



Sargassum in the Black Atlantic: Entanglement and the abyss in Bearden, Walcott, and Philip

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ABSTRACT

“Sargassum in the Black Atlantic: Entanglement and the abyss in Bearden, Walcott, and Philip” explores the figure of seaweed, particularly free-floating sargassum, as a model for conceptualizing transoceanic connections in the Black Atlantic. I present sargassum as a replacement for the concept of the rhizome, which fails to adequately function within an aquatic context since as a terrestrial metaphor the rhizome cannot capture the ocean’s fluidity and circulation. Replacing a terrestrial figure with an oceanic one allows for a richer understanding of connection and loss, since the migratory sargassum is able to conceptually entangle disparate cultures, while also attending to the histories, and gaps in histories, contained within the oceanic abyss. It is within this context that the article considers a variety of works, including Romare Bearden’s collage “The Sea Nymph” from the series *Black Odyssey*, Derek Walcott’s poem “The Bounty,” and M. NourbeSe Philip’s book-length poem *Zong!*.

KEYWORDS

Black Atlantic; Édouard Glissant; rhizome; new materialism; sargassum; entanglement; Derek Walcott; Romare Bearden; M. NourbeSe Philip; *Zong!*

coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps
Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation 6

The first written description of sargassum seaweed was a misrecognition. On his first transatlantic journey Christopher Columbus encountered dense mats of floating sargassum that gives the Sargasso Sea its name. Columbus described these mats as stretching to the horizon and felt certain they would soon find land, believing that the “large patches of yellowish-green weed” had “been torn away from some island or reef” near to the west.¹ Columbus, however, was incorrect – he had left the Canary Islands only 10 days earlier, and it would be another month before he encountered land. He was also incorrect in believing that the seaweed had been torn from its moorings since *Sargassum natans*, and the less common *Sargassum fluitans*, are holopelagic – never attaching to the ocean floor, or any surface, during their lifecycle.² These two species are unique among all seaweeds for being wholly free-floating, and the seaweed, a macro-algae (rather than a plant or weed), congeals into the huge mats Columbus encountered, creating a unique open ocean environment that migrates throughout the Caribbean and North Atlantic (Figure 1).

Columbus’s focus on the shore meant that he failed to understand he had encountered a unique ecosystem in the midst of the ocean. His description belies an idea of the ocean

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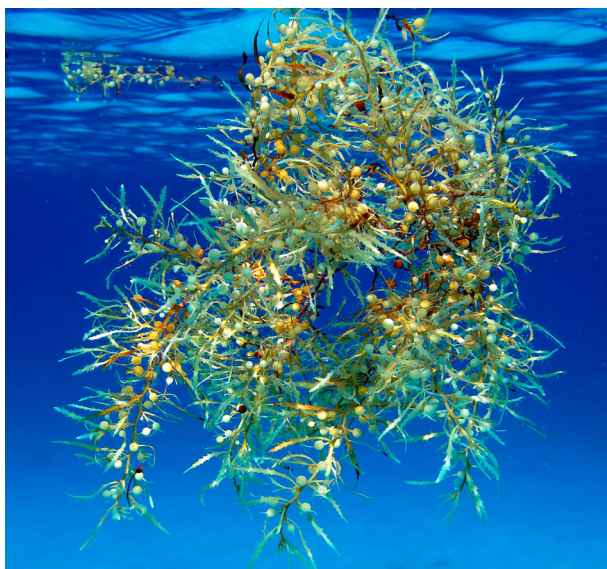


Figure 1. *Sargassum natans*, the most common form of seaweed present in the Sargasso Sea. Courtesy of Sean P. Nash, <http://nashworld.me>.

that emphasizes the terrestrial rim while reducing the ocean to a void to be navigated, and thus he failed to imagine sargassum as a migrating ecosystem *independent* of land. As an alternative to this terrestrial emphasizing approach we can consider the epigraph that begins this article. In describing the ocean's abyssal depths as a circulating reservoir of meaning that figuratively surfaces violences inflicted on enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage, Édouard Glissant presents the image of seaweed circulating in the wake of ships. Rather than imagining the ocean as a void, Glissant attributes to the ocean a meaning making process that attends to the ocean's own fluid material circulation, as well as ways that living matter like seaweed, in reminding us of the subsumption of the dead into the living, is an important part of our experience. As Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation*,

The next abyss [following being thrown in the hold of a slave ship] was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea – whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers* – still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains.³

Glissant represents the abyssal depths as reservoirs of meaning that appear like seaweed circulating in the wake of ships, rising from the depths. This image of seaweed entangles the material turmoil of the churning water with abyssal histories, as well as with ways that nature serves as a living reminder of these histories. Simultaneously, the rearranging action of the ocean means that there is no one location that can be pointed to as a location of the abyss. As Glissant further writes, "Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss."⁴

In recent decades, the ocean has increasingly been considered as an organizing metaphor for literary, political, and cultural relationships. Taking the ocean and the creatures that live within it seriously has provided theorists with new conceptual possibilities, and has proved particularly fruitful within the field of new materialism. While Margaret Cohen's "The Chronotopes of the Sea" serves as a watershed moment in studies foregrounding oceanic environments, such approaches can be traced back to earlier efforts, including Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands."⁵ More recent texts have also drawn on the ocean as a means of articulating intersectional issues.⁶ Similarly, much of this new oceanic imaginary can be traced back to texts that consider the Black Atlantic and ways in which histories of European imperialism and the slave trade reverberate today. This article therefore addresses considerations of the Black Atlantic put forth by authors like Édouard Glissant, while also taking seriously the call of new materialists like Stacy Alaimo to attend closely to material connections between the human and the more-than-human.⁷

While I refer to the term "new materialism" here and throughout, similar concepts have been articulated under many terms, including vital materialism, trans-corporeality, and object-oriented ontology. Each term, of course, entails its own particular nuances, but are unified by an interest in considering how attending to the material world can reconfigure our understanding of a world we are intimately connected with. What's at stake in new materialism is a reconceptualization of matter that distributes agency away from humans and toward "every existing thing and occurrence" as "the concretization of material *and* semiotic-discursive dynamics, and therefore bequeathed with the possibility of carrying meanings and with a historical (namely, narrative) dimension."⁸ This approach has been particularly fruitful in ocean studies, and has prompted a number of excellent texts, including Elizabeth DeLoughrey's "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," which calls for new "sea ontologies" that attend to living matter within the ocean as a means of understanding a "submarine temporality in which linear models of time are distorted and ruptured."⁹ DeLoughrey's approach emphasizes the confluence of human histories with the rearranging influence of ocean currents, while also addressing how nature reconfigures such histories, and it is within the spirit of DeLoughrey's call for "sea ontologies" that this article operates.¹⁰

This article explores the figure of sargassum as an oceanic replacement for, and improvement upon, the concept of the rhizome, as first discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and expanded by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*. The concept of the rhizome falters as a model for transoceanic connection because as a terrestrial figure the rhizome relies on an environmental milieu that is unmoving and stable. However, as a migrating holopelagic macro-algae, sargassum wholly inhabits the churning fluid materiality of the ocean. Additionally, while rhizomes connect, sargassum entangles. This distinction is necessary within an oceanic context since the fluid circulation of the ocean means that the environmental milieu is always undergoing change. Rhizomatic connections, figured as they are against a stable background of soil, fail to attend to the disrupting effects of this shifting materiality. Sargassum's entanglement, however, figuratively allows for the juxtaposition and migration of various parts, while also acknowledging the importance of ocean currents as both connecting and disrupting transoceanic relations. As such, sargassum can be understood as symbolically interconnecting various Atlantic cultures and histories, including Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe and the

Americas, while also allowing for gaps in knowledge and interconnection. Its circulation within and drawing of sustenance from the depths also means that sargassum is able to figuratively surface abyssal histories connected to atrocities such as the Middle Passage and the deaths of enslaved Africans cast into the sea. Thus, as a figure of relation sargassum makes the ocean *as* material critically present, while also refusing to ever be attached to one location.

Toward the goal of articulating sargassum as a figure of entangled transatlantic relations I consider texts and images that depict and discuss sargassum and seaweed, including the journal *Sargasso*, Romare Bearden's collage "Sea Nymph" from the series *Black Odyssey*, and Derek Walcott's "The Bounty." I conclude with a reading of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, which does not overtly include seaweed, but exemplifies the concepts I have attributed to sargassum within the figure of Setaey Adamu Boateng, who shares writing credit with M. NourbeSe Philip for *Zong!*. Boateng is ultimately revealed as a living archive of the dispersed subaqueous voices of the Ancestors speaking from the abyss, and as such disrupts Western assumptions about the individual as self contained.

