



Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 21: Derek Walcott "The Sea is History" (1978)

ADMIN

- REVISED ESSAY 1 — graded and grades sent by email. Let me know if you did NOT receive an email for a revision grade.
- Essay 2—due on Sunday 11/16
- SUGGESTIONS— have someone read your essay, for writing and grammar and clarity.

Peer Review of thesis statements for Essay 2

- WHAT is the insight about the text?
- HOW are they going to prove that? By looking at/analyzing WHERE in the text?
- WHY does this analysis matter? SO WHAT?

Remaining topics/questions from “The Water Will
Carry us Home”

Tracey Baptiste in the *New York Times* (July 10, 2019)

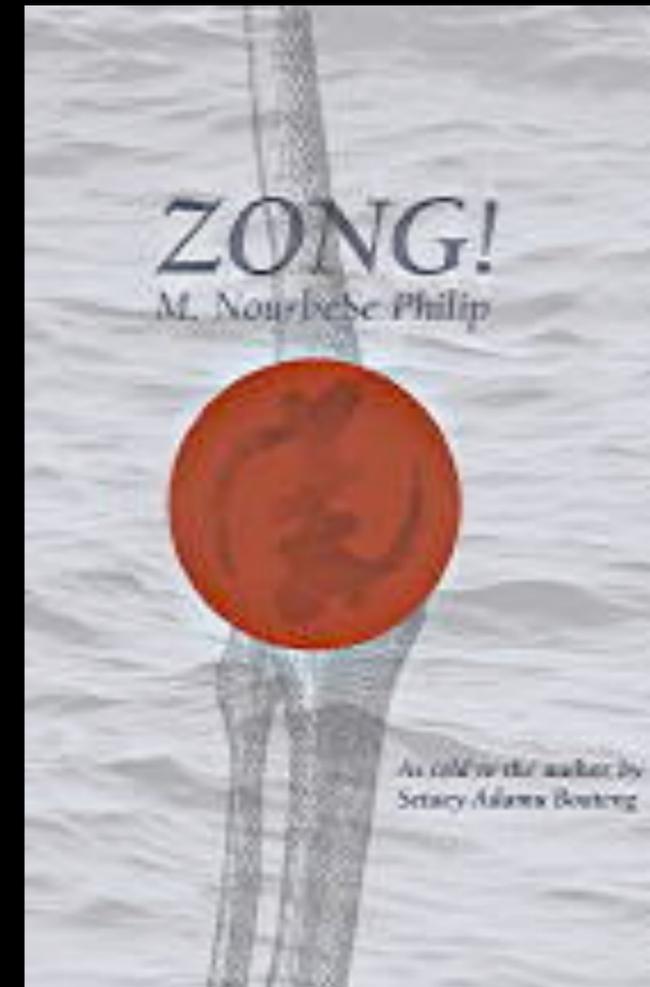
“Black mermaids have always existed: long before Andersen, certainly long before Disney. Given the way African stories have been taken and twisted, I wonder just where Andersen got his idea in the first place. He was writing at the height of the colonial period as people were being stripped from African lands, clinging to the stories that made them who they were. The focus on Eurocentric stories and storytelling has done us a disservice, leaving most totally ignorant of the fact that mermaid stories have been told throughout the African continent for millenniums. Mermaids are not just part of the imagination, either, but a part of the living culture.”



