Infrastructures of Late Documentary Poetics in North America

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the surge of long form and citational poetry in the first decades of the twenty-first century and the revival of the term "documentary" to describe these projects, a configuration that I refer to as "late documentary poetics." Documentary poetry emerged as a distinct genre in and around the time of the Great Depression, as writers and artists on the political left developed new aesthetic forms to respond to economic, social, and environmental crises. In the same period, documentary cultural production was integrated into state-sponsored programs, like those established under the New Deal, and played an important role in consolidating the liberal nation-building project in both the United States and Canada. My account of documentary poetry's development in the early twentieth century follows and extends existing studies of documentary film and literature that emphasize how documentary's early association with left radicalism was intentionally incorporated into the project of liberal governmentality in North America in order to develop a form of state-sanctioned opposition that was primarily cultural rather than political, reform-based rather than revolutionary.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that late documentary poetics not only addresses the colonial and state archive thematically through the citation of institutional, legal, and corporate documents, but also engages with documentary's own history as both a tradition of anti-capitalist writing and an infrastructure of governance rooted in the instrumentalization of cultural policy. By analyzing the social and political conditions of documentary poetry's emergence, I expand formal accounts of documentary poetics by connecting aesthetic structures associated with documentary composition like citation, visuality, and generic mobility to related structures of liberal governmentality like territoriality, carcerality, and individual agency. I use the term "infrastructure" to refer to the co-construction of these aesthetic and social forms because it emphasizes how documentary poetics materializes the assumptions of liberal modernity not by reflecting or reproducing social conditions in literary form but as an active participant in a dynamic system that includes literary forms but also institutions, communities, media, geographies, and histories. My chapters put several recent documentary poetry projects by Mark Nowak, Juliana Spahr, Cecily Nicholson, and Mercedes Eng in dialogue with related modernist documentary poems by Tillie Olsen, Muriel Rukeyser, and Dorothy Livesay to argue that late documentary poetics is what Raymond Williams calls a "residual cultural practice" because it makes meaning by negotiating documentary's infrastructure without taking it to be permanent or unopposed.

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I wrote this thesis on the ancestral territories of the Anishinaabe people. In solidarity with land and water defenders everywhere.

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Introduction

Late Documentary Poetics and its Residual Infrastructures

> It is significant that much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations. But this in turn has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of the selective tradition, are clearly and actively traced.
>
> — Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

The term "documentary" has recently been revived by poets and scholars to describe a resurgence of long form and citational poetry projects that integrate primary source materials (for instance, public records, legal documents, news articles, graphs, maps, and photographs). While documentary poetry participates in a long tradition of poetry that inquires into its social and political context, it emerged as a distinct genre in and around the time of the Great Depression, which saw increased cultural production on the political left as writers and artists developed new aesthetic forms to respond to economic, social, and environmental crises. In the same period, documentary cultural production was integrated into state-sponsored programs, like those established under the New Deal, and played an important role in consolidating the liberal nation-building project in North America. In both Canada and the United States, documentary poetry is therefore closely associated with cultural forms developed by both radical labour organisers and state-funded programs.

In this dissertation, I argue that the recent resurgence of documentary poetry, which I refer to as late documentary poetics, is what Raymond Williams calls a "residual" cultural practice because it is most thoroughly understood when read in relation to its own historical record. Most experimental poetic forms value innovation and are therefore associated with the emergent, the avant-garde, and the new. Documentary participates in a protracted shift in

experimental poetics toward a shared sense that "the cultural utility of the radical now lies in recuperating the *old*" (Butling 26). In part, this shift responds to widespread acknowledgment that metaphors of the progressive advance "reflec[t] the dynamism of capitalism, its new waves of destruction and construction" (Jencks 22). As poet and scholar Stephen Collis points out, "'innovation' has become capital's word" ("Towards a Dialectical Poetry"). In response, Collis suggests that poets return not only to aesthetic strategies cultivated by the historical avant-garde (collage, procedure, appropriation) but also to "the context out of which aesthetic avant-gardes formed: the context of revolutionary social movements." This call is particularly relevant given recent critical interest in historicizing poetic form epitomized by the new lyric studies.[1] I contend that late documentary poems make meaning in relation to the history of the form, which is a complex institutional history intimately related to the project of liberal nation-building in the US and Canada.

When I began my research for this dissertation, I had absorbed from poetry blogs and anthologies a loose sense of documentary poetry's association with progressive and left activist causes. According to Mark Nowak, whose three books of documentary are among the most widely cited examples of the recent documentary resurgence, "documentary poetry tends to pack a lefter-than-liberal, social-Democratic to Marxist political history (grounded largely in WPA-era poems ranging from Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* to Langston Hughes "Johannesburg Mines" and photo-documentary texts such as Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*)" ("Documentary Poetics"). Documentary poetry's foundations in the thirties cultural front are well-established.[2] From the 1980s to the early 2000s, many scholarly projects recuperated leftist

[1] See *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014) edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins.
[2] My thesis addresses the Anglophone tradition of documentary poetics in the US and Canada. There is a parallel tradition of Spanish-language documentary poetics that traces its roots to the revolutionary movements of 1960s and 1970s Latin America.

modernism written during the interwar years.[3] These studies differ widely in how they position documentary's role in the field of leftist modernism and with respect to politically oriented cultural production in the 1930s. For example, Candida Rifkind centres "documentary as a form that becomes dominant on the artistic left" (33) while Michael Denning argues that "though the focus on depression documentary… illuminate[s] the middle-class attempts to visualize the depression, to give face to economic crisis by collecting, classifying, and presenting images of the nation, it fails to capture the complexity of the aesthetic ideologies of the cultural front" (119). My chapters unpack the ways contemporary documentary poets navigate the unsettled terrain of documentary's institutional history.

Taken together, these recuperative studies delineate "a sophisticated version of social modernism, a literary culture in which collage, free verse, Marxist perspectives, and proletarian language all meet in the common use of modernist formal strategies to heighten and interrogate a recognition of the economic, political, and cultural crisis" (Wald, "American Poetry" 106). The perception that documentary poetics is left-leaning and attuned to crisis is as much a product of this period of late-twentieth century recovery as it is of the thirties cultural front itself. Modernist documentary poets like Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Reznikoff provided alternatives to the MFA-approved lyric and modeled how poetry might approach the social and political contexts of its inquiry, which was a pressing need as the anti-war and anti-globalization movements gained momentum. These studies share what Raymond Williams suggests is the latent goal of all radical

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[3] See Alan Wald's *The Revolutionary Imagination* (1983) and *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-twentieth-century Literary Left* (2002), Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* (1989) and *Revolutionary Memory* (2001), Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire* (1991), Walter Kalaidjian's *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (1993), Alan Filreis's *Modernism from Right to Left* (1994), Constance Coiner's *Better Red* (1995), Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1997), Caren Irr's *Suburbs of Dissent* (1998), Joseph Harrington's *Poetry and the Public* (2002), Candida Rifkind's *Comrades and Critics* (2009) and, more recently, Sarah Ehler's *Left of Poetry* (2019).

historical work—by assembling a "usable past" they provide a historical foundation for a new leftist cultural formation prepared to respond to the emerging conditions of neoliberalism. This goal is more explicit in some studies than in others. "In failing to tell appropriate stories—both in academia and in our public culture," writes Cary Nelson, "we have in a very real sense driven the Left out of existence" (*Revolutionary Memory* 2). Likewise, Sarah Ehlers suggests that "a consideration of marginalized interwar poetries might alter the logics of contemporary social poetics" (3) and calls on literary scholars to "juxtapose past and present economic crises in order to uncover new forms of knowledge" (3). Overall, these studies tend to recuperate not only texts but also the literary and political genealogy-making that was so central to anti-capitalist culture in the thirties.

The recovery of leftist forms and interpretive strategies provided a much-needed corrective to existing accounts of literary modernism, but these literary historical projects sometimes overemphasise the radicalism of the cultural front in general and overdetermine documentary as a leftist form in particular. With respect to the critical understanding of contemporary documentary poetics, the result has been an oversimplification of documentary poetics as unproblematically or unambiguously anti-capitalist. My goal is not so much to correct these readings as it is to complicate them by putting them in conversation with studies of documentary film and photography from the same era that tend to emphasize the governmental properties of documentary above its associations with labour and left activism. Documentary is now more commonly associated with film, to the extent that even a poet as self-consciously embedded in the tradition as Nowak has suggested that "documentary film has been more socially constructed/constructive than documentary poetry" ("Poetry as Social Practice" 13). However, the North American documentary movement was never limited to a single medium. "I

have no great interest in films as such," wrote John Grierson (qtd. in Hardy 7), "the documentary film movement was from the beginning an adventure in public observation. It might, in principle, have been a movement in documentary writing, or documentary radio, or documentary painting. The basic force behind it was social, not aesthetic" (9). Understanding documentary as a self-consciously "intertextual and interdisciplinary approach" (Gander 2) to cultural production underscores that disciplinary silos are especially counterproductive to the critical analysis of documentary poetics.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on governmentality, scholars of documentary film including Brian Winston, Zoë Druick, and Jonathan Kahana demonstrate that documentary films were instruments of social engineering that played an important role in consolidating the liberal nation-building project in the United States and Canada. Rather than approaching documentary as "an enduring, even timeless, form or manner of image making" (Druick and Kahana 153) associated with the factual representation of reality or the use of citational compositional strategies, the scholarship on visual culture that has shaped my thinking in this dissertation positions documentary as "a historically specific style or genre" (153) that emerges in the early twentieth century as a technology of liberal governmentality. This governmental history provides what I refer to as the "infrastructures" that late documentary poets necessarily negotiate when they take up the genre. The emergence of the modern liberal state in the eighteenth century required a shift in the analysis of power from the dynamics of repression and resistance to the forms of self-government that Foucault calls biopower, which "exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (*History of Sexuality* 137). Governmentality is the form of biopower associated with the liberal state's gradual expansion through a complex web of bureaucracies,

institutions, and managerial tactics that categorize and configure social relations and determine social needs.

The discourse of liberalism associated with documentary is initially shaped by the Popular Front's middle-way politics[4] and finds its full expression in the administration of the welfare state as it developed in western democracies during the interwar years. In the United States, documentary's institutionalization was facilitated by New Deal programs and is evident in Pare Lorentz's state-funded documentary films; whereas, in Canada it is associated with John Grierson's influence on the development of the National Film Board (NFB). While these instances of institutionalization have their own nuances, which I take up throughout this thesis, Druick and Kahana argue that they are closely linked and demonstrate that social documentary in the United States and Canada share a "confluence of factors" including "government support; a progressive ideology widespread among artists, intellectuals, politicians, and bureaucrats; and a public appetite for social and economic reform during periods of revolution, reform, and crisis" (153). Druick and Kahana propose the term "New Deal documentary" because the New Deal provides a "shorthand" for "a compromise intended to suppress revolutionary energies coming from left" (157). As a technology of liberal governmentality, "New Deal documentary found a way to soften sharper voices of proletarian dissent and incorporate more radical perspectives on the socioeconomic crisis facing the nation" (157). By the end of the thirties, Grierson's claim that "documentary's primary service [is] to the state" ("The Documentary Idea") was an accurate assessment of the form. By asking concrete questions about how documentary cultural production is shaped by governmental and institutional forces, critical approaches to

[4] The Popular Front refers to the political alliance of leftists and liberals against fascism prior to and during the Second World War, which resulted in the absorption of socialist positions in favour of a more centrist politics and the deradicalization of labour through political concessions.

documentary grounded in visual culture studies foreground the enduring relationship between documentary forms and social and cultural policy.

What these studies make visible is that documentary poetics does more than just address bureaucratic processes thematically by incorporating state documents because documentary is itself an infrastructure of governance rooted in the instrumentalization of cultural policy. How late documentary poets navigate this infrastructure is complex and varied and, I argue, crucial to understanding the specific intervention that late documentary poetics makes into poetic and cultural discourse. In order to describe this intervention in detail, it is important to clarify that scholarship on documentary governmentality does not necessarily contradict the important role leftist literary modernism played in the radical organizing movements of the thirties. Rather, it illustrates that the story of documentary culture in North America is about the gradual incorporation of leftist radicalism into a project of social planning and reform. Documentary programs like the NFB were "specifically designed to appropriate realism's more radical potential and apply the form to the liberal nation-building project" (Druick 16). That is, documentary's early associations with left radicalism were intentionally incorporated into the project of liberal civic education in order to develop forms of state-sanctioned opposition that were primarily cultural rather than political, reform-based rather than revolutionary.

My argument that late documentary poetics is residual is therefore not quite the same as just noticing that it "recuperat[es] the *old*" (Butling 26). The recent surge of documentary poetics is residual because it engages with documentary's history as a dynamic social process. Rather than just tracking the recuperation of an old form, reading documentary as residual allows me to register the active methods of adjustment through which oppositional forms get incorporated as dominant practices, but without taking that incorporation as permanent or unopposed. While

emergent practices are more obviously radical, "it is in the incorporation of the actively residual—by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion or exclusion—that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident" (Williams, *Marxism* 121). In other words, the residual helps us notice the never-neutral processes of selection through which "a version of the past is used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future" (116). Our contemporary understanding of documentary poetics is shaped by these processes of selection and, just as significantly, documentary has been used by governmental and cultural institutions as a crucial method of communicating liberalism's dominant selective tradition. As an active participant in these processes of incorporation and adjustment, documentary begins with a uniquely discerning sense of how cultural policy and production facilitates dominant forms of social and political organisation and might therefore also participate in the circulation of alternatives.

Incorporation is never thorough, however, and throughout this dissertation I look for moments when late documentary poets reveal areas of uneven incorporation. Still, as Williams warns, it is difficult to distinguish "aspect[s] of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual… which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture" (122). As my analysis of individual documentary projects will demonstrate, moments in which documentary forms emerge as truly oppositional are rare, but in attending to questions of process, late documentary poets move in that direction. That is, late documentary poets do not access a residual radicalism *despite* the genre's instrumentalization and incorporation but by engaging with the processes through which documentary gets incorporated into the project of liberal governmentality in the first place. It is, in other words, through engagement with its own

institutional archive that late documentary is most fully an anti-capitalist poetics. I therefore argue that documentary's association with governmentality is, paradoxically, what has made it particularly appealing to contemporary leftist poets who contend with liberal and settler colonial policies in their work because it allows them to renegotiate the terms of culture's participation in the political.

By analyzing several late documentary texts including Mark Nowak's *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Juliana Spahr's "The Incinerator," Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*, Mercedes Eng's *Mercenary English* and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*, and by comparing them to influential poems of modernist documentary tradition, like Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, Dorothy Livesay's "Call My People Home," and Tillie Olsen's "I Want You Women Up North to Know," I argue that late documentary poets participate in a variegated critique of liberalism. This critique is a project that unites many currents of contemporary critical theory. Throughout this dissertation, I draw on studies by scholars like Lisa Lowe, Glen Coulthard, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Tina Campt who argue that "liberal philosophy, culture, economics, and government have been commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and empire" (Lowe 2). Although liberal political philosophy is based on principles of freedom and liberty and has historically been characterized as tolerant of difference, these scholars illustrate how liberalism has both produced social marginalization and managed the terrain of response to that marginalization by constraining opposition to electoral politics, social reform, cultural expression, and individual consumer-driven approaches. As Lisa Lowe argues,

> liberal forms of political economy, culture, government, and history propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the

> seizure of lands from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents, and internalizes these processes in a national struggle of history and consciousness. The social inequalities of our time are a legacy of these processes… [and include] the manners in which the liberal affirmations of individualism, civility, mobility, and free enterprise simultaneously innovate new means and forms of subjection, administration, and governance. (3)

Lowe's definition is particularly useful because of how it constructs a broad "archive of liberalism" that includes "the literary, cultural, and aesthetic genres through which liberal notions of person, civic community, and national society are established and upheld" (3-4). Documentary is, as I demonstrate in my second chapter, among the genres that materialize liberalism's social arrangements. The critique of liberalism has been approached from another direction by affect studies insofar as the affective turn interrogates liberalism's presumptions of individual agency and responsibility by demonstrating that human actors are embedded in complex biological, environmental, economic, and governmental processes. Given documentary's associations with political and economic crisis, my interest in affect theory is primarily informed by Lauren Berlant's argument about how conditions of precarity reinforce attachments to normative ways of organising life.

Many recent studies consider how late documentary poetics responds to crises associated with neoliberalism and, indeed, late documentary poetics does emerge at a historical juncture marked by growing concern about the effects of the turn to economic liberalism in the late twentieth century. My approach follows theorists like Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Isabell Lorey by taking a slightly longer view that considers both continuities and differences between welfare state liberalism and neoliberalism. Lorey argues that there is no opposition "between the secure

welfare state and insecure 'precarity'" (42) because liberalism has always governed through the uneven distribution of security. Instead of isolating precarity as a recent phenomenon she asks "who was already not (sufficiently) safeguarded by the Fordist welfare-state system" (42). Gilmore attends to this question by analyzing the contemporary "anti-state state," the contradictory formation of "people and parties who gain state power by denouncing state power" and promising austerity ("In the Shadow" 228) and the simultaneous growth in government expenditures characterized by increased funding for prisons, policing, and military. Throughout this dissertation, I consider how the affective work of building relations across time, space, and community negotiates unsettled and persistent attachments to liberal promises of security, freedom, and mobility by those experiencing neoliberal precarity as something new.

Existing critical discussions of documentary poetics tend to take for granted that "resistance to definition is one of the defining features of documentary poetry and poetics" (Ehlers and Herd). In *Contested Records*, Michael Leong attributes documentary's ambiguity to divergent dictionary definitions of the word documentary in its adjectival form: "of the nature of or consisting in documents" and "factual, realistic; applied esp. to a film or literary work, etc." (*OED* qtd. in Leong). These "competing meanings" (Leong 35) have meant that documentary is used to describe both poetry that incorporates found text and poetry that is broadly "ethnographic" (35), that is, "poetry as a record of social practice" (36). This definitional split is captured in Joseph Harrington's widely circulated description of documentary poetry as "poetry that (1) contains quotations from or reproductions of documents not produced by the poet and (2) relates to historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural" (81).[5] Critics have so

[5] Leong suggests that the difference between these definitions "roughly corresponds to the fault line between contemporary North American conceptions of the 'documentary' and the 'conceptual'" (36). Although these approaches intersect in practice, documentary poets tend to position their work as a form of social engagement, while conceptual poets are "driven by a formal principle" (36). As a way of resolving this split, Leong proposes an

far contended with documentary's definitional confusion by developing new critical frameworks and have proposed several labels for the recent turn to documentary composition, including "poetry of witness" (Forché 1993), "relational poetics" (Prevallet 2003), "hybrid poetry" (Swensen 2009), "creative nonpoetry" (Harrington), "archaeopoetics" (Bloomfield 2016), "documental poetry" (Leong 2020), "shakeout poetics" (Dowdy 2020), "poetics of the record" (Grandy 2020), and "resource poetics" (Parks 2021). These terms emphasise different and sometimes competing orientations toward documentary poetic practice, but they also circumvent documentary's complicated institutional history in North America. My thesis advances critical discussions of documentary poetics by staying with the trouble. I insist on "late documentary poetics" because it allows me to pull at threads of intergenerational exchange and redraw lines of connection in ways that prompt questions about how we create genealogies in the first place.

The relationship between the two definitions of documentary identified by Leong and Harrington is as much temporal as it is categorical. While an identification with documents is what the word initially meant, our more colloquial understanding of documentary as "factual, realistic" comes from its first uses as a noun to describe forms of discourses that proposed to report on reality and is explicitly tied to the development of documentary aesthetics in the early twentieth century. In his ground-breaking study of "documentary expression" in American literature, William Stott writes that when filmmaker John Grierson first used the term to describe John Flaherty's ethnographic film *Moana* (1926), he "used documentary in its dictionary sense of a presentation of facts without fictional matter" (9). By the time Stott is writing in the 1970s, documentary's association with objective realism is so sedimented that Stott misses the

"overarching category" (34) that he calls "documental poetics" to describe texts that appropriate found documents, identifying common critical ground that "cuts across internecine squabbles regarding what counts as either conceptual or documentary poetry" (10).

etymological novelty of Grierson's review, which is in fact the OED's earliest recorded instance of the word documentary being used to refer to a factual and realistic artwork. Documentary enters aesthetic vernacular, then, to describe "films made from natural material" (Grierson, "First Principles" 99) and has from the outset been a concept driven by questions about the representation of reality. Early theorizations of documentary aesthetics are often accused of "missing the post-structuralist mark" (Magi 248), but even Grierson's own discussions of documentary in the 1930s were not oblivious to the mediation involved in any representation of reality. "You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it" (103), he writes in "First Principles of Documentary." For Grierson and other documentarians of the 1930s, acknowledging mediation was a practical insight about documentary's use as a form of "public persuasion" (Hardy 7). Grierson's comments make clear that self-consciousness about the role of documents, themselves always partial and motivated, has always shadowed treatments of documentary as a non-objective and equivocal form; however, when interest in documentary forms re-emerged in the late twentieth century alongside the linguistic and archival turns, documentary poetry was positioned primarily as a practice that drew "attention to representation as a non-neutral practice" (Magi 246) in more broadly philosophical terms leading to questions that were more ontological than sociological.

In their influential 1995 "documentary" issue of the literary magazine *Chain*, Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman begin their "investigation into forms that are traditionally perceived as neutral or 'objective'" (3) with an epigraph from Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha: "there is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion—as old and as fundamental as the antagonisms between names and reality—needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible

existence of a documentary tradition" (3). Postmodern approaches to documentary are characterized by a tendency to extend observations about the ideological nature of all representation into assertions about the existence—or non-existence—of "documentary," which is taken as nearly synonymous with objectivity itself. The conversations in the documentary issue of *Chain* echo many of the concerns raised by Canadian critics in the 1970s and 1980s about "whether 'truth' is an absolute or attainable condition" (Davey, "Recontextualizing the Long Poem" 123): "I doubt there are any purely documentary poems," wrote Frank Davey in 1988 (134). Documentary poems from 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s are characterized by "the interplay between fact and fiction, history and imagination" (Scobie 121) and play a significant role in Canadian literary imagination, inaugurated by Dorothy Livesay's claim that the documentary poem is a "Canadian genre" characterized by a "dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (267). The critical contributions of Canadian theorists of documentary poetics are rarely recognised alongside their American counterparts; however, both positioned documentary in relation to poststructuralism and the postmodern textual turn and should be read together as a chapter in North American documentary poetics whose theoretical impulses still have outsized influence on available approaches to documentary poetics. In this thesis, I focus on what I call "late documentary poetics" in North America, which emerges following what Mitchum Huelhs and Rachel Greenwald Smith identify as "the waning of postmodernism" (4) in the 1990s and moves beyond the objective-subjective impasse that occupied scholars of documentary literature for much of the late-twentieth century.

My own approach to poetics in this dissertation participates in a renewed interest in formalism after the philosophical tendencies of poststructuralism and is indebted to several theorists of contemporary experimental poetics who read poetic form in relation to the material

structures of racial capitalism, including Christopher Nealon, Anthony Reed, Walt Hunter, Sarah Dowling, Michael Dowdy, Amy De'Ath, and Jasper Bernes. These critical models extend formal analytical approaches to argue that the relationship between aesthetic and social structures can tell us something important about how power coheres in our daily lives. The late documentary poems that I discuss extend their concerns with materiality beyond textuality's fixation on mediation by engaging with the production of both poetry and documentary as institutional forms. In *The Matter of Capital*, Nealon proposes a version of poetic textuality that "allow[s] readers of poetry to rethink a form/content divide, and see the 'subject matter' of poetry as not only thematic but intertextual" (35). This synthesis of thematic and structural concerns is particularly important for documentary poetics because, as Leong's analysis demonstrates, this old divide can appear written into the very definition of documentary. Nealon's study reveals an active "cluster" of anti-capitalist poetry across the twentieth century that shares both compositional methods and topics or topoi, which he takes together as "matter." He suggests that "the amplification, revisions, and discoveries that grow out of such affinity—their family resemblances and their divergences—give a stronger picture of a multi-authored literary 'matter'" (31). Nealon's approach to literary matter provides a model of poetic textuality that allows me to track documentary as both an aesthetic and social approach to form, without abandoning the specificity of either. The matter of documentary includes its own institutional history, including its associations with the labour movement and its use as a welfare state technology. When poets use documentary forms, they draw on a history of cultural production's involvement in both facilitating and opposing forms of liberal governmentality.

I also draw insights from new formalism, especially Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. While new formalism has been characterized as a conservative

reaction to new historicism (Lesjak 2013), it offers a critical vocabulary that has more in common with cultural materialism than many of its prominent practitioners—and critics—might like to admit. Levine's goal is to expand "our usual definition of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience" (2). She contrasts her project to "the Marxist emphasis on form as epiphenomenal… [which] assumes that one kind of form—the political—is always the root or ground of the other—the aesthetic" (14). Levine's criticism of Marxist formalism sounds remarkably similar to Williams's account of the dynamic relations between base and superstructure, which situates literature as a participant in productive processes rather than a secondary reflection of them. So, while Levine frames her contribution to literary formalism as a departure from Marxist materialism and historicism, the critical insights that she borrows from design theory help me understand the relationships between social and aesthetic forms that I first encountered by reading Williams. In this way, my dissertation aims to articulate a capacious formalism that draws on both old and new materialisms.

I use the term "infrastructure" to refer to the co-construction of aesthetic and social forms because it emphasizes how documentary poetics materializes the assumptions of liberal modernity not by reflecting or reproducing social conditions in literary form but as an active participant in a dynamic system that includes literary forms but also institutions, communities, media, geographies, and histories. The "infrastructural turn" (Amin 2014) in literary studies has so far focused almost exclusively on fiction. Most notably, literary scholars Patricia Yaegar (2007), Bruce Robbins (2007), and Kate Marshall (2013) have variously applied anthropologist Susan Leigh Star's influential insight that infrastructure is invisible until it breaks down to consider the decay of urban infrastructure like mass transit, sewers, dams, and highways as a result of neoliberal cutbacks. The relative dearth of scholarship that reads infrastructure through

poetics is especially surprising given that poetics is itself a theory of structure. Indeed, anthropologist Brian Larkin uses the term "poetics of infrastructure" to suggest that infrastructural projects should be analysed beyond their purely technical function for how they "emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy" (Larkin 329). While infrastructure connotes physical things (railways, telephone cables), it is equally about the socialities these structures materialize. This argument is made cogently by scholars of racial capitalism and settler colonialism who argue that infrastructure projects like highways and pipelines materialize the "affective infrastructures of white supremacy" (LaDuke and Cowen 247) as part of a broad system of colonial of governance and expropriation (Cowen 2017, Spice 2018, Pasternak and Dafnos 2017). An analysis of infrastructure that is not limited to urban spatial systems has only very recently been developed as an approach to cultural criticism by Lauren Berlant who theorizes infrastructure as "the movement and patterning of social forms" ("Commons" 393). My infrastructural approach to formal analysis in this dissertation considers the networked connections between literary/cultural/aesthetic forms and related social/political/economic formations without transposing one form of structural organisation on to the other.

Critical studies of documentary poetics typically turn to the archive as their primary methodological opening to the convergence of aesthetic and governmental forms, but I argue that an infrastructural analysis introduces new ways of approaching these arrangements. The chapters that follow demonstrate that infrastructure is as central to documentary poetics as the archive—from Muriel Rukeyser's investigation of an occupational health crisis in the construction of a New Deal-era hydroelectric dam in *The Book of the Dead* to Mercedes Eng's criticism of the private-public partnerships that fund the construction of prisons and detention centres in *Prison*

Industrial Complex Explodes. The history of infrastructure also intersects with documentary in interesting ways given that documentary supplied the primary cultural equivalent to the New Deal's major public works projects through programs like the WPA's Federal Writers' Project and Federal Art Project. As Ara Wilson notes, however, the term "infrastructure" was popularized by NATO during the postwar redevelopment of Western Europe to refer to both large-scale construction projects and "education and other social projects" undertaken in the name of the "public good" (268). In this sense, documentary not only communicates information about public works projects, but is itself an infrastructure that facilitates the production of liberal modernity. The term infrastructure allows me to expand formal accounts of documentary poetics by connecting aesthetic infrastructures associated with documentary composition like citation, visuality, and generic mobility to related infrastructures of liberal governmentality like territoriality, carcerality, and individual agency. The poets that I discuss respond to carcerality, territoriality, and dispossession thematically but they also do so infrastructurally through their use of documentary forms.

This project is divided into four chapters, each focused on a particular configuration of aesthetic and social infrastructure associated with documentary poetics. The first chapter considers Mark Nowak's influential definition of documentary as "a subgenre not only of poetry but also of labour history" ("Poetry as Social Practice" 11). Nowak invokes documentary poetry's historical association with what Michael Denning calls "the laboring of American culture" (xvi) in the 1930s to reanimate the infrastructure of social movement unionism. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the distance between trade unions and the cultural politics of leftist activism illustrates the challenges of moving forms across social and cultural contexts. I argue that Nowak's late documentary poetics is a residual cultural practice

that is out of sync with existing social infrastructure. This residualism introduces interpretive challenges that are not adequately addressed by reading practices informed by a politics of form, which have become the standard way of interpreting leftist experimental poetry in the past few decades. These challenges ultimately lead Nowak to abandon documentary poetics in favour of what he calls social poetics, which gets expressed through the writing workshops that he organises for low-wage, migrant, undocumented, and precarious workers. While it may seem counterintuitive to begin with a turn away from documentary poetics, Nowak's indeterminate negotiation with documentary's formative historical moment provides an opening to questions about how culture incorporates and accommodates radical elements from the past.

The second chapter argues that late documentary poets take up the interwar documentary tradition as genre. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's theory of genre as an "affective historicism" (*Cruel Optimism* 75), I propose that numerous recent invocations of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* are best understood by reinterpreting documentary's generic context, which includes institutional models of documentary production established through New Deal programs like the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Writers Project. Through a comparative analysis of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* and Juliana Spahr's 2011 documentary long poem "The Incinerator," I argue that documentary poetics provides a familiar structure for managing affective scenes of crisis by inscribing a normative approach to agency and class mobility cultivated in the North American welfare state. I draw on studies of thirties documentary culture by Paula Rabinowitz and Catherine Gander to suggest that documentary's congenital association with crisis fosters forms of agency that reaffirm rather than restructure existing social hierarchies. My second chapter therefore engages in a critical conversation with my first by noticing a tension in late documentary poetics between a desire for radical transhistorical

connection and a generic pull toward the normative driven by promises of "the good life" for the white middle class.

Critics have written extensively about documentary's relationship to generic categorization, and they have tended to define documentary as intrinsically multi- or anti-generic. In this sense, documentary has been paradoxically overdetermined and undertheorized with respect to genre. As many scholars of leftist modernism have noted, the Depression was "a moment of historical crisis that [was] coupled with crises in genre" (Ehlers 10). Poets like Rukeyser, Tillie Olsen, Langston Hughes, and W.H. Auden participated in documentary film, radio, journalism, and photography projects that, in Michael Davidson's words, "blur generic terms" (138). This environment of interdisciplinary collaboration was prompted by a shared sense that preexisting forms of poetry—namely the Romantic and high modernist lyric—were inadequate to the historical moment and led poets to "creat[e] genre-mixing forms of documentary poetics to capture the costs and violence of industrial capitalism" (Nealon 19). The sense that "documentary poetry is really mixed-genre (or trans-genre) writing" (Harrington, "Docupoetry") persists in more recent critical conversations. For example, in "Docupoetry and Archive Desire," Joseph Harrington reinterprets documentary poetry's "generic scandal" by appealing to Derridean theorizations of genre. For Harrington, contemporary documentary poetry goes further than generic hybridity, "not simply mixing documentary writing and poetic writing, but instead rejecting the categories "documentary" and "poetry" altogether." In place of "documentary," he suggests "creative nonpoetry," which he calls a "nongenre genre" and describes as "a category for writing that does not fit into categories" and is not "invested in genre for genre's sake." While continuing to register the relationship between crisis and genre, late documentary poetics requires a different approach to genre because of how it builds meaning

transhistorically. Putting aside the optimism of Harrington's suggestion that any text might overcome genre, doing away with genre as an analytic lens deprives critics of a crucial tool for reading continuities and discontinuities across the past century. Restoring and reinterpreting documentary's generic context makes visible how late documentary poems "depend as much on the arguments the poems conduct with poetic histories as on the rhetorical stances they take in the political present" (Hunter, *Subprime* 615). Rather than continuing to think of documentary as fundamentally multi- or anti-generic, I therefore propose that documentary requires a theory of genre that captures its historical and affective investments—or, in other words, what Berlant refers to as an "infrastructural analysis" ("Commons" 394).

In chapter three, I turn to Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* and Dorothy Livesay's "Call My People Home" to argue that prioritizing dispossession rather than labour in critical conversations about documentary poetry contributes to an ongoing re-evaluation of the political stakes of citation-based composition. This argument engages with Glen Coulthard's reorientation of Marxist theory in the settler colonial context from its traditional focus on proletarianization to ongoing cycles of primitive accumulation. It also builds on Sarah Dowling's reading of appropriation-based poetry through the logics of property, race, and subjectivization. I analyse *From the Poplars*' dispossessed citation[6] through Nicholson's suggestion that a book of poetry might be considered "a minor purchase of property." Nicholson combines citational material from Canada's institutional archive with unattributed and unacknowledged sources from various decolonial and anti-capitalist movements. Through the combination of these two citational strategies, *From the Poplars* not only addresses the structures of capitalist colonial dispossession,

[6] In 2019, I used the term "dispossessed citation" in a paper about Nicholson's *From the Poplars* delivered at the Text/Sound/Performance: Making in Canadian Space conference at University College Dublin. In 2020, Matt Tierney published an article in *Diacritics* that also uses to the term to discuss Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed*.

but also proposes an alternative citational infrastructure committed to forms of relation beyond the property principle.

Nicholson's *From the Poplars* is among many late documentary poetry projects that appropriate material from official government documents: Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016) incorporates language from the US Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*; Layli Long Soldier's *WHEREAS* reworks the "Congressional Resolution of Apology to Native Americans;" in *from unincorporated territory: [guma']*, Craig Santos Perez appropriates material from the United States' Organic Act and from the US Navy's Draft Environmental Impact Statement in response to increased military buildup on the island of Guam; Philip Metres's *Sand Opera* (2015) is an erasure poem whose source text is the US Department of Defense's "Standard Operating Procedure" for the War on Terror. The incorporation of government sources into documentary poetry goes back at least as far as Rukeyser's use of congressional testimony in *The Book of the Dead*, but Michael Dowdy suggests that recent documentary poems tend to approach government documents from "historically specific subject positions" (156) to reveal the imperial logic of specific state archives and of the linguistic archive itself. In Dowdy's analysis, and indeed in most recent scholarship on the subject, documentary is characterized as a compositional method rooted in textual appropriation that involves "raid[ing] and sift[ing] through [the archive] for damning pieces of fact and language to be reappropriated for potentially emancipatory ends" (179). This impulse to "steal" and plunder resources extends beyond individual texts, however—as I have been arguing throughout my dissertation, documentary is itself an infrastructure that has been instrumental in the production and management of citizenship in western liberal democracies and

poets who employ documentary forms appropriate—knowingly or not—a complex infrastructure of governmentality.

My final chapter analyses Mercedes Eng's carceral poetics in *Mercenary English* and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* to illustrate the fugitive potential of working through and underneath the carceral tendencies of documentary aesthetics. If Nicholson's *From the Poplars* invites a re-examination of Nowak's social poetics by suggesting the need to read beyond labour, Eng's carceral poetics finds itself in productive conversation with Spahr about the uneven distribution of what Fred Moten calls "all this downward and outward and upward mobility" ("echolocation" 128). In *Mercenary English*, Eng documents the "organised abandonment" (Gilmore and Gilmore, "Beyond Bratton" 303), overpolicing, and subsequent gentrification of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood through the lens of her experience as a sex worker and long-time resident of the area. *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* (2017) appropriates the structure of a government survey on the implementation of the Multiculturalism Act in federal institutions to document Eng's father's incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s and investigates the violence of criminalization and incarceration that provides the conditions for liberal appeals to diversity and inclusion. My analysis of Eng's carceral poetics draws on Nicole Fleetwood's theorization of "carceral aesthetics," or artworks produced "under conditions of unfreedom" (25) produced by the carceral state. While her poetry is unequivocally abolitionist, Eng's carceral poetics is a specifically fugitive practice that treats documentary as a real and formal constraint because its foundational strategies—photography, surveying, statistics—are instrumental to the administration of the carceral state. This chapter draws on scholarship in visual culture studies on documentary's use in state surveillance and considers how forms of "documentary capture"—from the passport to the government survey—converge with varied

forms of corporeal capture under carceral capitalism, including but not limited to actual sites of detention. Eng incorporates strategic refusals of documentary capture while also acknowledging the potential foreclosure of these strategies and therefore enacts a fugitive practice that, to use Tina Campt's formulation of fugitivity, is "at once a refusal and an affirmation of one's capacity to inhabit a future against all odds" (*Listening to Images* 113).

Together, these chapters examine how late documentary poetics makes meaning by critically engaging with its own institutional history. Late documentary poetics differs from early instantiations of the genre, I argue, because it negotiates its own participation in liberal practices of governmentality. While this argument questions documentary's reputation as a "lefter-than-liberal" (Nowak, "Documentary Poetics") and straightforwardly revolutionary poetics, it also contends that documentary's association with liberal governmentality makes it a genre uniquely positioned to consider how the cultural facilitates—and might also oppose—normative ways of organising social and political life.

Chapter I

"The Local must / engage // past / its past":

Late Documentary Poetics as Labour History

In May 2017, a group of migrant agricultural workers performed a pop-up poetry reading at Union Square Greenmarket, Manhattan's largest outdoor farmers' market. The reading was organised by the Workers Justice Center of New York, part of a growing network of worker centers in the United States and Canada, and the Worker Writers School, a creative writing workshop organised by poet Mark Nowak. For several months, farmworkers who grow and pick the produce sold at Union Square Greenmarket met regularly to read, write, and workshop poems. When they read from wooden crates at the market, they not only contested a "worker-free vision of the agricultural landscape" (Nowak, *Social Poetics* 210) by recentering migrant labour in food production, they also recalled the role poets and poetry have played in labour movements of the past century.

