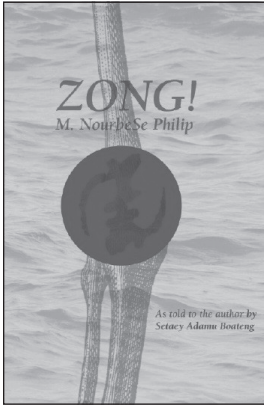


rob mclennan



Zong! by M. NourbeSe Philip. (Toronto, ON: Mercury Press, 2008, 128 pp., \$22.95.)

Zong! # 26

was the cause was the remedy was
the record was the argument was the
delay was the evidence was overboard
was the not was the cause was the was
was the need was the case was the
perils was the want was the particular
circumstance was the seas was the costs
was the could was the would was the
policy was the loss was the vessel was
the rains was the order was the that
was the this was the necessity was the
mistake was the captain was the crew
was the result was justified was the
voyage was the water was the maps
was the weeks was the winds was the
calms was the captain was the seas
was the rains was uncommon was the
declaration was the apprehension was
the voyage was destroyed was thrown
was the question was the therefore was
the this was the that was the negroes
was the cause

What is this thing called *Zong!* by Toronto writer M. NourbeSe Philip, as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng? As Philip begins in her essay, “Notanda,” at the end of the collection:

There is no telling this story: it must be told:

In 1781 a fully provisioned ship, the *Zong*, captained by one Luke Collingwood, leaves the West Coast of Africa with a cargo of 470 slaves and sets sail for Jamaica. As

is the custom, the cargo is fully insured. Instead of the customary six to nine weeks, this fateful trip will take some four months on account of navigational errors on the part of the captain. Some of the *Zong*'s cargo is lost through illness and lack of water; many others, by order of the captain are destroyed: "Sixty negroes died for want of water ... and forty others ... through thirst and frenzy ... threw themselves into the sea and were drowned; and the master and mariners ... were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes."

Captain Luke Collingwood is of the belief that if the African slaves on board die a natural death, the owners of the ship will have to bear the cost, but if they were "thrown alive into the sea, it would be the loss of the underwriters." In other words, the massacre of the African slaves would prove to be more financially advantageous to the owners of the ship and its cargo than if the slaves were allowed to die of "natural causes."

And so begins the story of Philips' complex quest, to rework the language of the court case of the captain against his insurers, to salvage a poem as a wake for those lost souls, working to salvage some kind of humanity against its own inhumanity. Her lengthy essay at the back of the collection provides a rich context to the work and where it came out of, the language she began with, a story ending with the deliberate murder of slaves at sea, and continuing with a court case that provided an impetus for change to slave traffic across the Pacific.

I have brought two legal texts with me to Vermont, one on contracts, the other is on insurance law — a branch of contract law. The boredom that comes with reading case after case is familiar and, strangely, refreshing, a diversion from going somewhere I do not wish to go. I find out what I knew before: that essentially a contract of insurance or indemnity provides that a sum of money will be paid when an event occurs which is adverse to the interests of the person who has secured insurance. But I am hunting for something — anything — to give me some bearing, since I am, metaphorically speaking, at sea, having cut myself off from the comfort and predictability of my own language — my own meaning.

What intrigues is just how she wrestles a kind of "found" language, incorporating such into a workable poetic text, tearing the language apart and reassembling it; turning the violence of what the words discuss back in on itself, making the act of writing a violence in itself, to reassert its own

power. This material of poems found in or created out of an outside text is something Canadian poetry has been tinkering with for years, whether Lisa Robertson reassembling the scientific language of weather in her poetry collection *The Weather* (Vancouver BC: New Star Books, 2001), Michael Holmes playing the language of professional wrestling in *Parts Unknown* (Toronto ON: Insomniac Press, 2004) or Rachel Zolf reworking “office speak” in her third collection, *Human Resources* (Toronto ON: Coach House Books, 2007). As Philip writes in her essay, “Law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language — the ‘right’ use of the ‘right’ words, phrases, or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both.” Perhaps this has even been a long time coming, for the self-proclaimed “poet, writer and lawyer,” merging the overlap of all her concerns in a single self-contained project.

Zong! # 15

defend the dead

weight of circumstance

ground

to usual &

etc

where the ratio of just

is less than

is necessary

to murder

the subject in property

the save in underwriter

where etc tunes justice

and the *ratio* of murder

is

the usual in occurred

Part of what Philip, among some of these examples, works is in rehumanizing a language set to do exactly the opposite (as in Zolf). Philip's poems work a scatter and a violence, fragmenting in the waves of the page in a way difficult to replicate properly in the confines of a review. Is it the sweet of water, the waves, and the song the water sings? Is it the violent tearing apart of a language expressly meant to dehumanize, after a series of dehumanizing acts, from slavery to murder, turning back into a poem written out as a wake, an acknowledgement for some one hundred and fifty human beings, writing "there is / creed there is / fate there is / oh / oh oracle / there are / oh oh / ashes / over," writing "*we act the part but ration / the facts*"? Broken up into various sections, the poem builds, the language tears, sweeps and expands across the page, finally fragmenting and even fading over itself, replicating a black or white out (as she suggests), a fading into the white of the page itself, sinking, singing, deep into water.

This poem makes its way through water, witness and song; and is it any accident that the final word of her text is "reason" (p. 182)?