TRIGGER HAPPY
Composing Poems Generated by Public Events

Therese Mancevski

Critical Paper and Program Bibliography
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) in Creative Writing, Pacific Lutheran University, August 2007.
A rather unusual set of circumstances prompted my interest in poetry driven by public events. In August 2005, I left my adopted home in Fort Lewis, Washington to return to my family’s home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi for a year-long stint while my husband completed a tour of duty in South Korea. Unfortunately, we met with disaster seven days after our arrival: no one in South Mississippi was left unaffected by Hurricane Katrina, and I began my first day as an adjunct instructor for the University of Southern Mississippi wondering how many of my students would even show up for a Beginning Composition class when, like myself, they still had no water or electricity three weeks after the storm hit, and when gas was still a precious commodity difficult to find. And these were small concerns: a majority of the student population at USM live farther south on the Gulf Coast and even in and around New Orleans, which meant the likelihood of having students in my class who had lost their homes and even loved ones in the storm was very high.

I wanted my students to have the opportunity to write about this horrific event, so I assigned a Katrina Autobiography as the first formal paper of the semester. Of the sixty essays I received on that topic, the ones that stood out above the rest were ones that included details not readily available on the nightly news. A year and a half later, I can still recall a paper about a young woman’s resolve to stay in Mississippi despite her parents’ insistence that she come back to her hometown of Seattle, Washington; a young father’s concern for his twin babies and his struggle to find food and diapers for them.
after the storm; a young man who, while floating down the street on a mattress, saw his fashion-conscious sister’s favorite outfits making their way out into the Gulf and couldn’t stop laughing; another young man’s argument for a new university contingency plan based on his awful experience in the dorms; another young man’s embarrassment at having to bathe in the lake behind his house for a week; and an exchange student’s entertaining recounting of the event told in the perspective of a South American lover of all things dry. Roughly ten percent of the essays I read seemed original, which forced me to consider the question: If public event based-prose is difficult to write in a compelling way, what would it take to write successful poems based on those same events, and which poets have been able to do it well?

Based on my students’ writing, I could surmise that, for one thing, if you’re going to write on a public event, it can’t be the only force driving the writing. There has to be some other concern at work, an additional subject for the writer to address. This idea extends to poetry through the work of Richard Hugo, who believed poems “can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject…and the real or generated subject” (The Triggering Town 4). In each of the successful examples cited from the Katrina assignment, the student devoted an equal amount of attention to both subjects, so that the storm became a catalyst for a young woman’s resolve to become more self-reliant, for a young father to bond with his infant sons, for a young man to reassess his relationship with his sister, for another young man to address some of the imperfections within his community, and for an exchange student to give his first impressions of a completely new experience in a completely new country. Therefore, the first, and perhaps most critical
challenge for writers of successful public event-based poems is to find both a triggering and a generated subject, and to address both of those concerns in the space of the poem.

I designated Hurricane Katrina as a “public event,” but what does that term mean exactly? To me, a public event is one that moves beyond mere reporting of facts, and speaks, on some level, to larger sociological concerns: does the event prompt individual change? Does it have an effect on our way of life as a nation? Does it speak to fundamental questions on what it means to be human? Katrina’s effects, for example, touched my students on an individual level by inspiring their spirit of independence and resolve, and reinforced their sense of commitment by re-establishing a sense of community. On the national level, the storm ultimately forced the American government to re-evaluate a national contingency plan for future natural disasters, not to mention making FEMA accountable for its (in)action. Katrina also made an appearance in the global arena, when some countries used it to promote their own anti-American sentiment, saying it was Allah’s way of punishing the United States for our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, this event raised questions, for me at least, about the current state of humanity: why, for instance, would the Army Corps of Engineers rebuild levees to withstand a category three hurricane when storms can potentially reach category five levels? And why, when I had just survived the worst storm in United States’ history, did I care what people thought of my idea to move to South Korea without the help or support of the Army? This experience taught me about having the courage to do what you feel is right, and about living your life the best way you see fit.

In the Information Age, public events are those in which anyone who owns a television or radio, subscribes to a newspaper, or has access to the Internet will know
about because they will get broadcast in all four media forms. Public events are the ones that are capable of reaching all levels of audience: local, national, and global. North Korea’s nuclear tests, the ongoing War on Terror, and the suspicious death of an ex-KGB member by poisoning are all examples of recent public events. In short, these are the events that all media forms recognize as most important, and these are the events which become part of the general public’s conscience, help shape the way we live, and will eventually become what we are remembered for.