Sargassum as conceptual entanglement

Philip Steinberg, quoting Hester Blum, begins his article "Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions" with the sentence "The sea is not a metaphor." Steinberg goes on to critique a tendency within recent oceanic studies to construct the ocean as a space that binds terrestrial societies along the oceanic rim while also under theorizing the ocean region itself. As a result, the ocean is too frequently figured as an "ideal-type" with an "empty surface of movement in the middle."¹¹ One example he provides is Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. Steinberg argues that while the concept of the Atlantic is important for Gilroy in interconnecting various transatlantic communities of the African diaspora, the liquid materiality of the Atlantic is largely absent. "Venturing into Gilroy's Black Atlantic," Steinberg writes, "one never gets wet."¹² In the next section I offer one possible response: perhaps Gilroy's oversight was in part prompted by his struggles with the rhizome's inability to function within an oceanic context.

Steinberg's purpose is not to deny the value of metaphor, but rather to promote the creation of conceptual models that attend to the ocean's "fluid mobility and its tactile materiality."¹³ As a conceptual model, sargassum stubbornly retains a focus on materiality, from the micro-level of atoms passing into and out of the seaweed, to the macro-level of the Sargasso Sea as a physical space within the Atlantic Ocean, the boundaries of which are constantly altered by currents. Similarly, Steinberg argues that

ocean-region-based studies must take heed of the uniquely fluvial nature of the ocean that lies at the center of an ocean region, so they must account for the fluidity of the lines that are drawn around and within the region.¹⁴

Much as the boundaries of the Sargasso Sea are constantly in flux, so to must our oceanic imaginary remain pliable. Rather than constructing solid vectors of transoceanic connections, we must attend to the vagaries of fluid currents and the ways that such connections entail loss, as well as exchange.¹⁵ My usage of the term entanglement is motivated in part by its conceptual traction within recent new materialist scholarship.¹⁶ In *Meeting the*

Universe Halfway Karan Barad draws on the term's usage in quantum physics to argue that systemic entanglement challenges the dominance of individualism in Western thought, which incorrectly believes "that the world is populated with individual things with their own independent sets of determinate properties."¹⁷ Barad challenges this belief, arguing that "Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."¹⁸ Rather than things, or people, or cultures, having inherent characteristics or properties, entanglement entails a continual process of becoming through interrelation that articulates certain properties. This process operates through what Barad describes as "intra-action":

The neologism 'intra-action' signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the 'distinct' agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements.¹⁹

We can discover an example of intra-action in the entanglement of a piece of plastic with a sargassum mat. The piece of plastic, which was once a toothbrush, and was itself created from petroleum derived from dead organisms, is in turn mistaken by a bird as a shrimp hiding among the sargassum. At each stage the piece of plastic, from petroleum, to toothbrush, to mistaken shrimp, enacts different forms of agency dependent on encounters with other agencies, such as the sargassum mat's entanglement, or the ocean's movement breaking plastic into smaller pieces.²⁰ As such, we might consider entanglement as challenging idealized visions of a nature/ culture divide in favor of constructing new models that acknowledge and attend to humanity's changing relationships with the material world.

Here I consider sargassum as both physically entangling diverse objects, and figuratively entangling diverse narratives, as we will see in Bearden's reworking of *The Odyssey*, Walcott's references to the culture of Ovid, and Philip's usage of the British legal text *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Placing these in relation with the Black Atlantic bring to light new aspects of narratives that had been assumed as foundational to Western culture. In the dominant cultural imaginary *The Odyssey*, Roman culture, or a legal document like *Gregson v. Gilbert*, have attributable characteristics. When entangled with the Black Atlantic, however, these characteristics are called into question and altered. This engagement has the effect of revealing new, or forgotten, or suppressed, aspects. Not only does this challenge the dominant cultural narrative, it also makes these historical narratives contemporaneous with the Black Atlantic, undermining the linearity of time for one of simultaneity, though a simultaneity that retains gaps.

Rhizomes and the Black Atlantic

Among discussions of transoceanic connections, the work of Deleuze and Guattari has served to help theorize connections within postcolonial contexts.²¹ In particular, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states," has often been deployed.²² Drawing on the

biological system of the rhizome, in which a modified plant stem grows, usually underground, in any direction, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome represents a model of connectedness that challenges any totalitarian or singular vision, which they figure as trees and roots, in favor of multiple heterogeneous possibilities. An additional effect is the possibility of temporal collapse or disarray, since rhizomes can serve to connect disparate time periods, drawing together past and present. This possibility for temporal fracture and rearrangement is important within a postcolonial context since an emphasis on chronological progression can produce a present and future over-determined by the historical colonial encounter. Temporal and spatial disarray allows authors to acknowledge and make demands of European influences without being overdetermined by these influences. In other words, within postcolonial contexts, breaks and fractures are as important as connections.

Foremost among postcolonial texts that have taken up and expanded the work of Deleuze and Guattari is Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, which articulates a context-specific model of interconnection and becoming.²³ "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation," Glissant writes, "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."²⁴ This model of global interrelation emphasizes heterogeneity and difference over a homogenous vision of monocultures sorted by language, ethnicity, or nationality, and appears most clearly in Glissant's vision of an interconnected Caribbean and Africa, which Glissant figures as unified by pathways made from the balls and chains of enslaved Africans cast into the sea:

I have always imagined that these depths navigate a path beneath the sea in the west and the ocean in the east and that, though we are separated, each in our own Plantation, the now green balls and chains have rolled from one island to the next, weaving shared rivers that we shall open up when it is our time and where we shall take our boats.²⁵

The historical atrocities held in the depths are figured as converging paths, rivers, and ship routes that interlink the Caribbean and Africa. Here, Glissant expands on his earlier discussion in "The Quarrel with History," in which he responds to Kamau Brathwaite's claim that "The unity is submarine":

To my mind this expression ["the unity is submarine"] can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.* And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence of the sublime, has come to light. It took us a long time to learn this. We are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship.²⁶

Much as in *Poetics of Relation*, the invisible presence of drowned slaves connects Africa and the Caribbean, but we also see Glissant arguing for an understanding of the Caribbean that originates from these interconnections. Rather than finding its meaning in a universal sublime, which like any homogenous vision excises differences, Glissant describes a culture saturated with the invisible presences of Africans thrown into the sea, a sort of original and continuous connection that challenges distinctions between life and death, while also interconnecting Africa and the Caribbean, as well as communities of the African diaspora and the ocean.

An underlying distinction between Deleuze and Guattari's and Glissant's uses of the rhizome, John Drabinski notes, is that Glissant places this interconnection at the beginning

of culture and identity, rather than as a means of resistance and challenge against hegemony. As Drabinski writes,

Glissant's appropriation of the language of rhizome is less revolutionary than it is a straightforward description of Caribbean history and memory. The fantasy of single-rooted identity is plainly absurd in the Caribbean context [...] Resistance lies in the anti-colonial assertion of *difference first*.²⁷

While Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is often articulated as a future-oriented means of resistance, Glissant places the concept in a more originary position, emphasizing how such arrangements prompt the juxtaposition of various cultures and experiences.²⁸ Rather than a single-rooted identity, Glissant articulates a form of interrelation present in the Caribbean from the start that crosses oceans but is also marked by violences and lacunae. These lacunae remain, abyssal and submerged, troubling the undisturbed functionality of transoceanic connections, since death remains an important presence throughout. Glissant also attends closely to ways that the ocean both serves as the medium of such intercultural exchanges and affects their transmission. In discussing his concept of a submarine unity, Glissant appropriates and alters the concept of the rhizome into one of "Submarine roots: that is free-floating, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches."²⁹ This imagery of free-floating "roots" already gestures away from the concept of the rhizome, and Glissant's willingness to alter concepts from Deleuze and Guattari indicates a broader trend in his thinking.³⁰ For instance, as Max Hantel points out, Glissant's replacement of nomadism with errantry implicates an interest in "the relationship between movement, memory, and traumatic but generative roots."³¹ Other than "roots," these concerns could be found within the figure of sargassum – by altering Deleuze and Guattari's nomadism Glissant is displaying an entanglement with their thought in which pieces are taken up and reconfigured in the concept's migration across the Atlantic Ocean.³²

In "Charting the Black Atlantic," Ian Baucom considers how Glissant's usage of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome requires further clarification due to its placement within the ocean. Baucom writes,

While this reading of the submarine again invokes a temporally dispersed subject, it equally implies a model of spatially-disseminated identity, a rhizomatic dislocation of the subject, a self which manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering. But where the Deleuzian metaphors of the rhizome imply some rooting of the subject, Glissant's comments can be seen to further "radicalize" our conception of the rooting of the self. [...] [Since] this subject finds itself wanderingly-grounded not "in some primordial spot" but in the uncertainties of imperial water. Where Deleuze enables us to think the self as a reticulated system, Glissant couples that heterotopic self to an equally fluid environment.³³

