



Documentary Poetry

as
Witness



Resisting Silence,
Refusing to Fade
Wendy DeGroat
Split this Rock, March 2014



Dynamic medium informed by
the history of the moment

Includes voices not
typically part of the
chorus of American life

Withstands the pressure of
reality to remain a poem in
its own right

Seethe and breathe multitudes

Power resides in their
negotiation between
language of evidence and
language of transcendence

Metres, Philip. "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The Poet as Journalist, Historian, Agitator." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation. 5 Nov. 2007. Web. 8 March 2011.

Sources

Text

- Newspaper/magazine articles
- Pamphlets
- Diaries
- Letters
- Trial transcripts
- Laws
- Forms (e.g., application for temporary assistance)
- Declassified documents

Image/audio/video

- Archival news footage (audio or video)
- Photographs
- Posters
- Postcards
- Advertisements
- TV/radio commercials
- Interviews (in-person , recordings, or transcripts)

Persistent pulse

Charles Reznikoff

- Objectivist
- Court records
- 1934 and 1978/9 - *Testimony: The United States, (1885-1890)*
- 1975 - *Holocaust*
 - "[Ghettos 8](#)"

Muriel Rukeyser

- Visit to Gauley Junction, WV
- Miners with silicosis
- Traveled with Nancy Naumberg, photographer and journalist
- 1938 - *Book of the Dead*
 - "[George Robinson: Blues](#)"



South Hantla Mine – Silica Mine in Kansas

Notation on the back of the photo: "Midco Product Mine. Shovel twelve."
Photo from http://www.oldmeadecounty.com/silica_mines.htm

Authority and Authenticity

George Robinson: Blues

As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the
tunnel at night,
with a white man, nobody could have told which man was
white.

The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white.

Actual testimony

As dark as I am, when I came out of that tunnel in the mornings, if you had been in the tunnel too and come out at my side, nobody could have told which was the white man. The white man was just as black as the colored man (Kadlec 23).

Giving voice to the past

Interpreting Documents

- Eady - *Brutal Imagination* (2001)
- Kooser - *Blizzard Voices* (2006)
- Nelson - *Fortune's Bones* (2004) &
A Wreath for Emmett Till (2005)
- Terry - *Capturing the Dead* (2007)

Arranging Documents

- Reznikoff - *Holocaust* (1975)
- Collins - *Blue Front* (2006)
- Nowak - *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004)

Speaking out in the present

Interpreting documents

- Dylan – “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (1965)
- Forche – “The Colonel” (1982)
- Turner – *Here, Bullet* (2005)

Arranging Documents

- Rukeyser – *Book of the Dead* (1938)
- Levertov – “News Report, September 1991” (1992)
- Wright – *One Big Self* (2006)
- Nowak – *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009)



Brenda Kenneally, UpstateGirls.org

+ Power of media

- Somers-Willett/Kenneally
 - [“In the Office of Temporary Assistance”](#)
- Dawes/Lambertson
 - [“Mother of Mothers”](#)
- Trethewey/Cogan – [“Believer”](#)
excerpt from “Congregation”

Expanding Source Types

- **Craig Santos Perez**

Unincorporated Territory (2008/2010)

- **Kaia Sand**

Remember to Wave: A Poetry Walk (2010)

- **Joseph Harrington**

Things Come On: An Amneoir ([2011](#))

✓ **Maps**

✓ **Definitions**

✓ **Medical reports**

I imagine the blank page as an excerpted ocean filled with vast currents, islands of voices, and profound depths.

I imagine the poem forming as a map of this excerpted ocean, tracing the topographies of story, memory, genealogy, and culture.

- Perez

Docupoetry by other names

- **Cliophrastic poems** (Marilyn Nelson)
- **Appositional writing** (Ryan Clark, *Spoon River Poetry Review*)
- **Shares characteristics of poetry by imagists, objectivists, and social realists**

What makes it poetry?



Copyright

- **Differentiate** source excerpts from your wording with *italics* or "quotation marks"
- **Cite** sources (all types)
- **Safer choices**: your docs, public records, or sources published pre-1923
- **Get permission**: post-1923

What questions do you have?

Whose story would you tell?

Which sources might you use?