

TWO

*The Ship*

*The Trans\*Atlantic*

who could not see this like the passage's continuum

— Dionne Brand, *Ossuary XI, Ossuaries*

(on Jacob Lawrence's *Shipping Out*, part of his *War* series)

Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's *The Forgotten Space—A Film Essay Seeking to Understand the Contemporary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic Legacy of the Sea* (2010) is a film that follows the movement of shipping containers on land and sea; it is a film about global capital and the wreckage it leaves in the wake. The filmmakers “visit displaced farmers and villagers in Holland and Belgium, underpaid truck drivers in Los Angeles, seafarers aboard mega-ships shuttling between Asia and Europe, and factory workers in China,” and finally the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, where they “discover the most sophisticated expression of the belief that the maritime economy, and the sea itself, is somehow obsolete.”<sup>1</sup> Burch and Sekula write in *New Left Review*, “The subject of the film is globalization and the sea, the ‘forgotten space’ of our modernity. *Its premise is that the oceans remain the crucial space of globalization: nowhere else is the disorientation, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest*” (Burch and Sekula 2011; emphasis mine). The filmmakers say the film is about a system. With such a premise, surely a film on the voraciousness of capital, the capitalization of human misery, and the profits of immiseration would contend, even tangentially, with the Middle Passage, the shipped, and with that fleshly wreckage that capital wrought. *The Forgotten Space* is indebted

to an earlier Sekula work, a book titled *Fish Story*, which consists of nine chapters. Chapter 3 of *Fish Story* is titled “Middle Passage,” and one might expect that as it locates its subject in and as the ocean, the shipping industry, and ports, the images and text of that chapter would contend with the historical Middle Passage and slavery. And perhaps, given the title, chapter 3 might also have addressed that always present throwing and jumping overboard, and the fish that fed and feed on those bodies in the wake of the ships.<sup>2</sup> Though the long essays of the text mention slavery, the Middle Passage of *Fish Story* bears no discernible relation to the planned disaster that is known by that name, nor to its long and ongoing effects. No surprise, then, that the film does not address the history of the trade in abducted Africans; does not locate *that* trade as the key point in the beginning of global capital. Africa, the Caribbean, and the rest of the African diaspora are absent, the forgotten spaces of *The Forgotten Space*. And so, too, those histories and presents of slavery and colonization, of tourism, and of the establishment of military bases that containerization abets fail to appear (Llenín-Figueroa 2014, 90).<sup>3</sup> They are absent, that is, but for one telling exception.

The section of the film called “Mud and Sun” begins with the Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach and with the predictably failed promise post September 11, 2001, of new jobs in the Alameda Corridor. But how is one to talk of mud and sun and firmament, the Atlantic Ocean, and the United States and not take up transatlantic slavery? The crew films in a tent city that is located between two container freight lines and in the direct path of an airfreight company.<sup>4</sup> Sekula says that after public screenings audience members often ask him what the residents of the tent city are doing in the film. His reply is that he wanted the film to have in it the insights of those people who have been ejected from the system. Two of those ejected interviewees are middle-aged white men. Bruce R. Guthrie, who tells the film crew that they would have a hard time if they had to live in the tent city for a month, talks about not having the money to move now but says that after his mother dies and he inherits he will buy a trailer, put it on the river, and drink and fish his life away. He is identified as a former building contractor. The second white man, Robert W. Wargo, talks about the dearth of programs designed to help middle-aged men like him get a new start and about the indignity of “help” in the form of a lottery that one can only win once

and that gives the winner a hotel room for three days. Wargo distinguishes himself from the other men in the tent city, whom he calls “reprobates,” and he is identified in the end credits as a former mechanic. Viewers of the film are to understand that Wargo’s and Guthrie’s current hardship has occurred because the system has let them down.

Then there appears in front of the camera a Black woman whom we have glimpsed in the background of earlier shots.<sup>5</sup> She is the only Black speaking figure in the film, the only Black person who doesn’t just appear in the background or in file footage. Her name is Aereile Jackson, and, in my theoretical terms, she speaks in the film from the position of the wake: from a position of deep hurt and of deep knowledge. It is painful to watch and listen to her. She is pained as she talks about her children who have been taken from her and about the cruelty of the state that cast her into this position. She talks, too, about being overweight and about her hair, and she says she wears a wig because her hair is falling out in chunks. These are symptoms of her distress. She’s not mentally ill, she tells the filmmakers — she knows she is holding baby dolls in her arms, but those dolls are placeholders for her children, who were taken from her and whom she has not seen in six years. She is identified in the end credits as a “former mother” (figures 2.1, 2.2)

I had held out some hope that this film that looks at the maw of capital wouldn’t simply feed her into it, wouldn’t simply use her as a container for all of that unremarked-upon history, would not use her as an asterisk or an ellipsis to move forward the narrative. I had thought that Ms. Jackson wouldn’t just be a transit point (“the act or fact of passing across or through; passage or journey from one place or point to another,” *Dictionary.com*). But though she provides the terms and the image, if not the exact words, that give the segment its name, Aereile Jackson appears only to be made to disappear. She is metaphor. Her appearance in the film makes no sense within the logic of the film as it unfolds; yet it makes perfect sense, for, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013, 93) write, “modernity,” the very modernity that is the subject of this film, “is sutured by this hold.” The *hold* is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness. When Ms. Jackson appeared in the film, she stopped time for me. In my memory, the section with her in it appeared at the end of the film and not in the first half of it. “What is time?” (Sissako 2014).

At the end of the film we get to the credits, where each of the three tent city interviewees is identified again by name and former profession: Bruce R. Guthrie is a former building contractor; Robert W. Wargo is a former mechanic; and Aereile Jackson is a “former mother.”<sup>6</sup> In this title, “former mother,” that the filmmakers tag her with there is seemingly no sense of the *longue durée* of that term à la *partus sequitur ventrem* and its afterlives. Recall her interview:

This [and one might hear in that “this” her anticipation and condemnation of their future labeling] is like a slap in my face to me and my family. I’m not on drugs. . . . I have, these are my dolls I picked up so don’t think I’m mentally ill or anything like that. I picked these up. I have a tent full of stuffed animals and dolls. This is the only thing that I have to hold on to for me to remember my children. I lost a lot and I’m homeless and I haven’t seen my children since I was unable to attend court because I had no transportation. The court was way in San Bernardino and I’m way in Ontario and I lost out on my children and I haven’t seen my children since and this is since 2003 and here it is 2009 so I’ve lost a lot. I’m trying . . . I’m hurt. I’m trying to figure out am I ever going to get the chance to be a mother again with my children I already have. I don’t have my children. I’m over here in the dirt, getting darker and darker and darker. And my wig is because my hair comes out you, know, mysteriously my hair comes out, and it wasn’t like that at first but I get over here and I take my hair out to wash it and stuff and it’s coming out, you know. In patches. Like someone is shaving my hair off. That and I’ve gotten overweight to where I’m just starting to handle my weight in the hot sun and I can barely walk to the corner without getting hot and without getting hot flashes. So I’m trying to deal with my weight and my situation at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

Aereile Jackson has lost a lot. More than this film can or will reckon with. The violence against her is (in Wilderson’s terms) not contingent, it is not violence that occurs between subjects at the level of conflict; it is gratuitous violence that occurs at the level of a structure that constitutes the Black as the constitutive outside. Put another way, the fact and the mode of the inclusion and display of Ms. Jackson’s body and speech are indicative of how the film cannot understand the enactments of a language of gratuitous violence against the Black. That is, the film-

makers' language of analysis begins from the violence of her absence, and it is clear the film operates within a logic that cannot apprehend her suffering. How she is written into the film and the film's inability to comprehend her suffering are part of the orthography of the wake. The forgotten space is blackness, and as Jackson is conjured to fill it she appears as a specter. It is as if with her appearance capital is suddenly historicized in and through her body. She is opportune. They see in her an *opportunity* (from the Latin *ob-*, meaning "toward," and *portu(m)*, meaning "port").<sup>8</sup> But Jackson wasn't ejected from the system: she is the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through, which the system reimagines and reconstitutes itself. "*Violence precedes and exceeds blacks*" (Wilderson 2010, 76). The suffering of Black people cannot be analogized; "we" are not all claimed by life in the same way; "we" do not experience suffering on the same plain of conflict, since the Black is characterized, as Wilderson tells us, by gratuitous violence (Wilderson 2010, 126).

Sekula and Burch continue: "The cargo containers are everywhere, mobile and anonymous: 'coffins of remote labour-power,' carrying goods manufactured by invisible workers on the other side of the globe" (Sekula and Burch 2011) (figure 2.3). How are these containers that Sekula and Burch track connected with global warming and fights over water and other resources? How are they connected with the journeys that Africans make over the land, from, say, Somalia to Libya, and then across the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reach places like Lampedusa? How are they connected to the containerization of people prior to and during and then after that perilous sea voyage? These are questions that Sekula and Burch's film does not attempt to address.

