Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure

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Abstract
This article is a relational conversation nested in black studies, science studies of blackness and race, geographies of knowledge, and black creative text. The overlying purpose is to address how the social production of biologically determinist racial scripts – which extend from a biocentric conception of the human – can be dislodged by bringing studies of blackness in/and science into conversation with autopoietics, black Atlantic livingness, weights and measures, and poetry.

Keywords
black studies, interdisciplinarity, race, racism, The Zong

There was, quite simply, no secret about the killings of Africans on the Atlantic slave ships.

– James Walvin

. . . the no is proved
. . . negroes
was the bad made measure

– M. NourbeSe Philip

This article is a relational conversation nested in black studies, science studies of blackness and race, geographies of knowledge, and black creative text. The overlying purpose is to address how the social production of biologically determinist racial scripts – which extend from a biocentric conception of the human – can be dislodged by bringing studies of blackness in/and science into conversation with autopoietics, black Atlantic livingness, weights and measures, and poetry. A biocentric conception of the human, it should be noted up front, refers to the law-like order of

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knowledge that posits a Darwinian narrative of the human – that we are purely biological and bio-evolutionary beings – as universal. It assumes, then, that we are bio-evolutionary humans that do not author this racially coded bio-evolutionary script; it assumes that the human is inherently, and all, natural (produced only by nature), which, in turn, situates black subjects as naturally unevolved. As will be discussed later, as well, a biocentric conception of the human can also undermine research that seeks to show how the biologies of race is socially constructed.

My discussion is implicitly informed by a series of geographic tensions – precisely because the discipline of geography and the sub-disciplines of cultural and social geographies open up and close down black studies in meaningful ways. Indeed, many research projects in cultural and social geographies importantly track how the social production of race is spatially enacted and how marginalized communities negotiate and live out a range of ongoing plantocratic and colonial racial violences. These geographic violences are haunted by positivism – the social scientific and empirical verification of racial, gendered, classed, queer, and locational differences – which has led to the ongoing exposure of lingering and false scientific racisms and biologically deterministic scripts. With this in mind, and as I have argued in a different context, a large cluster of analytical work on race – and specifically blackness – draws attention to the unjust racial violences imposed on black bodies. Some analyses of the violated black body are coupled with oppositional narratives, wherein black embodied knowledge is (rightly) valued as a site of resistance. While this embodied-black-situated-knowledge importantly informs the production of space and provides a way to rethink our collective political epistemological grounds, I wonder how it also continually situates biologic skin – only the bodies – as essential to alternative non-patriarchal–non-Eurocentric mappings. Put another way, what happens when racial knowledge is mobilized solely as a site of violation through which resistant corporeal epistemologies are tasked with illuminating the inequities that underwrite the production of space? How are discussions of race and space and knowledge tethered to an analytics of embodiment that can only posit black knowledge as biologic knowledge? Does this foreclose the ways in which alternative racial configurations are, or can be, collectively and relationally and spatially liberatory and, perhaps, staging a range of black knowledge formations that, while certainly embodied, are not reduced to the biologic? Indeed, we must ask ourselves – and I ask myself this often – how black bodies rather than black people are informing how we understand the production of space and the production of knowledge and, as well, how these bodies that tidily uphold our academic ideas inadvertently or explicitly replicate a biocentric order. This is an urgent geographic problem – inside and outside the discipline of geography – because black knowledge is analytically posited as a priori biologic (a violated body that body-knowledge emanates from) and is therefore already marginal or excluded or outside how we know.

The underlying purpose of this article is to think about how engaging interdisciplinarity and forging relational knowledges assist in anti-colonial academic research and teaching while also disrupting biocentric scripts, disciplined ways of knowing, and the spatial workings of knowledge. With both of these purposes in mind, the discussion cues Frantz Fanon, noticing that Black Skin, White Masks is, among other things, an interdisciplinary text: in this work, Fanon asks that we not only unsettle the fact of blackness but also read across a range of texts and sources – poetry, psychiatric studies, archives, jazz, fiction, philosophy, folklore – in order to make this unsettlement possible. What Fanon alerts us to is how the act of disciplining of thought (the process of habitually delimiting what we know about blackness according to colonial perimeters) stabilizes race and perpetuates anti-blackness. More specifically, the biocentric logic of race, which sorts and assesses
bodies according to the phenotype and attendant evolutionary scripts, is part of a larger commonsense belief system that seemingly knows and thus stabilizes the biological data that validate unevolved black deviance; this belief system thus knows, in advance, who should live, who should survive, who should die, who is naturally selected, and who is naturally unselected. Indeed, this biocentric belief system is steadily carried forward (or paid forward!) – not articulating itself in the same way over time and space, but certainly shaping what we think we know about, and how we know, black people.

