

Documentary Poetry, Poetics, and Craft

Documentary poets have received considerable attention by literary scholars, craft critics, and educators for their experimental techniques and intellectual rigor. Some current scholarship on American documentary poetry and poetics focuses on the colonial perception of the “other.” In other words, the experience of marginalized people (immigrant, ethnic, working-class, LGBTQ+) is marred by race, gender, and class discrimination and indifference to sexual orientation (outside heteronormative standards) and non-white western customs.

Documentary poetics offers a lens for examining poetry, poetic form, and poetic craft. Such poetics can encompass a theory on poetry or poetic form(s), commentary on writing poems, or criticism on a poet’s use of poetic devices or craft skills evoked within a poetry movement or school. Craft critic Philip Metres states that poets who engage documentary poetics “give voice to stories of people and movements that the mass media tend to ignore or misrepresent” (1). Many practitioners of documentary poetry and/or poetics focus on social justice as a central theme. They also employ activism, identity formation, and community empowerment as tenets of this theme. Documentary poets employ experimental poetic techniques and forms, cultural aesthetics, and sociopolitical commentary in their craft process.

Crafting documentary poetry is experimental and can involve integrating elements of visual art (film, photography, paintings, political cartoons, mixed-media art), music lyrics, content from historical archives, print media (newspapers, magazines), official documents (legal records, written correspondence, medical records, testimonials), and/or resource materials (advertisements, pamphlets). Utilizing such resources in crafting poetry creates meaning and provokes discourse. The language, tone, imagery, setting, characterization, metrical length, and poetic form used by poets vary according to their subject matter. The “poet as journalist, poet as documentarian, poet as historian, poet as agitator” provokes readers to think critically about issues relevant to society while appreciating the poet’s use of poetic form, language, and imagery (Metres 1).

Learning Activity: “Crafting a Documentary Poetics Statement”

Description of the activity: For this interactive activity, students will utilize their critical reading and writing skills to craft a documentary poetics statement. Instructors can introduce students to model documentary poems focusing on the theme of social justice.

Documentary Poetics Statement

For this learning activity, students will develop a two- to three-page documentary poetics statement, critiquing a documentary poem of their choice. Instructors can assign a five-paragraph essay or a free-write for the poetics statement. If the instructor chooses the free-write option, it would be helpful for students to select one or two central themes and poetic devices that they find interesting and important. It would also be important for instructors to teach students how to find and cite evidence from poetry to support their writing on the themes and poetic devices. For the five-paragraph essay option, students must develop a thesis statement in which they will state the

theme, poetic device(s), and resource material(s) used to create the documentary poem. Here are two thesis statement templates:

(Author) (shows, develops, illustrates) the theme of _____ in the (play, poem, story) through (poetic device(s)), (information source(s)/resource material(s)).

Example: Martín Espada illustrates the theme of social justice in the poem “Floaters” through alliteration, imagery, and a Facebook post.

In (title of work), (author) uses (literary element(s)/device(s)) and (information source(s)/resource material(s)) to (accomplish, develop, explore, illustrate) (theme or element of work).

Example: In “Theme for English B,” Hughes uses repetition, symbolism, and autobiographical information to explore the theme of identity.

The instructor can model concise paragraph structure and the development of main points that help explain or support the thesis statement. If instructors use the suggested thesis templates, they can use the following criteria for organizing the body paragraphs:

- **Body paragraph #1** can focus on the social justice theme. Students can identify and discuss issue(s) related to the social justice theme.
- **Body paragraph #2** can focus on the poetic device(s) used to illustrate or explain how the social justice theme is explored in the poem. Students can include one example for analyzing how a poetic device is used by the poet.
- **Body paragraph #3** can focus on the resource material(s) and/or information source(s) used by the poet to document issue(s) related to the social justice theme.

For instance, if I teach the poem “A Parable” by Australian Aboriginal poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, I can focus on the child removal policy as a social justice theme. I would then model how Eckermann uses the parable as a poetic form to explore the effects of the child removal policy on Aboriginal mothers. Issues connected to the social justice theme in Eckermann’s poem are colonial oppression, trauma, and racism. The poet uses the parable form as well as poetic devices (e.g., imagery), historical information, and parent testimonial to document these issues within the poem.

Learning objectives:

- Gain an understanding of documentary poetry through exploring a theme of social justice and experimenting with poetic craft.
- Practice critically reading a poem with attention to themes, poetic form, author’s purpose, language use, and poetic devices.
- Engage the documentary poetics statement as a work of literary criticism and craft commentary.
- Identify a theme in the poem that connects to social justice.
- Identify issues that the poet raises to explore the social justice theme.

- Identify poetic devices used by the poet to illustrate and/or explain the social justice theme.
- Identify information source(s) and/or resource material(s) used by the poet to craft/create the poem. Consider how the poet uses the information source(s) and/or resource material(s) to experiment with language, poetic form, space, etc.

Central tenet of the learning activity: Students envision themselves as engaged readers and practitioners of documentary poetics.

Method for assessing student learning: Instructors will assess students' critical reading and analysis skills through their understanding of a poet's use of poetic devices, experimental techniques, and social justice themes.

Model Documentary Poems

- ❖ "Instructions to All Persons" from *Legends from Camp* by Lawson Inada
- ❖ "Incendiary Art: MOVE, Philadelphia, 1985," "Incendiary Art: Ferguson, 2014," and "No Wound of Exit" from *Incendiary Art* by Patricia Smith
- ❖ "Millie and Christine McKoy" from *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess
- ❖ "Theme for English B" and "I, Too" by Langston Hughes
- ❖ "Floaters" by Martín Espada
- ❖ "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings" by Joy Harjo
- ❖ "George Robinson: Blues" from *The Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser
- ❖ *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
- ❖ "Children 3" from *Testimony* by Charles Reznikoff
- ❖ "Believer" by Natasha Trethewey
Link to the poem: <https://www.vqronline.org/believer>
Link to the video: <https://vimeo.com/6362681>
- ❖ "Hope: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica" and "Voices from Haiti" by Kwame Dawes
Link to the video: <http://www.livehopelove.com/>
- ❖ "A Parable" by Ali Cobby Eckermann

Model Documentary Poetics

- "Documentary Poetics" by Mark Nowak
- "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The poet as journalist, historian, agitator" by Philip Metres

Online Sources

- ✓ Documentary Poetry: <http://docupoemunit.weebly.com/>
- ✓ Coal Mountain blog by Mark Nowak: <http://coalmountain.wordpress.com/>