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A FORM OF PROTEST: DOCUMENTARY ASSEMBLAGES IN AMERICAN POETRY

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, American poets increasingly began to integrate into their works a variety of found or adapted texts, including legal documents, court proceedings, testimonies, or reports to capture historical moments. These poetic experiments have been collectively described as instances of “documentary poetry.” Like documentary film or literary reportage, this mode of poetry unsettles a habitual understanding of the term “documentary” as an ostensibly objective mode of representing reality, asking whose truth is being represented and how. Here, the fact emerges as prone to change and tangled with subjective, or even surrealist, perspectives. Even though we are currently witnessing an intensified interest in documentary poetry, this field remains largely undertheorized. My project fills this research gap by situating American documentary poetry within a broader tradition of protest writing, which has been unfolding especially in times of crisis and change. Its aim is to examine and theorize literary and transmedial assemblage as an experimental form of protest, which both exposes and opposes socioeconomic, environmental, and racial injustice in the United States. Drawing on the new materialist assemblage theory, it investigates how documentary poets assemble voices of dissent to shed light on those aspects of history which were forgotten, silenced, or kept out of sight. By setting the form of documentary assemblage and protest literature in conversation, it broadens our understanding of protest literature and offers a new perspective on documentary assemblage and its cultural significance as a crisis-responsive form of protest.

While focusing primarily on contemporary documentary poets (Ammiel Alcalay, Jennifer Scappettone, Craig Santos Perez), the project also examines selected works by modernist women authors such as Kay Boyle, Muriel Rukeyser, and Mina Loy, whose pioneering innovations in the use of documentary assemblage can illuminate our current understanding of experimental documentary practices. Tracing documentary impulse back to the 1930s, the project points to some crucial parallels between now and then. In the United States, the decades leading to World War II witnessed a series of cascading crises: the Great Depression, which caused massive unemployment; the Dust Bowl, which spurred mass exodus from the Plains, as well as structural racism exemplified by the case of the Scottsboro Boys, among many others. The first decades of the third millennium, on the other hand, have been marked by major financial crisis, growing socioeconomic divides, environmental and waste disposal crisis, migration and displacement crisis, coronavirus pandemic, and the escalation of military conflicts. These mounting crises triggered a strikingly similar response among the discussed poets: a turn to documentary practice coupled with a need to rethink the connections between the avant-garde experimentation and social commitment, without lapsing into programmatic political agendas or the oversimplified language of propaganda.

The project develops an innovative theoretical framework, which employs methods derived from new materialist philosophy, with a special focus on Gilles Deleuze’s and Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theories. Such a perspective helps to rethink documentary assemblage as a relational and collaborative form of protest and establishes connections between poetic experimentation and posthumanist thought. The project entails library and archival research at The New York Public Library, which holds The Muriel Rukeyser and Kay Boyle Collections and The Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego. Research results will be disseminated through a number of publications: a research monograph and two articles, which will be submitted to top-tier academic journals and international university presses. Over the course of research, my findings will be also shared at international conference in the United States and Europe.