Baucom highlights the temporal and spatial dissemination present in Glissant's articulation of the rhizome, but he also extends Glissant's model by considering how Glissant articulates an even more radical version of the rhizome than Deleuze and Guattari. Glissant's integration of rhizomes and an aquatic environment points to a subject that is even more dislocated and meandering, since the fluidity of the ocean accentuates the rearranging possibilities of the rhizome, or to be more precise displays the *limits* of the concept of the rhizome.³⁴ This doubled instability challenges any straightforward pathway to underwater connections. Yet, such a radical model may also enable broader

and more numerous possibilities for interconnection. "Serial locations merge with disseminated identities," Baucom writes, and "sea-changing subjects occupy multiple moments, and our categories of cultural belonging [...] shift 'unceasingly, this way and that.'"³⁵ To my mind these serial locations invoke the migratory aspects of sargassum, and the disseminated identities invoke the presence of those who sank into the abyss. Baucom's description of "sea-changing subjects" with shifting categories of cultural belonging also echoes Barad's description of individual characteristics as emerging through interaction. These "sea-changing subjects" inhabit an array of overlapping and disparate locations, times, and influences, challenging strict chronology and place in favor of simultaneity and interconnection, and we will encounter such "sea-changing subjects" in the works of Bearden, Walcott, and Philip.³⁶

Baucom proposes the synapse as an alternative, arguing that the synapse, unlike the rhizome, remains placed within history and retains a locatability. Imagining scattered islands as neurons, and shipping routes and currents as synapses, Baucom presents the submarine as a space of uncertainty that congeals into a network of connecting relays or "submarine flows" directed by ocean currents that "exhibit a synaptic intentionality."³⁷ Yet while Baucom's synaptic model emphasizes historical continuity, that continuity comes at the cost of curtailing the abyss as interruption and lacuna because synapses depend on continuous reproduction and propagation since they "configure themselves under the shadow of both a hereditary phylogenetic past and a continuous ontogenetic past; that is, they bear the traces of both a collective and an individual history."³⁸ This synaptic model of inheritance functions through the experiences of survivors, but it brackets the experiences of those who did not survive the Middle Passage, as well as those whose histories have been erased, hidden, or not passed on. As will be seen in my later discussion of *Zong!*, the figure of Setaey Adamu Boateng complicates this dependence on lineage by recounting the experiences of those who did not survive the Zong massacre. Finally, in emphasizing shipping routes and submarine currents, Baucom's model fails to attend to oceanic spaces like the Sargasso Sea that lie beyond the Gulf Stream.

Rhizomes and synapses, both of which defer back to a terrestrial footing, and thus depend on an immobile milieu, point to a tension involved in conceptualizing subjectivity or identity in relation to the fluid medium of the ocean. This tension, in fact, is one that Paul Gilroy points to in his foundational articulation of the Black Atlantic. In writing of the difficulties involved in constructing intellectual traditions across a complex space marked by both migration and the abyss, Gilroy remarks that "critiques of modernity articulated by successive generations of black intellectuals had their rhizomorphic systems of propagation anchored in a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience."³⁹ Gilroy's remark on generations of black intellectuals' "continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience" sounds similar to me to Glissant's discussion of "melancholic transatlantic crossings." However, while ships are central to both texts, Gilroy focuses on the image of ships, while Glissant turns to the environment that surrounds the ships, "these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains," as a central figure.⁴⁰ Perhaps Gilroy's decision to focus on the image of the ship was a means of responding to the limits of the oceanic rhizome and the problem of needing to reconcile transoceanic movement with the stubborn remainders of death.⁴¹ With this in mind, Steinberg's declaration that "[v]enturing into Gilroy's Black Atlantic, one never gets wet" may in part be due to Gilroy's decision to focus on

the figure of the ship rather than the environment that *surrounds* the ship, and the ways that this fluid environment affects and alters forms of transmission.⁴²

Migratory and abyssal sargassum

Figure 2 to understand sargassum as a figure of entangled transoceanic connections, I believe it is also important to understand sargassum as a living macro-algae. The Sargasso Sea, where sargassum is most frequently found, is a mid-ocean gyre defined by ocean currents whose boundaries constantly shift in response to seasonal and global changes. Studies have shown a yearly pattern in which sargassum grows in the spring in the north-west Gulf of Mexico, its development bolstered by agricultural runoff from the Mississippi River, before being carried by Caribbean currents through the Florida Straits into the Gulf Stream which transports the seaweed along the eastern seaboard of the United States.⁴³ Some of the sargassum continues north with the Gulf Stream, but significant amounts are carried by eddies into a central gyre created by the clockwise currents that circulate around the Atlantic.⁴⁴ While this constant circulation serves to concentrate the sargassum, it also breaks off sections which in turn wash up on beaches in the southern United States and northern Caribbean. In response to a range of causes, such as soil runoff in the Amazon, and changing climate patterns, large mats of sargassum have also been discovered in new areas, such as off the coast of Africa and in the South Atlantic.⁴⁵

Notably, sargassum entangles. It entangles other pieces of sargassum to create mats, but it also entangles other materials that come into contact with it. Indeed, on first encountering sargassum the sailors on Columbus's ships were fearful of becoming entangled in

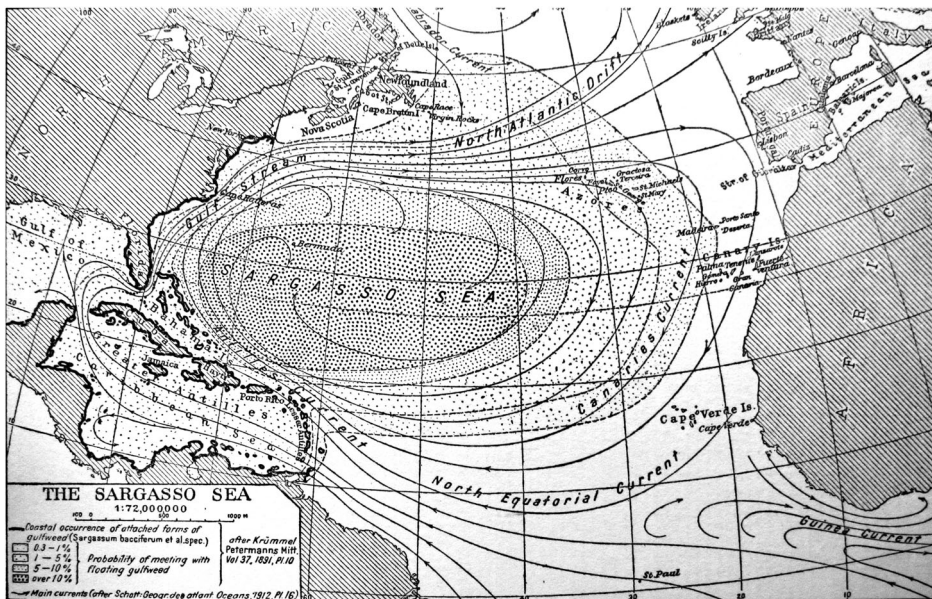


Figure 2. Map of the Sargasso Sea displaying currents and sargassum concentrations. Soley, J. C. "Circulation of the North Atlantic in February and in August," from William H. Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: a Study in Medieval Geography* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1922) 28.

the mats and either being dragged underwater or becoming stuck and eventually dying of starvation or dehydration.⁴⁶ More accurately, Columbus's sailors were responding to light and irregular winds and currents caused from being within the gyre created by the circling Gulf Stream. Later sailors learned to take advantage of the Gulf Stream and avoid the Sargasso Sea, leading to the same triangular trade of which the Middle Passage was a central part.⁴⁷ Regardless, as Columbus writes, the sargassum "weed,"

caused some of them great apprehension because in some places it was so thick that it actually held back the ships. Since fear evokes imaginary terrors, the men thought that the weed might become so thick that there might happen to them what is supposed to have happened to St. Amador when he was trapped in a frozen sea that held his ship fast.⁴⁸

Interestingly, the sailors' identification of the sargassum mats as comparable to sea-ice prompts the potential for considering sargassum, much like sea-ice, as challenging expectations of solidity and liquidity. As Steinberg points out, sea-ice is "neither purely sea nor purely land." While sea-ice is "unquestionably of the sea [...] its tactile, functional, and visual properties in many cases more closely resemble land."⁴⁹ Despite the sailors' fears, however, describing sargassum as a type of pseudo-land like sea-ice would be overstating sargassum's solidity. While sargassum mats are robust enough to provide a habitat able to support a diverse range of life, including ten species endemic to sargassum alone, this habitat is constantly changing according to location, season and age of the algae.⁵⁰ Similarly, sargassum exists in smaller unmatted forms. Finally, as a living entity sargassum entails characteristics not applicable to land or sea, such as its ability to entangle, as well as its living permeability in which particles move into and out of the macro-algae.