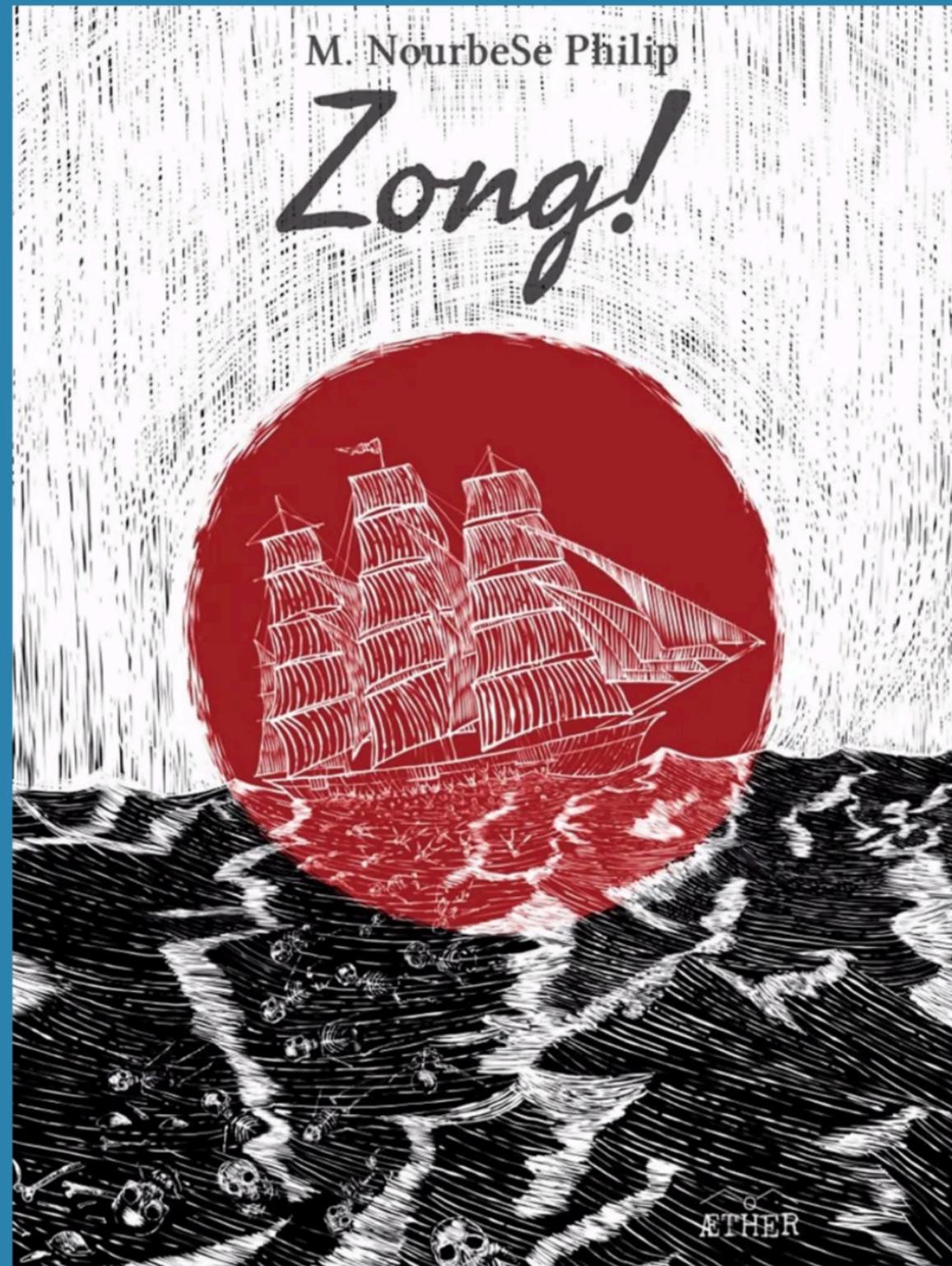
Zong & Zong!

On November, 1781, the captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered that some 150 Africans be murdered by drowning so that the ship's owners could collect insurance monies

“The case report *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, recounts the massacre by drowning of some 130 enslaved Africans over the course of ten days beginning on November 29th, 1781. The captain of the eponymous slave ship, *Zong*, having made many navigational errors resulting in extending the length of the voyage from West Africa to Jamaica ordered the Africans be thrown overboard so as to allow the owners of the ship, the Gregsons, to claim indemnity from their insurers, the Gilberts. When the insurers refused to honour the contract of insurance, the ship’s owners initiated legal action against them, which proved to be successful. Upon appeal, however, the insurers, the Gilberts were granted a new trial. The report of that hearing, *Gregson vs Gilbert* constitutes the only extant, public document related to the massacre. Through fugal and counterpointed strategies, *Zong!* explodes the coded, documented silence of the historical text to become an anti-narrative lament that tells the story of this haunting and tragic massacre: it cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling.”



M. NourbeSe Philip, Setaey Adamu Boateng
2008



“What is the word for bringing bodies back from the water? From a ‘liquid grave’? Months later I do an Internet search for a word or phrase for bring someone back from underwater that has as precise a meaning as the unearthing contained within the word exhume. I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not ‘exaqua.’ Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you’re underwater there is no retrieval – that you can never be ‘exhumed’ from water?”