These are the asterisked histories of slavery, of property, of thingification, and their afterlives. I can't help but see that word "risk" in "asterisk." And to link that risk and those asterisked histories to the seas and to the beginnings of the insurance trade subtended by a trade in Africans.

The history of insurance begins with the sea. Three developments are central to the conceptual framework established by marine insurance: first, the "bottomry" agreement or "sea loan" in which money is loaned at a steep rate for a voyage, the risk falling to the lender. Second, the concept of "general average," the idea that losses undertaken to save a boat (jettisoning or cutting down masts in a storm, for instance) represent a risk shared among those investing in a voyage — usually seen

as the oldest form of joint-stock enterprise. And third, in the notion of “Perils of the Sea” — the earliest form of the concept of insurable risk. (Armstrong 2010, 168)

One might say that Aereile Jackson is the film’s insurance — as she lends the film its vocabulary and her abjection underwrites its circulation (figure 2.4).

*The risk in insurance: the asterisked human.*

So I’ve been thinking about shippability and containerization and what is in excess of those states. What I am therefore calling the Trans\*Atlantic is that s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents. I want to think Trans\* in a variety of ways that try to get at something *about* or *toward* the range of trans\*formations enacted on and by Black bodies. The asterisk after a word functions as the wildcard, and I am thinking the trans\* in that way; as a means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls the “position of the unthought” (Hartman and Wilderson 2003). The asterisk after the prefix “trans” holds the place open for thinking (from and into that position). It speaks, as well, to a range of embodied experiences called gender and to Euro-Western gender’s dismantling, its inability to hold in/on Black flesh. The asterisk speaks to a range of configurations of Black being that take the form of translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transformation, transmogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation (by which process we might understand the making of bodies into flesh and then into fungible commodities while retaining the appearance of flesh and blood), transmigration, and more.

With the Trans\* I am not interested in genealogy; it is not my intention to recover transgender bodies in the archive. But when Omise’eke Tinsley writes in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage” that “the Black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic” (Tinsley 2008, 191), we might add that the Black and queer Atlantic have always been the Trans\*Atlantic. Black has always been that excess.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, blackness throws into crisis, whether in these



Aereile Jackson  
Former mother



**2.1–2.2** Stills of Aereile Jackson. **2.3** Cargo containers.  
From Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space—A Film Essay Seeking to Understand the Contemporary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic Legacy of the Sea*, 2010 (film still). Sound, color. 112 min.  
Courtesy of Doc.Eye Film, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



## Making Political Cinema – *The Forgotten Space*

Darrell Varga

The making of independent cinema is always on some level a political act. Its existence is a challenge to the hegemony of the cultural industries, whether through its subject matter, its refusal to accede to prevailing social norms, or even by virtue of its regional location. It needs to be said, though, that plenty of independent media production is an audition to be let inside the culture machine. For the founding patriarch of documentary, John Grierson (the first commissioner of the NFB), art was to be used as a hammer, and he happily took on the role of propagandist from his *ciné-pulpit*. From Grierson we can still understand documentary as engaging the viewer not just as an individual but also as a member of society; he saw the medium as a means of fostering citizenship and enabling democracy. Documentary was important for the way that it shines a light on the technologies of power through which society is organized. The limits of the Griersonian approach, though, lie in its problem/solution structure, whereby film is used to identify issues and concerns and posit solutions for the betterment of existing society. Overall, then, we can think of political documentary as something that, broadly speaking, goes against the grain of the existing political system.

Radical political filmmaking has long been identified with movements of resistance against colonial rule and capitalist exploitation in places of underdevelopment. This kind of work is not really invested in auteurism and the art cinema tradition. Here,

2.4 Publicity still of Aeriele Jackson in *Making Political Cinema*. Courtesy Jerry White and the Centre for European Studies at Dalhousie University, Halifax

places one can ever really think together, Black and (hetero)normative. That is, Black life in and out of the “New World” is always queered and more. We might say that slavery trans\* all desire as it made some people into things, some into buyers, sellers, owners, fuckers, and breeders of that Black flesh. That excess is here writ large on Black bodies—as it is with the process of subjection. And it is that point, post the “rupture in the world,” at which, Dionne Brand tells us, *we*, whether *we* made *that* passage or not, are “transform[ed] into being. That one door [the door of no return] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed” (Brand 2001, 25).<sup>10</sup>

As we hold on to the many meanings of Trans\* we can and must think and imagine laterally, across a series of relations in the ship, the hold, the wake, and the weather—in multiple Black everydays—to do what Hartman, in “Venus in Two Acts,” describes as “listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured



lives” and to do what NourbeSe Philip calls the necessity of “telling the story that cannot be told.” “I think,” Philip says, “this is what *Zong!* is attempting: to find a form to bear this story which can’t be told, which must be told, but through not telling” (Saunders 2008a, 72).

To encounter people of African descent in the wake both materially and as a problem for thought is to encounter that \* in the grand narrative of history; and, in the conditions of Black life and death such as those delineated by Hartman (“skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death”) and the ways we are positioned through and by them, the ways we occupy the “I” of Hartman’s “I am the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2008, 6). Theorizing wake work requires a turn away from existing *disciplinary* solutions to blackness’s ongoing abjection that extend the dysgraphia of the wake. It requires theorizing the multiple meanings of that abjection through inhabitation, that is, through living them in and as consciousness.

We see that dysgraphic positioning of Black people via abjection everywhere: from responses to the Black abandoned in the multiple and ongoing disasters of Hurricane Katrina to conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks’s abhorrent January 15, 2010, op-ed on Haiti, “The Underlying Tragedy” (Brooks 2010a), in which he wrote that Haiti’s problems were less a problem for “development” to solve than they were a call for a radical and radically imposed cultural shift, coming as they do as a result of “progress-resistant cultural influences.”<sup>11</sup> Drawing from the anthology *What Works in Development?* Brooks goes on to write, “We’re all supposed to politely respect each other’s cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and a horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them. . . . It’s time to promote locally led paternalism. . . . to replace parts of the local culture with a highly demanding, highly intensive culture of achievement—involving everything from new child-rearing practices to stricter schools to better job performance” (Brooks 2010a). This op-ed is properly understood in the context of what *is not* said: its refusal to speak, for example, Haiti’s revolutionary past and the billions of dollars in indemnity Haiti has been forced to pay to France; or the successive US military occupations and coups. Three days earlier Brooks wrote an op-ed entitled “The Tel Aviv Cluster,” about the accomplishments of Jewish people all over the world. He says: “The Jewish faith encourages a belief in progress and personal accountability. Tel

Aviv has become one of the world's foremost entrepreneurial hot spots. Israel has more high-tech start-ups per capita than any other nation on earth, by far. It leads the world in civilian research-and-development spending per capita. It ranks second behind the United States in the number of companies listed on the Nasdaq. Israel, with seven million people, attracts as much venture capital as France and Germany combined" (Brooks 2010b). As with my students in *Memory for Forgetting*, the disaster of the Holocaust is available as human tragedy in a way that slavery, revolution, and their afterlives are not.

The asterisk is evident globally. From the death by drowning of Glenda Moore's sons Connor and Brandon (ages four and two) on Staten Island, New York in Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, to the murders of Michael Brown and Miriam Carey, to the continued crossings and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, to the policing and cordoning of Black people on and off the streets of North America, the "problem" is Black (moral) underdevelopment. The problem is blackness. The problem is blackness *is and as* underdevelopment. One can't imagine similar "culture of poverty" proclamations like Brooks's being made, for instance, in the aftermath of the devastation of the tornados in May 2013 in predominantly putatively white communities in Tornado Alley in the midwestern United States — even though many of the people living there do not or cannot take the precautions of building storm shelters, evacuating, or otherwise readying for disaster. That such things *are* said and said with such regularity about Black and blackened people is some part of what it means to be/in the wake. "*We are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force*" (Sharpe 2012a, 828).

## *The Ship*

### THE ZONG

The sea was like slake gray of what was left of my body and the white waves . . .

I remember.

—Kamau Brathwaite, *Dream Haiti*

After spending several months off the coast of West Africa as its hold was gradually filled with abducted Africans, a slave ship named the *Zong* started its journey to Jamaica. It was originally called the *Zorgue*,

and it was based in the Netherlands before being purchased in 1781 on behalf of a group of Liverpool merchants. When the *Zorgue* was captured by the British on February 10, 1781, it already had 320 abducted Africans on board; the “cargo” then was underwritten after the capture, after the ship had set sail from Cape Coast. Built to hold approximately 220 African men, women, and children; the *Zong* sailed with twice that many; there were 442 (or 470) captive Africans on board. When the ship set out for Jamaica on August 18, 1781, it had provisions for three months and the knowledge that there were a number of ports in the Caribbean where it could stop to replenish if it ran short of water and food. Records show that due to navigational errors the ship overshot Jamaica. Records show that the captain and crew reported that they decided to jettison some of the enslaved in order to “save the rest of the cargo.” The transcript of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (the 1783 court case) echoes this report. It reads: “Some of the negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest” (quoted in Philip 2008, 210).