The idea of sargassum as entangling ships remained in the popular imaginary and helped to inspire a number of late nineteenth century poems that present Columbus's encounter with the Sargasso Sea in heroic and imperialistic terms.⁵¹ Similarly, responding to Caribbean author John Hearne's 1981 novel *The Sure Salvation*, DeLoughrey describes the Sargasso Sea as "a mariner's nightmare, a space of aquatic weeds located between the Old and New Worlds that signifies impenetrability, stasis, and in the words of the online *OED*, a figurative 'confused or stagnant mass.'"⁵² As we will see in my discussion of the journal *Sargasso*, this idea of the Sargasso Sea as a morass retains traction, however I seek to overturn visions of sargassum as impenetrable to show how it could instead be interpreted as a form of interrelation through entanglement.

The same oceanographic processes that concentrate sargassum also concentrate other particulates floating in the water, such as plastic and other pollutants.⁵³ Scientists have known of the presence of plastic in the Sargasso Sea since 1972, and a 2010 report noted that "the concentration of plastic particles taken from plankton tows on occasions reached in excess of an equivalent of 200,000 pieces km⁻²."⁵⁴ In her May 2010 *PMLA* "Editor's Column," Patricia Yaeger describes ocean plastic as "a quasi-object once filled with human agency that exceeds this agency in its afterlife," and points to the presence of plastic within the Sargasso Sea as a means by which readers can "recognize the way the present has evolved from the past."⁵⁵ Much as sargassum functions as a migrating biotic presence with the Atlantic, it also functions as a literal moving archive of human produced waste.⁵⁶ Humanity is now actualizing Columbus's misinterpretation of sargassum as something akin to detritus "torn away from some island or reef" near to the west, though humanity's contribution to sargassum mats are pieces of plastic that will remain for

hundreds of years, if not longer.⁵⁷ It is in part this literal entanglement with human history, drawn from a variety of shores, as well as the influence of ocean currents that facilitate this entanglement, that I would like to place within the figure of sargassum. Whereas rhizomes are understood as connecting across a stable background, thus limiting the range of particularities that may be encountered, sargassum's entanglement occurs within, and in response to, a changing three dimensional fluid environment. This entails conceptualizing transoceanic relations in ways that attend to a diverse range of "more-than-human" agencies, and not simply those characteristics we may seek to impart or discover.

Free-floating sargassum reproduces asexually, by fragmentation.⁵⁸ Rather than fertilization, sections break off and grow on their own. Similarly, sargassum lacks polarity: without a single main stem, growth may occur in all directions.⁵⁹ While this mode of growth seemingly recalls Deleuze and Guattari's description of the rhizome as having "neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows," sargassum moves beyond the figure of the rhizome since a watery environment enables development and dispersal in all three dimensions.⁶⁰ While rhizomes grow along the unmoving medium of soil, a material boundary that functions as a stable backdrop against which rhizomes laterally spread, within a fluid medium the middle from which sargassum grows is more accurately a middle since there's no necessary orientation. The turbulent three dimensional domain of ocean water means that sargassum is *always* acentered and nonhierarchical. Rather than a rhizome growing horizontally along the ground and vertically toward sky and soil, sargassum's orientation is more accurately "always a middle (*milieu*)" since sargassum's lack of polarity, along with its mode of reproduction through fragmentation, means that any piece could develop on its own, and in any direction, displaying a strong interaction between sargassum's development and reproduction and the fluid environment it inhabits.

Sargassum is often found within ten feet of the ocean's surface, though through a process known as Langmuir circulation, free-floating sargassum often sinks deeper into the sea.⁶¹ In 1927, during a transatlantic voyage through the Sargasso Sea, Irving Langmuir noticed that seaweed aligned into rows when the wind exceeded 10–20 knots.⁶² The wind over the surface of the water creates rotating vortices, which in turn drive the seaweed deeper into the depths. Ultimately, Langmuir circulation functions to deposit large amounts of sargassum as abyssal sediments, forming an important trophic link between the surface and the depths, and sargassum provides up to 10% of sea-floor communities' energy input.⁶³ In addition to its free-floating migrations, sargassum serves a critical biological function in connecting the surface and the depths.

Sargassum can also be considered as figuratively entangling death. The Sargasso Sea overlaps with what Spanish sailors called the "Horse Latitudes." Becalmed colonial ships would throw overboard whatever they could to lighten the ship. Running out of water, sailors would eventually jettison the horses many ships carried as part of their cargo.⁶⁴ The horses, calling out to the sailors, would swim after the ships until they drowned. While the sargassum mats do not, as Columbus's sailors feared, sink ships, they do float over an abyss filled with the remains of, and are themselves nourished by, nutrients from the dead. Sargassum invokes the fecundity of a nature that overwrites such deaths and this force is invoked in Glissant's references to the "now green balls and chains" that roll from island to island. Nature overtakes, erasing the identities of the dead and matting onto the past with a certitude fueled by time.

An extension of this theme can be found in the ways that living matter in the ocean continuously recycles, up-taking particles drawn from the dead and inculcating these particles into new arrangements. Biotic matter, including seaweed, functions as a sort of living archive through its utilization of matter drawn from the dead. In “States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea,” Alaimo expands on work begun in *Bodily Natures* to explore how the concept of trans-corporeality, which “traces the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world” can be extended to the sea.⁶⁵ Living bodies are permeable and operate within cycles of material exchange that dissolve stable outlines by drawing new matter into themselves. Similarly, in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe discusses how bodies of slaves drowned in salt water entered into the ocean’s nutrient cycle, and, since the nutrient cycle is constantly circulating, the atoms of these slaves remain in the ocean – and in its biotic matter (including seaweed) – today.⁶⁶ Sharpe writes that “around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled.”⁶⁷ Broken into their constitutive elemental parts, the atoms of drowned slaves permeate the ocean through their continued presence in other living sea creatures. It is through this dispersal and permeation that I see sargassum upwelling abyssal histories. In its recirculation of atoms, sargassum literally embodies the haunting presence of the dead, though in a highly dispersed fashion.

Inscriptions of seaweed

Entanglements with seaweed can be discovered within a number of texts that consider the Black Atlantic. For instance, Jean Rhys drew on the mystique of sargassum in the title of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a text that explores transspatial connections between northern England and Jamaica, as well as transtemporal connections between the early 1800s in which Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is set, the mid-1800s in which it was published, and the postcolonial moment Rhys inhabits. Here the title *Wide Sargasso Sea* functions as a cipher for such diverse interconnections. The first issue of the University of Puerto Rico-based journal *Sargasso* (1984) describes the decision to name the journal *Sargasso* as in part due to an appreciation of Rhy’s novel. Lowell Fiet goes on to write in the “Editor’s Note” that “the sound and rhythm of the word seemed to unite disparate elements, and to smooth out at least some of the possible contradictions of producing an English-language journal in a predominantly Spanish-Speaking society.” Fiet points out that sargasso “also carries with it negative connotations: a free-floating mass of brownish seaweed (sargassum) where strange creatures lurk and in which unfortunate vessels are trapped and held prisoner.”⁶⁸ Fiet’s introduction signals how sargassum can serve as a strong figure for considering various interconnections across the Caribbean, as well as the ways in which sargassum entangles. Both the journal *Sargasso* and the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* gesture toward a Caribbean that is simultaneously local and interconnected with the world, as sargassum serves as a focal image for the articulation of entangled interconnections across both space and history.

The work of esteemed African American Harlem Renaissance artist Romare Bearden (1911–1988) often focused on unity and connection within Black American communities.⁶⁹ Though firmly rooted in Harlem’s African American community, beginning in the 1970s Bearden and his wife would spend several months of each year in St. Martin, and he became increasingly interested in depicting the Caribbean, in part due to his friendship



Figure 3. Romare Bearden “The Sea Nymph,” *Black Odyssey*, 1977. With permission © 2018 Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

with Derek Walcott, whom he met in the Chelsea Hotel and connected with over a story Bearden told of traveling between various Caribbean islands by boat.⁷⁰ His 1977 collage series *Black Odyssey*, a retelling of the *Odyssey* with black figures, conjures up these Caribbean experiences (Figure 3).

Bearden’s “The Sea Nymph,” one of the 20 collages of *Black Odyssey*, unifies the threads that have been running throughout this essay via his direct reference to seaweed. Evoking the abyssal imagery of slaves cast from ships, one body reaches out, appearing to sink down, while the other grasps at the cloth that surrounds the sinking body. The sinking body appears almost entangled in the seaweed, and both cloth and seaweed look like chains; not only is there a sense of the possibility of death and entrapment among nature’s dispassionate embrace, but also a visual invocation of drowning slaves.⁷¹ The shapes of the seaweed also mirror the subaqueous movements of ocean water, though the reach of green seaweed overlapping with blue on the bottom right emphasizes ways in which the ocean extends outward into the abyss.