- M . NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008)

er
our
te r gg
o oo
waa
w w w
w
a wa
w a
wa
g g
goo
wa wa
s
t
d

when did we decide you
thought he had secret
sing sing
didn't the bell ring
I come from the north
land of mist
of hoar-frost
sow the seven seas
with ash
i come from
i come from
the north
dales the
dales of mist
there of rise in
he had an ace
queens
king
Sam
mortality by the world
mortality by the tail
on the sun
maia
mai
writ in sand
writ in sand
live in life
rent life
as sin

dear Lisa
Dave ask/s that i
the crone
my hand shapes them
to the dead
apes all
sing sing
they sang
a song
the date again
the time and date of sin
with ave/s
of dying
decide when did we die
the died
the died
very own
land
hey hey ho
of hoar frost
the time and date of hoar frost
of sin
of sin
i a sequence of
one
the rum
ever
if told
cold
lives
of writ/s &
the truth
to the right
this is but
an oration
old
is new

these words come from his lips
she
sh/h
not so loud
oh oh
my ass
my goat bag
palm with
&&
the
writ in
sand
sing i say
my lives
of hoar frost
the time and date
chu
dear Ruth can a tale be
a secret race
*underwriters
rent/s
to be sure
a tale
is new



[The Slave Ship](#) (1840), [J. M. W. Turner](#)'s representation of the mass killing of enslaved people, inspired by the Zong killings.

(1978)

The Sea Is History

Derek Walcott 1930 – 2017

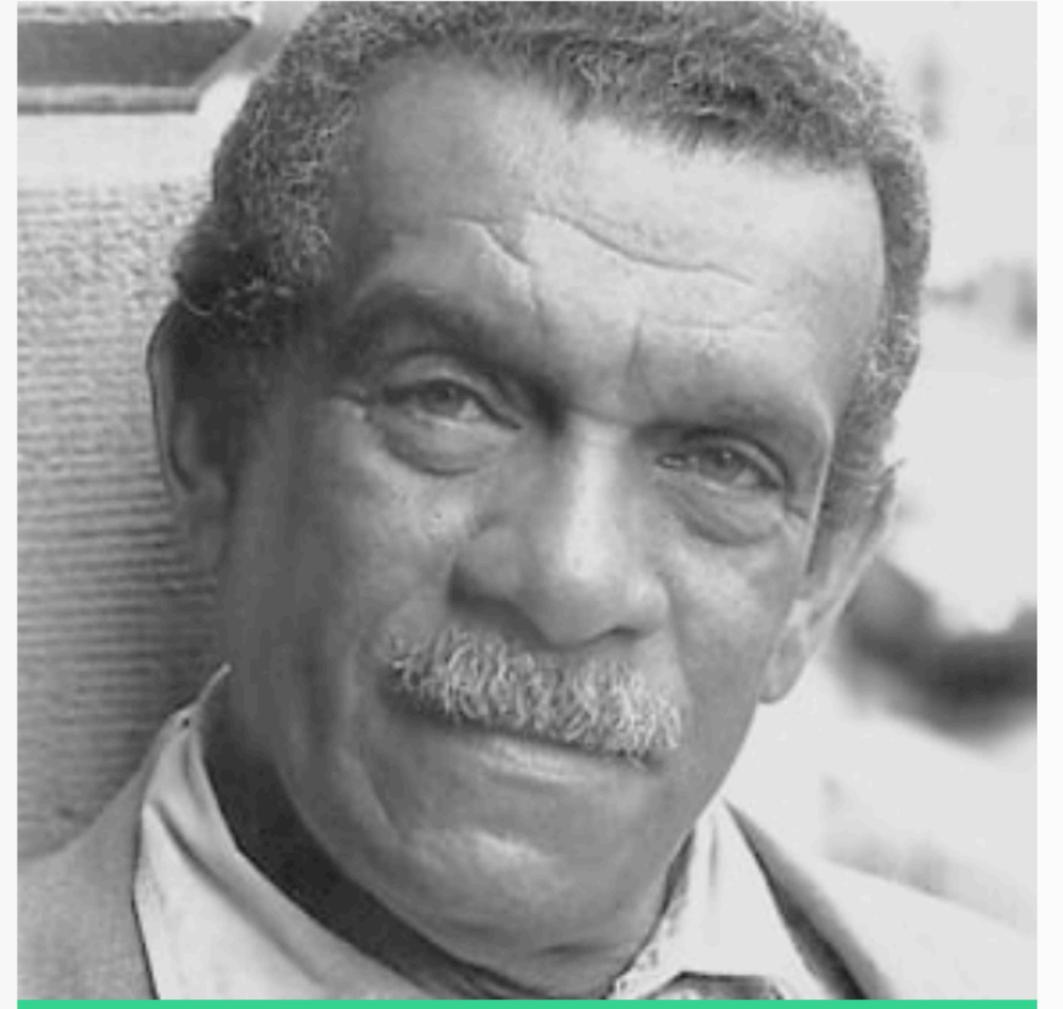
Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.

