

Untimely Dispatch

From the Middle of Nowhere 24

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*There
is nowhere
like this place, and
no time
like the present.*

We work with the shards of Black life and death that called out to us because we knew and know that the critical, caring, and perilous work we need to do is bound up with destruction. These fragments of Black life and death surrounding us affirm our sense of our own untimeliness against the neatness of time, and of our stankiness in the middle of nowhere.

I have written elsewhere and at length about what I am calling “untime,” which describes the dereliction of Black temporality, and about “stankiness,” the defining characteristic of the nowhere of Black spatiality. The untimeliness that signals our destructive relationship to human models and experiences of time and the stankiness that signals our destructive relationship to human spaces and spatiality act as the Black *prima materia*, the Black and essential material, with which we must work to create these impossible stories we imagine, witness, bear, conjure, and live in and against the antiblack cosmos where and when we cannot *be*. What we knew, and now know with excruciating intimacy, to be the violent, distorted fabric of spacetime shaping the field of fragments around us *is* the material we must bend to create Black pocket universes from streets to pages (and everywhere and when between). We knew and know that in order to conjure Black spacetimes that might upend the antiblack cosmos, we would have to become avatars of destruction, able to bend the forces of untimeliness and stankiness and love toward the kinds of authentic upheaval that *must* be born if we are to save the *earth* and conjure the impossible story of a wholly unimaginable *world*.

Wherever and whenever we’ve ended up, *nowhere* is better or more apropos, and we’ve got *no time* to celebrate. We wordly wanderers wander wondering about the possibility of other worlds, word worlds that would warp and rend and otherwise radically reimagine the fabric of spacetime, especially since we understand the ways that our pain, terror, and subjection stitch that fabric together. We traverse the perilous folds in space and wrinkles in time in search of the fragments of a

theory of Black spacetime because we recognized that understanding not only how time and space tear Black life, death, and creation absolutely asunder, but also how Black life, death, and creation unsettle and upend time and space,² would be essential if we aimed to take time and make space for Black folk, in theory, in word, and in deed.

Our many lingering questions about the actual possibilities of Black creation are the connective force arranging the field of these fragmented, impossible stories we sought out and that sought us out, that we write and we tell, around us. For Jasmine, Shakara, Dajerria, Sandra, Kalief, Nephi, for my students across time and space, for my wife and my family, and for all the Black folk living and dying untimely lives and deaths in the middle of nowhere, these questions illuminate the path forward, propel and direct the vector of our imaginative journey, and shape our vision of a destination. Asking how we have marshaled, do marshal, and might better marshal the violent energy of our spatiotemporal dereliction and transmute it into the creative, caring energy required to conjure moments and sites for Black folk to disturb the air with our breath opens us into a serious consideration of the stakes and potentiality of Black creation. Our visitations with Black words and worlds created and lived by Black folk allow us to advance this consideration and to move ourselves toward taking the leap into the wholly Black black hole of it all.

Ultimately, our leap leads us to recognize that to make the arrangements, conjure ways out of no way, and take and make time when there is none to spare is to engage in dangerous work—and not in the least because the work tends to draw the fire, bullets, terror, and domination of the antiblack world, its institutions, and its agents;³ we work with volatile material, this stuff of untimely death and destruction, and this stank of nowhere, so we must negotiate how we imperil ourselves and the variously dead and living Black folk for whom we care. How we handle the forces that destroy us, that remove us from a subject position—that is, from a stable location relative to space and time—has significant import for us because our handling of these forces will impact those who encounter the creations we destructively produce.

How we alchemically transmute destruction determines the shape the product takes and the effects it might have on those for whom we endeavored to create it. How we treat this material across each step of the process of alchemical creation affects what form that material is able to take. Alchemy functions as a useful frame for this process because it requires the dissolution or destruction of our *prima materia*, our original material, as a necessary and *first* step toward the creation of something else. Nigredo, alchemy's first step, signifies blackness and requires the dissolution of our source material, compelling us to think about how we break our material down to its volatile essential components. Albedo, alchemy's second step, signifies whiteness and requires the distillation of the usable from what nigredo produces, compelling us to consider how we scrub clean or purify what we can or want to use of that material. And rubedo, alchemy's final step,⁴ signifies redness

and results in the synthesis of the fabled philosopher stone itself, compels us to consider how we alter and synthesize that destructive force into a radically different product. Alchemical transmutation is the process of radical breaking-apart/disordering, reorganization, and creation. When we think of Black creation, especially when that creation is inherently a 'working-with-fragments,' we must think (and have thought) about the ways we handle these fragments throughout the complex process of transmutation under untimely, spatially dislocated conditions.