Poets who choose to write public event-based work face a number of difficult challenges: it’s not such an easy task to “make it new” when an event appears as the headline of *The New York Times*, receives a copious amount of air time on CNN, is being researched for Oprah’s talk show, and pops up on the computer screen as you go to check your email.

In addition to the challenges of originality, poets of public event-based work must also consider the issue of credibility. If narrators sound too authoritative, poets run the risk of alienating their audience; conversely, if narrators sound too distant from the event, poets run the risk of losing credibility with audiences who can see through vague language and abstraction just as easily as if they were a transparent set of curtains on paper.

When I sit down to write a public event-based poem, I know that the three questions I ask myself regarding composition always revolve around issues of time, form, and narrator, so I kept these questions in mind and looked for other poets’ treatment of these concepts as I conducted my research. I noticed that the public event-driven work of Naomi Shihab Nye, Adrian Oktenberg, and Seamus Heaney all devoted special attention
to various manipulations of time. For poems contributed by Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Dickey, and Charles Simic, form choice and physical presentation of the work seemed to be the primary consideration. And finally, I noticed that the work of Norman Dubie, Ai, and Fleda Brown all seemed to pay careful attention to the possibilities of incorporating different kinds of narrators into pieces.

Playing around with concepts of time when composing an event-driven poem can produce arresting results. Additionally, adjusting the lense of time on the picture of an event or set of events can yield a wide variety of reactions from the reader. Naomi Shihab Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Adrian Oktenberg’s *The Bosnia Elegies*, and selections from Seamus Heaney’s collected work, *Opened Ground*, travel down the road of a time continuum, moving from immediate impact pieces to the more prolonged impact work readers might expect to encounter in flashback or hindsight-style poems that exchange tones of uncertainty with more contemplative or pensive ones. Additionally, these three selections deal with different time periods: Nye’s collection revolves around the single-day events of 9/11, while Oktenberg’s work examines a decade of struggle in Bosnia as a result of the conflict begun in the 1990’s. Heaney’s work, in contrast to both Nye and Oktenberg, is the result of a reality created by a lifetime, not just a single day, a couple of months, or a few years, of unrest experienced in Ireland.

It is my contention that our constant exposure to widely broadcast public events impacts our lives, primarily in terms of how we process information: our initial reactions to events such as the sudden onslaught of violence in Iraq, or news of finding the decapitated bodies of journalists, include shock or disbelief, followed by resentment or anger. At some point, we begin to take stock, re-evaluating either ourselves or our
society, or both. Finally, we either adjust to the new reality prompted by the event or become ambivalent to it. The important point here is that all of these different stages are governed by one important factor: time.

Other critics have noted the increasing importance the concept of time has had on poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Lorrie Goldensohn, editor of an anthology of war poems written by Americans, characterizes the work of recent years as follows:

These recent poems…do not in glad triumph affirm the validity of sacrifice, or call for vengeance or retaliation. Nor do they recognize the traditional boundaries of wartime: beyond sketching a new intensity or escalation of war power, the poems seem all middle-time, with no discernible sense of anything but endlessly opening hostilities. (American War Poetry: An Anthology 336)

Such characterization comes as no surprise to readers who are exposed to real-time, round the clock reporting twenty-four hours a day. Indeed, a huge part of the culture shock I experienced living in South Korea, due to both a language barrier and censorship of channels broadcast in English, was the switch from real time reality to one where I received information on a second-hand basis. I found out about a protest involving 10,000 demonstrators when the taxi I was riding in wasn’t allowed to take the exits back to my apartment. And when North Korea tested its nuclear capabilities in October 2006, even though I live less than 50 miles away from the border of that country, I had no inclination that anything had happened until a frantic girlfriend called me from 15,000 miles away, wanting to know when she could expect my arrival back in the States. Until I experienced life outside the realm of “real time,” I never realized my preoccupation with
those moments that seem to exist outside of it, and how much of my own work seemed to take place in that realm of detached time. This idea eventually formed the basis for my first collection, *Zulu Time*, which deals largely with those moments when the connection between time and narrator is severed, however momentarily, making way for explosions of intense feelings that demand to be reckoned with.

