

TRACKING/TEACHING ON DOCUMENTARY POETICS

curated by **JOSEPH HARRINGTON**

featuring

Allison Cobb

Donovan Kūhiō Colleps

Camille T. Dungy

Adrian Matejka

Craig Santos Perez

Kaia Sand

with an afterword by

Philip Metres

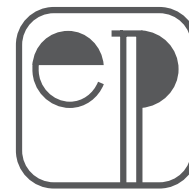


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ON
DOCUMENTARY
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ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#21

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As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press cultures.

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Introduction

—Joseph Harrington

The Lacedaemonians, entering into battle, sacrificed to the Muses, to the end that their actions might be well and worthily written, looking upon it as a divine and no common favour, that brave acts should find witnesses that could give them life and memory.

—Michel de Montaigne “Of Glory” (trans.
Charles Cotton)

Poets are the unacknowledged historians of the world. Or maybe historians are the unacknowledged poets. History looks different when understood as a creative act. Theorists such as Hayden White and Michel de Certeau have taught us to view history as history writing, and historiography as poetics. What happens when the historian embraces this view—when the historian thinks of herself as a writer, as a poet? Or, alternately, what happens when the poet turns

historical researcher/writer? These questions underlie the conversations that follow.

The impulse to preserve, record and disseminate the stories of individuals and collectivities (including species and ecosystems) in worthy words is one motivation for writing a “poem including history.” In addition, poets are driven into the archive due to curiosity and the need to know. Since Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* was published in the late ’90s, the World Wide Web has come into its own. Rather than being a space defined by its boundaries, as Derrida’s archive was, this new meta-archive offers something expansive, to be investigated endlessly (provided you have access to the tools, and provided your government will allow it!). Nowadays the archive seems virtually (and deceptively) boundless—the multiple trails of breadcrumbs beckon the inquiring mind in many different and ramifying directions. It is no wonder that so many poets have been drawn to research.

At some point, the searching has to stop, and the storytelling begin (“You won’t believe what I just found out!”). The investigative poet, by presenting her research results in her poetry, ends up teaching new reading publics things that they did not know already. In some sense, this result has to be the test of any documentary/historical/investigative poetry. In many cultures, past

and present, the poet is the historian and history teacher, or history is told as poetry or song (meter and rhyme are aids to memory, if nothing else). These histories have often celebrated the legacies of kings and the deeds of warriors. Nowadays, poets are more likely to record and celebrate the brave acts of anti-war activists than those of (unselfconscious) warriors. But the impulse to make those acts “well and worthily written” in order to “give them life and memory” is the same—not least of all when these records memorialize the murdered, the enslaved, the colonized, the surveilled, the silenced, the disappeared, the invisibled.

However, the Official Story already has an archive of its own, and it is, as Derrida points out, policed. If the poet aims to overturn or detourn oppressive structures of power, she must re-fashion the archive, refuse to let someone’s history be destroyed. Doing so means not repeating, but re-writing history, in both a factual and affective manner—in order, as Camille T. Dungy puts it, “to bring the human back to a group of people.” Likewise, for Chamoru poet Craig Santos Perez, documentary poetry constitutes “a refusal to be erased from the archive.” This resolution may entail researching “off the beaten path” (literally, in the case of Kaia Sand’s work about the Vanport section of Portland, Oregon). Or, as Adrian Matejka says of his book *The Big Smoke*, “The real opportunity for poetry in this project came in

the margins.” If the archive must be opened up, poetry can help do so, if it focuses on the outlines, the margins, the elided, the unsaid as well as the said.

But what do you make of it? This process of turning the archive inside-out (or relocating it altogether) requires imagination. It requires transformation into poetry, into a language that is conscious of itself. A research-based poetics selects and manipulates documents and artifacts, just as any “creative” nonfiction must involve poesis, fashioning. The primary materials are de-accessioned: they become collage, mash-up, braided stories or imagined voices. Allison Cobb cites her dual “commitment to inquiry as well as the imagination,” and perhaps this is the theme that unites the following contributions—imaginary gardens with real toads (or flowers) in them. The relationship between historical documents and poetic imagination is sometimes difficult and fraught. The participants in these conversations speak clearly and frankly about the artistic, practical and ethical issues they’ve confronted.

The three exchanges that follow take different tacks. Craig Santos Perez and Donovan Kūhiō Colleps lay out many of the theoretical and practical issues raised by contemporary documentary poetry—most importantly, the political and personal stakes. Camille T. Dungy and Adrian Matejka discuss a few of those issues at

greater length, plus the nitty-gritty logistics, and ethics, of the process of composition, from conception to research to writing. Allison Cobb and Kaia Sand then steer the conversation into even larger philosophical and phenomenological issues (they end with “Life & Death”!). The textual form of their conversation gives a sense of the trans-genre nature of much documentary or investigative poetry today.

It is my hope that this little book teaches, or puts you on the trail of, something you did not already know or had not already thought.

Two Pacific Decolonial Docu-Poets Walk into a Tiki Bar

Donovan Kūhiō Colleps
& Craig Santos Perez

Craig Santos Perez: How did you first learn about “documentary poetics”? Which authors/texts were early influences?

Donovan Kūhiō Colleps: I first encountered docupoetics in a creative writing graduate course at University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa, during my last year in the masters program. It was a pivotal course for me, in terms of being surrounded by amazing poets and teachers, and in terms of finding new expressive paths to explore. I think we were all trying to approach the form without really solidifying a definition for it (for me that was very exciting). When asked what I thought “documentary poetics” was in that class, I remember saying something like, “It’s an evolving dance between documents and poetic imagery that turns a subject inside-out.” But even now, I feel that it is not a good enough definition. Some poets who were early influences on me were people like Allison Cobb, Muriel Rukeyser, William Carlos Williams, Mark Nowak, Kaia Sand, Claudia Rankine—too many to name them all! They, along with my amazing community

of poets in that class, helped build a constellation of what is possible with the form.

Can you speak about how and when the form of documentary poetics became a key path for your poetics? Are there any authors or texts that really spoke to you while writing what was to become your first collection, *from Unincorporated Territory* [hacha]?

CSP: Many of the authors you mentioned have also influenced my own work, and I would add the influence of poets like Charles Reznikoff, Charles Olson, Ezra Pound, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Barbara Jane Reyes, Catalina Cariaga, Simon Ortiz and Lisa Linn Kanae. Because I never had the opportunity to take a course dedicated to documentary poetics, I didn’t have a name for what drew me to certain poets and poems (I would only learn this name later, when scholars started writing about and teaching my work in a “documentary” context). I continued to explore this path because I wanted to learn techniques that could help me write the history of Guam into my poetry. It is a similar question that Simon Ortiz asked in his book *from Sand Creek*: “How to deal with history?” And, as you know, history becomes much more complex in a colonial context.

Looking at our incomplete lists, there is such a diverse range of writers who have explored the documentary

impulse. As a scholar of Pacific literature, do you feel that documentary poetics is evident and/or prevalent in Hawaiian and Pacific poetry?

DKC: Yes, for sure. I think that's why I respond to it the way that I do. The word that resonates with me is *braid*. That form seems to lend itself to the ways stories have functioned and lived throughout Hawai'i, throughout the Pacific, all cultures, really. For me, documentary poetics—the act of weaving history, poetry, myths, legends, tradition, tale, record, anecdote (and certainly more) into something that amplifies each of them while it also contributes something new to a collective continuance—is such an abundant form to explore when a writer has the privilege to make the choice about writing for family, for communities, and for lāhui (nation). For me, the form feels like a way to humbly enter into this immensely deep tradition of mo'olelo, today.

Because the term, the name given to describe this form wasn't something known to you at the time you were writing about and for Guam, could you speak on why this path of poetics spoke to you, in terms of what and who you were writing about?

CSP: When I first starting writing about Guam and my family, I was living in California, which is where my family migrated to in 1995, and where I lived from when

I was 15 years old to when I was 30. I struggled to write about Guam, because it had become so distant, both in nautical miles and in memory. What helped me was reading poets who explored documentary poetics. These poets were able to write the complex histories, politics and cultures of places and peoples by braiding (as you put it) multiple voices, narratives, discourses and documents into their poems. This might sound odd, but the polyvocality reminded me of being at family gatherings back home, listening to family and extended family talking story around the table or in a circle. It was a space of multiple voices, languages and narrative styles. The documentary mode offered a model of how to textualize talk-story, and thus how to write the immense depths of my homeland.

Your new collection of poems, *Proposed Additions*, was published by Hawai'i-based Tinfish Press in 2014. How was the book influenced by documentary poetics?

DKC: Yes, you mention polyvocality, and I think the form of documentary poetics lent itself nicely to thinking about and writing *Proposed Additions*. The form feels like a kind of creative, interdisciplinary methodology that can re-present (in our projects, primarily through the English language) the ways mo'olelo have functioned, and still function, in Hawai'i. The multiplicity of voices (and I'd include the incorporation of various genres of English

and indigenous writing styles, too) seemed to amplify themselves when I was trying to find my grandfather through time and space, and in the land that raised us. In a similar way, too, with regards to the spatial struggles you express about writing about/for Guam, I first started thinking about writing about/for my grandfather when I was living in San Francisco. And when I returned to O‘ahu that distance was still there, taking on different internal forms, perhaps. Documentary poetry really helps me think constantly about moving from “I” to “we,” and I think this may be the sole reason I’m drawn toward it—besides the illuminating excavations it provides.

Obviously, there are definite connections that thread across your three books, but as you’ve moved through the composing processes for each of them, how has documentary poetics’s influence changed for you (if it has at all) from book to book?

CSP: For me, the influence of documentary poetics has not changed, only intensified. This poetic movement encouraged me to conceive of and activate documents in different ways, as well as to explore a plenitude of archives (real and symbolic, written and oral) in order to weave political, historical, religious and cultural contexts into my poetry. Sometimes these documents are visible foregrounds and sometimes they are interwoven palimpsests. This movement has also drawn my poetry

to a range of documents and their complex meanings, including The 1950 Organic Act of Guam, my U.S. passport, a boarding pass, a customs declaration form, a United Nations testimony, a memorial of soldiers killed in action, a Guam history book, a tourism website, an old family photograph, the prayers of the rosary. Because of this movement, I think my poetry has become more deeply engaged in capturing the aura and limit of the documents that shape our lives—and perhaps of poetic documentation itself.

Documentary poetics is often lauded for its ability to articulate social injustices and to advocate for civil rights. For both of us, who write from Pacific literary traditions, do you also feel that documentary poetics is a powerful decolonial methodology?