Drawing on Fanon’s unsettling of disciplinary thinking (precisely because the aforementioned anti-black logic he takes apart in his text continues to reverberate and circulate in the present), I address how biocentricity can discursively discipline and delimit our analytical approach to race and racism. The interplay between race, biology, blackness, and science, I argue, undermines the undisciplined and interdisciplined workings of black intellectual life. Part of what I am suggesting, then, emerges from the many black studies that rely on a variety of sources (bringing music and math to sociology, bringing science and history to poetry, bringing slave narratives and psychoanalysis to feminism, and everything in between) in order to study, convey, talk about, and undo race and racism. This is why, as I note above, Frantz Fanon writes *Black Skin, White Masks* not only through and with the eyes of a psychiatrist but also through and with the eyes that have spent a lot of time reading and writing about fiction, activism, music, philosophy, historical narrative and primary sources, science, psychoanalysis, medical studies and journals, poetry, psychiatry, and more.

In what follows, I explore the conceptual possibilities that emerge from the kind of radical interdisciplinary black studies Fanon utilizes in *Black Skin, White Masks*. I suggest that paying close attention to, drawing out, and forging relational knowledges provide us, as academics and thinkers who are invested in undoing the deadly yet normalized workings of anti-blackness, with analytical mechanisms that allow us to do anti-colonial work in a variety of university settings that, as we know, were not built to support or recognize marginalized communities and intellectuals. Part of the intellectual task, then, is to work out how different kinds and types of voices relate to each other and open up unexpected and surprising ways to think about liberation, knowledge, justice, history, race, gender, narrative, and blackness. In terms of black studies, the task is not to measure and assess the unfree – and seek consolation in naming violence – but rather posit that many divergent and different and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that can tell us something new about our academic concerns and our anti-colonial futures.

This article has four parts that are to be read in tandem. These are narratives and ideas that I have brought together because I believe that they relate to each other and because I believe that, in their relationality, they momentarily unsettle how blackness is read within and against scientific narratives. Part 1 is a very brief overview of how race is taken up in science studies that also thinks about how the dynamics of race in/and science can be read as an autopoietic system. Part 2, drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, provides an analytic pathway to reorienting the discursive scientific data of race and blackness. In part 3, I introduce the slave ship The Zong through four relational vignettes: history, weights and measures, social theory, and poetry. These vignettes, together, allow me to read the slave ship as a historically present living system that articulates the unexpected promise of science. The overarching work of the vignettes, and the paper as a whole, is to push up against the tendency to read blackness in/and science through a singular analytical model – biological determinism – that taxonomizes black subjects. I conclude with a brief discussion that addresses the difficulties of reading, teaching, and analyzing racial violence, particularly when we rely on data sets that seek to make race knowable in terms that socially produce the biology of race.
when read in tandem, draw attention to an analytical praxis that, I hope at least momentarily, demonstrates that thinking, writing, and talking blackness, analytically and ethically, is a productive, interdisciplinary, and undisciplined experiment in black studies.

**Part 1: science studies, the singularity of black biologics, autopoietics**

Since about the 1980s, feminist science studies have provided an interdisciplinary and theoretical critique of claims to scientific neutrality and epistemological purity. Feminist science studies have developed research queries that are committed to challenging biological determinism and the absented role of women in the sciences. These studies have also contributed to some meaningful methodological and epistemological shifts that complement broader feminist and anti-racists projects, specifically the development of a standpoint feminist perspective and situated knowledge – which developed in different ways across feminist theory but, in science studies specifically, are well-known in the research Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding. These feminist perspectives posit identity-place as a viable avenue through which scientific neutrality and other masculinist and colonial knowledge systems can be called into question. In short, the demystification of scientific objectivity and the insertion of gendered voices into discourses of scientific knowledge inform the field. Related areas of feminist science studies address how race informs the gendered workings of scientific knowledge and also track how race and racial apartheid are constituted through scientific knowledge and colonialism: here, the work by Banu Subramaniam, Evelyn Hammonds, Dorothy Roberts, Karla F.C. Holloway, Simone Browne, and Alondra Nelson stands out. This research, while theoretically different, centralizes the themes of the body, biological determinism, scientific racism, and representation to identify the role of racial difference in science studies and destabilizes the notion that the raced and gendered body can elicit transparent data. These studies also draw attention to how practice of documenting and knowing Otherness (and thus seeable epidermal differences) puts demands on how we ethically respond to processes of racialization.

In feminist science studies and science studies of race, then, three overlapping research areas emerge: research that addresses the ways in which the racial underpinnings of science have long informed analyses of social inequities, poverty, racial and sexual discrimination, citizenship and belonging; research on genomes, blood quantum, miscegenation, the bell curve, intelligence testing, reproductive technologies that brings into focus racial formations; and investigations that critically take up the ways in which the body, phenotype, skulls, height, hair, and gender comportment are indicators of biological differences among humans. In these areas of study, two important themes are worth highlighting: that race is socially produced yet differentially lived vis-à-vis structural inequalities and that the application of science can, and in many cases has, adversely shape the lives of women, impoverished, and nonwhite communities. Put differently, although science is a knowledge system that socially produces what it means to be biologically human, it is also the epistemological grounds through which racial and sexual essentialism is registered and lived. These research foci and themes, for the most part, tend to focus on the longstanding prominence of scientific ‘facts’ developed between the 18th and 19th centuries, the dominance of the colonial and patriarchal Western knowledge systems and scientific racism, and undoing these histories.