These experiences, along with many others, have provided me with a more acute awareness of time, so when I opened *19 Varieties of Gazelle* and noticed the copyright date, 2001, and the date of the first poem in the collection, also 2001, it came as no surprise to me that Nye’s work would most likely contain raw, immediate-impact poems on the subject of 9/11, and my suspicions were confirmed over and over again by the poet’s consistent use of present tense, the ever-present atmosphere of multiple perspectives regarding the event, and the final images of uncertainty presented in the collection’s concluding poem.

Simple present, present perfect, and present perfect progressive verbs dominate the poems that appear in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, a small observation with large implications: these verbs function to keep the poems in the moment, which is to say, they keep our attention on the event of 9/11 though there’s no specific mention of that event in the entire collection other than in the first dated poem. Furthermore, even though Nye *does* revisit her own past, and the past of her generated subject, people of Middle Eastern descent, her poems seem to take great care to delineate between these two very different time periods, and readers are always very clearly aware of the narrator’s journeys back into the past because they usually involve some mode of transportation, so that, in
addition to the verb tense switches, we are able to use planes, trains, and cars as clues to signal our arrival at a different time period.

The collection also includes a host of different points-of-view, which quickly gives readers the impression that they’re dealing with a rather elusive narrator. With such an overwhelming number of voices and varying reactions, Nye’s intent may have been to include generational differences, to illustrate how age, time, and the event might be related. But after readers have devoted the bulk of their time wandering around crowded poems, we are more anxious to finally have the chance to sit down with the narrator for a moment.

The concluding poem in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* allows us that moment, but not without a final word from the narrator’s father. “Blood” begins with his attempt to define cultural identity by giving the speaker the example of what he thinks a “true Arab” can do, namely catch flies, so that right away, both the speaker and the reader are presented with a set of standards with which to measure a certain culture. The narrator passes her initiation into that culture during the course of the poem, until the powerful final stanza:

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I call my father, we talk around the news.
It’s too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
to plead with the air:
who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now? (137)
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This moment extends beyond the borders of the poem and offers the closest thing to a summative statement readers will receive for the entire collection. Other than in the very first poem, it represents the only time we are privy to the interior thoughts of the narrator, which also increases the significance of the final lines. The series of questions that end
the piece reiterate the feeling of uncertainty readers can detect from the very first pages of *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, and the last line reinforces the focus on time the poet has concerned herself with throughout the collection. While we have completed the journey, which started in the present and has returned back to that point, there is no sense of satisfaction in that progression. Instead, Nye offers readers the sense that we have run into a brick wall going through the maze of life, and she makes no attempt to offer any solutions as to how we’re going to get around it. Readers’ expectations for a tidy organized conclusion do not get realized in this collection, which may come as a disappointment for some.

For me, these questions immediately reverberate back to the day I watched the towers fall and the security blanket was yanked away from all Americans, and the strange feeling of being lost in a world that became much less friendly in the space of a single day. I think we all wanted to know how to respond to 9/11, and none of us turned the light out on that day with the same sense of certainty we had come to expect and enjoy for over half a century. My own work began to take on a more emotional intensity after that event, even though I wasn’t living in New York and I didn’t personally know anyone who had perished as a result of what happened. Katrina provided my firsthand experience with terror and devastation, and it wasn’t until that event that I began to incorporate the language of anger and indignation into my writing. The poems generated by these two specific events were some of the most necessary ones of my life: they prompted me to deal with issues of purpose, and have become some of the most meaningful pieces of writing I’ve ever produced.
Based on Nye’s example, one option writers have to deal with the concept of time in their public event-driven work is to attempt a recreation of the event. When successful, this approach allows readers to experience firsthand the feelings and emotions of the event rather than being told what it was like. Another option regarding the aspect of time writers might consider for their public event-driven work is to re-visit recent prior events, moving away from the shock of first responses into a more contemplative arena. Adrian Oktenberg’s work in *The Bosnia Elegies* exemplifies such a movement, and readers quickly notice a change in tone between Nye’s confusion and uncertainty to Oktenberg’s resentment and despair.

