

[OCEAN WAVES]

**NAHLAH: Welcome to Ideas. I'm Nahlah Ayed.**

**On November 29th, 1781, some 500 kilometres out into Caribbean Sea west of Jamaica... a massacre began aboard the slaveship known as the 'Zong'.**

[handbell, distant, music]

NourbeSe: "The events on the Zong are so bizarre and traumatic, even now, when I read about it, I still am shocked by it."

"Mansfield": This is a very uncommon case and deserves a reconsideration.

Dave Gosse: As far as they concerned, it wasn't murder, wasn't murder, because enslaved people were counted as chattel..

"Mansfield": ... whereby the voyage being retarded, and the water falling short,

**NAHLAH: It is said, supplies of drinking water on board the ship were running dangerously low.**

JAMES: It was decided, by whom we're not quite clear, that they would reduce the risks to everybody by killing some of the Africans.

CHRISTINA: There are those living Africans, girls, men, women and boys who are thrown person by person, hour by hour overboard ...

[music]

**NAHLAH: The massacre lasted ten days. In its aftermath... a shocking court case fired up the abolition movement in Britain.**

DAVE: It provided the abolitionists with fuel now to ignite the abolition flame in England.

**NAHLAH: Each year, the Zong story comes alive again in group readings of a book-length poem published in 2007.**

[sound of group readings]

**NAHLAH: The poem is called *Zong!* (with an exclamation point.) It's by M. NourbeSe Philip (nor-BESS-ay). And it's among the most intensely studied and written-about works by a Canadian author this century.**

CHRISTINA: I think that *Zong!* is an enormous work...

FRED: ...there's been maybe three or four books that I've read over the last 40 years that have been the most important books to me and it's one of them.

**NAHLAH: On today's episode, the extraordinary case of a mass murder at sea, and the work of art still rising from its depths.**

[Sfx / Music fade]

NOURBESE: Hello. I am M NourbeSe Philip. Poet, writer, playwright and resident in the spacetime of Toronto.

November 29th is a significant date for me because that is the date that a massacre on board a slave ship in 1781 began. There was a court trial. The name of which is Gregson versus Gilbert. And it had ramifications for the abolitionist movement in the United Kingdom at that time.

I wrote a poem, called Zong, based on those events. The name of the ship was called The Zong. Every November .. I stage a durational reading of the work Zong! to remember the people who died on board the ship and whom we call 'ancestors' in our culture.

Reading footage: Thank you all for listening and we're going to begin our reading now. We'll be reading pages 3 through 36. Comes from the first section entitled 'Os' which means 'bone.' It starts with an epigraph from Wallace Stevens. "The sea was not a mask."

*[singing.. voices say "Wa.. wa.. .wa.."]*

NourbeSe: We actually read the text through from the beginning to the end and it takes several hours. We usually begin around seven, 7:30 in the evening and we usually finish around 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. And that constitutes a durational reading.

*[group reading clips]*

NOURBESE: I first read about the case in a book by James Walvin, a British academic, a scholar. The book was called *Black Ivory*...

JAMES: Hello, my name is James Walvin.

By the late 18th century, Liverpool was the dominant force shipping Africans across the North Atlantic. One African in five crossed the Atlantic on board a ship out of Liverpool. One of them was a ship called The Zong, which was a Dutch ship which had been impounded by the British off West Africa, 1781, and loaded with huge cargo of African

slaves. And as they shipped into the Caribbean, towards Black River in Jamaica, navigation errors and provisioning errors led to an extraordinary shortage of water.

NOURBESE: The ship is coming across the Atlantic from the west coast of Africa. It leaves Sao Taume. The captain is inexperienced. It takes maybe three times as long as the normal time it takes. They get lost.

DAVE: I am Dr. Dave Gosse. I am the director of the Institute of Caribbean Studies at UWI Mona. And I am a historian. It is said that somehow Captain Collingwood got sick. Well, wasn't feeling very well. And so mistakes were made. Somehow on the journey they mistook Jamaica for Haiti. So if you understand your map, you have to pass Haiti first then come towards Jamaica but they bypassed Jamaica, and realized then they'd made an error. By this time then on the return to Jamaica, it is said they realized they had some leakage in some of the water vessels, right? They had a leak. So, sometime around November now, November 29, they made a decision then.

JAMES: — it was decided, by whom we're not quite clear, that they would reduce the risks to everybody by killing some of the Africans. The result was that something like a 132 Africans were murdered, thrown overboard.