While feminist science studies and cognate studies of race in and science constitute vast areas of inquiry – research themes range from equity in engineering to environmental racism – the question of where we know science from remains relevant precisely because, as Banu Subramaniam has argued, the field has actually continued without comprehensively attending to colonialism and has rarely moved beyond a critique of the biological sciences. What the above overview of science studies reveals, as I see it and in terms of blackness and biology, is an analytical system that is
closed: colonial and racial narratives are attached to and extend from the body outward, stabilize white supremacist logics, classify black life as unworthy, and loop back to mark the black body as an unworthy script that validates white supremacist logics. In her critical engagement with a range of scientific studies and stories, Dorothy Roberts provides a slightly different pathway. She shows that while race and blackness have been differently narrated over time and space, and meaningful openings have been made in scientific research, the analytical system through which race circulates is one laden with the strong belief that humans are genetically naturally divided into races.\textsuperscript{16} Karla F.C. Holloway’s research on cultural bioethics complements Roberts’ thinking by delineating how medical–legal–scientific infrastructures assure that that some bodies, marginalized and/or black bodies, are cast as public ‘fleshy indignities’.\textsuperscript{17} Holloway also importantly notes that these assurances unveil and mirror society’s ‘habits and traditions’.\textsuperscript{18} Together, Roberts and Holloway sketch out how blackness is bound up in, and in fact necessary to, a self-replicating white supremacist system. What they also uncover are the profound ways in which the scientific narratives are racial narratives, populated by marginalized bodies, and strongly informing a publicly narrated belief system (or habits, or traditions) that rests on credible scientific ‘facts’. Put slightly differently, this biocentric belief system is ubiquitously ordinary because it is a habitual and public validation of 18th and 19th century racial–biological human differences that were paid forward in time. I am suggesting, too, that the disciplining thought that stabilizes race in these biocentric terms is a self-perpetuating and self-referencing closed belief system that presents blackness in/and race in familiar, habitual, and truth-making terms that are anti-black.

In \textit{Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living}, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela track the discursive and biological enactment of social life through autopoiesis. Through examining cellular networks, the two biological theorists explain how the system that houses the cellular network is a closed and recursive system. The cellular network understands itself as bounded; any cellular growth or cellular changes that occur only do so through the reconstitution of the system which houses and sustains the cells. The system is closed and self-referential and the cellular network is committed to this system because it realizes itself through the process of recursion.\textsuperscript{19} The argument that follows suggests that the organization of human life – which underpins the enactment of ourselves and each other and our attendant environments – is comparable to, but not twinning, the cellular networks as just described above. Here, the practice of being human is relational to and embedded in a living system that replicates itself and, in this, replicates what it means to be human according to the \textit{parameters of the existing social system}. Autopoiesis, put another way, is the process through which we repeat the conditions of our present mode of existence in order to, seemingly, keep the living system – our environmental and existential world, our humanness – living. Here, too, the processes of repetition and replication double into each other demonstrating the co-relational workings of how we know our human life and, simultaneously, do not notice the process of recursion: the practice of being human, and the enactment of social life replicates itself with the analytic, affective, and material talisman of \textit{realization} inducing the replication of how things already are and therefore both normalizing the system and rendering the system imperceptible. As humans, we organize ourselves according to self-referential social systems: these systems are many and interconnected (and they can be bound up in our scholarly practices).\textsuperscript{20}

Science studies of blackness reveal a bundled autopoietic system that perpetuates and singularizes the logic of biological determinism. This disciplined and singularized logic, resting on a habitual belief system, renders other (scientific/empirical/experiential) experiences opaque. This logic also replicates what it means to be human and black according to the perimeters of the existing social system. And even as we urge and applaud social construction, the logic of biological determinism (and therefore anti-blackness) emerges. The social production of race can also, inadvertently, mimic
the classification and typology of humans according to racial–sexual differentiation: naming these racial and racist rankings, groupings, and taxonomies of humans is replicated over and over again – whether as truth claims or socially produced fictions that seek to undo the weighty singularity of biological determinism. As science studies of race have shown, race is socially produced, yet our belief system perpetuates biological differences by nesting these differences in infrastructures and discourses that are already embedded with the racial differences they seek to make plain. Or, because ‘it is assumed that races differ biologically, the differences between them appear to be biological’. What is uncovered is a knowledge system that sustains itself through the repetition of biologically determinist codes. What becomes apparent, analytically, is a loop of scientific racism – a closed system of knowledge about race–sex – that only knows itself through biocentric recursion: the organization of human life is conceptualized along racial–biological lines, lines that are informed by the essentialisms that are repetitively constituted as socially constructed by science. The narratives and critiques that work alongside this biocentric loop, through repeating it, produce this system of knowledge as a truth, which, in turn, loops around again and naturalizes racial–sexual differentiation.

It follows that the symbolic code of blackness and embodying blackness can only, in this figuration, be scientifically imagined as already oppressed by nonwhite flesh (because ‘the black’ is already prefigured as outside the family of humans). All other scientific matters or possibilities are foreclosed by biological determinism, often even in critique – because blackness must be positioned as purely biological and scientifically inferior in order for the critique, ‘social construction’, to make sense. The analytical and methodological purpose then – to name and dismantle race and racism – tends to move from the physiological figure outward. Black lives are reduced, too, to analytical data and are cast as figures that are biologically determined to become factual parts of a bigger habitual belief system invested in racial differentiation and violence. This discloses a teleological narrative where the body violated by racial and racist scientific narratives is the anchor to a liberatory trajectory and thus can, in this closed system, only realize itself and keep living by – to paraphrase Frantz Fanon – moving from sub-humanness toward a genre of humanness that despises blackness.