The Bosnian conflict ended on paper with a peace agreement signed in 1995, though Oktenberg’s collection of poems devoted to that event didn’t appear in print until 1997. Oktenberg’s work had at least a one year time difference between the end of hostilities and the book’s publication. In terms of creativity, the most apparent impact of this time difference occurs in the overall tone of the pieces. In general, the tone of Oktenberg’s collection is much less uncertain, much more definitive. Unlike Nye, Oktenberg has had five years, 1991-1996, to process the information and effects of the event, and “Banja Luka,” a piece that deals with some of the political outcomes of the conflict for this particular town, effectively demonstrates the difference a single year can make:

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and that is the trouble with this peace so-called plan
it rewards ethnic cleansing
ratifies it
purifies the land crystallizes borders
where no borders divided us before
This land is Croat, that for the Serbs
the Bosnian Muslims will have their own unequal piece
so-called peacekeeping troops will separate the groups
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In the example of this poem, readers will notice that the continual sense of shock and awe characteristic of Nye’s work isn’t as readily available in the work of Oktenberg. A scattering of graphic imagery seems to serve that function in *The Bosnia Elegies*, and Oktenberg’s main concerns aren’t so much in the cause or effect of the public event, but in trying to identify problems and consider solutions that have arisen as a result of the public event.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s book concentrates on re-examining the past to help supply solutions for the future, and when that search seems to come up empty-handed for her, the narrator ultimately remains rooted in the present. On the other hand, Oktenberg’s book, while including occasional quick glimpses from the past, uses the present to make more of a hypothesis for the future, which, though both poets use present tenses, may account for the difference in how the poems are perceived so differently in a more general sense. Oktenberg doesn’t seem to be as fixated on the event as Nye, so that, while the latter’s generated subject is fueled with a strong desire to attempt to explain or reassert, the generated subject of the former can move away from examination or cause into the realm of impact and implication.

Both poets prove successful at keeping their respective events from overtaking the work, which is no small accomplishment since both of them use the event to provide the connective tissue for entire collections, not just a few individual poems. For both Nye and Oktenberg, an effective treatment of time not only sustains the reader’s attention for the entire duration of those collections, but also allows both writers to transition easily from the triggering subject to the generated one. *19 Varieties of Gazelle* and *The Bosnia*
Elegies dispel the idea that public event-driven poems are confined to the space of a single poem or small group of poems.

At this point, I admit that my own writing has not been able to achieve such a seemingly effortless balance between event and time. Unlike Nye and Oktenberg, both of whom manage to keep the event as a centerpiece for response, my poems tend to give precedence to the latter, so that events function more as a way to provide a historical reference that accounts for whatever larger concern I undertake. And while I remain impressed by these poets’ ability to engage so thoroughly with their respective events, I must also admit that both poets’ collections began to feel redundant in some other aspects—Nye’s refusal to have her narrator stand alone, Oktenberg’s repetitious use of broken lines and breaks within lines—so that I felt myself becoming more and more immune to the horror and shock of them. I experienced the same sense of complacency that occurs when broadcasters focus so intently on a single story.

Perhaps that’s why most writers of public-event poems, including myself, are content to compose them only on an occasional basis. Seamus Heaney’s Opened Ground for example, reflects on Irish experience in its entirety, not just on the public events which have helped define Ireland as a volatile country continually at odds with England until recently. His poems that deal directly with those events are few and far between, so when words such as “snipers” and “battlefields” creep in to create allusions to them, they almost become a natural part of the narrator’s landscape. The effect of their presence, however, knocks the reader off balance each time they get mentioned.

And when Heaney does consider public events as centerpieces, his approach is subtle, more like Nye than Oktenberg. His treatment of time differentiates his work from
either previous poet, however, because his ability to condense time switches within the
space of single poem, rather than using the space of an entire collection.

Unlike the relatively short poems that comprise most of the work in both 19
Varieties of Gazelle and The Bosnian Elegies, “Casualty” appears as a 112-line piece
divided into three parts. Right away readers may suspect a more contemplative tone. Our
suspicions are confirmed by the first lines, “He would drink by himself/ And raise a
weathered thumb…” and we are prepared for a reminiscence Heaney’s narrator lingers on
for thirty-six additional lines, describing an unnamed character who seems to remain a
casual acquaintance, acknowledging the narrator’s presence despite his reputation for
engaging in subversive activities the narrator sees as both questionable and enticing.
Readers observe the relationship between narrator and character as something like father
figure or childhood idol, until

He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry. (www.poetseers.org)

These heart-stopping lines effectively and abruptly introduce readers to the event that
precipitates the story behind the poem: we may not be immediately aware of who “the
thirteen men of Derry” are, but we know the event impacted the narrator’s life to the
extent that our own curiosity prompts us to find out more. Heaney isn’t so acquiescent,
however, and “Casualty” quickly moves to its second section, switching to funereal
descriptions, along with continued commentary on the dead man’s obstinacy. It is in this
section that the pendulum of time swings back and forth most rapidly between past and
present until, in the final lines, we could swear the dead man has just asked the narrator a question.