The *Zong* was first brought to the awareness of the larger British public through the newspaper reports that the ship’s owners (Gregson) were suing the underwriters (Gilbert) for the insurance value of those 132 (or 140 or 142) murdered Africans. Insurance claims are part of what Katherine McKittrick calls the “mathematics of black life” (McKittrick 2014), which includes that killability, that throwing overboard. “Captain Luke Collingwood thus brutally converted an uninsurable loss (general mortality) into general average loss, a sacrifice of parts of a cargo for the benefit of the whole” (Armstrong 2010, 173).

The deposed crew recounted that it was lack of water and the insurance claim that motivated that throwing overboard. They recognized that insurance monies would not be paid if those enslaved people died “a natural death.” (A natural death. What would constitute a natural death here? How could their deaths *be* natural? How can the legally dead be declared murdered?) But in his testimony in court the chief mate revealed that the crew on board the *Zong* never moved to “short water,” that is, at no point did they resort to water rationing (Hochschild 2006, 80). Despite the individual and combined efforts of antislavery activist Granville Sharp and the formerly enslaved antislavery activists Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, it would not be murder that was at issue. The events on board the *Zong* would be com-

mitted to historical memory first as the insurance claim in the case of *Gregson v. Gilbert* and only later as the murders (injury to “subjects”) of 132 Africans not seen in the court to be murders. “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 the throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue” (quoted in Philip 2008, 211).

It may be fitting that the *Zong* most often comes to memory not as the singular ship itself but as an unnamed slaver on which the crew threw captured Africans overboard. The murderous actions of the captain and crew of that *unnamed* ship are memorialized in J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 painting titled *Slave Ship: Slavers Throwing Overboard Dead and Dying—Typhon Coming On*. In the roiling, livid orpiment of Turner’s painting, the dead are yoked to the dying. That Turner’s slave ship lacks a proper name allows it to stand in for *every* slave ship and every slave crew, for every slave ship and all the murdered Africans in Middle Passage. As James Walvin (2011, 107) writes, “Everyone involved in the slave trade—from the grandest merchant to the roughest of deck hands—knew that there were times when the crew might have to kill the very people they had been sent to trade for and for whom they paid such high sums. Though no one would admit it openly, a crude human calculus had evolved at the heart of the slave trade and was accepted by all involved: to survive, it was sometimes necessary to kill.” Turner’s painting captures the horrors of the trade and refuses to collapse a singularity<sup>12</sup> into a ship named the *Zong*; that is, Turner’s unnamed slave ship stands in for the entire enterprise, the “going concern” (Brand 2015) of the trade in captured Africans: the part for the whole. In style and content Turner’s painting makes visible the questions at the center of the *Zong*—property, insurance, resistance,<sup>13</sup> and the question of ballast. (Think of the recent discovery of a wrecked ship off the coast of South Africa that archaeologists have determined was a slave ship because of the iron bars of ballast that they found in the wreckage. Ballast was necessary to offset the weight of the captured Africans in the hold of the ship [Cooper 2015]).

The decision of the court was achieved through an act of lexico-legal transubstantiation<sup>14</sup> that declared that “the case [of the *Zong*] was a simple one of maritime insurance,” that is, a case of property

loss and not murder. Despite the differences recorded in the numbers of Africans thrown overboard, what remains constant is that *there was that throwing overboard*; there was in fact that murder of over 130 abducted Africans. *The event*, which is to say, one version of one part of a more than four-hundred-year-long event is as follows: “29 November, at 8.00 pm, fiftyfour [sic] women and children were thrown overboard ‘singly through the Cabin windows.’ The time seems to have been chosen to coincide with the changing of the watch when the maximum number of crewmembers would be available. On 1 December a further forty-two male slaves were thrown overboard from the quarterdeck” (Lewis 2007, 364). We read that “the next day it rained, and the crew collected enough fresh drinking water to add a three weeks supply to the ship’s store” (Vincent Brown 2008, 159). Nevertheless, counter to the logic that lack of water is what motivated these acts that would circumvent the insurance rules of “natural death,” “in the course of the next days thirty-six more slaves were thrown overboard and a further ten jumped into the water by themselves. Kelsall later considered that ‘the outside number of drowned amounted to 142 in the whole’” (Lewis 2007, 364).

When the *Zong* finally arrived on the Black River in Jamaica on December 22, 1781, there were 208 living Africans on board. When the Jamaican *Cornwall Chronicle* listed those Africans for sale, they noted that “‘the vessel . . . was in great distress’ having jettisoned some 130 slaves” (Lewis 2007, 364). With that notation of great distress, the paper did not (mean to) gesture toward the enslaved. They did not (mean to) account for the psychic and material toll the long journey of forced abduction, want, and incredible violence had taken on the enslaved (violence not marked as violence nor abduction nor want). It was the ship that was in great distress, not the enslaved. Here, if not everywhere, as we will see, the ship is distinct from the slave. When the sale took place on January 9, 1782, the remaining enslaved people sold for an average of thirty-six pounds each — above the thirty-pound price at which they were insured. But, of course those enslaved *people* were also in great physical and psychic distress; witnesses to and survivors of the extravagant violences of the ship, its living death, and mass murder. Perhaps, especially, that one enslaved man who, thrown overboard, managed to climb back onto the ship.

How does one account for surviving the ship when the ship and the un/survival repeat?

ZONG!

We sing for death, we sing for birth. That's what we do. We sing.

—Patricia Saunders, “Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive”

What does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death; to live this imminence and immanence as and in the “wake”? I turn here to NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*. Each of the numbered poems in “Os,” *Zong!’s!* first section, is composed of words taken from the court case of *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Below the line of the poems in “Os” appear Philip’s annotations—names for those Africans on board the *Zong* who had no names that their captors were bound to recognize or record.<sup>15</sup> Those now-named Africans in “Os” (Os as ordinary seaman, mouth, opening, or bone) are the bones of the text of *Zong!*

*Zong!*, Philip says, “is hauntological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present” (Philip 2008, 201). The dead appear in Philip’s *Zong!*, beyond the logic of the ledger, beyond the mathematics of insurance, and it is they who underwrite the poems that comprise “Os.” Philip aspirates those submerged lives and brings them back to the text from which they were ejected. Likewise, in the structure of *Zong!* the number of names of those people underwriting the enterprise of slavery do not match the number of the thrown and jumped, and so, with that too, Philip dispenses with a particular kind of fidelity to the invention of the historical archive.

“*Zong!* #15” begins with the statement/imperative/injunction to “defend the dead.” I reproduce it here. Philip provides names.

“What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a ‘liquid grave’?” (Philip 2008, 201). The word that Philip arrives at is *exaqua*. But there is no retrieving bone from its watery wake. There is no bringing the bodies from the *Zong* and so many other past and present ships up from the water or back to the shore. There are, as Philip knows, no bones to recover.

*Zong! #15*

defend the dead  
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to usual &  
etc  
where the ratio of just  
in less than  
is necessary  
to murder  
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the save in underwriter  
where etc tunes justice  
and the *ratio* of murder  
is  
the usual in occurred

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Akilah Falope Ouma Weke Jubade

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Micere Ndale Omowunmi Ramla Ajani

A ship moving through water generates a particular pattern of waves; the bow wave is in front of the ship, and that wave then spreads out in the recognizable V pattern on either side of and then behind the ship. The size of the bow wave dictates how far out the wake starts. Waves that occur in the wake of the ship move at the same speed as the ship. From at least the sixteenth century onward, a major part of the ocean engineering of ships has been to minimize the bow wave and therefore to minimize the wake. But the effect of trauma is the opposite. It is to make maximal the wake. The transverse waves are those waves that run through the back; they are perpendicular to the direction of the motion of the ship. Transverse waves look straight but are actually arcs of a circle. And every time, every instant that the boat is moving through water it has the potential to generate a new wave.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly the *Zong*, far away from any landmass, would have been in deep water, and any object, or person thrown overboard would have been in deepwater waves. Once in the water that thrown overboard person would have experienced the circular or bobbing motion of the wake and would have been carried by that wake for at least for a short period of time. It is likely, though, that because many of those enslaved people were sick and were likely emaciated or close to it, they would have had very little body fat; their bodies would have been denser than seawater. It is likely, then, that those Africans, thrown overboard, would have floated just a short while, and only because of the shapes of their bodies. It is likely, too, that they would have sunk relatively quickly and drowned relatively quickly as well. And then there were the sharks that always traveled in the wake of slave ships.

There have been studies done on whales that have died and have sunk to the seafloor. These studies show that within a few days the whales' bodies are picked almost clean by benthic organisms — those organisms that live on the seafloor. My colleague Anne Gardulski tells me it is most likely that a human body would not make it to the seafloor intact. What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean (the process of organisms eating organisms is the cycling of nutrients through the ocean), the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed



them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. Around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled. As Anne told me, “Nobody dies of old age in the ocean.”

The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which “everything is now. It is all now” (Morrison 1987, 198).

