

Institute of Contemporary Arts

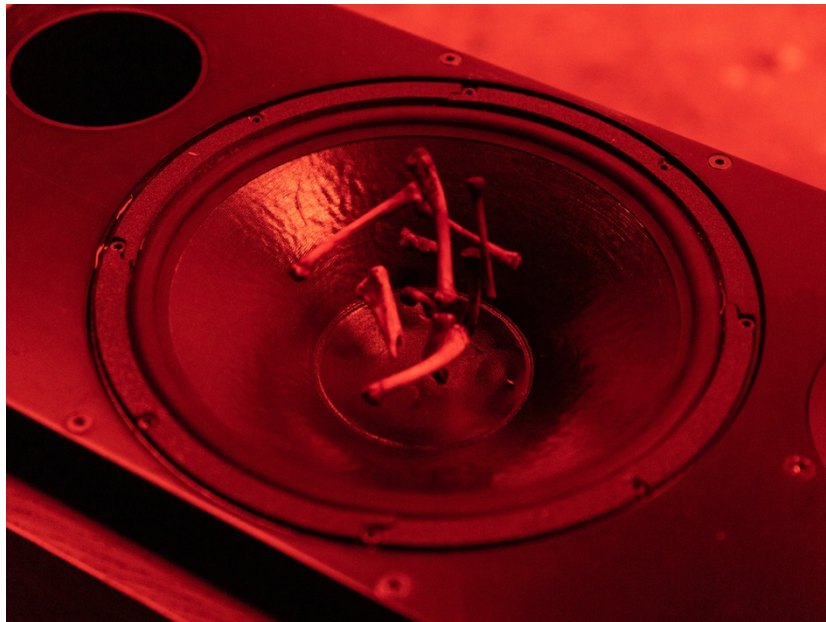
PRESS RELEASE

STRANGE ECHOES

22–27 February 2022

THE ICA PRESENTS 'STRANGE ECHOES', A SIX-DAY CONVENING OF SPOKEN WORD, SHORT FILMS, LISTENING SESSIONS, WORKSHOPS AND CONVERSATIONS CELEBRATING M. NOURBESE PHILIP AND FOREGROUNDING BLACK BRITISH EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

The convening puts M. NourbeSe Philip's work in dialogue with British poets, writers, artists, and academics to articulate questions of race, silence, politics and poetics.



Called To Respond, Shenece Oretha, installation view,
Cell Project Space, London. Courtesy the artist.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts presents *Strange Echoes*, a six-day convening curated by poet Olivia Douglass that celebrates the life, work and influence of poet and writer M. NourbeSe Philip.

Philip's writing has a deep influence on Black experimental writing in Britain today, and *Strange Echoes* positions Philip's work as a call to which artists respond in creative forms, spanning poetry, installation, film, audio and live music. Collectivity, language, belonging, and the poetics of the fragment, are themes and concerns that persist throughout the convening.

M. NourbeSe Philip's writing is marked by a striking distrust and re-dubbing of the English language as a colonial tool, its design reducing the experience of African people to abstraction and commodity. In her seminal texts *She Tries Her Tongue*, *Her*

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Silence Softly Breaks and *Zong!* language is ruptured and exploded in order to reveal the violence and absurdity it imposes on Black people. Her profound deconstruction of colonial language and logic urges readers to consider how the brutality and infrastructure of the transatlantic slave trade still reverberates into the realities of the world today.

As Black writers in Britain grapple with the country's history, racism, politics and culture, they find resonance with Philip's poetic exploration of exile and the ache of belonging. Philip's work becomes a blueprint for articulating the complexity and beauty of Black life, and emboldens experimental, fugitive writing. With this guidance, new generations of writers across the African diaspora continue to map routes towards alternative visions of liberation and being.

Inspired by the 'song, moan, shout, oath, ululation, curse, chant' that composes Philip's *Zong!*, a polyvocal, book-length poem concerning slavery and the legal system, *Strange Echoes* gathers poets, artists, writers and audiences, and seeks to catalyse collective dialogue, contributing Black British voices to M. NourbeSe Philip's unfolding chorus of dissent.

Commissioned for the ICA Theatre on the occasion of *Strange Echoes*, artist Shenece Oretha's *at/Tribute* is a sound and light installation that pays tribute to Philip. A multivocal reading of *Zong!*, *at/Tribute* will be open to audiences throughout the convening (22–27 Feb), acting as both a meeting point and a listening site and transforming the theatre into a space for communion with different speakers, voices and histories.

Strange Echoes opens with a screening of *Frontiers of Silence*, a short film series made by Douglass featuring poets Courtney Conrad, Esther Heller and Eburn Sodipo, followed by a conversation between M. NourbeSe Philip (who joins on Zoom), Shenece Oretha and poet Victoria Adukwei Bulley (22 Feb). Workshops will be led by Professor Joan-Anim Addo (23 Feb) and K Bailey Obazee, founder of PRIM, a digital platform for queer Black storytelling (26 Feb). A spoken word night hosts poetry readings by Olivia Douglass, Latekid, Abundance Matanda and Kareem Parkins-Brown, all accompanied by a live band (24 Feb). *Strange Echoes* will be closed by M. NourbeSe Philip whose live voice will transform the ICA theatre into a 'listening room' (26 Feb).