DAVE: So they threw 54 Africans first. At this time they were basically women and children, right? Women and children. Then on the first of December they threw 42 more Africans overboard...

NOURBESE: it's quite distressing when you read about it. They were throwing overboard women and children because they were less valuable so that when they got to the to their destination, they would get more money. The 'cargo', quote unquote, would fetch more money because there were more male slaves, or more 'men, enslaved'.

DAVE: Now interestingly, it was said around the 1st of December, rain started to fall. And so they were able to catch more water in their vessels. But by the 6th or so of December, they threw another 26 Africans overboard, which was completely unnecessary.

JAMES: The captain of the slave ship, a man called Luke Collingwood and Collingwood was a very sick man when the Africans were murdered. He died very shortly afterwards.

We're really unclear as to who decided what should be done with the Africans. My own my own feeling is it was a man on board who was traveling as a passenger. A man called Stubbs, who'd worked for the Royal African Company at one of the forts in Africa, who was heading back to Britain on a slave ship and who had experience not merely of African slaves, but actually knew something about the laws of maritime insurance.

The point is, it doesn't really matter who made the initial decision, I think. What matters is that the crew carried it out. The crew carried this out without any kind of compunction, without saying, "Hang on. There's something grotesquely immoral and wrong about this."

[music / waves / drone pad / violin] [distant handbell]

NOURBESE: And when the ship docked in Jamaica, they sold what was left of their cargo as it was referred to. Then it went back to Liverpool.

And there, the owners of the ship, the Gregsons, made a claim against the insurance because at that time, as we do today, we insure our property and the enslaved were seen as property, no different from horses or cattle. As the Chief Justice referred to in his judgment.

JAMES: He said, "as much as it shocks one, it is the same as horses being thrown overboard." He said, "thought it shocks one very much."

It was traditional that Africans were covered as cargo. They were counted as beasts of the field on board the ship. And the law accepted that they were covered by insurance as cargo. But no one had ever tried was to claim for those Africans, not because they died naturally or because they were killed in an insurrection or because they drowned in an accident... but no one had ever tried to claim for them once they'd been murdered.

[beat]

DAVE: Now, they initially won the case. Initially. The court agreed with the owner of the vessel against the insurance company, and a claim of 30 pounds a head, on each

person, so they ended up receiving — well, they should have received over 3600 pounds. However, the insurers disagreed.

JAMES: The insurers appealed. And that appeal went to Lord Mansfield in Westminster Hall, sitting with two of his colleagues. His judgement was required: were the insurers obliged to pay up or not? He was trying to stick to this very narrow definition of the case. In other words, this was a question of maritime insurance. The question of a mass murder didn't come into it.

“BRITISH JUDGE” voice: *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Thursday, 22d May, 1783. This is a very uncommon case, and deserves a reconsideration. Where the captain of a slaveship mistook Hispaniola for Jamaica, whereby the voyage being retarded, and the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard ... *[fades]*

NOURBESE: I practiced law for a few years here in Toronto. And so I filed away the reference and thought to myself, I should go down and look at this case because it really jolted me when I read about it.

When I did go to the Law Library at the University of Toronto and I found the case, I remember the moment. I was stunned. It's a case report, which is the sort of foundational part of legal studies. You know, cases are reported if they have some significance. And as law students and lawyers, you go to look up these cases to find what the precedents are. I was stunned because it was two pages. And I thought, how could you report about the murder of 150 people in only two pages? Anyway, I made a copy of it and I brought it home and I filed it away, and then some years later, I began to look at it more closely.

JUDGE VOICE: The declaration stated, that by the perils of the seas, and contrary currents and other misfortunes, the ship was rendered foul and leaky ... so much of the water on board the said ship, for her said voyage, was spent on board the said ship...

JAMES: Here was the Lord Justice of England and two senior colleagues sitting in judgment about the murder of 133 Africans. But actually, they weren't talking about the

murder of Africans. They were talking about their value, their costs to the insurance cover.

JUDGE VOICE: Davenport, Pigot and Haywood argued there appeared in evidence no sufficient necessity to justify the captain and crew in throwing the negroes overboard. The last necessity only could authorize such a measure..