DKC: Yes, definitely. Especially in the ways that documents can become juxtaposed with each other, and with other forms of Pacific storytelling. For *Proposed Additions*, I found myself moving beyond the documents of my grandfather’s file cabinet, and reading mo‘olelo (in Hawaiian and English) and a few environmental assessments drafts of the places in ‘Ewa (where he and his wife raised their children and grandchildren) that supported various state and federal development plans. Documentary poetics has ways of inverting the colonial/imperial power of documents meant to provide support

for those plans. For instance, by setting archaeological surveys for a proposed biological laboratory in Kalaeloa next to mo'olelo of that wahi pana (storied place), next to interviews with community members who are outraged about their home becoming a dumping ground for hazardous materials, next to video clips showing the inabilities of project leaders to create transparency for those communities, documentary poetics really amplifies the voices of those who—if we were just to listen to government officials (at all levels)—could never possibly be heard. Creating a temporal and spatial stratification of stories, for me, is just the beginning of what this form can do in terms of not only understanding the past(s), but also knowing how to change the ways we think about the present(s). To see the land as a kind of palimpsest of stories, and to have our work attempt to articulate that layering, that succession, is, I think, a very Pacific literary tradition in and of itself.

You mention decolonizing methodology. How has documentary poetics provided paths toward writing about/for Guam and about/for your family in ways that create recognition and/or action for the decolonial project?

CSP: Documentary poetics has given me a pathway to expose the documents (and thus the mechanisms and structures) of colonialism. This is a first step toward

decolonizing those structures. Documentary poetics has also given me a pathway to expose the archives of colonial violence, bringing to light the forgotten memories of native trauma. Reckoning with our violent and traumatic history helps us decolonize our memories and remember our indigenous identity. From there, we can begin to recover, inherit and care for the unheard voices and the unofficial stories, which inspire us to envision (and struggle toward) a decolonial future. Haunani-Kay Trask, in "Writing in Captivity: Poetry in a Time of Decolonization," writes that decolonial poetry is "a continuing refusal to be silent." Decolonial documentary poetry, then, is a refusal to remain silent, a refusal to be erased from the archive. Each of my books, archived in many libraries, is a documentary about Chamorro survival and resilience. Each book is proof of our humanity and dignity.

In my last two collections, [saina] and [guma'], I've also been exploring how decolonial activism can be documented in a poem. For example, in [saina], I weave into a poem a testimony I delivered to the Special Committee on Decolonization at the United Nations in 2008. In [guma'], I wove public comments on an environmental-impact statement of a military buildup on Guam into a poem. Moreover, I have woven activist hashtags and websites into poems, hoping that a reader

might go from the poem to a website and to a decolonial movement.

In your new book, as well as in many collections of documentary poetry, there seems to be an engagement with visual poetry and poetics. Sometimes this involves replicating and manipulating visual documents into the poem, or sometimes it involves activating the entire space of the page. Can you describe your relationship with the visual elements of documentary poetry?

DKC: For me, the process of writing is more rewarding than any other stage, and getting to play with the various forms and genres of documents is incredibly fulfilling for a creative writer. In the poem "Daddy Sea Horse," I use an instruction manual for the nebulizer machine that my grandfather used for his breathing treatments. In that poem I preserve the rigid, formal structure of the manual and imagine what it would be like to read it through my grandfather's thoughts about his own mortality and his concerns for the family once he passed. Being able to cultivate a poetics for/of your kupuna, out of something as dry and lifeless as an instruction manual, for me, really speaks to the malleability of documentary poetics, especially when poetics are visually composed within the structural limitations of something like an instruction manual. In "Kalapu (A Walking Poem for 'Ewa)," I braid excerpts from multiple documents

(mo'olelo, archaeological surveys, environmental-impact drafts, etc.) with memories of my grandfather in 'Ewa, to suggest the temporal layers that can exist in one place. In that poem, the page becomes a representation of the land, in a way, with all the positive and negative spaces, all the lines and their enjambments, simultaneously mapping specific moments in time that are not just significant to my grandfather or me, but also to the ones who were here before us. I think this stratification is important when trying to see beyond (or below, or before) the rapid residential, commercial and military developments that have and still are occurring in Hawai'i. These visual replications and manipulations, I hope, serve such functions in my writing. I think I've grown more comfortable with thinking of my kuleana (responsibility, privilege) as a writer, as someone who thinks about a blank page in similar ways that a farmer may think about a lo'i (an irrigated terrace for kalo), and what kind of strategies can be utilized to produce a specific kind of cultivation.

Could you talk about the relationships between the visual elements of documentary poetics and your creative work? How do you decide when to replicate and when to manipulate the documents you choose? Or do the documents themselves seem to choose their roles?

CSP: Visual poetry is one of my favorite genres (as you know, I've taught several undergraduate courses on visual poetics), because it activates a whole new realm of compositional and aesthetic possibilities. Even though I've been inspired by the international and historical Visual Poetry movement, for this interview I will just mention Pacific Islander visual poets who have influenced my work, including Albert Wendt, John Pule, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, Sia Figiel, Kapulani Landgraf, Wayne Kaumualii Westlake, Imaikalani Kalahale, Robert Sullivan and Joe Balaz. Visual poetry feels deeply documentary (and vice versa). I use visual elements to map and navigate a rooted and storied sense of place; to remember and memorialize people or events; and to surf the waves of Pacific spiral time. These visual elements manifest in a wide variety of poetic techniques, many of which you have discussed: juxtaposing documents, utilizing enjambment and cultivating (your poignant verb) the entire page (I love the idea of the page as lo'i). In another interview, I've talked about how the page, for me, is an excerpt of an ocean, how words are islands, how the sounds of words are wave signatures.

One route in Pacific literary studies that I find fascinating is the search for "literary antecedents" (think aesthetic genealogy) to contemporary Pacific literature. Obviously, the most common ancestor is Pacific orature; however, many scholars have articulated visual antecedents to

contemporary Pacific literature. These "visual literacies" include tattooing, petroglyphy, dance (like hula), star compasses, stick maps, pottery, paper arts (kapa/tapa), architecture, canoe design, agricultural design (like lo'i), weaving, carving, floral arts (like lei), etc. So when I think about documentary poetics, I am also thinking about a Pacific visual documentary poetics rooted in indigenous cultural practices and decolonial methodologies.

But let me actually answer your question! Yes, I try to engage intuitively and emotionally with documents. For example, in [guma'], I include military reports on the death of soldiers from Micronesia during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At first I changed the font color of this document to a light gray, barely visible, to comment on how the memory of these soldiers fades over time. As I revised the poem, I also felt mourning and anger at the loss of these sons and daughters of the Pacific, or the "fallen brave" as they were memorialized, so I decided to strikethrough all the words in the report, except for their names.

Along those lines, can you talk about the relationship between documents and memorials, and between the archive and memory, in your new book, or your work in general?

DKC: I forgot who said this, but there's a kind of linguistic mystification inherent in the kinds of documents that seem to govern us, identify us, and claim knowledge of us (I'm thinking of documents like tax forms, land titles, medical bills, constitutions, petitions, etc.). For me, and especially within the contexts of my creative work, I can't help but look for examples in those kinds of documents where life can be seen and felt and smelled and heard—even if only for brief moments. I think that the memorializations of whatever subject one writes about occur at the seams of these moments, and that being able to braid a multiplicity of perspectives and voices into something that's maybe both familiar and new seems to demystify the various forms of power that language takes in our lives. Trying to simply remember my grandfather and my family through my writing has brought me to the edge of this incredibly vast ocean of paper that is the archive, where more of my ancestors have been waiting for so long. Even that word, archive, lacks ability to truly define and explain the breadth and depth of knowledge it contains about Hawai'i (and the world!). But I think these relationships between documents and memorials, the archive and memory, lead to—at least for this docu-poet—memorials and memories that can be, for once, woven (or returned) into existence on our own terms.

I just want to Mahalo Nui you, Craig, for this amazing conversation. I'm very much looking forward to continuing it! Here's my final question to you: you mention literary antecedents or aesthetic genealogies (which I've been thinking about, a lot!). Can you talk about the relationship between these forms of knowledge-keeping and the documents of a more colonial form in your work?

CSP: Yes, the various forms of Pacific orature and visual arts/literacies were the vehicles for Pacific genealogies, epistemologies, histories, values and protocols, politics, geographies, memories, etc. The practice and inheritance of these arts often involved communal situations, thus strengthening familial and community kinship networks. Stories and customary arts were crucial spaces for indigenous culture, identity, pride and power. Of course, this meant that these aesthetic practices became primary targets for colonial regimes to destroy and replace, in order to dispossess and disempower indigenous peoples. That made many of our cultures dependent on colonial aesthetics and forms of knowledge-keeping. What is powerful to me about contemporary Pacific literature and arts is that many forms of customary Pacific orature and arts have survived centuries of colonialism and are being revitalized. Moreover, Pacific writers and artists are also re-articulating and indigenizing foreign languages and aesthetics for our own purposes and on our own terms.

This testifies to the continuity, resilience, creativity and vitality of Pacific cultures, identities, literatures and arts.

In my own work, I try to destabilize, denaturalize and critique colonial documents that have shaped Chamorro lives. Countering these documents, I have highlighted oral stories from my grandparents and parents, to show that this everyday form of Pacific storytelling is a vital and necessary form of memory and knowledge-keeping. While colonial documents often limit the possibilities of Chamorro existence, I envision my poetry (the poem itself as a document, and the book as a collection of documents) as opening new possibilities for Chamorro futures.

Saina Ma'ase to you, as well, for this wonderful conversation. I am excited to re-read your new book with this interview in mind, and I am looking forward to seeing how you engage with documentary poetics in your future work.

Full of Many Stars: Pushing Past (and Pushing the Past into) the Heliocentric Poem

Camille T. Dungy
& Adrian Matejka

Camille T. Dungy: So, Adrian, when you visited my class last semester via a video conferencing interface, you had all these great things to say about your process in writing *The Big Smoke*. When Joseph Harrington asked whom I might like to work with on this conversation/interview, your name came to mind immediately. We both have these projects that honor the erased lives of figures who loom large in our histories. You're looking at Jack Johnson, who plenty of people know about but not many people really understand. I was talking about enslaved African Americans, self-emancipated African Americans and, importantly to *Suck on the Marrow*, free blacks who either remained "free" (whatever that meant in nineteenth-century America) or were kidnapped and forced into bondage. These people *built* America, built our consciousness as well as our bodies (through rice and sugar and more) and our clothes and our tools. Still, their specificity is frequently erased. It was crucial to me, as I wrote *Suck on the Marrow*, that I found ways to bring the human back to a group of people from whom humanity has been repeatedly stripped. I want to be more precise and say that there has been a consistent attempt to strip the humanity from these people or a

lack of resistance when these erasures take place, and I wanted to work against this trend in my book. What this meant was a lot of research. I spent nearly four active years researching the worlds out of which these people would have come. You mentioned that you spent about four years doing your research for *The Big Smoke*. Why do you think four is the magic number?