*The sea was like slake gray of what was left of my body and the white waves. . . . I remember.*

#### HOW A GIRL BECOMES A SHIP

First another epigraph from *Dream Haiti* by Kamau Brathwaite and then a long quotation from June Jordan’s “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley.”

Brathwaite: “I do not know why I am here—how I came to be on board this ship, this navel of my ark.”

Now Jordan:

It was not natural. And she was the first. Come from a country of many tongues tortured by rupture, by theft, by travel like mismatched clothing packed down into the cargo hold of evil ships sailing, irreversible, into slavery. Come to a country to be docile and dumb, to be big and breeding, easily, to be turkey/horse/cow, to be cook/carpenter/plow, to be 5’6” 140 lbs., in good condition and answering to the name of Tom or Mary: to be bed bait: to be legally spread legs for rape by the master/the master’s son/the master’s overseer/the master’s visiting nephew: to be nothing human nothing family nothing from nowhere nothing that screams nothing that weeps nothing that dreams nothing that keeps anything/anyone deep in your heart: to live forcibly illiterate, forcibly itinerant: to live eyes lowered head bowed: to be worked without rest, to be worked without pay, to be worked without thanks, to be worked day up to nightfall: to be three-fifths of a human being

at best: to be this valuable/this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave. Come to this country a slave and how should you sing?

...

How should there be Black poets in America? It was not natural. And she was the first. It was 1761—so far back before the revolution that produced these United States, so far back before the concept of freedom disturbed the insolent crimes of this continent—in 1761, when seven year old Phillis stood, as she must, when she stood nearly naked, as small as a seven year old, by herself, standing on land at last, at last after the long, annihilating horrors of the Middle Passage. Phillis, standing on the auctioneer's rude platform: Phillis For Sale.

Was it a nice day?

Does it matter?

Should she muse on the sky or remember the sea? Until then Phillis had been somebody's child. Now she was about to become somebody's slave.

...

When the Wheatleys arrived at the auction they greeted their neighbors, they enjoyed this business of mingling with other townfolk politely shifting about the platform, politely adjusting positions for gain of a better view of the bodies for sale. The Wheatleys were good people. They were kind people. They were openminded and thoughtful. They looked at the bodies for sale. They looked and they looked. This one could be useful for that. That one might be useful for this. But then they looked at that child, that Black child standing nearly naked, by herself. Seven or eight years old, at the most, and frail. Now that was a different proposal! Not a strong body, not a grown set of shoulders, not a promising wide set of hips, but a little body, a delicate body, a young, surely terrified face! John Wheatley agreed to the whim of his wife, Suzannah. He put in his bid. He put down his cash. He called out the numbers. He competed successfully. He had a good time. He got what he wanted. He purchased yet another slave. He bought that Black girl standing on the platform, nearly naked. He gave this new slave to

his wife and Suzannah Wheatley was delighted. She and her husband went home. They rode there by carriage. They took that new slave with them. An old slave commanded the horses that pulled the carriage that carried the Wheatleys home, along with the new slave, that little girl they named Phillis.

Why did they give her that name? (Jordan 2003, 174–76)

We know that the Wheatleys name that African girl child Phillis after the slave ship (the *Phillis*) on which her transatlantic abduction through the Middle Passage was completed. The Wheatleys made an experiment of her. They allowed and encouraged this Phillis, child of a “bitterly anonymous man and a woman,” to “develop,” to become literate, to write poetry, to become “the first Black human being to be published in America” (Jordan 2003, 176).<sup>17</sup>

Ninety years after “Phillis Miracle” (Jordan 2003, 176), Louis Agassiz, one of the founders of the American school of ethnology, commissioned daguerreotypes of seven enslaved men and women, among them two sets of Africa-born fathers and their US-born daughters, all meant to be “pure,” unmiscegenated examples of the race. We know that the daguerreotypes of Renty (Congo) and Jack (Guinea), the Africa-born men, and the “country-born” daughters Delia and Drana are meant to reveal what blackness looks like and how to look at blackness. They are meant to make visible separate development and separate species. “Agassiz’s hope [was] to enlist the aid of photography so as to prove his claims that not all humans are of the same species and that the black race is inferior to the white one, alongside the transformation of these photographed people into illustrations for a scientific claim” (Azoulay 2008, 166). Put another way, the daguerreotypes of the fathers and daughters are meant to make visible the ship, *and* its wake, *in the slave*. Given that the law of slavery was *partus sequitur ventrem*, one might ask why it is fathers and daughters who are photographed here and not fathers and sons, mothers and sons, or the mothers (through whom slavery legally passes) and the daughters through whom, if they give birth, it will also pass? What might the subject choice of these daguerreotypes tell us about the photographic framings and subjections of racialexualgender and of Black resisting objects? What might it tell us about how this particular framing will reach into and across the

present and future—to arrest *and* set in motion how all Black images will be seen in their wake? In the movement in the United States from slave law to black codes, to Jim Crow, to what will come after, this projection into the future is an attempt to submit Black inheritance to a patriarchal order that will then be seen to fail to *take hold* after the date of formal emancipation, thereby marking *blackness* as pathology through to future generations.<sup>18</sup> Despite all its transformative power, blackness, here, will be seen to fail to be transformed. Put another way, in and out of the United States this ethnographic gaze will be put into practice across time and administrative process, and the injury will then be seen to slip from the conditions of slavery, colonialism, segregation, lynching, touristic display, ethnographic display, incarceration, vigilantism, gentrification, “immigrant camps and detention centers,” and state murder, to social and other “scientific claims” about blackness, about Black being, itself.

I was struck on first seeing those daguerreotypes of Jack, Delia, Renty, and Drana, as I was by my encounter with a photograph taken 160 years later that I found when I entered the archives of photographs of disaster in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12, 2010. These photographs echoed the photographs of that disaster, and disastrous response to, Hurricane Katrina on the US Gulf Coast in 2005. It was not the first time I had cautiously entered this archive, but this time I was stopped by this photograph of a Haitian girl child, ten years old at the most (figure 2.5). A third of the image, the left-hand side, is blurry, but her face is clear; it’s what is in focus. She is alive. Her eyes are open. She is lying on a black stretcher; her head is on a cold pack, there is an uncovered wound over and under her right eye and a piece of paper stuck to her bottom lip, and she is wearing what seems to be a hospital gown. She is looking at or past the camera; her look reaches out to me. Affixed to her forehead is a piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it.

Who put it there? Does it matter?

*What is the look in her eyes? What do I do with it?*

When I stumbled upon *that* image of *this* girl child with the word *Ship* taped to her forehead, it was the look in her eyes that first stopped

me, and then, with its coming into focus, that word *Ship* threatened to obliterate every and anything else I could see. (What was it doing there?) But I returned to her face; what was the look in her eyes? And what was I being called to by and with her look at me and mine at her? Over the years I have returned repeatedly to this image to try to account for what I saw there or thought I might see. Where is she looking? Who and what is she looking for? Who can look back? Does she know that there is a piece of tape on her forehead? Does she know what that piece of tape says? Does she know that she is destined for a ship? Her eyes look back at me, like Delia's eyes, like Drana's. I marked her youth, the scar on the bridge of her nose that seems to continue through one eyebrow, her eyes and eyelashes, the uncovered wounds, a bit of paper, and a leaf. In this photographic arrangement I see her and I feel with and for her as she is disarranged by this process. I see this intrusion into her life and world at the very moment it is, perhaps not for the first time, falling apart. In her I recognize myself, by which I mean, I recognize the common conditions of Black being in the wake.

*Where was her mother? Her father? Whom did she turn to when scared?* (Saunders 2008a, 77)

Twenty years after Phillis, the ship and the girl, arrive in Boston, Massachusetts, the *Zong* achieves notoriety through the binding and throwing overboard of 132 (or 140 or 142) Africans in order to collect insurance.<sup>19</sup> The text of the 1783 court case *Gregson v. Gilbert* tells us that this was not a case of murder, tells us that “it has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow creatures may become property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue” (quoted in Philip 2008, 211). Originally named the *Zorg* (or *Zorgue*), which translates from the Dutch into English as “care,” the ship becomes the *Zong* after it was captured in war and bought by a Liverpool slave company and an error was made in the repainting of the name. We should pause for at least a moment on the *fact* of a slave ship named *Care* (care registering, here, as “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something,” as support and protection but also as grief) *before, and as*, we attempt to understand that



2.5 Haiti struggles for aid and survival after earthquake.

© Joe Raedle/Getty Images

single word *Ship* attached to that small Black female body in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake in 2010. Is *Ship* a proper name? A destination? An imperative? A signifier of the im/possibility of Black life under the conditions of what, Stephanie Smallwood tells us, “would become an enduring project in the modern Western world [of] probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within” (Smallwood 2008, 35–36)? Is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death? Of those other Haitians in crisis sometimes called boat people? Or is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the ongoing migrant and refugee crises unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans? Given how visual and literary culture evoke and invoke the Middle Passage with such deliberate and reflexive dysgraphic unseeing, I cannot help but extrapolate.