This chapter engages with Nowak's influential definition of documentary "as a subgenre not only of poetry but also of labour history" ("Poetry as Social Practice" 11) and examines how Nowak extends and materializes the labour politics that he initially developed in his three books of documentary poetry by founding the Worker Writers School, a project through which he provides poetry workshops in collaboration with labour organizations that support low-wage, migrant, undocumented, and precarious workers. Scholars have tended to interpret Nowak's poetry as a response to the "economic and representational crisis for the working class" (Shea, "No Working Class" 607) produced by neoliberalism and globalization. This chapter considers the limits of criticism that interprets documentary poetry as a response to neoliberal restructuring by arguing that late documentary poetics is a residual genre that aims to reanimate not only

aesthetic strategies but also the social infrastructure through which these strategies once circulated. Documentary's historical attachment to organised labour makes especially clear how late documentary poetics invites analysis across a longer temporal span than critiques of neoliberalism typically make available.

Raymond Williams uses the term residual to refer to cultural practices that are "lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation" (122). Many of the meanings and values currently associated with documentary poetry were formed at a historical moment in which cultural production held a significant place in the institutional life of the left. In the 1930s, poets and artists regularly participated in interventions not unlike the one staged by the farmworkers in Manhattan. Documentary culture was initially a product of labour schools organised by trade unions and John Reed Clubs, which assembled workers and Marxist writers and artists associated with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). It was common for poetry to be published in CPUSA's *The Daily Worker* and newspapers run by the major trade unions. The International Workers of the World (IWW) regularly printed poem cards, broadsides, and even posters of popular poems to be circulated at rallies, union halls, and May Day parades.[7] Documentary poetry emerged from within this sophisticated infrastructure of labour movement organising, which included presses, writing workshops and education programs, as well as trade unions and political parties themselves. The recent resurgence of documentary poetics has been characterized as a return to citational and research-based compositional strategies of

[7] For example, Lola Ridge's poem "Stone Face" (1933, 1935), about labour organiser Tom Mooney's conviction on falsified evidence of planning the 1916 San Francisco bombing, was printed as a large poster and displayed at union offices across California to raise support for Mooney's appeal (Nelson 51).

documentary modernism, but documentary poetics is also marked by the residue of the cultural formation within which the genre first developed.

In his influential recuperative study of leftist modernism, Cary Nelson argues that close reading strategies that interpret poems as "discrete objects" (*Revolutionary Memory* 2) risk misreading leftist poetry from the thirties because they overlook how poets "wrote as part of a collective enterprise" (7). Nelson suggests that "an aesthetic of the differential field" (2) provides an alternative method of interpretation that captures how these poems accumulated meaning in relation to the other cultural forms with which they circulated. "We are accustomed to grouping poets within literary movements," writes Nelson, "but thereafter we tend to read and understand their work individually. Yet on the Left the historical conditions of both production and reception are sometimes fundamentally interactive, reactive, and responsive" (7). In other words, poetry of this period makes meaning through its "empowering integration with a wide range of other cultural activities" (7) including theatre, journalism, visual art, and critical prose. When critics read poems "without those supplementary meanings" (2), without accounting for their specific histories of publication and circulation, then "the poems themselves may be strangely silent or substantially curtailed" (2). My analysis of late documentary poetics builds on Nelson's foundational theory for reading leftist modernism by proposing that documentary poems make meaning in relation to an infrastructure that includes not only cultural texts and contexts but also institutions and movements. This chapter introduces the infrastructural approach to formal analysis that I pursue throughout this dissertation by unpacking documentary poetry's infrastructural relationship to the labour movement.

This dissertation argues that late documentary poetics is a residual genre not only because it contains the residue of a past cultural formation but also because it makes visible the process

through which a dominant cultural tradition selects and claims available practices and values for its own. Williams makes a crucial distinction between the "residual-incorporated and residual not incorporated" ("Base and Superstructure" 11)—that is, between nostalgic and more properly revolutionary appeals to the past. As my introduction outlined, this dissertation examines how documentary cultural forms, including documentary poetics, have been incorporated into a liberal project of social planning in the United States and Canada. My next chapter will explain that this incorporation happened fairly swiftly with the introduction of the New Deal, which is not surprising considering Williams's observation that "straight incorporation is most directly attempted against the most visible alternative and oppositional class elements: trade unions, working-class political parties, working-class life styles" (*Marxism* 124). Whereas the following three chapters demonstrate documentary poetry's incorporation into infrastructures of liberal governmentality, this chapter considers whether late documentary poetics has been able to reclaim aspects of a more oppositional, or "not incorporated," residualism by reanimating historical associations with radical labour and socialist organising. Ultimately, I argue that these associations are only actively oppositional in the present if late documentary poetry can establish and sustain lasting alliances with existing forms of labour and socialist organising, which, for the most part, it has been unable to do.

Nowak's writing is frequently invoked as a test case for late documentary poetics and I begin this chapter with a brief analysis of some of his best-known documentary poetry projects, which were published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Studies by Anne Shea, Jeff Derksen, Michael Davidson, and Jules Boykoff read Nowak's poetry as a response to the "effects of neoliberalism and globalization" on the culture and economy of the United States (Davidson

746).[8] I suggest that late documentary poetics initially gains traction on the contemporary poetry scene because documentary's historical association with the labour movement makes it an especially appropriate genre to mobilise in response to deregulation, transformations in the global labour market, and the decline of public institutions. By positioning both Nowak's poetry and critical responses to his work in relation to the anti-globalization and anti-austerity movements, which staged mass public protests but struggled to articulate and actualize an alternative social formation in response to neoliberal precarity, I notice that the turn toward documentary poetics in the early twentieth century is propelled by a desire among committed poets for a poetics that moves beyond a politics of poetic form associated with Language writing. Nowak's late documentary poetics initially appears to fulfill this desire by recirculating the revolutionary potential of the thirties cultural front but ends up revealing the limits of the left's existing infrastructure. In the absence of a labour movement prepared to animate the revolutionary potential of Nowak's labour history, his documentary poetics remains nostalgic.

Documentary poetry, Nowak came to realise, could never on its own produce that labour movement. In order to make documentary poetics part of a revolutionary social practice, Nowak was obliged to supplement literary text with pedagogical programs and direct social engagement. In the second half of this chapter, I discuss Nowak's movement away from documentary poetics as the primary expression of a poetics of labour. Nowak's most recent publication, *Social Poetics*, assembles a "people's history" of the poetry workshop and documents a decade of

[8] These critics enter the conversation about neoliberalism from different angles but, broadly, they associate neoliberalism with the gradual turn to economic liberalism starting in the 1970s and the widespread effects of the withdrawal of welfare provisions and labour regulations that had defined social and economic policy since the 1930s. Shea's readings of *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* are informed by Wendy Brown's influential interpretation of neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" (Brown 9) through which "all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (10). Derksen's more wide-ranging study follows scholars like David Harvey and Jamie Peck in defining neoliberalism as an exclusively economic project of free-market capitalism and argues that globalization provides "the cultural logic of neoliberalism" (29).

organizing workshops through the Worker Writers School. Rather than positioning the Worker Writers School as a break with Nowak's published books of documentary poetry, I emphasize the continuity between these creative practices rooted in Nowak's ongoing commitment to building spaces for poetry within the labour movement. Since the thirties, anti-capitalist poetics in North America has rarely engaged with actually existing workers' movements. Timothy Kreiner observes that while Language poetry coincided with deindustrialization and the decline of organised labour, its politics of form called on poets to "heroically seize the means of poetic production and materials of language the way workers might take over a factory, even as those factories and that working class were vanishing beneath the horizon of industrialization" ("Politics of Language Writing"). Through its engagement with the conditions of work in the age of deindustrialization and contention that creating spaces where poetry is discussed and written can contribute to organising precarious workers, Nowak's Worker Writers School delivers a challenge not only to literary institutions but also to the institutional left by insisting on the importance of durational cultural projects built into the fabric of labour organizing. At the same time, social poetics introduces interpretive challenges that are not adequately addressed by reading practices informed by a textual politics of form and therefore solicits analytical approaches that consider the co-construction of poetic and social forms. I argue that social poetics, and the Worker Writers School in particular, fulfills late documentary residual potential by creating a durational and durable place for cultural production—and for poetry in particular—within emergent labour organizations. By making this argument, I am also suggesting that the radical residual practices associated with documentary do still circulate, but that they require a reassessment of the interpretive strategies currently being employed by scholars of contemporary

poetics. The infrastructural analysis that I pursue in this dissertation explores one possible approach.

Nowak's three books of documentary poetry, *Revenants* (2000), *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), register the experiences of workers and communities on the front lines of neoliberal restructuring. *Revenants* documents Nowak's Polish family's working-class experience in Buffalo where his grandmother was a Teamster and his father was a steelworker and Vice-President of the Westinghouse union before the plant closed in 1985. *Shut Up Shut Down* is a collection of five long poems that incorporate material from numerous source texts—including local news stories, academic articles and books, photographs from Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Industrial Façades*, as well as Nowak's own photography—to capture the deindustrialization of the Rust Belt and Iron Range, especially the closure of steel mills like LTV Steel in Buffalo and Bethlehem Steel in Minnesota. *Coal Mountain Elementary* combines oral testimony from miners who survived the Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia and news reports of shockingly frequent casualties in coal mines across several Chinese provinces with pedagogical exercises produced by the American Coal Foundation. It also includes photographs of Chinese mining communities by photojournalist Ian Teh and several of Nowak's own photographs of the West Virginian county where the Sago mine was located.

With the publication of *Shut Up Shut Down*, Nowak "consciously attempted to construct a new audience, a new social space" ("Poetry as Social Practice" 14) for documentary poetics outside of established cultural venues and universities. When members of the Northwest Airlines mechanics (AMFA Local 33) went on strike in 2006, Nowak was invited to read "Capitalization," a poem from *Shut Up Shut Down*, at a rally to protest the airline's use of replacement workers. "Capitalization" brings newspaper coverage of the 1981 Professional Air

Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike together with biographical material about Ronald Reagan's early career as a motivational speaker and host of General Electric's *GE Theatre* television show. These sources are spliced between historical accounts of labour organising at General Electric and Westinghouse manufacturing plants beginning in the 1920s, including testimony from labour activists who were forced out of industrial unions and lost jobs in the post-war climate of McCarthyism. Excerpts from *The Elements of Grammar*, a Reagan-era college grammar textbook, provide a hinge that establishes language as a site of conflict between labour and capital. Nowak calls "Capitalization" a "long poetics theatre piece" (11) and routinely recruits members of the "audience"—in most cases, activists and striking workers—to read the poem's three "voices," which are clearly delineated through typographical changes. It is useful to imagine the poem's performance at the AMFA strike rally in 2006, during which each typographical set was performed by a striking worker:

> *"I think [Reagan] forced the strike*
> *so he could show big business that he will*
> *beat up on union workers," said Thomas McNut,*
> *president of UFCW Local 400 in Baltimore.*
> **But as the benefits we gained grew,**
> **those of us in the forefront**
> **became targets of red-baiting.**
> Capitalize the names of organized bodies
> and their adherents.
> Capitalize Republicans, Shriners
> Capitalize Socialists, Elks.

They red-baited me.

They red-baited Charlie Newell

and those who represented the left in our union.

"I get a strange feeling that our democracy

is seriously being challenged when

the administration says, 'Either you work

or we'll destroy you economically,'

said David Wilson, director-elect

of District 8 of the United Steelworkers. (47, emphasis original)

As a collaborative piece performed at the AMFA Local 33 rally, "Capitalization" situates the 2006 Northwest Airlines strike within a history of resistance to corporate- and state-led attacks on labour, including the PATCO strike. The poem leverages the commonplace that "*the [air traffic] controllers' defeat"* was a decisive turning point in North American labour relations that "*hasten[ed] / America's drift towards / an almost union-free society*" (58, emphasis original), but the interwoven threads of "Capitalization" also situate the PATCO strike as part of a much longer history of labour repression in the United States. In other words, while neoliberalism "signalled an all-out assault on the powers of organized labour" (Harvey, *A Brief History* 25), Nowak resists assigning a decisive turning point in US labour relations and instead establishes continuities within a longer temporal frame in order to highlight documentary's residual potential.

For Nowak, documentary poetry is one way to assemble and communicate working-class history. In her incisive analysis of *Shut Up Shut Down,* Anne Shea argues that while Nowak "works within the history of working-class literature, he simultaneously offers an implicit

critique of its dominant representational modes" (607), namely documentary realism. I agree that Nowak's poetry is aware of the "limitations of documentary photography" (609) but, unlike Shea, I see his use of documentary poetry's citational forms and community-based performance contexts as evidence of an investment in the infrastructure of social documentary, even as he attempts to retool this infrastructure for a globalized economy. Nowak's revival of documentary as "labour history" suggests that his work should be positioned not only within "the history of working-class literature" (607) in general, but also with reference to the specific history of labourite writing associated with early social documentary.

As "the form preferred by 1930s socialists in both poetry and prose" (Rifkind 116), documentary is a compositional strategy with roots in what Michael Denning calls "the labouring of American culture" (xvi) in the early twentieth century. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, widespread unemployment, poverty, and crop failure mobilized waves of union organizational drives, rent strikes, hunger marches, and general strikes spearheaded by major industrial unions that developed in the United States and Canada. Hundreds of thousands of workers organised illegal strikes and engaged in sometimes violent confrontations with employers. These labour uprisings and general strikes ushered in "the age of the CIO" (Denning xiv), several decades during which labour held significant political influence consolidated around large union coalitions like the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO), a federation of dozens of industrial unions in the US and Canada from the 1930s to the 1950s. Like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the first decades of the twentieth century, the CIO initially promoted a "One Big Union" model of social movement unionism. Skepticism about the efficacy and equity of capitalism was widespread and while many of the organisers of these unions and strikes aimed for reform measures that ultimately led to the New Deal and the National Labor Relations Act

(NLRA), which the CIO supported, many others were also members of the national communist and social democratic parties and considered labour organising a step toward the proletarian revolution.

This surge in labour organizing was accompanied by a proliferation of cultural production by working class writers and by "committed" middle-class poets who positioned themselves in relation to the working class.[9] Poets like Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, Tillie Olsen, Anna Louise Strong, and Dorothy Livesay investigated, catalogued, and dramatized the impacts of industrial labour on working people—miners, factory workers, strikers, and the unemployed—and addressed the inequities of capitalism in their poetry. These poets were also journalists, social workers, and labour organisers on the front lines of labour and Popular Front movements and their poetry circulated alongside reporting and critical analysis in little magazines and trade union publications. Michael Denning refers to this broad coalition of writers, artists, and intellectuals as "the cultural front," a term that captures how cultural production was understood as a site of struggle and solidarity, a separate but related battleground irreducible to the political.

In the early 2000s, poets and scholars turned to Denning's articulation of the thirties cultural front as a provisional model for how cultural workers might respond to neoliberalism. In his 2005 article "Poetry and Politics," poet and scholar Jeff Derksen "think[s] of a cultural front

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[9] Many middle-class writers were inspired by Marx and Engels's description in *The Communist Manifesto* of "a small section of the ruling class [that] cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands" (82). In *The Cultural Front*, Denning shares Williams's skepticism with this model of the "committed" artist because it reinforces "the Romantic notion of the artist as the epitome of the free individual, and… view[s] the politics of art as an individual act, an almost heroic choice" (Denning 56). Denning draws on Williams's notion of "unconscious involuntary alignments" (58) by focusing on the professionalization of the creative industries in the early twentieth century. While they had little experience of industrial labour, many middle-class writers found themselves equally in need of wage and job protection and "the association with the left was less a conversion to than an affiliation with a movement that enabled both an artistic and a political vocation or career" (61). Denning's emphasis on involuntary alignment suggests that "going over" was motivated by more than partisan commitment. Studies of leftist modernism like Denning's and Nelson's generally take for granted that writing is both craft and industry—that is, they adopt a cultural model that highlights art's participation in a broad social infrastructure.

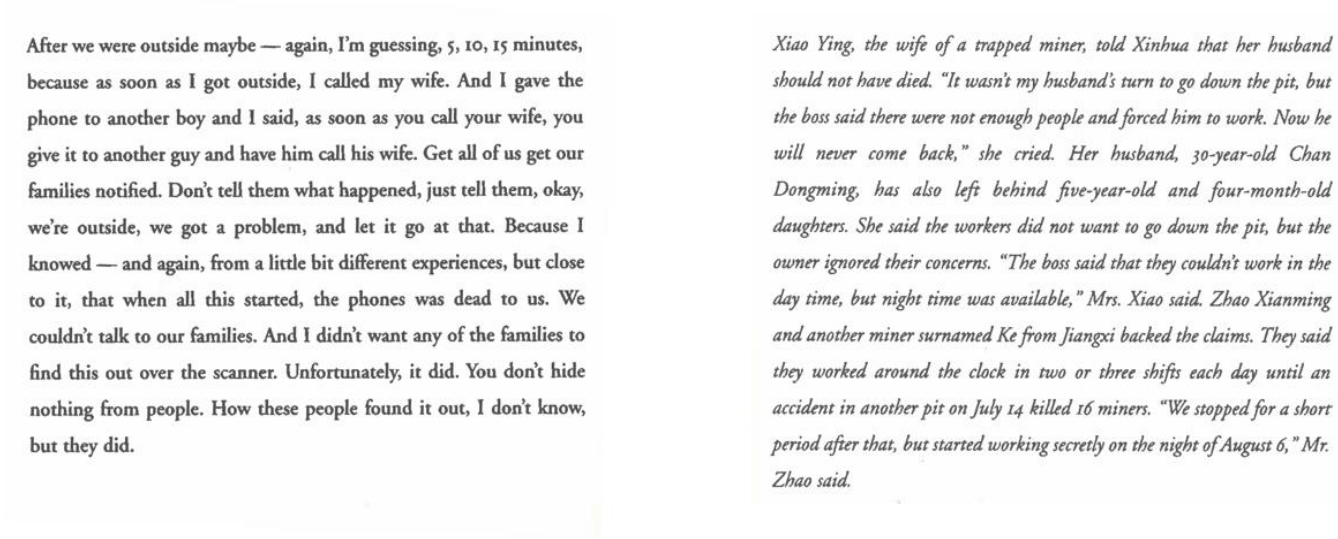
in relation to anti-neoliberal social movements" and suggests that a new cultural front model could, "as Denning ends his book, 'allow us to see new forms of struggle and solidarity in places we never thought to look'" (45). For Derksen, the cultural front model responds to the fact that it has become "increasingly difficult… to imagine poetry and politics (or a politics of poetry) in poetry alone" (45). Derksen's appeal to the cultural front seizes on a desire to move beyond the politics of form associated with the Language writing of the previous decades. Joshua Clover, for example, is especially critical of theory-based claims about poetry's political force associated with Language writing and argues that "certain things will have to be actively destroyed on the side of capital… and they will not be destroyed with language" (qtd Hickman 1). These comments are characteristic of the widespread skepticism among post-Language experimental poets about poetry's capacity to produce social change. Rather than attribute a revolutionary energy to poetry itself, these poets position poetry as a cultural activity undertaken alongside other forms action. Juliana Spahr, for example, frequently invokes the "riot dog" as a metaphor for poetry's role in contemporary social movements, referring to the stray dogs that joined protests in Athens in the aftermath of Greek's financial collapse as a result of the 2008 recession (Spahr and De'Ath 301). This widespread desire to move beyond a textual politics of form associated with Language writing propels the turn to documentary poetics in the first decade of the twentieth century. And yet, documentary poetics is ultimately unable to fulfill this desire because the social infrastructure—the union-run educational programs, the Marxist clubs, the socialist party system—is not there to support it.

Documentary poetics is frequently temporalized based on the "historical rhymes between the Great Depression and the Great Recession" (Dowdy 161) but I suggest a slight adjustment to this timeline. Nowak's best-known documentary projects precede the 2008 recession and draw

on the spatial and cultural politics of the anti-globalization movement, which voiced resistance to multinational corporations, free trade agreements like NAFTA, and international institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. The anti-globalization movement adopted strategies of globalization "from below," which encouraged organizations and social movements "to mobilize on an international scale against the neoliberal logic of globalization" (Della Porta 3). While Nowak focuses on regional and personal experiences of dispossession, he is keenly aware that globalization—the elimination of trade barriers to facilitate competition between unequal economies—has worsened already existing inequities between workers within nations and transnationally. In studies by Derksen, Boykoff, Davidson, and Shea, Nowak's poetry is paradigmatic of a "post-NAFTA poetics" (Davidson 65) that participates in the "global imagining of a literary-social project" (Derksen 97) that "cross[es] [spatial and geographic] scales, but without imagining the scales themselves to be dissolved, or by limiting their aims to the dissolving of borders, as cultural theories so often do" (99). These studies pay particularly close attention to the compositional method that Nowak calls a "transnational poetry dialogue," a poetic form that combines carefully selected citational material to map solidarities between workers who are connected through global economic circuits but whose relationships might go unnoticed at national or regional scales. The transnational poetry dialogue responds to the anti-globalization movement's call to "scale up," which was aimed both at social movement organisers and at trade unions that resorted to local and national protectionism in response to outsourcing (Moody, *Workers* 2), by mobilizing a politics of form which had become synonymous with anti-capitalist poetics in the preceding decades.

Coal Mountain Elementary provides the strongest example of Nowak's transnational poetry dialogue. Like "Capitalization," *Coal Mountain Elementary* is constructed entirely from

appropriated material—Michael Dowdy calls it documentary poetry's "limit case" (166). The book is structured as a series of lesson plans that mirror the American Coal Foundation's curriculum for elementary school classrooms, but its primary conceit is the juxtaposition of two related bodies of citational material: 1) a transcript of testimony provided by miners who survived the Sago Mine Disaster in West Virginia and 2) journalistic accounts of mining disasters in China drawn from several newspaper articles. As in "Capitalization," source texts are distinguished through typographical cues—testimony from the West Virginian miners is bolded and material from Chinese newspaper articles is italicized—but the sources are also more clearly differentiated than those in "Capitalization" because they appear on separate pages (Fig. 1).



After we were outside maybe — again, I'm guessing, 5, 10, 15 minutes, because as soon as I got outside, I called my wife. And I gave the phone to another boy and I said, as soon as you call your wife, you give it to another guy and have him call his wife. Get all of us get our families notified. Don't tell them what happened, just tell them, okay, we're outside, we got a problem, and let it go at that. Because I knowed — and again, from a little bit different experiences, but close to it, that when all this started, the phones was dead to us. We couldn't talk to our families. And I didn't want any of the families to find this out over the scanner. Unfortunately, it did. You don't hide nothing from people. How these people found it out, I don't know, but they did.

Xiao Ying, the wife of a trapped miner, told Xinhua that her husband should not have died. "It wasn't my husband's turn to go down the pit, but the boss said there were not enough people and forced him to work. Now he will never come back," she cried. Her husband, 30-year-old Chan Dongming, has also left behind five-year-old and four-month-old daughters. She said the workers did not want to go down the pit, but the owner ignored their concerns. "The boss said that they couldn't work in the day time, but night time was available," Mrs. Xiao said. Zhao Xianming and another miner surnamed Ke from Jiangxi backed the claims. They said they worked around the clock in two or three shifts each day until an accident in another pit on July 14 killed 16 miners. "We stopped for a short period after that, but started working secretly on the night of August 6," Mr. Zhao said.

igure 1: Scan of pages 54-55 of Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary*.

As Shea notes, *Coal Mountain Elementary* uses "parataxis to place US and Chinese coal miners side-by-side… [and] creates a structure that allows miners to see their work in relation to one

another, a vantage point that is not possible from within lived experience" ("Forms of Affiliation" 97). By putting these source texts "side-by-side," Nowak asks the reader to consider connections between US and Chinese coal miners that might lay the foundation for transnational worker solidarity. Even though we normally think of parataxis as a property speaking to the relationship between lines or sentences, Nowak extends the principle to larger structural units, in this case, two poems placed side-by-side.

Nowak's compositional method for representing these solidarities is not surprising given that "contemporary communist poetry's signature strategy is parataxis" (Jennison and Murphet 1). Parataxis is a "signal component of collage" (Hejinian 68) but it is also closely associated with anti-capitalist writing through the legacy of Language poetry and the new sentence. Criticism of Language writing's politics of form is, of course, longstanding and widespread. In "The Politics of Form and the Poetics of Identity in Postwar American Poetry," Christopher Chen and Timothy Kreiner explain that this criticism formed the basis of the so-called "Poetry Wars" wherein language writing advanced the now-familiar position that experimental formalisms are anti-capitalist and expressive poetry associated with identity-based writing is not. Despite its goals, Language writing's politics of form counterintuitively "eclipse[s] concerns with the critique of political economy" because it "take[s] for granted the oddly cultural character of the Marxism on offer" (29) by the New Left. This cultural class politics is obvious, for example, in Ron Silliman's introduction to the Language writing anthology *In the American Tree* in which he refers to poetry as a "surrogate social struggle" (xxii). Chen and Kreiner also observe that Language writing "had little overlap" (29) with existing Marxist and workers' organizations like those associated with the New Communist movement, which fused socialist revolution with national liberation struggles. Instead, "the politics of form associated with

Language Writing traffics in generic notions of class struggle between a bourgeoisie and working class that may have been lifted from the pages of nineteenth-century factory inspectors" (29). The result is a textual politics that takes for granted a version of class politics based on the experience of white male wage workers that is increasingly out of synch with the realities of contemporary economic production. Nowak's use of paratactical citation addresses this problem by trying to update Language poetry's signature technique for a globalized economy.

Ron Silliman attributes a revolutionary quality to the new sentence, Language poetry's distinctive unit of composition, because of how its paratactic structure disrupts syllogistic shifts and referentiality in order to "focu[s] attention at the level of language" (Silliman 88). Fredric Jameson, however, sees the new sentence as itself a symptom of the logic of late capitalism that Language poetry purports to oppose. Through a reading of Bob Perelman's poem "China," Jameson points out that there is a homology between the "discontinuities" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 29) of postmodern experience and the paratactic poetic form associated with Language writing. Stephen Collis puts this relationship succinctly when he writes—using the paratactic logic of the new sentence, no less—that "**Capitalism** is paratactic, mobile, and poses everywhere the problem of boundaries. / **Poetry** is paratactic, mobile, and poses everywhere the problem of boundaries" ("Barricades Project" 4, emphasis original). In his rebuttal of Jameson, Perelman argues that "new sentences imply continuity and discontinuity simultaneously" and invite readers to consider "the degree of separation or connection" (317) between the material related through parataxis. In *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Nowak seems to draw on Perelman's two-pronged reading of the relationship between parataxis and late capitalism—because the disjunctive logic of the global market encourages nationalist and often racist antagonisms, a global workers' movement will need to propose solidarities between workers across capital's

uneven terrain. *Coal Mountain Elementary*'s textual solidarity between miners in the United States and China therefore relies on a particular critical mobilization of parataxis inherited from Language writing's politics of form to account for the disjunctive experience of labour in a globalized economy.

Nowak's documentary poetics also attempts to connect Language writing's politics of form with a global workers' movement using the citational model developed in *Coal Mountain Elementary* as the basis for his first poetry workshops organised through labour unions. In a talk delivered at a 2006 symposium celebrating Adrienne Rich, Nowak lists several global protests and strike actions coinciding with the symposium and asks,

> Where are the poems in dialogue with these global people's movements? Where are the poems bridging and building transnational social and aesthetic networks of alternative and agitational modes of grammar and syntax, revolutionary critiques of corporate culture (the contemporary complement to Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*)? ("Notes Toward an Anticapitalist Poetics" 239)

Coal Mountain Elementary is widely read as a response to this call and suggests that Nowak looked for resources to support a more capacious politics of form in the thirties cultural front, emulating Rukeyser's combination of source material in *The Book of the Dead* but also expanding the transnational poetry dialogue's politics of form beyond the page. The transnational poetry dialogue not only supplies *Coal Mountain Elementary*'s form, it also provides the structure for Nowak's first collaborative poetry workshop. The workshop followed the announcement of the Ford Motor Company's 2006 restructuring plan, which led to fourteen plant closures and thirty thousand layoffs in North America. Nowak offered to meet with members of the United Auto Workers (UAW 879) at the union hall across the street from the

soon-to-be shuttered Ford Assembly Plant in St. Paul, Minnesota. Over the span of a few weeks, interested members met between shifts to read and write poetry together and discuss their concerns about impending layoffs. Nowak initially imagined facilitating a dialogue that would include workers at all the North American Ford plants slated for closure and provide a valuable means of communication between workers even after the plants had closed. He called UAW locals in Georgia, Ohio, Ontario, Virginia, Missouri, and Michigan. Not one responded.

Instead, Nowak facilitated a "poetry dialogue" between two St. Paul Ford workers, Denny Dickhausen and Joe Callahan, and members of the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) in South Africa who worked at Ford assembly plants in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria. Before leaving for South Africa, Nowak recorded Dickhausen and Callahan reading their poems "My Life at Ford" and "On the Line." The NUMSA worker-poets then wrote poems in response to the video of their UAW colleagues. In his discussion of the exchange, Nowak notices how the differences between Dickhausen's "My Life at Ford" and NUMSA member Philemon Madila's "Myself," written directly in response to Dickhausen's poem, illustrate the distinctive sensibilities of the labour movements in the United States and South Africa. These poems are both published in *Social Poetics* and I place them side-by-side, "My Life at Ford" on the left and "Myself" on the right, to invoke the dialogue.

August 1970	An employee for more than 15 years
I began working	I started in 1987 at Ford.
at Ford	It was difficult for me because it was
Making big boxy LTDs.	my first job.
……..	…….
Thirty-six years later	I know this not my forever place.

Ford said it's closing its plant.

What a shock.
My friends cried.
Some almost died.
What will they do
(including my daughter, 32,
who works on works on the sealer line),
…….
I grew up, I grew up at Ford
I bled at Ford
I feel used up. (158-59)

I know that one day I can
be retrenched, or dismissed.
I know that one day I can
sleep without something to it.

Ford is not my home.
Anything can happen.
My friend, be alert, business is
Fluctuating every day.
So be prepared. (171-72)

Madila's direct address to Dickhausen—"my friend"—shows a pre-existing sense of international worker solidarity fostered by the South African labour movement's "uncompromising… socialist views" (165); whereas, Dickhausen's personal investment in Ford suggests a close identification with work characteristic of neoliberalism. Despite these differences, Nowak sees value in "a white Minnesota Ford worker… speaking to a black worker in South Africa through poetry" (172) because these opportunities for dialogue are so rare for workers. In a globalized economy, "bosses and managers, of course, have countless opportunities to meet, convene, strategize, and plan. But workers are rarely offered such opportunities" (172).

The transnational poetry dialogue, which scales up the politics of form associated with Language writing as a form of labour organising, involves a reversal of what Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover describe as "the transposition of economic content to cultural and political

forms with little or no mediation" (194), which they argue is common of poetic critiques of neoliberalism that "explain aesthetic form according to political form" (195). In other words, the "transnational dialogue" between these workers from different areas in Ford's supply chain works in the same way as *Coal Mountain Elementary*. It juxtaposes two experiences of labour and union organising and, like most paratactic arrangements, suggests unanticipated conjunctions. It does not, however, establish meaningful interpersonal and interorganizational connections because the paratactical gesture of placing side-by-side is not sufficient for building forms of solidarity on the ground.

Although this transnational dialogue, mediated through written and recorded poetry, did not provide the foundation for workers to strategically organise together or separately, it did expose the UAW workers to the possibility of organising beyond the collective bargaining and workplace safety codes familiar to members of industrial trade unions in the United States and Canada. Nowak also recorded Madila's poem while in South Africa, along with a collaborative poem by other participants in the NUMSA workshops, and shared that recording at a public event organised by UAW 879 to celebrate the long history of worker struggles at the St. Paul plant. He describes the event as "tainted by the looming shuttering of the plant" and "a grave sense of nostalgia, or if not nostalgia, a sense of a lost opportunity to be militant over the pending plant closure" ("Imaginative Militancy" 181). Nostalgia, the most common "historical emotion" (Boym xvi), can certainly have progressive political valence but not without actively tracing connections between past and present struggles.[10] The transnational dialogue between UAW and

[10] For example, Jameson identifies Benjamin's writing with a potentially revolutionary nostalgia appropriate to the left: "But if nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as revolutionary a stimulus as any other: the example of Benjamin is there to prove it" ("Walter Benjamin, Or Nostalgia" 68).

NUMSA members ends by contextualizing the St. Paul Ford plant's closure within a global history of working-class struggle but does not channel the UAW members' affective or "imaginative militancy" into a durable organizing structure. The meaningful integration into existing social structures is what distinguishes "aspect[s] of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual… which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture" (Williams, *Marxism* 122). While nostalgia for an era of industrial unionism during which trade unions like the UAW held significant social and political sway might recuperate a *feeling* of militancy in response to shutdowns and layoffs, it overlooks major practical differences between the period of industrial unionism and the contemporary moment of deregulation and global restructuring.

In *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization*, Sonali Perera asks what "it mean[s] to invoke working-class writing as a mode of internationalism in an age of comparative advantage and outsourcing" (4). Perera calls for working-class writing that explicitly contends with "the disappearing object of working-class literature itself—class" (8) by acknowledging that "class is a relationship, not a fixed static object" (8). She issues a warning against the risk of ontologizing class in working-class literature, the tendency to privilege "this or that successful working class in history" (8). In particular, she warns against the tendency to let "the 'radical' 1930s, the development of proletarian literature [as] short-term political agitation, codings of crisis, and revolutionary romanticism" (80) stand as the ideal to which working-class literature from all historical moments and geographic locations aspires.[11] Like

[11] It's worth noting, however, that Perera draws a distinction between thirties proletarian writing in which "the working class is seen and represented as masculine, metropolitan, and revolutionary" (80) and the work of Marxist feminists like Tillie Olsen who she offers as an example of "nonrevolutionary socialism" and "serial interrupted

Nowak, the writers Perera discusses (Mulk Raj Anand, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Bessie Head, Tillie Olsen, and others) consider the possibility of international working-class solidarity despite and also because of the uneven terrain of global production and imperialist trade policies. However, whereas Perera considers how writers from the 1930s to the 2000s writing across the North-South divide have turned "away from the language and dicta of trade unionist socialism and left-party politics" (49), Nowak remains invested in the possibility of not only a poetics but also a revitalized institutional left capable of organizing the most precarious subjects. Still, Perera's critical and contextual reframing working-class literature demonstrates how challenging it is to move forms across historical and social contexts and makes clear that reading late documentary poetics as residual "has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of the selective tradition, are clearly and actively traced" (Williams, *Marxism* 116).

Before I move on to discuss Nowak's Worker Writers School, I want to briefly enlist Perera's help and consider a poem that is a clear model for Nowak's transnational poetry dialogues but also points toward his more recent turn to social poetics. At both the UAW and NUMSA workshops, Nowak provided Tillie Olsen's "I Want You Women Up North to Know" as an example of a transnational documentary poem (*Social Poetics* 150, 165).[12] Olsen was a ley figure in the thirties cultural front and her citational poem is based on a letter to the editor written by Felipe Ibarro and published in *New Masses* in 1934. Ibarro's letter documents labour conditions in a garment factory in San Antonio, Texas, through interviews with several Chicana

form." In Nowak's appeals to the thirties poetry and labour organizing, he most often offers materialist feminist writers like Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur as examples.

[12] Perara would be unlikely to call "I Want You Women Up North to Know" a "documentary" poem because she is interested in how non-representative prose works against the overbearing influence of "documentary realism and biographical testimony" (5) on working-class fiction. However, her theorization of working-class literature as "serial interrupted form" maps particularly well on to documentary poetry's paratactic structure and points out how the use of terms like "documentary" can vary across analyses of poetry and prose.

garment workers.[13] Olsen's poem, which otherwise deviates very little from its source text, omits Ibarro's reasoning that the workers deserve occupational safety because they are "*American-born* Mexican" (qtd. in Perera 98) and instead depicts "an economic and ideological divide between 'the North' and 'the South'" (97) and provides an early example of what Nowak would come to call the transnational poetry dialogue.

> I want you women up north to know
> how those dainty children's dresses you buy
> at macy's, wanamakers, gimbels, marshall fields,
> are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh,
> down in San Antonio, 'where sunshine spends the winter.' (qtd. in Perera 97)

As both Perera and Nowak observe, these conditions could just as easily describe contemporary maquiladoras along Mexico's northern border. Olsen's poem was "written during a period of hard-won gains for the U.S. labor movement, at the height of proletarian internationalism… [and] anticipates the age of comparative advantage, multifiber agreements, and NAFTA" (Perera 97). While the UAW and NUMSA dialogue scales up networks of industrial unionism to make visible the "geographical restructuring of capitalist activity (deindustrialization here and reindustrialization there)" (Harvey, "The Spatial Fix" 24), Olsen's poem speaks to the feminized labour that is the underside of industrialization and deindustrialization in both the 1930s and 2000s. Through her reading of Olsen's poem, Perera proposes that global feminism is a working-class language opposed to the temporal and sectoral limitations of industrial unionism. As a language of counter-globalization, global feminism is, "properly speaking, a translation or mediation, never pure, not always clear, sometimes ideologically compromised—that facilitates

[13] Catalina Rodriguez, Maria Vasquez, Abrosa Espinoza, and Catalina Torres.

communication (amid misfirings) across the North-South divide" (97). Olsen's poem—the silent interlocutor of Nowak's first transnational poetry dialogue—points toward the workshops facilitated by the Worker Writers School insofar as it offers a tradition of working-class cultural production that runs alongside and underneath the historical narratives typically associated with the cultural front by illustrating that the cultural front itself was more complex than appeals to industrial unionism suggest.

As Terry Eagleton writes about British worker-writer collectives in the 1980s, "community and cooperative publishing enterprises are associated projects, concerned not simply with a literature wedded to alternative social values, but with *one which challenges and changes the existing social relations* between writers, publishers, readers, and other literary workers" (191, my emphasis). This challenge to existing social relations is what Nowak calls social poetics, a "shorthand for a new formation within both literary practice and socialist political practice" (1). His most recent publication, *Social Poetics*, is a collection of essays that chronicles a "people's history"[14] of the community-based poetry workshop. Nowak's recent shift in emphasis from *documentary poetics* to *social poetics* speaks to a movement away from a textual politics of form toward a more capacious formalism that links social and aesthetic infrastructures. In other words, because the Workers Writers School is explicitly engaged in building relevant and sustainable infrastructural links between labour organising and creative writing, it makes the limitations of theories of documentary poetics that rely primarily on a

[14] Historian Howard Zinn uses "people's history" to refer to a creative and future-oriented approach to historical analysis that emphasizes "new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win" (Zinn qtd in Nowak, *Social Poetics* 11). Nowak also aligns his approach to E.P. Thompson's "history from below," which he describes as "an emerging historical tradition that seeks to 'rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete hand-loom weaver… from the enormous condescension of posterity'" (11).

politics of form even more obvious. While Nowak does not articulate it this way himself, social poetics more successfully materialises the residual radicalism of the documentary movement than the transnational dialogue because social poetics' object of experimentation is simultaneously aesthetic and social, engaging as it does with both "literary practice and socialist political practice" (1). Social poetics issues a challenge to literary institutions, as Eagleton explains, but Nowak likewise urges "individual union locals, national organizing bodies, and even international trade union confederations… to engage in practices that create spaces for workers to imagine how to transform and expand their forms of solidarity" ("Imaginative Militancy" 175). This challenge is based on a conviction that cultural production is a crucial element of social movement organising not because art creates change on its own but because direct action is most successful when supported by a community with sustainable bonds and openness to the failures and uncertainties that accompany experimentation. These bonds and attitudes are developed beyond the jobsite, between shifts, and with an eye to the future.