First, there was the heaving oil,
heavy as chaos;
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel,
and that was Genesis.

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.



Born in 1930, in the West Indies, Derek Walcott received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992.

[About Derek Walcott](#)>

Themes

From your blogs- ocean as archive

- HAHNNAH: Showing us the importance of seeing the Ocean as a form of history and not just a body of water. Taking care of us as if it were a museum of relics rather than a big puddle.
- AIDAN: Derek Walcott's poem shows that the Caribbean environment—especially the sea—is not just a backdrop to human events but a living archive of colonial violence and survival, which is exactly what environmental humanities asks us to see...The poem also challenges who gets to be a historical actor.
- KAILA: The metaphor of “The sea is History” collapses the distinction between history and nature, between written record and lived experience. The sea becomes both a literal and symbolic archive, where the sea literally holds the bodies of the enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage, and symbolically represents memory, trauma, and the erasure of people's past by colonial forces.

From your blogs- Thesis!

- *ALYSSA*: By structuring the poem as a distorted biblical timeline—moving from Genesis to Lamentations and the New Testament—Walcott critiques how colonial and Christian narratives have overwritten indigenous and African histories.

From your blogs- archival silences

- **ADRIAN:** In “The Sea is History,” Derek Walcott reframes the ocean as an archive that resists the neat documentation associated with Western historiography. Walcott suggests that the sea functions as both a repository and ruin, one where it is a space where traditional historical “records” dissolve, yet the collective memory endures in non-material ways....Ultimately, the poem argues that history cannot only be found written in documents, but also what they gloss over: the trauma, silence, and memories embedded in places often ignored. Walcott’s ocean demands that we listen to the history that has been submerged for centuries.

Discussion

- What did you see/notice? What do you want to discuss?



Grenada's Underwater sculptures.
A tribute to fallen African slaves.

BLACK HISTORY GROUP

- Jason de Caires Taylor's underwater sculptures in Grenada's Moilinere Bay are a monument to the hundreds of slaves that sought freedom or were forced to jump overboard slave ships travelling through the Middle Passage