Compare that image to the 1992 photograph of another Haitian girl child (figure 2.6). She is also seven or eight years old, ten at most, and she is holding a ship. That photograph is taken during the height of the forced exodus of Haitian refugees — those people adrift, sometimes picked up and incarcerated, and other times, most often, turned back

by the US Coast Guard and other nations. As Kaiama Glover (2011) reminds us, the “ship” indexes the “floating detention centers controlled by government agencies of the United States and the United Kingdom . . . where ‘ghost prisoners’—individuals denied protective anchoring to a sovereign homeland—languish in the international waters of the Indian Ocean. . . . [as well as those] 20th and 21st century Haitians . . . shipwrecked and lost at sea or turned away from hostile beaches in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Florida . . .” We know, too, that “the United States has intercepted thousands of Haitian refugees at sea and forcibly returned them” (DeLoughrey 2010, 708). The Haitian girl child in this photograph stands in front of a desk and before a man and a woman seated behind and to the side of the desk. Their backs are to the camera. They are taking down her information, checking boxes, in a ledger of some sort. The woman is wearing gold earrings; there appears to be an epaulet on the shoulder of the man’s shirt. The little girl stands in front of them, in front of the desk on which a model ship rests (a model Coast Guard cutter?), and her hands are on the ship. No one appears to be with her there. Her face is serious, her look concentrated. *What is the look in her eyes? What do I do with it? “Where was her mother? Her father? Whom did she turn to when scared?”* The ledger that renders us illegible as human returns and repeats, as does the ship. In the 1992 photograph we see a ship and we see a little girl; we see a little girl holding a ship and know that a ship will hold this girl, precariously. The photograph is captioned “Haitian Boat People” and the accompanying description reads: “A small child waits while her personal information is written down in preparation for the voyage from Haiti to the United States. US President Bill Clinton offered temporary asylum to fleeing Haitians who have abandoned the poverty and corruption of their homeland. Thousands of refugees head for the shores of Florida, attempting the 500 kilometer journey in rickety boats made from their former homes.” The phrase *boat people*, applied to those Haitians leaving the country under force, *reflects*, enacts, and attempts to erase its particular and brutal violences, and this ship and this girl enact a prior and ongoing instance of eponymity.<sup>20</sup> “A boat, even a wrecked and wretched boat still has all the possibilities of moving” (Brand 2002, 92).

Of course, after the initial obliterating shock of seeing the 2010 photograph, one searches for clues to help understand, perhaps explain, the violence of someone placing the word *Ship* on the forehead of



2.6 Haitian boat people. © Jacques Langevin/Sygma/Corbis

a young Black girl. One pulls back so that the other details I described become visible: the gown, the leaf, those big brown eyes with their impossibly long eyelashes and an uncovered wound under the right one, the stretcher and the cold pack. In addition to indexing all that Glover cautions us to keep in mind, we might allow that the label *Ship* is expedient, that the people who put it there are trying to help, that it's a signifier of medical necessity in the midst of disaster and the disorder that follows. Someone wanted to mark this girl child for evacuation, wanted to make sure she got on that ship. But an allowance for intention aside, one of the larger questions that arises from the image is how does one mark someone *for* a space — the ship — who is already marked *by* it?

In *Beloved* (Morrison 1987, 61), Sethe asks her mother, “Mark me, too. Mark the mark on me too” (the mark being the brand under her breast that she shows Sethe so that her daughter might identify her if her face is destroyed in the event that their revolt is unsuccessful). The mark was burned into Sethe’s mother’s flesh on the littoral before she was stowed in the hold of the ship. But it is also more than that. It is a mark consistent with the branding that would turn those Africans into property and with a Kongo cosmogram that marks the bearer of it as an initiate. In the latter case, it connects the living and the dead, and it



signifies that the bearer “understands the meaning of life as a process shared with the dead below the river or the sea” (Stuckey 1992, 103; see also Thompson 1984). The mark in *Beloved* is connected to the ship on which Sethe’s mother is forced to cross into slavery and to what was before and what comes in its wake. The mother’s response to Sethe’s request that she “mark the mark on me too” is a slap because she knows what that mark means and she knows, and Sethe will come to know, that she is already marked. The mother also knows that to live in the wake, Sethe will have to remake the meaning of the mark, as she too will come to “understand the meaning of life as a process shared with the dead below the river or the sea” (Bolster 1998, 65). We must ask, again, with Spillers (2003b, 207), whether “this phenomenon of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments.”

To return to the image of the little girl with the word *Ship* on her forehead, it also strikes me that of the forty-two photographs in the online image gallery of the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake where I first found this one, this is the only one in which the caption does not label the person photographed as male or female, boy or girl.<sup>21</sup> And this seems to me to be significant in a culture so intent on that marking.<sup>22</sup> When I look at this photograph I see a young girl, to quote Jordan on Phillis Wheatley, “a delicate body, a young, surely terrified face” (Jordan 2003, 176)! And I wonder if it is the word *Ship* that has confused the photographer and the caption writers. A synchronicity (a singularity) of thought emerges here. And it occurs to me that the person who affixed that word *Ship* to her forehead emerges as another kind of underwriter, here, whose naming operates within the logics and arithmetics that would also render her a meager child, as in one who occupies less space in the hold of a ship (figure 2.7).

To be clear, the optic that registers this girl only as “child” is one that indexes at least a certain inability to see, but what is at stake here is not a correction of that vision, not an expansion of that category of “girl” to include this child. Rather, what I am indexing here arrives by way of Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (2003b, 208), that “our task [is to make] a place for this different social subject.” We should remember not only that the “death rate on the trans-Atlantic voyage to the New World was staggeringly high” but also that slave ships “were more than

floating tombs. They were floating laboratories, offering researchers a chance to examine the course of diseases in fairly controlled, quarantined environments. Doctors and medical researchers could take advantage of high mortality rates to identify a bewildering number of symptoms, classify them into diseases and hypothesize about their causes” (Glover 2011). We should remember, too, those in the present, seen and still abandoned at sea—like those on board what has come to be called “the left-to-die boat.”<sup>23</sup> And remembering this, we should pause, again, on the name and provenance of the ship that that little girl is destined for—a US *military medical ship* named *Comfort*. “US,” “military,” “comfort,” and “allopathic medicine”—each and together being terms whose connection in the lives and on the bodies of Black people everywhere and anywhere on the globe—warrant at least a deep suspicion if not outright alarm: from those experiments on board the floating laboratory of the slave (and migrant) ship, to J. Marion Sims’s surgical experiments conducted without anesthesia on enslaved women; to the outbreaks of cholera in Haiti introduced by UN troops; to experiments with mustard gas on US Black soldiers in World War II to produce an “ideal chemical soldier”; to the Tuskegee and Guatemala syphilis experiments and their ripple effects; to the dubious origins and responses to the crisis of Ebola; to the ongoing practice of forced sterilization; to recent studies that show again and again that Black people in the United States receive inferior health care because they are believed to feel less pain.<sup>24</sup> We might pause, too, because that ship named *Comfort* is too close in name to another one originally named *Care*, the *Zorgue* renamed the *Zong*. But in this particular 2010 un-naming, in this marking of a quantity known only as “child,” we glimpse that *oceanic ungendering* that Spillers theorized in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (2003b, 214) as “those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ . . . literally suspended in the oceanic, if we think of the latter . . . as an analogy on undifferentiated identity.” We continue with Spillers (2003a, 206), “Under these conditions we lose at least *gender* difference in the *outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.”

The question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives. “What

else is there to know” now? In excess of: “Hers is the same fate of every other Black Venus” (Hartman 2008, 2)?

I didn’t want to leave her (this girl child with the word *Ship* affixed to her forehead) as I found her in an archive of hurt and death and destruction that reveals neither her name nor her sex nor any other details of her life. One AP caption tells us: “An injured child waits to be flown for treatment on the USNS *Comfort*.”<sup>25</sup> The second AP caption reads, “Port-Au-Prince, Haiti—January 21: A child waits to be medevaced by US Army soldiers from the 82nd Airborne to the USNS *Comfort* on January 21, 2010 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Planeloads of rescuers and relief supplies headed to Haiti as governments and aid agencies launched a massive relief operation after a powerful earthquake that may have killed thousands. Many buildings were reduced to rubble by the 7.0-strong quake on January 12.”<sup>26</sup> But a “*voice interrupts: says she*” (McKittrick 2014, 17).

And so this Girl from the archives of disaster of the first month of the second decade of the twenty-first century is evocative of another two girls on board that slave ship *Recovery* in the midst of the long disaster of Atlantic slavery whose effects are still unfolding and whose stories Hartman tells by untelling in “Venus in Two Acts.” And they are evocative of other contemporary girls, as they, too, are mis/seen and all too often un/accounted for.