Adrian Matejka: Thanks for thinking of me for this. I had a great time talking with your class. I've always imagined *The Big Smoke* as part of a continuum of historic reclamation/re-introduction projects following in wheel tracks of books like *Buffalo Dance* (Frank X Walker), *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Marilyn Nelson), *Leadbelly* (Tyehimba Jess), *Suck on the Marrow* and many others. The authors of each of these texts did significant research as well. So maybe there's some Gladwell-esque corollary here, where ten thousand hours of practice is replaced with four years of research? I don't know.

CTD: I certainly relate to the idea of the Gladwell corollary. When I first started writing *Suck on the Marrow* I was a novice. I didn't even know I was writing *Suck on the Marrow*. I thought I was on the track of an entirely different project. I didn't know much more about mid-nineteenth-century America than your average historically astute American. But over the years of research, I became something of an expert on the era.

That can be directly attributed to the time I spent in library stacks and reading historical accounts and following the documents to their primary sources. I visited plantations; I crawled through Underground Railroad hideouts; I held abolitionist newspapers in my own hands; and I took a book's worth of notes (a much thicker book than the book I ended up writing). This was all in service to the poems. I wanted to write the best poems possible, to record the world as accurately as I could—even if I did so in a "fictional" manner—and for this I needed the most accurate and in-depth information I could access. Learning to find those materials took time. Learning to handle those materials also took time. So, I think you're right. I must have needed those ten thousand hours/four years of research.

AM: For me, it was imperative. I didn't know enough about Jack Johnson's world to begin writing until I'd researched substantially. I researched without writing anything for two years. Then I started generating poems while continuing to research. It was a fluid process and I don't think any part of it ended. I was still fact checking and editing details while the book was already laid out for publication eight years after I started the thing. The production people cringed every time they got another email from me requesting a change to a word or a number. I just wanted the facts to be as right as the archives would allow.

Part of that is respect for Johnson—I wanted to stay as close as I could to *his* story. Part of it was trying to create a version of his world that would be irrefutable today. I'm thinking of Michael Ondaatje's book about Buddy Bolden, *Coming Through Slaughter*, right now. Bolden's mythology, like all myth, is fairly malleable. But there are instances of factual inaccuracies in Ondaatje's book (telephones in places that wouldn't have phones, buses mentioned before there were buses, for example) that push up against the suspension of disbelief. It's one of my favorite books in spite of these errors. But I wanted the world around Johnson to enhance the understanding of his circumstance, rather than resisting it.

I used direct quotes from newspapers and other authentic found-texts as part of the poems. Your book has a similar historical directive in even more useful ways, from having time/setting dictated in the section titles, to notes that explicate the historical source texts and references for the poems. I'm really interested in these archival choices as they relate to the creative process. The notes seem to be the place where the divide between art and history gets broken down most directly. What dictated what and how you annotated the poems? How did you see those notations operating in your creative process?

CTD: Funny you should ask about the notes section. I thought of that immediately when you said you were editing until the very last moment. I had this big journal in which I kept all the notes for *Suck on the Marrow*. I was writing the book around the time of the explosion over Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose. Did they source their materials ethically? Did they cite their materials ethically? I knew I was writing a creative piece, not a historical text, and so I knew I had some latitude, but still I kept these precise and detailed records about what I learned and from what sources. These notes, themselves, were really interesting to me, and at the end of one poem, "'Tis of thee, sweet land' (a poem of found-text)," I used to have a coda with the notes, about where I found each of the poem's lines. I also had this really bland notes section at the end of the book that flatly stated all the historically relevant information you might need in order to understand what was happening in the book. It was a snooze fest. I always hated it. But what was I to do? Most people didn't know the history like I did, so I needed to fill in details and information, both about the "real world" and about the world of my characters, but I couldn't think of a poetically relevant way to convey this necessary (and to me often quite interesting) information. One day, after the book was already at the press, when I was in the final proof reading phase, I read an interview with Matthea Harvey in which she spoke about her inventive abecedary project, "The

Future of Terror"/"Terror of the Future," collected in the book *Modern Life*. I knew some of these poems already, but hadn't read them as abecedaries until that point. I'm a sucker for received poetic form as a means to allow us to express what we might not be able to express in simple prose. I loved the idea of a quirky abecedary, and I immediately came up with the idea of writing "Primer, Or a History of these United States (Abridged)." This was the part of the book that ended up containing all the relevant notes, but it was also a place where I was able to have fun with order and details and facts and erasures and omission and inclusions. It was a much better way to deal with all the clunky materials that needed to be in the book but hadn't hitherto fit directly into poems. It's a poem and also a collection of necessary notes (which is one of the things I think an interesting poem can be).

Can you talk about something you did in *The Big Smoke* that allowed you to convey information in a way you might not have been able to do without the help of the poetry part of docupoetry?

AM: I was just reading this essay by Ben Okri called "While the World Sleeps." It's an affirmation of the poet's position as radical or political agent. But in the essay Okri says, "Poet, be like the tortoise: bear the shell of the world and still manage to sing your transforming dithyrambs woven from our blood...our history." It

made me think about the relationships between the self, history and the poetic. As in: can we contextualize history through poetry? Those pre-written world events that were kept alive by poetic storytelling, for example. Or the African griots recounting history in one long poetic litany.

I think Jack Johnson belongs in that epic, oral tradition. He had some Odysseus in him. He had some Beowulf and Othello in him. He was poetic in his life and actions, but at the same time he was *real*. So the challenge became balancing the historical imperatives with the creative impulses. Which was tough because, like you pointed out about the challenges of a notes section, quite a bit of the superficial—yet necessary—historical context for these projects isn't poetic. It can be textbookish.

The real opportunity for poetry in this project came in the margins. Those places that might have been saved or recounted via the oral tradition. In Johnson's case, there were interviews and court transcripts that dictated a specific kind of behavior or language in those public moments. There weren't records of what was said in private. There aren't recordings of Jack Johnson's apologies or fears. He didn't keep a diary of his waking thoughts. Those non-existent texts became the places where the poetic asserted itself in the collection. Those missing texts were also the inspiration for the poems in

the voice of Jack Johnson's shadow. In a way, Shadow becomes Jack Johnson's autobiographer and fills the archive that was either missing or nonexistent.

CTD: I said above that we had our initial conversation via video conference. There was one student who recorded the conversation on her phone, but she didn't answer her email when I asked if I could get a copy for this project. More and more I wonder about our current modes of recording our lives. Digital platforms whose interfaces change constantly, rendering stored information obsolete. Tapes that warp and ruin. Video conferences or phone calls that disappear. So much of what I discovered for *Suck on the Marrow* came from letters and newspapers and almanacs. The title of one of the most important poems in the book, "On the Observation of Migratory Birds," and the dates and birds noted in the poem, came from the notes someone scribbled in the back of an almanac in the 1830s. I was struck again and again when I was doing the research for this book that, even when the people I was writing about were not allowed to or not able to read or write, there was an extensive written record. Thank goodness for that. "Dinah in the Box" was triggered by reading several accounts of women who freed themselves by packing themselves into boxes and having those boxes shipped to border states. We know the story of Henry Box Brown because that became a famous narrative,

but the abolitionist newspapers had lots of accounts of women doing the same thing. In fact, I read more about women than about men. I wondered what would drive a woman to do this. I also wondered about why we don't hear these women's stories more often. I was so happy to have the old newspapers, so I could hold the stories in my hands. That physical connection helped me as I was writing my poems. If we keep all our notes on our phones and type all our schedules into our iCalendars, what will happen to creative archivists in the future when they want to find out the details of the minutia of our daily lives?

AM: Those archivists are going to be overwhelmed by the minutia left for them, if social media keeps evolving the way it has. They'll know more about Sunday brunches and baby's-first-car-rides than they'll know what to do with. The Library of Congress is even archiving tweets, which is complicated, considering the kind of ephemera that shows up on my timeline. I think what has happened is those illuminating notes and textual accounts you mention have changed from text into image. It's quicker and easier to post a photo than it is to describe the experience. To take it a step further, it's easier for the audience to look at a photo than to interpret text. Then that photo becomes a meme and represents everything. All of this is the exact opposite of how things operated

before the late twentieth century, when it used to be fairly expensive to take, develop and print photos.

I thought about absent texts quite a bit when I was working on *The Big Smoke*. There would be huge gaps in the coverage around Jack Johnson, depending on who was doing the covering. For example, if the sportswriter was racist, the text illustrated a version of Johnson that reified that racism. Almost all of the writers had misogynistic tendencies as well. Johnson was involved with these adventurous women, and they were rarely mentioned by the press unless it was in a scandalous context. And now, the only references to these women are because of their relationships with Johnson.

At first, I thought the problem was with the archive. I was researching Jack Johnson, so of course all of the texts would be Johnson-centric. But I went deeper into the archives and still couldn't find anything about his girlfriends or wives. I think mainstream history operates in a heliocentric and, of course, patriarchal way. Everything is going to be slanted toward (usually white) men, and those figures around the men will only be recognized in relation them.

Part of the beauty of these kinds of historical projects is they allow us to reclaim those missing narratives, whether it be women who are doing something as

brave as packing themselves in boxes or something more mundane but which has since been forgotten. The Matilda Effect operates across race, discipline and history, and it doesn't only apply to trailblazers. Were there instances in your research where this paradigm wasn't in place? Where maybe the women you encountered in the narratives were afforded the appropriate credit for their actions?

CTD: What an interesting question! I was trying to write a book about women's history when I found myself writing poems in the voice of the male character, Joseph Freeman. I was trying to unerase some of these gendered erasures we're talking about, and this male voice kept insisting I write his story. I've learned to follow my imagination's wisdom, and I ended up with a book that is very much about women's lives, but for a while it felt scary to so deeply follow the track of a man's story. Of course, what we know of history is that often the only way to access women's lives is through the portals set up by men. For better or for worse.