JAMES: The letter of the law is what he's interested in. And believes that without the letter of the law, everything else falls apart. He realizes that there is a growing sense in the country at large that there's something wrong with the system. Something was rotten about the slave trade. It's been pointed out by a number of people by the time it comes to the Zong case and what he didn't want to do is to sort of tug away at the fabric because he knows that if he makes one legal gesture towards the abolition, the whole thing begins to pull apart.

JUDGE: It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is not now the question, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue. The question is, first, whether any necessity existed for that act.

DAVE: The insurers knew that one, that when the ship arrived in Jamaica they sold the slaves and they were basically healthy. So there was no crisis -- there was no disease on board. There was no insurrection on board, right? Where you could claim — because you could claim insurance for insurrection, but you had no insurrection on board. And so when they carried the case back to Lord Mansfield, he was so outraged to know basically that they did not give full information — because their argument was that having less water on board could create insurrection. That was the basic point, that an insurrection could have occurred, and that's why they had to do that. But when he found out that they had enough water and the third — the 26 that they threw overboard after having water — then the case now became more kind of a moral case to that extent.

MANSFIELD: There is great weight in the objection, that the evidence does not support the statement of the loss made in the declaration. There is no evidence of the ship being foul and leaky, and that certainly was not the cause of the delay. There is weight, also, in the circumstance of the throwing overboard of the negroes

after the rain (if the fact be so), for which, upon the evidence, there appears to have been no necessity...

JAMES: If he's critical of killing Africans as Africans, as people, then he knows full well that that will actually begin to undermine the existence of the slave trade itself. Everyone's aware of the importance of the slave trade. It's economically important. And which major politician, to say nothing of judges, is going to stand up and say, Listen, I'm going to help unravel this.

JUDGE: There should, on the ground of reconsideration only, be a new trial on the payment of costs.

[gavel] [music] [sfx]

DAVE: We don't know.. we don't know if the case was re-tried. But what it did was supply the abolitionists with fuel now to ignite the abolition flame in England.

[music fade]

JAMES: (A) the cold-blooded nature of the decision to murder so many people. (B) the even more cold-hearted decision of their owners that they wanted money back from the insurers having murdered 132 Africans.

DAVE: And also the fact as well that societies like Great Britain, based on their law, right, could have sanctioned persons to — ha hum — to actually make decisions, you know, to throw innocent people overboard in the guise that could, you know, reclaim insurance. And the mere fact that the law provided that each person thrown overboard was worth thirty pounds! Really, and that they got over 3000 pounds.. so, what are the implications of the case? By 1787, about four years after the decision or so, the society for the abolition of slavery was actually born. And to a great extent, the Zong massacre helped the abolitionist movement to speed up the process of abolition.

[music pads / fade under]

NOURBESE: We need to remember that this was not the only instance where slaves were thrown overboard.

JAMES: The Zong wasn't alone. We have evidence — and it's still being garnered by researchers — we have evidence of any number of other slave ships in the 19th century who ditched Africans overboard for a variety of reasons -- not to be caught by pursuing abolitionist naval ships, not delivering wounded or sick Africans to the American slave auctions. The deaths of Africans was a kind of economic consequence of the whole system.

[music]

NourbeSe: Yeah, it's quite uncanny because the original name of the boat was Zorg. I'm probably not pronouncing it exactly the way it should be. It's a Dutch word. Also, it's found in the Scandinavian countries: z-o-r-g. It means 'care'. Which is really ironic!

When it was being repainted in West Africa. The R became an N, so it enters history as 'Zong'.

[applause]

[NourbeSe reading alone on stage] *Mlolo.. Fektemba.. Ha.. ha... hadi.. hadiia.. hadiia.. undersc... undersc.. [syllables]*

FRED: Yeah. Hi, my name is Fred Moten. I teach at New York University and I write about, you know, Afrodiasporic literature and culture.

Zong was published in 2007. I was, you know, already a fan and student of NourbeSe Philip's work from before then. But that book was a sort of revelation to me and a disruption to me as well. You know, I really thought and knew immediately, just upon opening the book and looking at the first few pages that it was something different and something new.

[NourbeSe reading... "And weeks.. them off... and negroes... off.. water.. ]

FRED: You know, on the most basic level, the book, it's not organized in the way that normal books are organized. Even the way that normal books of poetry are organized. Um.. the words are not presented on the page in a way that's supposed to both follow and at the same time reproduce a kind of linear pathway of reading.

{NourbeSe live reading clip: *Aben.. Nomusaaaaa*}

NOURBESE: The way the book is constructed is as follows: the first phase of it was, I decided, looking at the two page document..