A meager story is not a failure. “*We are not only known to ourselves and to each other through and by that force*” (Sharpe 2012a, 828). And I was not drawn to this young girl’s image to enact more violence. If I could help it, I did not want to resubject her in those ways. Echoing the poet Claire Harris (1984, 38) in “Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case,” I think, “Look you, child, I signify . . . the child was black and female . . . and therefore mine, Listen.” What happens when we look at and listen to these and other Black girls across time? What is made in our encounters with them? This looking makes ethical demands on the viewer; demands to imagine otherwise; to reckon with the fact that the archive, too, is invention. Harris’s poem takes its title from a news item that appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1983. The girl is fifteen and Black and she is stopped by the police for jaywalking. She is “terrified” (a bystander recalls) and unable to produce identification with a photo on it that will satisfy their gaze, their rules, and so she

is arrested, “stripped/spread/searched” (Harris 1984, 36). The second girl in the poem is the poet, who at fifteen is daydreaming when she steps, thoughtless, into a busy street in Trinidad. “I was released with a smile/with sympathy sent on in the warm green morning/Twenty years later to lift a newspaper and see my fifteen year old self/still dumb/now in a police car/still shivering as the morning rolls past but here/sick in the face of such vicious intent” (Harris 1984, 36). In the face of the Canadian state’s “vicious intent” Harris is moved to imagine across time and space to retrieve the incident from her childhood in order to place it alongside the contemporary one, and to speak and write to and from an imagined and lived otherwise. So when Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts” concludes: “So it was better to leave them as I had found them” and then two pages later asks, “In the end, was it better to leave them as I found them?” the statement and the question perform an epanalepsis: “the repetition of a word or words after an intervening word or words, whether for emphasis or clarity, as to resume a construction after a lengthy parenthesis”; a “liaison between words and sentences.”<sup>27</sup> Between the statement and the interrogative is the interregnum; and in that interval the “something—anything—else” can and does appear.

In the 2010 photograph of a Haitian girl child marked with *Ship*, we lose whatever attempt at a first name Phillis granted Phillis Wheatley, lose something like gender and individuation. “*Yet a voice interrupts: says she*” (McKittrick 2014, 17). Recall that in the archives Spillers, Philip, Hartman, and others most often encounter not individuals, but columns in which subjects have been transformed into cargo marked in the ledger with the notation “negro man, ditto, negro woman, ditto.” “There were,” on the *Zong*’s and other ships’ manifestos, Philip tells us, “no names—the lists of slaves in the book were simply identified as ‘Negro man’ or ‘Negro woman’ at the top of the ledger and the account book followed by ‘ditto’ all down the page, with the exception of one gloss, ‘meagre,’ allowed with reference to ‘negro girl’ — ‘negro girl meagre.’” She continues, “And just in that one word . . . I halted when I saw the word, and I thought, there is a whole story in that word, ‘meagre’” (Saunders 2008a, 77).

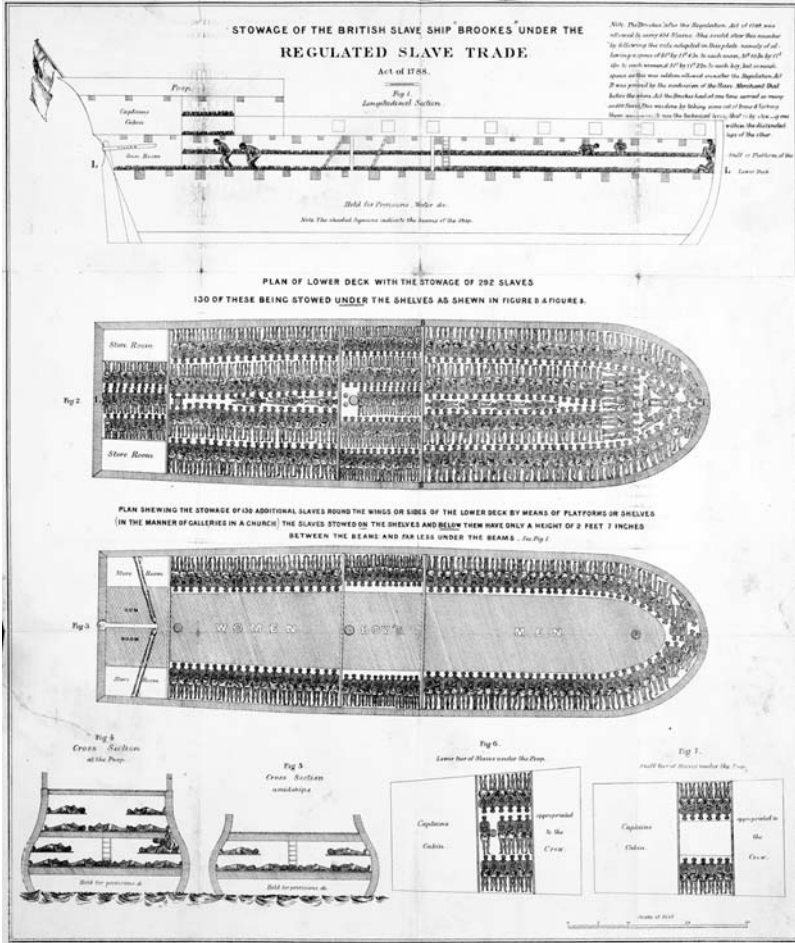
Phillis Wheatley, daughter of a “bitterly anonymous man and a woman” (Jordan 2003, 176), was “meager” (a meager, sickly child according to some accounts), never really a girl; at least not “girl” in any

way that operates as a meaningful signifier in Euro-Western cultures; no such persons recognizable as “girl” being inspected, sold, and purchased at auction in the “New World.” Likewise, to some, Phillis was never really a poet. Most famously not to Thomas Jefferson, who wrote in Query XIV of *Notes on the State of Virginia* ([1785] 1998, 147), “Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. — Among the blacks is misery, God knows, but no poetry. . . . Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.”

In that 2010 photo the meager child is not Phillis, but *Ship*; that is, she is not a *particular* ship/girl named Phillis but *any* ship/child/girl; the part for the whole. And, while this is the only photograph like this that I have found, my experience of photographs of disasters that happen in Black spaces and to Black people is that they usually feature groups of Black people, to quote Elizabeth Alexander, in “pain for public consumption” (Alexander 1995, 92) whether those Black people are in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Sierra Leone, the Dominican Republic, Lampedusa, Liberia, or Haiti (figures 2.9–2.13).

Philip in *Zong!* and Fred D’Augiar in *Feeding the Ghosts* tell us that there were on board that slave ship *Zong* many meager girls. So, on the one hand, we can imagine this photographer pulling back the shot to reveal not one Black girl child but row after row after row of Black girls, boys, men, and women with the word *Ship* affixed to their foreheads. Alternatively, given the ways Black suffering forms the backdrop against which another kind of “human drama” (capital H) is staged, we might also realize that pulling back the shot may reveal that she is the only one so labeled for evacuation. Marked as the *Ship*/the child (like The Phillis); saved (?) in order to be subjected yet again, because we are only usually singular, only the one, in an extraordinariness that, from one point of view obscures suffering in order to produce a “miracle Phillis,” and rarely “singular” or “one” in our putatively visible suffering or vulnerability despite that being, for some, all that there is to be seen. It was not better to leave her as I found her. In my reading and praxis of wake work, I have tried to position myself with her, in the wake.

October 3, 2013. A ship filled with 500 African migrants caught fire, capsized, and sank one half-mile off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Like the *Zong*, which was built to carry at most 200 people but was packed with over 440 captive Africans, this unnamed ship was



2.7 Stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the regulated slave trade act of 1788, ca. 1788. Etching. Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division. LC- LC-USZ62-34160

meant to hold fewer than half the number of people on it. Over 300 of the men, women, and children on board were killed. “Deep sea divers ‘unpacked a wall of people’ from the hull of a smuggler’s trawler on the seafloor near this Italian island on Monday, gingerly untangling the dead would-be migrants in the latest and most painstaking phase of a recovery operation following the ship’s fiery capsizing,”<sup>28</sup> a staggering loss of life and a “human cargo” that, we learn for the smugglers was “worth almost €500,000.” Two hundred thirty years after the crew on board the slave ship *Zong* threw overboard those living Africans, that word *cargo* repeats, and so do the horrors of the holding, the throwing, and the beating. African migrants are exposed “to inhuman levels of violence,” stabbed and thrown overboard, shot and thrown overboard, migrants shut in the “dark and suffocating hold,” while others are packed on deck—standing on the door to the hold; the perils are not now, and never have been, evenly distributed. As newspapers report on these present disasters and the migrants’ states of distress, are we to imagine that some kind of repair is done with the contemporary newspapers recognition of their physical and psychic distress and the addition of the adjective *human* to the noun *cargo*? The addition of the word *human* to *cargo* does nothing, here, to ameliorate the ghosting these ships do of transatlantic slavery or the afterlives of slavery or the afterlives of property. “*Pastness . . . is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past*” (Trouillot 1997, 15).