By the poem’s final section, the dead man has transcended the physical world to become the driving spirit of freedom for the narrator. Readers feel compelled to explore the factual basis of the poem, and a quick historical check reveals “Casualty” is the result of the events which occurred in Ireland on January 30, 1972. Readers who might be unfamiliar with Heaney’s description will immediately recognize the name which has been designated for this pivotal moment in Irish history: Bloody Sunday. Finally, the concluding stanza of the poem is marked by the narrator’s own transcendence from innocent bystander to resolute participant as a result of this event and his relationship to it.

How a writer chooses to approach the aspect of time in public event-driven poems can yield a variety of different results: a conscious awareness of the treatment of time can spotlight the moment of a particular event, allow for a re-assessment of it, or even showcase the narrator’s transcendence of it. The actual passage of time can also effect the public event-driven poem: we can witness the chaos and confusion of 9/11 years later in Naomi Shihab Nye’s work, examine the unexpected outcomes of the conflict in Bosnia in the poems of Adrian Oktenberg, and experience the birth of a narrator’s hunger for a free Ireland in the example of Seamus Heaney’s “Casualty.” Regardless of whether writers expand time to cover the length of an entire collection or condense it into the moment of a single poem, if we are to follow Hugo’s recipe for success, we must acknowledge time’s importance as a legitimate and effective way to promote the inclusion of generated subjects so that the event doesn’t remain the public event-based poem’s sole concern.
A second technique writers of the public event-driven poem can employ to prevent the event from overtaking the piece is to consider their treatment of form. Writers such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the example of James Dickey’s earlier work use traditional forms to invoke feeling without having to write those feelings down in the words of the piece. Free verse writers can also achieve the same effect. As we’ll see, a poem from Charles Simic’s work, which utilizes the effectiveness of extended metaphor, demonstrates the ability of free verse poems to recapture the emotional impact of the event without relying on any particular rhyme scheme.

*American War Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by Lorrie Goldensohn, showcases the different ways American poets have reacted to hostilities involving the United States. Because of the chronological arrangement of the collection, readers can easily observe the evolution from formal to free verse, until the latter becomes the dominant preference of writers with the advent of World War II. I was curious to find out what techniques poets might substitute for traditional forms, and whether those substitutions would produce poems as powerful as some of their formal predecessors.

Much like the other selections by Paul Laurence Dunbar included in Goldensohn’s anthology, including “Black Samson of Brandywine” and “The Conquerors: The Black Troops in Cuba,” “The Unsung Heroes” provides readers with an impressive example of formal verse. The piece is composed of eight stanzas of heroic couplets, and recounts the bravery of African American soldiers who fought for the Union during the Civil War. According to Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, poets and editors of the textbook *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, this particular kind of verse is one “in which a high subject matter could be written. This was
the form often used for translation of epic poetry from the classical Latin and Greek” (121). Dunbar’s selection of this particular form affords a happy marriage to the subject matter, and contributes to the poet’s larger concern of making a place in poetry—and in American history—for African Americans.

Not surprisingly, heroic couplets had been an obvious choice, not only for Dunbar, but for many of the poets preceding him in this anthology. Before readers encounter “The Unsung Heroes,” they have already become acquainted with the form through the work of poets such as Philip Freneau, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Ambrose Bierce. However, until Dunbar, readers have been given a romantic vision of the American soldier. The reality of Dunbar dissolves that fanciful illusion, however. His speaker doesn’t attempt to distract readers with pictures of heroic battles or important figures. Rather, “The Unsung Heroes” is delivered as a plea from the narrator that some higher power might recognize and include the contributions of African American soldiers:

Give, Thou some seer the power to sing them in their might,  
The men who feared the master’s whip, but did not fear the fight;  
That he may tell of their virtues as minstrels did of old,  
Till the pride of face and the hate of race grow obsolete and cold.  
(Goldensohn 93)