“The Sea Nymph” depicts Odysseus’s encounter with Ino, who rescues Odysseus from a stormy sea caused by Poseidon. Ino instructs Odysseus to take off his clothes and leave the

raft and to drift with the winds while paddling with his hands. She gives him a veil that will protect him in the sea, but, as soon as his hand can grab the shore, he is to take the veil off and throw it back into the sea.⁷² Interestingly, Ino's advice to Odysseus to drift with the wind echoes the movements of seaweed along the ocean's surface, and the veil itself in the "Sea Nymph" looks like seaweed. Avoiding entanglement in seaweed, Odysseus becomes entangled in Ino's veil and in this transition from macro-algae to myth, survives.

"The Sea Nymph" also constructs original and overlapping relationships between the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and Africa as Odysseus and the nymph Ino are figured as black bodies. By constructing a version of the *Odyssey* filled with black bodies, Bearden rewrites the journeys of Odysseus into one of Black successes in the face of adversity and oceanic journeys. While an image such as "The Sea Nymph" may evoke memories of the Middle Passage, it also gestures toward an epic striving, both drawing on and reconfiguring the Passage's traumas. In other words, the abyss here resurfaces, but is figured as epic rather than strictly tragic. Seaweed functions in this image to visually connect the ocean environments of the Caribbean, Atlantic, and Mediterranean, unifying all three into one overlapping image that crosses space and time. There is a sense of entanglement here, but an entanglement that reconfigures existing narratives, drawing various pieces into a new arrangement that realizes new affinities and connections. Walcott refers to this sort of entanglement when responding to "Sea Nymph":

"Look at those black cutouts. They are like Greek vases." Yes, they may be like Greek vases, but they are *simultaneous* concepts, not *chronological* concepts [...] If you think of art merely in terms of chronology, you are going to be patronizing to certain cultures. But if you think of art as a simultaneity that is inevitable in terms of certain people [...] ⁷³

Walcott's response emphasizes that Bearden's work does not just make explicit existing relationships, it generates new relationships and new meanings, including our understanding of *The Odyssey*. Walcott's description of art as an inevitable simultaneity for certain people also echoes Glissant's model of a Caribbean that has from the beginning been composed of various cultures and experiences, challenging the myth of direct lineage in favor of a lineage of dispersion and juxtaposition derived from the entanglement of diverse particulars.

Bearden's usage of collage as his medium is also worth noting since it presents Black experience as constructed through matting and accumulation, processes that evoke sargassum's entanglement. In an essay published nine years before the creation of *Black Odyssey*, Ralph Ellison wrote of Bearden that

Bearden's meaning is identical with his method. His combination of technique is in itself eloquent of the sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams which characterize much of Negro American history.⁷⁴

In Ellison's view, form and content overlap in a manner that connects Bearden's art to Black experience. Toni Morrison articulates a similar argument when she describes Bearden's collages as "artistic renderings of a complexly layered black community with individuals of complexly layered consciousness."⁷⁵ The very sort of matting physically present in Bearden's collages indicates a Black cultural narrative constructed out of an accumulation of diverse parts, an accumulation that in turn gives rise to new forms of Black consciousness.

Seaweed also appears centrally in the work of Bearden's interlocutor Derek Walcott. In 1997 Walcott published *The Bounty*, his first collection of poems after winning the Nobel Prize in 1992.⁷⁶ The title poem of this text weaves together a wide range of issues, including the experience of receiving the Nobel Prize and the death of Walcott's mother.⁷⁷ "The Bounty" is composed of seven sections of terza rima, with each section having an irregular number of stanzas. And as one Bearden-like section of the poem reads,

All of these waves crepitate from the culture of Ovid,
its sibilants and consonants; a universal metre
piles up these signatures like inscriptions of seaweed

that dry in the pungent sun, lines ruled by mitre
and laurel, or spray swiftly garlanding the forehead
of an outcrop (and I hope this settles the matter

of presences). [...]

In these lines, seaweed represents historical influences that have washed onto Caribbean shores. This vision makes coextensive a Mediterranean history and the Caribbean moment, undermining a monolithic vision of influence or lineage for one of simultaneity and presences.⁷⁸ Ovid here is depicted as entangled with Roman culture, and the Mediterranean is in turn entangled with the Caribbean, in part through language itself, since Romance languages, and the rhythms inherent within them, can be traced back to Latin. We also encounter here an entanglement of individuals (Ovid and Walcott), cultures (Roman and Caribbean, particularly St. Lucian), and Mediterranean and Caribbean shorelines marked by the shared sounds of the universal meter of waves. The ocean itself functions as a sort of shared fertilizing presence, "garlanding the forehead/ of an outcrop," that connects disparate locations and times through elemental inspiration.⁷⁹

Simultaneously, this influence is cast upon the shore to dry-out, or rot, like seaweed in the "pungent sun." Both influence and cadaver get inscribed onto the Caribbean shore. As waves cast seaweed and history onto the Caribbean shore, they mutate and change, and the culture of Ovid is but one presence among many within the Caribbean context, challenging the lineage of a single root in favor of a broad range of interconnections.

"The Bounty" also includes Walcott's rumination on death and loss, figured as a "vegetal fury." While discussing one's feelings, "once the beloved have vanished," the narrator of the poem describes the dead as follows:

not only are they relieved of our customary sorrow,
they are without hunger, without any appetite,
but are part of earth's vegetal fury; their veins grow

with the wild mammy-apple, the open-handed breadfruit, [...]

This vision of the afterlife is one of dispersion, in which the dead have become inculcated into nature's fecundity, dispersed into mammy-apples and breadfruit. This vision of an afterlife echoes Sharpe's discussion of how atoms that formerly constituted the bodies of drowned slaves continue to cycle within the ocean, as well as Glissant's vision of "the now green balls and chains." Between the rotting seaweed on the beach and this description of the fecundity of nature, the dead circulate through our encounters with both nature and culture. Maria Fumagalli describes this "vegetal fury" as "Walcott's surrender to the fact that

bios, individual life which comes and goes, must submit to the laws of *zoe*, the life principle, *bountiful*, inexhaustible and infinite," and she claims that "Walcott, in fact, seems to be able to inhabit the space between life and death, and to find a radiant alternative to the dualism that they normally seem to constitute."⁸⁰ This space between life and death, marked as it is by the fecundity of vegetation fueled by the dead, articulates the same sort of meaning as the figure of sargassum as it sinks into and fuels life within the abyss, as well as how sargassum is itself fueled by particles which were themselves parts of other lives.⁸¹

M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) also evinces the characteristics of sargassum I've described here, particularly regarding the enigmatic presence of Setaey Adamu Boateng.⁸² Boateng's last name is next to Philip's on *Zong!*'s spine, and *Zong!*'s cover describes the text "As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng." In embodying and speaking for the disparate identities of people cast into the abyss Boateng unifies a variety of cultures into a single voice. I'm reminded here of Barad's claim that "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action."⁸³ Boateng emerges from the intra-action of diverse voices, yet this emergence is also fragmentary and entails the absence of former characteristics of the diverse voices she embodies. While seaweed is not explicitly mentioned in the text, her presence in the text replicates the dispersing action of the abyss in a similar manner since the effect of her collaboration with Philip is a sort of a persistently shifting rearrangement and evasion that recreates gaps of meaning in *Zong!* that cannot be filled in.

Zong! takes as its subject matter the 1781 murder of 150 slaves who were thrown overboard to drown in the sea, as well as the insurance case *Gregson v. Gilbert* which arose out of this event. The particulars of this case (to the degree that we know them) bear repeating, in part for the ways in which these particulars are relevant to *Zong!*'s larger project of addressing history's lacunae. Having left the West Coast of Africa carrying 442 slaves and 30 crewmen, the slave ship *Zong* was placed under the command of inexperienced ship surgeon Luke Collingwood.⁸⁴ The ship was headed for Jamaica, and, as was the custom, the enslaved "cargo" had been insured. Due to navigational errors on the part of the captain, the expected six- to nine-week trip took four months. Running out of water, on 29 November 1781, the crew decided, to quote first mate Kelsall, that "part of the slaves should be destroyed to save the rest."⁸⁵ The thinking was that if the slaves died a "natural" death from dehydration, then "the owners of the ship will have to bear the cost, but if they were 'thrown alive into the sea, it would be the loss of the underwriters."⁸⁶ Out of this event rose a court case concerning whether the insurers should pay the owners of the slave ship *Zong* for the drowned slaves. The insurers challenged the initial ruling, and the case was moved to the Court of King's Bench. This ruling, titled *Gregson v. Gilbert*, serves as the sole source text for *Zong!*. Philip uses words taken directly from the decision and reconfigures words to create (or recreate) new words. This usage of the source text echoes Bearden's and Walcott's usage and rearrangement of narratives long considered cornerstones of Western culture, though the text here is a British legal document that, as Ian Baucom persuasively argues in *Specters of the Atlantic*, we should consider as foundational for contemporary structures of insurance and finance capital.⁸⁷