Survivors of that October 2013 shipwreck report that the smuggler set a fire to attract the attention of the fishermen in the waters and the authorities on shore; they report that maritime authorities had the vessel under surveillance but did not come to the struggling and then burning ship’s aid. They report that the fire quickly got out of control and that more than twenty minutes elapsed before any help came. “Local yachters” said “that they thought they were hearing a gaggle of seagulls, rather than human beings on the precipice of death. . . . The refusal to believe and to know, or more so, the desire to misrecognize black suffering, naturalized as so much wildlife” (Saucier and Woods 2014, 18).

“These bodies are all speaking,” she [Mayor Giusi Nicolini] told the BBC, of the corpses in lacquered green and blue body bags. If that’s true, it’s a troubling sort of ventriloquism. What if next time, such

voices weren't invited to the table only as corpses—if their complexities were heard, say, before their callings-out could be taken for the cries of seagulls? (Stillman 2013)

Hearing high-pitched cries, they looked out to sea to find that the source of the noise wasn't birds (as they'd first assumed) but Eritrean migrants shouting for help, their bodies thrashing. A large portion were women and children fleeing conflict and poverty by way of Libya, only to be hastily drowning, within eyesight of the Italian shoreline, in the same waters they'd hoped would rescript their lives. (Stillman 2013)

"For five hours we were floating, using the dead bodies of our companions," a survivor named Germani Nagassi, age thirty, told CNN this week. "There is nothing worse than this. There were many children. There was a mother with her four children, a mother with an infant, all lost at sea. My mind is scarred and in a terrible condition." (Chance 2013)

"Rescuers and local fishermen described the scene as a 'sea of heads' with scores of people waving arms and screaming for help in the water." From the fishermen we learn that many of them did not go to the aid of the drowning passengers because to do so would be to risk having their boats seized under Italian law. Says one fisherman, "This immigration law is killing people"; while another reports, the "coastguards stopped him saving more people" and "that rescue workers refused to take people from his full boat so he could rescue more, because it was against their protocol."<sup>29</sup>

*The details accumulate like the ditto ditto in the archives.*

Rescuers describe their "shock" when they find among the hundreds of the dead a woman, aged approximately twenty, with a newborn baby boy still connected to her by an umbilical cord. They report losing their detachment. They say, "We could not have gone back up without trying to do something for her. . . . We took her out of the boat forming a human chain with our arms. Then we laid her on the seabed. We tied her with a rope to other bodies and then . . . we rose with them from the depths of the sea to the light." (Davies 2013)



*We stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand.* (Hartman 2008, 2)

The Italian rescuers' feeling, though, will not mitigate that this young woman's care will be transformed into her incapacity to mother (*à la partus sequitur ventrem*) and that so-called incapacity will come to stand in for *their* crimes (of imperialism, colonialism, privatization, mineral and resource extraction, environmental destruction, etc.). The rescuers' sympathy does not mitigate Fortress Europe's death-dealing policies. Hartman and Wilderson (2003, 189–90) remind us of this: "There's a structural prohibition (rather than merely a willful refusal) against whites being the allies of blacks due to this . . . 'species' division between what it means to be a subject and what it means to be an object: a structural antagonism."

*The sea is history.* (Derek Walcott quoted in Brand 2001, 12)

These scenes return us to Brathwaite's *Dream Haiti* and its depiction of a "collapse of the space and time separating the contemporary interdiction of Haitian refugees at sea and the long history of patrolling African bodies in the Middle Passage" (DeLoughrey 2010, 708). The energies of the wake pattern force us back to Brathwaite's epigraph, with which this section began — "*I do not know why I am here, how I came to be on board this ship, this navel of my ark*" — with its homophones of *naval* with two *a*'s, as in maritime or aquatic forces, as in navies or warships, and *navel* with an *e*, as in the remainder of the umbilicus; the *ark* with a *k*, as it gestures to Noah's saving ship, to the curse upon Canaan, and also the *arc* with a *c*, as it references routes traveled, circumference, and the transverse waves of the wake.

It is those who survive this ordeal, repeated multiple times a week — not the multinational corporations and governments that compel the ordeal — who face criminal investigation, further containment, and repatriation.

*If the crime is blackness, is the sentence the circuit between ship and shore?* A girl named after a ship. A girl with the word *Ship* on her forehead. A girl holding a ship. A girl whose school is a "ship in the storm."<sup>30</sup> The

wrecked and wretched boats keep moving. *The details accumulate like the ditto ditto in the archives; “we don’t even know [all of] their names.”*

#### THE BLACK MEDITERRANEAN

a boat, even a wrecked and wretched boat still has all the possibilities of moving

—Dionne Brand, *Inventory*

The Mediterranean has a long history in relation to slavery. “What we are facing today is a new declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project and modernity itself: the ‘black Mediterranean’ is a constituent unit of analysis for understanding contemporary forms of policing Europe’s borders.”<sup>31</sup>

“How did you travel like this? This is a fiberglass boat, and you have this small child, and your whole boat is broken, and you have this small child, and your whole boat is broken.” . . . “How did you get here? Only by the grace of God . . .” “When they saw the boat, everybody said, ‘It’s not possible with this boat, it’s a complete wreck.’” (Venice Biennale)

The evening of March 26, 2011, late, seventy-two African women, men, and children left Tripoli in a crowded ship, no, not a ship, a dinghy, heading to Lampedusa, Italy. About four hours into the journey the ship was in distress and sent out signals. The signals were received, at least one passenger was, and despite being spotted by many parties, military and commercial, the occupants of the ship were not rescued but were allowed to drift for over two weeks until only 9 of the passengers remained alive when it landed back on Libyan shores. Rescuers and the rescued report that one French warship “came so close that the migrants — on the brink of starvation — could see sailors peering at them through binoculars and taking photos.” (Walt 2012; see also Forensic Architecture Project *The Left-To-Die Boat* 2011)

In the aftermath of those deaths, those murders, of sixty-three Africans in great distress on board the boat now known as the “left-to-die boat,” a group of “researchers, architects, artists, filmmakers, activists, and theorists” started the Forensic Architecture project at Goldsmiths, University of London. They write, “Our investigations provide evidence

for international prosecution teams, political organizations, NGOs, and the United Nations. Additionally, the project undertakes critical examinations of the history and present status of forensic practices in articulating notions of public truth” (Forensic Oceanography).

As part of this work the Forensic Architecture team locates the geopolitical circumstances that compel migrants to make these journeys. “In response to the Libyan uprising, an international coalition launched a military intervention in the country. As of March 23, 2011, NATO started enforcing an arms embargo off the coast of Libya. During the period of the events of the ‘left-to-die boat’ case, the central Mediterranean Sea was being monitored with unprecedented scrutiny, enabling NATO and participating states to become aware of any distress of migrants — and therefore be effective in assisting them. The Forensic Oceanography report turned the knowledge generated through surveillance means into evidence of responsibility for the crime of non-assistance” (Forensic Architecture Project 2012).

The ongoing crisis of capital in the form of migrants fleeing lives made unlivable is becoming more and more visible, or, perhaps, less and less able to be ignored. Think of the thousands of migrants rescued and those who have been allowed to die at sea over the course of the year 2015. The crisis is often framed as one of refugees fleeing internal economic stress and internal conflicts, but subtending this crisis is the crisis of capital and the wreckage from the continuation of military and other colonial projects of US/European wealth extraction and im-miseration.

On May 18, 2015, the European Union (EU) voted to replace humanitarian patrols of the Mediterranean with military ones.<sup>32</sup> Under this new plan, and with Libyan cooperation that is “complicated by the fact that there is not just one government in Libya,” the boats of the smugglers will be intercepted and then destroyed.” The EU say that their “aim is to disrupt the business model that makes people-smuggling across the Mediterranean such a lucrative trade.”<sup>33</sup> But the EU has no intention of disrupting the other business models, profitable to multinational corporations, that set those people flowing.

As it appears here, I mark the Forensic Architecture group’s use of mapping, survivor testimony, and counternarrative as another kind of wake work that might counter forgetting, erasure, the monumental, and that ditto ditto in the archives.

## ARKS OF RETURN

Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is, as it says no way in; no return.

—Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*

*arc*: noun: any unbroken part of the circumference of a circle or other curve.

verb: move with a curving trajectory.