HOME

ABOUT ▾

CONTRIBUTORS

FEATURED BOOKS

AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

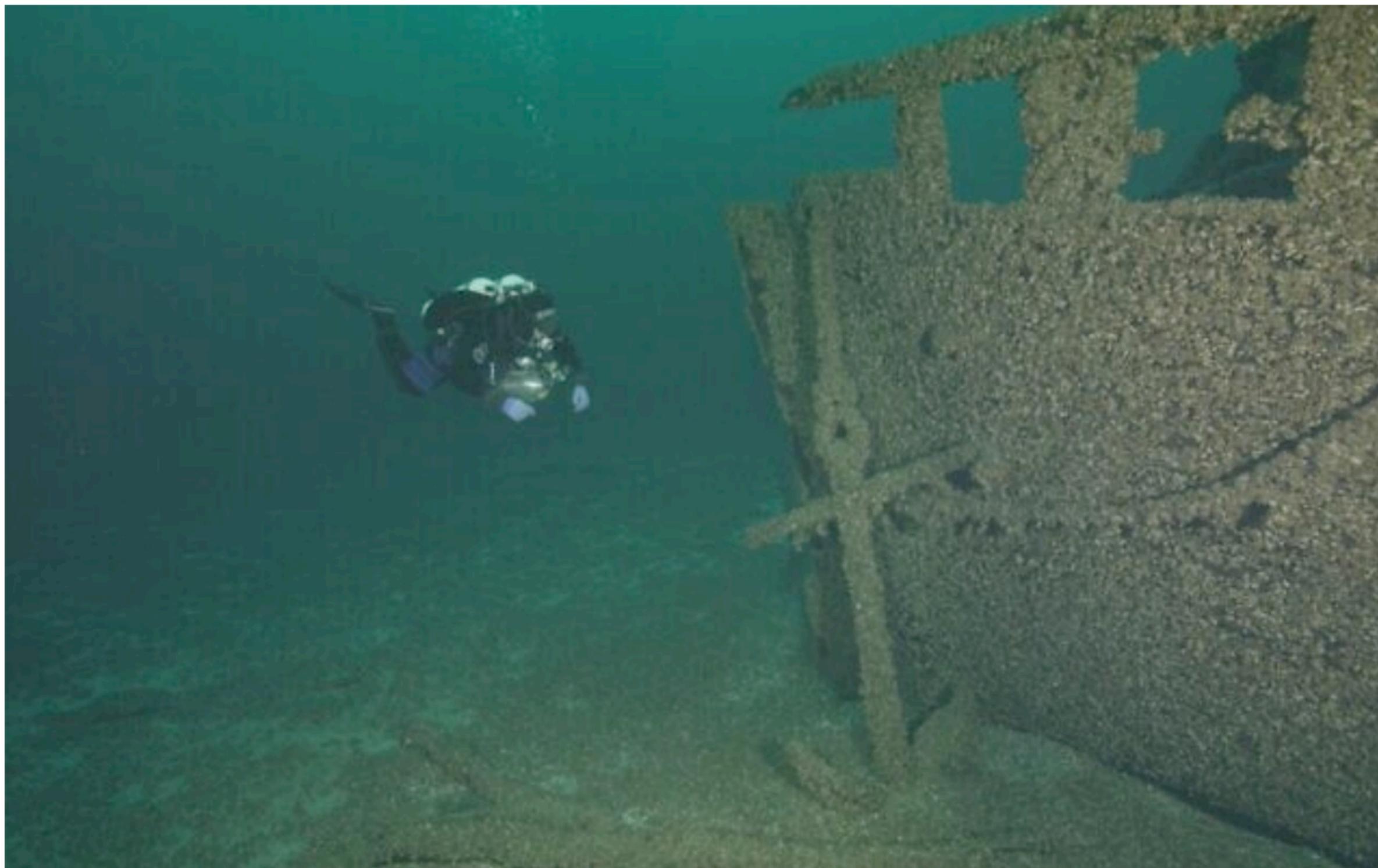
ROUNDTABLES

RESOU



Jason deCaires Taylor, "Vicissitudes"

At the ocean floor off the coast of Grenada stands the underwater sculpture of 26 children holding hands. Titled *Vicissitudes*, many have attributed the monument to those lost in the Atlantic Slave Trade, though sculptor [Jason deCaires Taylor](#) denies this purpose. Instead, he is quoted as saying that this sculpture and others he created were meant to provide Grenada's reef a "break," while being mindful of the environment of the sea and local culture. Despite DeCaires Taylor's platitudes against naming the sculptures as a monument to the Atlantic slave trade, that so many make this connection speaks of a need to reconcile with the horror of chattel slavery. For many, the sculptures function as a way to make peace with the past. They provide an outlet to honor those lost.