Figure 4 from the first poem we can see that water is a core concern of *Zong!*, and these initial lines read like the gasps of enslaved Africans thirsting for water. Words and letters are staggered here, as they are throughout most of the text, like bodies and seaweed in the wake of a ship. Philip describes her writing process as placing words "so that they never come directly below another word or word cluster. Each word or word cluster is

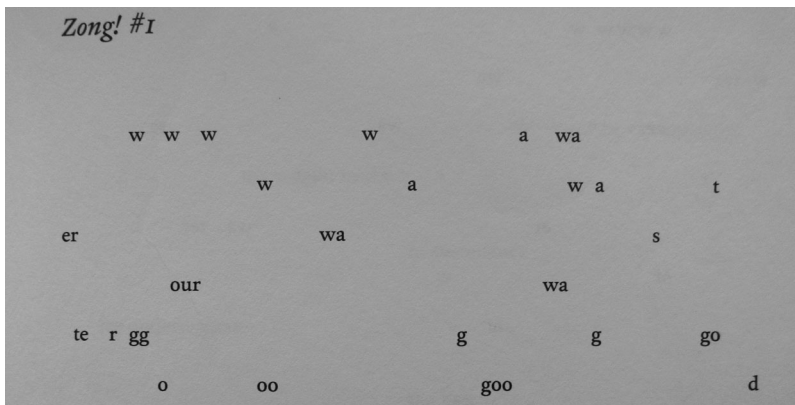


Figure 4. “Zong #1” Excerpt from *Zong!* © 2008 by M. NourbeSe Philip. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.

seeking the space above within which to locate itself, and in doing so enters into relationships with those other words.”⁸⁸ Dispersed like seaweed, the words nevertheless become entangled with each other. By inhabiting an open engagement with the space around it, as well as with every other word within the poem, each piece of the poem, as in “Zong #1,” excerpted above, constructs a model of migratory and shifting meaning without determined or necessary arrangement. The effect is much like navigating the shifting movements of waves that push objects this way and that. Furthermore, since the Zong massacre took place upon the ocean, there is no one location where the massacre can be “placed.” Instead, the massacre and its effects are dispersed throughout the Atlantic Ocean and even beyond. Philip describes this dispersion in *Zong!* :

Our entrance to the past is through memory – either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water. And, as the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always.⁸⁹

Philip’s text thus articulates a transspatial model of connection and dispersion, while also displaying temporal disarray. The history within the sea is not history at all, but rather presence always about to resurface. The effect is a construction of meaning that has no clear lineage, and yet the past and present, as well as disparate transoceanic locations, are revealed as entangled.

The resurfacing of this history is further enacted via the presence of Boateng, whom Philip describes in an interview as

the cipher, named yet unseen, who stands in for all that is subterranean and subaqueous [...] she is identified as the voice of the Ancestors [...] she who recounts the story that can only be told by not being told.⁹⁰

As a manifestation of the abyssal dead, Boateng appears most clearly in the final poetic section, “Èbọra,” Yoruba for “underwater spirits.” As both cipher and speaking ancestor, Boateng inhabits a liminal space that challenges the binaries of life and death. Boateng is subaqueous and dispersed, yet she also recounts the Zong incident to Philip. Like sargassum, Boateng is a living archive of the dispersed dead. Additionally, just as the figure of sargassum challenges the belief that things have independent and determinate

properties, Boateng disrupts Western concepts of authorship and the individual. As “the voice of the Ancestors” whose name is alongside Philip’s on the cover of *Zong!*, Boateng unifies many voices cast into the abyss, while also displaying the irretrievability of these voices. In being both abyssal and present, dead and alive, historical and contemporary, Boateng points to a form of identity that, like the figure of sargassum, is constituted through a variety of matted connections. Though a ghostly presence, we might consider this form of entanglement as again indicative of a Caribbean experience constructed through various influences, including the abyss, embodying Glissant’s claim that “Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss.”⁹¹

Philip describes *Zong!* as “hauntological [...] a wake of sorts, where the specters of the undead make themselves present.”⁹² One place we can discover such specters is in the area beneath the first section “Os,” below an area demarcated by a line (symbolically “underwater”). Here we find a series of African names, largely Shona and Yoruba, which remind us that what is at stake are real people. Philip uses the literal margins of the text to recall people who, in having their names erased and referred to only as slaves, were expelled beyond the margins of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. In “Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage,” Evie Shockley suggests that we read these names as “underwriters of the text,” an interpretation Shockley connects to the underwriters of the Zong ship’s insurance policy, as well as to Boateng’s presence on *Zong!’s* cover.⁹³ Just as the monetary interests of insurance underwriters motivated the creation of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, the interests of these absent dead, unified in the voice of Boateng, have motivated the creation of *Zong!*. Yet in *Zong!’s* second section, “Dicta,” while the line demarcating the bottom margin remains, the names are absent, and only an empty space remains. Through this absence, Philip makes the reader critically aware of individuals thrown into the sea and the human loss that occurred with their drowning. Names are presented as if underwater, yet remembered, then only the surface remains. For the next three sections, there is no bottom margin, and it is not until the conclusion of the penultimate poetic section, “Ferrum,” that we witness the return of a bottom line with 22 names underneath, appearing in a font that evokes signatures. Notably, none of the names in “Ferrum” appear in “Os.” Perhaps these names are intended to represent those who survived the Middle Passage aboard the Zong: signatory witnesses to the tragedy.

The 22 names at the end of “Ferrum” also demarcate the end of Philip’s authorial voice. We can see this in two passages from “Notanda,” the prose section in which Philip comments on the text: “There are times in the final book, *Ferrum*, when I feel as if I am writing a code and, oddly enough, for the first time since writing chose me, I feel that I do have a language,” and “Together, *Os*, *Sal*, *Ventus*, *Ratio* and *Ferrum* comprise the movements of *Zong!*, the story that must be told that cannot be told, which in turn becomes a metaphor for slavery.”⁹⁴ Philip’s accounting makes explicit through absence how “Eḃora” represents something beyond what she can speak for. Boateng functions as “the voice of the Ancestors,” but Boateng also makes explicit the difficulties (or near impossibilities) of recuperating voices from the abyss, marked as it is by dispersion and circulation. Again, Boateng’s presence implicates the impossibility of constructing clear lineages when considering relations mediated by the material recirculations of the ocean.

In “Eḃora,” arguably the most challenging section of the poem, words overlap and are printed in grayscale, while different languages jostle each other (Figure 5). Only

occasionally is the reader able to apprehend definite words or phrases among the dissonance. The abyss makes itself felt as we encounter within the fragmentation and erasure of meaning the impossibility of representing death. Nevertheless, echoes of these murdered Africans, much like entangled atoms circulating in the ocean's nutrient cycle, remain.⁹⁵ We also simultaneously encounter a visual form of matting as various transatlantic cultures juxtapose and overlap. English, Spanish, Latin, and Yoruba can all be found in the excerpt above, as well as selections from *Gregson v. Gilbert* and from various narratives found in *Zong!*, including those of a Yoruba ruler and a European sailor. These various pieces of the poem, clumped together like sargassum mats inundated with the remains of human material culture, challenge linear chronology in favor of a transtemporal reckoning that makes 1781 contemporaneous with today, as well as revealing these diverse cultures as entangled with each other. As in "Zong #1," language is dispersed across the page, indicating a fluid meaning-making process that evokes to my mind sargassum's migrating entanglements. It is here in "Eborā" where Boateng, simultaneously alive and dead, absent and present, speaks loudest, though as an abyssal voice, she speaks in a language of fragments. This fragmentation mirrors how voices lost to the abyss can never truly be recuperated, because while the abyss may resurface, something always remains dispersed. The gaps that arise out of such loss and dispersal must remain a constitutive part of any telling of the Middle Passage, echoing Philip's claim that "There is no telling this story; it must be told."⁹⁶

As an embodiment of the characteristics that I place within the figure of sargassum, Boateng makes critically present sargassum's propensity for entanglement, as well as the ways we must attend to the ocean as a materially rearranging presence. The migratory connections Boateng embodies interconnect Africa, Europe, and the Americas, but these migratory connections also function according to literal ocean currents and eddies. The concept of the rhizome, figured as it is against an immobile milieu, is too static to hold these various shifting relations. As a figure sargassum, on the other hand, assists us in realizing the variety of relations that occur on the ocean, for instance the simultaneous