With this in mind, it is notable that some analyses of black lives and black histories that solely focus on naming scientific racism fall back on a biocentric model. As such, some analytical approaches to race – across disciplines – inadvertently produce blackness as less-than-human in order to point to the problematic narratives that are attached to those who are socially produced as less-than-human. Biological determinism and the critique of biological determinism, together, flatten out and singularize the biologics of blackness. This necessarily forecloses the relational and undisciplined workings of black studies. In this formulation, scientific racism continues to have the last word precisely because it is recursively enacted as socially constructed. Conceptually, the critique is useful – the work of demystifying race and racism is difficult, important, and urgent. However, at times this demystifying work necessarily involves marking blackness as a site of false racial defectiveness that reinforces, analytically, black-as-always-defective. An analytical conundrum is thus posed, one that echoes the concerns Frantz Fanon identified in 1952: how might we think about the social construction of race in terms that notice how the condition of being black is knotted to scientific racism but not wholly defined by it?

**Part 2: a new frame of meaning**

If we turn to the writings of Sylvia Wynter, we can observe how the repetitive naming and critique of biological determinism are nested in a much bigger, much more monumental, system of biocentricity. While I do not have the time or space to delineate the breadth of Wynter’s thinking, I do want to dwell on how Wynter allows us to work through the ongoing predicament Fanon posed.
This will take us back in time, momentarily returning to the above section, and then move forward to the slave ship The Zong. Wynter’s writings demonstrate the ways in which moments of scientific thought ushered in broad cognitive ruptures, with the Copernican leap pointing to the ways in which new conceptions of the physical cosmos exemplified how particular ‘discoveries’ led to a radical, albeit gradual, shift in how we collectively perceive the world and its inhabitants. She also demonstrates the ways in which scientific matters gradually came to be articulated as an objective system of knowledge that enumerates and classifies ‘difference’. With this, the scientific expressions of modernity – namely rational Man, cartographies of colonialism and the plantation, the metrics of gendered and sexed bodies, the mathematics of nature, and the sorting of biological data – disclose the ways in which the question of human life is mapped out by scientific imperatives that increasingly profit from positing that we, humans, are fundamentally biocentric and natural beings.24 Here, the critique developed in science studies of race and gender circulates, while the work of Wynter yields another set of questions through her extension of Maturana and Varela. She argues that the concept of autopoiesis not only identifies a recursive looping system but also demonstrates that particular radical perspectives can observe this system and name its normalcy and thus provide the conditions to assert different living systems and/or breach the existing social system. The consensual circular organization of human life through which we scientifically live and die as a species must also draw attention to what she describes as

a new frame of meaning, not only of natural history, but also of a newly conceived cultural history specific to and unique to our species, because the history of those ‘forms of life’ gives expression to [a] . . . hybridly organic and . . . languaging existence.25

She writes, then, that there is

always something else besides the dominant cultural logic going on, and that something else is constituted another – but also transgressive – ground of understanding . . . not simply a sociodemographic location but the site both of a form of life and of possible critical intervention. 26

Importantly, the possible critical interventions are not simply oppositional narratives or reclamations that prize what Wynter calls the over-presentation of Man-as-human.27 Rather, Wynter’s project delineates the ways in which the practice of opposing and/or reclaiming can, in fact, be made through and against, and thus in the image of Man-as-human. The ‘something else’ that is ‘going on’ is a new ethics that moves beyond the bio-evolutionary story of man and toward the inscriptions of being human that unsettle this racial logic. Part of her concern is that the dominant belief system about what it means to be human follows governing codes that divide and sort science and creativity: the human, in this formulation, is primarily physiological, while creativity is an extra-human activity. With the category of race in mind, we can observe how the bifurcation of science and creativity can reify racial differentiation: the bifurcation posits, in advance, that all humans are bio-evolutionary beings that develop and progress toward creative acts that are non-physiological. Wynter posits, then, that we must notice the ways in which we, as humans, are simultaneously biological and cultural and alterable beings – skin and masks, bios and mythos. This positions humans as beings whose physiological origins are relational to representation and narrative.

The simultaneity of bios and mythos/skins and masks must be emphasized here, for she is not suggesting that we evolve, grow, develop, and then, once ‘developed’, we narrate our world; rather, she is arguing that that we come into being as languaging humans. This is a significant point to keep in mind because it notices that some social systems are constituted through consensual circular organization and rooted in epistemological trappings (e.g. science is objective and oppressive).
These social systems can be, and are, breached by creative human aesthetics that generate a point of view away from this consensual circular social system. This framework also points to relational and connective knowledges rather than positioning, say, science first, social construction second, and resistance third/later. Following these insights, I suggest, then, that the racial underpinnings of scientific knowledge, and the application of this knowledge to black bodies have, at times, foreclosed interdisciplinary conversations and a ‘hybridly organic’ and ‘languaging existence’. Yet, a transgressive ground of understanding, a new form of life, and critical intervention are, I think, available if we shift our analytical frame away from the lone site of the suffering body and toward co-relational texts, practices, and narratives that emphasize black life. In reading the slave ship and the story of The Zong as such, I hope to dislodge, at least momentarily, the biocentric codes that offer this site up as the location of black death and instead bring into focus how this history doubles as a critique and undoing of biocentricity.