*[echo Judge: Gregson vs Gilbert, Thursday 22nd...]*

NOURBESE:... which contains some 500-plus different words, that I would lock myself in that text. And only use the words that appear in that case report.

*[echo JUDGE: voyage being retarded, and the water falling short, several of the slaves died for want of water, and others were thrown overboard...]*

NOURBESE: So, for the listeners, just imagine you have a document, a letter, you're only using the words that appear there. That process gave rise to 'Os', which means bone, Os is the Latin for bone, in the first section and the poems are all numbered.

*[readings: "Zong Number 21. Is being is? Or should. Is is is. Is be being?"]*

NOURBESE: At the bottom of those poems is what's called a footnote line, and below that, there are names. Because at some point in this process, I really felt the need to name the people who had been killed.

Of course, they would have had names. But in the ship's manifest and in the documents regarding what was happening to them, they were only identified as "Negro Man", "Negro woman," sometimes "Negro child."

*[readings: 'or..']*

CHRISTINA: Or you just have a "ditto ditto". There's a 'Negro Man' is one title. Then under that, ditto ditto, ditto, to just indicate the repetition, repetition without difference, in the eyes of those who are putting people in the hold.

CHRISTINA: I am Christina Sharpe and I'm the author of *In the Wake - On Blackness and Being*. I am professor of humanities at York University and Canada Research Chair in Black Studies in the Humanities.

*[readings continue underneath]*

I think that Zong is an enormous work. Philip provides what the legal document will not, cannot.

*[Reading: "was not.."]*

She gives us names and breath and thought and care. She enacts what one of her poems, Zong 15, declares, which is defend the dead.

*[Readings: "or.. have been..."]*

[music]

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**I'm Nahlah Ayed.**

**TWO SECONDS**

**NAHLAH: The book-length poem, *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip is unusual right from the front cover, which includes the note, "as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng". [se-TAY-ee a-DAM-oo bow-a-TENG]**

**This immediately makes a reader question whose story is being told, and what the author's role is, and of course, whom these other names refer to.**

NOURBESE: Setaey Adamu Boateng, the three names that have relevance to me and my family and so I brought them together as representative of the ancestors. And part of using the phrase "as told to by," you know, the slave narratives — that genre of work that we know — usually it's an African person formerly enslaved telling someone white who then writes it. And in this case, what I felt was happening, it was a story that was being told — because that's one of the challenges of the work. There's a white male European voice there — It's being told by this white European voice to an African person who then brings it to an African woman who then brings it forward. So it was for me a turning on the head of that, of that whole genre and that whole trope.

**NAHLAH: Names matter in *Zong!*—the book. But in 1781, on Zong—the ship—the names of those being thrown over side were lost along with the victims, as far as we know. Christina Sharpe, a professor at York University, brings up a fictional story that imagines a rare exception to this rule.**

CHRISTINA: One of the books that I often teach when I teach Zong is Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, which is another imagining of the slave ship Zong, in which of the 133 people thrown overboard — and this does happen — one person climbs back onto that ship. D'Aguiar makes the person a woman and her name is Minta and she climbs back on board the ship and survives the throwing overboard... to be sold into slavery in Jamaica. Um, but there's a moment when Minta and I think two or three other enslaved people are trying to overthrow the ship. They're caught, they are beaten, they're chained to the deck, and the throwing overboard begins again on the second or third day, and

there's a woman who's about to be thrown overboard, and Minta yells to her, "What is your name?" And the woman says, "What does it matter?" And she says, "I will remember your name."

And the woman tells her her name, and I think her name is Alma. And so Minta is holding her name, holding the memory of her name. And that, to me is counter to that slaveship 'hold', which is to destroy the name.

*[clip from live reading: Nourbese calling, "Oshe. Ibishoke. Abione.]*

*[readings: THREE ... BUTTS ... GOOD ... OF ... SEA]*

CHRISTINA: Philip transforms Zong from a proper name into "Zong!"—exclamation point. And that exclamation point does a lot of work. It marks urgency. It becomes a cry. Suddenly, it sort of breaks into song, moan, chant, shout, breath, as I write. And this exclamation point, making it into, from an object into an act.

*[NourbeSe reading: /WATER DAY ONE OF MONTHS]*

CHRISTINA: When I found the book I was really astonished by it and started teaching it nearly every year. At first the students don't know what to do with it. They're still a bit intimidated by the text. They don't know how to read it.