*ark*: noun: *a*: a boat or ship held to resemble that in which Noah and his family were preserved from the Flood

*b*: something that affords protection and safety

—Dictionary.com

What does it mean to return? Is return possible? Is it desired? And if it is, under what conditions and for whom? The haunt of the ship envelops and persists in the contemporary. French President Jacques Hollande “returned” when he began his trip to the Antilles on May 10, 2015, with a visit to Guadeloupe for the opening ceremony and the dedication of a “museum and memorial site to honour the memory of slaves and their struggles in the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe,” the “first of its kind by France to remember those who suffered during the slave trade.” The Memorial ACTe, housed in a former sugar factory in the Guadeloupian city of Pointe-à-Pitre, is called “a place of remembrance and reconciliation” and described as “a Caribbean centre on the expression and memory of slavery and the slave trade.”<sup>34</sup>

Hollande’s visit to the site spotlighted, for those who would not and did not know, the ongoing reparation claims made by descendants of enslaved peoples in Guadeloupe, in Haiti, Cuba, and all over the Caribbean. And while in 2013, Hollande acknowledged France’s “debt” to Africa because of slavery and the “baneful role played by France,” he added that this history “cannot be the subject of a transaction.”<sup>35</sup> Unless, of course, that transaction benefits France (like the indemnity Haiti was forced to pay) through trade and other contracts and “investments.” But what is a moral debt? How is it paid? Is it that Black people can only be the objects of transaction and not the beneficiaries of one, historical or not? The arc of return for Haiti is closer to a full circle or, perhaps, that Ellisonian boomerang of history,<sup>36</sup> with Hollande making the first official state visit by a French president to Haiti since its successful revolution, and with Hollande and France as the

beneficiaries of that visit and not those nations immiserated by ongoing legal theft.

On March 25, 2015, on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the United Nations dedicated *The Ark of Return* (figure 2.8). The press release read:

The bravery of millions of victims of the transatlantic slave trade, who suffered unspeakable injustice and finally rose up to end the oppressive practice, was permanently enshrined today as the United Nations unveiled a memorial at its New York headquarters, on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Entitled the *Ark of Return*, and designed by American architect Rodney Leon, of Haitian descent, the memorial aims to underscore the tragic legacy of the slave trade, which for over four centuries abused and robbed 15 million Africans of their human rights and dignity, and to inspire the world in the battle against modern forms of slavery, such as forced labour and human trafficking.<sup>37</sup>

Leon activates the familiar language of monuments and memorials: the language of injustice, suffering, tragedy, inspiration, and transcendence.

Rodney Leon is the architect of both *The Ark of Return* and the memorial at the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, where between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand African and African-descended enslaved and free people were buried in the eighteenth century. He says *The Ark of Return* is a “good counterpoint to establish a spiritual space of return, an ‘Ark of Return,’ a vessel where we can begin to create a counter-narrative and undo some of that experience. The idea is that you are not necessarily returning physically, but there is a psychological, spiritual and emotional transformation, as well as a cleansing feeling through the process of moving forward to a place where humanity comes closer together.”<sup>38</sup> What constitutes a counter-narrative here? What is the nature of this undoing?

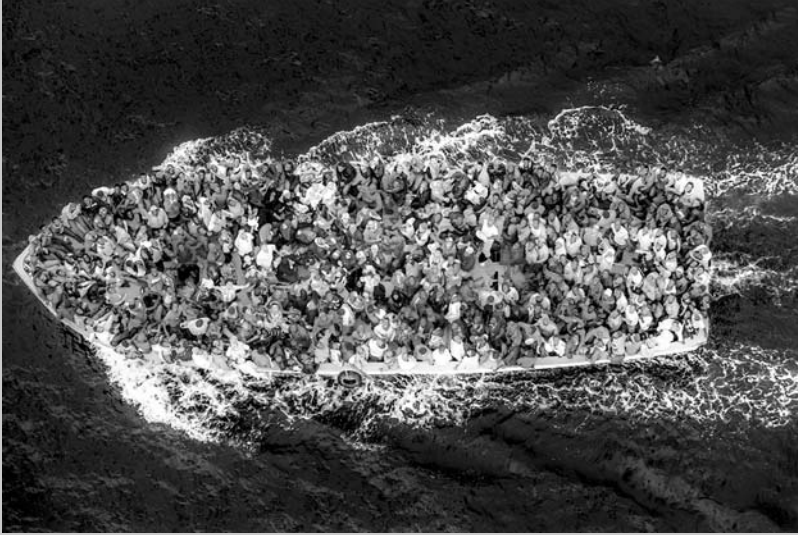
A counter to Leon’s *Ark of Return* is the work of visual and sound artist Charles Gaines (figures 2.14, 2.15). Gaines has been commissioned to create a temporary installation at a location on the Mississippi River, itself a gateway to Manifest Destiny, which is to say, put in service to the colonial, slave, and imperial project that was and is the United States.

Gaines has written an opera based on the cases of Dred and Harriet Scott, and he has created an installation that he calls *Moving Chains*. As he describes it, each chain link weighs ten pounds, and each chain is two hundred feet long. There are seven chains: three silver chains, a red chain in the center to represent blood, and then three additional silver chains. They are mechanized, and the silver chains move at the speed of the Mississippi, while the red chain moves at the speed of a barge on the river.

These are the coordinates of the temporary structure that Gaines calls ship-like and about which he says that being in it and walking through it will be a “ferocious experience.”<sup>39</sup> I read Gaines’s temporary monument as grounded in the knowledge of the wake, in a past that is not past, a past that is with us still; a past that cannot and should not be pacified in its presentation. Gaines’s visualsonic affective language is not one of pastness and reconciliation. That river, that time, that place, are still present; the air around that ship is as disturbed as it has always been. Gaines gives us ship time, a counter to monumental time.



**2.8** A close-up from the memorial on the legacy of slavery. Courtesy UN Photo/  
Devra Berkowitz



**2.9** *Mare Nostrum*, June 2014. Refugees crowd on board a boat some twenty-five kilometers from the Libyan coast, prior to being rescued by an Italian naval frigate working as part of Operation Mare Nostrum. Courtesy Massimo Sestini

**2.10** Operation Unified Response. © MC2 (sw) Candice Villarreal/US Navy/Handout/Corbis



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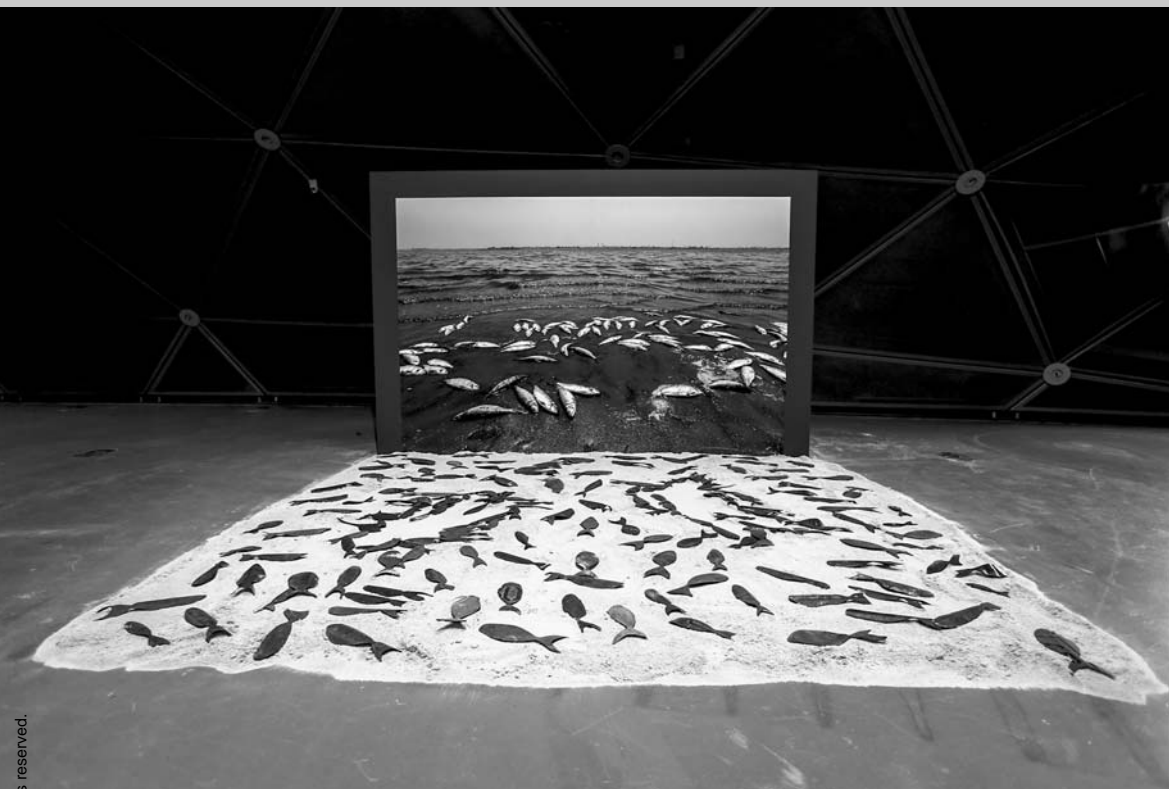




2.11 Ebola cartoon. Courtesy of André Carrilho

2.12 Hew Locke, *For Those in Peril on the Sea*, 2011 (installed in the Church of St. Mary & St. Eanswythe, Folkestone). © Hew Locke. All rights reserved, DACS 2015





**2.13** Romuald Hazoumè, *Lampédouzeans*, 2013. Mixed media installation, 220 × 360 × 380 cm. Image courtesy of October Gallery. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



2.14–2.15 Renderings of *Moving Chains*, by Charles Gaines, a potential project to be located along a riverbank. Courtesy of the artist. © Charles Gaines 2015