Nowak borrows "social poetics" from Langston Hughes who asserts in a 1947 article for W.E.B Du Bois's *Phylon* magazine that "some of [his] earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems—whole groups of people's problems—rather than [his] own personal difficulties" ("Adventures" 205). For both Hughes and Nowak, there is a difference between a "social poet" and one who is "more exclusively concerned with aesthetics and craft" (1). Hughes writes that his "adventures as a social poet" began in the mid-1920s and intensified once he "had been to Russia and around the world as a writer and journalist" (208). In 1932, Hughes visited the Soviet Union with the Harlem branch of the Friends of the Soviet Union to create a documentary film about racial segregation in the American South funded by the Communist International. In the same period, Hughes was also a member of the Carmel John

Reed Club through which he participated in organizing the 1934 West Coast longshoremen strike, one of the most significant labour actions of the decade. Hughes describes his poetry from the early thirties as "documentary, journalistic, and topical" (*I Wonder as I Wander* 58) and Sarah Ehlers's recent scholarship positions Hughes's travel reportage from trips to Cuba and Haiti in the thirties within the radical documentary tradition. Ehlers argues that Hughes's experiments with documentary reportage "generated questions about the politics and practices of representation that he pursued in his subsequent political poetry" (28), but I approach Hughes's relationship to the documentary tradition from a slightly different angle. Instead of noticing how Hughes's poetry was influenced by thirties documentary culture, I suggest that Nowak invokes Hughes's social poetics as an alternative to documentary poetics because it emphasizes poetry's participation in wider networks of collective organizing. In Nowak's conception, social poetics might take shape as a poem, but it might also take shape as a union drive or direct action. Not unlike Perera's appeal to global feminism, social poetics provides Nowak with the historical basis for a working-class cultural formation that recognizes the limits of the cultural front.[15]

Nowak's own approach to social poetics is realised through the Worker Writers School, which is framed, above all, as a challenge to "the American MFA Industry" ("Neoliberalism" 7) but, as I mentioned earlier, also reveals the limit of criticism aimed at existing social infrastructure by calling on labour unions to construct cultural spaces capable of fostering durable bonds between workers. In 2005, Nowak published a forty-page stapled tract called "Neoliberalism, Collective Action, and The American MFA," a numbered manifesto against "the

[15] I plan to spend more time developing this argument about Hughes's influence on Nowak's poetics. I recently applied for a two-month fellowship at the Huntington Library to study a collection of Hughes's correspondences and papers dating from 1932 to 1934. I see Nowak's invocation of Hughes's social poetics as an invitation to correct an overemphasis on Rukeyser's influence by charting divergent routes within thirties documentary culture and hope to demonstrate that when contemporary poets draw on the legacy of thirties documentary, they do not refer to a monolithic tradition but to an internally dynamic and sometimes conflicting set of practices.

multimillion-dollar conglomeration of state and private enterprises within the neoliberal language industry" (7), including not only MFA programs but also the Modern Language Association, corporate bookstores, literary journals, and funding bodies. In *Social Poetics*, Nowak expands this earlier critique. Emulating Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, he traces the etymology of "workshop" from its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins in the "stickey [sic]" spaces of manual labour to its current "geographies of individual self-improvement and neoliberal economic systems of exchange" (Nowak, *Social Poetics* 87).

The liberalization of the creative writing workshop is worth expanding on here. Building on Mark McGurl's influential account of the rise of the post-war "program era," Eric Bennett argues that the institutionalization and professionalization of creative writing was meant to direct writers away from the radicalizing influence of the thirties cultural front as part of the larger cultural program of Cold War containment. This not only involved corporate and state funding for university programs in creative writing[16] but also substituting the cultural front's social forms of cultural production with a "strident veneration of the personal" (5). As Kimberly Quiogue Andrews points out, poetry's unique position in the literary field qualifies some of the claims made about the program era's influence on the development of modernist fiction by scholars like McGurl and Bennett. While a "strident veneration of the personal," or what McGurl more deftly calls "autopoesis," may be a development in literary fiction that arises alongside and even as a result of the creative writing program, personal expression has long been a value associated with poetry and, indeed, "reflexive autobiography has been the standard way of doing things since at least the Romantic era" (Andrews, "Poetry in the Program Era" 207). I will return to Andrews's insights about how the program era has in fact influenced poetic form at the end of this chapter.

[16] Interestingly, Bennett notes that "the Ford Foundation was deeply involved and invested in cultural diplomacy" (163) and supported the development of creative writing as a discipline.

For now, however, I simply want to notice that, despite Andrews's important qualification, social poetics and the early documentary movement of the 1930s did provide a meaningful, though brief, departure from the "standard way of doing things" (207) since the Romantic era. Even though the poetry workshop does not constitute an anomalous turn toward liberal self-actualization, it is still worth noticing that, for leftist poets like Nowak, the program era represents a concerted and politically motivated effort to return to business as usual after the collective tendencies of thirties cultural production.

Since the 1990s, creative writing programs have proliferated in the United States. In "The Program Era and the Mainly White Room," Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young attribute this growth to the decline in public funding for higher education and the rise of the corporate university because these programs are "cheap to run (no studio space or lab space required, low technology needs, very deep adjunct pool) and tuition generating" (147). Spahr and Young's analysis aims to uncover "what sort of socialities these economic pressures are creating" (149). They ask how MFA programs materialize "social relations between writers, publishers, readers, and other literary workers" (Eagleton 191) and whether those relations might be imagined differently. Their analysis is wide-ranging but, in sum, Spahr and Young argue that the MFA system, like the corporate university as a whole, reproduces a sociality of debt that values creative writing education based on a student's projected post-program professional earnings from book contracts, awards, and teaching. This sociality of debt is, predictably, also organised on gendered and racial terms that reflect the uneven distribution of awards, publications, and teaching contracts. From this perspective, the content and forms of poetry produced in the MFA classroom matter less than the creative writing department's position within a university system that binds study to debt.

These investigations of the MFA system by Nowak, Bennett, Spahr, and Young take a rather unoptimistic position within what is still an active debate about impact of institutional creative writing programs on the development of literary forms and communities. They do, however, make abundantly clear that the MFA workshop is not any *less political* than the workshops run through CPUSA's John Reed Clubs in the thirties. The professionalization of creative writing merely puts cultural production in service of a different of politics. The next three chapters of my thesis unpack how late documentary poets negotiate documentary's instrumentalization as part of the infrastructure of liberal governmentality. This chapter, however, examines how Nowak's Worker Writers School likewise instrumentalizes poetry but as a tool for labour organizing. Importantly, the instrumentalization of poetry—as discussed in both this chapter and the ones that follows—often has little to do with the content of individual poems and more to do with how poetry participates in the construction, articulation, and continuation of social formations. Recognizing that the cultural is a crucial terrain of liberal governance, the Worker Writers School rejects the very possibility of autonomous art and puts poetry in the service of a burgeoning resurgence of labour movement organising.

The Worker Writers School takes its name from a textbook that Meridel Le Sueur developed in 1937 for participants in her WPA-funded writing workshops in Minnesota. Le Sueur was a central figure of the thirties cultural front. She was a member of CPUSA, participated in labour organizing starting in her teens, and lived in Emma Goldman's anarchist commune. In the 1930s, she published several short stories about the working-class experience in *New Masses*, *The Woman Worker*, and *The Anvil* (Greer 608). As Jane Greer describes, Le Sueur carried her convictions as a labour organiser into the classroom by teaching that poetry was not an expression of individual creativity but "a collaborative reworking of shared cultural resources"

(608). While Le Sueur's conviction that "the word is a tool going back to the people" (Le Sueur) takes on new connotations in light of the creative economy, it ascribes writing with utility in the lives of working people beyond narratives of entrepreneurship and self-fulfillment. In *The Cultural Front*, Denning describes how WPA workshops like Le Sueur's had roots in the workers schools organised by both CUPSA and the CIO. Many unions funded education programs that included writing workshops like Le Sueur's, which started at the Minnesota Labor School, photography and art courses, sports and theatre programs, and language classes. According to Denning, these schools "were crucial to the development of young working-class activists and intellectuals" (68) and "came to serve as an infrastructure for the Popular Front social movement" (69). While Le Sueur's workshop provides a name and pedagogical frame, Nowak positions the Worker Writers School within an international tradition of worker writer collectives and community-based workshops throughout the twentieth century. This is a tradition of "poets and other writers entering schools, prisons, community centres, factories, trade union halls, juvenile detention centres, eldercare facilities, hospitals, and other public spaces" (12). His detailed analysis of these workshops and the poems produced in them illustrates how poetry has facilitated conversations not only about craft but also about prison abolition, radical pedagogy, decolonization, and labour organizing.[17]

Nowak first conceived of his worker-writer workshops as a program to be run through the UAW, which falls under the umbrella of American Federation of Labor and Congress of

[17] The examples he provides include Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry workshops with the Blackstone Rangers in the late 1960s; Ernesto Cardenal's *talleres de poesía*, post-Sandinista-rebellion writing workshops in rural Nicaraguan communities; June Jordan's youth workshops that followed the 1966-67 New York City teachers' strikes; Celes Tisdale's poetry workshops at the Attica Correctional Facility following the Attica prison uprising in 1971; Adrienne Rich's Elizabeth Cleaners Street School in Manhattan; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's community education and theatre projects in 1970s Kenya; The Durban Workers' Cultural Local (DWCL) that brought together worker writers in South Africa at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle. In "Building a Better (Socialist) MFA System," Juliana Spahr compiles a list of radical writers' workshops similar to Nowak's and argues that the MFA curriculum should "focus less on contemporary literature and more on the social, economic, and political forces that shape literature."

Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in the US and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in Canada, but big trade unions rarely returned his emails and calls. As the Worker Writers School's landing page on the PEN America website explains, "most participants are affiliated with progressive labor organizations like Domestic Workers United, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, the Taxi Workers Alliance, the Worker Justice Center, the Laundry Workers Center, the Retail Action Project, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center" ("Worker Writers School"). This list of partners catalogues forms of labour organization that have developed in the gap left by traditional trade unions' unwillingness or inability to meet the needs of low-wage, part-time, immigrant, and undocumented workers. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains, "US labor history is dominated by worksite- and occupational-movement building, with group boundaries established by employers or by skills. These boundaries, of course, negatively organise—and even disorganise—the excluded because US worksites and occupations are historically segregated by both gender and race" ("You Have Dislodged" 395). The historical conditions that Gilmore describes are only exacerbated under neoliberalism. Trade union strategies like collective bargaining were developed under the assumption that their members are full-time, permanent employees who work onsite. As manufacturing followed cheap labour costs, the United States and Canada avoided high rates of unemployment by increasingly replacing unionized jobs in manufacturing with low-wage, part-time, subcontracted, non-unionized work. Many people now piece together a living wage by balancing several part-time jobs or freelance contracts, often working from home. This work is increasingly being done by women, immigrant, and migrant workers whose work-related concerns like childcare, immigration policy, and public transit do not cohere around a single job site. These workers, who trade unions consider "extremely difficult to organise" (Fine 133), are

also most vulnerable to labour law violations and occupational safety risks, particularly migrant and undocumented workers who might also fear legal repercussions for reporting employers.

In this gap, the worker center has emerged as a community-based and worker-led institution that facilitates the self-organisation of precarious labour in the North American economy. Unlike trade unions, worker centers adopt a "place-based rather than worksite-based" (13) model so that workers can continue to engage in organizing efforts and access legal representation and community resources close to home even as they move between jobs and even sectors. Most worker centers follow a social movement organizing model in which membership "is a privilege that is not automatic but must be earned" (14) through participation rather than through the payment of union dues. While worker centers in North America have been more likely to credit their organising strategies to Latin American liberation movements, Gilmore turns to CPUSA's organising efforts in the 1930s for limited but situated examples of social movement unionism. Depression-era labour organisers often "ran into a sturdy wall of racism that prevented the CPUSA from forging a movement in which white people could recognize themselves and Black people as equally exploited workers" ("You Have Dislodged" 396). Still, the Black Sharecroppers' Union adapted the Communist Party's class-based analysis of shared conditions of precarity to build a strong network in Alabama that, significantly, did not require members "to be a sharecropper, nor unemployed, nor Black to participate in the union" (396).[18] Based on the horizontal principles of social movement organizing, the worker center's broad vision of labour organizing builds cultural and educational activities into its organizational framework and focuses on developing the organizational agency of all workers by encouraging members to take

[18] For a history of the Sharecroppers' Union and its ongoing impact on activist organising in the region, see Robin D.G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*.

language and public policy courses and participate in coalition-building cultural activities like the Worker Writers School.

Nowak began by running one-off workshops in collaboration with trade unions and worker centres, but after organizing a public reading that brought together members of Domestic Workers United, the Taxi Workers Alliance, and migrant farmworkers through the Worker Justice Center of New York, Nowak established the Worker Writers School to facilitate regular workshops that would bring together worker-poets from different sectors of the economy. The Worker Writers School is now supported by many workers centers but it operates as an independent institute that brings together "members" of several labour organizations. At a talk for the Centre for Labor Studies at the University of Washington, Nowak explained why he facilitates workshops exclusively through pre-existing labour organisations. The Worker Writers School poems shared in *Social Poetics* include descriptions of health and labour code violations, and even sexual abuse. By running workshops in collaboration with labour organisations, Nowak and other workshop participants can respond to the content of these poems with resources provided by the union that would be unavailable in the typical creative writing workshop: pro-bono legal services, information about workplace rights and organizing efforts in the community. He is, as he puts it, "choos[ing] a different tradition than the one that can only offer empathy" ("A People's History").

As I suggested above, Nowak's published books of documentary make most sense when read in relation to the anti-globalization and anti-austerity movements; the Worker Writers School, however, is best situated in relation to recent efforts like Fight for $15 and the Debt Collective—which are social movements that also operate as unions—and successful and highly publicized unionization drives at the Amazon warehouse in Staten Island and the Starbucks store

in Buffalo, New York. The visibility of these grassroots drives suggests that organizing the "millions of workers currently outside of organized labour" will "require transforming most of today's unions and transcending the current system of labour relations" (Moody, *Breaking the Impasse* 2). These successful movements and drives also suggest the importance of building durable and durational projects into the fabric of union organizing. For example, the Amazon Labor Union's first win at the JFK8 warehouse has been widely attributed to the way organiser Chris Smalls made space for workers to share food, listen to music, and be together, which is especially rare for shift workers.

When I say that the Worker Writers School is a durational project, I mean, in part, that it is a project committed to longevity. Unlike "protest marches and occupations," the Worker Writers School is a "submerged form, embedded for the duration" (*Social Poetics* 122). The protest and the workshop are both forms of what Nowak calls "imaginative militancy," but the workshop's commitment is to the long, slow project of being together between events, whether those events are protests or poems. As Nowak puts it,

> Unlike many literary workshops that occur for a limited time at a site—a week- or month-long workshop at a library, a school, a nursing home, or a literary centre—before ending or moving on to the next site, Worker Writers School forms long-term bonds with the worker centres and then recruits workers in those fields—domestic workers, taxi workers, fast food restaurant workers, and others—to become part of our ongoing collaborative and collective project. (123)

This group has been meeting at the PEN America building in New York on the first Saturday of every month for over a decade. While Nowak facilitates workshops internationally under the banner of the Worker Writers School, the poems that I consider in the final section of this

chapter are written by "core" members of the group who might be understood both as individual poets and as participants in the Worker Writers School as a poetry collective.

By durational, I mean not only longevity but also durability, the quality of being "lasting in use" ("Duration," *OED*). In her study of the UK-based Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, Janet Zandy discusses this "joining of use and aesthetic value" (65) in worker writers workshops. Echoing Nelson, Zandy suggests that "it is less the valorization of a single poem, author, or even book—although the appreciation is genuine—than the sparks of connection a good story or poem trigger" (64). According to Zandy, "the finished product or book matters, but equally important is the agency of possibility it evokes" (64). Nowak's documentary poetry discussed in the first section of this chapter provided a useful historical foundation for creative writing's role in the labour movement but struggled to extend itself forward as well as backward. Extension into the future, the durational and durable quality that I identify with the Worker Writers School, involves not only identifying residual literary forms and social relations but also meaningfully transforming them in the present.

The durational quality of the Worker Writers School also responds to the ongoingness of labour, which is not a single punctual event but an ongoing social relationship that is regulated by the temporality of the working day, which now exceeds the eight-hour block for many. "Workers Instruction Manual" is a poem composed collectively by members of the Worker Writers School. Nowak frames "Workers Instruction Manual" as a response to Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* (2000), in which Goldsmith records every movement his body makes for thirteen hours. Nowak takes exception to Marjorie Perloff's reading of *Fidget* as "a documentary record of how it actually is when a person wakes up on a given morning" (qtd. in Nowak 220). Echoing common criticisms of conceptualism's absent and presumed-universal subject, Nowak

objects to "Goldsmith's decision never to use the first-person 'I'—an 'I' privileged enough to wake up at 10:00 a.m. on a Tuesday, to not have to go to work or 'go on errands'… but can instead attend to sleeping in, drinking Jack Daniels, and taking naps as part of a documented performance" (221).

In response, "Workers Instruction Manual" catalogues the invisible labour that makes a documentary performance like Goldsmith's possible. The poem lists commands directed at members of the Worker Writers School throughout a single day as they work as taxi drivers, domestic workers, street vendors, retail and restaurant workers. The poets each recorded commands in notepads or on their phones throughout the day, included the exact time that the command was given, and then came together to arrange the commands chronologically. Their day is much longer than Goldsmith's, beginning at 5:00 am and ending at 2:44 am. The commands register the demands of flexible labour: "I will need you to work late today as I won't be able to make it home 'til 6 p.m." (5:00 p.m.) and "Can you work until 9:00 p.m.?" (6:00 p.m.) They also make clear that the bodies of workers are already surveilled prior to any documentary performance: "Stand against the wall" (12:00 noon), "Take off your shoes" (7:55 p.m.), "You've got to leave the building" (8:10 p.m.). As Nowak writes, "all that exists in the poem of commands are working hours and work. After that, all that remains of the worker from the employing class's perspective is absence, the worker's disappearing act until work begins" (229). The reproductive acts (sleeping in, napping) that structure Goldsmith's poem are noticeably absent in "Workers Instruction Manual."

Rather than just reading "Workers Instructional Manual" as a rejoinder to conceptualism, I want to think about Carolyn Lesjak's call to "read dialectically"[19] for what the poem does not

[19] In "Reading Dialectically," Lesjak argues that "the impulse to be affirmative, to talk about what texts do rather than what they don't do, occludes the negation upon which such affirmation is based" (247).

do as much as for what it does do. Reading beneath the surface of the text reveals a "submerged form" of the poem that registers the affective temporality of the precarious subject—not just the quantitative temporality of the working day, but also "a zone of temporality marked by [an] ongoingness, getting by, and living on" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 100) which is the "structural position of the overwhelmed life" (117). The poem records a series of imperatives clearly demarcated in time, but it does not record the actions, the labour, that presumably followed these commands. In the poem, the workers are on break, have punched out, are unavailable for overtime. The Worker Writers School's performance of the poem at the 2017 PEN World Voices Festival also demonstrates a collective refusal to claim or voice the commands in the poem. Instead of reading their contributions aloud, as they have done with other collaborative poems, the poets projected the commands as individual PowerPoint slides on a large film screen. Against the demands being made of the workers, then, the poem and its performance adopt a lateral agency. Lauren Berlant argues that under conditions that chip away at the individual and collective ability to act, lateral agency registers the exhaustion of the precarious subject and refuses the responsibility of the self-possessed individual. Instead of actively contesting the physical and affective demands made of the poets, the poem offers "a form of ballast against wearing out, but also a counter dissipation, in that, like all small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways" (116). For the worker-poets, poems like "Workers Instruction Manual" can facilitate "small vacations from the will itself, which is so often spent from the pressures of coordinating one's pacing with the working day" (166). Berlant is careful to insist that lateral agency is "a relief, a reprieve, not a repair" (117) but, because the Worker Writers School's poems must always be read alongside the labour movement's

organisational forms, the relief of poetry's lateral agency might help facilitate the ongoing work of organising or just carrying on.

My reading of "Workers Instruction Manual" and the Worker Writers School has a lot in common with how scholars of performance art have analysed live, durational performances that take place over long periods of time and challenge the temporalities of the theatre, the gallery, and the book. By basing the structure of their collaborative documentary poem on the temporality of the workday, the Worker Writers School poets raise practical questions about the kinds of poems that are typically defined as "documentary" in scholarly contexts. In the months leading up to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Worker Writers School began studying what Nowak refers to as the "radical haiku tradition," which includes "Japanese-American internment camp haiku, haiku of the Black Arts Movement (Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, Amiri Baraka's 'low coup,' and haiku from Celes Tisdale's anthology *Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica*), as well as modernist haiku collected in Makoto Ueda's *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology*" ("Coronavirus Haiku" 12). From its inception, documentary poetry's approach to form has been most closely associated with the long poem and its attendant investment in scale, the provisional, and the processual, or what Robert Kroetsch diagnoses as an obsession with "perpetual delay" (119). "Workers Instruction Manual" makes visible a tension between the temporality of the long documentary poem and the reality of a workday during which few workers "essential" to the North American economy could find the time to write long-form poetry. During the pandemic, the Worker Writers School continued to meet regularly on Zoom and produced the collaborative collection *Coronavirus Haiku*. These haiku share the observational and frequently citational quality of documentary writing—the haiku "takes language from the streets, from conversation, from the news, from everywhere" (17)—but they

are also “compact” (17). They fit into a notebook small enough to be carried in a pocket and, since “you can write a haiku in a matter of seconds” (17), they lend themselves to writing during what Zandy calls “stolen” time (63)—on the subway, on a cab’s dashboard, during a bathroom break—in which many of the haikus in the Worker Writers School’s collection began.

Nowak suggests that the haiku supplies the Worker Writers School poets with “new histories” (19), but the lineage of radical haiku that he invokes remains connected to the documentary tradition in the United States in concrete ways. For example, the Worker Writers School studied Evie Shockley’s “Statistical Haiku” as a key text in the radical haiku tradition and Shockley attended one of the Zoom workshops to discuss the poem. “Statistical Haiku” directly responds to Langston Hughes’s “Johannesburg Mines” (1928), a poem that many contemporary documentary poets, including Nowak and Claudia Rankine, cite as inspiration for their own work and that frequently appears on syllabi for academic courses on documentary poetics. It is therefore incumbent on scholars of documentary poetics to consider how short-form documentary poems like “Johannesburg Mines” and “Statistical Haiku,” as well as the coronavirus haiku produced by the Worker Writers School poets, challenge normative definitions of documentary poetry.

To do so, it may be helpful to briefly revisit Nowak’s critique of the MFA system from a different angle and with these questions about the accessibility of literary form in mind. In *Contested Records*, Michael Leong “argues that contemporary, documental long poems perform cultural work that is analogous to the wider humanities” (26). Invoking the interdisciplinary writing and reading strategies that characterized leftist modernism’s “aesthetic of the differential field” (Nelson, *Revolutionary* 2), Leong “understands documental poetry as an unacknowledged practice within the humanities” (33). Leong’s theorization of documental poetics shares

Andrews's contention that many "poets seeking an alternative to the types of personal narrative developed in and propagated by departments of creative writing" (212) have not necessarily sought alternative institutional affiliations like Nowak but have instead identified strategies from within available institutional structures, namely university English departments. As Andrews puts it, "when the avant-garde stays in school" (217) then "the humanities' own ways of scrutinizing and historicizing texts… become methodologies for poetic production as well" (212). While this chapter engaged with literary studies that attribute the resurgence of documentary poetry at this particular historical juncture to its longstanding association with labour organising, Leong and Andrews's explanations for the recent turn to documents in contemporary poetry are equally compelling.[20] While I want to resist an easy opposition between research and writing that happens inside versus outside the university, I also want to notice how an overemphasis on compositional approaches based on humanistic methodologies, especially those associated with archival research, also risks overdetermining documentary poetry's infrastructural attachment to a single institutional lineage. Nowak's Worker Writers School is an important intervention, then, because it invites us to think about the intersections of research, reading, and writing within a long and complex tradition of social and labour movement organising in North America, a tradition that has justified the utility of these practices differently than the academic humanities. I will return to the question of whether approaches to documentary poetics that emphasize the long-form research-based poem overlook residual undercurrents of documentary in my discussion of Cecily Nicholson's poetry in chapter three.

[20] Kimberly Quiogue Andrews's book *The Academic Avant-Garde: Poetry and the American University* was published while I was in the very final stages of revising my thesis. My engagement with Andrews's work here is limited to the chapter "Poetry and the Program Era" published in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First-Century American Poetry*. Further revisions of this chapter will have to consider the broader scope of Andrews's argument in the more recent monograph.

By unpacking documentary poetry's historical association with radical labour organizing, this chapter identified one infrastructure that configures late documentary poetics. In the following chapters, I examine how this residual documentary tradition was incorporated into a project of liberal social planning by identifying other infrastructures of late documentary poetics that emerge from the similar co-construction of aesthetic and social forms. Documentary may be "a subgenre not only of poetry but also of labour history" (Nowak, "Poetry as Social Practice" 11) but the terms poetry, labour, and history remain contested and identifying a residual radicalism available for recovery by late documentary poets will require identifying submerged remnants of both radical cultural production and radical labour organizing that go beyond appeals to the thirties cultural front.

Chapter II

"The Desire I Want":

Thinking Documentary's Generic Infrastructure

> If we are free, we are free to choose a tradition.
> — Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*

In a series of lectures delivered at American colleges in the early 1940s, Muriel Rukeyser, whose long poem sequence *The Book of the Dead* (1938) is widely considered documentary poetry's urtext, developed a sophisticated defense of poetry as the cultural form best suited to respond to conditions of crisis. When the lectures were later adapted and published as *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser opened her introduction with an appeal to readers characteristic of social documentary: "in times of crisis," she writes, "we summon our strength… [and] call every resource" (1). She argues that poetry is a valuable and renewable resource whose potential to effect social and political change is being "wasted" (85) by proponents of then-dominant new criticism, which she pointedly refers to as "the old criticism" (166).[21] When *The Life of Poetry* was published in 1949, it was largely ignored by the post-war literary establishment. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, however, Rukeyser's crisis poetics has become a "resource" for poets who contend with increasingly widespread conditions of precarity under neoliberalism.

As the product of a historical moment characterized by mass unemployment, labour strikes, drought, and the rise of fascist dictatorships, documentary poetics has a congenital

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[21] Rukeyser opens *The Life of Poetry* (1949) by recalling her experience fleeing the Spanish Civil War. In 1936, she travelled to Barcelona to cover the anti-fascist People's Olympiad for *Life and Letters Today* and witnessed the outbreak of the war. Her book of essays begins "on a small ship, five times past our capacity in refugees, sailing for the first port at peace" (2). A refugee on the boat asks a question that would frame her thinking for the next decade: "And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?" (3). *The Life of Poetry* responds to this question by outlining a poetics of "meeting places," which Catherine Gander directly connects to the "intertextual and interdisciplinary approach to material" (2) that Rukeyser developed through her experimentations with documentary.

association with crisis. When poets increasingly turned to documentary techniques to respond to crises associated with twenty-first century global capitalism, critics were quick to point out the "historical rhymes between the Great Depression and Great Recession" (Dowdy 161). In one of the few scholarly articles about the recent turn to documentary forms, Michael Dowdy echoes Rukeyser's understanding of poetry's proper function when he argues that "documentary indexes crisis, emerges from it, and figures forms of collective subjectivity that a crisis makes necessary and possible" (161). Dowdy's account restores crisis as a central point of connection between Depression-era social documentary and late documentary poetics. In this chapter, I consider how this transhistorical orientation toward crisis shapes late documentary's generic commitments.

The Book of the Dead is widely considered "the great touchstone of documentary poetry" (Metres, "(More) News"). In this twenty-poem sequence, Rukeyser investigates the Hawk's Nest Tunnel incident, an occupational health crisis that exposed the state's complicity with corporate capital's inequitable and deadly labour practices. In recent decades, poets have increasingly turned not only to documentary forms but to Rukeyser's poem in particular to inform their own poetic responses to economic, environmental, and social crises. Rather than tracking iterations of documentary poetics across the twentieth century, I focus on the afterlife of *The Book of the Dead* by exploring why so many contemporary poets have responded to our moment of ongoing crisis by reviving an older form rather than innovating a new one and what this response says about contemporary poetic production and its activist contexts. I propose that these numerous invocations of Rukeyser constitute a transhistorical selective tradition that is best understood by reinterpreting documentary's generic context, which includes institutional models of documentary production established through New Deal programs like the WPA's Federal Writers Project. Unpacking documentary's generic attachment to this particular political and

cultural history, I suggest that when late documentary poets use this familiar structure to respond to crisis they may also inadvertently reinforce structures of racial capitalism consolidated under the New Deal.

Genre provides a concept of structure that is useful for theorizing the discontinuous repetition of documentary forms in a way that "recognize[s] not only 'stages' and 'variations,'" but accounts for what Raymond Williams calls "the internal dynamic relations of any actual [historical] process" (*Marxism* 121). My turn to genre in this chapter takes its cue from Walt Hunter's focus on how contemporary poets respond to the conditions of global capitalism by "remaking the poetic forms they have at hand" (*Forms* 1). By tracing the contemporary re-emergence of genres like the ode, the country house poem, and the prospect poem, Hunter "attempt[s] to move beyond a smooth genealogy or agonistic theory of influence" and identify instead how "poetic genres reemerge in a punctuated fashion, embedded in the rhythms of historical capitalism" ("The American Subprime" 615). Hunter's work participates in "a growing recognition of the importance of generic categories" (Culler 63) among scholars of poetics and establishes genre as a particularly useful tool for analyzing the relationship between poetic and political histories.

While I draw insights from multiple genre theorists, this chapter relies primarily on Lauren Berlant's theorization of genre as an "affective historicism" (*Cruel Optimism* 75). Across their body of work, Berlant investigates "the retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe" (*Cruel Optimism* 4). The coalition of social forces that responded to the crises of the 1930s and early 1940s fought for securities that made life livable for a large segment of society: stable and often unionized work, publicly funded social programs and institutions, and limited

forms of wealth redistribution. The conditions of neoliberalism ushered in during the 1980s eroded these post-war securities and the promise of "the good life" they offered. While upward mobility, job security, reliable intimacy, and political agency are increasingly unattainable, Berlant diagnoses the present moment through our ongoing attachment to these good life promises. Significantly, this attachment is not naïve; it is an affective investment that makes it possible to endure ongoing crisis even while these fantasies paradoxically tether us to existing forms of social organization and hinder our ability to imagine alternatives.

Extending genre's concern with structuring conditions beyond the strictly literary, Berlant uses genre to "specify how the activity of affective attachment can be located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field" (51-52). Berlant defines genre as "a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take" ("Austerity" 2). Genres bridge aesthetic form and lived experience by providing structure to "what would otherwise seem the arrhythmic rule of crisis" (*Cruel Optimism* 57). In this sense, they tether experience to familiar promises and scenes because they provide structures for understanding crisis by "refracting the present moment as a historical one" (59), making the present "feel historical" ("Thinking" 229). For Berlant, the way genres mediate political and social desires through familiar structures "can say something about why things don't change" (*Female Complaint 24*). When we narrate our experience of the present through familiar genres, we recover solid footing, but we also foreclose possible openings to something different.

I argue that late documentary poets take up the documentary tradition *as genre*. When they invoke *The Book of the Dead* they do so for "the sense of the historical" (*Cruel Optimism* 66) that it provides. That is, Rukeyser's poem provides more than just a formal and thematic structure; it also provides a familiar structure for managing the affective scene of crisis. Berlant

argues that as precarity deepens available genres fail to provide convincing structures for understanding the ongoing crisis of the present. This leads to what Berlant calls the "waning of genre" and corollary "genre flailing" in our artistic production and cultural thinking, both "the loss of genre and a hyperactive scavenging for genre" ("Austerity" 3). According to Berlant, "genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so that we don't fall through the cracks of heightened affective noise into despair, suicide, or psychosis" ("Genre Flailing" 157). Genre flailing registers how we negotiate not only crisis conditions themselves but also the available patterns and familiar affects that structure our experience of crisis. Berlant's later work considers the terms of a transition "beyond the exigencies of the current crisis" ("The Commons" 393) toward new organizations of life. Significantly, Berlant proposes an infrastructural analysis that builds on their theorizations of genre by paying closer attention to questions of transition, movement, and relation. According to Berlant, "an infrastructural analysis helps us see that what we commonly call 'structure' is not what we usually call it, an intractable principle of continuity across time and space, but really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement that's only solid when seen from a distance" (394). Reading documentary's generic infrastructure therefore requires more than providing a taxonomy of shared characteristics or tracing a genealogy. Throughout this chapter, I consider how documentary poetics participates in a network of institutional, geographic, and social relations that, taken together, make up documentary's generic infrastructure. This allows me to extend existing arguments about documentary's relationship to crisis by noticing that crisis is not just about moments of catastrophe or obvious social antagonisms; it is also the slow adjustments that go unannounced but metastasise ways of living together and imagining futures.

Documentary demonstrates that these adjustments to what Berlant calls "the ordinary" so often take place through cultural forms and affective registers.

I begin this chapter by situating *The Book of the Dead* within its generic context. I am especially interested in how the poem's method of witness inscribes a normative approach to agency and class mobility cultivated through the New Deal's documentary culture. Building on Paula Rabinowitz's study of thirties documentary and Catherine Gander's analysis of *The Book of the Dead*, I argue that social documentary records crisis in order to precipitate specific forms of agency that may, paradoxically, reaffirm rather than restructure existing social hierarchies. Scholars have noticed that late documentary poets tend to circumscribe agency because calls to action "would be asking too much of poetry in the post-Reagan neoliberal era" (Harrington, "Politics" 79). I agree that late documentary poets have a more tentative "relation to activism" (78) than their early twentieth-century counterparts, but I am not convinced that this is always because poets think cultural forms are unlikely to effect social change. Social documentary circulates forms of agency and action made familiar through a model of liberal humanism consolidated in the North American welfare state. With this generic context in mind, I suggest that late documentary poets do not necessarily reject the possibility of agency *as such*; rather, they reconsider the conditions for action that social documentary makes available. In other words, late documentary poets *do* propose forms of agency in response to crisis, but they do so by troubling rather than reinforcing documentary's generic infrastructure.

Of all the poets that allude to Rukeyser, I focus the second part of this chapter on Juliana Spahr's "The Incinerator" because of how Spahr treats documentary as a generic infrastructure to be negotiated. The poem is part reflection on Spahr's own class identity as an upwardly mobile academic with roots in Appalachia, part essay on Language poet Hannah Weiner's collage poem

"Radcliffe and the Guatemalan Women," and part consideration of the generic conventions and class politics that shape documentary production. While "The Incinerator" is typically framed as a critical reflection on Weiner's poem, its structure and generic choices lead me to argue that it engages in an equally compelling conversation with Rukeyser and the documentary tradition. Divided into five parts, the poem is bookended by opening and closing sections that mirror the first and last poems in Rukeyser's sequence: "The Road" and "The Book of the Dead." While many poets allude to Rukeyser, I find "The Incinerator" one of the most illuminating examples because of how it negotiates a tension that I see in late documentary poetry. On the one hand, it expresses a desire for transhistorical connection that Williams suggests is so central to the counter-hegemonic tradition. On the other hand, it demonstrates a generic drag toward the normative motivated by affective attachment to promises of stability and mobility for the white middle class. The poem therefore raises questions about how documentary's emphasis on class formation and mobility may betray attachments to forms of liberty and liberalism that have yet to be adequately addressed in available conversations about documentary's "crisis subjectivity" (Dowdy 161). I argue that Spahr's poem engages with documentary's generic infrastructure in order to foreground documentary's attachment to specific histories, socialities, and geographies while also suggesting that this infrastructure is not fixed. "The Incinerator" is paradigmatic of late documentary poetics insofar as it leverages documentary's generic attachments to stimulate moments of poetic and political thinking that reach through and beyond genre.

Existing scholarship has traced a genealogy of documentary poetry from the thirties to the present beginning with *The Book of the Dead*. According to Philip Metres, "one can draw a straight line between Rukeyser's poem and practice and the work of C. D. Wright, Mark Nowak, Claudia Rankine, Martha Collins, Susan Tichy, Juliana Spahr, Bhanu Kapil, Erika Meitner,

Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Briante, Tyehimba Jess, Solmaz Sharif, Layli Long Soldier, my own writing, and many others." Metres's phrasing suggests a model of linear development, but his genealogy of documentary poetry is more productive when read as "a process… [through which] each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents" (Cohen 53). Allusions to Rukeyser's work have also proliferated. As Dowdy points out, Rukeyser provides the epigraph for several recent books of documentary poetry including Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016), Susan Briante's *The Market Wonders* (2016), Rebecca Dunham's *Cold Pastoral* (2017), and Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Inside the Money Machine* (2011). Many poets also gesture to Rukeyser's influence in interviews and essays—Claudia Rankine, for example, writes that she "wanted to put *Citizen* in the tradition of Muriel Rukeyser's documentary work" (qtd. in Schwartz). In her creative-critical project *Defacing the Monument* (2020), Susan Briante even echoes the opening lines of *The Life of Poetry* when she "summon[s] Rukeyser" (19) to address omissions in the court hearings of seventy-five undocumented migrants. Poets invoke Rukeyser for different, even contradictory, reasons but, collectively, they direct our attention to a shared investment in the production of a documentary tradition. When these poets invoke "the tradition of Muriel Rukeyser," they aim, in Walt Hunter's words, to "give form to the contemporary development of capital through their reinvention of poetic traditions" (Hunter 4). If, as Ralph Cohen argues in his influential 1986 essay "History and Genre," genres "arise, change, and decline for historical reasons" (53), this chapter offers one explanation for documentary poetry's re-emergence in the early twentieth century.

The Book of the Dead investigates the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster in which hundreds of miners died of occupational silicosis during the construction of a hydroelectric power plant owned by the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. A

combination of dry drilling, poor ventilation, and inadequate safety equipment led to an estimated 764 deaths, though the number is likely much higher because over two-thirds were Black migrant workers from the southern states with few local ties whose deaths were not recorded in official reports. The deaths were first reported in 1935 by the Marxist magazine *New Masses*, to which Rukeyser was a regular contributor. In 1936, Rukeyser drove from New York to Gauley Bridge with friend and photographer Nancy Naumburg to conduct interviews with surviving miners, their families, and the committee of locals assembled to provide evidence in an ongoing congressional investigation into labour conditions in the mines. Rukeyser's poem sequence draws on congressional testimony, court records, personal interviews and letters, stock reports, scientific data, and news articles to reconstruct what is still considered one of the worst industrial disasters in the history of the United States. The poem was published in Rukeyser's 1938 collection *US 1*, alongside other lesser-known documentary poems, including "Mediterranean."

Poets who invoke Rukeyser often draw attention to *US 1*'s endnotes in which Rukeyser asserts that "poetry can extend the document." In other words, poetry can be used as "a tool to expand the documentary record" (Briante, *Defacing the Monument* 19) when other forms of institutionalized recording have failed to tell the whole story. In *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser draws on congressional testimony, but she also fills gaps in that record because, as Briante writes, "the profits of Union Carbide, the parent company responsible for the gross negligence that led to the silicosis poisoning and deaths of anywhere from 764 to 2000 miners, the majority of whom were African American migrant workers, did not appear in the Congressional testimony of the event, / because centuries of systemic racism did not appear in Congressional testimony or newspaper reports on the 'disaster'" (19). I understand calls to "extend the document" as the

primary way that poets communicate late documentary poetry's mutable and flexible economy of witness, which recognizes the importance of both experiential knowledge and in-depth archival study, with many gradations in between. In the following analysis of *The Book of the Dead*, I zero in on an approach to poetic witnessing that is specific to thirties social documentary not to contest the crucial adjustments and expansion that poetry of witness has undergone over the past century, but because I want to draw attention to an under-discussed element of documentary's engagement with its own archive: the relative absence of analyses of agency and social mobility in recent critical studies of documentary poetics. Noticing the normative currents of social documentary's appeal to middle-class agency prepares scholars for the way late documentary poets position themselves within the documentary tradition as more than a gesture of affinity—they also do so in order to stage an immanent critique of documentary's generic infrastructure.

The opening poem of Rukeyser's sequence, "The Road," follows Rukeyser and Naumburg's journey from New York to Appalachia.

> These are the roads you take when you think of your country
> and interested bring down the maps again
> phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,
>
> reading the papers with morning inquiry.
>
> ……
>
> These roads will take you into your own country
> Select the mountains, follow the rivers back,

travel the passes. Touch West Virginia where

the Midland Trail leaves the Virginia furnace,
iron Clifton Forge, Covington iron, goes down
into the wealthy valley, resorts, the chalk hotel. (61-62)

This poem, which also includes "unpack[ing] camera and case," and "surveying the deep country," is widely read as a description of the documentary process itself, dramatizing the "phoning," "asking," and "reading" through which the documentary poet gathers source material. The road is central to this analogy not only because it maps "the figurative path taken by the poet in the process of putting together the poem" (Gander 178), but also because traveling was considered a requisite form of research in the thirties. As Paula Rabinowitz explains in *They Must Be Represented*, "one goes somewhere to be a documentarian—Polynesia, Alabama, Poland, downtown; the documentarian is drawn somewhere by an other" (6).[22] Rukeyser is drawn away from her "tall city's central influence" (61) to Gauley Bridge, a West Virginian town where workers are coerced into poor wages, dangerous labour conditions, segregation and racial violence as the only alternative to conditions of unemployment elsewhere in the country. By tracing her movement away from New York—the nation's corporate and financial center—Rukeyser calls attention to Appalachia's position as a physically remote and socially marginal region, New York's figurative other.

[22] Rukeyser's engagement with travel reportage is not limited to *The Book of the Dead*. In 1933, she covered the Scottsboro Boys trial in Alabama for her student newspaper and her poem "Mediterranean" is based on her experience witnessing the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War as a reporter in Barcelona. In 1972, she travelled to Hanoi to document Vietnamese resistance to American invasion and participate in the movement for peace. As Gander corroborates, "a poetics of witness necessitates travel" (174).

While witness is now closely associated with Carolyn Forché's theorization of "poetry of witness," which draws on trauma theory to suggest that "poems bear the trace of extremity within them" (Forché 4), social documentary's orientation to witness descends from the twinned legacies of ethnography and progressive-era social reform movements. Forché insists that "poets [of witness] must have personally endured such conditions" (30) but, as Rabinowitz points out, documentarians tend to record events from an etic perspective that often replicates existing racial, class, and gender hierarchies. [23] Dowdy suggests that "non-reciprocal exchanges, with their uneven power relations, highlight the (dis)continuities between thirties documentary and the present" (158) and, indeed, many critics, including Rabinowitz, have unpacked the politics of documentary's voyeuristic gaze. There is, however, another layer to social documentary's approach to witness that is less often discussed, perhaps because it sits uneasily alongside the prevailing sense that "the political and social goals of [late] documentary poets tend to be rather circumscribed" (Harrington, "Politics" 77). In the thirties and early forties, witness was never an end in itself. As Rabinowitz argues, "the subject produced and provoked by documentary… is a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history. And the performance of documentary is precisely to remand, if not actively remake, the subject into a historical agent" (8). From this perspective, social documentary not only records crisis but also leverages punctual moments of crisis in order to articulate the ability to exercise agency individually and collectively. In other

[23] The distinction between these two orientations to witness is not always straight forward, as my analysis of "The Incinerator" will demonstrate. In "Mediterranean," for example, Rukeyser witnesses the first days of the Spanish Civil War from a refugee boat off the coast of Barcelona, blurring the lines between observer and observed. This ambiguity was common in the "participant journalism" produced by labour movement activists in the thirties, which is, in part, why its categorization as "documentary" has been debated (Winston, *Claiming the Real II* 91). Late documentary poets also frequently blur this line by drawing to attention to "how, in the context of social media, the Internet, and the 24-hour news cycle, we all become traumatized witnesses of a sort" (Milne 157).

words, if crisis provides an opportunity to realise emergent forms of agency, then documentary records crisis to precipitate that process for its reader.

In *The Life of Poetry,* Rukeyser suggests that "'audience' or 'reader' or 'listener' seem inadequate" (175) to describe the engagement that a crisis poetics requires. She suggests that "witness" is more appropriate because there is an "overtone of responsibility in this word [that] is not present in the others" (175). Through the act of witness, documentary subject, poet, and reader are bound together in a scene of responsibility. In "The Road," this relationship is communicated through Rukeyser's use of direct or apostrophic address. "These roads will take *you* into *your own* country," she writes (my emphasis), which draws the reader not only into Appalachia but also into the performance of intersubjectivity and citizenship that propels documentary's call to action. As Jonathan Culler explains, the "function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or refrain from acting" (61). Apostrophe and documentary share similar stakes, then: "the power of poetry to make something happen" (62). Rukeyser's direct address is followed by imperatives that instruct the reader to "select," "follow," "travel," "touch" (62), actions through which they might bear out their responsibility. According to this model, the scene of witness in the "The Road" *moves* the reader/witness—into Appalachia, into empathetic relation with "an other" (Rabinowitz 6) but also, crucially, to action.

In contrast, late documentary poets rarely claim that poetry can "make something happen." This is perhaps the most notable difference between late documentary and its historical referent, and yet, critics of documentary poetics generally assume that reasons for this difference are self-evident or attribute this reluctance to the "modesty of the poets' political aspirations" (Harrington, "Politics" 67). By glossing over the issue too quickly, however, we miss how late

documentary poets participate in a reconsideration of the very meanings of political action, agency, collectivity, and mobility presumed by social documentary. To make this reassessment visible, we must first notice how the forms of agency and subjectivity "produced and provoked by documentary" (Rabinowitz 8) are more normative than documentary's reputation as a revolutionary poetics suggests. Poets writing from marginalized subjectivities have already done much of this work. For example, Anthony Reed's theorization of "broken witness" in visual poetry of the Black radical tradition by M. NourbeSe Philip, N.H. Pritchard, and Terrance Hayes makes clear that "the act of witnessing is conventionally rooted in and routed through the consensual institutions of governing where relationships between subjects are fixed and stable" (42). For Reed, witness encourages a specific kind of agency grounded in conventions of liberal empathy and institutionalized through the politics of recognition. In what follows, I consider the historical agent that emerges from *The Book of the Dead* and how that agent is produced through historically contingent modes that shaped documentary expression in the thirties.

This chapter follows Spahr's lead and focuses on the contradictions inherent in the "road" as documentary's symbol of mobility. Building on Christine Bold's study of the WPA American Guide series, Catherine Gander positions Rukeyser's use of the road as symbol in relation to one of the New Deal's best-known documentary projects. Gander argues that the "image of privileged travel" (178) that opens *The Book of the Dead* leans on the rhetoric of the WPA Guides series, which Rukeyser also alludes to directly by naming her collection *US 1*. The Guides were produced as part of the Federal Writers Project, a WPA initiative that provided jobs for hundreds of unemployed writers as part of the New Deal's emphasis on professionalizing cultural production. The Guides documented regional geography, history, geology, and folklore and were accompanied by photographic records produced by the Farm Security Administration

(FSA). According to Gander, "the series is in many ways the apotheosis of the documentary genre as technique, aesthetic and phenomenological concept" (172). At a time when most Americans could not afford to travel, the Guides turned to interstate travel for an image of aspirational upward mobility that fueled support for New Deal policies, which included the expansion of America's interstate highway system. In response to the conditions of the Great Depression, "the Guides reassert a specifically American tradition of mobility and progress" (171) in which the road symbolizes upward mobility itself, the feeling that one is "going places" (171). In this sense, while the documentarian travels from one place to another, documentary may not really move toward "an other" (Rabinowitz 6) at all. As Berlant suggests, apostrophe "appears to be reaching out, a direct movement from place x to place y, but it is actually a turning back, an animating of a receiver on behalf of the desire to make something happen" (*Cruel Optimism* 25). The roots of this symbol are especially noteworthy given that *The Book of the Dead* aims to fill an archival gap produced in part by the undocumented flow of migrant labour in the same period.

Gander's analysis illustrates how *The Book of the Dead* produces an "actor in history" specific to a documentary culture that was "produced by and produce[d] the 'political unconscious' of middle-class culture" (Rabinowitz 38). Besides its influence on poetry's approach to witness, the New Deal's production of middle-class subjectivity had practical effects for documentary producers like Rukeyser. As Michael Denning demonstrates in *The Cultural Front*, it was in the New Deal period that "a generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals came to staff the agencies of the federal government and the studios of the culture industry" (xix). The WPA was especially instrumental in the professionalization of creative producers, many of whom were born into working class families and initially engaged in cultural production through

their participation in the labour movement. This professionalization involved not only recasting art as waged labour, but also positioning the artist as a member of the emergent postwar middle class. Artists were suddenly civil servants, program administrators, professors—white collar workers considered structurally separate from the working class.

From the perspective of capital and the state, the emergence of the middle-class as an "agent in history" eroded solidarities like those constructed through the Popular Front by consolidating them into a single vision of progress. This single vision "institutionalized gendered dramas of race and class" (Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings" 19) and continues to organise social relations in the United States. Ruth Wilson Gilmore lays out the lasting influence of New Deal social arrangements succinctly and is worth quoting in full:

> In Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal regime, social welfare apparatuses took shape as Progressive-era bred reformists used the state's power to resolve the Great Depression's antagonisms. They did so in order both to restore general health to the economy and to disarm radical alternatives such as communism. The programs' spread guaranteed effective demand by redistributing wealth, but it did so unevenly, to the point that, while labour achieved a modicum of security against economic disasters, lawmakers and agents of the nascent Keynesian welfare state reworked and made critical the very U.S. hierarchies that activists were fighting to deconstruct in radical organizing. Thus, under the New Deal, white people fared well compared to people of color, most of whom were deliberately excluded from opportunities and protections, men received automatically what women had to apply for individually, and normatively urban, industrial workers secured rights denied agricultural field workers even to this day. (140-41)

While few of the Gauley Bridge miners and Appalachian residents interviewed in *The Book of the Dead* would have directly benefitted from New Deal programs, social documentary's call to action was particularly persuasive to white middle-class readers because of how it drew on the New Deal's retooled rhetoric of the American Dream of class mobility.

This reading might seem to contradict Rukeyser's reputation as a leftist poet, but I suggest that it speaks less to Rukeyser's intentions and more to the way political and literary meanings are mediated through generic processes. "No matter what its political intention," argues Rabinowitz, "the documentary narrative invariably returns to the middle class, enlisting the reader in a process of self-recognition" (51). The self-positioning of poets in a documentary tradition is important for understanding shared commitments but, in practice, genres are not always or entirely conscious choices. Genre analysis also discloses latent structural possibilities and limitations. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson argues that genres inscribe the conditions and ideologies of their historical moments by rendering repressed or irresolvable material conflicts in aesthetic form. When a genre reemerges, then, it carries the ideology of its formative historical moment with it, restaging the conflict in conversation with the specific social conditions of its reemergence. As Jameson explains,

> What this model implies is that in its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form… The ideology of the form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure as a generic message which coexists—either as a

> contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism—with elements from later stages. (Jameson 126-28)

If *The Book of the Dead* inaugurates the genre of documentary poetics, as so many poets and critics argue that it does, then the emergence of a social consciousness specific to the white American middle class remains a significant if latent ideological problem for late documentary poets to negotiate.

Rukeyser returns to the road in *The Book of the Dead*'s final poem, also called "The Book of the Dead." The poem begins by echoing the sequence's opening lines: "These roads will take you into your own country. / Seasons and maps coming where this road comes / into a landscape mirrored in these men" (117). The refrain "these are the roads you take" returns several times throughout *The Book of the Dead*, leading the reader, in the final poem, to "the landscape mirrored in these men" (117), a reference to the workers who constructed the dam and the New Kanawha power plant, workers whose bodies are buried in the land, "under the corn" (96). The landscape broadens, however, as the poem gradually shifts from "your own country," "past all your influences, your home river," to "the theatres of the war" (117). The road into Gauley Bridge turns into "the long French road to Spain, / the old Mediterranean / flashing new signals from the hero hills / near Barcelona" (119) as the Hawk's Nest Incident becomes one among the Popular Front's "sums of frontiers" (119). The reader/witness is called upon to

> Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,
> to photograph and extend the voice,
> to speak this meaning.
>
> Voices speak to us directly. As we move.

As we enrich growing in larger motion,

this word, this power.

……

speeding ahead the red and open west,

and this our region,

desire, field, beginning. Name and road,

communication to these many men,

as epilogue, seeds of unending love (123).

Rukeyser returns to the imperative, calling upon the reader/witness to "carry," "extend," and "speak," and reinforces connections between revolutionary action and motion: "as we move," she writes, "growing in larger motion… speeding ahead."

And yet, there is also a tension here between this forward movement and *The Book of the Dead*'s cyclic structure. In his influential reading of the work, Michael Thurston reads the "seeds of unending love" as the bodies of the miners whose cycle of death and rebirth—suggested by Rukeyser's mythic allusion—will be completed by the revolutionary action of the Popular Front. The seed's "fertilizing image" (12) is particularly germane when read alongside Rukeyser's call in *The Life of Poetry* to claim poetry as an underused and undervalued resource. In the context of late documentary poetry, the seeds might instead be understood as the tradition of documentary poetics. This introduces the possibility that *The Book of the Dead*'s cyclic structure might extend

beyond the text of a single poem through the affective historicism of genre and into the wider formal and social infrastructures of the present.

In 1995, Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman published a "documentary" issue of their literary magazine *Chain*. While Jill Magi overlooks important precursors when she contends that the issue was one of "the first instances of 'documentary' and 'poetry' used in the same breath" (247), the issue did announce the resurgence of documentary poetics in the United States. Over the next two decades, Spahr published several important collections of documentary poetry, including *Fuck You Aloha I Love You* (2001), *Well Then There Now* (2011), and *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015). "The Incinerator" is the final poem in *Well Then There Now*, a collection that examines the politics of place through the twin lenses of ecopoetics and settler colonialism. The poems in *Well Then There Now* employ a range of documentary techniques. "Unnamed Dragonfly Species," the collection's best-known poem, splices an alphabetical list of endangered species into a relentless stream of climate-related facts and news stories. In "Sonnets," Spahr weaves Complete Blood Count (CBC) data into a reflection on how settler colonialism remakes social and biotic ecosystems in its image. The collection also includes two investigative photo essays— "Dole Street" and "2199 Kalia Road"—that trace the colonial history of Hawai'i by researching its street names and documenting the privatization of its beachfront.

"The Incinerator" is the last poem in the collection and functions as an epilogue that spatially and temporally situates the tradition of documentary poetics that Spahr draws on throughout the collection. In a collection concerned with how "location shapes one's awareness of and responses to the social, political, and environmental forces" (Keller 182), it makes sense that Spahr takes a place-based approach to analyzing her own compositional process. Each of the eight poems in *Well Then There Now* are accompanied by a grayscale map and GPS coordinates

for the location where they were composed. In "The Incinerator," Spahr writes about growing up in Chillicothe, Ohio, in the foothills of the Appalachians; however, GPS coordinates show that the poem was composed in Berkeley, California. Spahr writes that she is "trying to write something about being a child of a certain moment, of a certain class, working class, and then an adult of a different moment, of a different class, middle class" (*WTTN* 148). Just as Rukeyser dramatizes the distance between New York and Gauley Bridge in "The Road," Spahr calls attention to the social, economic, and spatial distance between Chillicothe and Berkeley to negotiate the uneven power relations between documentary producer and documentary subject, even as she occupies both positions in the poem.

Divided into five parts, Spahr's poem is bookended by opening and closing sections that mirror the first and last poems in Rukeyser's sequence: "The Road" and "The Book of the Dead." In 2018, *The Book of the Dead* was reissued for the first time since its publication in *US 1* and the edition's supplemental material draws together the historical and material contexts that Spahr mobilizes in "The Incinerator." The reissue includes Nancy Naumburg's original photographs, which help situate *The Book of the Dead* more comfortably alongside other touchstones of thirties documentary that depict rural poverty like Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* and, more aptly, James Agee and Walker Evans's self-reflexive *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The reissue also includes an introduction by West Virginian poet and historian Catherine Venable Moore, who re-evaluates the poem as a contribution to regional studies of Appalachia. Published by West Virginia University Press alongside recent academic work that responds to stereotypes about Appalachian coal country reinforced by J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*[24] and media coverage of 2016 federal election, this

[24] J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (and the 2020 film it inspired) has been widely criticized for reinforcing stereotypes of Appalachian poverty, addiction, and mental illness and for its assertion that "these problems were not created by

new edition treats *The Book of the Dead* as not only an influential documentary text but also a significant archive of the impact of extraction on Appalachia's regional development and social imaginary.

The examination of class and mobility in this chapter intersects with complex questions about "the acute race divide" in Appalachia (Venable Moore 4). Besides reframing *The Book of the Dead* as a document of Appalachia, Venable Moore makes significant efforts to correct the few official accounts of the Gauley Bridge disaster by centering the role anti-Black racism played in the crisis and its documentation. Her analysis takes up Rukeyser's imperative to "measure our times again" (Rukeyser, *Book of the Dead* 121) and makes clear that "race is still downplayed in official accounts" (4), including Rukeyser's. "Disaster binds us, maybe," she writes, "but what if you're one of those deemed unworthy of memory" (4). Over two-thirds of the miners at Gauley Bridge were Black migrant workers from the southern states driven north by segregationist laws and mass unemployment. With few local ties, migrant workers who contracted silicosis "either fled West Virginia for wherever home was, or they were buried as paupers in mass graves in the fields and woods around Fayette County" (Venable Moore 6). In a 2018 article for *Commune*, Spahr describes stereotypes about the white Appalachian working class that circulated in the years following the 2016 federal election, including "an endless series of photographs that were appearing at that time in the mainstream media (an unusual amount of them taken within a sixty-mile radius of where I grew up) that showed the residents of Appalachia and their tendency to play video games, shoot heroin, or just look sadly out the dirty windows of poorly lit rooms, often while sitting on plaid couches." In Spahr's analysis,

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governments or corporations or anyone else. [Appalachians] created them, and only we can fix them" (Vance 256). See *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* (West Virginia UP, 2019) for critical essays responding to stereotypes of white rural poverty in Appalachia and the narratives of self-responsibility that sustain them.

organised abandonment links these experiences of Appalachia in ways that remain uneven and unsettled.

Spahr's engagement with the generic conventions of documentary in "The Incinerator" calls upon a historical association between documentary poetics and Appalachian geography established in *The Book of the Dead* and reinforced in Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009), which uses testimony from survivors of the Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia as source text. Spahr's allusion to Rukeyser relies on the way that "genres sponge up and relate residues of places and times their objects carry" (Dango 503). The promise of upward mobility captured in "The Road" never arrives in Appalachia, whose resource economy provides fuel and economic growth for other regions while Appalachia itself remains in poverty relative to national standards. In Bob Johnson's words, "if fossil capitalism promises mobility in theory, it has a century of failure to account for in West Virginia" (121). For Spahr, and for Venable Moore, engaging with *The Book of the Dead* in the twenty-first century involves navigating a felt sense of combined crisis and stasis associated with Appalachia. "Disaster binds our people to this place and each other, or so the story goes," writes Venable Moore, "if your list of tragedies gets long enough, you start to think you're fated for disaster" (2). The orientation toward crisis in "The Incinerator" therefore differs from *The Book of the Dead* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* in a notable way: while Rukeyser investigates the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Incident and Nowak documents the Sago Mine Disaster, Spahr's examination of Appalachian precarity is not focused on any single event. This refusal to think of crisis in terms of the event is crucial to Spahr's critical intervention into the documentary genre. In her introduction, Venable Moore uses Rukeyser's poem as "a kind of map" (14) to guide her own journey through Fayette County eighty years after Rukeyser's own. Spahr makes use of *The Book of the Dead* in a similar way in

"The Incinerator" by developing what Berlant calls a pathocartography, a form of affective mapping. *The Book of the Dead* provides the formal and affective structure through which Spahr initially navigates regional and class identity. Like all road maps, however, it struggles to account for the entire territory.

The first section of "The Incinerator" is an awkward sex scene between the speaker and a personification of Chillicothe, Spahr's hometown:

> … Chillicothe leans back. We turn
>
> towards each other
>
> turn towards each other and as if we did it all the time, I start
>
> unbuttoning Chillicothe's shirt. It is difficult to unbutton because
>
> it has many small white buttons and as I do it I keep fumbling
>
> as I do it I keep fumbling. Chillicothe seems disconnected from
>
> what's happening. I pull the shirt open, exposing the roads we
>
> take through hilltops and hollows, as we travel the line between
>
> glaciated and unglaciated and I look down at Chillicothe,
>
> grinning, unable to believe I am actually about to do what I have dreamed of
>
> so many times, and then Chillicothe says, "This is my first time."
>
> I laugh. I say, "You're kidding" (137).

As the speaker moves over Chillicothe's body, she "travel[s]" the geographical features of Southern Ohio: "over the Scioto," "amid floodplain soils and the hills that extend south past the farm lands," "then out of the valley, past Mt Pisgah and Swiger Knob, the wild game trails, the war trails" (138). This scene of topographical desire alludes to the opening poem of Rukeyser's poem sequence, "The Road," in which Rukeyser and Naumburg travel into Appalachia from

New York. Taking Rukeyser's imperative to "touch" Appalachia literally, the speaker "pulls [Chillicothe's] shirt open, "exposing the roads we / take through hilltops and hollows" (137). Spahr's poetry has often explored the relationship between private and public intimacy. In *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), for example, she imagines global citizenship as an extension of the intimate partnership between lovers, addressing her readers as "beloveds," but, unlike other scenes of intimacy in Spahr's poetry, there's something unsettling about the exchange in "The Incinerator." Chillicothe's admission that "this is my first time" establishes an uneven power dynamic reinforced by the speaker's laugh and dismissive reply. Spahr navigates around the ecofeminist "rape of the land" trope by queering the scene, but this encounter between the speaker and Chillicothe still has tones of conquest and submission. Chillicothe is described as "embarrassed and vulnerable" (137) and "a nervous child" (137). The speaker must reconcile her "fantasies," what she has "dreamed of / so many times" (137), with the uneasiness of a mature encounter with a pastoral Appalachian landscape.

Like Rukeyser's cartographic exposé in "The Road," the opening section of "The Incinerator" introduces a object of desire that carries through Spahr's poem. While the desire appears to be for another, it circles back and reveals itself as a way of locating the speaker's own positionality and potential agency. As Berlant writes, "when we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (*Cruel Optimism* 24). Throughout "The Incinerator," Spahr is "trying to understand [her] mother when she called [her family] middle / class all through [her] childhood. And why she said this since by / all the markers of economic resources, education, and / cultural access within the US [they] were working class" (143). The poem's main insight is that "class has something relational about it," that is, what it means to be middle class shifts

depending on one's spatial and temporal location. The poem begins by mapping Spahr's family home's "location on the block" (144) but relational structures become increasingly difficult to map as the poem's spatial and temporal scale expands. Through the combination of statistical time and scale jumping, Spahr thinks of precarity not as a regionally or temporally specific phenomenon to be resolved by claiming either working or middle-class class agency, but as a felt phenomenon that spans the historical and global field in increasingly uneven and unpredictable ways.

The three middle sections of "The Incinerator" are structured temporally through statistics on poverty and unemployment rates in Appalachia. The first lines of the poem's second section report that in "1969, 17.8 percent poverty in Appalachia. / 1979, 14.1 percent" (139). In the poem's fourth section, the statistics report that "in 1999, 13.7 percent people in poverty in Appalachia / In 1989, 15.4 percent people in poverty" (151). The statistics rise and fall throughout the poem, a temporal rhythm that spans Spahr's lifetime, which also roughly aligns with the rise of neoliberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state in the United States. Their fluctuation produces a durational pattern of statistical continuity that, as Spahr writes, leads to the assumption "that one could say one was Appalachian and more or less mean that one was lower class" (149). The statistics provide a measure of "the slow death that happens to targeted or neglected populations over time and space" (Berlant qtd. in Puar 169). While Rukeyser and Nowak's poems frame crisis through the lens of the historical event, the use of statistical time in "The Incinerator" illustrates that "precarity has a long history in industrial capitalism, where insecurity in working and living has, for a lot of people, been the norm, and the welfare state the exception" (165). By the end of the poem, Appalachia has moved closer to national standards of precarity: "in terms of unemployment, the numbers for / Appalachia more closely resemble those

of the rest of the / nation but at the same time they are still not that different / from the numbers that so defined the region in 1964 when it was / exemplary of poverty" (153). This gap closes not because Appalachian standards improve but because national standards decline. While Rukeyser's poem reveals the production of the middle class at the early stages of the welfare state, Spahr's poem tracks its decline—the paradoxical situation through which her "current income puts [her] in one of the top income percentiles in the world and yet [she] continue[s] to think of [herself] as broke" (153). While Spahr experiences the paired spatial and upward mobility articulated in "The Road," the structure of feeling tied to Appalachia persists.

Wedged between statistical data are several narrative threads about Spahr's experience growing up in Chillicothe, including school visits to the local paper mill, her father's precarious employment at a local radio station, and the location of the house she grew up in, which was owned by her father's boss. These threads interrupt each other, communicating the struggle to nail down a single, cohesive narrative about what it means to be "a child of Chillicothe" (148):

> Appalachia had forty jobs per 100 people in 1969.
> As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning
> them: the nuances around race in the contemporary US.
> As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning
> them: she was probably saying something about how she did
> not see her life in that static and unhappy way working class
> lives were presented in books and movies.
> As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning
> them: shame about being working class transformed into
> claims of authenticity from her generation to my generation. (139)

According to Berlant, genres provide structures "for managing simultaneous incoherent narratives of what's going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life" (*Cruel Optimism* 4). The constant narrative reconfiguration that Spahr describes, in which "stories keep popping up and [she] keeps abandoning them" (139) as if she is scrolling through them on social media, is, for Berlant, the affective scene of contemporary precarity for which genre provides temporary yet satisfying relief. Throughout the middle sections of "The Incinerator," Spahr captures multiple overlapping "stories" about precarity in the United States and, eventually, globally. Her personal narrative provides a loose thread that links these paratactic statements, but these middle sections of the poem also struggle to locate a generic structure for that experience. She is reluctant to adopt precarity as her own because she is aware that "being working class [is] transformed into claims of authenticity" when divorced from material conditions. She also positions her own experience with respect to "the nuances around race in the contemporary US," acknowledging that while "those who should be the white middle class experience precarity as if it is new… this process of normalization doesn't at all mean equality in insecurity" (Berlant qtd. in Puar 172).

The dominant affect in "The Incinerator" is anxiety. Spahr repeatedly writes about being "worried" (140, 142, 143, 149), "uneasy" (146-47), and "nervous" (152). This anxiety is directed not only at conditions themselves but at her ability to accurately map those conditions for the reader. As theorists of precarity like Berlant, Butler, and Isabell Lorey point out, the experience of precarity is marked not only by economic strain but also by an anxious structure of feeling. In "The Incinerator," this anxiety is directed at the ability to accurately map intersecting insecurities and vulnerabilities and becomes more pronounced as the poem expands its spatial scale.

I was trying to think about the role of the US government in forcing

reduced tariff barriers on numerous countries.

I was trying to think about the General Agreement on Tariffs

and Trade.

I was trying to think about women packing ice cream in the

Gaza Strip.

I was trying to think about the World Trade Organization.

I was trying to think about women sewing garments in Liberia.

I was trying to think about the North American Free Trade

Agreement.

I was trying to think about women shelling shrimp in Honduras.

I was trying to think about the Dominican Republic-Central American

Free Trade Agreement.

I was trying to think about women cultivating cassava in Zambia.

I was trying to think about a number of bilateral agreements.

I was trying to think about women panning the tailings of diamond

gravel for gold in Sierra Leone. (144)

This section is part of Spahr's conversation with Hannah Weiner's poem "Radcliffe and the Guatemalan Women," which is constructed entirely of citational material drawn from Radcliffe College's alumnae magazine[25] and newspaper articles about women workers in Guatemala in the

[25] Weiner attended Radcliffe, the women's liberal arts college affiliated with Harvard, in the late 1940s. She is often associated with the Language poets, in part because her writing was included in Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* anthology. She is best known for her 'clairvoyant' poems in which polyvocality and typographical differences destabilize the lyric speaker. "Radcliffe and the Guatemalan Women" employs the new sentence, parataxis, and citation common to Language poetry to examine the (dis)continuities between Radcliffe alumni and women in Guatemala during the country's civil war. Spahr's description of the way Weiner "keeps one eye on herself, one eye on her neighborhood / and one eye on another place" (144-45) draws a clear parallel to her own project. Toward the end of section four, Spahr reveals that she initially imagined her poem might be very similar to Weiner's: "when I sat down to write this piece I began / by writing about myself using a series of statements that I stole / from working

1980s. Gender emerges as a possible generic structure here, an alternative to the fraught relations of class and race explored elsewhere in the poem. However, Weiner's gender-based comparison make Spahr equally "uneasy" (146). By invoking tariffs and trade agreements, Spahr adds another layer to the poem's thinking about mobility and suggests that a gender-based analysis is complicated by correspondences between mobility and agency. She positions women as uneven participants in the circulation of trade, labour, and capital that makes any simplified solidarity or comparison impossible.

The "waning of genre" is most clear, however, in the poem's performance of the machinations of thinking. As the two examples above illustrate, the poem's primary rhetorical device is anaphora—the repetition of a sequence of words at the beginning of successive clauses. The parallel syntax not only "suggests multiple trajectories and perspectives within the unfolding of historical change" (Keller 183), it also creates a "holding environment" ("The Commons" 405-6) that stalls the application of a generic framework, allowing multiple "stories" to circulate without one taking primary importance. Critics often attribute Spahr's processual poetics to the influence of Gertrude Stein's methods of defamiliarization, but here it provides an opening to the relationship between genre and crisis that Berlant proposes in which genre leverages familiar narrative structures to manage the anxious scene of crisis.

Throughout the poem, Spahr engages in a performance of thinking; or, as Berlant would put it, Spahr is "not just thinking, but stopping to think" ("Thinking" 232). This thinking "will

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class memoirs by US women and then memoirs / by women from the global south" (152). But, for Spahr, "the categories 'Radcliffe women' and 'Guatemalan women' are not equal" (146) and she ultimately rejects the comparative framework suggested by Weiner's poem.

eventually appear monumentally as form" (231), but Berlant "link[s] thinking to being in the 'now,'" in a way that precedes genre.

> Occupying the long middle of a crisis, [the] ambitious pursuit of an understanding of the presenting situation produces a personal, political, and aesthetic ambit that pushes the ongoing event into something that has not found its genre… In these narrative histories of the present, a shift between knowing and uncertain intuitionisms enables us to think about being in history as a densely corporeal, experiential felt thing whose demands on survival skills map not the whole world in one moment but a way to think about the history of sensualized epistemologies in the atmosphere of a particular moment now (aesthetically) suspended in time. (*Cruel Optimism* 63-64)

For Berlant, "stopping to think" is how we temporarily register "the waning of genre" ("Thinking" 235) or the novelty of our present experience before falling back on the familiar structures that we use to explain moments of crisis. Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that documentary poetry has historically leveraged moments of punctual crisis to encourage the emergence of a new "agent in history." This suspension evokes what Berlant refers to as lateral agency, which they contrast to the sovereign agency of the liberal subject, a "self-suspension" rather than a "self-extension" (*Cruel Optimism* 116). Significantly, lateral agency is not positive or reparative but describes the limited agency of a subject who is unable to "extend" in the same way because of conditions that chip away at the individual and collective ability to act. In "The Incinerator," the self-referential gestures of processual poetics and the stalled circuitry of anaphora register an anxious retreat from the self-extension associated with documentary's generic attachments to mobility and agency.

In the final section of the poem, Spahr picks up her conversation with *The Book of the Dead,* circling back to reprise the opening section.

epilogue

These are the roads we take

the roads we take through

hilltops and hollows. (Spahr 154)

While the first section was a scene of intimate desire rooted in the regional, Spahr also follows Rukeyser by expanding the poem's landscape in this final section. The poem moves across Appalachian geography once again, but this time it covers a timescale that is no longer historical and statistical but geological, mapping "layers of limestone, / sandstone, / shale, / and coal sediment" (155). Against the revolutionary punctuality of Rukeyser's focus on the Spanish Civil War, Spahr's geological scale evokes the slow wearing down that characterizes what Berlant refers to as "slow death" and Rob Nixon calls "slow violence." Once the timescale has been expanded, the forward motion of the road is suspended:

Streams going off in all directions.

Going off in all directions,

the road, almost cultureless,

exits at even intervals, floats

floats above

above the desire I want

the desire I want as epilogue

as epilogue, for my heart seeds

heart seeds of

unending love,

love, still, but also despite (155).

The road "floats / floats above / above the desire" in a suspension mirrored in the delay produced by the frequent repetition of words and phrases. Unlike Rukeyser's poem, the road does not reach a point of arrival, a place where the poem's accumulated witness culminates in a call to action. The ongoing desire that Spahr "want[s] as epilogue" is not so much a desire for the structural stability that Berlant associates with genre but for a "sense of the historical" that might untether from the nostalgic tendencies of genre. This chapter begins with an epigraph from Rukeyser's Preface to *The Life of Poetry*: "if we are free, we are free to choose a tradition" (x). In her engagement with the documentary tradition, Spahr refuses to take the conditional clause that begins Rukeyser's statement for granted. And yet, these "heart seeds" are worth planting "still, but also despite" the failures of historical revolutionary fronts.

Chapter III

"dispossessed disposed to struggle":

Dispossessed Citation in Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*

In lieu of an epigraph, Cecily Nicholson begins *From the Poplars* by describing an exchange at the City of New Westminster archives:

> 'The island,' I am told, 'is not for sale.' I am surprised to be
> mistaken for a potential buyer. At Planning, their recollections
> of the place are of ownership and 'issues.' I describe my project
> and they express a kind of curiosity, perhaps even delight. How
> to say, then, that this effort is an outcrop of disunity—a gross
> sense of settlement in the Royal City, a call and a response.
> I could not explain my purpose other than to say:
>
> "I am writing a book of poetry." A minor purchase of property.

From the Poplars is a book-length documentary poem about Poplar Island, a depopulated, industrialized, and reforested island in the Fraser River in western British Columbia, and the site of one of Canada's first reservations; or, as Nicholson writes, a parcel of land "bought and sold repeatedly / as the record shows stolen" (3). In *From the Poplars*, Nicholson engages in site-specific and archival research to expose the ways that capitalist and colonial violence compose the island by way of dispossession and displacement, historically and in the present. In this chapter, I read the poem's citational strategies through Nicholson's suggestion that a book of poetry might be considered "a minor purchase of property." As an infrastructure that upholds the intellectual economy, citation has a foundational relationship to property. Recent critical

conversations about appropriation-based poetics make connections between citation and other forms of territoriality and suggest that the relationship between citation, property, and dispossession should be more closely examined, especially in the settler colonial context. Citation is also a relational infrastructure that maps and delineates intellectual genealogies, a function that scholars make use of regularly and which has been the subject of recent debate about the "politics of citation" in academia. Insofar as documentary poetry composes itself as a distinct tradition within experimental poetics through its use of citation as a compositional strategy and through its appeal to the relational politics of citation, a poetics of dispossession like Nicholson's troubles the field in productive ways.

As Nicholson herself admits, *From the Poplars* is "hard to summarize" (Nicholson qtd. in Cooke) because it combines lyric's presumptively singular voice with documentary citation, shifting between lineated verse and prose poetry constructed from found material. The poem employs two different citational strategies that provide related but fractured points of entry. The first strategy makes *From the Poplars* immediately legible as a documentary poem. It involves the incorporation of citational material from institutional and state archives and performs a critical historiography that makes evident the discursive logic through which Indigenous land is appropriated by the state and entire communities are erased from the public record. Nicholson clearly acknowledges these source texts in a list of references and formats them in ways that draw attention to their existence as material documents outside the poem's textual space. The second strategy involves the incorporation of citational material that is marked as such through italicization but remains unattributed and unacknowledged in the poem's list of references. These italicized citations are drawn from sources including Pablo Neruda, Billie Holiday and "Strange Fruit" composer Abel Meeropol, Joe Strummer, Frantz Fanon, Ojibwe economist and water

protector Winona LaDuke, seventeenth-century agrarian socialists the Diggers, Mark Nowak, and others. Unlike the citational material drawn from the institutional archive, these sources converge with the poem's own voice to create a fractured and displaced collective of dispossessed subjects that resists temporal, geographic, and institutional framing. The combination of these two citational strategies allows the poem to address not only the structures of capitalist colonial dispossession specific to Poplar Island, but also to propose an alternative citational infrastructure grounded in resistance to overlapping but unequal histories of displacement and dispossession.

