



Resisting Silence, Refusing to Fade: Documentary Poems as Witness

Characteristics of Documentary Poetry

- Creative process connected with and inspired by primary sources
- Poet's intention is to represent tone/voice in primary sources authentically
- Creative works integrate primary sources, sometimes responding to documents unseen by the reader, other times arranging excerpts from primary sources to create something new, or integrating source excerpts with original poetry
- Purpose is to bear witness/raise awareness/incite social change, reflecting the role of poet as engaged citizen, journalist, historian, witness, and advocate

Source Types

Newspaper articles	Forms (e.g. application for temporary assistance)	Photographs
Magazine articles	Pamphlets	Maps, charts, diagrams
Diaries	Medical reports	Newsreel footage
Letters	Public records/data	Radio recordings
Laws, trial transcripts	Interview transcripts	TV commercials
Declassified documents	Print advertisements	Posters
Speeches	Oral histories	Postcards
Sermons, hymns, spirituals	Written creative arts	Infographics
Scientific/scholarly studies		Visual/performing arts

Curricular Connections

“Art is not about communication. It's about communion.”

- Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (electronic artist), IdeaFestival 2013

- With novels whose contexts/settings/themes relate to primary sources such as *The Things We Carried* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- With projects related to personal/family history, such as genealogy research projects
- With lessons focused on an era/place, such as literature of the Harlem Renaissance
- As a way for students to convey the stories of an individual or group for whom primary sources like diaries and letters are available
- As a way for students to give voice to events/conditions represented in a photograph in a manner authentic to available documents/documentation about the event/condition

Differentiation and Citation

- Use quotation marks, italics, or another method to differentiate your original wording from text excerpted from source documents
- Remember to cite your sources, including government documents, photographs, etc. - especially if you incorporate excerpts in your poem
- If your source is from your own family collection, then you should be fine using it



Resisting Silence, Refusing to Fade: Documentary Poems as Witness

- If your source is a non-public document published before 1923, then you're probably o.k. to use it *unless* copyright is still held by estate or a later publisher
- If your source is a non-public document published after 1923, it's best to use excerpts *only if* you have permission – and it's best to get that permission in writing

Documentary Poetry Projects, Poems, and Collections

Multimedia

Kwame Dawes

- [Voices from Haiti](#) – collaboration with photographer Andre Lambertson
- [Hope: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica](#) – collaboration with Joshua Cogan

Susan A. Somers-Willett – [poems](#) resulting from collaboration with photographer Brenda Kenneally on *Women of Troy* project about urban decline in Troy, NY

Natasha Trethewey – “[Believer](#)” (excerpt from “Congregation”)

Poems

Martín Espada – “[The Meaning of the Shovel](#)” and “[Something Escapes the Bonfire](#)”

Nikky Finney – “[Left](#)” (also in [video](#) format) and “Red Velvet”

Gabriel Spera – “[In a Field Outside the Town](#)”

Collections

Purchasing books by following linked titles listed in this section helps support [Poetry River](#).

Amy Benson Brown – [The Book of Sarah](#) – about abolitionist Sarah Grimke (1792-1873)

Martha Collins – [Blue Front](#) - about her father, when he was five-years old, witnessing the lynching of a black man in Cairo, Illinois

Nicole Cooley – [Afflicted Girls](#) – about the Salem witch trials (1692)

Cornelius Eady – [Brutal Imagination](#) – imagined speaker for many poems is the black male kidnapper invented by Susan Smith after she killed her two boys in Union, SC (1994)

Jorie Graham – [Overlord](#) - incorporates words of soldiers who stormed Normandy

Joseph Harrington – [Things Come On: An Amneoir](#) – juxtaposes medical reports from his mother's death (from breast cancer) with Watergate testimony



Resisting Silence, Refusing to Fade: Documentary Poems as Witness

Tyehimba Jess – [leadbelly](#) – about blues legend Huddie Ledbetter (1888-1949)

A. Van Jordan – [M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A](#) – about MacNolia Cox, who in 1936 was the first African American finalist in the National Spelling Bee

Ernesto Cardenal – [Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems](#) – about the 1979 Sandinista revolution documented by a Jesuit priest and former Nicaraguan minister of culture

Ted Kooser – [The Blizzard Voices](#) – about the Great Plains Blizzard of January 12, 1888

Marilyn Nelson – [Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem](#) and [A Wreath for Emmett Till](#) - latter is a heroic crown of sonnets in Petrarchan rhyme scheme

Mark Nowak – [Coal Mountain Elementary](#) and [Shut Up, Shut Down](#) – about coal mining and industrial crisis (particularly in manufacturing) respectively

Craig Santos Perez – [from unincorporated territory \[saina\]](#) - about Chamorro culture - incorporates Guam myths and definitions, colonialism texts, and his family's story

Charles Reznikoff – [Holocaust](#) (1975) – based on Nuremberg trial transcripts

Arra Lynn Ross – [Seedlip and Sweet Apple](#) – about Shaker founder Mother Ann Lee (1736-1784)

Muriel Rukeyser – [Book of the Dead](#) (1938) – about mine workers afflicted by silicosis in West Virginia during the late 1920s and early 1930s; she joined photojournalist Nancy Naumburg for a trip to Gauley Junction. Uses court records, interviews, and poetic narrative.

Kaia Sand – [Remember to Wave: A Poetry Walk](#) – about Japanese internment in Portland

Patricia Smith – [Blood Dazzler](#) – persona poems about Hurricane Katrina

Daniel Nathan Terry – [Capturing the Dead](#) – about Civil War soldiers and photographers

Brian Turner – [Here, Bullet](#) and [Phantom Noise](#) – about the war in Iraq by an veteran

Natasha Trethewey – [Domestic Work](#) – based on photos of African-Americans at work in early 20th c. (photos not included in the book)

C.D. Wright – [One Big Self](#) and [One with Others](#) – based, respectively, on interviews with inmates in Louisiana prisons and sources related to the struggle for civil rights in Arkansas

Studying, Teaching, and Writing Documentary Poetry

For essays about documentary poetry, student samples, and links to primary sources that may inspire poetry, visit [Poetry River](#) where you'll also find a blog with monthly book reviews and featured poems. [Subscribe to Poetry River updates](#) to receive a quarterly newsletter.