Part 3: The Zong

I read The Zong, the slave ship, as a historically present conceptual device that opens up two overlapping analytical pathways: first, the histories embedded on and around the slave ship anticipate our ecocidal and genocidal present because they are part of an identifiable biocentric loop – the ship incites an analytical leaning toward racism and black death; second, The Zong allows us to think about racial matters anew and interrupt this loop because it holds in it the possibility to foster different knowledges and, simultaneously, be understood as a location through which many knowledges are constituted. Put simply, the ship imparts and creates knowledges. It follows that the scientific underpinnings of modernity – biocentricity, positivism – are aligned with, not preceding, human practices. The Zong cannot be contained by a singular theoretical frame or story – instead, it demands and is an articulation of multiple historically present black lives. I present four vignettes below: history, social theory, weights and measures, and a burst of the long poetry cycle, Zong! by M. NourbeSe Philip. I ask that the reader deliberately stack and overlap these vignettes in order to notice how the slave ship is a device that points to the ways in which the brutal histories of racial violence – that is, the indexical, the measurable, the disposable, who inhabit the science of race as we know it – ask not how we describe and get over the awfulness and brutality, but rather how we live with our world, differently, right now and engender new critical interventions.

Vignette 1: history

James Walvin’s legal history, The Zong, provides the first narrative voice. Walvin’s research on the slave ship Zong tracks the deliberate killing of black slaves that occurred in 1781 so that the slavers could both survive and collect insurance on their massacred human cargo. Walvin writes,

It was calculated that the ship now had enough water for only four days, but that it would take between ten and fourteen days to sail back to Jamaica . . . On 29 November [1781] the crew were assembled and asked what they thought of the suggestion that, faced with the water crisis, ‘Part of the slaves should be destroyed . . .’ . . . At 8 pm that evening fifty-four women and children were pushed overboard . . . two days later . . . a group of forty-two men were thrown overboard from the quarterdeck. A third batch of thirty-eight Africans were killed some time later: ten Africans, realizing what was about to happen, jumped to their deaths.

The history Walvin uncovers is disturbing: he evidences that the killings were premeditated and situates this racial violence within the context of the slave trade: ‘. . . killing Africans was not unusual’ and, moreover, was ‘not a matter of murder’.
What emerges first, through this narrative of history, is the closed system circulating through and beyond The Zong. This history conveyed points to the acceptability of black death. The archival research done by Walvin, which I won’t replicate here, demonstrates the ways in which the legal landscape simply oversees racial violence. Indeed, as one reads Walvin’s text, the historian refers to the justified, admissible, commonsense killing of human cargo throughout the slave trade multiple times, thus remarking that the violence aboard The Zong was not unusual and, as a result lays bare for the reader the mundane workings of anti-black violence. In many ways, this history is a closed system – for the pages claim to uncover a ‘murderous secret’ that is, as you continue to read, not a secret at all. Indeed, the text needs an engagement with explicit and mundane anti-black violence to move forward: anti-blackness and black death provide the conditions through which Britishness makes itself known and realizes itself, for The Zong would, Walvin argues, figure into anti-slavery campaigns and then lead to British rejection of their ‘lucrative habit’. This is a biocentric history, there is little to no room for an unusual or alternative tale or the promised secrets: the dimensions of racial difference stay in place, while emancipatory tenets are soldered to exploitation that is shrouded in white benevolence.

At the same time, though, the historian provides a mathematical opening. Walvin initially puts forth confident numbers – those just listed above – which allow the reader to tabulate the number of Africans killed: 186. Yet, despite Walvin’s data, he also exclaims that numbers are unreliable: ‘there is some confusion’, he writes, ‘about the precise numbers killed’. He follows this with a series of other numbers: 150, 142, 122, and one-third of the Africans on board. Other histories of The Zong are also unclear about the number of Africans killed: 150, 133, 132, and 123. The death tabulation is, as I read it, best understood as a range of numbers gathered from many texts and sources. The inability to count the dead allows us to doubt knowable data, and a singular analytical frame, and therefore open ourselves up to another set of questions and numbers that follow alongside and after The Zong. With this opening in place, one cannot help but think about these deliberate killings alongside a whole host of contemporary premature and preventable deaths that continue to realize the closed system – deaths that are too many to list and too many to grieve (miners shot, hoodies, killing black youths to bring silence to black music, executing the unarmed, and more). In many ways, the deliberate murdering of black slaves on The Zong eerily anticipates our contemporary struggles with racial violence. This is not to conflate time and space but rather notice how The Zong moves forward in time and becomes implicated in a similar circular closed system: in naming these histories as evidence of the violent, ongoing, but differential workings of premature or preventable death the history of The Zong points to how we know our human life through instances of black death; the practice of being human and the enactment of social life are sustaining itself through the replication of how things already are. With this history in mind, The Zong stands as a cosmogony of contemporary racial violence, throwing blackness overboard, again and again, and thus realizing – in the present – a living network of scientific racism and despair where black life has no beginning and a discourse of emancipatory benevolence – The Zong as anti-slavery technology – that mimics Fanon’s predicament.

