

Epistemologies, ‘Holes’ and Empty Spaces

Workshop with Denis Esakov

Report by Marina Solntseva

What constitutes the space of the unknown? How can we describe it? How do we engage with it? These questions guided the workshop held on 19 December 2025 on the ‘spaces in-between’ that emerge in processes of knowledge production.

The workshop focussed on the work of M. NourbeSe Philip, a poet, writer, and former lawyer based in Toronto. After practising law for seven years, Philip turned to writing full-time in 1983. Although primarily known as a poet, she also writes fiction and non-fiction. Among her early poetry collections are *Thorns* (1980), *Salmon Courage* (1983), and *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988).

At the centre of the workshop was Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), a poem in book-length dedicated to an episode of the Atlantic slave trade known as the ‘Zong Massacre’. The incident involved the mass killing of more than 130 enslaved Africans by the crew of the British slave ship *Zong* over several days in November 1781. As was common practice at the time, the enslaved Africans were insured as cargo. Following a series of navigational errors which led to a shortage of potable water on the ship, the crew decided to throw the enslaved Africans overboard with the expectation that the insurance company would provide financial compensation for the loss. The insurance company, however, refused to cover the claim. This gave rise to a court case that turned on the question of whether the deaths constituted murder or the loss of insured property. When composing *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip worked with archival material on the case including court documents, testimonies from the crew, and the legal arguments of the insurance company.

Zong! allowed the workshop to explore several key concepts:

- 1) *Othering in colonial situations and subsequent narrative retrospection*: Participants explored the role and manner of ‘othering’ both in the murder itself (slaves were regarded not as people but as insured objects) and in the narrative retelling of events during the trial, when the insurance company refused to recognise the slaves as ‘insured objects’. M. NourbeSe Philip subverts the narrative by naming the deceased slaves, granting them agency, and changing the perspective within the poem.

In the “Western” mindset, the “Other” is an imaginary container in which you can put many things. It is a way to meet your desire in the case of Lacan; it is a space for

development, tolerance, and mutual understanding. It is a space of imagination and conscious orientation towards each other. In colonized cultures, it is a daily practice: the practice of oppression, including invisible oppression, and the practice of limitation and punishment. It is the desire to be not oneself, but to be more like the dominant Others. The rejection of the Self, of the ego, because it is too difficult, painful and risky.
(Denis Esakov)

- 2) *The production of distance:* The discussants analysed how the creation of narrative distance from past events (i.e. temporal and geographical distance) allows scope for different interpretations of events and variations in narrative retelling; they also looked at how the existing archive of knowledge shape our perception of events as distant or near:

The invention of perspective brought distance into human relations, leading us all to invisibility. The invisibility of violence, the invisibility of the Other, the invisibility of relations of power and capital. (Denis Esakov, [‘The Otherness. They are always speaking. Who listens?’](#))

- 3) *The production of ‘holes’ and empty spaces:* The workshop also addressed how the inherently fragile nature of narratives generates empty spaces of silence and untold stories –and how these gaps in turn are made into spaces for reception, instrumentalisation and interpretation (cf. Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *Looking for Livingstone – an Odyssey of Silence*, Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1991). Which perspectives are related and in what way, and which remain untold because of established power relations? The very structure of the poem *Zong!*, written with visible gaps in the text and a fractured narrative structure, invites engagement in such critical reflections.
- 4) *In-Between spaces and decolonial theory:* Last but not least, workshop participants examined both the poetic in-between space as an alternative space of narrativity as well as the concepts and tools developed by decolonial theory and practice. These included, amongst others, ‘nepantla space and nepantleras-bridges’ (Gloria E. Anzaldúa), ‘a space of intersectionality, multiplicity, and difference’ (Audre Lorde), ‘a space to move as largely and as freely as possible, as a witness’ (James Baldwin), ‘the body as a public spectacle’ (Paul B. Preciado), and ‘Inflamed Recreation Room’ (Emma Wolf-Haugh).

These approaches helped to provide a practical framework for understanding the processes and conditions informing aitiological narratives. The workshop concluded with a discussion of research ethics when working with the ‘empty spaces’ between knowledge and the unknown, as well as practical consideration of the conditions under which an archive of knowledge can be produced.