Until the Civil War, America’s enemies had been external. “The Unsung Heroes” reminds readers that this conflict was the result of internal strife between Americans. This poem does not attempt to demonize the enemy, which might have been the more obvious choice if Dunbar’s aim had been focused on black patriotism or some other theme that excluded whites. The speaker in this poem seems more interested in unifying rather than alienating the enemy, and his attempts at unification are realized by Dunbar’s use of
traditional form. Dunbar’s choice to adopt heroic couplets allows the narrator’s hopes to become a reality simultaneously: while the speaker hopes for someone to glorify the efforts and courage of African American soldiers in the same way other soldiers have been glorified, Dunbar’s lines are doing just that very thing. By following the form of previous poets, “The Unsung Heroes” ensures black soldiers are represented in the same way as white soldiers, at least in poetry, and, like most of the abolitionist literature of this period, Dunbar’s poem strives to create a sense of unification based on country, not color. Readers might not have been able to make such a connection if the poem had been written in some other form, and the result might not have been one of inclusion.

While Dunbar uses traditional form in an effort to promote his larger concern, James Dickey’s combat poem “The Island” uses traditional form to unify the literal with the metaphorical. This poem, like “The Unsung Heroes,” is also written in a sequence of heroic couplets, perhaps to serve as homage for the fallen soldiers, who are the subject of the narrator’s concern. More specifically, “The Island” deals with the cessation of combat during World War II, and the immediate problems of how to deal with the dead and how to return to some sense of normalcy.

Unlike Dunbar’s narrator, Dickey’s is a man of action. He notices the haphazard care with which the dead have been disposed of, and early on in the poem he states: “The coral and I understood/ That these could come to no good/ Without the care I could give,/ That I, by them, must live” (The Whole Motion: Collected Poems 102). His reaction to the scene is to give the dead a proper burial before he leaves, and so he begins the work of gravedigger.
The couplets in Dickey’s poem signify the ritual nature of the narrator’s actions, so that the question of whether or not the narrator actually buried the dead or just thought about doing it becomes irrelevant. They also represent an ordering, a kind of return to uniformity, structure, or routine that may have been absent during the chaos of war. They provide a sense of control over a situation which the narrator, as soldier, may not have had.

After reading my students’ essays and in the months immediately following Hurricane Katrina, I relied heavily on form because they were my way of re-establishing some sense of control as far as my poetic world was concerned, so Dickey’s couplets in “The Island” also struck me as his narrator’s way of doing the same kind of thing. This line of thinking creates a duality for the poem: the action of regaining order through the ritual of proper burials for the dead is also the reaction of regaining order in the narrator’s mind at the closing of the war. “The Island” represents a way to use form to successfully marry the literal with the metaphorical aspects of a poem, adding a second dimension for readers to consider.

To date, the most important poem I’ve written about the storm is a sonnet sequence called “Unearthed.” The sequence focuses on some of the more immediate impacts of that event, and what it took to recover a sense of place in the aftermath of disaster, confusion, and chaos. My aim for the sequence was to not only provide readers with vivid details, but to also try to recapture what it felt like to be put in the alien position of picking up the pieces and moving on in the face of such overwhelming devastation.
The sequence revolves around the thoughts and feelings of a female narrator, Ismene, whose experiences immediately after a hurricane are recounted in whirlwind detail over the course of four sonnets. In the final piece of the sequence, however, Ismene looks forward for a moment, beyond the madness of the present moment and the physical and mental work it commands:

Only when the waters return to their natural gumbo brown, when the rotten refrigerators and flooded vehicles disappear, when shops reopen and shrimp reclaim their breeding ground will she trade her worker’s mask for one of glittering cheer… Ismene will ask for a blue note held for a slow moment of peace: a chance for her to breathe in all that’s happened…and release.

After reading the sequence, one reader remarked that the experience had been “like trying to run through mud.” This response was exactly what I had intended: I wanted to re-create the sense of frustration that resulted from the hurry-up-and-wait mentality which became the status quo for so many, and persists even today. Based on the reaction I received, I consider the sequence successful in having accomplished what I had hoped.

Creating that additional dimension, of marrying form with content, doesn’t come as easily for free verse poems generated by public event, so writers who choose to present their material in this way must resort to using some other means to achieve a semblance of the effect form pieces produce. However, while this method of producing the event-based poem may prove more difficult, it is, by no means, impossible.

As form gave way to free verse in the anthology, I noticed an increased use of graphic imagery, so much so that I surmised its employment was used to replace what had been lost as a result of omitting any kind of formal structure. Charles Simic’s poem about World War II, “Prodigy,” stood out from the crowd of free verse poems filled with violent imagery, however. In this poem, Simic effectively creates a stark landscape
readers can readily identify with the experience of living through hostilities. In his poem, readers begin to understand how the reality of war can, and often does, overshadow all other aspects of life.

There are no specific names or historic facts included in “Prodigy,” and the opening lines of the poem don’t even seem to have anything to do with wartime concerns: “I grew up bent over/ a chessboard” (Goldensohn 245). The narrator’s primary concern for the poem is the recollection of a childhood memory. Readers don’t know where the narrator is physically located, and his note concerning the time period when all this took place is nothing more than an estimate. According to him, “That must have been in 1944” (246). This line serves as the reader’s first specific inference to the war, but the narrator doesn’t give us any additional information. Instead of launching into lines that place him in the world or what his experience might have been, he describes the chess board and pieces. A short stanza later, we get the closest glimpse of firsthand experience from the narrator, who insists:

I’m told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.
I remember my mother
blindfolding me a lot. (Goldensohn 246)

The narrator’s preoccupation with his own memories stops the poem from becoming a generalization. In fact, his focus quickly returns to chess after these few lines, ending on a comment about how some of the best players are able to play multiple games while blindfolded. It isn’t until the end of “Prodigy” that readers receive the full impact of the piece, its extended metaphor between the business of war and the game of chess, and Simic’s subtlety makes the poem all the more powerful.
The consideration for form given by Dunbar, Dickey, and Simic all emphasize the importance of presentation. The result of such careful attention to form is the creation of a kind of duality for the piece. Dunbar’s heroic couplets give credence to the contributions of African American soldiers in the Civil War; Dickey’s couplets add an emotional dimension to his combat poems; Simic’s free verse and his implementation of the extended metaphor free up his subject matter while simultaneously creating an intimate relationship between the specific events of his narrator’s childhood and a more general impression of the experience of life during World War II.

Up to this point, readers may have observed that most of the examples I’ve included have been the direct result of an individual narrator’s response to wartime violence. However, public event-driven poems aren’t relegated to that one subject. Like an American society obsessed with the lives of its celebrities and politicians, a number of poets have also included public figures in their writing, a fact that necessitates some discussion of how, like the aspects of time and form, a consideration for the narrator impacts the public event-based poem.

The most conventional way to use the narrator in a public event-driven piece would be to use the third person omniscient point of view, assigning the narrator the role of either reporter or storyteller. While this approach can be interesting, I’ve found that, more often than not, poems written in this way adopt a tone of authority that often fails to engage the reader in the most effective way. The pieces sound more like textbook entries than poems, and quite often they can become more of a challenge than a delight to read.

A far more intriguing way to approach the aspect of the narrator would be to employ the persona poem for public event-driven work. I’d much rather read about
Napoleon’s conquests from Napoleon himself than from a narrator speaking about him. It’s much easier for me to suspend my (dis)belief about whether or not Napoleon felt a certain way than for a narrator who’s showing off how much he/she knows about Napoleon’s life. Persona poems eliminate suspicions readers may have about motive and add a degree of credibility to public event-based work. In addition, they crack the subject of the public event-based poem wide open. For instance, if I wanted to write a collection of work based on the War on Terror, I might not only include poems about specific events—9/11, bombing Baghdad, finding Saddam Hussein—but also poems written from various personas. It might be very interesting to write a piece about George Bush’s defense for the continuation of the war, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “real” reasons for submitting his resignation, or even what it must be like to work as a civilian contractor in Afghanistan who is always under the threat of being kidnapped and killed under a policy that doesn’t allow companies to negotiate with insurgents. More than anything else, persona poems encourage poets to reach into our bag of “what ifs,” ultimately offering us an arsenal of almost limitless possibility when it comes to writing public event-based poems.

Most writers of persona poems construct a single piece or a short series of poems told from the perspective of a public figure or about a defining event in the public figure’s life. In addition, the primary sources for most of the persona poems I came across were the product of literary history, biography, or historical text. Because this kind of persona poem appeared most frequently in my reading, I began to refer to it as the most conventional employment of this kind of poem, and concerned myself with finding
work that represented either an interesting variation or complete break with that convention.

One such variation materializes in Norman Dubie’s collected work, *The Mercy Seat*. Poems such as “Anima Poeta: A Christmas Entry for the Suicide, Mayakovsky,” “The Pennacesse Leper Colony for Women, Cape Cod: 1922,” and “Her Monologue of Dark Crepe With Edges of Light” stand out in *The Mercy Seat* because they are all persona poems written under the guise of letters or journal entries. As such, readers become aware, almost immediately, that the intended audience is either nonexistent or limited to one other person.

Consider the opening of “The Czar’s Last Christmas Letter: A Barn in the Urals”: “You were never told, Mother how old Illya was drunk/ That last holiday, for five days and nights” (Dubie 45). While the title does an excellent job setting up the dichotomy that will persist throughout this poem, one in which the narrator examines myth and fact, fantasy and reality, public and private life, the first lines present us with a narrator who is ordinary, down-to-earth, likeable even. Granted, Dubie’s example of Nicholas II as just a regular guy underneath the title of Czar isn’t a great stretch of imagination, it does capture our attention. Why? The epistolary nature of the poem functions to both pique our curiosity (this letter was not intended for public readers) and adds a degree of intimacy to the poem (this is a public figure’s private thoughts and feelings). For these reasons, Dubie’s technique offers writers of the public event-driven persona poem a powerful alternative to the more conventional type of persona poem.

Anyone familiar with Russian history or the Disney production of *Anastasia* will quickly be able to recall that Nicholas II was the last czar of Russia, and that he and his
family were executed shortly after the Russian Revolution. Of course, enquiring minds might hypothesize what Nicholas may have been thinking after escaping from Moscow into the Russian countryside, and Dubie’s poem doesn’t disappoint, offering this possibility:

Don’t think me a coward, Mother, but it is comfortable
Now that I am no longer Czar. I can take pleasure

From just a cup of clean water. I hear Illya’s choir often.
I teach the children about decreasing fractions, that is

A lesson best taught by the father…. (The Mercy Seat 46)

It’s no mistake that the narrator directly addresses his intended audience once again, during the most poignant part of the poem, the confession. As with the opening lines, readers are reminded that letters and journals record momentary thoughts, feelings, and ideas rather than convictions, mottoes, or lifelong beliefs. The nature of the epistle is a fleeting one, and Dubie’s use of it for this poem effectively prompts readers to suspend their (dis)belief, which works to reinforce to readers the idea that persona poems are meant to be taken as fiction without having to be labeled as such.

While Dubie’s work in The Mercy Seat might be characterized as a variation of the conventional example of a persona poem, the work of both Ai and Fleda Brown offer readers a completely new approach to this type of poem.

Ai’s Vice: New and Selected provides us with a cultural study on (mostly) American crime, presented as a rather expansive collection of different voices speaking about their motives and actions. Graphic imagery combined with unusual viewpoints and a focus on more recent events in American history give the pieces in Vice a gritty, “ripped-from-the-headlines” feel that differs vastly from Dubie’s persona poems ripped
from the more familiar pages of history. As a result, not only do readers get poems about relevant contemporary social topics such as the Wako, Texas incident or the perverted sexual acts of Catholic priests, but, in many cases, we relive a specific act of violence from the perspective of the aggressor, which makes *Vice* a much more terrifying collection to read.

Fortunately, before readers become completely convinced that all people are monsters at their cores, we come across “The Antihero,” a piece about a police officer who committed suicide before being awarded for his rescue efforts during the Oklahoma City bombing. This poem occurs relatively late in the collection, and is one of the most impressive examples of Ai’s contribution to the public event-based persona poem. Not only does it demonstrate some of the poet’s trademark idiosyncrasies, it also becomes memorable for readers because of its ability to elicit a sense of empathy.

“The Antihero” is told from the point of view of police officer Terry Yeakey. Readers are provided a short note from Ai that informs us of his involvement in rescuing victims trapped in the Murrah Federal Building and his subsequent suicide following that event. Such notes frequently begin Ai’s poems, who also feels the inclination to provide the disclaimer that each piece is “a fiction.” Before we ever get to the first line of “The Antihero,” we are made aware of the dramatic situation which will unfold within its lines, and before the end of the first stanza, