# Documentary Poetry

**a unit**

**Interpretation of Literature**

**Course Number**

**Location**

**8:00-9:15 T/TH**

**Fall 2015**

The University of Iowa

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

**Department of English**

Course Info

**Instructor**: Heidi Renée Aijala

**Office:**

**Office Hours**: 9:15-10:45 T/TH and by appointment.

**Email**: heidi-aijala@uiowa.edu

**Department Chair**: Jonathan Wilcox

**Department Main Office**:308 EPB

**General Education Literature Director:** Barbara Eckstein, Barbara-eckstein@uiowa.edu, 305B EPB, 5-2789.

# Unit Texts

Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. “The Cry of the Children.” 1844. Found online here: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172981>.

Dawes, Kwame. “Hope: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica.” Watch online here: <http://www.livehopelove.com/>.

--- “Voices of Haiti Project.” Watch online here: <http://pulitzercenter.org/features/voices-haiti>.

Jess, Tyehimba. “Syncopated Sonnets: TED Talk.” Watch online here: <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TedxNashvlle-Tyehimba-Jess-Sync>.

Nowak, Mark. *Coal Mountain Elementary.* Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2009.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen.* Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014.

Reznikoff, Charles. “Children 3.” *Testimony.* Black Sparrow Press, 1978. Listen online here: <https://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/authors/Reznikoff/Holocaust_1975/Reznikoff-Charles_14_Children-3_Holocaust_NYC_12-21-75.mp3>.

Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Book of the Dead.* 1938. Found online here: <http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/writing/the-book-of-the-dead/>

Trethewey, Natasha. “Believer.” *Congregation*. New York: William Meredith Foundation/Dryad Press, 2014. Watch online here: <https://vimeo.com/6362681>.

## Unit Description

“A poem does invite,” suggests Muriel Rukeyser in her 1949 publication, *The Life of Poetry.* The poem, suggests Rukeyser, invites the reader not only to feel but to engage in a “total response.” In this unit we will take up Rukeyser’s invitation to become immersed through total response by getting involved vocally, mentally, kinesthetically with poetry that documents and relates historical narratives.

The topic of this unit is documentary poetry. But, what does that mean? In his essay, “Documentary Poetry and Archival Desire,” published in the on-line journal,*Jacket2*, Joseph Harrington defines documentary poetry as designating “poetry that (1) contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the poet and (2) relates historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural.” I will add that documentary poetry investigates historical events of national and global significances and argues for political, social, and legal change.

In this unit, we will consider how documentary poetry records grief, mourns the dead, and memorializes the voices of those who can no longer speak, such as Chinese coal miners who were killed in the Sunjiawin mine disaster and the Jews who were sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. To frame our discussion, we will read widely and deeply in the form of documentary poetry, beginning with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous 1844 poem “The Cry of the Children.” As we read, we will consider the implications of documentary poetry across history, emphasizing the present consequences of such calls and ultimately taking up Claudia Rankine’s 2014 work, *Citizen.* Ultimately, we will conclude the unit by constructing our own documentary poems.

As we investigate documentary poetry, I invite you to engage in a “total response” through reading annotations, contributions to the class blog, discussion, and performance.

## Learning Outcomes

* Articulate the definition of documentary poetry.
* Explain the similarities and differences between poems.
* Analyze the form and style of each poem.
* Examine the historical and political contexts associated with each poem.
* Discuss how each poem documents grief and presents modes of mourning and memorialization.
* Assess the author’s purpose for each poem.
* Compose your own documentary poem.

## Assignments

**Informal Assignments and Participation:** These informal assignments include reading annotations, a group facilitation projects and in-class participation. Here, you will practice rhetorical moves in low-stakes settings. Please ask questions along the way, take risks, and explore the strategies introduced through the assignments. Attendance and active participation are necessary and expected. Note: Your participation grade is determined by your active, thoughtful and informed participation in class discussion and activities (distinct from mere attendance).

**Final Project:** As a culmination of this unit, you will create your own documentary poem. This project requires multiple drafts and in-class workshops. Deadlines can be found on the class calendar and a detailed description will be handed out in class.

## Grading

This unit has four categories. See the category breakdown below.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Total Percentage** | **Percentage Breakdown** |
| Final Project | 20% | Final Poem (10%)Drafts and Workshop Materials (10%) |
| Unit Quizzes | 20% |  |
| In-Class Participation | 30% | Verbal Participation and Performance (15%)Written reflections on daily work (15%) |
| Reading Annotations | 30% |  |

*A few words about grading:* This semester will be intellectually stimulating and rewarding. Grades in this unit will reflect your ability to think critically and move beyond previous modes of analytic processing. Part of your obligation, as a student of poetry, is to apply yourself wholly and be willing to take risks and learn new things. Expectations for this course are set high and your job is to reach out to (re)discover yourself as a reader, writer, and thinker.

Engaged Participation

To be an engaged participant in our classroom requires you to be present, on time and engaged in the fullest sense. This may include listening actively and respectfully, asking questions and making helpful, substantive contributions to workshops, peer review in-class activities and discussions. You are evaluated on your ability to consistently contribute to the conversation in ways that *raise the level of discourse.* Thus, talking frequently is not the same thing as A-level participation. Rather, actively listening to your classmates, respond incisively to others’ comments in the room and reflecting and building classmates’ ideas leads to a strong participation grade. I am aware that cultural and power differences may empower some students to speak more comfortably and more often than others. This is another reason why more participation is not necessarily better participation. I encourage you to help balance our classroom airtime by drawing out others, holding back if you are dominating the conversation and challenging yourself if you are reticent or reluctant to speak.

Late Work

**Unless other arrangements are made, including excused absences, late work falls under the 24 hour rule:** Late assignments must be turned in within 24 hours of the due date to receive partial credit. Assignments turned in after 24 hours may not be accepted. Late work, including worked turned in using the “24-hour rule,” is acceptable only by arrangement with me and may receive a reduced grade.

What Should I Do If I Miss a Class?

You need to be in class and on time every day. Absences cause you to miss out on instruction, learning time, and thinking opportunities. Assignments, directions, homework, and due dates will be updated in class and posted to ICON. It is your responsibility to know what these are, even if you miss a class. You are responsible for knowing the material and preparing any assigned work.

Communication

My goal is to create an environment where both teacher and students routinely practice respectful exchange of thoughtful ideas. I believe that learning is, in part, a result of this relationship and communication is at the heart of the interchange. I want to avoid anything that causes a breakdown of good dialogue, and have, therefore, learned to be wary of email. Please feel free to email me questions that need quick answers or to set up appointments. However, anything that is important should be discussed in a way that promotes maximum understanding. Please plan on face to face conversations when anything of issue is at stake; that is what my office hours are for, and I’d love for you to stop by. If those times are impossible for you, then we can arrange for another mutually convenient time. When it is appropriate to email, know that I do check email regularly during the day. If you have a question that requires a response via email, please be advised that I do not check email after 6pm. Therefore, it is in your best interest to email questions in advance.

Plagiarism

All CLAS students have, in essence, agreed to the College’s Code of Academic Honesty: “I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others, nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty.” Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled. To find the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Code of Academic Honesty go to the website: <http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/academic-fraud-honor-code>

Grade Concerns or Complaints

Students should always first bring such concerns to their instructor. If no satisfactory resolution is gained from discussing the problem with the instructor, students should contact the General Education Literature Director, Professor Barbara Eckstein, by e-mail to schedule an appointment to discuss the grading concern or complaint. This e-mail should specify the student’s section and instructor and should briefly outline the nature of the concern or complaint.

