

An impressionistic painting of a ship at sea. The sky is a mix of warm, hazy colors like yellow, orange, and red, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The sea is dark and turbulent, with white foam from the ship's wake. The ship's masts and rigging are visible as dark, vertical lines against the bright sky. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes.

Prompts and Play: In theory and creative practice

Writing with/against a legal document  
by Ellis-Neyra

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***Writing with/against a legal document***

(Prompt Abstract: With M. NourbeSe Philip's "breaking and entering" the "Zong" case in mind, locate a metaphor in a legal text with or against which you want to write.)

For this assignment, my students work in a relation to a legal text and any of the following literary texts and films: Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*; M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*; Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*; Jeff Barnaby's *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*; Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*; and/or José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

The stakes of this assignment are to poetically undermine the law's claims to dominion over life and death.

1. Make a decision to work from one legal document, event, or phenomenon that *moves you*. How it moves you is open—as in, it could enrage you, depress you, incite you to wish for revolt, or stimulate some accord (perhaps this legal phenomenon is, dare we imagine it, ethical). The point here is: focus on one legal text/event/object that you can cite, and that gives you *language* to work with and around.
2. This assignment can take video, audio, or written forms. Whichever mediatic/aesthetic/textual form you work in will convey an analysis, one that makes specific use of that genre/medium's materiality, imaginary, and history.
3. Channeling M. NourbeSe Philip's "breaking and entering" the relatively slim but exponentially violent legal transcripts of the 1783 *Gregson v. Gilbert*, or "Zong", Case, in *your process* of reading and re-reading the legal document/event/object, let a metaphor emerge for how you are working on/against/beside/off of the law. The metaphor may emerge from lingering with the language of the law. Pay attention to what makes you suspicious, uneasy, or somehow stimulated. Dig deeper into that place: what exactly is getting to you? What other laws does this one reference? What structures does it require to enplace itself and reiterate its power? Make your process's metaphor manifest in your piece—use it. Remember that metaphors operate like bridges, or vehicular transport that gets you from an A to a B. But that movement from A to B need not involve drawing a straight line of thought *per se*. Indeed, think about trajectory through curves and wandering; think about what makes metaphorical sense in how you are trafficking the law into your piece, and how your piece disrupts or bends that law's exact iterability.
4. If you are writing, stay within the frame of 3-7 double spaced pages. I offer this range because whether you use paragraphs, rhymed and metered stanzas, or free verse,

whatever containers and patterns carry your thoughtful and creative analyses will call for different amounts of page-space to get to the end of your idea and argument.

If you are working with audio or video, you must submit a written score to orient and explicate to your audience/interlocutor what is being referenced legally, and how you imagine your aesthetic strategy operates. The written score can be a page or two long—use space as it makes sense in relation to what you've made. Keep audio or video to 7-10 minutes, i.e., edit yourself. Plz: no nudity, fire, or featuring *your body* in any visual work, please.

5. What will I evaluate, as that is my role (to play (with)) here: that the aforementioned parameters have been used; that your piece's structure or form holds its argument and does not contradict itself; that the piece has given thought to its own materiality and history, and how such can be used to deviate from the legal reference's materiality and history; that a metaphor emerges from your process of re-reading and making something else.