**Vignette 2: weights and measures**

If the history Walvin uncovers is one of public racial violence and the anticipation of different instances of post-slave premature death, we would do well to think through how the seeming scientific underpinnings of modernity – acts that weigh and measure and differentiate – are insinuated into, and push up against, the knowledge systems that narrate The Zong. We might dwell, even more, on the measurements that make this difficult diasporic life possible, in part because, as I note below, the practice of empirical containment provides the conditions for social theories to interrupt
and undo and prop up the logic of race. It is through conceptualizing weights and measures as relational to and distinguished from black life that the promise of the slave ship emerges. Here, the positivist underpinnings of modernity open up, just fleetingly, to reorder or mark black life and breach the closed system that is otherwise understood as a location that houses objecthood and death.

Maritime knowledge systems are grounded by weights and measures. There are numerous scientific and mathematic calculations that underwrite ship design, safety measures, port fees, manning regulations, and so forth. But most interesting to me is the concept of deadweight tonnage – a post-slave term – for it is this measure of weight that brings together and collapses the entirety of the ship’s weight. This is to say that unlike gross tonnage or net tonnage – which measure internal volume and cargo, respectively – the deadweight tonnage or deadweight capacity measurement takes into consideration all provisions, crew, fuel, cargo, and so forth. Deadweight tonnage is everything and everyone as viewed and calculated through the lens of weights and measures. What these weights and measures offer is a way to re-mathematize black life, for in deadweight the entirety of the ship is subjected to a measurement system that bundles everything and everyone together. There is only a singular deadweight tonnage measurement although there are a range of people and objects that make this weight possible. The measurement erases humanness just as it enacts it, for the deadweight signals the unfolding of modernity and collective human lives alongside, rather than prior to or after, the biological determinant is posed. The deadweight measure tasks us to review the ship through relational and connective means – bundled data sets that are both closed and open, past and present – without losing those biocentric codes that differentiate the weight sources and noticing, of course, that the deadweight will be relieved in crisis through the loss of black life. Here, the biocentric narrative is not situated as the primary analytic story; instead, biocentricity is correlational to transport and other scientific matters that, together, are brought into being by black and other human lives. Put differently, the weights and measures, the bundled deadweight tonnage, provide the conditions for us to, analytically, shift our focus away from the always oppressed black body and toward a different set of questions that ask how the measurability of anti-black violence lends a voice to black life.

**Vignette 3: social theory**

There are many social theories that attend to the slave ship, the Atlantic slave triangle, and the middle passage. I will outline those that have most directly informed this article and lead to my discussion ahead and look back on Walvin’s history and deadweight. The first is Paul Gilroy’s brief discussion of the slave ship in *The Black Atlantic* where he argues that the slave ship is a technology of modernity that connected various diasporic geographies and histories of terror; Gilroy’s discussion of the ship underscores – or presupposes, to use his word – his critique of ethnic absolutism thus demonstrating how slave and post-slave struggles evidence the complicated work of belonging. Gilroy’s analysis draws attention to J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting, *The Slave Ship* (Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming), which was inspired by the Zong massacre (and sadly enlivens black premature death through descriptively coding the enslaved as not simply dead, but also ‘dying’). Gilroy also names the slave ship as purposeful and living and in this provides the conceptual platform for Omise’eke Tinsley’s research on the queer intimacies that were experienced on the middle passage. Tinsley thinks ‘concrete maritime space’ alongside the practices of queer resistances that disrupted the violence of the normative order. She contextualizes her research by historicizing the work of ‘loving your kind when your kind was suppose to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths’. These insights can be thought about alongside Saidiya Hartman’s
research that dwells on the ways in which the data of the ship render the enslaved part of a register, a record, a ledger, and a tally of debits. Hartman’s thinking demonstrates the ways in which the tabulation of anti-black violence and unfreedom is only legible as a loss. No matter how hard we try to retell the story, the quantitative matters of the slave trade emerge as the official story.

These theorists – while differently attending to the slave ship – provide a conceptual frame that can be stacked onto and situated alongside Walvin’s history and the weights and measures. In these texts, one can read the ways in which the technology and science of the slave ship not only reduced black humans to cargo but also, in this process of objectification, provided the conditions through which blackness was rearticulated as rebelliously diasporic. Relatedly, there is a naming of anti-black violence and death as an insistence that black life – not just black survival – informs modernity. In short, the empirical purpose of the slave ship belies its ongoing living history. The closed analytical system, wherein we theoretically describe the brutalities of slavery as the origin of black oppression, is breached upon the recognition of the analytics of black life. The theoretical insights noted above return to slavery to position anti-black violence and death alongside black life. Noticeably, across these texts, the mathematical data of the slave ship are continually interrupted by the assertion of life and therefore a new definition of what it means to be living. I read these texts and the actors within – queerly diasporic, figures of loss – as a disruption of anti-black violence that is articulated by a conception of black life that is put forth by those who live intimately with death. Here, then, the science of anti-black violence – the normalized biological death of unsurvived as well as the slow death that informed living black colonial histories – is animated by a relationality wherein a different kind of living figure emerges. These texts do not move from racial violence to a freedom that houses and replicates racial violence. Instead, they differently notice that the slave ship and the horrors of slavery incited a difficult diasporic life.