I can tell you one place where women figured prominently in the materials I researched. There's a section of the book that takes place in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the red-light district that was called Buzzards Roost. In the records of the wealthiest free blacks in the town in the mid nineteenth century, several of the figures are

women. They were brothel owners, and they had a level of power and access in the city that was unrivaled by others—because of the clients they served and the manner in which they served them. I found it fascinating that these women would wield that much power and wealth, in a public way, given their occupations. But I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. Even while they were powerful, they were still invisible.

Back to what I was saying about that male voice that interrupted what I thought was going to be a book about women's history: I had already written several of the "Molly" poems that would eventually make up one section of *Suck on the Marrow*, when I found myself writing the multi-section poem "from The Unwritten Letters of Joseph Freeman." This was before I heard about the story of Solomon Northup. In fact, it was the morning after I finished the 36-hour binge that was the writing of "from The Unwritten Letters of Joseph Freeman" when I walked into a bookstore in Sarasota, New York (where Solomon Northup and his wife lived), was confused by my exhaustion, walked in the wrong direction, and found myself confronted by a wall of books that included *12 Years A Slave*—the book written by Solomon Northup on which the movie would eventually be based. This all happened to me in 2003. I read the book. I also had a chance to visit the house where Northup's wife lived, as well as several Underground Railroad sites in

upstate New York. I'd written a poem about a man very much like Northup, but not Northup. And in this poem I considered the life of a woman very much like Northup's wife, but not his wife. When I learned about Northup and his wife, I allowed my book to continue in its own direction, because I knew that Northup's story was only one of many such stories. I owed those other lives the honor of being spoken about as well. I've always marveled about that synchronicity, or the haunting, or the visitation or whatever you will call it that allowed me to write my poem in the same town where a famous and similar incident happened, even when I didn't yet know about the incident. It seems like with this kind of poetry, what people are calling docupoetics or archival poetry, there is also a need to be open to a degree of magic. What do you think?

AM: That's really cool. I love the idea of something more majestic than the imaginary guiding us through poetic moments. And I think it's absolutely true. I've always felt like I was trusted with Jack Johnson's story somehow. To say that aloud seems grandiose to me. But maybe it's not about being trusted as much as it is being open to something bigger than myself.

Northup, York, Dinah, Etta and Jack don't need us to make their stories valuable. The stories are already necessary. Whatever I might add to the narrative

probably won't be as interesting as what is already there. It's a matter of negotiating their spaces with respect and awareness, of honoring the lives by speaking them—as you so eloquently put it. When I started researching Johnson, I did so planning to write an essay about watching boxing with my mother when I was a kid. We watched all of the great heavyweights of the 1970s, and she brought Jack Johnson up frequently, but never explained who he was. She still hasn't, but that's for the essay I will write one day.

The more I learned about Johnson, the more I realized that his story deserved a different kind of attention, and that my role in this project needed to be different. Not poet, necessarily, but poetic curator or collagist. I needed to speak his story as it was presented to me through articles and recordings and Department of Justice files, but with a twenty-first-century lens. That was my role and anything else would be diminishing the material. It took me a while to get out of the way of the source material, though.

This brings up a different question for me. What do you see your role as in *Suck on the Marrow*? Where does the source material stop and the imaginary begin for you? Or does ownership even matter in a book like this?

CTD: This question of getting out of the way is part of the question of what role I play as a poet. It's part of the question of what docupoetics can do, and how. I'm trying to give voice to the voiceless, right? But to do that, I can't just give them *my* voice. I have to let the characters speak. I have to let their stories tell themselves. You wrote about "real" people in *The Big Smoke*. What's funny to me is that I went into *Suck on the Marrow* fleeing just that. In my first book, *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*, I had written about my own grandparents and knowable public figures of the twentieth century like Ella Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, O. J. Simpson, Billie Holiday and (yes!) Jack Johnson. I didn't want to be accountable to facts like I was in that book, so I decided to invent a world in my next collection. But I became deeply accountable to facts by the time I started really writing *Suck on the Marrow*. If you're writing truth, you can't escape this accountability.

I found a map of Philadelphia from the time when Joseph Freeman was kidnapped. I also found a Green Book, which was a sort of White Pages/register of black people in a community, and which listed people's names and occupations and addresses. So I found the street on which my fictional character would have lived, and I walked on that street with my real nonfictional feet, and I had it in my mind as I drafted my poems. For a while I wanted to use that map for the cover of my book.

Then I found this Library of Congress image from Central Virginia, where Joseph Freeman would have lived while enslaved, and near where I myself actually lived at the time I was writing the poems. It looked just like the world I knew and the world Freeman would have known, and that's my cover now. I think what I'm trying to say is that in the end I was never sure where my imagination stopped and reality began with the parts of this book I believe are the most successful.

I used actual documents (advertisements, newspaper articles, marginalia written by living human beings), and enfolded them into my fabricated world. That was part of the process of crafting this book. I thought a lot about what I called hidden texts—those coded messages that some people know how to read and which are invisible to other people. Some of my borrowed text was planted in a way that was completely independent from the rest of the poem, and some of the text was inextricable from the language of the rest of the poem. I believe this is the way society works. Sometimes you can take the black body/text out of the white world and the white world will keep going; sometimes, without the black body/text, the white world would collapse. The attention I paid to how I moved between found-text and my imagined, historically informed world was part of how I exercised my responsibility to poetry (to the forms, fancies, lyricism and vivacity of poetry) while also attending to my sense

of responsibility to history and the memories of actual human beings.

Another example along these lines is the way we both use letters in our books. I've got "from The Unwritten Letters of Joseph Freeman." You've got the letters from Jack Johnson's lover, Hattie. I've just said that my letters happened early in the book project, before the documentary aspect of the book came into play. The letters allowed me to enter a man's mind in a way I wouldn't have been able to do with another form of persona poem. I guess the letters felt differently authoritative than trying to get inside a man's mind and pretend I could speak for him. I could talk about the minutiae of a nineteenth-century life, and bring in details I knew and understood, as a way to help me to say what a person would and would not directly communicate in a letter. Interestingly, your letters are from Hattie's point of view. What do you think it is about the epistolary poem that allows you to document the reality of a world and time and mind differently than some other kind of poem?

AM: I'm a great fan of epistolary poems for a number of reasons, including the imaginative possibilities you mentioned. There can be a wonderful freedom in the epistolary. Just as important is the fact that writing a letter is kind of an act of persona. We employ rhetorical structures in letters that would never work on the

basketball court or at a dinner party. We emote with a kind of clarity and attention to language that few of us display in our daily goings-on. There are all kinds of salutations and closings in letters that would completely confuse someone if spoken. Who says "All best" as part of a conversation?

So there's a kind of accepted artifice of diction, syntax and rhetorical structure, and all of that can be used in ways that suggest social and cultural paradigms. The epistolary poems voiced by Hattie started out as traditional monologues. The shift to letters was less about the things I value in the epistolary form, and more about wanting to give Belle, Etta and Hattie their own spaces. On the page, I wanted to differentiate the women from each other and from Jack Johnson. I decided on letters, interviews and broken sonnets as a way to create linguistic geographies. I wanted to offset some of those historical absences we talked about earlier, if that makes sense.

I should also mention my trepidation about writing poems with female speakers. Before this book, I had only written a few true persona poems and they were all voiced by African American men. I was stretching, but not really. When I started writing poems voiced by white women, at the turn of the twentieth century, who were romantically involved with the same African American

man? I was in way beyond my imaginative depth. And to make it more complicated, there was very little archival text for Hattie or Etta. I was just making things up, based on newspaper quotes from other women or the language in turn-of-the-century novels. It was a disaster.

I showed my wife an early version of what would become one of Hattie's letters and she said, "This sounds like what a man thinks a woman sounds like. Try again." I got variations of that response to the poems from her for about six months before something (and I still don't know what) opened up, and I found more reasonable language. I don't think I would have had anything near the same problem voicing a white male character. So race was a part of it, but a small part. How do you feel about writing across cultures/races? What challenges does that imaginative maneuver present for you?

CTD: I tried to write poems in the voices of some of the white people who interacted with my black characters, but only once was I able to effectively do so in a persona poem, and this was when I stuck very close to the facts without trying to venture into any deep meditations on the inner workings of the subject's psyche. The epistolary poems I tried, which required such examinations of the interiority of the speaker, all came out as two-dimensional drivel. I had no ability to feel empathetic toward these men, and empathy is a basic

requirement of quality persona poetry. This is another way in which using archival materials came in handy. I used advertisements I found in pro-slavery newspapers (or that I found in abolitionist newspapers that were quoting pro-slavery newspapers, like MSNBC quotes Fox News today). These advertisements I enfolded into the poems written from the perspective of my black characters. In this way, I was able to give voice to the white slave-owning segment of the population, using their own words rather than my own. Mine would have been unreasonably biased (I'm interested in your use of the word "reasonable" above), in such a way that my poems would lose credibility. I think of Jack Johnson's and Muhammad Ali's fighting strategies here. Let the opponents do all the work. They'll work themselves toward their own demise soon enough.

Thinking about how Johnson and the other great, verbally deft heavyweight of the twentieth century fought their fights makes me think about your poem, "The Battle of the Century," which details Jack Johnson's 1910 fight with Jim Jeffries—as well as about the Shadow Boxing poems throughout the book, which illuminate Johnson's fights with himself. Can you talk a bit about the process of writing these poems, and how the ethics of docupoetics applied in these instances?

AM: “The Battle of the Century” was complicated because it was the longest poem I’d tried to write at that point. I started wishing Johnson would have knocked Jeffries out sooner, just so I could finish the poem more quickly. In seriousness, the poem was a challenge because the fight was documented more heavily than any event related to Jack Johnson—other than his Mann Act trial and conviction in 1912–13. There have been many, many other important public racial events since 1910 (including some that involved Muhammad Ali), and they have marginalized the importance of the Johnson-Jeffries fight to some degree. It’s difficult to explain just how important and pressurized the fight was to a contemporaneous audience.

White America had a kind of hatred for Jack Johnson that was beyond reason or circumstance. Someone could have murdered Johnson, and he or she would have become a national hero. Ali recognized the danger Johnson dealt with. He once said in an interview, “Jack Johnson was the greatest. He had to be the greatest of them all. Wasn’t no Black Panthers. Wasn’t no bodyguards. White people were lynching Negroes.... And that Negro was doing all of this stuff in them days. He was bad when you think about. I know I’m bad, but he was crazy.”