This is a good way of thinking about what has been the subject *and* the work of the kind of impossible invention Black folk (vie to) perform: on the one hand, we spend pages trying to think about how this process works (its mechanics) and to what ends (its stakes and possibilities); on the other, we spend pages performing this work by unraveling the entanglement of Blackness, spacetime, care, and creation, extracting what is essential to this entanglement, and producing a theory of Black untimely creation out of nowhere. Across genres, styles, disciplines, and paradigmatic divides marked by woefully inadequate names, written account of a difficult and dangerous transmutation. Working with and through our destructive relationship with the fabric of the cosmos produces what we understand to be an essential contradiction of Black creative work: in this cosmos, our untimeliness and our displacement are *constitutive to* our capacities to make time or take a minute, and to make space or find our way; that which destroys our relationship to time, space, and each other remains inextricably bound up with our creative aspiration and imaginative aim. We knew this, and we know this, and we have created, and do and will continue to create under these conditions.

Fragment 117 **Destructive Writing, and Fragmented Work**

How
to tell
a
shattered
*story?*⁵
*What is required to...tell an impossible story?*⁶
I do not know
when or how else
to begin,
but I do know that
each and
*e ver y **Black** frag ment*
matters

*Here are the fragments put together by another me*⁷

The cord of cowrie shells drags across the polished dark wood of the floor beneath her feet, tracing a constellation through the small nodes of water she arranged before us. M. NourbeSe Philip conjures a liquid narrative arc from the watery remnants of the lost words and names, bodies and souls, and untimely timelines of Black lives lost at sea as she performs selections from *Zong!* for we who sought to bear water and witness.

Clamoring cowrie shells clatter a rhythm for our guided collective recollection. Like the beautiful fragments of shells to which she was condemned to beaches to search, they are their own w/holes, and their arrangement along the snaking cord traces the coordinate field of the event horizon that she asks us to cross. The wet drag of heavy, shelled rope through water scratch-splash-crashes above a low rumble, the drumroll of tidal forces altering the fabric of the small, dark cosmos of the theater. Overwhelming, oceanic, Black, chant, song, dance, breath, wake, word, and work warp, wrinkle, and collapse into one another. We get lost in the riff, rift, and riptide of the performance, rhythmically called by shell fragments to where and when the lost might be.⁸ In the cosmic Black magic being conjured, uncertainty is our familiar.

Zong! is M. NourbeSe Philip playing with fragments, a poiesis of destructive means and ends. There are orders of fragments at play, here, and play is only possible under the parameters set by Philip in an agreement with the limitations of the archive brokered by the 150 Black folk thrown overboard. The first order is comprised of the narrative bits of Black life and death that make up, but will always fail to fully add up to, the 150 souls lost beneath the waves. The second order is established by the fragmentary (and figmentary) nature of the available, historical account—the insurance claim and the court case. To become both magician and censor, the poet locks herself inside the limits of the available archive of the legal case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, attempting to inhabit the same conditions endured by the slaves aboard the *Zong/Zorgue*. Sequestering herself to the language of the available record means situating herself in the “dysgraphia” characteristic of every untimely narrative fragment—of the Black lives thrown overboard from the deck of the *Zong*, of those left to die on a dinghy in the Mediterranean,⁹ of all of us. The “dysgraphia: the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and the suffering of [we] Black people who live and die in the wake and whose everyday acts insist Black life into the wake”¹⁰ is the condition of possibility for Philip’s magic. *Incoherence* makes her form of spellcasting—or *spelling*—possible. We read, we watch, and we are caught in the derangement of the spell.