My chapter is organised in two sections corresponding with these strategies. Unlike the preceding chapter's relatively chronological discussion grounded in Spahr's direct allusion to Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, this chapter tests out a methodological approach based on looser associations or what Berlant calls "kinds of relations with histories but not ontologies of cause and effect" (*The Inconvenience* 11). This approach relies on and adds to the dynamic set of historical relationships built up in the preceding two chapters, especially the unsettled relationship between documentary and labour examined in Chapter one, and takes seriously Berlant's call for "a writing that needs both to fix its object enough that it can be seen and to disturb it enough that it can reorganize its objects" (17). In the first section, I follow Sarah Dowling's reading of appropriation-based poetry as continuous with dominant systems of property ownership. By emphasizing this continuity, poets like Nicholson use textual appropriation to reveal and critique the racial logic of property that undergirds settler colonialism. Nicholson uses this strategy to construct a poetics of dispossession that depends on the structural continuity between aesthetic and legal appropriation.

In order to flesh out the significance of Nicholson's conjunction of formal and legal processes of appropriation, I consider *From the Poplars* alongside Dorothy Livesay's documentary poem about Japanese Canadian internment, "Call My People Home" (1949), which addresses the dispossession of Japanese Canadians' land and property on Canada's Pacific Coast during and after the Second World War. Placing these two poems in proximity allows me to revisit the relationship between documentary and labour from a different angle. Documentary's privileged position in English-Canadian literature stems in part from Livesay's sometimes revisionist treatment of the form and her efforts to solidify its existing association with cultural nationalism first established by John Grierson at the National Film Board. While "Call My People Home" addresses the dispossession and displacement of Japanese Canadians thematically, Tania Aguila-Way demonstrates that Livesay's social theme is undercut by her adherence to Griersonian narrative strategies. Specifically, the poem's narrative structure attempts to resolve tensions inherent to the colonial nation by appealing to a romanticized and depoliticized sense of solidarity rooted in shared labour. I argue that the poem's false resolution, which smooths over conditions of dispossession by appealing to a myth of shared labour, reveals a moment of incomplete institutionalization of the documentary form. Because appeals to labour have helped documentary acquire progressive connotations in national-cultural discourse, reading documentary poems through the lens of dispossession rather than labour makes it easier to identify the limits and possibilities of documentary's residual radical tradition.

In her influential essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" (1969), Livesay engages in a politics of citation in order to construct a national tradition of social poetics. While most scholars of contemporary documentary would be skeptical of Livesay's cultural nationalism, documentary's utility as a critical term has long been tied to literary and political

genealogy making. In the second section of my chapter, I turn to recent conversations about the academic politics of citation to consider how the politics of canon formation, in which documentary poetics is heavily invested, might also be a form of territorialization that is incompatible with a poetics of dispossession. In *From the Poplars*' second citational frame, Nicholson challenges citation's attachment to territoriality by exploring relational possibilities that emerge under conditions of dispossession. By circulating her own family narratives of Black diasporic movement alongside citational material that draws on sources from various decolonial and anti-capitalist movements, she builds a dispossessed subjectivity for the poem that remains radically open to coalition with others. Like Nicholson's poem, this section reads across histories and notices resonances between incommensurate contexts without forcing a tidy resolution. Ultimately, however, I argue that Nicholson's poem proposes a citational infrastructure through which documentary poetry might become less a "purchase of property" and more a commitment to relations beyond the property principle.

Dispossession is a term that encompasses multiple and overlapping forms of enclosure, displacement, precarity, and statelessness that unevenly distribute conditions for living and thriving. It can refer to forms of economic precarity that result from neoliberal privatization and reconfigurations of the global market, but it refers, first and foremost, to the enclosure of land. Glen Coulthard's assessment of settler colonialism as "a form of structured dispossession" (7) in *Red Skin, White Masks* is particularly well-suited to the study of documentary poetics because Coulthard reorients Marxist theory in conversation with Indigenous studies to correct shortcomings of Marxist analysis in settler colonial contexts. In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx describes primitive accumulation as the historical precondition for proletarianization, which is itself a precondition of the capital relation. While Marx focuses on primitive accumulation only

insofar as it produces a class of workers "possessing nothing but their own labour-power" (293), Coulthard suggests Marxist analyses of settler colonial contexts should begin by "*contextually shifting* our investigation from an emphasis on the *capital relation* to the *colonial relation*" (Coulthard 10). This is especially true if we want to grasp the "cycles of colonial domination and resistance that characterize the relationship between white settler states and Indigenous people" (8). The cyclical nature of dispossession is critical to Coulthard's account. He addresses "problematic features of Marx's primitive accumulation thesis" (8) that need to be corrected before it can be brought into conversation with Indigenous critical theory and praxis, namely "Marx's rigidly temporal framing" (9) that positions dispossession as a historical process that facilitated the transition to capitalism but is now over. Coulthard is not alone in arguing for the centrality and cyclicality of primitive accumulation. There have been many similar revisions to the temporal nature of Marx's notion of primitive accumulation—theorists from Rosa Luxemburg to David Harvey and Naomi Klein point out that dispossession is an ongoing rather than a merely historically situated process. Coulthard differs from other theorists, however, in his insistence that analysis of neoliberalism's enclosures must be grounded in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land.

Given that documentary poetry has strong historical attachments to the labour movement, evident in Mark Nowak's influential characterization of documentary as "a subgenre not only of poetry but also of labor history" ("Poetry as Social Practice" 11), Coulthard's contextual shift provides a way of reading contemporary documentary poets including Craig Santos Perez, Layli Long Soldier, Mercedes Eng and others who, like Nicholson, engage in a shift in emphasis from labour to dispossession and foreground settler colonialism as the frame within which other configurations of power cohere in Canada and the US. Without seeking to refute the centrality of

labour to the self-formation of documentary poetics, this chapter takes a different tack and argues that prioritizing dispossession in critical conversations about documentary poetry makes the boundaries of the form's institutionalization more visible and introduces provisional openings toward forms of sociality that are not rooted in institutional recognition and territoriality.

Throughout the poem, Nicholson reproduces research from municipal and provincial archives and draws material from published texts about the island and adjacent City of New Westminster.[26] This research documents Poplar Island's history as a Qayqayt First Nation reserve, a smallpox quarantine site, a logging camp, a First World War shipbuilding yard and, finally, parkland central to the City of New Westminster's waterfront redevelopment plan. Drawing the reader's attention to textual appropriation as a signature technique of documentary poetics, the poem begins by quoting from a paratextual statement that appears on all microform reproductions produced by the Canadian Institute for Historic Microreproduction (CIHM), an archive established by the National Library of Canada to preserve documentary records of early settlement.[27]

> pages damaged restored discoloured stained or detached
> wholly or partially obscured by errata slips and tissue, etc., are
> refilled for the best possible quality of the image. the
> following diagrams illustrate the method. (1)

The CIHM statement orients our attention to Nicholson's citational practice in two important ways. First, the statement points to the materiality of the records that she consults and incorporates into her poem—"pages damaged restored discoloured stained or detached" (1). She

[26] New Westminster is a city in British Columbia's Lower Mainland and is part of the Metro Vancouver Regional District.

[27] CIHM is now a digital archive hosted at Canadiana.org and has merged with the Canadian Research Knowledge Network.

also highlights the materiality of these records by bookending the poem with two archival images of Poplar Island, using font and formatting choices to convey that much of the poem's material is drawn from pre-existing textual sources, and following standards for the use of quoted material by clearly acknowledging her sources in a list of references, even occasionally using parenthetical in-text citation. Second, the CIHM statement situates Nicholson's use of textual appropriation within a specific context. The records belong to a national archive "dedicated to the preservation and access of Canada's documentary heritage" ("Heritage Content"), which communicates their institutional origin as records of settlement.

At the center of *From the Poplars* is a series of archival chapters from the City of New Westminster's legislature dating to the 1880s. The documents include "An Act respecting the Official Map of the City of New Westminster," which details the adoption of city boundaries and the allotment of land parcels—"officially spoken boundaries borders and property" (13)—directly following the creation of a reserve system under the Indian Act in 1876. The reserve system forcibly relocated Coast Salish and other Indigenous communities to small patches of land with few resources and Poplar Island became one of "three reserve parcels" (35) designated for the Qayqayt First Nation. The chapters declare that the "extinguishment of right title is permanent" (13) and that "it shall be lawful for the Corporation of the City… to sell and convey all or any part of the said squares or reserves, and public lands" (47). They also include amendments to the City's Lands Act to facilitate the sale of "public" land to facilitate infrastructure projects like "the construction of a railway to connect the City of New Westminster with the mainline of the Canadian Pacific Railway" (12) and resource development on the island's "log boom shores" (12), demonstrating that the legal appropriation of land and resources by the state is central to "the future of the Colony" (80). These documents resurface

throughout Nicholson's poem, grounding her wide-ranging historical inquiry in site-specific dispossession.

It is significant that Nicholson chooses to appropriate from archival sources concerned with the legal processes through which Indigenous land is privatized and developed. By textually appropriating from land act and land survey documents, *From the Poplars* reveals the continuity between aesthetic and legal appropriation. In "Property, Priority, Place: Rethinking the Poetics of Appropriation," Sarah Dowling calls for a reconsideration of appropriation-based poetics based on the fact that "the term *appropriation* references real property" (100):

> literary critics have rarely examined the logics of property described and reflected in contemporary appropriation-based writing. Nor have critics adequately examined how these logics of property are intertwined with settler colonialism and its attendant ideologies of race, although much recent theoretical work powerfully connects property, race, and subjectivization. (100)

Citation is the method through which we acknowledge ideas and texts as property. Textual appropriation has roots in the modernist avant-garde but, as Dowling points out, most recent theorizations of appropriation-based poetics are more likely to draw meaning from free-culture and open access movements that challenge the enclosure of creative and intellectual content. Self-theorizations of conceptualism's "plagiaristic tendencies" (Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual," xx) stake their political ground in being opposed to intellectual property in favour of the free flow of information, a position that is often understood as an unavoidable outgrowth of the sheer volume of information circulating on the internet and the "cut and paste scenario" (xix) made possible through word processing software. The use of citation in documentary poetry has its

own history that precedes, challenges, and overlaps with conceptualism in complex ways,[28] but this history is often obscured because "conceptual poetry is now so closely identified with appropriation that uses of the technique by other poets are imagined to be subsidiary to or derivative of conceptual writers' work" (Dowling 98). While I want to resist the ahistorical "framing and *marketing*" (Collis, Dialectical Poetry) of appropriation-based techniques as the unique purview of conceptual writing[29] and avoid narrowing the scope of Nicholson's project by positioning it as a response to conceptualism, it is useful to consider how *From the Poplars*' engagement with the relationship between citation and ownership departs from and complicates these more widely known theorizations.

In a detailed analysis of conceptualism's "open source poetics," Stephen Voyce argues that appropriation-based poetry is "part of a broader movement to enlarge and protect a public cultural commons" (425).[30] According to Voyce, conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith,

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[28] While the differences between documentary and conceptual citation get unpacked throughout my dissertation, one major difference might be worth noting here. While conceptualism focuses on "information about information" (Dworkin xxvii)—that is, it privileges the method through which material is accessed, processed, and organised—documentary citation has always been equally concerned with the content of cited material and focuses on how that content takes on new meaning through the contextual reframing inherent to the process of appropriation. This recontextualization is what William Stott called "exposé citation" in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973). For an excellent comparative analysis of documentary and conceptual poetry, see the chapter "'It Matters What You Call a Thing': Documentary, Investigative, Conceptual, Documental" in Michael Leong's *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry* (2020).

[29] Collis suggests that "in many respects the perception now is that conceptualism is the avant-garde, and the avant-garde is conceptualism" primarily because conceptual writers have been excellent at marketing their work, which is uncharacteristic of poets. According to Collis, "conceptual writing has appropriated a whole range of literary practices, rebranding them as markers of the unassailable 'newness' ('innovation') of the latest literary craze" (Collis, "Dialectical Poetry").

[30] Goldsmith's open-access digital archive, UbuWeb, enacts conceptualism's investment in the production of a cultural commons more successfully than any single compositional project. The archive offers "free and open" access, "no membership or password required," and "openly violate[s] copyright norms" (Goldsmith, "About UbuWeb"). It also encourages users to download material to use as source texts for their own appropriative projects. But, as Voyce points out, there are still significant limitations to UbuWeb's "gift economy": "UbuWeb hardly permits the volunteer-based open-editing model of *Wikipedia*; instead, a small group of individuals comprised mainly of poets, archivists, and academics exert full editorial control while lateral organization among its members operates within this social sphere" (420). The emphasis on aesthetic innovation as the end-goal of open access also assumes a kind of profitability that ensures that this model remains compatible with an ideal of market competition.

Rachel Zolf, and Darren Wershler not only challenge "our attitudes toward originality, authorship, property, and the ontological status of art objects" (408), they also stimulate conversations about creeping privatization, especially the expansion of copyright law and the rise of the intellectual economy. Goldsmith's call to "rais[e] the craft of the copyist to the same level of the author" (*Uncreative* 35) fashions appropriation-based writing as a form of labour that is both immaterial and machinic. While these poetries may raise interesting questions about the reconfiguration of labour under neoliberalism, Dowling points out that they "rely upon the most conventional, pedestrian ideas about real property" (100). By imagining language as a commons and textual appropriation as a form of labour, they reinforce Lockean conceptions that link individual property rights with productive labour. Dowling argues that

> such claims must be situated within a larger set of cultural beliefs about property: what is owned and what is ownable? Who has the right to appropriate, and who does not? How is the right to appropriate or to own property distributed? And, perhaps most importantly, what is the flip side of appropriation? *Who is dispossessed, and with what consequences*?" (100, emphasis mine)

Drawing on Aileen Moreton-Robinson's theory of "white possessive logics" and Brenna Bhandar's "racial regimes of ownership" (qtd. 102), Dowling counters the nominal universalism of poetic theories of appropriation to illustrate how "possession is racialized" (102).[31] Ultimately,

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[31] Dowling's intervention needs to be positioned in relation to two debates that have preoccupied literary communities in recent years. The first is the debate over what Cathy Park Hong calls "delusions of whiteness in the avant-garde" and racist performances by conceptual poets Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place. As Dowling suggests, Michael Leong's article "Conceptualisms in Crisis" provides a good summary of these debates. Dowling's argument is more wide-reaching than the numerous criticisms of individual conceptual poets and their racist projects, however. She contends that "regardless of the particular content or topic of a given poem, the act of appropriation itself is culturally associated with whiteness. To the extent that an appropriation-based poem—especially one that purports to critique any aspect of property—fails to grasp that association, it fails as a work of art" (100). The second debate is about the ethics of literary appropriation and the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous writers by the Canadian literary establishment. Most recently, this debate flared as a result of the 2017 "appropriation prize" controversy in which an editorial by a white editor calling for the literary appropriation of

Dowling argues that appropriation "is inextricably bound up with the logics of property undergirding settler colonialism" (104) and that textual appropriation is "an especially suitable compositional method for poetic projects that aim to consider and critique the transformation of Indigenous lands into settler property" (110). Dowling suggests that appropriation is therefore "uniquely useful for Indigenous poetics" (110) and reads appropriation-based work by Jordan Abel and Layli Long Soldier, but her analysis is also relevant to settler and arrivant poets who investigate the logic of dispossession through textual mobility and citational forms.

Nicholson's first citational strategy uses textual appropriation to reveal colonial dispossession at the heart of Canada's nation-building project. In the Canadian literary context, documentary has close associations with cultural nationalism encapsulated in Dorothy Livesay's well-known assertion that the documentary long poem is "representative of the Canadian character" (269). It is significant, then, that Nicholson writes her investigation of the island using a signature technique of documentary poetry. Moreover, the explicit framing of *From the Poplars* as a documentary poem in paratextual material prompts readers to consider not only how the poem unsettles nation-building narratives but also how it exposes the role documentary poetry has played in constructing and canonizing these narratives.

Throughout the poem, Nicholson traces dispossession through the textual record, linking settlement to the appropriation of Indigenous land and resources. One section of the poem pairs language from the archival legislative documents with a series of fragmented images of early settlement in New Westminster: "amenities under construction during winter," "cannery crates of sturgeon and roe / packing it in at the company's dock," "train in the snow at the docks," the

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Indigenous experience and voice was published by The Writers' Union of Canada. This issue is summarized in the introduction to *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* edited by Erin Wunker, Hannah MacGregor, and Julie Rak.

"ARBRE MAI COSMIQUE" (26). She closes her list of paratactic fragments with "pictured at the centre of the image," the kind of indexical language that would caption an archival photograph. She uses this technique several times in the poem, inserting text like "Big Crowd Sees Columbus II Take the Water Gracefully at Dawes Way" (43) giving the impression that the scenes these captions or headlines index are so familiar that the reader should be able to conjure the images to which they refer. The following page appropriates language from an amendment to the City's Land Act stating that "surplus" from the sale of land acquired through the creation of the reserve system "shall be applied in the construction and maintenance of an efficient system of water-works, and of drainage and sewage works in the City of New Westminster, and in the construction of a suitable City Hall" (27), making clear that dispossession of Indigenous land is a precondition of the scenes of settlement described on the preceding page. This juxtaposition of source texts suggests that scenes of settlement are also always what Stephanie Latty and Megan Scribe call "scenes of dispossession" (136) in settler colonial contexts. Latty and Scribe combine insights from Saidiya Hartman and Audra Simpson to consider how settlement and dispossession are necessarily entwined. Settler sovereignty and Indigenous dispossession are inextricable because "the flourishing of these two settler states [Canada and the United States] has indeed been made possible by the structured dispossession of Indigenous land" (Latty and Scribe 136). Throughout *From the Poplars,* Nicholson reframes scenes of settlement and nation-building familiar to Canadian documentary poetics as scenes of dispossession.

As the preceding example's appeal to "the construction and / maintenance of an efficient system of water-works, and of / drainage and sewage works" (27) signals, scenes of settlement in the Canadian and documentary imaginaries frequently feature critical infrastructure projects.[32]As

[32] Druick and Kahana argue that "industrialization of agriculture and the establishment of energy mega-projects, such as dams and power plants, were defining features of early twentieth-century planned economies [and] clearly

an "economy of fur-bearing animals" (77) gives way to the waterfront's industrial development, Mary Agnes Vianin, the last member of the Qayqayt Nation living on the island, is paid off her land by government officials who are "*very anxious to get this little piece / of ~~right of way~~ the reserve, as we propose / to erect our Gas Plant (Municipal) / and give the C.N. Rly. Co. a right-of-way through it*" (21). Nicholson uses italics to indicate that this text is from a letter, reproduced in full elsewhere in the poem, addressed to British Columbia's Premier from New Westminster's mayor. The letter arranges for Vianin's eviction and requests that the Premier "drop a line to Ottawa, suggesting that they settle all those Indian reserves, including Poplar Island, at once… as we require them for Railroad and Harbor Development purposes" (49). The semantic slip from "the reserve" to "~~right of way~~" appears in the original letter and reveals the varied and shrewd legal logic through which Indigenous land is appropriated by the Canadian state. Right of way is a type of property easement that allows the state to appropriate land for the construction of transportation infrastructure. It is also the legal principle that undergirds more recent state appeals to "critical infrastructure" in debates over the construction of energy infrastructure. Scholars of Indigenous and settler colonial studies including Anne Spice, Winona LaDuke, Deborah Cowen, and Shiri Pasternak characterize "'critical infrastructure' as a settler colonial technology of governance and expropriation in lands now claimed by Canada" (Spice 41). By designating an infrastructure project "critical," the state mobilizes the language of national interest and security to push through industry projects that "extend settlements' reach into Indigenous territories that remain unceded, unsurrendered, or protected under treaty agreements with Indigenous nations" (Spice 45). LaDuke and Cowen discuss how the federal

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reflected in the burgeoning form of documentary film in the late 1920s and 1930s" (Druick and Kahana 155). This is also true of documentary poetry, as numerous examples from the last century suggest, including Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), E.J. Pratt's *Toward the Last Spike* (1952), and Don McKay's *Long Sault* (1975).

government continues to mobilize nation-building rhetoric to push through infrastructure projects. The Canadian Infrastructure Bank—the Trudeau government's plan for private-public infrastructure development—refers to these investments as "nation-building projects" (250). When approving an expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline that runs through fifteen Indigenous territories, including the Tsleil-Waututh, Coldwater, Squamish, and Stk'emlupsemc Te Secwepemc First Nations, "Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asserted his government's jurisdiction by deeming the project 'national infrastructure'" (254). The archival letter in *From the Poplars* shows that right of way easement and "infrastructures of invasion" (Spice 45) have been integral to the production of Canada dating back at least a century. The slip from "the reserve" to "~~right of way~~" is, in Nicholson's rewriting, the story of Canadian nation building itself.

This synthesis of national progress and infrastructure development is epitomized in one of Canada's most ubiquitous scenes of dispossession, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR). In *From the Poplars*, Nicholson captures how City officials rush to correct the fact that New Westminster was "bypassed by the mainline" of the CPR and reconnect the City to the nation via rail. Details of a CN Rail connection circulate throughout the poem:

> all in all a grand day, a triumphant day
> for the City bypassed by the mainline
>
> invested heavily in its own railway
> connections south tap the spikes driven
>
> to a band of steel that completes the union (22)

The CPR is credited with facilitating Canadian confederation and its role in "clearing the plains," to use James Daschuk's wording, is well documented. As LaDuke and Cowen summarize, "the survey of lands could not proceed until plains peoples' relationships to the land were severed, and the building of the railroad infrastructure served this goal… Land was cleared to make way for the railroad but the railroad also enabled mass slaughter" (248). The construction of the CPR is also the subject of one of Canada's most well-known book-length documentary poems, E.J. Pratt's *Toward the Last Spike*, which solidified the CPR's role as a nation-building project in the Canadian imagination. As F.R. Scott's famous rejoinder suggests, Pratt's poem ignores the labour of ten thousand Chinese workers who came to Canada between 1880 and 1885 to construct the railway in dangerous and often lethal conditions and then faced strict immigration policies once construction was complete. Anti-Blackness also played a role in the CPR's construction, as it does in the construction of the nation. Cowen and LaDuke explain that "the CPR that made the settler state possible was financed in part through wealth extracted from unfree labor, especially in plantations in the Caribbean and southern US states" (248).

Nicholson captures these dynamics in another section of the poem that takes up the CN rail project:

> Public Works of Canada Plan: North Arm of Fraser River
>
> Poplar Island to C.N. Rly Bridge
>
> *although there was a small population of*
>
> sawmills along the waterfront
>
> on land side 'smoke' stacks

beehive burners collecting ponds greenchain works yard
a machine is

many large stacks of cut lumber logs and squares
shipments to and from (30)

A "small" and unnamed population is wedged between a proposal for the construction of a rail bridge and a catalogue of facilities that support the resource industries. The Indigenous population's removal is signalled by the ellipsis—even though the poem's context tells us that "a small population" likely refers to the Qayqayt, the fact that the "population" remains unnamed also suggests that this erasure could refer to any of the hundreds of Indigenous nations whose land has been expropriated for the purposes of infrastructure development. In Nicholson's poem, this erasure remains at the center, emphasized through italicization.

Infrastructure not only provides a legal mechanism for the appropriation of Indigenous land, but also materializes the "affective infrastructures of white supremacy" (LaDuke and Cowen 247):

> It is not only the technical or physical aspects of coloniality that rely on infrastructure—feelings, ideas, and attitudes that produce racism and white supremacy are also material systems of social reproduction that sanction the extension of the means of life to some, often through their withdrawal from others… Infrastructure is how sociality extends itself; it is how life is provisioned or curtailed. In its most immediately material and graspable forms, infrastructure underpins and enacts sustenance and reproductions. (LaDuke and Cowen 264)

Infrastructure makes settler presence permanent and organises space according to colonial principles. The sociality of infrastructure includes not only the way infrastructure organises space but also the way uneven access to infrastructure and infrastructural abandonment affects the distribution of life and death. Of the public works projects discussed in the poem, Nicholson spends most time comparing the construction of two hospitals. Details about these hospitals appear side by side toward the beginning of the poem, but they also reappear throughout the poem. The first is the Royal Columbian Hospital in the newly established City of New Westminster, for which she includes accounting:

> $3,396 spent to build The Royal Columbian Hospital
>
> The Board of Management desire to accord a
> vote of thanks to His Excellency the Governor
> for a grant……. $2,500 00,
> To the officers and men of the Royal
> Engineers, for the proceed of a
> theatrical performance at their club,
> the sum of…… $354 50
> To the Chief Inspector of Police, for
> Granting the use of convict labor
> in clearing and grading town lots
> 17 and 18, Block XXXI, the site
> of the hospital.
>
> the growing import-

> ance of the Colony, and the rapid increase of
> our population, especially in the mining season,
> great necessity
> General Hospital
> An institution, when inaugurated, to be conduct-
> ed on liberal principles, open to all deserving
> patients…. (19)

I quote this section in full to illustrate how Nicholson formats the text to emphasize its materiality as an archival document. There is also a lot to unpack here about the way extraction, carcerality, dispossession, and liberalism cohere in the nation-building project. Resource extraction (mining) is leading to population growth, the hospital is funded with financial support from municipal police and the military, land for the hospital has been cleared and prepared by convict labour, and the hospital will be "conduct-/ed on liberal principles" (19).

This conjunction is compounded by the fact that the Royal Columbian Hospital appears alongside available information about the construction of a second hospital. The archival record does not include detailed accounting or information about the second nameless hospital and this omission is telling. In 1889, a smallpox epidemic ran through the new settlement and Poplar Island, which was at that time a reservation belonging to the Qayqayt, was chosen as a quarantine site. Nicholson amalgamates available records of the hospital constructed on the island, citing her sources:

> In July, New Westminster Mayor John Hendry reported to council that 'prompt steps had been taken to prevent the spread' and that a 'good hospital had been created on Poplar Island to which patients as far as known had been removed'

> (City Minutes—July, 1889). $100 was spent to build the hospital. It is believed that many native people from around Vancouver were transported to Poplar Island during the epidemic and many may have been buried there (Wilkinson). (18)

The juxtaposition of the cost of the two hospitals—one constructed for $3,396 and the other for $100—illustrates how infrastructure materializes the racial politics that unevenly distribute basic conditions of survival.

The poem also captures how capitalist-colonial dispossession underlies contemporary infrastructure projects, namely the construction of oil pipelines and other "critical infrastructure" like rail and roads. Playing off Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's famous claim that the CPR is "the spine of the nation," LaDuke and Cowen assert that "energy infrastructures constitute the contemporary spine of the settler colonial nation" (249). In one section, Nicholson inserts tar sands imagery between Lenin's assertion in *Imperialism* that "railways are a summation of the basic capitalist industries" (4):

> … *railways… a summation*
>
> paid shill for Big Oil
> fuel-injected big-block on cowboy boots suns
> the Diamond Club where real men come to play
>
> *the basic industries*. (83)

This historical continuity counters the tendency to relegate enclosure and dispossession to the past and calls upon the reader to "feel *historical problems* trending present" (69). The poem spans the island's history, moving through New Westminster's "post-fifty-five industrial" (36)

boom and the "long hollow perpetual job loss" (52) of post-industrial decline to "wakening condos / o'r supplanted industry (5). The redevelopment of the Vancouver-area waterfront, this neoliberal round of enclosure, facilitates ongoing dispossession of Indigenous nations—"the Waterfront Esplanade / magnificent waterfront / band landless" (31)—while simultaneously enacting forms of displacement on other marginal communities on Vancouver's periphery for whom there is "no asylum here winter is hitting / tent frame shed shack trailer SROs" (83). The lack of affordable housing and attendant homelessness crisis are the unfinished business of colonial dispossession, raising questions about who decides what infrastructure projects are deemed critical.

Although the poem spans over a century of the island's history, significantly, its structure is not linear. Language appropriated from the legislative chapters weaves through the entire poem, resurfacing alongside language that invokes the gentrification of the waterfront and the expansion of real estate for the superrich like the Golden mile, a row of waterfront homes in Vancouver with some of the highest prices in the global market: "how the eye loves to rest on the water / determine to supplant the water / purchase a view of the water… [a] view of the Golden Mile" (51). The cyclical and ongoing nature of dispossession is especially clear in one section that pairs what appears to be found language from a real estate proposal for "brand new logistics facilities for port-related business thousands / of square feet efficient layout" (81) with text from the legislative documents describing the distribution of land allotments assuring that "it will be found that / sufficient lands are held in trust to meet all requirements" (80). The deindustrialization and privatization of the Vancouver-area waterfront is most often read as an example of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" ("The 'New' Imperialism" 63) but, by pairing redevelopment plans and documents of early settlement,

Nicholson follows scholars like Neil Smith in encouraging us to read gentrification through a colonial lens. Gentrification is yet another "frontier" of capitalist accumulation intimately connected to the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land.

Through the continued reappearance of Land Act documents, subsequent displacements explored in the poem, including the displacement of industrial workers from the island's shipyard, the closure of the logging hold and sawmills by rollovers of creative destruction, and waterfront redevelopment must be read within the archival frame that emphasizes the appropriation of Indigenous land. Nicholson's use of textual appropriation ensures that every instance of displacement and dispossession catalogued in the poem is positioned in relation to the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous land, which offers a corrective to examinations of neoliberal precarity that focus on the capital relation at the expense of the colonial. As Coulthard makes clear, "settler colonialism is territorially acquisitive in perpetuity" (151-152). And yet,

> what must be recognized by those inclined to advocate a blanket 'return to the commons' as a redistributive counterstrategy to the neoliberal states new round of enclosures, is that, in liberal settler states such as Canada, the commons not only belong to somebody—the First Peoples of this land—they also deeply inform and sustain Indigenous modes of thought and behaviour that harbor profound insights into the maintenance of relationships within and between human beings and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity, nonexploitation, and respectful coexistence. (Coulthard 12)

The poem's structure not only includes layers of dispossession—the "place (built over) at the southern end of Agnes Street / burial grounds (built over) the present high school" (11)—but also

the persistence of what Coulthard calls "grounded normativity"[33] through acts like "picking berries on the side of the road; an assertion of sovereignty" (25). In *From the Poplars*, "place is a while we walk on the bones of all time" (11) that not only requires careful attention to overlapping and interwoven histories of displacement produced by capital and colonial dispossession, but also provides the ground for coalitions of resistance that extend well beyond the island.

Like Rukeyser, Livesay first turned to documentary techniques in the 1930s in search of poetic strategies that were in "alignment with revolutionary forces for change" (*RHLH* 101). Livesay's interest in the political potential of documentary aesthetics can be traced, in part, to her participation in Canada's proletarian theatre. In the early thirties, she wrote plays for the Progressive Arts Club's Workers' Theatre organised and funded through Communist Party of Canada. Like the Living Newspaper popularized by the WPA's Federal Theatre Project in the United States, these plays drew on conventions of agitprop, including the incorporation of multimedia sources. By 1936, however, Livesay was disillusioned with agitprop and the "orthodox Marxian literature" (*RHLH* 153) she read in *Masses* and *The Daily Worker*. Her poems from the thirties express a commitment to Marxist principles and a personal investment in a range of social causes, but they also show her grappling with how to write a more nuanced committed poetry. Her "discovery" (153) of a new "revolutionary poetry but full of lyricism and passion" (153) in the late thirties marks her earliest intimations of what she would eventually call "the documentary poem."

[33] By "grounded normativity," Coulthard means "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and long-standing experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagement with the world and our relationships with human and non-human others over time" (13).

Livesay begins her 1969 essay by gesturing to poetry that employs "actual data itself, rearranged for eye and ear," but her own poems and those she provides as "representative examples" (269) of the Canadian documentary tradition are not citational. While Rukeyser emphasizes the intertextual and interdisciplinary character of documentary, Livesay has tended to highlight documentary's dramatic and narrative potential.[34] She writes that documentary poems "are to be heard aloud, often specifically for radio" (269) and refers to them as "poems for voices" ("Canadian Documentary" 128). Livesay's emphasis on audience and voice also grows out of her participation in the thirties cultural front and what Cary Nelson calls the "revolutionary chorus." The revolutionary chorus captures the collective aims of leftist poetry in the thirties and provides ways of reading the collaborative and dialogic methods common to the leftist cultural field. Drawing on ancient notions of the relationship between poet and audience and the labourite tradition of popular song reactivated in the revolutionary chorus (Rifkind 58), Livesay often dramatizes speaking voices in her documentary poems and even employs the chorus as a motif in "Call My People Home." Livesay's later appeals to radio also stem from historically situated expectations about poetry's role in public life as a medium capable of circulating information to a mass audience. When she argues that documentary poetry's goal is to "illustrate a precept" ("Documentary Poem" 269), she takes for granted assumptions about poetry's publicity that were common in the thirties but fundamentally opposed to assumptions

[34] This difference explains why Rukeyser's poems have been the subject of recuperative projects while Livesay's have not. When documentary poetics first resurfaced in the 1990s, it was through the lens of poststructuralism and Rukeyser was praised for her *avant la letter* emphasis on textuality and mediation. Although Livesay asserts that the documentary poem is "based on research" ("Documentary Poem" 280), this research is meant to provide the poem with an objective foundation or, as Frank Davey puts it, "the 'essence' of an historical event" (124). Rukeyser's self-reflexive textuality suited postmodern sensibilities in a way that Livesay's interest in audience and publicity did not.

about poetry's self-containment and lyric individualism that would eventually cohere in the modernist canon.[35]

By the time Livesay theorizes the documentary poem as a PhD student in the late 1960s, she does so with reference to "experimentations originally made by Grierson in film" ("Documentary Poem" 269). In the years between Livesay's first experiments with documentary poetics and her theorization of the form, documentary's radical tradition had been successfully incorporated into a project of liberal civic education. In Canada, this absorption meant that the documentary tradition associated with Grierson came to stand for documentary as a whole. Grierson spent his career creating documentary films for corporate and state clients and contributed to the production of Canada's national imagination as the NFB's inaugural commissioner. His documentary theory brought John Flaherty's imperialist ethnographic, and ultimately racist, notions about the filmmaker as artist/explorer together with insights from the emerging field of social science. Film scholars have argued that Grierson's films were instruments of social engineering and played a central role in consolidating Canada's liberal nation-building project.[36] Druick's analysis of state-funded documentary in *Projecting Canada* explores how documentary film and cultural policy converge by charting the development of what she calls "government realism" (23). As both "the style of filmmaking and the technology for knowing and regulating the population" (23), government realism manages the relationship between citizen and state and actively incorporates oppositional practices. As Druick explains,

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[35] For an excellent study of the changing social meaning of US poetry in the early twentieth century, see Harrington's *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics*. While Harrington focuses on the American context, Livesay's work demonstrates this trend in the Canadian context.

[36] See Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: Grierson Documentary and its Legitimations*; Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*; Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*; and Christopher Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference and Representation*.

the NFB "was specifically designed to appropriate realism's more radical potential and apply the form to the liberal nation-building project" (16). It speaks to the success of this project that Livesay, who participated in the activities of the documentary left, would later theorize the form with reference to the Griersonian tradition.

Livesay's essay on documentary poetry was written in a moment of nation building that followed the Canadian centennial. Besides her appeal to Grierson, the cultural nationalism of Livesay's approach to documentary is also evident in how nearly all her "representative examples" (269) feature scenes of settlement. Indeed, examples like Isabella Valency Crawford's "Malcolm's Katie," Archibald Lampman's "At the Long Sault," and E.J. Pratt's *Toward the Last Spike* suggest that settlement is the central theme of the Canadian documentary tradition. The examples that Livesay provides are "doing missionary settlers railway surveyors," as Nicholson puts it (21). However, as I have been arguing, a shift in emphasis from labour to dispossession requires that scenes of settlement also be read as scenes of dispossession. The purpose of the scene of dispossession is to "instruct those in settler colonial nation-states to forget the persistent presence and value of Indigenous life, the imbrication of Indigenous life and land, and the persistent presence and value of Black geographic life" (Rowe and Tuck 7). While Livesay's essay illustrates the extent to which "socialist literature's dominant form, the documentary, is covered in the layers of its post-war state institutionalization" (Rifkind 74), it also reveals that dispossession remains a solipsism in both liberal and leftist approaches to theorizing the documentary poem in Canada. Within this shifted frame, Livesay's own documentary poem "Call My People Home," which she also includes among her essay's examples, is particularly important because it takes dispossession as its central theme and unsuccessfully tries to resolve conditions of dispossession with an appeal to the mythology of settlement and work.

"Call My People Home" also suggests that documentary's incorporation into the liberal project was less smooth than scholars like Rifkind suggest. The absorption of leftist oppositional positions by the dominant liberal culture produced tensions and contradictions in Livesay's own writing. In her study of Grierson's influence on Livesay's conception of documentary poetry, Tania Aguila-Way establishes that, while Grierson and Livesay both turn to documentary for its capacity to move a public, Livesay's notion of civic education differed from Grierson's. Aguila-Way writes that Grierson "produc[ed] state propaganda… [which] meant mobilizing audiences in the service of the status quo. For the poet, it meant inspiring audiences to engage with—and ultimately challenge—the injustices and inequities of their socio-political reality" (Aguila-Way 43). However, Aguila-Way argues that Livesay's adaption of Griersonian narrative conventions in her best-known documentary poem "Call My People Home" inadvertently bound the poem's social message to "hegemonizing versions of the national imaginary" (44). Building on Aguila-Way's analysis, I argue that the unresolved tension in "Call My People Home" speaks to the incomplete incorporation of documentary's radical tradition into the liberal nation-building project and illustrates the critical significance of reading late documentary poetics through the lens of dispossession.

First published in 1949, "Call My People Home" is subtitled "A Documentary Poem for Radio" and dramatizes the forced internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians following the attack on Pearl Harbor.[37] The poem brings together an array of fictionalized voices to correct the

[37] "Call My People Home" was originally published in *Contemporary Verse* magazine in 1949. It was later published as a chapbook (1950) and again in *The Documentaries* (1968). I am using the version of the poem from Livesay's *Collected Poems* (1972). It is worth noting that the poem's subtitle may mark the first published use of the term "documentary poem;" however, I want to resist the urge to assign a specific point of origin to documentary poetics. Livesay's insistence that "there was no one of my friends or comrades who would have taken an interest" in the "discovery" of a poetry that combines political and lyric elements (*RHLH* 153) not only goes against the "collective register" (Rifkind 58) of leftist documentary production in the thirties, but also elides the fact that many poets were also producing documentary work in the same period. Rifkind warns that Livesay's "self-descriptions… give the impression that her conversion to socialist modernism carved an entirely new position in the Canadian

official record by bearing witness to the experience of violent relocation and mass dispossession in the name of national security. It opens with a "Chorus of Issei" which voices the experience of the first generation of Japanese Canadians and establish the poem's central theme.

But for ourselves we learned
How home was not
Even the small plot, raspberry laden
Nor shacks on stilts, stooping over the water,
Nor the brown Fraser's whirl,
Sucking the salmon upward.

…….

Home was in watching:
The fruit growing and pushing
So painfully watered;
The timber hewn down
The mill run completed.

Home was in waiting:
For new roots holding

literary field" (67) though documentary is widely understood as "the dominant form of socialist modernism" (Rifkind 70) in both Canada and the US. We should therefore resist positioning Livesay's use of the term documentary as the "discovery" of an individual poet. Livesay's recollections in *RHLH* are perhaps best read as inflected by the emphasis on individual self-expression and innovation that comes to dominate popular and critical approaches to poetry in the intervening years.

For young ones branching

For our yearning fading…. (181)

Home is not tied to place/land—either Japan or British Columbia's coastal landscape where most Japanese immigrants initially settled—but to a sense of productive investment and integration in the national community. The poem describes how coastal property owned by Japanese Canadians, including houses and businesses, was seized by the state, but throughout the poem, this material dispossession is understood as synecdochic of the more profound loss of a sense of belonging in the new nation.

This kind of synecdochic logic is common in early documentary writing and is most fully realised in the use of dramatic character types, a strategy that Livesay also employs. As Druick explains, "films made under the influence of Grierson are concerned with anonymous individuals who are typical of particular populations or occupation groups" (49). Livesay based her poem on archival research but, unlike Rukeyser who integrates citational material drawn from congressional testimony, Livesay constructs fictionalized accounts that she voices through Japanese character types like "The Fisherman," "A Young Nissei," and "The Wife." Critics have often characterized documentary's claim to "give voice" to marginalized communities as a form of appropriation with ideological implications for the form.[38] Most writers of social documentary are interested in the revealing and challenging power structures in their poems, and yet, the use of typology and dramatic voice is one way that documentary writing has been complicit with

[38] Ethical issues with documentary writing are longstanding. Even in the 1930s, documentary writers like Dorothea Lange were accused by their contemporaries of appropriating the voice of sharecroppers for their own financial and social gain. William Stott argues that James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the most important documentary text of the thirties because it takes a critical position with respect to documentary appropriation, recording rural poverty while also questioning the ethics of documentation. Rukeyser's poem likewise tries to avoid appropriating voice by using citation, which shows that citation itself has a long history as a way of managing, though not circumventing, documentary's ethical pitfalls.

oppressive structures. Livesay has not been immune to this criticism. For example, Dick Harrison writes that

> Livesay's imaginative identification with the Japanese Canadians could be construed as an appropriation of their voices to the articulation of myths of Western civilization and cultural codes of Anglo-Canada. It could be argued that the dialogue is overwritten with a monologue of Canadian establishment history, the voices of the witnesses liberated from their silence only insofar as they speak for the myths and cultural codes of the dominant ideology that silenced them in the first place. (157)

Although Livesay's poem is critical of the material dispossession of Japanese Canadian property, it engages in its own dispossession by appropriating its subjects' voices and therefore misses the co-construction of cultural and legal systems of governance under liberalism.

Aguila-Way argues that Livesay adopts Grierson's "teleological narrative orientation" (44), which Brian Winston calls the Griersonian "problem moment" structure. By analyzing several of Grierson's films from the thirties, including *Shipyard*, *Workers and Jobs*, and *Housing Problems*, Winston demonstrates Grierson's tendency to frame social problems as brief and transitory moments in the "unfolding history of the nation" (Winston qtd. in Aguila-Way 44). For Winston, the problem moment structure is an early discovery of Grierson's and central to the documentary tradition that developed under his tutelage. It allows documentary to address a social problem without having to unpack its systemic causes and effects. It also "removes any need for action, or even reaction, on the part of the audience" (Winston, *Claiming the Real II*, 54) because the problem has already been resolved or neutralized through the film's narrative structure. In other words, it turns national social issues into pedagogical moments that the audience can then move on from once the problem has been resolved within documentary's

aesthetic space. While "Call My People Home" appears to resolve the nation's appropriation of Japanese Canadian property by appealing to "heroic labour" (Winston 47)—a resolution that is also common in the films that Winston interprets—this resolution remains in tension with material conditions in the settler colonial nation.

Aguila-Way focuses her analysis of this narrative structure on a section of Livesay's poem that dramatizes a Nikkei family's relocation from the coast to a sugar beet farm on the prairies. As part of the War Measures Act, Japanese Canadians were forced to move east of the Rocky Mountains or face repatriation. "The Wife" worries about the false choice these families faced "to labour in uncertain soil, inclement weather / yet labour all as one—all the family together" (Livesay 190). As Aguila-Way explains, the stanzas that follow cast the family's labour on the sugar beet farm as a pioneering narrative, what Livesay elsewhere calls "man versus nature which must be dominated if man wants 'progress'" ("Documentary Poem" 280). The struggle is not against the Canadian government or its policies of forced relocation but against the prairie landscape's "lumpy soil" and "mosquito swarm[s]" (191). The family's pioneer work ethic eventually leads to the fulfilment of "harvest time" (192) and the repossession of home as a "loved land" (192) cultivated through labour and reintegration into the national cultural narrative. In Livesay's application of the problem moment structure, labour and settlement appear to resolve conditions of dispossession; however, if we follow the imperative to read scenes of settlement as also always scenes of dispossession, the poem's resolution is less successful. "The wife's account tacitly reinforces the temporality of progress," writes Aguila-Way, "defusing the political implications of relocation by embedding it within a teleology that bolsters Canada's tradition of tolerance and diversity" (51). Livesay not only inserts the Japanese Canadian diaspora into a narrative of settler colonial progress, she also "belies a crucial aspect of

life in the sugar-beet fields of Alberta and Manitoba: the Nikkei workers who were employed there laboured not for their own benefit, but for that of the farmers and large agricultural interests who owned the land, the notorious Rogers Sugar Company of Alberta being the most prominent among these" (51). Aguila-Way argues that Livesay's adaption of the Griersonian problem moment structure may have stimulated the empathy of white Canadian audiences, but it ultimately casts dispossession, internment, and displacement "as a transitory, if painful, interruption in the nation's development" (Aguila-Way 50). Aguila-Way's analysis of "Call My People Home" illustrates the institutionalization of documentary poetics but also demonstrates that it is possible to read documentary poems in ways that identify the margins of that institutionalization.

I take two key insights from Aguila-Way's analysis of "Call My People Home." The first is that the problem moment structure, a key invention of the Canadian documentary tradition, is a social engineering technique that not only "run[s] away from social meaning," as Winston puts it (76), but runs away from the meaning of settler colonial dispossession specifically. In this sense, it prefigures similar teleological narrative strategies common to the politics of recognition. In her 1991 memoir *Journey with My Selves*, Livesay laments that "Call My People Home" may have been too "ahead of its time" (173) and, indeed, she is writing on the cusp of a major shift in colonial policy. Coulthard argues that the 1969 White Paper—a federal policy paper calling for the dissolution of the Indian Act that would extinguish Indigenous title to land negotiated through treaties with the Crown—ushered in a new era of colonial governance characterized by the politics of recognition.[39] Prior to this shift, "Canada depended heavily on the deployment of

[39] The politics of recognition associated with Charles Taylor encompasses a variety of practices aimed at producing "mutual recognition" (3), including but not limited to practices and discourses of reconciliation that purport to reconstitute Indigenous and settler state relations. The relationship between documentary and the politics of recognition will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter on Mercedes Eng's carceral poetics.

state power geared around genocidal practices of forced exclusion and assimilation" (4). Poplar Island's history as a Qayqayt reserve turned smallpox quarantine site provides an appalling example of a genocidal policy that nearly succeeded in eliminating an entire nation. In the 1960s and 1970s, powerful anticolonial activism "forced colonial power to modify itself" (6). Coulthard builds on Frantz Fanon's re-examination of Hegel in *Black Skin, White Masks* to suggest that, because of the persistence of colonial structures of domination, these acts of recognition do not take place between equals and therefore reproduce rather than remake the colonial relation. Drawing on Patrick Wolfe's formulation, Coulthard shows that symbolic gestures like official apologies, land claim settlements, and economic development initiatives

> implicitly address the problem of settler colonialism… as an 'event' and not a 'structure': that is, as a temporally situated experience which occurred at some relatively fixed period in history but which unfortunately continues to have negative consequences for our communities in the present. By Wolfe's definition, however, there is nothing 'historical' about the character of settler colonization. (125)

By relegating injustices to the past, gestures of recognition and reconciliation solidify the right to govern on a still-expropriated land base. The "problem moment" structure must therefore be read as more than just a narrative technique of documentary film and literature—it is also a technique of liberal governmentality that seeks to relegate colonial dispossession to a fixed moment in the past in order to accommodate ongoing dispossession through legal means. *From the Poplars* avoids the problem moment because its structure is cyclical and layered rather than linear and progressive, capturing how "violence routinely occurs generic" (Nicholson 78) and because it foregrounds colonial logic that subtends contemporary infrastructural development to illustrate

that dispossession is not a "problem moment" but a requirement for the continued existence of the nation.

The second insight that I take from Aguila-Way's analysis is that the politics of labour, which provided the radical root of the documentary tradition, also plays a role in facilitating the erasure of ongoing conditions of dispossession. It is widely acknowledged that the liberalization of documentary through the New Deal's Popular Front politics and projects like Grierson's NFB served to neutralize the radical labour politics that initially animated the form. What is less readily apparent is that documentary's continued appeals to labour may also be complicit in efforts to relegate dispossession to the past. The false resolution in Livesay's poem signals that the incorporation of a defanged labour politics into nation-building narratives may check radical labour but it does not offer a convincing resolution to colonial dispossession. This incomplete incorporation suggests that we may be more likely to locate sticky moments of documentary resistance by shifting the lens from labour to a critique of dispossession.

Livesay's "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" participates in efforts to establish a national literary canon. She argues that documentary poems are "part of a tradition which has enlivened our English-Canadian literature for a hundred and fifty years" (267). Leveraging documentary to challenge the emergence of a dominant tradition of aesthetic value in Canadian literature, Livesay positions her argument about documentary poetry in opposition to Northrop Frye's thematic criticism. She agrees with Frye's well-known observation that there is "an unusual prominence of the narrative" (Frye 151) in Canadian poetry and with his assertion that existing "canons of criticism" (151) associated with the lyric tradition set standards that "do not always apply to the narrative" (151). But she takes issue with the new critical parameters that Frye establishes for judging literary value within this Canadian narrative tradition. In "Preface to

an Uncollected Anthology," Frye claims that "the poet who tries to make content the informing principle of the poetry can write only versified rhetoric, and versified rhetoric has a moral but not an imaginative significance" (qtd. in Livesay 268). For Frye, poetry with a didactic social message confuses literature with rhetoric and shifts the criteria of value from literary form to the moral correctness of the poem's content. For Livesay, however, a poem's narrative form is merely a vehicle for its social message. "The story is a frame on which to hang a theme," (269) she writes, echoing Grierson's contention that the "basic force" of documentary is "social, not aesthetic" (qtd. in Hardy 7). As my discussion of "Call My People Home" explains, Livesay's approach to documentary composition is not citational; still, I suggest that Livesay engages in a version of citational politics in her influential essay by constructing an alternative canon of poetry meant to refute Frye's claim that "social poetry" is "cold-blooded carpentry" (Livesay 268).[40]

Citation is more than a textual and formal strategy in the documentary tradition—it is a way of signalling affiliations and desires, as my previous chapter demonstrates, as well as a practice of canon formation and institutional belonging. While appropriation's associations with property and territorialization make it an effective compositional strategy for revealing the logics of settler colonialism, Livesay's essay draws attention to how documentary's "citational desires" are often rooted in an "institutional longing" (Nash 76) that remains under-examined. In other words, at this late stage of documentary's recuperation, scholars of documentary need to go beyond correcting omissions and mapping points of origin in order to examine the structure of

[40] Given that Frye also praised many of the poets that Livesay includes in her alternative tradition, like E.J. Pratt and Isabella Valency Crawford, Livesay is somewhat exaggerating and oversimplifying Frye's position for the sake of her argument. Still, I am more interested in noticing how she constructs her alternative tradition through an appeal to documentary than in verifying whether that tradition substantially deviates from Frye's or whether she accurately conveys Frye's position.

recuperation and reclamation itself. In the second section of this chapter, I turn to recent critical conversations about the academic politics of citation to consider how investment in citation as an oppositional compositional strategy might reproduce forms of territorialization. I argue that *From the Poplars*' tropistic and dispossessed citation suggests an infrastructural alternative to the territorializing gestures of canon formation and academic citation that are so often used to (re)construct documentary as a revolutionary tradition.

The "politics of citation" refers to conversations about how academic citation practices reinforce institutional norms of inclusion and exclusion through the uneven reproduction of intellectual contributions. Initiatives like #CiteBlackWomen and the Citation Practices Challenge organised by Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández ask scholars "to interrogate the techniques of selection in our own work" and "to stop erasing Indigenous, Black, brown, trans*, disabled POC, QT*POC, feminist, activist, and disability/crip contributions from our intellectual genealogies" (Tuck, Yang, and Gaztambide-Fernández). These interventions by feminist and anti-racist scholars consider how citation reproduces white, heteronormative, and masculinist scholarship and propose concrete ways for scholars to adjust their practices.[41] As Annabel L. Kim writes in her introduction to a special issue of *Diacritics* on the subject, the politics of citation "requires the suspension of this reproductive citational incitation so that the

[41] The hashtags #citeblackwomen and #citeherwork have fairly self-explanatory calls to action. The Citation Practices Challenge invited participants to sign up for a newsletter that included "tips, meditations, and strategies for renovating your citation practices and techniques of selection." Other examples include Wendy Belcher's suggestion that all journal articles should cite at least two women and two racialized writers whose work is engaged with meaningfully and Sara Ahmed's "strict citation policy" against citing "any white men" (15). Some of these rely on quantitative strategies, like citation counting, that may inadvertently reinforce logics of representation and inclusion that characterize the politics of recognition rather than challenging academic structures themselves. Mott and Cockayne also point out that citation counting reproduces the neoliberal university's reliance on performance metrics as the measure of intellectual value: "we should be wary of strategies that further attune us to the quantification of the neoliberal university and regimes of accounting" (962), particularly because "citation alone does not necessarily constitute engagement" (962). This is not to suggest that these strategies are not valuable but that we should also interrogate the systems of value that underlie citation itself.

structures of citation might be examined and critiqued: citation must be turned away from its usual function as a practice to serve instead as the object of inquiry" (Kim 5). The politics of citation not only seeks to diversify the scholars being cited but also to unpack the logic that subtends citation as an institutional practice.

What remains under-examined in many initiatives to diversify academic citation practices is how the politics of citation may inadvertently reinforce forms of affiliation and genealogy-making rooted in the property relation. In "Citational Desires: On Black Feminism's Institutional Longings," Jennifer C. Nash offers a critique of the politics of citation from within Black feminist praxis. For Nash, the politics of citation responds to "the erasure of Black women's intellectual and scholarly contributions to various fields" (80) and addresses the real and pressing "*feeling* of having something taken" (80) by recovering and preserving Black feminist traditions. However, citational politics also reinforces academic investments in intellectual property, which contravene Black feminism's deeper "commitments to non-captivity and non-territoriality" (80). Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, for example, interprets the politics of citation as an infrastructural project, one that builds paths, buildings, and walls that materialize institutional logics. She describes citations as "academic bricks" (148) and explains that "when citational practices become habits, bricks form walls" (148). Citation is a structure of repetition and relation, the piling of one brick on another confers intellectual legitimacy, which incites more citation of the same. Ahmed is interested in how "wall[s] becomes a defense system[s]" (156) that protect the institutional inheritance of white men while serving as "physical barriers to the progression of others" (159), particularly racialized women. She describes her own experience of becoming "sore" from running into these walls and suggests that feminist scholars engage their

own “building project” (14) by citing one another. Nash responds to Ahmed’s politics of citation by arguing that

> this form of brick-laying—creating an alternative intellectual world from women of color knowledge production—is both the act of worldmaking and a project of fortification. While the house is a form of shelter for its writer, and the production of a refuge from the violence of academic life—much as bell hooks figures “homeplace” in her canonical essay—it is also about the creation of a certain kind of territory, one that Ahmed seems to figure as anti-institutional, radical, creative, and as something that can be shared with future generations of women of color feminist scholars. (Nash 82)

Nash’s criticism is nuanced and careful. It holds space for the necessity of a citational politics that redresses institutional exclusions while also questioning whether that project is best served by the language of territorialization. “While I remain invested in citational practices that do justice to earlier work,” writes Nash, “I remain ambivalent about the project of territoriality, and instead invest in a riskier and vulnerable antiterritorial stance” (87). Nash’s concerns are addressed to specific debates within Black feminist theory and practice, but her call is widely relevant. How might documentary’s “longings for institutional recognition” (83) contribute to its reincorporation into a liberal cultural politics despite scholarly and grassroots efforts to recuperate its radical base in recent decades? On the other hand, how might documentary contribute to developing a citational politics that “sit[s] with” (80) its own investments in institutional territoriality for long enough to consider “riskier and vulnerable antiterritorial” alternatives?

I turn to Nash’s analysis of the politics of citation because it provides a material and theoretical basis from which to consider the complexity of late documentary poetics’ investment

in citation as both a compositional strategy and a way of constructing alternative literary and political traditions, while also recognizing citation's tendency toward ownership and exclusion. I am also interested in how Nash suggests an alternative to the intellectual commons discourse invoked by conceptual poets like Goldsmith because she is moved by the promise of a utopian intellectual commons but only if that promise remains responsive to the ongoing racial logic of property. By grounding her analysis in the history of Black feminist thought, Nash situates conversations about citation—academic and otherwise—in relation to an abolitionist future that "is not possible without the abolition of property" (Walcott 13). As Rinaldo Walcott writes, "Black people have a special relationship to property, having once been property [themselves]" and while "refashioning relationship[s] to property begins with another encounter with the idea of the commons" (43), if that encounter is to produce new relations it will have to begin with the full meaning of the property relation which includes not only the appropriation of land but also the appropriation of bodies. *From the Poplars* uses textual appropriation to critique settler colonialism, but Nicholson's rejection of the relationship between citation and property is also a strategy rooted in the Black Radical Tradition. In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), Cedric Robinson "challenge[s] Marx's understanding of the European proletariat as the main revolutionary force in the world, an understanding that did not acknowledge Black liberation movements" (Johnson and Lubin 10). The Black Radical Tradition refers to a tradition of global resistance against what Robinson calls "racial capitalism," which includes the mutually reinforcing systems of slavery, class oppression, and empire.

Running through *From the Poplars* is an interest in tropism, an organism's involuntary movement or growth in response to external stimuli, as when a tree bends toward a light or water source or shifts its growth to avoid some obstacle.

given to *tropistic*

survivance

toward light

collecting light

……

not your typical foment

the use of language past

winded bleached individuation

toward conscious listened horizon. (79)

I read Nicholson's second citational strategy as a *tropistic citation* because the citational material in this second frame is drawn from sources that respond to shared conditions of dispossession—they are the "dispossessed disposed to struggle" (75). Tropistic citation captures how forms of resistance are not only reactive—movement away from—but also provide the ground for coalition—movement toward. Nicholson's use of the term "survivance" to describe the poem's tropism signals that this textual strategy not only reacts to conditions of dispossession but also generates networks of resistance. Survivance is a critical term in Indigenous literary criticism associated with Gerald Vizenor, who defines the concept in *Manifest Manners* (1994) as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere a reaction, or a survivable name… [but as] renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (vii). A neologism that

combines "survival" and "resistance," survivance is a practice that casts stories of active Indigenous presence as always more than reactive to colonization. They are also movements toward generative and mutable worldmaking.

Throughout *From the Poplars*, Nicholson invokes decolonial and anti-capitalist resistance movements through the incorporation of citational material from other poets, activists, and scholars. Unlike the material from the institutional archive discussed above, these sources are uncited and do not appear on the poem's reference page. Nicholson neither claims this material as her own nor attributes it to specific sources; instead, she uses italicization to create what she calls "listened horizons" or "listening horizons" (5)—a concept that recurs several times in the poem. The poem's listening horizon is temporally and geographically wide-ranging: the reader is asked to consider Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"[42] alongside "The Diggers Song," a seventeenth-century protest ballad about enclosure of the English commons, alongside words by scholar and Land Back activist Winona LaDuke. By integrating this source material directly into the poem's lyric voice, Nicholson experiments with a "riskier and vulnerable antiterritorial" (Nash 87) approach to citation that circulates creative contributions to struggles for resistance without limiting their scope to particular geographic or temporal contexts.

[42] In the article "'Strange Fruit hangin' from the poplar trees': Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars*," Evangeline Holtz-Schramek argues that "the key intertext for analyzing *From the Poplars* through the intersections of Blackness, settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty is American blues singer Billie Holiday's version of the song 'Strange Fruit' (first recorded in 1939)" (62). Nicholson's allusions are best read in relation to one another, but "Strange Fruit" is a particularly important allusion not only because it situates *From the Poplars* within a history of antiracist protest, as Holtz-Schramek demonstrates, but also because it situates the poem in relation to the historically specific moment of coalitional protest that I argue remains residual in late documentary poetics. "Strange Fruit" was first published by Jewish composer Abel Meeropol as a poem called "Bitter Fruit" in the magazine of the New York Teacher's Union in 1937. When Holiday began performing "Strange Fruit" in the spring of 1939, she received criticism that would be familiar to documentary poets like Rukeyser and Olsen. Michael Denning analyses the song's reception and explains that "for many critics and historians, 'Strange Fruit' represents a corruption of Holiday's work, a piece of agitprop that is, according to jazz critic Martin Williams, 'moving propaganda perhaps, but not poetry and not art'" (Denning 324). For a full account of the song's significance to the thirties cultural front, see the chapter "Cabaret Blues" in Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of Culture in the Twentieth Century*.

Nicholson calls *From the Poplars* "an effort towards building an active subjectivity that's located on land, as well as within histories of settlement, migration, and brutal erasure resulting from colonialism" (qtd. in Cooke). In relation to this practice of tropistic or dispossessed citation, Nicholson also circulates her own family narratives of Black diasporic movement "particularly the thread that draws on legacies in proximity to Detroit" (Nicholson qtd. in Cooke), which she explores in detail in *Wayside Sang*. The result is a poetic voice that is "multifarious and fractured" (Nicholson qtd. in Cooke) because it reads across multiple archives of dispossession. In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe explains that "National Archives are to preserve government records and information for the public; its imperatives are classification, collection, and documentation, rather than connection or convergence" (5). I understand Nicholson's listening horizon and tropistic citation as a project akin to Lowe's interdisciplinary search for links between settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and imperial trade within the archives of Western liberalism. Lowe argues that

> in order to nuance these connections and interdependencies, one must read across the separate repositories organized by office, task, and function, and by period and area, precisely implicating one set of preoccupations in and with another… This approach does not foreground comprehensiveness and teleology, in either a historical or geographical sense, but rather emphasizes the relationality and differentiation of peoples, cultures, and societies, as well as the convergence and divergence of ideas, concepts, and themes. In pursuing particular intimacies and contemporaneities that traverse distinct and separately studied "areas," the practice of reading across archives unsettles the discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonized by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development. (Lowe 5)

Nicholson's second citational frame is less concerned with recovering archival material or filling gaps in the archive—the familiar gestures of documentary poetics—than with creating new affiliations. Alongside Lowe's intimacies, I also find it useful to think of Nicholson's listening horizon in terms of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "constellations of co-resistance" (228), the bonds between people and movements with common political and economic interests that facilitate a "*thinking in formation* or *thinking with*" (37, emphasis original) that does not center whiteness. Simpson writes that in Nishnaabeg thought "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep reciprocal, consensual attachment" (43). Constellations of co-resistance are solidarities between Indigenous, anti-capitalist, antiracist, feminist, and anticolonial organizing efforts that remain deeply informed by the grounded normativities of the places and territories on which these solidarities are enacted. *From the Poplars* remains grounded in the first citational frame's site-specific investigation of Poplar Island, but also bends toward other listening horizons that intersect Poplar Island's history.

Nicholson begins her poem by situating Poplar Island within a global constellation of islands, including Kamau Taurua in New Zealand, North Brother Island, Grosse Isle, and Angel Island. These islands share histories as lazarettos and immigration stations—often one and the same—where "kept and sent subjects" (2) are held in "worse conditions of confinement / *subjects of capture* / *property in the strictest sense*" (2, emphasis original). The words in italics are from the Dred Scott decision, which ruled that the descendants of slaves could not be granted United States citizenship because the Fifth Amendment affirmed their ontological status as "property in the strictest sense." This status was maintained even if an individual property owner relinquished property rights because Africa remained the property of Europe. As Rinaldo Walcott explains, "it was not just that one was enslaved; it was also that one could not 'own' one's self and one's

offspring… [who] became at birth the white master's property. This fact has informed Black people's relationship to property ever since" (17). By lifting language from the Dred Scott decision, Nicholson establishes an expansive understanding of dispossession that links the appropriation of land and the capture of bodies as property. The islands—"unitary in the midst of scattered" (2)—provide a way of imaging the distinct but mutually reinforcing systems of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism, but they also provide the ground for coalitions of co-resistance. Throughout the poem, Nicholson links translocal and transhistorical sites of resistance through citation but makes clear that these coalitions are always "bound in a given moment / called to ground" (2).

In some sections, the poem's movement follows the forced migration of Nicholson's father's labour "rather like Louisiana to Canada, somewhere" (57) through "a job in a paper mill" to "Flame Show Bar / on John Street" (57) in Detroit where he worked as a musician. In these sections, the density of citational material enacts a sense of displacement as the reader is pulled from one location and voice to another, losing ground. This section from Detroit ends with a single, islanded line: "*dwells in nepantla* Belle beyond, hovering *with no feet*" (57, emphasis original). The poem moves from Detroit back to Poplar Island by way of Belle Isle, the artificial island marking the likewise constructed boundary between the United States and Canada, and through unacknowledged quotations from Chicana feminist scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word that refers to a threshold "place where different perspectives come into conflict... the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium" (548-549) and is a key concept in Chicana cultural criticism. Anzaldúa explains that "living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling. Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it's become a sort of

'home'" (1). Nicholson combines nepantla's home-in-displacement with a well-known quote from Audre Lorde's multi-generic "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*: "wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs." As Natalie Knight writes in her review of *From the Poplars*, Nicholson has "a desire to approach 'home' as it is reconstructed in displacement, and the work to do so by a diasporic body, a bird with no feet" (235). This desire is communicated through the poem's construction of dense citational networks that destabilize the reader's attempt to reconstruct a chronologically and spatially stable history of Poplar Island by situating the island alongside other historical and personal archives.

The question of how to approach Poplar Island from a shifting and displaced perspective also follows from the conditions of the poem's composition. Nicholson knows the island first from the vantage point of a commuter passing over it "from that rare seat by the window" (9) on SkyTrain[43] rides from New Westminster to downtown Vancouver. Early in the poem she considers her vantage point—"this view from above" (78) composed through movement—in comparison to William Wordsworth's "romancing words" (5) in "Composed on Westminster Bridge." Her poem is also "*composed upon a bridge* / *in the smokeless air* / from the sky bridge / in the golden dawn pouring over wakening condos / o'r supplanted industry" (5, emphasis original). She draws a parallel between Wordsworth's commute on a "smokeless" morning in industrial London and her own transit past post-industrial Vancouver's waterfront absent of "sky-sucking pipes the smoke" (34). She complicates the parallel, however, by asserting that "routes [Wordsworth] give[s] in strings and I take in ligaments" (5). The lyrical, cohesive quality of Wordsworth's poem gives way to the flexible, fibrous, connective ligaments of Nicholson's verse. In Nicholson's poem, "an 'I' wants to pull apart as well" (5), signaling how the poem's

[43] The SkyTrain is a rapid transit system that connects the Metro Vancouver area.

voice is cut through with the voices of others held together by Nicholson's verse rather than by a single cohesive subject at the center of the poem.

In this opening section, she also draws lines, again unacknowledged, from the final canto of Pablo Neruda's "From the Heights of Macchu Picchu": "*for the old lamps to show the whips still stuck / after centuries in the old wounds*" (qtd. Nicholson 4, emphasis original). Like Wordsworth, Neruda approaches his subject from the elevated vantage point of the poet but, like Nicholson, he allows himself to be called to "earth beneath here" (4). In the canto from which Nicholson draws, Neruda imagines himself speaking through the "dead mouths" (Neruda 47) of slaves who laid stone upon stone to build the Incan city. Like the ruined city, Poplar Island also "passed back into non-standard / trees suffer catenary curves of ivy and gossamer" (4) and Nicholson takes Neruda's place in inviting the voices of the dispossessed to join her on its ground. Here, it is "an 'I' on pavement or other words over / centuries of rotting matter" (4)—the poem's 'I' necessarily writes on top of "centuries of rotting matter" that also enter the poem's intertextual space. Knight's description of the poem captures this impression well; she calls *From the Poplars*

> a poem of an island as a body within rivers of diaspora—of labouring, racialized, Indigenous, and gendered bodies—I slip between reading the few "I"'s in the book as either and all: the island itself; Nicholson herself; and these diasporic unarchived bodies… Here is the subjectivity of the island, or is it the poem's, or is it the author's? (Knight 238)

Nicolson refuses to retreat to a coherent, individual subjectivity. Instead, she constructs a citational voice capable of holding differing and uneven experiences of dispossession.

In "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," Ruth Wilson Gilmore turns to

Raymond Williams to explain how the Black Radical Tradition "gather[s] not by chance, nor through a natural process that would seem like a drift or tide, but rather by way of what [Williams] calls 'the selection and reselection of ancestors'" (337). Gilmore then asks a version of the question that motivates my inquiries in this chapter: "what underlies… the productive capacity of visionary or crisis-driven or even exhaustion-provoked reselection?" (338). It is worth quoting her answer at length:

> The best I can offer, until something better comes along, is what I've called for many years the 'infrastructure of feeling.' In the material world, infrastructure underlies productivity—it speeds some processes and slows down others, setting agendas, producing isolation, enabling cooperation. The infrastructure of feeling is material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings enable or constrain. The infrastructure of feeling is then consciousness-foundation, sturdy but not static, that viscerally underlies our capacity to select, to recognize possibility as we select and reselect liberatory lineages. (237)

The infrastructure of feeling that Gilmore attributes to the Black Radical Tradition—and that Nicholson materializes in *From the Poplars*—challenges "the normative presumption that territory and liberation are at once alienable and exclusive—that they should be partitionable by sales, documents, walls" (238) and instead "seiz[es] the particular capacities we have" (238). This infrastructure of feeling is, in other words, a refusal of the property relation and this refusal shapes the aesthetic, social, and political forms that emerge from its productive capacities.

Nicholson's dispossessed citation does not fit easily into available accounts of documentary poetry that focus primarily on "the reappropriation of languages plundered by capital and the state" (Dowdy 156). However, by using citation to assemble a cacophony of

uncredited voices of the dispossessed, Nicholson still plunders a valuable resource from capital and the state: documentary poetry itself. *From the Poplars* develops a form of citational poetics that resists current assumptions about documentary research, namely the tendency to identify documentary poetry primarily through its engagement with official archives. How might scholars provide accounts of documentary poetics that bear in mind the financial and institutional constraints often inherent to citational poetics? In the Afterword to her third book, *Wayside Sang*, Nicholson addresses these concerns:

> I have grown more concerned with document and archive, institutional, community, and informal as my writing practice continues… My last book project, *From the Poplars*, had me in information centers, libraries, and archives. These were in walking or transit distance from where I lived and in the same city, province, and country. I did not require academic library cards, subscriptions to journals, or a credit card to access them. It was possible to sustain that study, address queries, and weather the challenges to finish the book in two years. For *Wayside Sang* I did not have enough time and resources to be the kind of researcher and writer some part of me longs to be. There were many barriers to enacting documentary poetics in this moment. (104)

Nicholson explains that the research that makes *From the Poplars* immediately legible as a documentary poem—the archival and library research that makes up the poem's first citational frame—required "time and resources" that were not sustainable beyond the scope of the single project. She also explains that the citational approach she employs in *Wayside Sang* was "narrowed in part by constraints to my time and labour" (105). Reviews and promotional material for *Wayside Sang* suggest that it has not been considered "documentary" like *From the Poplars* though it is, as Nicholson writes, equally "concerned with document and archive" (104).

Nicholson's remarks invite scholars of documentary poetics to acknowledge the role that national arts funding and institutional access has played in the form's development. For example, the fact that documentary has seen much more sustained popularity in Canada, in contrast to the form's booms and busts, as Michael Dowdy puts it, in the United States, might have something to do with Canada's more consistent commitment to liberal cultural governance characteristic of Western welfare states, which often includes funding for the arts. My concern is not only that these institutional contexts and limitations shape who gets to write documentary—they clearly do—but also that they shape what is recognisable as documentary literary form in the first place. If we are only looking for documentary poems that require a specific type of "research" or that "perform cultural work that is analogous to the work of the wider humanities" (Leong 26), might we be missing the residual undercurrents of a more radical tradition of documentary? In order to posit a more complex understanding of the late documentary poetry's oppositional capacities, I have been looking for late documentary poems that either reveal documentary's liberal infrastructure or propose alternative infrastructures that draw on documentary's residual radicalism. Through the combination of two citational frames, Nicholson's *From the Poplars* does both.

Chapter IV

Documentary Capture: Mercedes Eng's Carceral Poetics

> Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,
> surveying the deep country, follows discovery
> viewing on groundglass the inverted image
> —Muriel Rukeyser, *The Book of the Dead*

> We simultaneously make places, things, and selves, although not under conditions of our own choosing.
> —Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*

This chapter argues that late documentary poetics provides strategies for examining the relationship between agency and structure under carceral capitalism. Abolitionist scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests that agency is "the human ability to craft opportunity from the wherewithal of everyday life" (*Golden Gulag* 27), a definition that challenges the tendency to locate resistance only in exceptional moments of struggle against the state. Glossing Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Gilmore writes that "in a crisis, the old order does not simply blow away, and every struggle is carried out within, and against, already existing institutions: electoral politics, the international capitalist system, families, uneven development, racism" (28).[44] In my analysis of Mercedes Eng's first two books of poetry, *Mercenary English* (2013) and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* (2017), I argue that documentary provides a system of constraints because of how its foundational strategies—photography, surveying, reporting—have been instrumentalized as forms of disciplinary capture integral to the administration of the carceral state. By unpacking the convergence of documentary and corporeal capture, I argue that

[44] "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under conditions existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, *Eighteen Brumaire* 15).

Eng's carceral poetics demonstrates the fugitive potential of working through and underneath the carceral tendencies of documentary poetics.

Mercenary English documents the gentrification of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood through the joint effort of real estate development, city planning, and policing. In the notes that follow the collection, Eng explains that, "historically, the DTES was a working-class neighbourhood that included many of the city's historic and living communities of colour: Chinatown, Japantown, and Hogan's Alley, where a Black community lived, are all here" (119). The dispossession of residents of these three communities are all layered on the dispossession of the Musqueam, Tsleil-waututh, and Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and the creation of False Creek Indian Reserve. The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre describes the DTES as "a neighbourhood with disproportionate levels of manufactured and enforced violence, poverty, homelessness, child apprehension, criminalization, and fatal overdoses" (Martin and Walia 4), emphasizing how these conditions are produced through cycles of capitalist and colonial dispossession and displacement. *Mercenary English* includes three long poems, "knuckle sandwich," "February 2010," and "autocartography," which combine techniques of found, visual, and lyric poetry to map the DTES through the lens of Eng's experience in the neighbourhood's survival sex trade in the 1990s. The poems also address media representations of the neighbourhood's missing and murdered women in the same period with careful consideration for how intersections of gender, race, and class produce the DTES as an extension of settler colonial logics and criticize the techniques of surveillance and militarized policing used by the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) during the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes (2017) is a book-length citational long poem structured to resemble a government survey and resulting report. It is, in part, a response to

Eng's father's incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s in Alberta and BC, but also reacts to the introduction of Bill C-51, the so-called "anti-terrorism act" introduced under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and explores proposals for public-private partnerships (P3s) in the construction of correctional facilities (prisons and immigration detention centres) in Canada, several of which have since been constructed.[45] The poem draws citational material from sources ranging from official governmental reports to video game instructions to highlight the dispersed and deeply embedded carceral infrastructure of the Canadian settler colonial state.

Much of the critical work on carcerality focuses on the United States, highlighting California's unprecedented construction of prisons. Eng's carceral poetics provides an opportunity to study carceral logics in the Canadian context, refuting commonplace assumptions that Canada is less carceral than the United States. As Rinaldo Walcott explains, "the sensational examples of violence against Black individuals and communities in the US have lesser known and only slightly less sensational counterparts elsewhere, especially in Canada," illustrating that "the history of policing and its deadly consequences for Black people is therefore not an issue bound by national borders" (*On Property* 27). According to the John Howard Society's review of annual reporting from The Parole Board of Canada, "Canada's incarceration rate, at 114 per 100,000 population, is one of the highest in the 'developed' world, lower than the US, Britain or Australia but higher or much higher than all of western Europe" ("Data on Canada's Prisons System"). More civilians are killed by police in Canada than in any country besides the United States (Cheatham and Maizland) and a CBC analysis of police data from 2020 reported that "the majority of people shot by police were young men [and that] when race could be identified, 48

[45] The Toronto South Detention Centre, which was recently the subject of an Ontario Human Rights Commission report condemning "its over-reliance on segregation, restrictive confinement and lockdowns" ("Report on Conditions of Confinement at Toronto South Detention Centre") is probably the best-known example of a P3-constructed facility in Canada.

per cent of people shot were Indigenous and 19 per cent were Black" (qtd. in Walcott 68). Contemporary police forces in Canada extend and expand the historical role of the RCMP (formerly the North-West Mounted Police), which was established to stamp out Indigenous resistance to settler dispossession and expansion. In Canada, and indeed across North America, "policing emerged as and remains a form of racial, gendered and economic violence shaped by the logics of slavery and settler colonialism" (Maynard, "Police Abolition" 71-2).[46]

Eng's poetry focuses on a dispersed carceral infrastructure that enforces the interests of the Canadian settler colonial state, including but not limited to policing and mass incarceration. Her second collection explicitly invokes the prison industrial complex (PIC), a concept that has been central to the politics of abolition for decades. According to Critical Resistance, the organizing network that coined the term in the 1990s, the prison industrial complex refers to

> the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems. Through its reach and impact, the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and other privileges. There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent, or deviant.

Gilmore, who is a founding member of Critical Resistance, explains that while the PIC was meant to be "conceptually expansive" ("Abolition Geography" 231), in practice "its effect has

[46] Racism, according to Gilmore's oft-cited definition, is "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (*Golden Gulag* 28). For detailed histories and analyses of policing, anti-Black racism, and abolitionist movements in Canada see Robyn Maynard's *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, Desmond Cole's *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power*, Rinaldo Walcott's *On Property*, and El Jones's *Abolitionist Intimacies*.

been to shrivel—atrophy, really, rather than spread out—imaginative understanding of the system's apparently boundless boundary-making" (231) by overemphasizing the prison as a singular site of struggle. Gilmore therefore proposes to "provisionally call the PIC by another name" (231)—"carceral geographies"—to better convey that "prison is not a building 'over there' but a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere" (*Golden Gulag* 242). In this chapter, I follow Gilmore and leverage the broad scope of the term "carceral" to cover the "conceptually expansive" range of institutions and practices that Eng "call[s] out" (*Mercenary English* i) by invoking the PIC. Canada's carceral infrastructure encompasses the complex relationships between city planning, natural resource development, immigration, public services like health, housing and education, cultural policy like the Multiculturalism Act, as well as policing, surveillance, and detention.

Against the liberal understanding that prisons ensure public safety and provide rehabilitation, Gilmore argues that prison expansion is primarily about incapacitation. Prisons not only immobilize struggles for economic and racial equity by fracturing communities, but they also resolve surpluses of labour by facilitating the removal of the workless poor from civil society. Recent studies of mass incarceration foreground what Noah de Lissovoy calls the "carceral turn" under neoliberalism by which welfare state reduction during the neoliberal era has been paired with increased law enforcement and surveillance to manage the crisis produced by the withdrawal of social supports. While neoliberalism is typically characterized by deregulation and limited state interference, these scholars and activists make clear that neoliberalism has in fact involved a reorientation of state resources rather than a scaling back of the state. Carceral infrastructures respond to growing poverty and the widening racial wealth gap by providing a "catchall solution to social problems" (*Golden Gulag* 5). In these emergent

theories, the carceral makes visible the intersection of capitalism and colonial racial apartheid, bringing together pressing conversations about policing, austerity, deindustrialization, and resource management. When I refer to "carceral infrastructure" throughout this chapter, I mean this expansive arrangement of institutions and processes, the "forms and patterns that coalesce into premature death" ("Abolition Geography" 229), alongside the forms of image making and information gathering unique to documentary capture. As in my previous chapters, infrastructure refers to the abiding relationship between these two levels of formal analysis.

My account of Eng's carceral poetics draws on Nicole Fleetwood's theorization of "carceral aesthetics" in *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Fleetwood defines carceral aesthetics as "forms of art-making that emerge as a result of the carceral state" (25) and considers how the creative process is shaped by conditions of surveillance and confinement. Fleetwood's project is primarily concerned with art produced by incarcerated people in the US prison system, and therefore performs a much-needed reassessment of "prison art," but it also considers work by non-incarcerated artists produced "under conditions of unfreedom" (25) manufactured by the carceral state. Carceral aesthetics involves speaking "to and through captivity" (25) and is therefore a fugitive practice that "builds on black radical thought and traditions that center the cultural production of people held in captivity, as well as on collective movements for freedom, historically and in the present" (26). *Mercenary English* and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* are undoubtedly abolitionist projects but I engage with them through the lens of fugitivity in this chapter in order to foreground how they negotiate existing documentary strategies as real and formal constraints—a strategy that I argue is unique to *late* documentary poetics.

Fugitivity is closely associated with a politics of refusal, what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call "the refusal of what has been refused" (96) and Damien Sojoyner explains as "the disengagement from state-governed projects that attempt to adjudicate normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and democratic belonging" (516). My reading of Eng's "creative strategies of refusal" (Campt, *Listening Images* 9) in *Mercenary English* and *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* is informed by approaches to fugitivity practiced by all "those who have sought—and are seeking—to evade state capture" (Maynard, "Black Life and Death" 143) but I draw primarily on Tina Campt's approach to fugitivity, which is grounded in Black feminist praxis. For Campt, fugitivity is "at once a refusal and an affirmation of one's capacity to inhabit a future against all odds" (113) and emerges from the lived understanding that though freedom is often "a transient and fleeting expression of possibility" (Hartman 53) it is nonetheless *the* vital pursuit. Campt understands "refusal as a generative and capacious rubric for theorizing everyday practices of struggle often obscured by an emphasis on collective acts of resistance" and emphasizes "the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as to refuse the terms given to name these structures" (Campt, "Black Visuality"). In this sense, while fugitivity and abolition are incommensurate approaches to theorizing resistance to state capture—one naming individual, strategic, and daily practices and the other naming a much broader worldbuilding project—Campt's definition of fugitivity makes clear that these approaches share an emphasis on the durational character of struggles for freedom rooted in the simultaneously historical and speculative registers of the Black Radical Tradition. Eng's carceral poetics leverages and refuses the regulatory function of documentary in strategic ways in order to inhabit provisional zones of freedom. These fugitive practices are directly related to the residual character of late

documentary poetics, which requires late documentary poets to negotiate existing infrastructures of documentary.

This chapter also addresses a significant but underdiscussed division that has emerged within the field of documentary poetics between critical approaches that highlight the (re)circulation of existing documents and those focused on recording events. Michael Leong observes that "in privileging models from photography and film, discussions about documentary poetry rarely consider what a document is" (37). In this chapter, I demonstrate that documentary's disciplinary infrastructure relies on the combination of photography and paperwork, neither of which can perform their bureaucratic function in isolation. In other words, instead of adopting an approach grounded in "documentality" (Leong 30) or photography, I pursue an infrastructural analysis that emphasizes links between administrative, visual, and corporeal discipline. The first section of this chapter introduces intersections of documentary and carceral visuality by analyzing the role of state-issued identification in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*. After introducing the approaches to carcerality on which my analysis relies, I begin by comparing the photographs in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* to the portraits of inmates in C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster's *One Big Self,* a collaborative project that combines image and text to record conditions of three Louisiana prisons and one of the best-known examples of late documentary poetics. Drawing on Fleetwood's analysis of the "carceral index," I compare divergent responses to documentary indexicality and suggest that Campt's call to "listen to images" provides a fugitive opening through, but not beyond, the indexical correspondence between text, image, and body.

The second section of this chapter reads across *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* and *Mercenary English* to demonstrate the crucial role of cultural policy in Canada's carceral

infrastructure. By taking its formal structure and much of its content from a Harper-era survey on the application of the Multiculturalism Act in federal correctional facilities, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* illustrates how multiculturalism expands the scope of carcerality in Canada by deploying documentary strategies associated with what Roderick Ferguson calls "diversity bureaucracy" (26). The frequent and strategic convergence of citational materials that address forms of documentary capture alongside forms of corporeal capture reveals that Canada's multicultural "policy of containment" (Kamboureli 11) relies on both the production of administrative documents and the surveillance and over-policing of Indigenous and racialized communities. *Mercenary English* turns its attention to cartography and portraiture, both "weapons" (110) of colonial capture that Eng steals for her own documentary representations of the DTES community. Instead of frustrating documentary referentiality, Eng's poetic portraits of sex workers from the neighbourhood insist on the material presence of the women they portray by evoking what Campt calls the "phonic substance" of photography, or "the sound inherent to an image" ("Black Visuality"). Eng's carceral aesthetics does not accept or reject the expectations of documentary realism; rather, it finds ways to move documentary practice into the fugitive spaces that exist beyond and below liberalism's governmental rationality.

Eng's investigation of Canada's carceral infrastructure in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* includes reflections on her own father's incarceration and attendant threat of deportation to China in the 1980s and 1990s. The poem incorporates several photographic documents from her family's archive including her father's inmate ID card and Chinese passport, as well as family photographs taken during visits to detention centres. By including state-issued identification, Eng departs from approaches to documentary poetics that employ the language of photography and film as merely metaphorical. The photographs in *Prison Industrial Complex*

Explodes were produced by specific regulatory regimes of empire that continue to hold racialized subjects captive in ways that are not easily resisted through forms of disruptive syntax or discursive reframing.

The framing of the documentary subject through the "camera eye" has been the prevailing metaphor of social documentary literature from its inception. The "camera *as an idea*" (Kazin qtd. in Stott 76) affected thirties culture as a whole, shaping aesthetic practice well beyond film and photography. While William Stott reads the thirties "camera-mind" as an expression of the desire for "a quality of authenticity, a direct and immediate experience" (77), the camera-as-metaphor in documentary poetry has more often been used to call attention to selective methods of representation. In the opening lines of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, which serve as this chapter's epigraph, the camera's presence calls attention to "representation as a non-neutral practice" (Magi 246). Susan Briante describes the trope in detail:

> the camera functions as a symbol through which Rukeyser lays bare the documentary process. Rukeyser draws our attention to the camera as an instrument of documentation and to the photographer who selects a subject, considers composition, focuses a lens, and decides what to include or crop from the frame…. the photographer shares with the documentary poet an opportunity to shape the reality that is presented. ("Defacing the Monument")

Drawing a parallel between the photographic and discursive frame, Briante rejects any notion of documentary objectivity. This understanding of documentary poetics, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in conversation with Foucault's archaeology and Derrida's notion of the archive, remains a prevailing critical approach to late documentary poetics. It suggests that documentary is grounded in a unique awareness of the power of language to both mediate and

produce reality.[47] The role of the documentary poet is to make the frame visible and to "be attentive to what is being left out, shorn away, effaced, suppressed" (Metres, "(More) News from Poems"). While these approaches do "privileg[e] models from photography and film" (Leong 37), their invocation of these models remains primarily symbolic and rarely engages with critical work on documentary produced by scholars of art history and film studies. A rematerialization of photography within critical conversations about documentary poetics would not only bring documentary poetics into closer contact with these other fields—which is not insignificant for a genre with interdisciplinary roots—but would also help close the gap that Leong identifies between critical approaches to documentary within the field of poetics.

Scholars of visual culture have been more likely to "challeng[e] the notion of a progressive 'documentary tradition' by connecting an array of nineteenth-century modes of photographic documentation to the emergence of disciplinary techniques" (Tagg 11) and to forms of "government realism" (Druick 23) associated with the welfare state.[48] These studies draw primarily on Foucault's later work on the relationship between documentary techniques and disciplinary practices to argue that

> techniques of documentation and documentary accumulation… [are] locked into a history of disciplinary practice and knowledge that emerged piecemeal across the workings of

[47] For Foucault, the archive is not a physical place or even a container for knowledge, it is the system that orders the emergence of discourse, "the law of what can be said" (129), and the fundamental ideological unit in the production of reality. Derrida's archive is more closely associated with the material storage of documents. For Derrida the archive is "a physical, historical, or ontological principle" and is located "*there* where authority, social order are exercised" (9). It is the "*place* from which *order* is given… initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (9). For a reading of documentary poetics that draws explicitly on Derrida's theory of the archive, see Joseph Harrington's "Docupoetry and Archive Desire" and for an extended poststructuralist reading of documentary poetics in the Canadian context, see Manina Jones's *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary-collage' and English-Canadian Writing*.

[48] In 1986, Allan Sekula remarked that "it is extraordinary that histories of social documentary photography have been written without taking the police into account. Here the issue is the maintenance of a certain liberal humanist myth of the wholly benign origins of socially concerned photography" (56). The same could be said about histories of social documentary literature produced in the same period.

> new apparatuses—the police, hospitals, schools, insane asylums, prisons, departments of immigration, planning, public health and sanitation—each of which sought to exert a new and fine-grained measure of control over bodies and spaces. (Tagg 16)

Foucault does not directly address photography, but these theorists extend Foucault's argument that "the examination that places individuals in the field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them. The procedures of examination were accompanied at the same time by a system of intense registration and of documentary accumulation" (*Discipline and Punish* 189). In these accounts, documentary film and photography participate in "the will to document" (Ouellette 100) that characterizes the historical emergence of disciplinary techniques of surveillance.

The development of identification photography has been particularly important in the study of the state's instrumentalization of photography. As Allan Sekula has influentially argued, "every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police" (7). Criminal identification documents in particular "are designed quite literally to facilitate the 'arrest' of their referents" (7). In this respect, "the workings of capture… clearly exceed the framing of the photograph" (Tagg 15) emerging as they do from a carceral infrastructure that combines visual and textual practices. While these studies of documentary visuality supply a useful corrective to readings of social documentary literature, my own approach—and, as I will argue, Eng's approach—to documentary differs in one significant way. In John Tagg's work in particular, documentary capture involves a thorough "appropriation of the photographic apparatus by the institutions of disciplinarity and disciplinary knowledge" (13). That is, Tagg rejects a universal account of photography and refers only to the subsection of photography that has been instrumentalized for disciplinary purposes as "documentary." I am interested in how late

documentary poets productively negotiate documentary's governmental infrastructures to create new openings within the genre; whereas, for Tagg, there is no documentary that is not wholly disciplinary.

Eng's carceral poetics mobilizes these longstanding arguments about the instrumentalization of documentary techniques as a form of disciplinary capture but her work also requires a different genealogy than undergirds most existing studies of documentary visuality. Joy James argues that Foucault's analysis of policing and surveillance is limited because it does not attend to the specifics of race and warns against the tendency to rely primarily, or only, on *Discipline and Punish* in contexts, like the US and Canada, where "panopticism and the policing gaze are also informed by racial and sexual bias" (James 27). James is especially concerned that Foucault's overemphasis on the turn toward non-corporeal forms of discipline obscures the continuation of state-sanctioned violence well into the twenty and twenty-first centuries, including but not limited to the violence of contemporary policing. In her 1998 essay "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition," Angela Davis follows James in arguing for "the need to move beyond a strictly Foucauldian genealogy in examining histories of punishment" (96). "As interesting as it may be, however, to examine the influences of the earlier European models on the emergent US prison system," writes Davis, "what may help us to understand the way in which this system would eventually incorporate, sustain and transform structures and ideologies of racism is an examination of the impact of the institution of slavery on US systems of punishment" (97). Davis suggests that a genealogy that "accentuate[s] the links between confinement, punishment and race" would account for

> at least four great systems of incarceration… the reservation system, slavery, the mission system, and the internment camps of World War II. Within the US, incarceration has thus

> played a pivotal role in the histories of Native Americans and people of African, Mexican, and Asian descent. In all of these cases, people were involuntarily confined and punished for no reason other than their race or ethnicity. (97)

The scholars and activists that I rely on in this chapter continue to draw important insights from Foucault while also foregrounding "links between confinement, punishment and race" (97) in their analyses.

It is useful to begin by comparing Eng's *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* to another well-known late documentary poetry project that investigates the prison system through image and text. C.D. Wright and Deborah Luster's *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* is a collaborative project that records life in three Louisiana prisons by combining Wright's almost entirely citational poetry, drawn from interviews with inmates conducted over three visits, and Luster's tintype portraits of prisoners.[49] *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* and *One Big Self* differ in obvious ways. As Eng's title makes eminently clear, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* is an explicitly abolitionist project while Wright's text participates, if uncomfortably, in a tradition of reform-minded social documentary. "If we go there, if not with our bodies then at least with our minds," Wright postulates in the essay that introduces the project, "we are more likely to register the implications" (xiv). Wright positions herself within this tradition somewhat ironically when she claims that she is "going to prison to write about it. Like a nineteenth-century traveler" (xv).[50] Whereas Wright and Luster seem to take for granted the continued existence of the prison, Eng investigates the prison's conditions of possibility by emphasizing

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[49] The three prisons are the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, the East Carroll Parish Prison Farm, and the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

[50] Interestingly, *One Big Self* was the recipient of the Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Prize from the Center of Documentary Studies at Duke University.

how carceral logic is deeply embedded in the fabric of Canadian culture. She is concerned, in other words, with "exploding" far more than actual sites of detention.

The photographic images reveal more subtle differences between these projects, however, differences which are rooted in how they approach photography's relationship to the documentary record. Instead of isolating her father's portrait, Eng scans his entire inmate ID card (figure 2) so that the image appears alongside information including his date of birth, height, and eye colour, but also his inmate number and date of incarceration. This choice positions the photograph firmly within the "carceral index," a term that Fleetwood uses to refer to "a range of data collected by the state to mark, register, classify, and surveil subjects labeled as criminals" (88). The administrative function of images on identification cards depends on the photograph's indexical relationship to its subject, the referential "that-has-been" (Barthes 77) characteristic of all photography and foregrounded in documentary image making. According to Bill Nichols, to document means simply "to bear an indexical relationship to the historical world" (27).[51] The carceral index makes use of photography's inherent indexicality to reinforce the unity between the photographed subject and the information on the card, producing "subjects to be seen, read, touched, and consumed… rather than individual bodies, agents, actors" (Campt 278). The carceral index relies on what Craig Robertson calls "the documentary regime of verification" (79) that produces a "stable and reliable object for governing" (33) by combining personal information with photographic corroboration, what Sekula refers to as "the merger of optics and statistics" (18). The inmate ID card is an instance of carceral index not just because it is a document issued by the Correctional Service of Canada but also because it instrumentalizes the continuity between the photograph and its referent as a form of surveillance and capture.

[51] For theories of the photograph as index, see Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography* and Walter Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography."

Figure 2: Sue Dong Eng's inmate ID card reproduced in Mercedes Eng's *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*. Note: In the full-length print version published by Talonbooks in 2017, the card appears in grayscale (55). This full-colour scan is how the card appears in the digital chapbook published in 2016 by SMALL CAPS, a multimedia chapbook press associated with *The Capilano Review*.

In *Listening to Images*, Campt argues that "photographs produced predominantly for the regulatory needs of the state or the classificatory imperatives of colonialism" differ from other forms of photography because "they are not produced at the desire of their sitters" (5). Rather, "they are images required of or imposed upon [their subjects] by empire, science, or the state" (5). Luster is careful to position the *One Big Self* portraits outside the carceral index by insisting that they provide "an opportunity for those inmates to present themselves as they would be seen." Luster explains that she was "commissioned, in a sense, by the inmates to make

portraits for their loved ones—trying to ensure a balance between photograph and subject, to connect the viewer, whether mother, child, friend, or stranger, to the prisoner."[52] Unlike inmate identification cards, these images were not compulsory. *One Big Self*'s engagement with the overlap between the documentary and the carceral index is more complex than Luster's self-positioning suggests, however. In her study of Wright and Luster's "documentary photo-poetics" (254), Claire Grandy argues that the project employs both visual and poetic strategies that disrupt the indexicality of the documentary image. Grandy points out that Luster's portraits "frustrat[e] identification" (255) because the inmates are often posed in ways that enact a "strategic refusal to be seen" (258). For example, two participants are photographed with their backs turned and several appear costumed, with their faces masked or painted (figure 3), producing an "inability to touch or see clearly" (Grandy 253). Although Luster does caption her photographs, Grandy also reads Wright's poetry as a form of extended captioning. As Grandy explains, the word caption is "taken from the Latin *captiōn* and the Old French *capcion*, meaning 'a catching, seizure, capture' or 'arrest or apprehension'" (258), an etymology that discloses the caption's participation in processes of indexical regulation. Wright's citational poetry disrupts these processes, Grandy argues, because it "cannot be attributed to any particular individual" and therefore "generates a sense of opacity and withdrawal, rather than identification or recognition" (256). Grandy is interested in how these stylistic choices undermine social documentary's ethical imperative grounded in Hegelian recognition and Levinasian humanism, the "empathy premised on seeing and being

[52] Besides the limited-edition, large-format publication that resulted from Wright and Luster's collaboration, Luster's images were exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Luster also provided each inmate with copies of the photographs to share with friends and family. As she writes in the introduction to the project, "the act of photographing and returning prints to these incarcerated persons and their eventual distribution of the portraits to friends and family are as important to this project, and compelling to me, as any formal exhibition or publication of the images" (Wright and Luster).

seen" (264). When read alongside Eng's invocation of the carceral index, however, her insights also suggest that there are limitations to these aesthetic strategies when confronted with the lived realities of state capture.

Figure 3: Deborah Luster's "doc #298170" from *One Big Self*. Note: In 2007, a text-only version of Wright's poem was published by Copper Canyon Press as *One Big Self: An Investigation*. This image was selected for the edition's front cover. Luster captions the photo: "Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, St. Gabriel, Louisiana / Sentence: 7 years, 4 children, Work: chair plant, Halloween Haunted House."

Wright and Eng both make use of citational methods of composition but Wright's work, which "play[s] with anaphora, vocatives, and intertwining fragments" (Grandy 256), is more conventionally "poetic" than Eng's. Both *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* and *Mercenary English* are deceivingly simple, making use of devices like end rhyme and visual puns far more than is common in contemporary experimental poetics. For the most part, *One Big Self*'s lineated pages look like poetry in a way that Eng's long curated passages of citational prose do not. *One Big Self* provides a useful counterexample to *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* because, as Grandy demonstrates, Wright and Luster purposely frustrate the referentiality and indexicality on which both the documentary genre and carceral index depends, whereas Eng leans into these conventions, treating them as simultaneously real and formal constraints. Eng's carceral poetics illustrates that the instrumentalization of documentary indexicality is a far more pervasive and adaptable component of the state's carceral infrastructure than Wright and Luster's aesthetic experimentation suggests. This understanding, acquired through lived experience of varied forms of state captivity, informs Eng's fugitive approach to late documentary poetics in which provisional freedoms arise from "quotidian practice[s] of refusal" (Campt 96), those creative strategies lived daily on streets and pages that remain under siege.

The use of portraiture in state administration dates to Alphonse Bertillon's system of criminal identification in nineteenth-century France, but the Canadian state first used mass identification photography to enforce the Chinese Immigration Act by including photographs on all Chinese Immigration 9 (CI 9) certificates, which meticulously recorded the data and movement of Chinese migrants in Canada. Under the Chinese Immigration Act (1882 to 1947), also known colloquially as the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese migrants paid a "head tax" for

entry into Canada ($50 per "head" in 1885, $100 in 1900, and $500 in 1903) and were later completely barred from entry. CI 5 certificates were issued as proof of having paid the "head tax," while CI 9s tracked migrants leaving and entering the country during the period of exclusion (Cho, *Mass Capture* xii). As Lily Cho explains, "until the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, and even for many years after the official end of this requirement, Chinese migrants were required to 'register out' with immigration authorities prior to departure" (5) in order to be granted re-entry within a two-year period, after which point, they could not return even if they were born in Canada. The photographs included on all CI 9 certificates issued after 1910 "make up the largest photographic archive of images of Chinese migrants in Canada" (xii). As Cho discusses in detail in *Mass Capture*, her study of the archive of CI 9 certificates, the CI 9s also provide an example of the failure of photographic indexicality as the basis for identification. Since "the vast majority of Chinese migrants did not speak English [and]… no agent assigned to the offices responsible for the records spoke Chinese," the certificates were often "more of a promise of a suggestion of the identity of its bearer than an absolute proof of identity" (5). The history of "paper sons," migrants who entered the country with illegally obtained certificates, provides an example of a fugitive practice that both refuses to accept restrictions on movement and reveals the limitations of the state's documentary infrastructure. Ultimately, Cho demonstrates that the "CI 9s illuminate a larger history of the failure of the state to capture, contain, and limit Chinese migrants in Canada" (26).

Cho argues that this colossal project of state identification produced for the purpose of tracking and constraining movement was "a form of documentary mass capture" (xii). Cho's study draws parallels between carceral and immigration documents, a connection that Eng's project also investigates through the inclusion of her father's Chinese passport (figure 4). The

passport appears across two pages and is separated from Sue Dong Eng's inmate ID card by a single page of text that collages headlines from February 14, 1985.[53] Eng's project makes clear that both "the regulation of bodies across borders and the containment of bodies through prisons requires identification" (Eng 102). As the history of border regulation demonstrates, the passport and the inmate ID card are both "document[s] of suspicion" (Cho, "Citizenship" 278) that participate in what Campt calls the "racialized index" through which subjects are identified, classified, and made visible for surveillance.

Figure 4: Passport belonging to Gam Hoe and Sue Dong Eng, Mercedes Eng's grandmother and father, reproduced in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* (52-53).

The relationship between the passport and CI 9 certificate is complex but important because it makes clear that racial and carceral indexicality are intrinsic to all forms of

[53] I have not been able to identify this date's significance.

surveillance. The CI 9s predate the passport and therefore inaugurate the use of identification photography that becomes central to the state's "mobility infrastructure" (6) with the introduction of passports in 1921. As Cho argues, however, the CI 9s differ from the passport in a very significant way: while the passport surveils the identity and movement of citizens, the CI 9s "regulate and police the terms of non-citizenship" (7). This difference suggests that "the racialized body anticipates the ways in which non-citizens, and then also citizens, would be identified and tracked" (24) through the increasing securitization of borders and intensification and normalization of surveillance. Cho's analysis of the difference between the passport and the CI 9 makes clear that "mass capture is not solely about data collection" (17). Rather, documentary capture intersects with and facilitates forms of corporeal capture, "the bodies of migrants amassed in the hold of a ship or the barracks of an immigration detention centre" (17), that persist despite Foucault's diagnosis of "a slackening of the [penal system's] hold on the body" (*Discipline* 10).[54]

Eng also introduces the possibility of engaging with these photos through another register, however. She writes that "the state identification, Chinese and Canadian, is *both intimate and reductive*: the photographic portraits allow us to glimpse shimmers of my father's and grandmother's emotional states, while they are simultaneously reduced to date of birth, country of origin, physical information, passed medical exam" (Eng 102, my emphasis). The idea that documents produced for the purposes of institutional and state accounting can be "both intimate and reductive" drives Campt's study of archival identification photographs of Black

[54] For a more detailed analysis of passports and border regulation in the US and Canada, see Cho's article "Citizenship, Diaspora and the Bonds of Affect: The Passport Photograph" and Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Browne traces the passport's genealogy to "Birch Certificates," identity documents that predated the ledger known as The Book of Negroes, and monitored Black movement across the US-Canadian border in the late eighteenth century.

diasporic subjects in *Listening to Images*. When identification photographs are repurposed as objects of intimate attachment, it is possible for "the fugitivity of these images [to] excee[d] [their] regulatory function" (12). Besides the identification documents just discussed, *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* also includes several vernacular photographs, including images of Eng with her mother and father taken during supervised family visits at correctional facilities (figure 5).

Figure 5: Family photograph of Mercedes Eng with her mother and father, reproduced in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*.

Vernacular photography refers to images taken for private use, the personal and family photographs that "are rarely included in museum collections, public histories, and institutional archives" and yet "account for the vast majority of photographs taken since the medium's

invention in the nineteenth century" (Fleetwood 235). In the notes that follows the poem, Eng positions the vernacular photographs included in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes*:

> The photographs are mine. The whole time I visited my dad inside—from in utero to age nineteen—prisoners would go around taking photos of inmates with their families, and sometimes friends, charging a small fee of one or two dollars. These photos are vital because they provide inmates with a connection to the outside through their loved ones… Now that my father is gone, these photographs are among my most beloved possessions. I owe a huge debt to of gratitude to these unknown photographers at all the institutions that ever imprisoned my dad. Thank you. (103)

Vernacular prison photography is a common practice and "many millions of prison photos… circulate between incarcerated people and their families and friends" (Fleetwood 233). These photographs are "a significant component of the visual culture of mass incarceration" (234) and an example of "the production of art and visual representation in conditions of un / freedom" (234) or what Fleetwood calls "carceral aesthetics." While the subjects of identification photographs are forbidden from expressing emotion, these vernacular photos reveal "emotive smiles" and "familial gazes" that "acknowledge the intimacy of their intended audience" (233). Fleetwood argues that these images "work against criminal indexes and punitive captivity" by repositioning prisoners within "networks of belonging" (234).

Placed alongside these family photos, the state-produced portraits in *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* likewise participate in an "unlikely interplay between vernacular and the state" (Campt 5) because they circulate as intimate objects within a personal archive. Despite "the foreclosure of emotion in a passport photograph" (Cho, "Citizenship" 276), Eng still

"glimpse[s] shimmers of [her] father's and grandmother's emotional states" (102). These "shimmers" invoke the haptic sensations of kinship—the "vibrations" and "frequencies" (Campt 6) that extend the range of these photographs beyond the regulatory visuality of the state. Campt explores the possibility of reading identification images through sonic modality of "quiet"—unlike silence, "quiet is a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect" (4). She proposes that "listening attentively" to photographs, even those "presumed to capture mute supplicants to governmentality… gives us access to the registers of fugitivity they simultaneously animate and suspend" (9). For Campt, listening to images "is a conscious decision to challenge the equation of vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound" (6).[55] I want to briefly follow Campt's invitation to notice the "shimmers" that Eng intuits in these photos through the affective modality of quiet.

The word shimmer usually describes a visual quality associated with the movement and reflection of light but, as a verb, it also means "to move effortlessly, to glide, drift (by, off, etc.)" (OED). In audio engineering, these two meanings combine to describe a specific type of reverberation; that is, a specific way that soundwaves move and reflect off the surfaces of an enclosed space. A shimmer is an especially high-pitched and long reverb effect that delays the time it takes for soundwaves to reach the listener's ear by imitating the movement of waves in a large open space.[56] By describing her father and grandmother's "emotional states" as "shimmers" (102), Eng fortuitously reveals the simultaneously spatial and temporal quality of fugitive creative practices. Fugitivity invokes movement, the line of flight from captivity, but it

[55] "But how many people have really listened to this photograph?" (202), writes Fred Moten in *In the Break*.
[56] If this effect is hard to imagine, it might help to know that Brian Eno invented shimmer reverb for his "ambient" albums.

also draws a temporal line from the "static historical act" (Sojoyner 516) of escape through contemporary forms of planning to the tense that Campt calls the future real conditional, that which "hasn't happened yet, but must" (17). If passports are "affective conduits of the aspirations" (19) associated with mobility across borders, then the modes of fugitivity and futurity that the photographs in *Prison Industrial Complex* make audible "register a quiet insistence on forms of diasporic dwelling that demanded the right to come, to go, and to stay, as well as to arrive and return over and over again" (29). The residual aspirations of Eng's late documentary poetics are therefore less about recuperating documentary as leftist aesthetic strategy and more about identifying the reverberating shimmers that remain uncaptured by documentary's regulatory norms. As scanned documents included in a trade publication, the images acquire yet another layer of complicated materiality, but they nonetheless offer a strong example of the tendency in Eng's work to provide unanticipated and transient paths within the stubborn infrastructures of carcerality.

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes takes its structure, and much of its content, from a Harper government survey on the implementation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in federal institutions. The poem is divided into sections that correspond to the questionnaire's own—"Section 1: Reflection of Canada's Multicultural Reality in Federal Institutions," "Section 2: Employment Opportunities in Federal Institutions," "Section 3: Policies, Program Delivery, and Practices." Each section responds to a series of the questions about how diversity and multiculturalism feature in the institution's "priorities statement(s)" (6), "policies" (8), and "initiatives" (14). Eng's "responses" to the survey's questions draw from a number of sources: an annual report for the federal Office of the Correctional Investigator, the websites of multinational accounting firm Deloitte and prison-construction giant CoreCivic, the video game

Prison Architect, several news articles and press releases about the surveillance of Indigenous land defenders under Bill C-51, as well as human rights complaints related to Indigenous child welfare services and privacy complaints lodged against the popular Canadian reality television show *Border Security: Canada's Front Line*. The survey structure provides a formal constraint that forces Eng to contend with the administrative discourse of cultural policy while examining conditions of incarceration and surveillance in Canada.

While Eng does not draw citational material form the Act itself, she opens by quoting at length from a statement issued by Canada's former head of state, Queen Elizabeth, to "mark 25 years since the Canadian Multiculturalism Act received Royal Assent" (2).[57] In the statement, Queen Elizabeth notes that multiculturalism in Canada has been characterized by "the celebration of differences through food and festivals, equity and tackling systemic discrimination, and working towards the full participation of culturally and religiously diverse communities in society" (2). Eng directly follows this statement with a second government report marking the fortieth anniversary of the federal Office of the Correctional Investigator, which was created in response to a federal inquiry into the 1971 Kingston Penitentiary uprising, and draws from a section of the Office's final report detailing conditions in Canadian prisons:

> Though 40 years removed from the circumstances that gave rise to one of the most infamous prison riots in Canadian history, the Commission's assessment of what caused the riot remains remarkably relevant today:

[57] Multiculturalism is a pervasive ideological apparatus across liberal democracies, but Canada was the first country to adopt multiculturalism as federal law. In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau introduced a federal policy of multiculturalism in response to recommendations in the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. In 1988, the policy received Royal Assent as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Bill C-93) under Brian Mulroney's government.

> overcrowding, the shortage of professional staff, programming cuts, the confinement in the institutions of a number of people who did not require maximum security confinement, too much time spent in cells, a lack of adequate channels to deal with complaints
>
> (3)

Eng's sharp use of exposé citation in these opening pages not only suggests that these documents do ideological work tied to their bureaucratic function, but that they do so in relation to one another. In other words, cultural policy like The Multicultural Act is an essential component of the carceral infrastructure that structures and maintains the settler colonial nation.

Multiculturalism is widely understood as "the cultural logic of multinational capitalism" (Zizek 28), an administrative strategy related to Western countries' reform of immigration policies due to changing global economic conditions. It is a form of "diversity management" (Davis, "Gender" 41) that responds to the colonial nation's need to "reinvent" itself (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 95) with the influx of racialized labour. The institutionalization of multiculturalism in Canada drew substantial criticism from the outset. As Smaro Kamboureli outlines, "multiculturalism has been attacked for offering a *policy of containment*, a policy which, by legislating 'otherness,' attempts to control its diverse representations, to preserve the long-standing racial and ethnic hierarchies in Canada (11-12, my emphasis). Influential critiques of Canadian multiculturalism by Himani Bannerji and Sunera Thobani argue that multiculturalism was never intended to improve material conditions for racialized communities; instead, the national policy was designed to manage and contain pressure for social, economic,

and racial justice.[58] Audra Simpson likewise observes that "where there is a language and a commitment to 'multiculturalism' as the protection, preservation and perhaps even celebration of one's 'cultural' difference, there is a simultaneous commitment to the taking of [Indigenous] territory" (440). While these criticisms of multiculturalism are well-established, they bear repeating because, as Eng's combination of sources makes clear, multiculturalism continues to supply a form of crisis management directly related to the expansion of state-sanctioned violence and the ongoing extraction of wealth, resources, and labour from both Indigenous and racialized communities.

In *Policing Black Lives*, Robyn Maynard explains that multiculturalism entered discourse about Canadian national identity alongside a "growing racial wealth gap" (74) produced by discriminatory immigration and employment practices and cuts to public spending on social, education, and health programs. Writing about the same rollback of social services in the United States, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore describe multiculturalism's manifestation as "colorblindness" as the latest infrastructure of racialization, arguing that "the state's management of racial categories is analogous to the management of highways or ports or tele-communication; racist ideological and material practices are infrastructure that needs to be updated, upgraded, and modernized periodically" (264). Multiculturalism is, in this sense, a critical infrastructure of the post-civil rights era that Dylan Rodriguez calls "White Reconstruction" (38) during which white supremacy "updated, upgraded, and modernized" its infrastructure to include the now-familiar "management of racial categories" through appeals to diversity and inclusion. In Rodriguez's account, however, multiculturalism not only updates and upgrades but also

[58] See Himani Bannerji's *Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000) and Sunera Thobani's *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2007).

"expands" the scope of carcerality. Drawing on the US military's language of counterinsurgency, he argues that multiculturalism is a "martial rearticulation that expands as it reforms the logics and protocols of domestic (carceral) war" (47). Multiculturalism is, then, a specifically carceral infrastructure that not only elides state violence but also facilitates and expands forms of capture. As Eng's combination of source texts makes clear, it is therefore impossible to grasp the full scope of Canada's carceral infrastructure without accounting for cultural policy.

Prison Industrial Complex Explodes is specifically concerned with how forms of documentary capture provide material strategies through which cultural policy gets deployed. The poem is structured as a government report and divided into clearly labelled sections that respond to the survey's questions by documenting the fulfillment of several policy priorities and providing forms of statistical, photographic, and clerical evidence. In her study of the implementation of the UK's federal equality legislation in higher education, Sara Ahmed describes how "diversity workers" collect data and produce documents (policies, statements) that are then "measured and ranked" (103) as proof of how well an institution performs equity and diversity. What is measured through these documents, however, is not the structural effect of policy change but "the degree of competence in writing documents" (104). Roderick Ferguson comes to a similar conclusion in his study of institutional response to student protests at university campuses across the US in the 1960s and 1970s, illustrating that this governance technique extends well beyond state offices. Universities responded to calls for "greater racial and gender representation by making diversity an administrative specialization—hence the rise of diversity offices, diversity officials, and what we now think of as diversity bureaucracy" (Ferguson 26). Significantly, Ferguson demonstrates that universities also "promoted diversity as

rationale for law and order" (28) by authorizing increased campus security and criminalization of students.

While "diversity bureaucracy" marks an upgrade and expansion of this arrangement, documentary capture and corporeal capture have long worked in tandem. Ann Stoler argues that "colonial statecraft was built on the foundations of statistics and surveys" (98) and suggests that one way to expose "the taxonomies of race and rule" (103) is to look for "information out of place" (103). In the section "Data Collection and Research for Policy and Program Development," Eng responds to a survey question about "initiatives related to collecting statistical data" (Eng 78) on the implementation of the Multiculturalism Act with material from the Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator detailing the "increasing diversity and complexity of prison demographics" (79).

> During this period, the Indigenous incarcerated population increased overall by 46%. Federally sentenced Indigenous women inmates have increased by more than 80% in the past 10 years. Visible minority groups behind bars have increased by almost 75%, while white inmates actually declined by 3% (79)

Describing disproportionate rates of incarceration as "increasing diversity" captures how the carceral system strains the logic of multiculturalism. Whereas "increasing diversity" is taken as a positive in liberal discourse, Eng's formulation makes visible the conjunction of documentary and corporeal capture.

