.
25. I am not implying that Kant's argument—where he argues that “ought implies can”—is grounded on the experience of the categorical imperative. It is rather that the categorical imperative, the truth of which has already been established, entails that what it obligates one to is doable. The corollary of this argument is excluding demands that are, in principle, unfulfillable. As I read him, Kant's intention here is rather the reverse. If we are the subjects of an ethical demand, the demand is not infinite, impossible, or otherwise made to a superhuman measure. To the contrary, the categorical imperative is perfectly fit for our capacities. Thus, Kant's argument comes to the exact opposite conclusion from the argument I am running, which concludes that the moral demand tells us something about what is possible but not necessarily what is possible for us. The moral demand in this case would not be perfectly fit to our capacities. For an excellent discussion of these issues from the point of view of contemporary Kant studies, see Kohl (2015).
26. There are a number of philosophical texts that one can explore in this regard, particularly William James's *Will to Believe*. Here James explores the generic question of when the demand or the ought requires rethinking the nature of what is possible. We may, at least sometimes, James argues, adopt a belief without prior evidence of its truth, and it seems we may find as evidence in favor of a belief's truth the sort of ethical demand that motivates it. I think it is possible to read Derrida's work on the demands of Justice and Hospitality as an attempt to think about the question of what is “possible” precisely from the point of view of the demand.
27. Interestingly, Walter Benjamin's account of translation, and the demand for translation (in “The Translator's Task”), argues similarly, that the demand for translation—which is just the text and the structure of the text itself—would exist even if and beyond the human. To understand the relation implied by textual translatability, it follows, we do well, Benjamin counsels, to imagine it beyond and outside the human—not because humans do not participate in this relation but because imagining relations in terms of the human falsifies is an impediment to understanding *all* genuinely relational concepts (of which translation is one, he argues).
28. “Ability” questions are relational in the sense that they are possibilities related to a corresponding “capacity.” Kant, for his part, indexed the “how possible” question to “human capacities.” Benjamin argues that the meaning of the relation is at least sometimes distorted when we assume, “from the outset,” that the latter (relations) are essentially connected to human beings. For a discussion of the centrality of this suffix, ability, to Walter Benjamin's thought, see the brilliant “*Benjamin-abilities*” by Weber (2010).
29. This infinite(ive) is the portmanteau of infinite and infinitive, and “conjures” or requires us to spell out the logic that links finite being with a form of in(de)finite (return). From the note dated October 4, 2002: “In simultaneously censoring the activity of the reported text while conjuring the presence of excised Africans, as well as their humanity, I become both censor and magician. As censor, I function like the law whose role is to

proscribe and prescribe, deciding which aspects of the text will be removed and which remain; I replicate the censorial activity of the law, which determines which facts should or should not become evidence; what is allowed into the record and what not. Like the law, I decide what is or is not. *As magician, however, I conjure the infinite(ive) of to be of the 'negroes' on board the Zong.* This is the axis on which the text of *Zong!* turns: censor and magician; the told and the untold; the telling and the un-telling of what cannot, yet must, be told.

In the struggle to avoid imposing meaning, I confront the tension between the poem that I want to write and the poem that must write itself. While a concern with precision and accuracy in language is common to both law and poetry, the law uses language as a tool for ordering; in the instant case, however, I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself" (199).

30. In fact, Derrida is attempting to translate Benjamin's German, where he is attempting to explain the relation of translation. He is pointing out that this relation Benjamin characterizes as both "Über-leben" and "Fort-leben."
31. In a fascinating article in the *Atlantic*, "Pleistocene Park" (Andersen 2017), the author treats us to an extended interview with a family of Siberian scientists and park officials, the Zimovs, who realistically dream of resurrecting mastodons to deal with the potentially calamitous effects of the melting permafrost.
32. Of course, the same is true for air. If water is sound-efficient, it is precisely because of the power of water to amplify and hold the sound in a transmissible, or "legible," form. Presumably the engineering or forensic task is somewhat easier with water than air.

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DEBORAH GOLDGABER is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Louisiana State University with a joint appointment in Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies. She is the author of *Speculative Grammatology: Deconstruction and the New Materialism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Her current research lies at the intersection of contemporary French philosophy, deconstruction, and feminist theory, with particular interests in embodiment, morphogenesis, life-forms, and bio-philosophy. Her research has appeared in *Philosophy Today*, *Parallax*, the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*.