The story of the *Zong*, the story that the dead demand to be told, can only be ‘un-told,’ or told in a deranged way by “re-presenting the sequence” of signs and symbols that index the available information. The writing becomes its own process of disfigurement and the process produces the second order of fragments: the language. The falling, failing, ripped-apartness of language, as an echo of the “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” of the “primary narrative” of Black flesh, becomes the

manifestation of this destructive “praxis” and “theory,” “text for living and for dying, and...method for [writing] them both.”¹¹ Spacing the words out and exploding their letters into the unintelligible disarray littering the pages of *Zong!* produces imaginative and physical strain. Eyes arrhythmically fail to track the lexical debris across, up, and down pages of the text, and the lack of an orthographic anchor subjects the imagination to a form of interpretive disorientation. The difference in legibility produced by a creative process that depends on the disfigurement of language and the refusal to impose meaning jettisons writer, reader, and witness into a state of imaginative vertigo.

M. NourbeSe Philip as Black poet, censor, and magician becomes something like a poetic Galactus: a Black cosmic entity and destroyer of words and worlds; a sentient, vigilant black hole in search of something in excess of meaning and sense, an “underlying current” subtending all that is written and all that the written account could ever mean. Against grammar, the “mechanism of force” structurally imposed onto the available language as symbolic order—the order of ideas, knowledge, and imaginations that ceaselessly and repeatedly murders Black beings—and the Black dysgraphia such grammar allows, Philip mutilates and disorders language, “literally [cutting] it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs...[separating] subject from verb, verb from object—[creating] semantic *mayhem*” in the name of “reaching into the stinking, eviscerated innards...and [reading] the untold story that tells itself by not telling.” This “not-telling” is both vengeful and protective. It is vengeful because it is aimed at mutilating, jettisoning, murdering, suffocating, castrating, cutting, and exploding the archive *in the same way* the archive mutilates, jettisons, murders, suffocates, castrates, cuts and explodes Black being. And it is protective because Philip recognizes the need to avoid subjecting the dead “to new dangers and to a second order of violence,” one that not only affirms the violence of the grammar that imposes meaning and structure, but *reproduces* that violence (by ‘maintaining order’)—and this is a need recognized by Hartman, Spillers, Sharpe, myself, and countless others who know the perils of bearing fragmented witness and water.

Alchemically transmuting fragments is, in one sense, a form of violent play, a form of derangement and disorder that playfully transforms the violence that *made* them fragments into a form of violence that can challenge, or outright disintegrate, the symbolic order. Thinking in these terms frames Philip’s creative praxis as a form of offense. In this light, Philip poetically plays with language in order to conjure an assault on the normative constraints of language, grammar, and knowledge. Philip works with the lexical, political, and metaphysical refuse of the lost and dead Black folk thrown overboard by first recognizing them as such—as refuse, as effluvium, as whatever one might call the end product of spaghetification—and then by subjecting them to a form of destructively creative and creatively destructive alchemy that transmutes the violence that produced this refuse into

something that attempts to dispose of the symbolic order and all its attendant limits. The organizing principle or grammar by which the antiblack fictions of the archive comes to be faces annihilation in the form of a poesis that turns its refuse against itself.¹² Reanimated¹³ or ghostly¹⁴ or deathly,¹⁵ the variously dead resurge in the breaks of word and meaning, and usher in an imaginative form of warfare waged *at* and *against* the limits of creative possibility imposed by the symbolic order that made Black folk deathly in the first place.

Alchemically transmuting fragments is also a means toward manifesting a ward, a protection. This frames Philip's writing as a form of defense. Philip flings out and disperses the lexical and semantic remnants scatters the broken words into a shifting, protective arrangement. Each poem, each section of the poems, and the Black w/hole collection of poetry comprise an amalgamated force field of fragments. Warped by the tidal forces of gravity beyond their composite barrier, the untimely, stanky force suturing the shards to one another undulates, shifting the spaces between the letters, words, names, and utterances that comprise *Zong!* All meaning and order violently imposed from without faces inevitable obliteration should it venture beyond this waving event horizon of the Black w/hole of the text. The promise of annihilating incoherence and the embrace and weaponization of fragmentation, dysgraphia, and illegibility provide a destructive defense. To "defend the dead," Philips-qua-poet-qua-magician-qua-chemist-qua-tactician marshals an absolute power cosmic that inheres in *destruction*.