This all comes back to your question of ethics, because it felt necessary to frame the fight as factually as possible—both for the integrity of the collection’s narrative and out of respect for the historical importance of the event. I don’t mean to elevate this one moment of Johnson’s biography above the others, but I ended up using six different primary texts for the poem, all of which were exclusively about the fight. Because of all of these source texts, this poem operates as an historical document in a way that some of the other poems do not. It’s respect for the experience, but also a desire to acknowledge the extensive scholarly work around this singular event in American history.

The Shadow poems were the complete opposite. They are a completely imagined construct that is meant to make Jack Johnson a more emotionally three-dimensional figure in the book. Marilyn Nelson gave me the idea to write a sequence in which someone talked to his or her shadow. It seemed like a good poetic balance to the archival work I was trying to do in the other poems. Because Shadow is a completely imaginary speaker, I could operate in a different linguistic register. The Shadow poems were the only places in the book where I allowed myself to move outside of the language of the time.

CTD: One of the things I loved best about writing *Suck on the Marrow* was playing with the language of the time. The poem “She Liked the Moving Things Best” started from my wanting to work out fun ways to incorporate the names of objects that would have been found in Molly’s world. *Oyster fork* and *hide hole*. *Glass eye*. I worked a narrative around the nouns, and went from there. These were words I’d come across in my research (and I want to say here that a better description than “research” might just be “obsessively focused reading”), and that I’d jotted down but hadn’t otherwise found uses for. That happens again with the *shoat* in “Born on this Place,” and the brand on a woman’s hand in “Code,” and in plenty of other places, I’m sure. I’m just a nut for words, and I wanted to use as many as I could in a way that could bridge the divide between how people talked in the mid nineteenth century and how we talk now. It was my way of making an experience genuine to the people about whom I was writing, but also accessible to readers today. Can you speak to how you played with the language of the early twentieth century in your poems?

AM: What great words, both in meaning and sounds. This speaks to one of those fundamental questions of poetry, right? Whatever we call poetic “voice” seems to reside somewhere in the balance of intent, music and meaning in language. For our books, we both made

choices about voice that were meant to enhance the audience’s understanding of time and geography. That’s almost more of a move for fiction writers than poets.

How did the already existing texts about these characters influence your linguistic or narrative choices in *Suck on the Marrow*? You mentioned *12 Years A Slave*, and I imagine writing “from The Unwritten Letters of Joseph Freeman” now, after the successes of the movie, might add different complications to the creative process.

I’m thinking about this because some of my language choices were dictated by the false representations of Jack Johnson already out in the world. There is an entire generation of people who saw Howard Sackler’s *The Great White Hope* and believe Jack Jefferson *is* Jack Johnson in language and action, when, in fact, neither is true. Jack Johnson was eloquent and very thoughtful in his language, though it’s hard to tell from Sackler’s almost-illiterate version of Johnson.

So one of the first things I had to do (before I could even focus on the specific word choices) was figure out what Jack Johnson actually sounded like. He had a couple of autobiographies, but they were ghostwritten by a French writer in French, then translated into English. There are a few recordings of Johnson, and some newspaper reports in which the language followed the same syntax

and diction as the recordings. Somewhere in the middle of all of that was what I imagined Johnson's voice to be for the purposes of the book.

The language itself (the actual word choice you mentioned) made it even more difficult. I love the way language recedes and returns and sometimes gets recycled, or gets appropriated by a different politic so that the meaning changes. That kind of vernacular shift happens from decade to decade, so it was a real challenge trying to decipher how or where the words would be used. The other part of this is persona and decorum. In *Suck on the Marrow*, you manage to be both musically poetic and historically aware. Did you ever find yourself wanting to use language or tropes that were inappropriate for the persona? Can you talk about how you handled those creative moments?

CTD: I think this question of how to deal with language or tropes that are inappropriate to a time or a persona has a lot to do with why I might be drawn to archival poetics. My sister is an eighteenth-/nineteenth-century historian, so I would sometimes run ideas by her. Would a city-dwelling slave owner in the 1850s be drinking rum, bourbon or brandy? (I remember asking her that specific question.) Getting that detail wrong, as you mentioned above in terms of the buses and telephones, would hurt my credibility with people who know better, and would

lessen my ability to teach people who don't know better. That sort of detail, that sort of insertion of evidence, document, fact, archival footage, whatever you want to call it, is crucial to the enterprise I chose to pursue when I committed to writing *Suck on the Marrow*. The language mattered.

The language also came in handy because, when I deployed appropriate words (*shoat*, *oyster fork*—do you know how many oysters they ate in the nineteenth century!—*iron pincers*, *blue bag*) throughout the poem, I didn't have to use archaisms in my syntax to mark the time period. In this way, I was able to straddle the demands of a twenty-first-century lexicon and a nineteenth-century one. I think this is one of the most interesting challenges of historically informed writing. How do you write work that speaks across decades or centuries in a manner that is comfortably conversant in both time registers? The language helps. Also situation. I love what the Belle Schreiber/Federal Agent interviews allow in *The Big Smoke*, for instance. You get to give us a glimpse of the life around Johnson in the language they might have spoken, but you also temper what we see through form and poetic intervention. We're playing both sides when we do this, aren't we?

This leads me to my final question. Writing *Suck on the Marrow* was often extremely difficult because the

subject matter was so excruciatingly harrowing. At one point there is a story (borrowed from a placard I read at a museum) of a woman who was killed when she was rolled down a hill while shoved in a whiskey barrel with “nails jutting through the core.” There are countless other horrible stories, taken straight from the history of this country and rendered in the poems in this book. Writing this book caused me to question all sorts of things about the ability of human beings to achieve anything approximating grace or beauty. What, do you think, is the role of the poem that holds in its belly the documentation of the most vile parts of our history? And how does the process of manipulating that history, as we do in archival poetry, effect this response?

AM: That’s such a great question to end on. Thanks for your words here. You’ve given me so much to think about.

Poets have to be the ones to look at those ugly parts of our history, because we have the language to manage it built into our art. Ben Okri says something similar in a much more elegant way in the essay I mentioned earlier. He says that poets “need to live where others don’t care to look, and they need to do this because if they don’t they can’t sing to us of all the secret and public domains of our lives.”

I love that. It’s not just documenting it. It’s living it in a way that allows poets to serve as some kind of conduit between the past and the present. Now I’m starting to make us sound a little bit like magicians again, but I think we agree that there is an element of magic in archival poetry. After all of the research and filing and notating and highlighting, we have to be open to the imaginative possibilities—those connected with language and metaphor and the difficult things history has often tried to edit out. We have to be willing to live all of those clandestine and ugly moments on the page in order to re-see history.

CTD: Yes, Adrian. Yes. Thank you so much for sharing in this conversation. I mean that in terms of this particular conversation, but also the conversation we’ve been having in/with poetry for all these years. Let the record show: I am honored to know you and to know what you’ve led me to know.

A Small Encyclopedia of Life, Death & Other Investigations

Allison Cobb
& Kaia Sand

Investigative Poetry: That poetry
should again assume responsibility
for the description of history

—Ed Sanders, 1976

The highly rewarded entrepreneurial
strategy of forging ahead with an air
of mastery no matter what spawns
impatience for the point or gist. This is
the economy of generally busy expertise.
It must detach itself from values that
encourage the necessarily inefficient,
methodically haphazard inquiry
characteristic of actually living with ideas.

—Joan Retallack, 2003

Light + water = fire!!

—Sueyeun Juliette Lee, 2015

Here is what happened: we talked. Over tea, over food,
sometimes we walked. We determined the exact middle
point between where we live “as the crow flies.” Kaia
marked it with a red thread and a crow silhouette on a
map. Nearby, we found a coffee shop. We met there
and talked. Sometimes we recorded our conversations,
sometimes not.

We have known each other since the late 1990s, when
we both were a part of the Washington, D.C. poetry
community after completing MFAs at George Mason
University. Now we both live in Portland, both of us
project-oriented with our poetry, both turning toward
investigative and mixed-genre work. We share particular
concerns, each of us contending with what it means to
be part of a species that has put at risk the future of all
life on the planet. How is one to live ethically, much less
write, under such circumstances?

When we started to think about how to document our
conversations over years for this project, we realized that
our talk courses along particular themes. We share an
admiration for Tisa Bryant and Miranda Mellis’s ongoing

Encyclopedia Project, and determined that our themes could become entries in an encyclopedia of sorts—a way of mapping the running flow of our shared speech.

— AC & KS

Documents

Allison Cobb:

The word “document” in English first meant to teach, from the Latin *docere*: to show. For me, documentary poetry has more to do with learning than teaching. Kaia, you and I have discussed preferring the phrase “investigative poetry,” which in literal terms means to be in the footprints, to follow the track (the Latin *vestigium*: path or trace).

Documenting as a way of going back, of following the trace. There is in this a sense of indebtedness and connection—the production of knowledge, of our understanding, is communal; it grows out of multiple wanderings, and it is also embodied, physical.

I learned this from walking around Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, and I learned it again from you, Kaia, when I first moved to Portland and joined one of the walking tours you led of the Portland Expo Center—used during World War II as a detention center for thousands

Kaia Sand:

These days I linger in archives, those repositories of documents organized according to idiosyncrasies of lives lived alongside paper. Provenance guides the archivists. Piles of documents, akin to a kind of enduring shadow-life.

The documents are relational, but I also consider a document in its flickering autonomy, a small system of language, a form. Seven years ago I began experimenting with “dystopic documents,” interested in taking one system of language, limiting myself to its patterns, but finding a new form. Could I write lyric poetry in this way? I tried. The obsessions and repetitions of legal language, the cataloguing of trade documents. In this way, I recognize my manner of writing as documentary. A document seems like a poem in its becoming. Transforming documents into poems puts into high relief, what Herbert Marcuse describes when he points out that poetry and art are necessarily

AC

of people of Japanese descent. In your walking tour and in your book *Remember to Wave* you immerse us in the physical trace of generations of people on that plot of ground within the floodplain of the Columbia River. I always remember you telling us that the massive beams of old-growth timber holding up the roof are the same that the people confined there in 1942 leaned and slept against. This is a document.

In investigation one travels where other bodies and minds have been first. But also, investigation is not only a looking back, a retracing; one aspect of the mind and body looks forward. Investigation is a way of asking how, now, to be alive. The question is not only a personal one. It is communal, and it staggers under the weight of what is at stake.

KS

social: "In its very elements (word, color, tone) art depends on the transmitted cultural material; art shares it with the existing society." And yet, because "aesthetic form" is "the transformation of a given content," it achieves a kind of autonomy, the possibility of creating alternative realities, or indicting reality.