Olivia Douglass, Curator, *Strange Echoes*, said:

'For me, M. NourbeSe Philip's writing arrived like a first breath above water. Her texts affirm our being, in turn urging me to follow the instinctive need to disobey the language, the logic, within which I write. As I look around in awe at the generation of Black writers, poets, thinkers, and dreamers to which I belong, I feel wild gratitude for the freedom and futures Philip's work offers us. In extension to being a site of celebration, I hope that this convening is an added impulse to a culture of Black poetry and writing thriving in the UK.'

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M. NourbeSe Philip, poet and scholar, said:

‘(I)t is imperative that our writing begin to recreate our histories and our myths, as well as integrate that most painful of experiences – loss of our history and our word. The reacquisition of power to create in one’s own i-i-mage and to create one’s own i-mage is vital to this process ...’
(*The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy*)

— ENDS —

NOTES TO EDITORS

With contributions from Joan Anim-Addo, K Bailey Obazee, Victoria Adukwei Bulley, Courtney Conrad, Olivia Douglass, Esther Heller, Latekid, Abondance Matanda, Shenece Oretha, Kareem Parkins-Brown, M. NourbeSe Philip and Eburn Sodipo.

Olivia Douglass

Olivia Douglass is a British-Nigerian writer and poet. They are the author of *Slow Tongue* (2018), a verse/lyric-essay hybrid that responds to M. NourbeSe Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Their writing appears in publications including *Bath Magg*, *Nothing Personal*, *Prototype 2*, and they wrote the foreword for *Away With Word vol. 4*. A Barbican Young Poets Alumna, Douglass has been commissioned by the National Poetry Library (London) and Galleria Duarte Sequeira in (Portugal), alongside curating reading rooms for Passa Porta Festival (Brussels) and Nottingham Contemporary. They have held residencies with Talawa Theatre Company and Theatre Peckham, been shortlisted for the Rebecca Swift Foundation’s Women Poet Prize 2020, and in 2021 was longlisted for a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship. Douglass’s writing is concerned with articulating alternative visions of liberated Black queer experiences, away from colonial frameworks. They are currently working on a debut poetry collection.

M. NourbeSe Philip

M. NourbeSe Philip is a Tobago-born unembedded poet, essayist, novelist, playwright and independent scholar who lives in the space-time of the City of Toronto, where she practised law for seven years before becoming a poet and writer. Among her published works are the seminal *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989); the speculative prose poem *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991); the young adult novel *Harriet’s Daughter* (1988); the play *Coups and Calypsos*; and four collections of essays, including her collection *BlanK* (2017). Her book-length poem *Zong!* is a conceptually innovative, genre-breaking epic, which explodes the legal archive as it relates to slavery. *Zong!* was named the 2021 winner of World Literature Today’s 21 Books for the 21st Century.

Among her awards are numerous Canada Council for the Arts and Ontario Arts Council grants, including the prestigious Chalmers Award (Ontario Arts Council) and the Canada Council’s Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award (outstanding mid-career artist), as well as the Pushcart Prize (USA), the Casa de las Américas Prize (Cuba), the Lawrence Foundation Prize (USA), the Arts Foundation of Toronto Writing and Publishing Award and Dora Award finalist (Drama). Her fellowships include Guggenheim, McDowell and Rockefeller (Bellagio). She is an awardee of both the YWCA Women of Distinction Awards (Arts) and the Elizabeth Fry Society Rebels for a Cause Awards. She has been Writer-in-Residence at several universities and a guest at writers’ retreats. M. NourbeSe Philip is the 2020 recipient of the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature and the 2021 recipient of the Molson Prize, the

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Canada Council for the Arts' lifetime achievement award, for her 'invaluable contributions to literature'.

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The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) is an independent organisation that supports the most pressing debates in contemporary culture. From its home on The Mall, the geographic heart of the UK establishment, the ICA presents a programme that speaks to the challenges of the 21st century: timely exhibitions, performances, independent film and keynote lectures by many of the world's leading thinkers. Founded in 1946 by a collective of artists, poets and their supporters, the ICA played a pivotal role in the development of pop art and charted the course of punk, performance art and independent cinema. The ICA is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and is supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Culture Recovery Fund.

Access

If you have an access requirement that we can assist you with, please get in touch in advance of your visit and we will make our best endeavours to help you. Please contact us in advance of your visit for more information at access@ica.art. Full venue accessibility information can be found here and you can download an accessibility map of the venue [here](#).

VISITOR INFORMATION

Opening times: *Strange Echoes* can be visited during regular ICA opening hours Tuesday–Sunday 12–9pm.

Location: Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London, SW1Y 5AH

For information about tickets and membership, please contact:
sales@ica.art / +44 (0) 20 7930 3647 / www.ica.art



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