Vignette 4: Zong!

It is in NourbeSe Philip’s long poem, Zong!, that history, weights and measures, and social theories of the slave ship and the Atlantic emerge and entwine. Reading the creative text with and through the aforementioned vignettes both reveals and disproves the logic of race. Here, poetics work within and think outside a closed system – and in this point to the conceptual work of autopoiesis. Because I am focusing on a text-based analysis and working with autopoiesis and network systems, I have found diachronic loops a useful and complementary concept. In their theories of loops and self-referencing, David Levary and his colleagues explore how words, definitions, and concepts are interrelated. Their research examines lexical networks – which we can, here, in a small way, liken to the aforementioned social systems and cellular networks. Their study shows how distinct semantic ideas remain coherent even when new words are introduced into the network. Levary and his colleagues use etymological data to show that even as new words disrupt and reimagine the broader definitional and conceptual ideas, this is done within a self-referencing system. Within this system are diachronic loops – clusters of words, definitions, and concepts that are introduced into the system at different times and thus hold in them the possibility to question its coherency yet remain verifiable within the context of the broader lexicon.

If we read NourbeSe Philip’s Zong! as a diachronic loop, the logic of racism and the naming of the dead and dying are understood alongside the cyclical structure of the poem and the attendant texts within and outside the work, including the vignettes discussed above. Notably, the text in its entirety iterates anti-black violence within the context of slavery, but the text also produces a network of words that unfold to produce a knowledge system that momentarily moves outside itself. Specifically, the structure of the text, which Philip calls a poetry cycle, is one where words and voices are dismembered and put back together, with the reader implicated in the recovery of the lost
voices. One must work hard to make sense of the words, locutions, and voices in order to envision the bigger conceptual picture that turns back on itself only to remark on the unspeakability of violences. Overall, the reader must approach the text from many perspectives and across overlapping and stacked histories and in order to glean how it needs multiple narratives in order to realize itself.

NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong*! is creative work that puts forth, within the context of a history of calculated and measurable racial violence, a thread that cannot simply bear witness to and recall anti-black violence within the biocentric and empirical terms that made this violence possible. The text is and is not an attempt to capture the complexities of the events that took place on The Zong in 1781: to suggest that this poetry cycle is *only* a reclamation forecloses the ways in which the poet is attempting to trouble practices of reclamation. Indeed, by inserting an additional recursive narrative that continually claims the story is *untellable* Philip signals that reclamation is impossible.

The poetry is scattered text— not linear or horizontal, but scattered; the words, ideas, names, and places are carefully placed on each page in a non-linear fashion, sometimes atop one another and in different shades of black, grey, dark grey (Figure 1).

Philips’s cross-referential framing of The Zong massacre is complex: to produce the scattering, she deploys and enjoins the law, the data of the slave ship, unusual and normative calendars, songs, prayers, biblical and philosophical guide quotes, historical narratives, archives, verses, multiple languages, phrases, ledgers, fugal and counterpointed repetition, and inventories, in order to exhibit ‘an extended poetry cycle’—a group of poems, ideas, songs, geographies, sounds, letters, textual gaps and spaces, that speak of and undo the legalities of racial violence. The poem includes a glossary, a journal entry, a legal document, songs, a ship’s manifest, and a co-author – Boateng – who is the voice of the ancestors.

NourbeSe Philip’s poem and poetry cycle cannot, in my view, withstand an analysis that dwells on simply naming black death. Indeed, I argue that the poetry cycle is not preoccupied with the past and resuscitating the dead. *Zong*! provides a future – and part of this future involves reading black cultural production as invested in history making that names the data of violence in order to creatively interrupt it and intentionally point to, and undo, the empirical and analytical violence that cannot sustain its own brutalities in the present. With the creative in mind, the logistics of the history of slavery might be read through the kind of lens NourbeSe Philip puts forth in *Zong*!: in these poetics we not only find loss, history, and the anticipation of the ongoing racial violences that engender and define us but also notice in the text a place where the data of the massacre, the

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**Figure 1.** Excerpt from NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong*!, in light-grey with overlayed words and fonts.
calculated empirical and theoretical and public and scientific accumulation of black death, *can no longer tell itself, in the present, through the terms that made it possible.*

Of particular significance, then, is the livingness of the slave ship – precisely because robust racial logics institute The Zong as predicated on the dead and dying. The livingness of the ship forges the aforementioned vignettes – intimacies, rebellions, weights and measures, and secrets that are not secret at all – with Philip’s textual history. Here, the voices within, sometimes faded and in italics, sometimes in plain text, sometimes songs, and sometimes data, can be read alongside and with the empiricism of weights and measures that contain and extend black life beyond the ship itself. Most obviously, the excerpt ‘uncommon weight/great weight/uncommon weight/great weight/new weight’ brushes up against ‘perils of necessity/mortality/slave/them was slaves not evidence’ (pp. 54–56). As one reads through, different histories take place – more words, more concepts, and more diachronic loops that cut across and refuse a narrative of deadness and lend themselves to the livingness of the ship itself. The text gives us clues to what a different form of life might look like by inscribing how freedom is worked out and worked on by those who have been unfree; these clues unveil that the biocentric logic of race, as we know it, cannot tell this history and narrative ethically.