I gravitate toward "investigation" as the description of my writing, because, as you point out, Allison, it is active, chasing down a path, or paths. This approach emphasizes open, and not predetermined, findings. We move into complexity. During my first semester at George Mason, I remember Carolyn Forché saying to the Poetry Forms class, "People say to write what you know. Well, you can always know more." Her encouragement toward inquiry was important to me. I've come to think of what I do as inexpert investigation, which I hope resists "the air of mastery" that Joan Retallack describes in our epigraph. My inexpertise is an insistence (no matter how much I research and learn), a way to

AC

Emotions

Allison Cobb:

I long for physical bodies in my documents, but often, of course, in official histories, they are erased. The researcher sublimates his body behind a rational discourse. How did he live while he performed this labor? Whenever I pick up a work of history or scholarship, I look for these traces, for the bodies of others who made this labor possible: caretakers, wage earners, teachers, colleagues, funders, librarians, graduate students. Then there are the bodies that the official histories sometimes deliberately erase—women, people in poverty, people of color.

For poetry to assume responsibility for the description of history, as Ed Sanders challenges, is to honor the gaps

KS

maintain investigation open to new insights, new participation.

Kaia Sand:

Four years ago, when you and I recorded a batch of conversations, Allison, I had recently investigated the financial collapse through poetry, a magic show, and "econ salons" (gatherings of artists, economists, activists). I expected my work to continue to emerge from a political-economic imagination, one that linked local housing foreclosures to international financiers. My investigative preoccupations tend to course through the uneven distribution of power; the difficulty and the necessity of acting in our ambiguous present; the difficulty, and necessity, of loving the stranger.

But at that time everything I spoke of to you spiraled inward—in, in. These were the days after my womb, sickly with roaming

and the absences, to resist the “air of mastery” Joan Retallack describes, and instead open to the inexpert, the wanderer, the chaos of the body and its emotions, its illnesses, all that logic can’t contain. That was a lesson I learned writing *Green-Wood*, where throughout I labored to maintain an air of distance, out of a desire for mastery of the material and of myself, until the final section just broke down into a poetry that became like a cry, a way of expressing the physical and mental breaking apart I experienced after September 11th.

It is a lesson I keep re-learning. Recently, working on a project called “Plastic: an autobiography,” I made a map of the key themes in the book. Surveying the map, I could suddenly see: I had blanked out nearly all the women. It was a stunning discovery, in a project I had claimed as autobiography. I had mindlessly replicated the blanks within the technological histories. I had in a sense erased myself.

cells, was scooped from my body, and I was searching for courage. I walked my neighborhood in a spiral, photographing my shadow as myself extending into the world. I wrote about the woodpecker on the telephone pole, the chickens that warble when I say *hello*. Inward. Emily Dickinson’s “formal feeling.” I remember my first poetry reading during these sicker days, when I read with a shaky voice in a gallery celebrating the discovery of an early, local Allen Ginsberg recording of “Howl.” People traded stories of knowing Ginsberg. All I voiced was that I saw a woodpecker, speckled with red-tinged feathers.

My preoccupations have become more far-flung again, but I also know that my social imagination is vulnerable, idiosyncratic, shaky-voiced. It is my porousness (the sorrows that sometimes sweep into me from the bus passenger across the aisle) that helps me at least glimpse, just glimpse, how to love the stranger.

Wait. Did I simply conflate private with emotional? Did I just give

Once one starts to pay attention (staying still enough to notice, as you say, Kaia), one finds that what cries for exhumation is infinite. We can extend it even to the trees destroyed in the making of the paper, even to the bodies of the animals whose skin became the old parchments. Lisa Robertson dwells on this in her essay “Lastingness,” which opens “I flew to the British Library to trace Lucretius.” There she is permitted to peruse a copy of the earliest known copy of *On the Nature of Things*. She focuses on a flaw in the vellum of the ninth-century codex—“the trace of an animal’s wound perhaps.” An individual, maybe the monk who copied the work more than a thousand years ago, doodled “a labial ornamental border” around the shape.

Robertson is drawn to these physical traces as part of the erotics of reading. Maybe it is the delight of the *and*, the *yet*, the *but*—all that connects. I aspire for my own investigations to overflow with doodles and scars.

private a square footage of things I notice 20 meters from where I sleep—to demarcate it from the social? Significantly, too, Allison, our conversations have reminded me that the smaller square footage, the 20 meters around one’s dwelling, has a form, that staying still enough to notice the woodpecker has its form. Permaculture. You show me that this too is political, but not everything. There is the *and*, the *but*, the *yet*...the fabulous coordinating conjunctions linking whatever we do to something else. This is something I look to your writing for: I know that at any given moment, you can make surprising, significant connections.

In a wobbly way, I try to notice my own subjectivity, emotions, in these investigations. When documentary poetry functions as news, the way Patricia Smith poetically reports on Hurricane Katrina in *Blood Dazzler*, and it accounts for “the doodles and scars” you describe, such poetry gets at William Carlos Williams’s famous lines: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems /

yet men die / miserably every day / for lack of / what is found there." When Kathy Jetnil Kijiner poetically reported on climate-change effects in the Marshall Islands as well as other island nations by reciting her poem "[Dear Matafele Peinem](#)" to the United Nations Climate Summit last fall, her reportage included fury, grief, resolve, tenderness. Poetry need not be disciplined by the disciplines.

I try not to jettison my own messy self from the page.

Fire

Allison Cobb:

Modern life is defined by the inauthentic, the artificial, by its separation from the brute forces of something called nature. I think we both are interested in investigating this as a fantasy based on a damaging (and increasingly blind) hubris. We are creatures of dirt, water, wind and fire, and subject to the interactions of these forces. Our vast technological structures

Kaia Sand:

"Let those of us who live / try" writes Charles Olson. How do we act? How do we act ethically? How do we act with courage? How is fear useful and stultifying? When I recently began investigating the work of local activists, I was curious about how they could be "heart-sure/afire with purpose," as I wrote in a recent poem for a triptych of poems titled *Air the Fire*. Give

depend on digging up the graves of fossilized beings and lighting them on fire—an activity that in its basic chemistry has not changed since the dawn of humanity. We have not exempted ourselves in any way from the vast exchange of energy and matter.

Perhaps it is the desire to overcome these forces, the desire for immortality (its flipside being negative, the fear of death) that places an essential violence at the core of so much human endeavor. In her book *The Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry writes: "The dream of an absolute, one-directional capacity to injure those outside one's... boundaries...[approaches] the dream that one will be oneself exempt from the condition of being embodied."

Scientists from around the world gathered in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the place of my birth, to figure out how to build an atomic bomb, how to ignite the fire of the sun here on Earth. Love drove them. They desired to exempt their own bodies, and the bodies of their loved ones, from the

fire what it needs and something happens.

Creating a fire takes effort; it does not always light. We show up for work, you and I, Allison, keyboard and paintbrush, plucking plastic from desire paths, toting a typewriter on a bicycle. We show up for work so that something happens. It doesn't always, but we keep showing up. The research is dogged but full of crosshairs, too, places for the birds to perch on the power lines of cognition. A crackle. Something happens. In everyday but metaphorical speech we call this a creative spark.

We try to discern the ethics of our actions, forecast outcomes. Fire-as-action reminds us of our destructive capacity, the scientists you describe building the atomic bomb. In *Savage Dreams*, Rebecca Solnit writes that a "post-modern sublime" is a rapturous response to the human capacity for destruction: "An exploding nuclear bomb is a kind of star come to earth, and these bombs lure us the way my candle lured the moths."

terror of Hitler, which they feared could reach across an ocean. They wanted to exempt themselves and those they loved from death. Because of love, because of fear, they desired an absolute, one-directional capacity to injure.

The spark you speak of, Kaia, is the positive potential of this fire—world-creating rather than world-destroying. We live in a world obsessed by the negative, hyper-focused on acts of domination and destruction, which are both celebrated (football games, the movie *American Sniper*) and feared (we have to kill them before they kill us). Perhaps one objective of investigative poetry is just to extend beyond one's own body in acts of connection rather than domination, and to document the work of others in creating and re-creating the world.

Permission

Allison Cobb:

Ed Sanders's epigraph, nearly 40 years later, should still carry

While I worked on this entry on fire, poet Sueyeun Juliette Lee posted a YouTube video, "[How to make Fire](#)." A man cuts out clear ice, smooths it with his hands into a convex lens, and holds it to the light—igniting a flame! I love this because of the creativity and contradictions inherent in this creation of fire. This is what we have to do as poets.

It's impossible. We try.

Kaia Sand:

I open your *Green-Wood* again, see my traces of pencil marks.

a radical charge. A whole host of poetries have flourished around what remains the central American form (the personal lyric narrative): Black Arts, the Beats, first- and second-generation New York schools, feminist poets, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, conceptual poetry. Documentary poetry, practiced along with these traditions, and before them, has only recently earned recognition as a distinct practice, and has become the subject of much critical writing and thought. But it remains an outlier to the major U.S. poetic movements. Why? Do poets feel a certain lack of permission when it comes to crossing genre boundaries? Do poets shy away from didacticism as antipoetic? Do we remain so deeply steeped in the Greek myth of the individual genius, the (male) poet inspired by the breath of gods?

[Mark Nowak](#) has written: "Documentary poetry has a deep international tendency.... And documentary poetics, though present in poetry, is currently more widely and, in my view, fully leveraged in visual culture (film,

That I am coming home when I re-read this book reminds me of the permission forged by our friendship of shared values and poetic concerns. I am looking for a passage about shyness and libraries, a bashfulness about one's poetic and artistic intentions among the researchers of other disciplines. I can't find it. "The New York Public Library creaks," I read. "It breathes, sucking call slips through the brass tubes to an invisible vault below our feet. The ancient book comes forth, encased in a cardboard envelope THIS FLAP FIRST. Book veiled for its resurrection like carved urns on tombs half draped in cloth, a sexual peeking out." The ritual of the research library, the forms—this is part of what I love about documentary poetry, this going-to-work, these encounters. I still do not find the passage I imagine; I read of more visits to the "low-lit, wood-patterned room" of the library.

Did I map my own apprehensions onto the text? I have talked recently about these apprehensions to Diana Banning, the archivist at the City of Portland Archives and

photography) than the language arts." What is this feeling that to document is not the place of the poet, but of the reporter, the professional historian, the filmmaker? What is this silence I feel I constantly push against?

