

Critical, Ethical and Informed Poetic Observation: a study on the craft of documentary poetry

What is Documentary Poetry?

I entered my research venture with the idea that I was going to synthesize a definition of documentary poetry. But because it is a young genre, documentary poetry is highly fluid and impressionable: each time an artist adds to its canon, the genre grows and changes. It shares fundamentals with several other foundational art forms, but it also extends past each of them. To consider a “definition”—which must be fundamentally non-comprehensive, as it evolves alongside the canon—I first had to think about what documentary poetry is *not*, and what it is *more than*.



More Than Witness:

A documentary poem is not just an account of an event, but a study on the documentation of said event. It asks:

- *do you know why it happened?* Or,
- *did you know it happened differently than you think it did?* Or,
- *do you know who felt what when it happened?*



More Than Documentation:

A documentary poem is not only a literary explanation of a document. A documentary poem:

- interrogates or extrapolates the document, or
- reveals alternative intentions of the document, or
- contextualizes the meaning of the document (especially if it is revealing the document for the first time).



More Than Poetry:

A documentary poem is an opportunity to reveal the impact of the document in question, via all of the traditional properties of poetry. The definition “poetry”, however, does not bind the work to any particular structure. Instead, it:

- allows (thoughtful and intentional) questions to exist within the work.
- refers to the use of language and form which expands and reframes a document to make it accessible, either to those who have not yet seen it or who have only considered it from one angle.
- refers to the use of language as a tool to reveal, highlight, celebrate, or condemn the document.

Whose story is it?

Representation is a non-neutral practice. Just as a documentarian authors what is or is not in the camera frame, a poet authors the framing of the poem. An effective documentary poet does not:

- get caught up in the myth of “giving voice”.
- exploit documents, by:
 - a) extracting pieces of the document with the intention to silence instead of reveal.
 - b) over-interpret the document such that it can no longer speak for itself.
- tell a story that is not theirs to tell.

SOURCES

Briante, Susan. *Defacing the Monument*. Noemi Press, 2020.

Long Soldier, Layli. *Whereas*. Graywolf Press, 2017.

Nelson, Maggie. *Jane a Murder*. Soft Skull Press, 2005.

Santos Perez, Craig. *from unincorporated territory [hacha]*. Omnidawn Publishing, 2017.

Sikelianos, Eleni. *The Book of Jon*. City Lights, 2004.

Harrington, Joseph. “Docupoetry and Archive Desire.” *Jacket 2*, 2011, <https://jacket2.org/article/docupoetry-and-archive-desire>.

Park Hong, Cathy. “Against Witness.” *Poetry Foundation*, 2015, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70218/against-witness>.

Magi, Jill. “Poetry in Light of Documentary.” *Chicago Review*, vol. 59, no. 1/2, 2014, pp. 248–275. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24770460.

What Constitutes a Document?

A POLITICAL TEXT

WHEREAS my eyes land on the shoreline of “the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples.” Because in others, I hate the act of laughing when hurt injured or in cases of danger. That bitter hiding, My daughter picks up new habits from friends. She’d been running, tripped, slid on knees and palms onto asphalt. They carried her into the kitchen, *she just fell, she’s bleeding!* Deep red streams down her arms and legs, trails on white tile. I looked at her face. A smile quivered her. A laugh, a nervous. Doing as her friends do, she braved new behavior, feigned a grin—I couldn’t name it but I could spot it. *Stop, my girl. If you’re hurting, cry.* Like that. She let it out, a flood from living room to bathroom. Then a soft water pour I washed carefully light touch clean cotton to bandage. I faced her I reminded, *In our home in our family we are ourselves, real feelings. Be true.* Yet I’m serious when I say I laugh reading the phrase, “opened a new chapter.” I can’t help my body. I shake. The realization that it took this phrase to show. My daughter’s quiver isn’t new—but a deep practice very old she’s watching me:

From *Whereas* by Layli Long Soldier. Long Soldier mimics the language and structure of The Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans, to criticize its intentions and its gaps.

A DIARY

(APRIL 15, 1960)

I’ve not written for awhile and it’s unfortunate for I’ve been filled with happiness. No troubles.

I’m getting along well in school, don’t sass Mrs. Ingalls any more. The girls have been nice to me, happiness at home, a feeling of oh—I don’t know—

I feel like reading the Bible.

From *Jane, a Murder* by Maggie Nelson. Nelson enjambes Jane’s diary, to influence where emphases lie. Nelson may also have curated the diary to reduce it from a longer form, to highlight essential pieces.

A PHOTO

Here, my mom has matched my hair bauble with my turtle neck with my yellow daisy dress. The era I loved to be femme. Dress me up, all day long. Take me out. Here, my fists wrapped around my two favourite play-things: toothbrush and hairbrush, the items I used to comb my brown bob. Watch her, my Grandma said, around this time, to my mom and my dad. She will grow up into a whole lot of sass. All the better, my dad said. She wants to be an artist (here, he must have looked at me and I must have nodded, because at the time of this photo I did not like to speak). Here my mom has matched Maxx’s bow-tie with his collared sweater with his Koala-red toddler’s lips. He did not mind, did not notice. All clothes wore the same. Soiled the same, tore the same. He was Arrow-Guy, his legs stuck through VHS covers. Not to keep him safe (he was not destructible) but to be armor. Around the time of this photo, my dad bought Maxx his own tool kit. *Hammer on the nails, kiddet, not the windows* (a redirection of energy).

From *Photos from Vanderhoof 1999*, one of three documentary poems I wrote during my research. This poem expands a photo into the context and tone of the setting in which it was taken.

A CONSENSUS RECORD

geographic absence ~

“the old census records show”

because who can stand on the reef
and name that below water and sky

imagined territory ~

“a spanish baptismal name and”

burnt villages

From *from unincorporated territory [hacha]* by Craig Santos Perez. Santos Perez builds this poem around pieces of a historical record, to contextualize the effects of the record on its subjects.

A DREAM

so i’ve had this dream about daddy, i’ve had it like three times, it’s not a descriptive dream but. he had to come back (from the dead, or wherever) to give me this book he had written about me and him (him and i?), and whenever he starts to hand me the book, he disappears. and then that’s the end of the dream, but i’ve had this same dream seriously 3 times.

(POULL, 1/18/03)

From *Book of Jon* by Eleni Sikelianos. Sikelianos creates several documents (accounts of her family’s dreams about her father), and constructs the final section of her memoir from them.