I read Philip’s work – what she describes ‘as a story that can only be told by not telling’ – not as one that is preoccupied with return, but rather as a poem that historicizes anti-black violence in order to demonstrate the ways in which transatlantic slavery prefigures our contemporary planetary troubles and a closed biocentric system that thrives on racial terror.41 In this formulation, I put forth that black cultural production that attends to slavery not only involves the work of rememory and return but also contains within it an anticipatory urgency that looks forward, to the present, and surveys the unsurprising and mundane work of contemporary racial violences. Because Philip denotes the text as a poetry cycle – a series of events and texts and narratives and gaps that are repeated and bend back into themselves – there is a circuitous logic that frames the story she is telling yet continually gestures to what this history of violence ushered in, now. I am signaling how this creative text, if read through the lens of black *life*, offers up a diachronic loop that undoes biocentric logic by looking in on it and demanding the reader contend with the ability for this logic to sustain itself.

Part 4: learning from The Zong

This is, in part, then, about teaching and learning from the analytics of violence and race – for the story of The Zong asks that we be cautious about the singular narratives while also noticing the ways in which the logic of race is anchored to a monumental biocentric narrative that is invested in replicating scientific racism even in critique. The intellectual work of honoring complex racial narratives that name struggles against death can be, paradoxically, undermined by the analytical framing of racial violence. The conceptual difficulty lies in the ways in which *descriptions* of racial violence actually contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of human relationships rather than identifying what is really at stake when horror takes place: our collective replication of, and thus implication in, descriptive statements that profit from racial violence.
While biocentric narratives have certainly been contested – social construction, socio-cultural practices, non-linear time-space experiences, and performativity are just some ways our biocentric world has been challenged – the language and process of explicating racial violence tend to fall back on an axiomatic frame of survival wherein the suffering body and the dying have always been the marginalized human Other who stands in opposition to the white Western liberated human norm, precisely because black death precedes and is necessary to this conceptual frame. This means that the analytical stakes of studying race and racism often only provide us with a story that corresponds with our existing system of knowledge, one that has already posited blackness and a black sense of place as dead and dying. Here, we would do well to notice how the inhabitants of spaces of absolute otherness can be, quite easily, discursively colonized by our intellectual investigations.42 There is a tendency to focus on a certain mode of appropriation and codification within mainstream academic questions that profit from simultaneously devaluing and damning racial–sexual intellectual narratives as they empirically collect wretched bodies. Within this framework we can apparently fix and repair the racial other by producing knowledge about the racial other that renders them less than human (and so often biologic skin, only and all body). No one moves. This is what is at stake in all of our intellectual pursuits and analyses of difference. It is therefore worth thinking about the ways in which the cyclical and death-dealing analytical descriptions of the condemned remain conceptually intact, at least in part, because thinking otherwise demands attending to whole new system of knowledge – and therefore honoring radical relational reading practices and knowledges – wherein the brutalities of racial violence are not descriptively rehearsed, but always already demanding practical activities of resistance, encounter, radical disobedient black studies, and anti-colonial thinking.

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Notes
7. This is, of course, a contested plea to the discipline of geography! Nonwhite bodies are largely excluded from ‘body’ theory in the discipline of geography. See: R. Longhurst and L. Johnson, ‘Bodies, Gender, Place and Culture: 21 Years On’, 21(3), 2014, pp. 267–78. See also: K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 158n25.
10. Too many to list, I note that W. E. B. Du Bois, S. Wynter, A. Césaire, E. Glissant, F. Fanon, K. F. C. Holloway, P. Gilroy, and R. Iton, also stand out for me, as radical interdisciplinary scholars.
13. S. Harding (ed.), *The ‘Racial’ Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. Notably, although often not mentioned, is the ways in which Haraway’s landmark concept of ‘situated knowledge’ is, in large part, made possible through her reading of the life and creative work of Nigerian author B. Emecheta.
15. B. Subramaniam, *Moored Metamorphoses*.
22. F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 163. Fanon writes,

Bourgeois ideology, however, which is the proclamation of an essential equality between men, manages to appear logical in its own eyes by inviting the sub-men to become human, and to take as their prototype Western humanity as incarnated in the Western bourgeoisie.

29. Walvin, _The Zong_, pp. 95–8.
31. Walvin, _The Zong_, p. 11.
32. Walvin, _The Zong_, p. 98.
33. Walvin, _The Zong_, p. 98.
35. An important read is also I.Baucom’s, _Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History_ (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), which tracks how slavery and racial capitalism, key sites of modernity, contextualize the historically present workings of credit, insurance, liability, recompense.
40. NourbeSe Philip, _Zong!_, p. 177.
41. NourbeSe Philip, _Zong!_, p. 191.

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