

WITH LOVE AND VIOLENCE:

“I deeply distrust this tool I work with — language. It is a distrust rooted in certain historical events...and I distrust its order, which hides disorder; its logic hiding the logic and its rationality, which is simultaneously irrational.” —M. NourbeSe Philip

The legal documents that intersperse our lives—birth and death and marriage certificates, applications for school and citizenship, contracts—live alongside our personal documents (journals, letters, photographs, notes). In this seminar workshop, we will explore the special work of documentary poetics—history that only poets can write—and how each of us might contribute to a greater understanding of history, culture, and justice/injustice. From Anne Carson’s fanfold, collaged elegy for her brother, Nox, to M. NourbeSe Philip’s fragmentary historiography of the slave ship *Zong!*, we will think together about engaging the documents of your life and history. Participants are encouraged to bring a document they would like to engage with them for use in workshop. Instructor will also provide documents for use in exercises.

When working with document:

**You have to decide what you want to do.** (Philip, *Zong!*: “this story must be told by not telling... the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text. I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong!*.)

**You have to decide what you do not want to do.** (Wright, *One Big Self*: not idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticized immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not anathematize. What I wanted was to unequivocally layout the real feel of hard time. I wanted it given to understand that when you pass four prisons in less than an hour, the countrysides apparent emptiness is more legible.

**You have to let go**—of the bulk of the text (usually quite physically!), of understanding completely.

**What is the emotion you feel towards the text?** These emotions are also your guiding reasons for creating something from the text in front of you.

Muriel Rukeyser wrote: “Poetry can extend the document.” **How are you extending the document?**

M. NourbeSe Philip, from **Zong!:**

“we believe we have the freedom to choose any words we want to work with from the universe of words, but so much of what we work with is a given”

“grammar an ordering but a violent and necessary ordering”

“making a whole from a fragment, or, perhaps, a fragment from a whole”

“I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards, and like some seer, sangoma, or prophet who, having sacrificed an animal fir signs and portents if a new life, or simply life, reads the untold story that tells itself by not telling.”

suppose the law  
is  
not  
does  
not  
would  
not  
be  
not  
suppose the law not  
— a crime  
suppose the law a loss  
suppose the law  
suppose

first:  
the when  
the which  
the who  
the were  
the throwing  
overboard  
the be  
come apprehended  
exist did not

**Susan Briante, questions from DEFACING THE MONUMENT  
(Noemi Press, 2020):**

Why must our documents be coherent if order is what we want to disrupt?

How do we use the documents we have to imagine something else?

When does witnessing become voyeurism?

What ruins are you writing through or writing with?

Is your poem / project a haunting of that ruin? Why or why not?

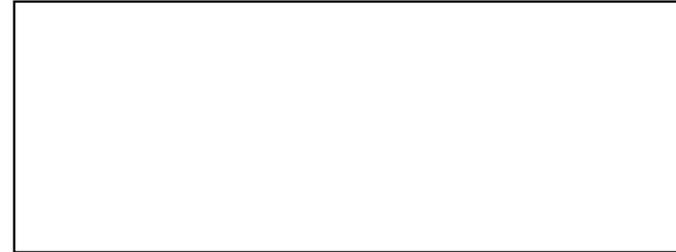
Is your poems / project a reconstruction or renovation? Why or why not?

Are you making a monument or defacing a monument through your poem's project

**2. QUESTIONS AND PROVOCATIONS FOR THE DOCUMENTARIAN**

***An Autolocation Exercise***

Place yourself in the center of this box.



Now place a point on a paper to represent your subject matter.

Draw your links to your subject matter. Map your intersections.

With what kind of ruler should you scale your proximity?

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Where were you born and where did the world rise up for you?  
What history falls behind you like a shadow? How are you writing  
in relation to your history? In hush, in slur, in scream?

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What does your complete project look like on the shelf, screen,  
book, web?

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Excuses and Waivers<sup>1</sup>

instruction in the home  
at a  
site remote from school  
this shall apply to any child  
every other person a special program  
having control charge of any child  
shall  
The provisions of this article shall not apply to  
cause such child private  
Children suffering  
home instruction  
private private  
who live more than two miles from a school  
where such children live  
private  
education

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<sup>1</sup> An erasure of the Commonwealth of Virginia’s “religious exemption” for homeschooling, as found in the Code of Virginia: “§ 22.1-254. Compulsory attendance required; excuses and waivers; alternative education program

attendance; exemptions from article.” Virginia is the only state to offer such an exemption, and is the headquarters for the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA)

Visual excerpt below from Anne Carson's fanfold collaged book NOX, an elegy for her brother.

## STOPPING

WHOSE woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Above erasure of Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Mary Ruefle.

***ipsum***

*ipse ipsa ipsum* pronoun and adjective

[IS+PSE, of disputed origin] himself (herself, itself, oneself, etc.) as opposed to others; for his (her, etc.) own part; in person (as opposed to through intermediaries, letters, etc.); the actual himself (herself, etc.) as opposed to persons more remotely connected; the real state of affairs, the fact, reality; acting or considered alone by himself; himself and no other; this or that very; just, the very; the master 'himself'; *ipse tristis* the sad one.