Final Exams

The final examination schedule for each class is announced by the Registrar generally by the fifth week of classes. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the date, time, and location of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar’s website and will be shared with instructors and students. It is the student’s responsibility to know the date, time, and place of the final exam. Final exams may not be rescheduled for any individual student without permission. The scheduled day and time for the final exam for each section may not be changed. The General Education Literature Program requires that the final exam be comprehensive in scope and does not allow take-home final exams.

Electronic Device Policy

Unless specified, you will not need any electronic devices during class. Please keep all cell phones, iPods and laptops put away. Thank you for being courteous toward our learning environment. **Inappropriate use of electronics during class time will negatively affect your participation grade.**

Accommodations

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet with the course instructor privately in the instructor’s office to make particular arrangements. See http://www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Controlling Policies for Students from Other Colleges

This course is given by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. This means that class policies on matters such as requirements, grading, and sanctions for academic dishonesty are governed by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Students wishing to add or drop this course after the official deadline must receive the approval of the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Details of the University policy of cross enrollments may be found at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~provost/deos/crossenroll.doc>

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. Visit the sexual harassment awareness site at http://www.sexualharassment.uiowa.edu/for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Tornado

The University of Iowa Operations Manual, Part V Chapter 16, outlines appropriate responses to a tornado or to a similar crisis. If a tornado or other severe weather is indicated by the UI outdoor warning system, members of the class should seek shelter in rooms and corridors in the innermost part of a building at the lowest level, staying clear of windows, corridors with windows, or large freestanding expanses such as auditoriums and cafeterias. The class will resume, if possible, after the UI outdoor warning system announces that the severe weather threat has ended. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website at http://police.uiowa.edu/stay-informed/emergency-communication/

Documentary Poetry

Unit Calendar

***\* Note: This unit is part of a larger course titled: “Good Grief!: Death, Grief, and the Politics of Mourning.” The “Documentary Poetry” unit follows a 4-week introduction to the course.***

**Week 5: What is Documentary Poetry?**

Tuesday, 9/22 “[The Cry of the Children](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172981)” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“[Believer](https://vimeo.com/6362681)” by Natasha Trethewey

“[Hope: Living and Loving with HIV in Jamaica](http://www.livehopelove.com/)” and “[Voices from Haiti](http://pulitzercenter.org/features/voices-haiti)” by Kwame Dawes

Thursday, 9/24 *Coal Mountain Elementary:* “First Lesson”: 2-66.

**Week 6: Memorialization through Documentation: Poetry, Image, and Narrative**

Tuesday, 9/28 *Coal Mountain Elementary:* “Second Lesson”: 67-135.

**Zero Draft for Documentary Poem Due**

Thursday, 10/1*Coal Mountain Elementary*: “Third Lesson”: 136-174 and “Coda”: 175-178.

 **Research for Documentary Poem Due**

**Week 7: The Politics of Mourning: What Makes a Life Grievable?**

Tuesday, 10/6 Selections from Muriel Rukeyser’s *Book of the Dead*

“[Children 3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/authors/Reznikoff/Holocaust_1975/Reznikoff-Charles_14_Children-3_Holocaust_NYC_12-21-75.mp3)” by Charles Reznikoff

**Rough Draft of Documentary Poem Due**

Thursday, 10/8 [Synocopated Sonnets](http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TedxNashvlle-Tyehimba-Jess-Sync) by Jess

 “Domestic Work” by Natasha Trethewey

**Week 8: Micro-Aggression, Violence, and Grief**

Tuesday, 10/13 *Citizen* (1-37), watch Serena Williams “Crip Walk” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tqxo05tMVP4>.

**Polished Draft of Documentary Poem Due**

Thursday, 10/15 *Citizen* (38-97), watch “Situation 5” on <http://claudiarankine.com/>.

**Week 8: Vigilance through Documentation**

Tuesday, 10/20 *Citizen* (98-162), watch “Situation 7” on <http://claudiarankine.com/>.

Thursday, 10/22 **Final Draft of Documentary Poem Due**

Documentary Poem Presentations