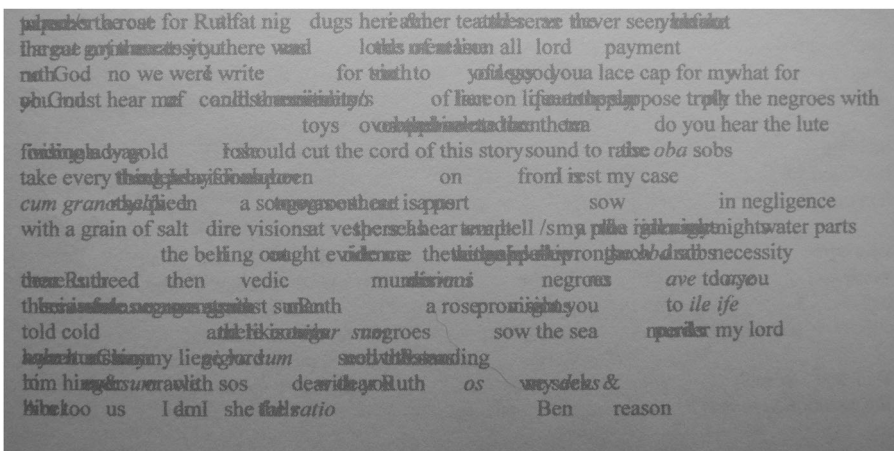


Figure 5. "Eborā" Excerpt from *Zong!* © 2008 by M. NourbeSe Philip. Published by Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.

dispersion and circulation of matter that once constituted slaves' bodies. As I have shown, sargassum and seaweed have been drawn on by Black Atlantic authors and artists in varied creative forms as a means of challenging the myth of cultural hegemony. Yet in keeping with its mobile nature, sargassum cannot be confined to the Caribbean. Much as Bearden's usage of the *Odyssey* draws connections between the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Caribbean, seaweed asks us to imagine beyond the boundaries of any one particular region and to think about the abysses that continue to appear in modern configurations of transoceanic relations. For instance, as Aracelis Girmay explores in *the black maria*, contemporary Mediterranean migration is creating new abyssal reservoirs of death for those crossing oceans today. The anthology *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World*, with essays on forced transportation over the Indian Ocean, the Sulu Sea, and China Sea, among others, points to ways in which at the bottom of each sea and ocean lies an abyss, unique because of the particulars contained within it, but also interconnected by parallel oceanic phenomena, including global exploitation of currents and marine resources. Seaweed, and particularly sargassum, can serve as a productive figure for these connections, since as a migratory macro-algae it is never "placed" in one location, but is constantly in motion, allowing it to figuratively entangle a variety of shores, as well as the ocean itself. These characteristics, alongside the fecundity of a nature which subsumes and recycles death, offers a new conceptual model for considering transoceanic connections, while also attending to the ocean's fluid materiality.

Notes

1. Columbus, *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, 63. The crew also found a crab on a seaweed mat, which Columbus took as another sure sign that land was nearby.
2. Shapiro, "Sargassum natans," 1. While the genus *Sargassum* is made of many species, the rest of which attach to the seafloor, the term sargassum almost always refers to these two species.
3. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6 (italics original). *Yoles* and *Gommiers* are traditional boats of Martinique.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. Cohen, "The Chronotopes of the Sea"; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands." See also Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*; Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*; DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*; Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea*; Blum, *The View from the Masthead*; as well as recent journal specials that have focused on oceanic studies, such as *PMLA* 125, no. 3 and *Comparative Literature Journal* 69, no. 1.
6. For examples at the intersection of ecocriticism and postcolonialism within the Oceanic Turn, see DeLoughrey and Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies*. On the intersection of queer theory and ecocriticism see Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics"; and see Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish." On the intersection of queer theory and race see Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic".
7. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.
8. Iovino and Opperman, "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism," 451 (italics original). In "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea," Alaimo traces the founding concepts of new materialism back to Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as Donna Haraway's, *The Companion Species*, and Barad's, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 114. For more on new materialism see Iovino and Opperman, eds., *Material Ecocriticism*; see Cohen and Duckert, eds., *Veer Ecology*; among many others.
9. DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," 33.
10. Additionally, one might consider this paper as responding to Alaimo's call to unmoor, "to descend and hover in the depths – not to dissolve into the ocean as an immense imagined

void or abyss but to grapple with the existence of a multitude of nonhuman lives in the seas," as a means of creating new concepts that "will lure us toward an environmental ethics and politics that can traverse the scales of the seas." "Unmoor" (409 and 417 respectively).

11. Steinberg, "Of Other Seas," 164.
12. *Ibid.*, 158.
13. *Ibid.*, 157.
14. *Ibid.*, 162.
15. Steinberg and Peters return to the turbulent materiality of the ocean in "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces," where they argue that

The vertical element introduced by scholars of volume is all too often abstract and dematerialised; the emphasis on materiality that typically is used to rectify this excess of abstraction tends to reproduce a sense of matter as fixed and grounded – formed rather than processual. (248)

- Sargassum's persistent entanglement means that it is constantly undergoing processual change, including, as will be discussed later, the inculcation of molecules that once constituted the bodies of slaves thrown into the sea.
16. Entanglement and its emphasis on entangled agencies has fostered new approaches in a diverse range of fields, including theology (see Keller and Rubenstein, eds., *Entangled Worlds*), animal ethics (see Chiew, "Posthuman Ethics"), and geographies of resistance (see Paddison et al., eds., *Entanglements of Power*; Graham and Rausser, eds., *Mobile and Entangled America(s)*). As a concept, entanglement is notably different from assemblage as described by Deleuze and Guattari. Assemblage's functionality is derived from relations among the various parts that come into and out of the assemblage (reterritorialising and deterritorialising it). Entanglement, however, maintains the agency of each enmeshed object. For more on this distinction, please see Bryant's, "Entanglements & Diffraction Patterns."
 17. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 19.
 18. *Ibid.*, ix.
 19. *Ibid.*, 33 (italics original).
 20. For more on plastic as an agent with a *longue durée*, see Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins"; Wallace, *Risk Criticism*.
 21. See Young, *Colonial Desire*; Burns, *Contemporary Caribbean Writing and Deleuze*; Bignall and Patton, eds., *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*; Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads*; Bignall, *Postcolonial Agency*.
 22. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.
 23. For more on how Glissant draws on and expands the work of Deleuze and Guattari, see Hantel, "Errant Notes on a Caribbean Rhizome"; Khalfa, *Poetics of the Antilles*; Nesbitt, "The Postcolonial Event"; Burns, *Contemporary Caribbean Writing and Deleuze*. For texts that discuss Glissant within a postcolonial context, see Arndt, "Euro-African Trans-Spaces?"; Llenín-Figueroa, "I Believe in the Future of 'Small Countries'"; Murdoch, "Édouard Glissant's Creolized World Vision."
 24. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.
 25. *Ibid.*, 206.
 26. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 66–67 (italics original). Brathwaite's quote also serves as an epigraph to *Poetics of Relation*.
 27. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial*, 175 (italics original). George Handley makes a similar argument in his discussion of Glissant's "archaeological search for the 'subterranean convergence of our histories,'" which Glissant develops as a cross-cultural poetics of "intermingled histories, spread around, rushing to fuse without destroying or reducing each other" as a means of challenging the temptation "to seek a singular, diachronic history of one people that stretches back through time and into the landscape" ("A Postcolonial Sense of Place and the Work of Derek Walcott," 9 [italics original]).
 28. I would connect this process to the figure of sargassum since Caribbean cultures depend on ocean currents as a means of interconnection, particularly before the rise of steam engines.

Similarly, the concept of entanglement helps to model how Caribbean cultures inculcate a variety of influences, while also allowing for an incompleteness of transmission.

29. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 67.
30. Burns, adopting a term drawn from Glissant, describes Glissant's working relationship with the theories of Deleuze and Guattari as one of "creolization" (*Contemporary Caribbean Writing and Deleuze*, 109).
31. Hantel, "Errant Notes on a Caribbean Rhizome," 16.
32. Glissant's interest in Faulkner is another interesting example.
33. Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic,'" 7.
34. As DeLoughrey, quoting Elisabeth Mann Borgese, points out,

the ocean is a medium different from the earth: so different, in fact, that it forces us to think differently. The medium itself, where everything flows and everything is interconnected, forces us to 'unfocus,' to shed our old concepts and paradigms, to 'refocus' on a new paradigm. ("Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," 37)
35. Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic,'" 7.
36. This model of subjecthood echoes Baucom's earlier description of a "heterotopic self," by which I take Baucom to be referring to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a space of otherness, particularly the third principle which states, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, "Des Espace Autres," 25). This "real place" itself becomes even further displaced when coupled "to an equally fluid environment."
37. Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic,'" 13.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 73.
40. *Ibid.*, 4; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
41. The figure of the ship, and in particular the slave ship, has remained a particularly fecund area of focus. Some relevant texts include Rediker's, *The Slave Ship*, Tinsley's, "Black Atlantic, Queen Atlantic," Smallwood's, *Saltwater Slavery*, and Sharpe's, *In the Wake*, among many others.
42. Steinberg, "Of Other Seas," 158.
43. Shapiro, "*Sargassum natans*," 1. It's estimated that about one million tons of sargassum flows out of the Gulf of Mexico each year.
44. Laffoley et al., *The Protection and Management*, 12.
45. Gaskill, "Sargassum is Ruining Beaches," 2; Sissini et al., "The floating Sargassum," 3.
46. John Kingsbury points out in "Christopher Columbus as a Botanist," that

