EVENT TITLE: “Re-Membering Past and Present: The Practice of Documentary Poetry”

Event Description: Documentary, or “research-based,” poetry provides writers with opportunities to present contemporary or historical complexities through wedded structure and content. The panelists include leading theorists and practitioners who will reflect on seminal texts within documentary poetry and examine the subgenre’s benefits, including how chosen forms can further a text’s message, demonstrate an artistic version of a truth commission, de-center hegemonic or colonial narratives, and chronicle the now.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Tara Ballard: Tara Ballard is the author of House of the Night Watch. A PhD student in English at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, she is an assistant poetry editor for Prairie Schooner and affiliate editor for Alaska Quarterly Review.

Event Participants

Joseph Harrington: Joseph Harrington is the author of Disapparitions; Of Some Sky; Goodnight Whoever’s Listening; Things Come On (an amneoir); and the critical work Poetry and the Public. From 2019-2023, he maintained a real-time online verse-chronicle of the climate crisis, “The Poem of Our Climate.”

Michael Leong: Michael Leong's most recent books are Words on Edge (Black Square Editions, 2018) and Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry (University of Iowa Press, 2020). He is Robert P Hubbard Assistant Professor of Poetry at Kenyon College.

Philip Metres: Philip Metres is the author and translator of a number of books, including Fugitive/Refuge (2024), Shrapnel Maps, The Sound of Listening, Sand Opera. His work has garnered Guggenheim and Lannan fellowships, two NEAs, three Arab American book awards, and the Hunt Prize. He is professor of English at John Carroll University.

Paisley Rekdal: Paisley Rekdal is the author, most recently, of West: A Translation, Appropriate: A Provocation, and Nightingale. A Guggenheim fellow and Utah’s former Poet Laureate, she teaches at the University of Utah, where she edits the web archive Mapping Literary Utah and directs The American West Center.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good morning, and welcome to “Re-Membering Past and Present: The Practice of Documentary Poetry.”

Before we begin, we would like to review a few gentle reminders:
• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me, as the moderator of the panel, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
• Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
• Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Thank you all for being here. We know you have a lot of panel and bookfair options, and we greatly appreciate you spending this time with us.

I am grateful to be surrounded by the incredible poets and scholars who make up this panel, and I am honored to introduce you to Michael Leong, Joseph Harrington, Philip Metres, and Paisley Rekdal.

[Read brief introductions for each panelist.]

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of poet Niki Herd, who was part of our initial brainstorming team and is a significant scholar in the discussion of the subgenre.

My name is Tara Ballard.

[Read brief introduction in first-person.]

During this panel, each of us will provide any relevant details regarding our creative or scholarly work before reading what we have prepared on documentary poetry for ten minutes each.

At the end of the event, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones. Thank you.

Michael Leong: In September 2020, I received an email out of the blue from John-Michael Rivera. It represents, apart from teaching, one of my favorite aspects of our profession: how we can learn from one another and find intellectual and creative common ground. This is a short excerpt from John-Michael’s message: “I wanted to write you and tell you how much I enjoyed your book, Contested Records! It was well thought out and timely indeed. It does not fully engage the Latinx tradition of docupoetics, and to be honest I understand why, especially since there are so few Latinx writers who do this work (Tejada, Martinez, Gimenez-Smith, Cervantes, Alurista, Corky and many others who came out of El Movimiento—writers who actually put manifestos in their poetry). But, of course, Latinx writers have been out of most conversations of any type of contemporary poetics, especially ‘conceptual.’ […] I know that was not your project and your work does indeed create an incredibly important foundation that I plan to
teach to my grad students this Spring in a class called UNDOCUMENTALITY [...] I attach the cover of my new book UNDOCUMENTS--and I think you will see by the title I am very much exploring what you locate. I wish I would have read your book before my manuscript was in press, as I surely would have included you and I think I would have better known what it is I was trying to do... I locate a term I call undocumentality and engage the anxiety in Greater Mexico created from the spectral docupoetics of our current moment.” In turn, I went on to learn a lot from UNDOCUMENTS. I enjoyed teaching it in a MA-level seminar at CalArts, where I formerly worked, and invited John-Michael to visit my class and give a lecture. To document our overlapping interests, I’d like to “stage” a poetic dialogue between my book Contested Records and his book UNDOCUMENTS by collaging together portions of our texts.

**Joseph Harrington:** My contribution will address the way “documentary poetry” often manifests as documentary mixed-genre (and -media) writing, and why that might be. I’ll discuss my most recent book, Disapparitions, which is centered around the several meanings of the word “spook” in mid-twentieth century America. It incorporates segmented, essayistic prose, as well as lyric, procedural, voice-based, and collage poetry. The prose sets forth the historical narrative(s) and argument; it is meant to provide context for the verse. The verse, in turn, is meant to explore the affective, unconscious, thematic, and nonrational implications of the prose.

I will also briefly discuss my verse-chronicle, “The Poem of Our Climate,” which I wrote as a real-time account of the impact of climate chaos on human beings, both globally and locally. The chronicle exists within a blog which initially alternated between the verse and prose reflections on “creative writing” in the era of climate emergency. Is the verse-chronicle a poem? If not, could/should it be? Does it matter? And is the real poem the climate itself, a poem which we are all composing?