*[NourbeSe live readings: sustenance, line, line]*

CHRISTINA: There's a lot of 'white space' on the pages. The words are broken up into smaller parts. So, for example, the word 'water' — w repeats across the page, sometimes close together, sometimes a w with lots of space. And so in Zong 1, the word water is spread out syllabically over the course of three lines..

*[group readings: w.. w.. a... a... ter ter]*

CHRISTINA: If 'water' is not a word in your language, how do you sound 'water'? You sound it, you know, consonant by consonant, vowel by vowel. And what happens when you open your mouth while drowning? Like the g on the page begins to sound like the gurgle of somebody swallowing water.

*[readings: ter.. water ... ggg]*

CHRISTINA: sometimes the poems take on particular shapes they might take on columns, they might take on what looks like the swirl of water, but always there is this space on the page in which the black letters appear.

*[group readings continue]*

NOURBESE: I had a number of strategies. I would cut up the text, I would black out words, white out words, all different things. Just trying to understand, how do I make this text yield what I know is in there? And how did I know it was in there? Because when you study law here in Canada, what you're doing is you're reading a lot of cases and often you're reading cases as they go up the appeal ladder, so to speak. As the cases move up that ladder to the Supreme Court here, or the Supreme Court in the U.S., all the messy, extraneous human details are extracted from the case until you get to, you know, this very sometimes small point of law, yes?

So, Roe vs. Wade, for instance, we don't know who Roe is. We don't know who Wade is. We just know it decided what was going to happen with respect to abortion. And so I knew, because I had studied law, that all of the stories were locked in that two-page report. So that was what kept me going. Like, how was I going to break and enter that document?

And it's as if the process was that by immersing the text in the water that actually drowned them, this dry desiccated two-page legal report, it sort of regained life, and the voices now continue to speak to us.

*[clips from readings: "the throw in circumstance, the weight in want.."]*

*[bell ringing, distant]*

FRED: For my money, you know, one way to think about the book is that NourbeSe Philip wrote it. And then another way to think about it is it NourbeSe Philip recorded it. And I tend to think of the book as the kind of ambient sound and ambient voicing that one might get if one crossing the Atlantic in a boat took a very, very, very sensitive microphone that could hear the voices of ghosts and let it fall into the water.

[clips from readings: "But.. " "the proved." "Was".. "Should".]

FRED: But it's more complicated than that ... it wasn't enough to simply hang them, hang the phone, the microphone over the side, you know, she had to go down there, too. She had to descend, you know, into those steps in order to record in order to be told in order to become a speaker through which that sound could be shared. And so that's an extraordinary, you know, gift to give, which is an extraordinary offering. .. And it obviously places upon the writer, you know, the speaker, the vessel, it places upon that vessel an extraordinary, you know, ethical responsibility.

*[sfx — live readings]*

FRED: Once you go down there, you discover, you know that against the grain of every possibility, there's there's beauty down there. And and to record that beauty is itself produces an ethical dilemma, because how could you talk about beauty? How could you talk about the corollary of beauty, which is pleasure, you know, within the context of the brutality of the conditions in which you've descended, you know. So that's the ethical dilemma of art: why are we making beauty out of all this misery?

*[sfx - readings - violin - judge echo "on the evidence, there appears to be no necessity etc.]*

NOURBESE: I felt what I was doing was carrying out a break-and-entry on the text! "Break-and-entry" is a term in law for a certain type of criminal charge. But it felt that way to me because I had set myself the rule — I'm not going to use any other words but those that appear in this document. What am I going to do? Then I thought, should I go in and find other words? So, for listeners, if you imagine the game of Boggle. You have a masterword, and then you pull words out of that. So I took each word out of that 500-word document, made dictionaries, and then would pull out words from those words. So, for instance, I mentioned the word 'Mansfield', Lord Mansfield. Mansfield will give you 'man'. It will give you 'field'. It will give you 'men'. And so I constructed these dictionaries...

*[readings clip: "If, only, dawn, yak yak.."]*

NOURBESE: I look at these words and they'll kind of come together and coalesce in little phrases and so on. I would sometimes want to use a word, and I would go hunting

in the mother-words to see if I can find the word. If it wasn't there, I didn't use it, yes?  
So that was how I constructed the poem.

*[reading clip: "field.. sun overhead.. in your hair.. gold as corn.. first.. at / third scene,  
Circe argues with Eve about Eden on the eve of murder. Rome mourns..]*

*[sfx - waves, bell]*

*[reading clip: Means evidence, means mortality, means voyage, means market, means..]*

*[reading clip: (chanting crowd group reading)]*

NOURBESE: I've never considered myself a performer. I can just consider myself a poet. But somehow the text demands performance. And so over the years since I began performing it, I do these solo readings at the end of which I usually invite the audience to read with me.

I will have cut up pieces, pages of Zong, and they would be placed on the seats. I usually say that we live in a time today where we're not reading from the same page, pages. And that is usually seen as something really negative and often is.

But in this case, what does it sound like "not to read from the same page" and yet to make a really beautiful and strange music?

*[clip - group readings: musical accompaniment, multiple voices]*

FRED: I didn't really feel the full impact of it until I started to try to teach the book to my students at that time. I was at Duke University and I taught a whole course on song. I think it was probably 2009, maybe? And over the course of those few weeks discovering the book along with my undergraduate students at Duke, it, you know, pretty much changed the way that I thought about poetry and that I thought about literature. And, you know, you know, pretty much changed the way I thought about everything, so!

FRED: The words are placed in ways that are designed to produce all kinds of gaps and air pockets and fissures and, as she puts it, you know, space and capacity for upward movement, for ascension. And so the book is a kind of complicated palimpsest. It's made of layers. And so it's just got a much more delicate constitution, I would say, than the average book!

But because of the way in which it's written, um, it presents a challenge. Because if you had been taught to read, you know, in the normal way and taught to read according to the typographical and sort of topographical conventions that the normal book adheres to, then you have to learn how to read again. And if you had also been taught to read, in a certain sense, silently — not only to read without speaking, to read without making sound, or even to read without moving your lips, but also to read within the context of a kind of, you know, sort of reverberative interiority so that, in a certain sense, to read silently used to read to yourself, but also to read by yourself — if you had been taught that that was the proper way to read, that was also an avenue that's no longer available to you.

And the closest thing I can say is that, you know, for me, at least, it became clear that this was a book that I could not read by myself. I *had* to read it with other people. And in that respect, it was a book that was meant, I think, to be a sacrament, a social sacrament, a ceremony.

[sfx: waves]

CHRISTINA: And it isn't passive at all. It is, it is a very active taking-apart of these grammars of violence to make something else. Of breaking them down into syllabic or glottal utterances, to also get at the kind of force of speech, the force of thought, the force of the imposition of a grammar. She talks about cutting, and ripping apart *Gregson V. Gilbert* in order to do this other work. It is a deliberate destruction of grammars of violence.

*[montage: drums, Judge's voice, mixed with Zong readings... fades into footage from an all-night Zong reading]*

NOURBESE: I did not think when I was writing *Zong* that I was writing something sacred. I don't think in that way. I feel like I'm not qualified to say what is sacred and what is not sacred. And I think we find the 'sacred' quote-unquote in friendships and in very ordinary things. I do not want to give the impression that I saw myself as creating

this sacred work. It was a situation that spoke to me because I had practiced law, and I did what I have done with my other works, which is I'll investigate it and write a poem about it. So, no, I don't... I didn't and I still don't have any great ideas about the importance of this work, really beyond the fact that in the moments when we do the durational readings, it's a really lovely, difficult occasion, but also affirming. And when I do readings, people are moved by it and find some value in it.

*[clips from live readings: "the that fact, the negroes.."]*

NOURBESE: Particularly when I see Black people, and African-descended people read this, for us, I think it's a way of us honouring this event that represents so much in our history, represents the erasure, represents the persistence of memory, represents survival — represents joy because at the end of it, the overwhelming feeling is, even though you're exhausted, this is in the overnight performances.. there's this constant strategizing going on — "How can I get through this?" — I find it onerous at times! And wonder, who is the person that did this..! Ha ha.

*[clips from readings]*

NOURBESE: But at the end of it, it's a strange, odd feeling of just being almost washed out, cleaned out, and it's not a feeling of being depressed or anger or how terrible this is or anything like that.

*[clips: group reading coming to end of section.. "The time.. in Africa.." [singing]]*

NOURBESE: There's something you can create for the moment, a whole from the fragments, or this net of fragments.