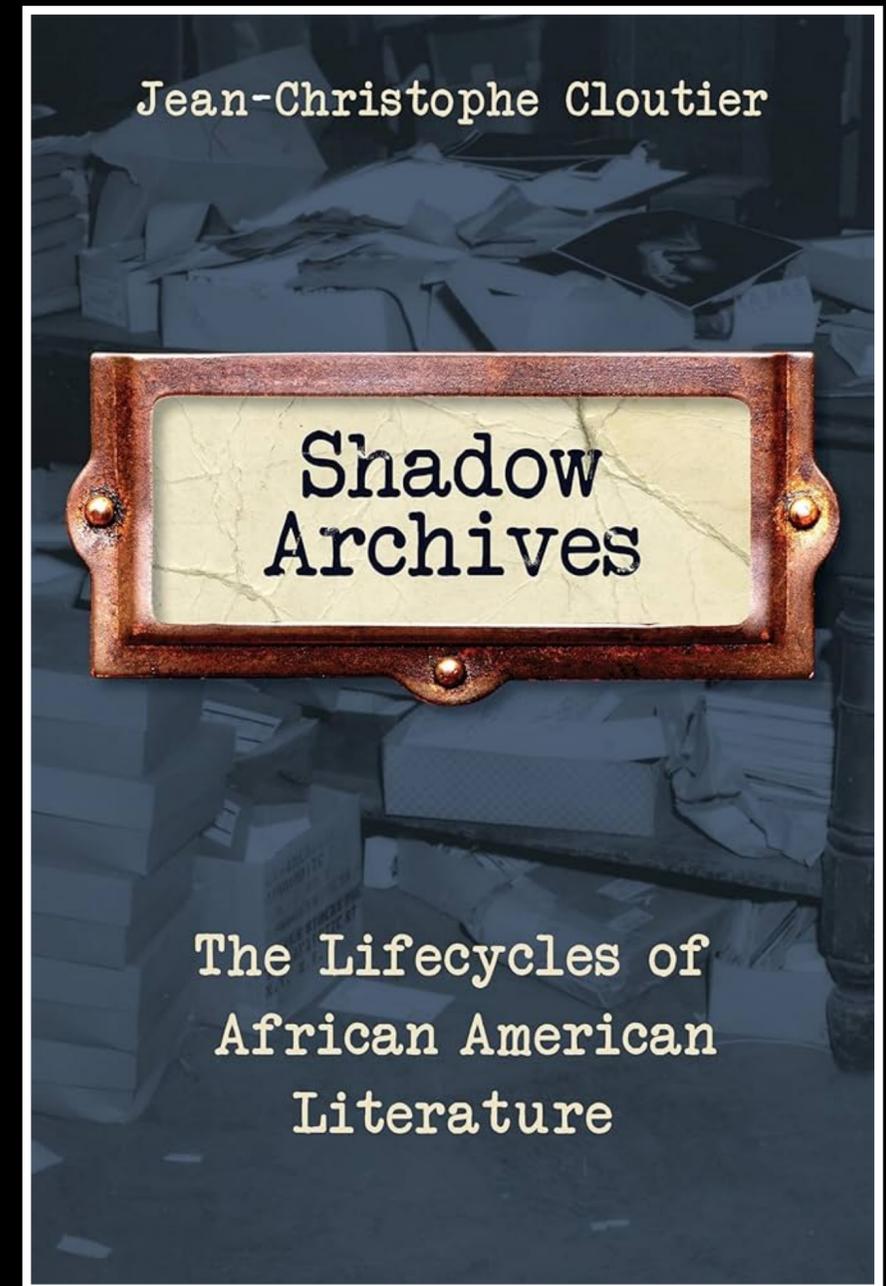
Wreck of The Home freedom boat of abolitionist captain James Nugent, Lake Michigan. (AP Slave Ships Productions Ltd./Cornelia Street's Ships Ltd.)

African American Archival Theory

“The archive is never an end in itself—otherwise we might as well call it a dumpster—but rather a speculative means to possible futures, including unknowable theologies guided by unborn hands” (3)

“African American criticism fuses archival theory and practice in thinking together afterlives, resilience, tradition, materiality, loss, translation, absences, recuperation, and civic engagement” (9)

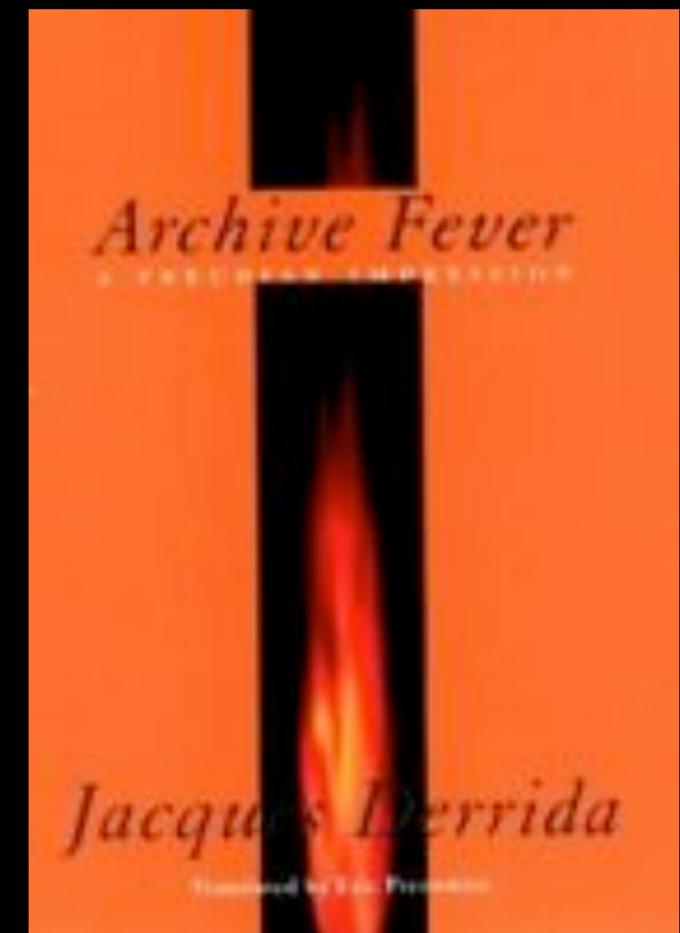
Jean-Christophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* (Columbia UP, 2019).



Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

“A science of the archive must include the theory of the institutionalization, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it” (4)

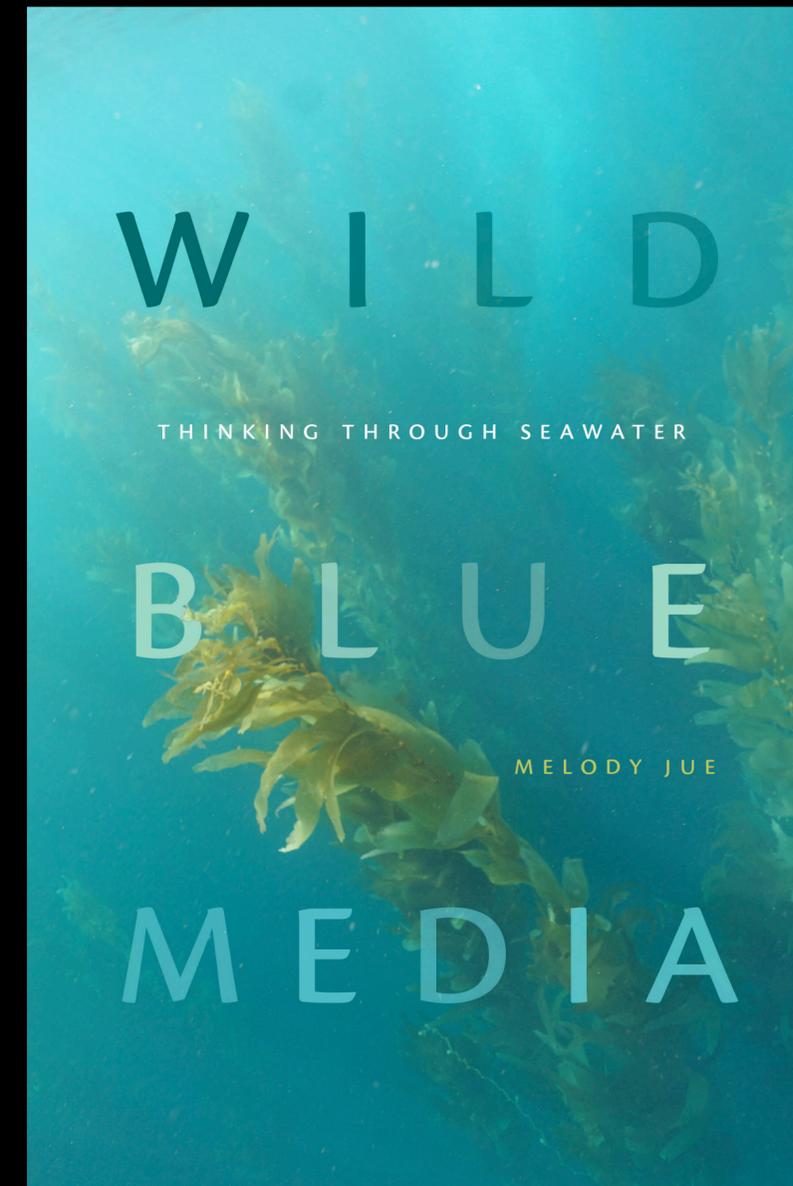
“The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (68)



Melody Jue,
Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater
(Duke UP, 2020)

“to explore the ocean as a force for conceptual reorientations that sometimes estranges what we thought was familiar” (5)

“Seawater asks us to rethink terrestrial notions of the archive or database as informed by the language of earth and sediment, and instead consider storage in terms of seawater’s capacity for protean transformation” (32)



Ending of Moby Dick

“Then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”

History is storytelling

Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1978)

- history as narrative, role of rhetoric
- history and/as literature and vice versa, rather than history as science
- “the status of the historical narrative, considered purely as a verbal artifact purporting to be a model of structures and processes long past” (1537)
- “The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies” (1539)

Take aways?

- What does this film add to our learning, discussion, process?