On the other hand, I can think of all the ways I've been given permission. My freshman-year English professor—a woman clearly suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, her hands gnarled painfully at the knuckles. But I didn't think of much outside my teenaged self. I wrote a pristine five-paragraph essay as I'd been taught. She called me to her office. "So you can write a five-paragraph essay," she told me. "Why don't you do something more interesting?"

I was stunned. I'd only ever been rewarded for following the rules. I interspersed the prose of the essay with poetic lines in italics. I wouldn't have called them "poetic lines" then. I just went by instinct. She asked me to read the essay aloud to the class. A few weeks later, a boy from the class handed me a small, woven

Records Center—where I have been sharing an artist residency with Garrick Imatani since 2013. She dreamed up this residency with something like permission in mind. Hospitality. How, she has wondered, might archivists welcome artists and poets into the archives?

And yes, you did write that passage; I did not fabricate a textual memory. Page 57, you tell me as you flip through the book while we are on the phone, after you have returned from working with Miranda Mellis's students at Evergreen State College, and their rapt reading had returned you to your own text. I look. There it is. Sitting in "The Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room for Rare Books and Manuscripts." You fill out a form: "Occupation: writer. Purpose: poetry. I expect at any moment for someone to call my bluff."

Our friendship, Allison, with so many shared preoccupations, lends a kind of permission for our poet's way of life. We meet for coffee, you and I, permission granted.

pouch. Inside were the lines from my essay on little scraps of paper. It was unnerving and exhilarating at once. The first time I felt my words had a seductive power. Years later, I realized with a start that I had used this same poetic gesture in writing *Green-Wood*. I wish I could remember the name of that professor. Hers was a kind of originating permission for me—it led to others.

At George Mason the poets Carolyn Forché and Susan Tichy both taught the value of documenting, of witness. They gave us permission to look at our own lives in the context of history, to write from that place. That is a permission we have shared back and forth for nearly 20 years, Kaia, across a continent, through illnesses and struggles, successes, through periods of silence and reconnection, continually giving ourselves permission again in our conversations, passing that red thread back and forth between us, as the crow flies.

Friendship and collaboration matter for how I extend my work. I began working on a multi-lingual mosaic wall as a poet creating conditions for children to write, but, as years went by, I also learned how to shape the clay and, once fired, affix it to the wall. I learned this from the lead artist Teresa Tamiyasu, who, as a set dresser for film and television, is accustomed to figuring out how to make something, and who showed me that what I didn't yet know, I could figure out. A material investigation ("you can always know more," said Carolyn Forché). I learned this from printmaker Inge Bruggeman showing me how to whack steel type with a hammer, and she suggested that I could do it, too. I learned from dancer Catherine Egan how to extend my thoughts on movement in a poetry reading. Love itself is permission when my daughter Jessi delights in language; yes, it is a place to dwell. Jules Boykoff helps me find permission through his shared poetic concerns, and through his consideration of what

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I do as important, and you have this with Jen Coleman.

Maybe we apprentice toward permission?

Molecules

Allison Cobb:

One seeks permission, one pushes against silence because, well, that's death, and I'm alive, in a body made of molecules, like everyone else. Investigative poetry can be a way of understanding this connectedness, of diving down to the molecular level, where there is a plasticity of identity, and tracing paths across the boundaries of race, class and nationality.

The philosopher Catherine Malabou evokes "plasticity" as the operative metaphor for our age. "Plastic" is the term neuroscientists use to describe the brain's ability to form and reform neural connections in response to new experiences or injuries. The adult brain is far more plastic (capable of transformation) than previously realized.

Kaia Sand:

Here's one story of how I became a poet: sitting in the front of a long, narrow classroom on the right-hand side, I was 21 years old, probably wearing a maroon skirt I crafted from a large scarf and wore almost every day. I likely leaned to see the hands of my professor, Dr. Raymond Bard, twist a plastic model of a molecule to show how other atoms attach to tetravalent carbon.

When I tell this origin story one way I tell it in terms of Dr. Bard's support. Aware that I cared about art and poetry, Dr. Bard would dedicate particularly lyrical or metaphorical turns of language in his lectures to me. He did not want me to feel like it had to all be separate—that I couldn't find

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"Plastic" also refers to a type of explosive. And to the industrial material that surrounds us.

Here is how plastic gets made: some people dig a well, insert a pipe and concrete and chemicals, force oil or natural gas up out of the earth. Other people take this fossil fuel by truck, or ship, or train to a factory, where others heat it with steam to "crack" apart its molecules and form new ones—benzene, styrene, propylene, and, at the highest temperature, past 1,400 degrees, ethylene. Some others put these molecules in a machine to squeeze them with thousands of atmospheres. These people mix in chemicals to bind the molecules—one to the other, to form the single, long chains that make plastic.

Because it takes so much heat and pressure to make, plastic would never form outside a factory. No creature has evolved the power to break these bonds and consume the molecules for fuel. This is what makes plastic a zombie, impervious to decomposition. This is why plastic

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poetry in organic chemistry (after all, his name was Dr. Bard!).

But I will add a bit more to this origin story. When I was a child, I recall searching for four-leaf clovers for hours, thinking that I was very interested in this idea of life, that I was quite glad to be alive. This reverie became something like a guide. I didn't know what life was, what its contours were, just that I was quite taken with it. When I began organic chemistry, I was again taken with this notion that it was carbon that turned chemistry organic—alive!

A thread of knowledge such as this carries forward in the "necessarily inefficient, methodically haphazard inquiry characteristic of actually living with ideas" that Retallack describes. These threads of knowledge are how investigations become textual, textile, once we pick them up again, add others.

All along the way, I pick up threads. Investigation moves through life. I think about how our atmosphere, heavy with

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persists, even as it breaks down into ever-smaller bits, building up in the oceans, in Arctic sea ice, in the bodies of lugworms, ants and honeybees, and in our own bodies. We dig the graves of fossilized beings and they come back to haunt us. This is our true zombie apocalypse.

Life & Death

Allison Cobb:

Something occurred to me: everything has already died. We all are collections of molecules reduced to our productive use value within the system of global capitalism. Amazon rainforest, plastic toothbrush, the lungs of a coal miner—all cease to have value within this system when they lose their productive function. This is a massive leveling of entities that succeeds by suppressing or ignoring all that does not have a use value or profit potential. A small percentage of us live privileged lives within this system, lives of comfort, free from

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carbon, is erratic. And how this is not unrelated to those carbon-bonded models we would twist in our hands, and this idea of life. Because it is this strange, strange way that life (sunk low into hot burial, carbon shifting, lakes of carbon and its fire) transforms, and then we dig it up and burn it. The carbon of life and death transforms, unbearably.

Kaia Sand:

Is the life of me my body's bits of carbon, ancient and tetravalent? When a coyote galloped down the city street on which I live, trailed by one crow, more crows filling the space the coyote had passed through, filling it like a dust cloud, my chest gaped at its sternum, filling with something that felt like life. Crows filling in. Whether combing a patch of clover with my child-hands or feeling life as a small impulse near my woman-sternum, I locate life in its reverie as well as its atoms.

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want. Nonetheless, we remain subject to its inexorable logic of production—a kind of death.

In a 2013 [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*, the scholar, writer and Iraq war veteran Roy Scranton called on wealthy nations to “learn how to die”—that is, dismantle the fossil-fuel driven civilization that has brought us to this climate crisis. The *Times* published his piece just as Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest storm ever recorded, spread devastation across the Philippines, killing thousands. I admired Scranton's provocative charge (that we must not only change but transform utterly) but, I thought, *Learning to die is a luxury; people are already dying*.

Perhaps the challenge is not learning to die, but learning how to be undead (even alive) in order to transform a system bent on destruction. This may seem impossible. But it is not unprecedented, a point Ursula Le Guin made in her [speech](#) at the 2014 National Book Awards: “We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so

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We chose to write about life and death, and we laughed, because it's so impossibly grandiose, and yet true to our investigations. We talk about how we burn ancient creatures, pyres of small animals, an earth caked with long-still pulses, the ocean drifters, the critters that wander, the kelp roped to the earth's low layers, settled forests, gummy death. We're grave diggers: I mean, other people do the digging for us, the rigs that bob their necked needles into the limestone shale of North Dakota.

Is there a kind of immortality lodged in this? When we are alive, we burn mildly with fever. Fever is not combustion; we just move toward it; bodies cannot create that fire in life—the “Tyger Tyger burning bright.” Illness is like soot, an incomplete burning, a smear of carbon. When we burn fossils, we subsume the dead with combustion. Finally, we burn bright with power.

Coal, oil, natural gas: animal graves. I never seem to know how to bury animals. There's the raccoon that shredded our

did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.” Le Guin called for “writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being.”

Can we create ways of being in which our every act does not add to the funeral pyre? We will need collective action to counter entrenched powers, and we will need new technologies, but we will also need transformed ways of thinking. I think investigative poetry, with its commitment to inquiry as well as to the imagination, can participate in this becoming.

chicken, doing the work of burial, only tufts of feather blowing around an elderberry trunk. Carnivorous diets are a burial ritual, and when another chicken died I read we could simply bag and toss her, in the way the carcass of a chicken dinner might be tossed, but I buried her in a paper box hoping she might decay, not like our cat, a plastic suitcase shaped around her, bones hidden from the mud. The ashes of another cat are nailed shut in a wooden urn—I did not do that burning, I do the daily burning of driving and such, a pyre for power to heat up or go fast.

When you and I investigate, Allison, we start showing up (through our research, site visits) so something happens. So I begin to track the long oil trains that trudge past Glacier National Park, along the Columbia Gorge and through my neighborhood (I hear their train whistles at night) to refineries in Anacortes, elsewhere. Reverie, doggedness.

Afterword: Habeas Corpus?

—Philip Metres

If form is an extension of content, to paraphrase Charles Olson, then these essays communicate much about the ethos of documentary poetry simply on the level of form. Rather than monodirectional interviews—in which the asymmetrical power dynamic of author and critic (or acolyte) is rendered explicit—these conversations embody and model a poetics of listening, interchange and democratic dialogue.

What do we call this practice? The practitioners themselves (ourselves) vary in what they call this engagement with other texts and textualities: documentary poetry, investigative poetics, poetics of inquiry, research-based poetics, social poetics—all overlapping practices, each with its own figuration of the poet: poet as alternative historian, detective (noir and classic), philosopher, radical text-worker, etc.