This convergence is most obvious in the poem's third section, "Policies, Program Delivery, and Practices," in which Eng responds to a survey question using citational material drawn from a journalistic report on the application of Bill C-51.

Q.3.1

Did your institution develop
policies and programs that took into consideration
multiculturalism and diversity?

According to RCMP documents obtained through access-to-information requests, the federal government created a wide-ranging surveillance network in early 2007 to monitor protests by First Nations people, including those that would garner national attention or target 'critical infrastructure' like highways, railways, and pipelines. (36-37, emphasis original)

In March 2015, the Canadian legislature passed Bill C-51, also known as the Anti-terrorism Act, which amended the criminal code to broaden the definition of "activity that undermines the security of Canada" (qtd. in Spice 43) and widen the scope of surveillance activities conducted by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Bill C-51 was widely criticized for criminalizing Indigenous land defense activities by expanding the definition of critical infrastructure to include pipelines and fossil fuel projects. Anne Spice explains that the Anti-terrorism Act, "ma[d]e it possible to place resistance to fossil fuels in the same category as domestic terrorism" (43). In the section quoted above, Eng draws a parallel between "diversity reports" and the "weekly situational reports" (37) produced by Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada and CSIS, the government entities responsible for "cataloguing Idle No More's activities" (37) under the purview of Bill C-51. Both genres of report monitor "critical

infrastructure" through forms of documentary capture and authorize the forceful suppression of radically transformative social demands.

Multicultural optics also surface in the first long poem in *Mercenary English*, "knuckle sandwich." The poem repeats a single quote from Yasmin Jiwani's 2008 article "Mediations of Domination: Gendered Violence Within and Across Borders": "*the visibility accorded to one expression or manifestation of / violence and the invisibility of the other are interlocked. / One supports and depends on the other*" (12, 17, 33, emphasis original). Jiwani's article considers how images of Muslim and Indigenous women circulate in the Canadian media and argues that the "*framework used by white society to pre-empt both racism and sexism*" (Jiwani qtd. in Eng 7, emphasis original) is based on a preoccupation with visible cultural differences like the hijabs and burqas worn by some Muslim women. According to Jiwani, the trope that Muslim women are subject to excessive cultural subordination "*persists [not only] because it is easy, accessible, iconic, [and] resonant with the historical context of Orientalism*" but also because it is "*ultimately a powerful strategic tool*" (Jiwani qtd. in Eng 15, emphasis original) for erasing violence sanctioned by the Canadian state. Jiwani links the hypervisibility of this "culturalized violence" to the comparative invisibility of the Canadian military's role in the deaths of Afghan women and the disappearance of hundreds of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people.

I am highlighting, and perhaps belabouring, the role of multiculturalism in Eng's carceral poetics because the process through which political and economic demands are contained and incorporated by being reframed as cultural demands is key to liberal governance and to understanding late documentary poetics' unique intervention. As this dissertation has been arguing, documentary was not adopted as a state-sanctioned expression of opposition *despite* its association with radical labour and communist organising; rather, documentary's residual

radicalism makes it an acceptable form of protest *because* it remains associated with material demands while enacting a form of protest that is primarily cultural. Eng's critique of multiculturalism demonstrates a lived understanding of how liberalism deploys the cultural as a form of containment and introduces the possibility of a more strategic engagement with documentary's residual radicalism. Eng's carceral poetics does not depart significantly from the framework of documentary poetics. Her work constitutes a fugitive practice because it incorporates strategic refusals of documentary capture while simultaneously acknowledging the potential foreclosure of these strategies.

The repetition of Jiwani's quotation suggests that racialized perception becomes meaningful through its iterative structure, producing genre-like forms of expectation and constraint. This seriality is, according to Campt, key to the production of both the carceral and racialized index (22). Alongside the accumulation of images that Jiwani describes, Eng constructs her own citational stockpile. In the book's acknowledgments, Eng explains that "knuckle sandwich" includes reporting on the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry[59] in the form of "found text from news sources such as *Vancouver Sun*, *The Province*, *The Globe and Mail*, *CTV* and *CBC*" (133). At first, these citational sections seem simply to corroborate Jiwani's thesis, emphasizing years of police inaction despite reports that

> the Native Women's Association of Canada has documented
>
> over 500 cases of Aboriginal Missing and Murdered Women

[59] The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry was established in 2010 to "inquire into and make findings of fact respecting the conduct of the investigations conducted between January 23, 1997 and February 5, 2002, by police forces in British Columbia respecting women reported missing from the Downtown Eastside of the city of Vancouver" ("Missing Women Commission of Inquiry"). The Inquiry's report was published in 2013, the same year as *Mercenary English*, and concluded that Indigenous women not only disproportionately face higher rates of violence and disappearance, but that Canada's colonial history led to government and police neglect in the case of women disappeared from the Downtown Eastside in the 1990s. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was formed as an extension of this local inquiry.

from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (and Prince George and

Edmonton and…) and across Canada over the last 30 years (26)

However, Eng draws her material from the same Canadian press sources that Jiwani criticizes, which suggests that she is not so much filling gaps in the record as constructing her own system of ordering, selecting, and unifying—building an index of the index, so to speak, that positions these images within Canada's carceral infrastructure in order to take that index as the constraint against which she constructs her own portraits of sex workers on the DTES.

In "knuckle sandwich," Eng quotes the ubiquitous and sensational language used by the Canadian media, language that marked a rapid shift from the invisibility to the hypervisibility of the conditions of street-level sex work in Vancouver:

unseen until

until

"the victims, female prostitutes"

until

"high-risk lifestyle"

until

"the city's gritty Downtown Eastside

until

"serial killer"

until

…

"butchered remains" (4-5)

Throughout “knuckle sandwich,” news reports are interrupted by reminders that these women were “unseen until / until” (6). It is difficult to estimate the exact number of women that have been disappeared from the DTES because of decades of police inaction, distrust of law enforcement, and the criminalization of sex work. In 2009, files belonging to the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC) “showed 129 women missing from the eras over nine years, while police statistics were fewer than 50 names” (Martin and Walia 5). The DEWC suggests that “there are many reasons for this lack of reporting to the police: reliance on the person causing harm, fear of being marked as an informant, deep mistrust of police, and prior negative experience with police either as a victim or an alleged offender” (128). After years of public and police apathy, the VPD launched a Missing Women Task Force in 1999 and, in 2002, charged Robert Pickton with the murder of twenty-six women, most of whom lived and worked on the DTES. As Caitlin Janzen writes, an “ongoing pattern of violence” was quickly repackaged by the national news media “into the event of ‘Vancouver’s Missing Women’ and later ‘The Pickton Case’” (810), which served to further “obscure inaction on behalf of the Vancouver Police and widespread apathy on the part of the Canadian public” by “reimagining… durative violence as [a] singular and exceptional event” (810). The news media focused on the fact that these women were all, to some degree, involved in survival sex work at the time of their murders. Few reports focused on the systemic causes of poverty, addiction, and homelessness, or on how “the criminalization of sex work combined with the effects of colonialism, poverty, and sexism leave many women without the ability to set the terms of their sexual labour, or with few other options” (Dean 16). Fewer still positioned the murders as “one aspect of a much larger national and international story about the murder and disappearance of Indigenous women rendered more vulnerable to violence by settler colonialism, by how they are constituted as subjects in settler

colonial contexts through racist discourses of disposability" (Dean xxiv). Eng's index of media representations makes these connections by integrating material from Jiwani's article and from the article "Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of Imperialism"; however, the context also functions to introduce the constraints against which she composes her own portraits of the DTES elsewhere in *Mercenary English,* which I return to below.

The criminalized and racialized modes of appearing and not appearing analysed in "knuckle sandwich" draw attention to the intersection of over-policing, under-policing, and urban segregation that characterize "carceral geographies" (Gilmore, "Abolition Geography" 231). Widespread protest in response to George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis Police officer in March 2020 and similar incidents in Canada, including the brutal killing of Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa's Hintonburg neighbourhood where I wrote much of this thesis, has made it impossible to ignore the violent over-policing of Black communities in North America. Eng's citational index of media sources tells a related but often overlooked story of under-served communities like the DTES. In the 1990s, the VPD "began responding to development and gentrification pressures in other parts of the inner city by pushing the street-oriented drug and sex trades as close as possible to the vicinity of Hastings Street" (Sommers and Blomley 20). Policing was reduced to efforts to contain poverty and criminalized activity within the neighbourhood's artificial boundaries, which, combined with the resulting closure of businesses and reduction of basic services from social housing to garbage collection, produced an especially exaggerated form of "organised abandonment" (Gilmore and Gilmore, "Beyond Bratton" 303). In the third section of *Mercenary English*, "autocartography," Eng performs her own survey of the DTES grounded in her lived experience in the survival sex trade in the 1990s and as a resident of the neighbourhood for two decades.

After decades of abandonment by policy makers, the DTES drew the attention of real-estate developers and, in the first decade of the 2000s, the neighbourhood saw a period of widespread redevelopment during which property values more than quadrupled (City of Vancouver). Although the City requires developers to invest in mixed-income housing, social housing has not nearly met demand and long-term DTES residents, many of whom rely on social assistance, struggle to afford basics at the upscale retailers that accompany condo development. Over the past two decades, gentrification has therefore displaced many of the DTES's low-income residents and fractured the tightly knit and increasingly politically organised community. "autocartography" includes six versions of the poem "how it is" composed between 2007 and 2016. Each poem textually maps the four blocks of East Hastings Street between Main Street on the east and Cambie Street on the west. In "And Tomorrow, I'm Somewhere Else: Destabilization, Dispossession, and Dissolution in the Vancouvers of Lisa Robertson and Mercedes Eng," Ryan Fitzpatrick argues that Eng "cognitively maps the political and spatial structures of her contemporary moment, aiming for an articulatory realism" (54). Building on Fitzpatrick's analysis, I suggest that Eng's "new accurate maps" (Eng, *Mercenary English* 72) have a slightly more complex relationship to "realism" than Fitzpatrick's analysis uncovers.

In the Afterword to the second and third editions of *Mercenary English*, Eng describes gentrification as "a war on the poor" whose "weapon is real-estate development" (119). In "autocartography," Eng identifies many more "weapons" in the settler nation's carceral "tool belt," including "cartographers / and language / and ships / and taxonomy / and guns / and progress" (110). When Eng surveys the DTES, she steals a tool "of colonial and neocolonial power" (72) for her own "mercenary pursuit" (72), enacting the creative fugitivity through which "a line of flight composes itself as a weapon" (Campt, *Listening to Images* 113). To move along

Hastings Street with Eng in the “how it is” poems is to be “on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment” and stolen back (Moten and Harney 28). According to Nick Blomley and Jeff Sommers’ description of the language of insurgency and counterinsurgency that characterized discussions about municipal development in the early 2000s, Eng’s mercenary language is apt. In order to garner support for redevelopment projects, City planners encouraged Vancouver residents to feel that

> the city has been “taken” from its inhabitants by the poor: as commuters speed down Hastings Street, they are invited to reflect that this is no longer "our" neighbourhood. The only way the valued landscape of the Downtown Eastside can be saved, on this account, is with the removal of what threatens it—the poor—and its replacement by citizens who are better equipped to reclaim its potential, both economically and historically. Property owners, attuned to "heritage" values, are to be encouraged to homestead the wilderness, and recapture this space. (49)

The developers’ rush to “recapture” what Neil Smith calls “the new urban frontier” explains the stakes of Eng’s weaponized refusal to forget the colonial violence supposedly consigned to the past as the cycle of displacement repeats itself. In the same essay, Blomley and Sommers detail a century of displacement on the DTES. For example, they cite material from a 1938 Vancouver Housing Survey and explain that “by the decade of the Depression, much of the area’s housing, particularly that consigned to Chinese residents, was considered ‘unfit for habitation,’ while those inhabitants were characterized as the ‘dregs of the population’” (30) to be cleared out of the neighbourhood as an influx of workers from the east and waterfront restructuring led to reduced demand for migrant workers.

The "how it is" maps are included in the section of *Mercenary English* titled "autocartography," which suggests that their counterinsurgency is also related to a practice of self-mapping and mobility. In the Afterword to the second edition, Eng reflects on the mapping process: "I've changed too," she writes, "in socioeconomic class and attendant privilege, I now typify the new residents that have displaced the kind of resident I used to be. My life is far removed from that of the women I worked with. For one, I am among the living" (120). It is fitting, then, that "autocartography" moves between the "how it is" maps and a series of poetic portraits of sex workers from the neighbourhood.

There are no documentary images in *Mercenary English* but Eng's Afterword grounds the book's intersecting concerns with mapping and portraiture in a critique of two public murals by Vancouver photographer Stan Douglas. The first is Douglas's sixteen-foot panorama *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, which is a composite of twenty-one photographs of the buildings on the south side of the 100-block of West Hastings Street. The row of buildings shows clear signs of neglect: many are boarded up or appear vacant. Most striking, however, is the complete absence of people from the block. As Eng puts it, "there are no people in it, none of the low-income people that populate the area" (120-21). Denise Blake Oleksijczuk theorizes that "the picture's profound emptiness" (97) is "mobilized to evoke a space haunted by the socially disprized and unloved" (100). That is, the panorama's viewer is engaged in an "active form of looking" (97) that forces them to question where the people have gone, a question made urgent by the fact that Douglas's piece was produced and exhibited at the height of the crisis of missing or murdered women from the DTES. Eng admits a complicated reaction to Douglas's panorama: "over time I've come to realize that the lack of people in *Every Building* may not be an erasure… but my first reaction to it was strong and it was: Why aren't we here?" (129). In the end, Eng

seems to object less to the mural itself than to Oleksijczuk's reading of the mural. While Oleksijczuk suggests that absence of people in the photograph forces viewers to contend with "the tragic situation that has recently brought so much attention to the area" (98), Eng's index of images "unseen until" (4) in "knuckle sandwich" suggest that not all kinds of "attention" are safe.

As Oleksijczuk points out, *Every Building* is "embedded in a set of issues and debates concerning documentary photography" (104). Oleksijczuk draws on commentary by documentary photographer Martha Rosley to suggest that *Every Building* responds to a long tradition of social documentary by "refus[ing] to allow viewers the easy satisfaction of feeling pity, or worse, being comforted by the fact that they themselves are much better off… [and] shifts the focus to broader social issues" (104). This argument associates the social documentary tradition with the images of "prostitutes" engaged in a "high-risk lifestyle" on "the gritty Downtown Eastside" (Eng 5) that circulated in the Canadian media. Oleksijczuk's suggests that documentary's new "revolutionary politics" (105) relies on cinematic lighting and digital manipulation of the images in Douglas's panorama to trouble the stability of realism. This argument is similar to Grandy's suggestion that Luster's *One Big Self* portraits frustrate documentary referentiality. On the surface, Eng's approach to documentary seems much more normative than Luster's and Douglas's experimental aesthetics because, for the most part, she adheres to recognizable forms of documentary production. She writes in her afterword, for example, that she "[has] a duty, and also I think a right, to bear witness and document" (125). As I have been arguing, however, Eng adopts a surprisingly novel approach. Instead of critiquing documentary and exploring alternative aesthetic approaches, she deploys documentary methods

in ways that allow her to stage strategic refusals from within documentary's carceral infrastructure of surveillance and surveyance.

The portrait poems in "autocartography" provide an interesting example because, while they are clearly meant to be documentary portraits, they make meaning by invoking the materiality of photography in an unexpected way. Documentary is a very content-driven poetry, concerned as it is with the exchange of information. Formal analysis of documentary poetry requires the reader to zoom out and examine the combination and selection of material. Eng's portraits invite an altogether different approach to formal analysis because they are as much "about" the daily activities of sex work as they are about the patterns and sounds of the words they use. Take the first stanza of "low track," for example,

> it's twelve midnight
> and the hustle begins
> eastside hustle, nobody wins
> kitty's gonna bounce to the track
> kitty's gonna skip to that trick
> lean on the car door, have a chat
> let him think he's brought the mac
> be a bit sassy
> so the cake'll lead him back
> and for a little price
> kitty's got her smack
>
> cause once she catches that mark

kitty's gonna light the spark

then it's bang bang bang

till mr. trick hits his mark

a lil stack, made on her back

The use of end rhyme—"begins" and "wins"—immediately places this poem in different register than the citational poems in the same collection. There is no rhyme scheme in this section of the poem (though there is elsewhere) but the consonance of "track" and "trick" and the assonance of "chat" and "mac" give the first stanza a strong phonic propulsion by pairing off-kilter couplets. The poem also uses slant and internal chain rhyme to connect stanzas—"back" and "smack" in the first stanza connect with "mark," "spark," "stack," and "back" in the following. Rappers often use slant chain rhyme to give verses an imperfect continuity that drifts and shifts as it holds together and there is a clear sense that this poem is to be spit, not recited. The "soundings" in these poems are not "quiet" like the shimmers in the identity photographs—they act as a kind of sonic reinforcement through which "bang bang bang" takes on double meaning.

In these poems, Eng moves portraiture beyond documentary capture. Against the gruesome description "butchered remains" (5) in the media index compiled in "knuckle sandwich," these portraits insist on a material presence that is not easily captured by regulatory functions of visuality. They refuse, as Eng puts it bluntly in "representation of hooker," to be either "a dismembered head with / a pair of hands inside it" or "a mugshot" (88) and respond to Campt's insistence on the importance of "creating forms of witness that refuse authoritative forms of visuality" (Campt, "Black Visuality"). The materiality that they enact relates to what Campt calls "phonic substance," which is "the sound inherent to an image; one that defines or creates it, that is neither contingent upon nor necessarily preceding it; not simply a sound played

over, behind or in relation to an image; one that emanates from the image itself" ("Black Visuality"). The women in these portraits are not "absent," but their presence also belies the photographic record. Eng's carceral poetics neither accepts nor rejects documentary realism, it simply refuses to show up and instead finds fugitive ways to inhabit the realities of documentary capture on and off the page.

Eng calls "how it is" a "living poem" (120) because it moves both spatially and temporally. When a second edition of *Mercenary English* was published in 2016, it included three new maps dated September 2012, November 2014, and July 2016. The second and third editions of *Mercenary English* also conclude with a conversation between Eng and Fred Moten in which Moten suggests that Eng's maps are empty of people, like Douglas's mural, but that is not quite right. Beginning in 2012, the "how it is" poems include "rest in peace AM & VS" near the corner of Hastings and Main and, as of 2014, there's a permanent space for poet and organiser Bud Osborn[60] on the same block. Eng's dad is there too, listening to Jimmy Hendrix in every version of the empty building that was once the Smilin' Buddha. As Moten suggests, "whenever [Eng] use[s] the word "I" it's not just [her], and wherever [she] go[es] the neighbourhood goes with [her]" (125). Eng calls her Afterword "there goes the neighbourhood!" and characterizes her "decision to move out of the area" (119) after two decades as an ironic inversion of so-called "white flight" from urban centres. "From a propertied perspective," writes Eng, the "goes" in "there goes the neighbourhood!" means "devaluation in the form of decreasing property values" (126), but she is "interested in a critique of gentrification that proceeds from the assumption that we live better than them rather than they live better than us" (127). In this inversion, flight is a movement toward as well as away.

[60] Bud Osborn published six books of poetry chronicling life in the DTES and was a community organiser who played a leadership role in the fight to open Insite, the first legal supervised injection site in North America.

Reading *Prison Industrial Complex Explodes* alongside *Mercenary English* positions displacements as a result of urban gentrification in relation to longer histories of diasporic migration, which makes visible what Gilmore calls "the time-route as well as the space-route" ("Abolition Geography" 236) of carceral infrastructures. Movement is often circumscribed in Eng's poetry, but it is also an animating force behind the fugitive practices that "affir[m]… one's capacity to inhabit a future" (Campt, *Listening to Images* 113). In his conversation with Eng, Moten probes Eng to speculate on movement as the modality of fugitivity: "Where does the neighbourhood go?" he asks, "And then, it's like, how does the neighbourhood go in your poetry? Go, here, means live. How does the neighbourhood, this confluence of people and place, the place the people make in their living and their collaborative and never-individuated mattering, live/go (move) in your poetry?" (125). For Moten, "the movement of things" is "fugitivity itself" (Halberstam 11). In *The Undercommons*, he suggests that "fugitive publics don't need to be restored. They need to be conserved, which is to say moved" (Moten and Harney 64). Eng's carceral poetics "moves" documentary into the fugitive spaces "out beyond the settlement, out beyond the redevelopment" (19) where documentary might also "escape policy [and] evade governance" (63) by moving alongside other histories and practices of resistance.

Conclusion

Horace Pippin's Heirloom Seeds:

Documentary Infrastructures from the Residual to the Dialectical

dismal Season. then
I am reminded seeds sprout
from cracks in concrete
—Christine Lewis, from *Coronavirus Haiku*

It's an earth song,—
And I've been waiting long for an earth song.
—Langston Hughes, "Earth Song"

I first started thinking about documentary as a genre that yokes poets to a particular political and cultural history in under-examined and potentially limiting ways because appeals to the New Deal suddenly seemed to be everywhere. In 2000, Michael Szalay lamented that "few on the left within the field of literary studies have been roused to treat the welfare state as an ideological formation coherent enough to be engaged at all" (4). Two decades later, the welfare state has become vital to the North American left's political imagination and rhetoric and, as this dissertation has demonstrated, crucial to understanding one of the most influential movements in contemporary experimental poetics. Since Alexandria Ocasio Cortez introduced the Resolution for a Green New Deal in 2018, the international climate left has coalesced around an approach to climate policy driven by investment in green infrastructure. Although the Green New Deal itself was never formally adopted, Joe Biden's bipartisan infrastructure bill prompted comparisons to Franklin D. Roosevelt, not least by Biden himself who hung an enormous portrait of FDR as the centerpiece of the Oval Office when he took office in 2021. The New Deal's influence has not been limited to the United States—during the 2019 Canadian federal election, my mailbox filled with flyers from the local candidate for the New Democratic Party calling for "a Green New

Deal for Canada." In 2019, the UK Labour Party and the European Council also adopted proposals for a Green New Deal. The Green New Deal has become the cornerstone of international calls for a just transition and the New Deal has become shorthand for an expansion of the government's role in funding, building, and managing infrastructure and, indeed, crisis itself.

By reading Lauren Berlant's work on affective historicism, I began to think of the New Deal as a "genre" for managing crisis that leverages historical narratives about the progressive 1930s to provide a familiar structure for responding to ecological and economic crises. On the one hand, appeals to the New Deal signal that we are in a moment of infrastructural reimagining not unlike the one that followed the financial, social, and environmental crises of the 1930s. On the other, these appeals tether the possibilities of this reimagining to a specific history associated with liberal efforts to revive growth by redistributing wealth and resources in ways that consolidated the influence of the white middle class. I see the resurgence of documentary poetics in the first decades of the twenty-first century as part of this broader set of concerns about how we manage futures through selective recourse to the past. Williams teaches us that this selectiveness never "exhausts all human practice" ("Base and Superstructure" 12) but it nevertheless deepens existing inequalities by reinforcing the structures of racial capitalism and blinds us to real revolutionary possibilities in doing so.

In this dissertation, I argued that late documentary poetics is a residual genre that makes meaning by negotiating its own institutional history. I explained this institutional history by identifying several structures of liberal governmentality, including upward mobility, individual agency, dispossession, and carcerality, and connecting those structures to related aesthetic strategies, including generic mobility, textual appropriation, and visuality. Each chapter

investigated the co-construction of related social and aesthetic forms as a unique "infrastructure" of documentary. The first chapter explained that documentary's roots in the thirties cultural front created lasting associations between documentary cultural production and radical labour and socialist organising. I argued that these associations are actively oppositional in the present only if documentary poetry can sustain infrastructural attachments to existing forms of labour and socialist organising, which has largely not been true of late documentary poetics. The second chapter considered how documentary's transhistorical orientation toward crisis precipitates related forms of generic and class consolidation rooted in New Deal liberalism and how late documentary poets might trouble both by refusing to take comfort in affective attachments to generic certainty. In the third chapter, I turned to documentary's signature formal technique, textual appropriation, to unpack citation's foundational relationship to property and consider the possibility of a citational poetics beyond the property principle. The final chapter investigated the relationship between forms of documentary and corporeal capture and suggested that documentary's infrastructure provides real and formal constraints through which poets examine the relationship between agency and structure under carceral capitalism.

Ultimately, I argued that documentary is itself an infrastructure of liberal governance insofar as it functions as a form of state-sanctioned opposition that instrumentalizes cultural policy to contain radical forms of political protest. In this sense, late documentary poets take up a genre that is uniquely positioned to consider how the cultural facilitates—and might therefore oppose—normative ways of organising social and political life. Late documentary poetics is residual not because it is old or outdated but because it attends to the processes of selection and reselection through which dominant traditions cohere over time. Documentary's infrastructures are therefore not only synchronic—connecting (though not conflating) multiple social and

aesthetic forms—but also diachronic insofar as they track the historicity of this dynamic set of associations and proximities between aesthetics forms, governmental and institutional practices, geographies, and texts.

I decided to study documentary poetics because the poets who most excited my literary and political imagination were writing under that banner. This study led me in unexpected directions that questioned rather than affirmed many of my initial assumptions about the relationship between documentary poetics and social change. Instead of proposing a new label that might distance the poets that I studied from documentary's association with liberal social planning, I investigated how some late documentary poets leverage "documentary" to say something about how cultural and affective genres foreclose imaginative alternatives but also make strategic realignments possible. At the end of this study, I am interested in a set of infrastructures that emerge not so much residually as dialectically in relation to the history of documentary poetics that I have laid out in this dissertation.

In late 2021, Cecily Nicholson and Mercedes Eng published a collaborative documentary poem in *BlackFlash Magazine*. "Restorative Practices" is a series of poetic reflections and photographs that document Nicholson and Eng's volunteer work for Emma's Acres, a social enterprise farming initiative in British Columbia's Fraser Valley that funds transformative justice programming for people impacted by the carceral system.[61] The farm employs people who were formerly incarcerated and victims of crime, as well as many people on conditional release, which allows the currently incarcerated to serve part of their sentence in the community under the

[61] Emma's Acres is run by Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community or L.I.N.C. Society, a registered charity whose leadership includes people who were formerly incarcerated and victims/survivors of crime. In September 2022, Cecily Nicholson also published the full-length collection *Harrowings*, which connects her volunteer work on Emma's Acres to her experience growing up on a farm in rural Ontario and turns to agriculture as a way of reconnecting with Black intellectual and aesthetic history.

supervision of a parole officer. During the Covid-19 pandemic, conditional release programs were suspended indefinitely and, as Nicholson and Eng write, "much of this community, for well over a year now, has been kept inside prison on actual lockdown" (40). Besides selling at local farmers markets, Emma's Acres provides free produce and eggs to families of incarcerated people and food-insecure households in the region, and therefore required additional volunteer labour to sustain their food production throughout the pandemic.

In this poem, Nicholson and Eng approach farm work and "poetry work" as related worldbuilding practices. Their short introduction to "Restorative Practices" ends by asserting that "poetry work is a necessary documenting and honouring practice in this place as we plant toward abolitionist futures" (40). By connecting documentary poetics to abolitionist praxis, they identify a form of residual futurity that runs alongside and underneath the documentary infrastructures explored in this dissertation. I examined documentary's proximity to liberal practices of governmentality but, in studying these poetic texts, I also gradually noticed documentary practices that are not legible within a liberal framework. These practices, like Hughes's social poetics and Nicholson's dispossessed citation, are often closely associated with the worldbuilding praxis of abolition. My first chapter on Mark Nowak's social poetics explained the challenges of locating a truly oppositional residualism in the thirties cultural front and followed Nowak's turn to Langston Hughes's social poetics as an alternative point of entry into radical visions of futurity circulating in the same period. In this chapter, I did not consider the extent to which Nowak's turn to social poetics, a "formation within both literary and socialist political practice" (*Social Poetics* 1), might also circulate a specifically abolitionist understanding of socialism. Convergences between communist and abolitionist organizing point toward vital documentary infrastructures that oppose the ones I studied in this dissertation.

As I look ahead to future research projects, I hope to further explore this intersection and build on the work in this dissertation by contextualizing Hughes's social poetics in relation to his organising activities with the Carmel John Reed Club and the Harlem Branch of the Friends of the Society Union in the 1930s. Hughes's experiences with documentary cultural production in the thirties demonstrate how documentary's gradual incorporation into the state's cultural apparatus throughout the New Deal period quelled the radical impulses of earlier international and coalitional models of documentary practice. For example, when the United States re-established ties with the Soviet Union in 1933, the Soviet Union agreed to cease the production of propaganda meant to foment revolution in the United States, including the documentary film about racial segregation in the South which Hughes and the Harlem Branch planned during their trip to the Soviet Union in 1932. Submerged remnants of this Black and coalitional working-class radicalism remain, as Nowak's appeal to social poetics makes clear, but these historical sensibilities and resistance strategies have also transformed many times over the past century.

In *On Property,* Walcott suggests that "abolition has come to occupy the place that the promise of communism once held" (14) and invokes Gilmore's description of abolition as "small c communism without a party" (qtd. in Walcott 14). By this, Walcott and Gilmore mean not only that abolitionist futurity is inextricably tied to the end of property ownership but also that abolition entails "a reworking of what communism is and means" (87) by locating the foundation of socialist organizing in the recovery of what Cedric J. Robinson describes as the Black Radical Tradition. While Marx proposed that a socialist revolution would negate the exploitative relations of capitalist production, Black radical thought employs a dialectical thinking that "plac[es] the start of the project of liberation before capitalism's development" (Johnson and Lubin 11). Abolitionist thinking involves a "return to an order of knowledge of collective

ownership, as the commons previously suggested prior to capitalism, in which we are collectively responsible for managing the natural and social resources that make human life possible" (Walcott 87). The genealogy that Black radicalism assembles is therefore one whose "traditions, strategies, and representations abide variously in dynamic intersections of radical thought" (Johnson and Lubin 9) that include socialist organizing but also Indigenous and anticolonial resistance, radical feminism and queer movements, and environmental activism. As Gilmore puts it,

> Abolition has to be 'green.' It has to take seriously the problem of environmental harm, environmental racism, and environmental degradation. To be 'green' it has to be 'red.' It has to figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable people in our community, which then will extend to all people. And to do that, to be 'green' and 'red,' it has to be international. It has to stretch across borders so that we can consolidate our strength, our experience, and our vision for a better world. (qtd. in Bhandar and Toscano 22)

This conjunction is beautifully materialized in Black Lives Matter – Canada's recent purchase of the former headquarters of the Communist Party of Canada as the site of their Wildseed Centre for Art and Activism.

In "Restorative Practices," Eng and Nicholson engage in a poetic dialogue about their experiences volunteering at Emma's Acres where they "helped grow this stuff we all need to live but don't all have access to" (42) under the leadership of people who were formerly incarcerated. While individual sections of the poem are not attributed, the poem opens with blocks of prose interspersed short descriptive lines on poetry characteristic of Eng's approach to documentary writing. Emma's Acres is in the "City of Mission, named after the colonial mission church, and

is nestled between the Nestlé sales office in Port Coquitlam and the corporation's bottling factory in Hope, where it takes water from the Kawkawa Lake aquifer" (42). Eng's description of the farm positions it as a site of refuge, not outside the corporate and colonial configurations of space but a reminder that other geographical configurations are possible. Even, or perhaps especially, when "it is hot as fuck in the greenhouse" (42) and the chicken manure "smells like death" (43), the farm is "a good teacher" (46). The tomato plants teach the daily attention and care, or "pruning" (42), needed for the crop to thrive. In the chicken coop, the hens that aren't "fast enough to get food" (44) teach lessons about redistribution. The strawberry and tomatoes and hawthorn, all "plants in the rose family," teach that "solitary flowers are rare" (44). "Poetry work" is a "documenting and honouring practice" (40) that circulates these lessons and, as in Eng and Nicholson's other documentary projects, this poetry work is never a solitary endeavour. In this collaborative poem they also work alongside other thinkers and organisers, including Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, la paperson, journalist Vicky Mochama, Paul Taylor who is the Executive Director of FoodShare Toronto, and other workers at Emma's Acres.

There are ways in which this teaching is also remembering. In the second half of the poem, written in long searching lines that juxtapose the sharpness of Eng's observations, Nicholson writes that "somatically [her] body remembers farming as a rurally entrenched kid" (46). Although the "occasional bush and ditches" of rural Ontario "weren't much at all like these / rolling hills," she writes that the work of planting "*feels* familiar" (46). Through her planting and reading, understood here as linked practices, she is reminded that mutual aid and the communal work of ensuring food sovereignty are "not new rather, are long-standing traditions / instilled in Black community and experience" (46). This section of the poem pieces together the history of the fish pepper, a variety of hot pepper originally from the Caribbean and grown by the

Black community around Chesapeake Bay in the nineteenth century. By the early 1900s, the pepper was nearly extinct but the painter Horace Pippin, whose paintings depicting the Black experience in the US became very popular during the thirties folk art revival, began trading rare seeds with his neighbour in return for bee sting therapy to treat his arthritis. Pippin's neighbour, H. Ralph Weaver, and his family eventually gathered one of the largest private heirloom seed collections in the world—the Roughwood Seed Collection—and, in the 1990s, the fish pepper saw a revival by Black cooks and farmers in and around Baltimore. In "Restorative Practices," Nicholson draws on this "perfectly verdant ancestry" (46) that includes Black agricultural and intellectual histories that have grown "heirloom systems of runners" who "will last through this latest, next crises" (47). She compares the fish pepper's history to the "inhumane scovilles" of "law-enforcement grade" (47) pepper spray and, in light of these grievously twinned histories, reflects on what it means for her to "hold a Carolina Reaper in repose" (47) on a hot summer day with her friend and fellow poet-worker.

To restore means to bring back, to return or repair. "Restorative Practices" refers to the community-based framework for achieving justice for both victims and offenders practiced at Emma's Acres, but Nicholson and Eng also use the term here to say something about the temporalities of abolition. Drawing lessons from the practical project of Reconstruction and W.E.B Du Bois's understanding of "abolition democracy," Gilmore argues that "we can decide what a particular form, old or new, is made of by trying to make it into something else" (229). She explains that Black radicalism's dialectical imagination stems from the recognition that "people didn't make what they made from nothing" (231), or, in other words, "this—making something into something else—is what negation is" (229). Not unlike practices of restorative justice, the Black Radical Tradition "goes back in time-space not in order to abolish history, but

rather to find alternatives… [to the] displacement and redistribution of human sacrifice" (228) that prolong the unfinished project of liberation. Gilmore's description of dialectical materialism—"making something into something else"—strikes me as a pretty good way to describe late documentary poetics.

"Restorative Practices" ends with the description of

a three-pepper hot sauce in a citrus brine

in the cupboard those smoked peppers from last fall infused

with a snip of lilac from my home and its kitchen no longer far (47)

I am interested in how Horace Pippin's heirloom fish pepper seeds—mixed here with other varieties to make "a three-pepper hot sauce in a citrus brine"—might be read in dialectical relation to Rukeyser's "seeds of unending love" to illustrate the existence of simultaneous traditions that likewise cohere through the active "selection and reselection of ancestors" (Williams, *Long Revolution* 69). Gilmore draws on Paul Gilroy's critique of Williams's structures of feeling to remind us that "ages and places have multiple structures of feeling, which are dialectical rather than merely contemporaneous" (237). My analysis of Eng's and Nicholson's documentary poetics in this dissertation dealt primarily with their constrained negotiation with the documentary tradition associated with Rukeyser's seeds, but they also select and reselect their own liberatory lineages that draw documentary's residual radicalism into the Black Radical Tradition's infrastructures of feeling. Their work invites an infrastructural approach to documentary poetics that extends beyond the US and Canada—an infrastructure that "has to stretch across borders" (Gilmore qtd. in Bhandar and Toscano 22) to speak to Ernesto Cardenal's documentation of the Sandinistas resistance to the Somoza dictatorship in *Canto*

Nacional (1973) and "Zero Hour" (1980) or Cecilia Vicuña's response to the Chilean military coup that ousted and killed Salvador Allende in *SABORAMÍ* (1973). A dialectical approach to documentary poetics might usefully place arguments about documentary poetry's associations with cultural nationalism in the US and Canada in conversation with arguments about the decolonial potential of Spanish-language documentary poetics that emerged from within the revolutionary nationalisms of 1960s and 1970s Latin America in response to US imperialism.

Since Dorothy Livesay's suggestion that documentary poetry is characterized by "a conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet" (267), documentary poems have been read for their unique capacity to generate a sense of transformative tension. Indeed, critical approaches to documentary poetry have kept a commitment to tension alive against a tendency in contemporary poetics toward what Rachel Greenwald Smith calls "compromise aesthetics."[62] Most often, this tension is expressed as a dialectic between "original texts and the new one" (Davey 131-132) that involves a critical reassessment of the pasts that inhere in the poem's source texts. But there is also a tension that emerges from documentary's own coherence as a genre and reading documentary dialectically, or against the grain of its own archive, is not just a matter of noticing how poets rework the language of state and corporate archives in order to critique these hegemonic structures. Rather, a dialectical approach to late documentary poetics would need to identify new revolutionary infrastructures that underlie and organise approaches to documentary writing, infrastructures that may require rethinking documentary's association with a research model rooted in humanities

[62] In "Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics," Greenwald Smith rejects critical approaches that suggest that "contemporary art is at its most socially relevant when it forges compromises between strategies traditionally associated with the mainstream on the one hand and those associated with experimental departures from the mainstream on the other." Many of these approaches, including hybrid poetry and post-language lyric, are used to describe poetic projects that could just as easily be described as "documentary." Greenwald Smith compares compromise aesthetics to Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, noticing in these strategies a utopian liberal centrism that overcomes the dialectical through easy alliances of aesthetic form.

scholarship. For example, El Jones proposes that an abolitionist research methodology would not begin with a research question and would "have *no particular research outcome* or goal in mind" (258-59). The research methodology that Jones proposes would instead be "based in *friendship* methods of engagement with incarcerated people" (258). This model of abolitionist intimacy is perhaps the social infrastructure that subtends Eng and Nicholson's "documenting and honouring practice" (40) of sowing, pruning, growing, and yielding in "Restorative Practices." I began this dissertation with skepticism of the claim that "resistance to definition is one of the defining features of documentary poetry and poetics" (Ehlers and Herd) but, by insisting that the terms of culture's participation in the political are still open to debate, the late documentary poetry projects discussed here also suggest that the generic infrastructures of documentary are hardly settled.

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