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ENGL463W

12 December 2021

What Is Documentary Poetry?

When we think of the word “documentary”, our minds tend to immediately envision the genre of documentary film, a “motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education or entertainment” (Britannica). Or documentary photography, “the art of capturing historically, culturally, socially, or politically significant events and experiences”, while neglecting to remember or consider that the term “documentary” encompasses a much wider range of possible mediums in which factual and historical documents and events may be presented (“Documentary.”). As we are, by nature, visual creatures, it is understandable that the mode in which we not only think of but also consume a documentary would be that of film and/or photography; especially as visual creatures within the digital realm of today, in which we have easy access to an ever-growing and seemingly endless selection of film, television, and visual images across countless streaming platforms and devices. Thus, documentary film and/or photography is not only preferred but is also simply most accessible.

While documentary photography is rather self-explanatory and without identified sub-genres, there exist six different modes within the visual spectrum of documentary film, as proposed by American film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols (MasterClass). Amongst those six modes lives the “poetic documentary”:

A poetic documentary eschews linear continuity in favor of mood, tone, or the juxtaposition of imagery. Since poetic documentaries often have little or no narrative content, the director of photography is often asked to capture highly composed, visually striking images that can tell a story without additional verbal context. (MasterClass)

Now that we know that there are multiple fields in which the documentary can be presented, and with that in mind, we must not confuse the poetic mode of documentary film, the “poetic documentary”, with the “documentary poem” or with “documentary poetry”, which is created and consumed in a literary sense rather than through visual media. But what exactly is documentary poetry? This should be relatively easy since we have already defined documentary film and photography, but Julius Lobo helps us better understand by stating:

Poets too, experiment with documentary forms, merging verse with nontraditional elements to create searing works of art. Starting in the early 20th century, poets such as Muriel Rukeyser and Williams Carlos Williams incorporated newspaper excerpts, government reports, political pamphlets, eyewitness testimony, and other documentary materials into their verse to create socially engaged poetry. Instead of wielding the camera, documentary poets spliced and transformed the textual trace of reality. Their poetry not only entertained, but also inspired their readers to action. (Lobo)

We can take what Lobo says about the author of documentary poems having “spliced and transformed the textual trace of reality” as a way to think of this documentary mode as a collage of sorts; a collage that is comprised by drawing from archival research. And what the poet deems as “archival” is to their discretion.

What is “Feminist Genealogy”?

I have definitions from two separate sources to consider here. The first states that, “We imagine feminist genealogies as transdisciplinary research and writing that engages critical genealogical methods to travel along rhizomatic pathways, searching for new vantage points... and offer[ing] new ways of seeing the present” (Meadmore et al.). While this next source is from the description of a Female Genealogy course at Rutgers University, I find that it, too, gives us a nice understanding. It states:

As a methodology, genealogy seeks to trace concepts back not to their origins (a task which presupposes continuity), but to points at which contradictions and contestations erupted in a manner productive of later discursive formations. This course examines key modern theories whose contradictions provoked feminist thought and elicited feminist critiques. (Pannu)

In laymen’s terms, or at least to the best of my understanding, feminist genealogies amount to the research and writing of interconnected/interrelated historical material in a comparative way as to shed light and/or offer alternative views on the now.

Wear & Tear, my poem, attempts to do just that through not only extensive research (which we will further discuss shortly) but by also drawing this connection between *Wear & Tear* and another work of feminist documentary poetry, *Dictee*.

Analytical Comparison Between *Wear & Tear* and *Dictee*

Dictee, written in 1982 by Korean-American artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, is a poetic masterpiece that highlights the struggles, sadness, violence, and oppression, among other things, that coincide with colonization and the figurative and literal sense of captivity, loss of

dignity and honor, erasure of identity, and the need for proper articulation, understanding, and expression.

Wear & Tear attempts to address many of the same issues within *Dictee* and the content, composition, and formatting of *Wear & Tear* was done so with *Dictee* in mind by acknowledging a specific grouping of people (women) and addressing the systematic policing, silencing, violence, and stripping of self-expression that women have suffered at the hands of cultural, societal, religious, and sexist norms.

Like *Dictee*, *Wear & Tear* draws a connection through a myriad of voices, yet it may not always or ever be one, discernable or identifiable voice. The aim of *Wear & Tear* was to produce a poem like Kyung Cha's in a way in which the narrator and reader could be anyone, and it matters not where you end or begin the story, as the intentional lack of a single story or voice is done so with the deliberate purpose of representing all women. In *Wear & Tear*, you will also find that there are voices of the oppressors themselves. But again, most are unidentifiable, and I have included them because they represent the assertion of power, control, and unnecessary policing of how women dress, or rather, how they ought to dress, as seen by others. It must also be noted that not all of the oppressive voices within *Wear & Tear* are that of men, for when it comes to how women dress (among other things), women are subjected to judgement and mistreatment from their fellow "sisters", i.e., other women, as well.

But unlike its counterpart, many of the voices within *Wear & Tear* are ones who were able to fight against their oppressors openly, as opposed to the silenced voices of *Dictee*. And although the voices within *Wear & Tear* are not always met with triumph at the time of their defiant acts, the women whose acts are featured in this poem are women who did what they wanted, at whatever cost, which would go on to impact discursive formations, incite further

rebelliousness, and sometimes even cause enough uproar that policy and/or societal changes were the outcome. In other words, within their situations, and either figuratively or literally, these women got the last word.

Investigative/Research Process

The research process for *Wear & Tear* began by sifting through the collection of photographs that I have amassed over the years and then doing the same with what my mother possessed as well. The latter was where I really sought to find something noteworthy or that sparked my creative juices and the result was fruitful.

Then began an exhausting and thorough scouring of the internet, conducting Google searches, and searches within library and newspaper archives. I would search using phrases such as, “policing women’s dress”, “history of women’s clothing”, “headlines featuring women and clothes” and so on. I searched for movies, songs, poems, and art specifically related to women’s clothes and discrimination as well.

I toured my personal library where I found useful material amongst several books, such as, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, *A History of World Societies*, and *Joan of Arc*, as well as a collection of Vogue magazine’s “September Issue” – all of which were helpful in my research.

While *Wear & Tear* covers only a mere fraction of what I found as research material, I believe that it is a representative culmination of those findings and of my research process itself.

Use of Language & “the Document” to Create Meaning

Most of *Wear & Tear* consists of words quoted from interviews or taken from articles with the intention of showcasing particular situations in which women have experienced discriminations, violations, and regulations as it pertains to their clothing choices, or sometimes lack thereof (such as with the inclusion of an illustration from Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* within the poem). The quoted material has been largely deconstructed and then artistically styled in a way that I felt best represented the key points of each situation experienced; this was achieved through the splicing and eliminating of what I deemed as “fluff” to bring focus to the “meat” of each situation. While many of the quotations include the immediate reaction and/or thoughts of the women involved in each situation, it is important to note that the quoted material that does *not* was included for a point made earlier in this rationale: that these women ended up getting the last word, regardless, through either influencing others, going to jail for their choices only to then see the judge who put them their with egg on his face, blasting their oppressors and discriminators on the web and stoking policy changes, and so forth. Within these quoted texts I often use a strikethrough and have done so to indicate the words of whomever was passing their rulings, judgements, or what have you onto the women and their choice of clothing. I use the strikethrough to indicate that those policing the women are wrong. For example, the word “inappropriate” may be used but may appear as “~~inappropriate~~” or “~~inappropriate~~”.

Anything italicized and within brackets in the text is [*my commentary*].

Within *Wear & Tear* there is the deliberate exclusion of specific names (there are two exceptions) or dates with hopes of each voice representing an entire body of individuals. Furthermore, this was done so that the reader may identify with any or all voices and/or situations that are represented here because of the sheer fact that any woman... all women...

have been, will be, or are susceptible to criticism, at the very least, when it comes to how they choose to dress.

I have taken some excerpts from songs or books that I feel have a powerful impact, as well, yet these *do* include names, at least the names of the authors/performers. And unlike the previously mentioned use of direct quotes, these excerpts are kept intact due to the point that each are making and the point that *I* am making by including them within *Wear & Tear*. For example, an excerpt from a book that features a statement by Lawrence Langer is used to blatantly give the reader background information on just how men have used clothing to make and keep themselves superior to women. And the name is included because I find it important that the reader know that this was said by a man. In contrast, I have used an excerpt from the Destiny's Child song, *Nasty Girl*, to acknowledge the hypocrisy, judgement, and lack of female empowerment exhibited by not just an all-female group but arguably one of the most famous and influential girl-groups of the last thirty years. And the explicit point being made by using this excerpt is to highlight the fact that women, not just men, are responsible for the policing of women's clothing choices, which is why the group's name is included on the page.

I have also used photographs of my own, images and excerpts from magazines, images and texts scanned and copied from books, geographical maps, and more, that I would like to leave up for interpretation, although the point of some will be quite evident. Others, not so much. Nonetheless, they are all strategically placed and have no direct connection with the women or situations that are featured in the written parts of *Wear & Tear*. But the images, again, are deliberately placed throughout; some of which were placed for sheer comic effect, such as the image of a woman (a family member of mine, apparently) all buttoned up and donning a fur stole and muff – immediately following the page featuring Destiny's Child *Nasty Girl*.

The point I am making, however, is that women ought to be able to wear whatever they damn well please. And do so without the fear of harassment, restrictions, or judgements from others. Which is precisely *why*, in my opinion, the world needs *Wear & Tear*. This poem reflects *what* women wear, *how* women have suffered at the hands of violence, dehumanization, and discrimination based on their clothing choices, and *who* is responsible for their mistreatment. My poem also reflects the long history of this abuse towards women, taking it all the way back to Ancient Greece. And lastly, *Wear & Tear* is meant to empower and encourage women to be unafraid, as it is *that* which disrupts the status quo, ultimately benefitting not just themselves but women everywhere.

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