Documentary poetry, for me, comes out of the sense that we are called to be co-creators of history through language and the discourses of language: at times we wrestle with it (Jacob); at times we are consumed by it and then thrust out of it (Jonah); and at still other times we try to outlast its madness (Job). I employ these Biblical allusions not to delimit the scope of documentary poetry, but rather to evoke how the practice of documentary poetics (that is, what leads us to dive into the detritus of the past or into repressed or oppressed moments or people or creatures in dominant narratives) necessarily places the poet into primal relation with otherness (angels and creatures and the divine), the otherness of others, the marginalized, the silenced, alongside or within the agents of empire, colonization and erasure. In the words of Donovan Kūhiō Colleps: “documentary poetics has ways of inverting the colonial/imperial power of documents.”

Consider Whitman’s attempt in “Song of Myself” as an aspirational, but limited, lyric version: “Through me many long dumb voices”—as if we could or would want to “contain multitudes” in an egotistical sublime.

In “From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The Poet as Journalist, Historian, Agitator” I suggested that documentary poetry drew upon both the ballad tradition and modernist experimentation with collage,

using found materials to “extend the document,” as Muriel Rukeyser once put it. To make the news (and the forgotten) “new.” Yet too often, our genealogies of contemporary poetry reach only as far back as the modernists. While modernism still may be the primary touchstone for much poetry written today, we fall prey to a foreshortening of history itself when we fail to draw upon precursors, earlier eras and other modes of writing and storytelling. We can look not only at creative nonfiction, but also to the rich trajectory of documentary film, and sampling from jazz to hip-hop. We should be listening back not only to balladeers (working with the news of the day to tell the stories in song) but also to elders, griots, troubadours, holy fools, tricksters, medicine men, witches and shamans.

Of course, this list of precursors is rife with contradiction. An elder may have one sort of story to tell, a trickster quite another. The work of an historian might open us to what Emerson called “the mind of the past” in a way entirely different from a shaman’s practice and access point to the spirit world. One question that documentary poetics induces regards our relationship to source material. The practitioners here tend to advocate for an ethical treatment of texts. Camille Dungy writes of explorations of nineteenth-century American history for *Suck on the Marrow* in the context of the plagiaries of popular historians Doris Kearns

Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose; the question of ethical sourcing drove her practice. Similarly, Donovan Kūhiō Colleps notes that documentary poetics “feels like a way to humbly enter into this immensely deep tradition mo’elelo, today.” Adrian Matejka puts it this way: “it’s a matter of negotiating their spaces [of prominent African Americans and their stories] with respect and awareness, of honoring their lives.” Kaia Sand talks of “inexpert investigation,” alongside Allison Cobb’s resistance to what Joan Retallack calls “the air of mastery.”

It’s for good reason that poets worry about exploitation of texts. At the heart of documentary poetics—as at the heart of modernism—is the question of appropriation. Whether it was Eliot or Picasso who said it first, the notion that great artists steal cannot but sound exploitative and colonizing, given the modernist backdrop of European empire. So many disciplined, disappeared and dismembered bodies. The latest outrage in this line of exploitation is Kenneth Goldsmith’s conceptual poem “The Body of Michael Brown,” an edited version of the autopsy of Michael Brown, whose shooting by police led to months of protest and has been part of a wider social movement to reform policing in African American communities and to expose institutionalized racism in law enforcement. In the words of Rin Johnson, “what I mean is there are political realities from which art cannot hide. To take a document like this and attempt

to make it into a form of art is blatantly not engaging with the issues at hand." Others have explicitly linked Goldsmith's Conceptual piece with white supremacy itself.

The documentary poet who attempts to represent or "give voice" to the other (with all good liberal intentions) necessarily must confront the epistemological limits that Gayatri Spivak articulates in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Western attempts to represent "the other" almost invariably contain an epistemic violence. The very claim of a universality reinstantiates the subaltern position of the subaltern. To put it another way: there is an ethical bind at the core of any documentary poetry project that attempts to reclaim history as some totality, or that says, *This is the body*. We must constantly confront both our own epistemological limitedness and our positions of privilege as text-workers, as makers in the language of contemporary empire.

Perhaps there is a dialectic of documentary poetics: between historicity and the transhistorical, between the local and the synecdochal, between the propaedeutic and the deconstructive, between the raw facticity of texts and bodies and the violence of the frame, etc. The strengths of documentary poetry (its attention to preserving a history, its instructionality, its architectures)

also risk the violence of silencing, naming, excluding that the documentary poetry attempts to redress.

Yet to refuse to engage in a dialogue with the silenced, to refuse to engage with the past, is also problematic for its own reasons. There is no getting around the past. As James Baldwin writes, "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it." History itself as repository not only of the atrocious, but also of the just and the beautiful. As Howard Zinn proposed: "If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win. I am supposing, or perhaps only hoping, that our future may be found in the past's fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare." In Allison Cobb's words, "investigation is not only a way of looking back, a retracing.... Investigation is a way of asking how, now, to be alive."

Documentary poetry (or the practices of investigative poetics) offers multiple possible outcomes. First, the poem can "extend the document," as Rukeyser wrote, thus giving second life to lost or expurgated histories, yet still finally remaining a poem. In this outcome,

the documentary poem offers its readers a double-movement both inside the life of the poem and outside the poem. Second, the poem itself can be extended through the document, given a breadth or authority that the lyric utterance cannot attain on its own. Third, the practice of investigative poetics can extend the very idea of poetry—it forces us to rethink what poetry itself is and can do.

The double-movement of documentary poems means that they constantly court their own collapse. They court their own collapse because they reach beyond themselves; documentary poems are not meant to be merely *objets d'art*. They are signals in the dark. For Donovan Kūhiō Colleps, documentary poetics is “the act of weaving history, poetry, myths, legends, tradition, tale, record, anecdote (certainly more) into something that both amplifies each of them while it also contributes something new to a collective continuance.” Perhaps the labor of documentary poetry moves toward the articulation and instantiation of a collectivity. I’m thinking in particular of Mark Nowak’s resolution to see his work as a departure point for empowering, rather than representing, others and othered voices. Leaping from his consideration of the struggle of industrial workers in *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak conducted workshops with autoworkers from Ford plants in Detroit and South Africa. In his recent project, rather than merely representing

the struggle of domestic workers in his own writing, he has conducted workshops with domestic workers and gathered their poems as part of an international campaign to create a domestic worker bill of rights.

Like Perez and Nowak, Joseph Harrington, in this chapbook’s introduction, proposes that “the test of any documentary/historical/investigative poetry” is whether it “ends up teaching new reading publics things that they did not already know.” There is knowing, and there is knowing that is a kind of being and doing. We *can know with our heads*, I counsel my children when I have to remind them of something that they’ve failed to do, *and we can know with our bodies*. My hope is that documentary poetry keeps moving from ways of textual knowing to a knowing that moves us into our bodies, that moves us toward connections with other bodies and beings, that moves our bodies with the double-awareness of what’s happened and all that is possible.

AUTHOR BIOS

ALLISON COBB



Allison Cobb is the author of *Born2*, about her hometown of Los Alamos, and *Green-Wood*, about a nineteenth-century cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. Cobb is a 2015 Djerassi Resident Artist and a 2014 Playa Resident Artist. She received a 2011 Individual Artist Fellowship award from the Oregon Arts Commission and was a 2009 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow. She works for the Environmental Defense Fund. She lives in Portland, Oregon, where she co-curates The Switch reading series.

DONOVAN KŪHIŌ COLLEPS



Donovan Kūhiō Colleps is a Kanaka Maoli writer from ʻEwa, Oʻahu. He is an instructor and PhD student at the University of Hawaiʻi, Mānoa.

CAMILLE T. DUNGY



image credit: WideVision
Photography — Marcia Wilson

Camille T. Dungy is the author of *Smith Blue*, *Suck on the Marrow* and *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*. She edited *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* and co-edited the *From the Fishhouse* poetry anthology. Her honors include an American Book Award, two Northern California Book Awards, a California Book Award silver medal and a fellowship from the NEA. Dungy is currently a professor in the English Department at Colorado State University.

JOSEPH HARRINGTON



Joseph Harrington is the author of *Things Come On (an amneoir)*, a Rumpus Poetry Book Club selection; *Poetry and the Public*; and the chapbooks *Goodnight Whoever's Listening* (Essay Press), *Earth Day Suite* (Beard of Bees), and *Of Some Sky* (Bedouin, forthcoming). Harrington is the recipient of a Millay Colony residency and a Fulbright fellowship.

ADRIAN MATEJKA



image credit: Michelle Litvin

Adrian Matejka is the author of *The Devil's Garden*, winner of the 2002 New York/New England Award, and *Mixology*, a winner of the 2008 National Poetry Series. His most recent collection, *The Big Smoke*, was awarded the 2014 Anisfield-Wolf Award, and was a finalist for the 2013 National Book Award and the 2014 Pulitzer Prize. He is the recipient of fellowships from Cave Canem, the Guggenheim Foundation and the Lannan Foundation. He teaches at Indiana University in Bloomington.

PHILIP METRES



image credit: Robert Muller

Philip Metres is the author of a number of books and chapbooks, including *Sand Opera* (2015), *A Concordance of Leaves* (Diode Editions, 2013), *abu ghraib arias* (Flying Guillotine, 2011), *To See the Earth* and *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941*. His work has garnered two NEA fellowships, the Watson Fellowship, five Ohio Arts Council Grants, the Beatrice Hawley Award, two Arab American Book Awards, the Creative Workforce Fellowship, the Cleveland Arts Prize and the PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant. He is professor of English at John Carroll University in Cleveland.

CRAIG SANTOS PEREZ



Craig Santos Perez is a native Chamoru from the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam). He is the co-founder of Ala Press, co-star of the poetry album *Undercurrent* and author of three collections of poetry: *from Unincorporated Territory [hacha]*, *from Unincorporated Territory [saina]* (2010) and *from Unincorporated Territory [guma']*. He has been a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize for Poetry and the winner of the PEN Center USA Literary Award. He is an associate professor in the English Department at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa.

KAIA SAND



Kaia Sand is the author of *A Tale of Magicians Who Puffed Up Money that Lost its Puff* (Tinfish Press, forthcoming), *Remember to Wave* (Tinfish Press) and *interval* (Edge Books, named Small Press Traffic Book of the Year), and co-author with Jules Boykoff of *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry and Public Space*. In collaboration with artist Garrick Imatani, she was artist-in-residence at the City of Portland Archives and Records Center from 2013–2015 (a public-art commission by the Regional Arts and Culture Council). She will hold an artist residency at Largo das Artes in Rio de Janeiro during the fall of 2015, creating a textile poetry project, *Pano Quemado*.



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