In its adherence to working with fragments, to accepting the absoluteness of fragmentation and the centrality of it to Black creative work, *Zong!*'s destructive approach to creation offers us a name for what it is we might best do with our untimeliness in the middle of nowhere: *destructive writing*. M. NourbeSe Philip's poesis is destruction. To leap into the Black w/hole of the text, the praxis, the theory, and the interpretive method necessary to operate on the same frequency of this work is to take very seriously the untimely, stanky, political-ontological relationship between Blackness, creation, and destruction. To "make generations" in the name of defending the dead, or to do the wake work, or to conjure the Black and cosmic magic, is to reckon with the paradoxical generativeness of destruction. It is to wholly embrace violence as violence, fragments as fragments, and incoherence as incoherence, in order to actively refuse, combat, and vie to destroy the very logic, or grammar, or order that murdered, continues to murder, and threatens to wholly obliterate Black being, or whatever deranged fragments of that being remain.

What have we done? What have we been doing? What should—*must*—we do? As we reflect upon the shards of thought, language, literary scene, physical property, lived experience, and unbearable inquiry that form the field of fragments we call Black Study, we consider how these arrangements we have made have all been an attempt at working with destruction. Arranging and deranging, ordering, reordering, and disordering, and always looking, listening, and attending to them carefully has always been the product of a continuous negotiation of the destructive

forces that turned Black life and death into fragments. We spent our textual spacetime theorizing the nature of these forces in order to both, understand how they destroy us (how they work), and to begin to consider what ways we might refract/reflect them (how we can create with and from them). My arguments have turned on establishing the significance or rethinking these spatiotemporal forces and how they shatter our existences, indeed because rethinking time and space and how they play out upon us as a project on its own will help us better grasp the nature of our subjection to the various orders and structures of the antiblack world, but also because a deeper understanding of their mechanics and their essence radically transforms how we imagine, theorize, and perform Black creation.

I/we have performed our impossible alchemy thusly: (nigredo) disintegrate our core materials—time, space, and work—shedding the ashen detritus inessential to our work and leaving only what we need; (albedo) the distillation of what remains—untime, nowhere, and refraction—into the material we can synthesize into a greater conceptualization; and (rubedo) the synthesization of a new, vexing, abstract material that might reshape our understanding of Black existence and imaginative creation—destructive writing. While we knew and know our work aims to *produce* an alternative theory of Black creation that *embraces* and *works with* the destructive forces that make us untimely and displace us into nowhere, we perhaps (re)discover that our work *is* its own negotiation of destruction, our own staging of these principles of destructive writing. That invisible force suturing the fragments surrounding us into a field, that unseen thing that amplified the call of the fragments we sought out and were able to hold and behold, that animating element of untimeliness, refraction, and being nowhere: that undergirds the whole of this work, argumentatively and creatively, is *destruction*, and in our endeavor to make time and space for our considerations, we contemplate and imagine and write toward an answer to our most difficult set of questions.

How to tell a shattered story, one not meant to be passed on or *passed* on? How to “un-tell” a story that must be told?¹⁶ How to tell an impossible story?

Perhaps it is not exactly as Sharpe says. Perhaps the goal is not to ‘imagine the unimaginable’¹⁷ but, as part of the same refusal NourbeSe writes and performs, to radically un-imagine the imaginable.

How to defend the dead, the dying, and we who live untimely lives in the middle of nowhere?

By
becoming
everybody?

No.

By destroying everything.

Cowrie shells drag across the hard, wet wood. A constellation has been traced in water. A spell has been cast. A conjuring has taken place. We bear the water and the witness. We are a clamor of fragments in the oceanic dark.

Telling and writing impossible stories is destructive work. Telling, writing, and living impossible stories is destructive, dangerous work when deathliness, untimeliness, and stankiness are the conditions of whenever and wherever we try to be. To really listen to Ursa Corregidora's blues¹⁸ and take the leap into the Black hole toward total destruction is to leap toward the singular possibility of radical, unimaginable, and impossible creation. Only in the dark and clamoring shatter, only from the nowhere of there and the untimeliness of then, might we really make time and space for one another.