real entrapment of the vessels was, of course, not possible; but in light winds, the Sargassum (which sticks some of its branches above the water and blows somewhat with the wind) probably moved down wind at about the same speed as the beamy, blunt vessels, which therefore did not make much visible passage through it. (15)
47. Bischof, Mariano, and Ryan, "The Subtropical Counter Current," 2.
48. Columbus, *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, 65.
49. Steinberg, "Of other seas," 163. For more on the unique challenges sea-ice prompts, please see Craciun's, "The Scramble for the Arctic" and "The Frozen Ocean."
50. Laffoley et al., *The Protection and Management*, 13.
51. Some examples include Bates's, "The Sargasso Gulf", Rogers's, "The Sargasso Sea", and Stedman's, "Sargasso Weed". For more on Stedman's poem as an example of American Imperialism see Loeffelholz's, "Edmund Clarence Stedman's Black Atlantic," 191. As an interesting contrast to these imperialist poems, Longfellow's, "Seaweed" and Fenner's, "Gulf Weed" specifically explore the migratory aspects of sargassum, and fall more in line with an understanding of sargassum as presented in this article.
52. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 70. This idea of sargassum as an impenetrable morass can of course be found elsewhere. For instance, in 1897 the *Chambers' Journal for Popular Literature, Science and Arts* (incorrectly) described the Sargasso Sea:

It seems doubtful whether a sailing vessel would be able to cut her way into the thick network of weeds even with a strong wind behind her. With regard to a steamer, no prudent skipper is ever likely to make the attempt, for it certainly will not be long before the tangling weeds would altogether choke up his screw and render it useless. Quoted in Ryther, "The Sargasso Sea," 98.

53. Laffoley et al., *The Protection and Management*, 36.
54. Ibid.
55. Yaeger, "Editor's Column," 537 and 538, respectively.
56. In "Archipelagic Trash," Soto-Crespo considers mid-twentieth century circum-Atlantic trashy fiction as an archipelagic archive that challenges nationalist narratives. Central to his discussion is the figure of the Sargasso Sea as "a living archipelago of unanchored trash forms" (309), "a living garbage heap" that "gathers rejected pieces from multiple shores to create an unattached living arrangement" (310). While I am cautious about the term "heap," since it conflates depth with height, I appreciate Soto-Crespo's reading of sargassum as gathering pieces from multiple shores.
57. Columbus, *The Log of Christopher Columbus*, 63.
58. Shapiro, "Sargassum natans," 1.
59. Lobban, Harrison, and Duncan, *The Physiological Ecology of Seaweeds*, 198.
60. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21, 18.
61. Casazza and Ross, "Sargassum," 2.
62. Smith, "Observations and Theories of Langmuir Circulation," 297.
63. Baker et al., "Potential Contribution of Surface-dwelling *Sargassum*," 1. Laffoley et al., *The Protection and Management*, 24.
64. National Ocean Service, "What are the Horse Latitudes?," 2.
65. Alaimo, "States of Suspension," 476.
66. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 40–41.
67. Ibid., 41.
68. Fiet, "Editor's Note," ii. A complete digital archive of *Sargasso* is hosted by the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dloc). Fiet also discusses the history of *Sargasso* in "Where Do Journals Come From?"
69. The first major retrospective of Bearden's work was held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1971. See The Museum of Modern Art's, "Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual."
70. Walcott, "Reflections on *Omeros*," 231. Walcott and Bearden went on to have a productive working relationship, publishing a book of Walcott's poems alongside Bearden's art, and Walcott used "The Sea Nymph" for the dust-jacket image of his 1979 book *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (Price and Price, *Romare Bearden*, 72). In "Reflections on *Omeros*" Walcott also discusses underlying conceptual connections between *Black Odyssey* and *Omeros*, published 23 years later.
71. We might consider Bearden's "The Sea Nymph" in relation to J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting "Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon coming on." Responding to the Zong massacre (which will be discussed shortly), Turner's painting presents the bodies of chained slaves sinking into the sea, with arms and legs outstretched and visible among the waves. Thrown from a slave ship depicted in the background, the fragmented figures in Turner's painting are surrounded by voracious looking sea creatures that appear to be consuming the slaves' bodies. Unlike Odysseus, who will survive, the drowning slaves will not. Rather, they will enter into the ocean's nutrient cycle, and return through the haunting presence of *Zong!*'s Setaey Adamu Boateng.
72. O'Meally, *Romare Bearden*, 82.
73. Walcott, "Reflections on *Omeros*," 240–241 (italics original). Walcott's reflections also appears as the foreword to the excellent *Bearden's Odyssey: Poets Respond to the Art of Romare Bearden*, edited by Kwame Dawes and Matthew Shenoda, which gathers poems that respond to Bearden's work from a number of contemporary poets. See Dawes and Shenoda, *Bearden's Odyssey*, ix–xii

74. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden," 679. Ellison's essay was reprinted from the catalogue introduction to an exhibit of Bearden's art at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany, 25 November–22 December 1968.
75. In a lecture given at Columbia University in 2004, Summarized by O'Meally in "We Used to Say 'Stashed'," 184.
76. Walcott, *The Bounty*.
77. For more on "The Bounty," see Handley, *New World Poetics*; Fumagalli, "Bridges Across Chasms"; and Handley, "Derek Walcott's Poetics of the Environment."
78. Walcott's poem "The Sea is History," in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (for which Bearden's "The Sea Nymph" served as the dust-jacket cover), could also be included in this description, as could *Omeros*.
79. As DeLoughrey points out in "Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene," "Walcott's poetics have long engaged living matter as a site for more-than-human history, depicting multispecies engagements with plants, fish, corals, and other creatures of the tropical coast and sea to pose alternative narratives for history making" (35).
80. Fumagalli, "Bridges Across Chasms," 305 (italics original). Though discussing different poems (particularly "The Sea is History" and "Gros-Ilet"), George Handley describes Walcott's "optimism regarding the paradoxical hope of oblivion" as being found in "The voice of nature" which becomes "the human voice of history because nature always signifies anew and is not dependent on or imitative of the past [...] In this search for nature's language, nature's indifference is a cause for amusement and awe, not lamentation" ("A Postcolonial Sense of Place and the Work of Derek Walcott," 16).
81. The concepts of interconnection and abyssal fragmentation I have discussed here in relation to "The Bounty" could easily be extended to Walcott's *Omeros*, and indeed I take Walcott's lines as oblique references to *Omeros*'s creation. Of course, "The Bounty" refers to Ovid, while *Omeros* invokes Homer's *Iliad* (among other references). Thus we might read the tracing of a lineage of West Indian Walcott to the Greek Homer through the Roman Ovid as further extending Walcott's description of influence and change. Interested in constructing a new, more fluid sense of Caribbean identity, Walcott consistently pursued a poetics that moved beyond direct chronological or spatial connections, and much excellent work has been written on the hybrid Caribbean-Mediterranean nature of *Omeros* (See Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*; Ismond, *Abandoning Dead Metaphors*; and Boeninger, "I Have Become the Sea's Craft"). As Jahan Ramazani points out, "Decades before the academic dissemination of such concepts as hybridity, creolization, cross-culturality, postethnicity, postnationalism, *métissage*, and *mestizaje*, Walcott argued vehemently for an intercultural model of postcolonial literature" (*The Hybrid Muse*, 63).
82. Philip, *Zong!*. There are a number of excellent texts which consider *Zong!*. See Austen, "'Should We?'" ; Feshken, "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold"; Siklosi, "'The Absolute / of Water'"; Leong, "The Salt Bones"; Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*; and Bloomfield, *Archaeopoetics*.
83. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33.
84. Lewis, "Martin Dockray and the 'Zong!'," 359.
85. *Ibid.*, 363–364.
86. Philip, *Zong!*, 180.
87. Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 94–110.
88. Philip and Scott, "Interview with M. NourbeSe Philip," 57.
89. Philip, *Zong!*, 201.
90. Philip and Scott, "Interview with M. NourbeSe Philip," 47.
91. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.
92. Philip, *Zong!*, 201.
93. Shockley, "Going Overboard," 814–815 (italics original). Other than Shockley's connection, very little has been written about Boateng.
94. Philip, *Zong!* 205 and 206 respectively.

95. Tinsley inadvertently responds to Philip's question "whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater" (*Zong!*, 203), in claiming that "The subaltern *can* speak in submarine space, but it is hard to hear her or his underwater voice [...]" (Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," 194 [italics original]).
96. Philip, *Zong!*, 189.

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