**Tara Ballard:** As a poet, I am often thinking about the ways in which a chosen form impacts, or is in conversation with, a chosen subject. When it comes to this form-content conversation in the subgenre of documentary poetry, I have been considering possibilities for the resistive that exist through the work of Layli Long Soldier, Marwa Helal, and Reginald Dwayne Betts, three writers I turn to as examples for their powerful re-vision: utilizing the structures of state or official language, not as end points, but to better reveal historical truths. To examine the potential for resistance through this subgenre, I am reminded of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her argument for “affirmative sabotage.” Spivak claims that it is through an intimate, working familiarity with the oppressor’s machines that one can manipulate and, therefore, disrupt, the intended aim. The machine then, or, in the case of documentary poets, the form of the poem, can perhaps be re-fused in order to serve another purpose than what was initially envisioned. If documentary poetry, in the words of Sarah Ehler and Niki Herd, repurposes “documents of empire” to draw attention to historical or contemporary sociopolitical circumstances and creates “oppositional value” through new “landscapes of resistance” (17), then is it possible for the concept of “affirmative sabotage” to be applied to the subgenre? If so, how do we, as poets, take this possibility into account when we draft new work or engage in projects that seek to resist narratives of oppression or political mythologies?
Philip Metres: What is Documentary Poetry in an Age of Reel/Real-Time Genocide?

Since October 7th, those of us who pay attention to the Palestine/Israel predicament have been inundated by—or are ourselves inundating—images of the bombings and its consequences. The violence is the worst since the founding of Israel in 1948, and outpaces anything that’s happened in what Rashid Khalidi refers to as the One Hundred Year War on Palestine. Perhaps more intensively than ever before, we are witnessing a real time (or reel time) unfolding of what many international human rights experts have called a genocide.

Having researched, written, and published Shrapnel Maps as polyvocal, investigative/documentary poetic text to start conversations about Palestine and Israel, I found the new iteration of violence both encouraged real-time historical primers and frustrated the measure of human complexity that I found in engaging with Palestinians and Israelis themselves, and that has long been the province of literature. After the shock of Hamas’s attacks, some critics noted that critique itself—at least in official, corporate media—was suddenly forbidden. And in some sense, the ongoing disinformation and censorship campaigns have created their own no-speak zones. Social media—despite its own measures of control and matrix of the information war—has been a space where once marginalized voices and perspectives have suddenly gained purchase, and even popularity.

And with the ongoing murders of journalists and poets alike, what can poetry do—not just documentary poetry?

Poetry’s durability is sometimes in proportion to its belatedness. Poetry is often a practice where first thought is usually not the best thought, nor even the final word. As it happens, poetry’s belatedness is paired with international law’s belatedness when it comes to defining genocide. Calling any event a genocide, particularly when unmoored from legal definitions of genocide, has become one of the go-to politicized moves of attention-grabbers.

The documentary/investigative poetry impulse spans historical and contemporary and ought to create a thread between them, but the present constantly recedes like the angel of history blown into the future. In other words, in a situation where genocide may actually be unfolding, when situations arise of monumental historical significance, is there not a need for other kinds of poetry, more transient, fugitive, and truthful to the moment?

In other words, it’s not enough to share the poetry of Hida Abu Nada or Refaat Alareer. Perhaps no poet has been more tireless in his production of writing—and his ever-widening reach—than Mosab Abu Toha. His work, and indeed the work of others like Motaz, invite us to think about a criticism that could treat a social media curation as a form of live documentary poetry. Once we release the page and book as our only source and look to new media, we might find how poets employ—or perhaps deploy language and narrative to fit the nebulous, changing story of an ongoing, massive traumatic event.
Paisley Rekdal: As someone who has written about appropriation in literature, and also who has written a book using documentary appropriation as a way of critiquing and also responding to the cultural impact of the transcontinental railroad on American history and culture, I want to speak about the ways that appropriation can be an ethical literary tool in documentary poetics. With that in mind, I will be talking about some of the critical and creative work by Susan Briante, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Sara Uribé, among others who have investigated the problems and possibilities of literary appropriation. I would also like to think about the ways in which our media influence how we receive/respond to the (appropriative) documentary poems we create, and the validity of their authorship. My project, West: A Translation, is both a book and a website, and other digital projects such as Blue Velvet (a digital project investigating the history and impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans) and 88 Constellations of Wittgenstein (a work of creative nonfiction whose linear, non-narrative structure allows a reader to “reconstruct” a life of Wittgenstein and his relationship to the Holocaust) offer fascinating possibilities for more interactive relationships between text and reader, effectively allowing readers to become co-authors themselves by assembling documentary material through their own self-selection, thus creating their own textual meaning from appropriated archival material. Essentially, my talk will question the idea of authorship itself. When working across media and through appropriated archival material, how do we finally determine authorship, and is shared authorship a possible, even desirable goal in documentary poetics?