Nothing less, nowhere else, and with no time to spare, we leap.

Endnotes

1. This is from my analysis of both Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Frank B. Wilderson III's "Do I Stank, or Was it Already Stanky in Here?" For more on stankiness, read the Third Arrangement of my forthcoming *Impossible Stories: On the Space and Time of Black Destructive Creation* (The Ohio State University Press, 2021).
2. There are a few good visual analogs/metaphors that I think of as I write this line. One would be the image of the Incredible Hulk fighting the Juggernaut during the World War Hulk storyline of Marvel comics. The Juggernaut, whose connection to the rage demon/deity, Cyttorak, affords him the ability to become physically unstoppable once he's gained enough momentum, confronts the Incredible Hulk who seeks revenge for being exiled to the far reaches of outer space. The Incredible Hulk merely redirects the Juggernaut's momentum, casting him aside and allowing him to 'unstoppably' fly off elsewhere. Another would be how the universe of *Fullmetal Alchemist* characterizes alchemy as transmutation derived from an equivalent exchange: whatever the material being manipulated, the energy required for the manipulation depends on an equivalent exchange made by the alchemist. There are dangers to this process, and there are forbidden forms of transmutation for which the offering is either impossible to produce, or the exchange cannot possibly be made equivalent (e.g. transmuting a human life/soul). These, I think, are the ways Blackness manipulates the force of the antiblack cosmos.
3. I really want us to think of the ongoing disappearances and deaths of several activists from the Ferguson protests in 2014 and beyond, as well as the deaths of their friends and family members as I mention this—most recently, the supposed suicide of Danye Jones reminds us of the ways the antiblack world seeks out and destroys those who would dare to confront it.
4. In alchemy, the Great Work or the Magnum Opus names the process of working with the prima materia, the first matter or essential matter, to create the fabled philosopher's stone, which in *Fullmetal Alchemist* promises the ability to transmute anything without adhering to the principle of equivalent exchange, there are 3 steps (condensed from an original 4 steps): nigredo; albedo; and rubedo (which was previously preceded by citrinitas, but this step was consolidated with rubedo).
5. This question comes from Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It is a poem engraved onto a tombstone, and it characterizes the framing and plot of the novel beautifully. I was moved by the question, as well as the full poem, especially since it resonates so powerfully with what I've been thinking about across all of my work, especially in *Impossible Stories*, and what I think we've been thinking about in/across all Black Study.
6. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* vol. 26 (2008), 10.

7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 2008, 89. The Markmann translation reads a bit differently: "Now the fragments have been put together by another self" (82). I prefer the one I play with here.
8. Philip, "Fugues, Fragments, and Fissures," 2-3.
9. Vivienne Walt, "Migrants Left to Die on the High Seas Continue to Haunt NATO," *TIME*, 17 April 2012.
10. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 96.
11. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2 (1987), 67-8. I make this parallel after reading a line from Sharpe's *In the Wake* that introduces *Zong!* thusly: "It is in and with such falling, such ripping-apart, of language that *Zong!* begins."
12. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008, 196.
13. I have elsewhere described untime, or Black untimeliness, as "a zombified force and feature of Black being in the antiblack cosmos."
14. See (at least): Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Angela Fluornoy's *The Turner House*; and, Natashia Deón's *Grace*.
15. I'm conjuring "deathliness" from "Ice Cold," the afterword to David Marriott's *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
16. Philip's *Zong!* culminates in a "Notanda" we have cited throughout this conclusion, and one of the most intriguing, if not completely vexing, conceptualizations comes in the form of "un-telling" the story of the Zong massacre, and how this "un-telling" became the way Philip framed her destructive, archival, poetic work. I conjure that labor and her insistence upon this work here.
17. Christina Sharpe, "Black Studies: In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* vol. 44, no. 2 (2014), 59.
18. My own analysis of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* reads Ursa Corregidora's blues singing in relation to the blueshift phenomenon and to black holes; her call, or the call of her blues, is a call for a leap toward the kind of total spaghettification or obliteration that comes from approaching black holes. This analysis appears in full in the second chapter of my forthcoming text, *Impossible Stories: On the Space and Time of Black Destructive Creation*.