*[group reading footage: "Africa.." "Now the questions falls upon enemies" / "In the between of day, a sea of negroes drowned.. "Africa"..]*

*[music] [waves]*

CHRISTINA (reading): The Zong repeats. It repeats and repeats through the logic and the calculus of dehumanizing started long ago and still operative. The details and the

deaths accumulate. The “ditto ditto” fills the archives of a past that is not yet past. The holds multiply. And so does resistance to them, the survivance of them.

[music]

CHRISTINA (reading): Across time and space, the languages and apparatus of the hold and its violences multiply. So too the languages of beholding. In what ways might we enact a ‘beholden-ness’ to each other, laterally? Quote, “beholden: to hold by some type of duty or obligation; to retain as a client or person in duty bound” end-quote. Beholden in the wake as at the very least, if we are lucky, an opportunity in our black bodies to try to look, try to see.

[wave]

[clip from ocean-side readings: “This.. was.. is... is.. should and have been... is there... was there.. Ebi bola... Sonupe..” (breath, sigh)]

FRED: For some people, for the... for the devoted reader, you know, the event becomes something other than an object of study, OK? We become involved in it. Ok? And so that’s what makes it different. It’s not cos it’s new. It’s not cos it’s, “oh, we didn’t know about that before!” It’s if you thought you knew about it before, you realize you didn’t know anything. Because it’s in some fundamental sense.. it’s not really limited to the relatively vulgar operations of knowing! It expands into the much more refined operation of the feeling.

NOURBESE: Recently, as in the last maybe a year or so, at the most two years, I’ve come to understand, the most important thing happening in Zong are the silences. It’s not the words. The silences are where the honouring comes in. And the silence is also a space of potentiality. Anything is possible in that silence.

[sfx - waves]

NOURBESE: I felt I had to ask permission of the ancestors to bring these voices forward. So I travelled to Ghana and I speak to some traditional leaders there, traditional *spiritual* leaders there. The challenge for me, though, was that on my way back from Ghana to England, I realized that I had to go to Liverpool to also ask

permission of the European ancestors. Because, remember, the story's about all the people on board the ship. And that was a challenge!

And I think, without pulling any claim to being spiritual, enlightened being or anything like that, far from it. I think, on that plane, what we concern ourselves with here, in terms of issues like race, which are serious issues... I don't think that exists. I think a soul is a soul is a soul. And I felt I needed to do that as well. And so I went to Liverpool. I bought some whiskey. I went down to the harbor and I poured a libation, which is a part of African culture and asked simply in my own way that I be allowed to bring their voices forward. So that was the process that happened. And that's what I mean about it being an exercise in abdication of the.. of the ego. Yeah, I talk about "un-authoring the book." And this is a work that has to be told but it can't be told. And the only way you can tell it... is through untelling it. What I mean is that we will never know exactly what happened on board that ship. Just as we never know what happened totally in slavery, it was such a long lasting and horrendous experience. For instance, the logbook of the Zong was lost. There's never any factual evidence of what happened. So it can't be told, but it must be told. Yes? And only through the un-telling of it.

[sfx: waves]

**NAHLAH: You were listening to a documentary about M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem *Zong!***

**Each year, a collective reading event occurs on or around November 29th, the first day of the massacre in 1781. Go to our website, [CBC.ca](http://CBC.ca) - slash - Ideas for links to information about this year's events.**

[music]

**This episode was produced by Tom Howell.**

**Thanks to Christina Sharpe, Dave Gosse [pronounced GOSS], James Walvin [pr. WALL-vin], and Fred Moten. [MOW-t'n mow rhymes with 'go']**

**Thanks also to Michael Nield [pronounced like ‘kneeled’] for playing the part of Lord Justice Mansfield. [MANS-feeld].**

**You heard extracts from recorded readings and performances of *Zong!* The readers included:**

**Otoniye Juliane Okot Bitek (otto-NEE-ah JOOL-ee-ANN o-KOT bee-TEK)**

**Diane Roberts**

**Richard Douglass Chin**

**Edna Carolina Gonzalez Barona**

**Ola Mohammad (oh-la)**

**Curtis Santiago**

**Adom Philogene Heron (fill-o-ZHEN)**

**Natalie Wood**

**Amber Rose Johnson**

**Kuda Matamba**

**and, of course, M NourbeSe Philip!**

**Technical production, Danielle Duval.**

**Web producer, Lisa Ayuso.**

**Senior producer, Nicola Luksic.**

**Greg Kelly is the executive producer of Ideas.**

**And I’m Nahlah Ayed.**

**[music to fade]**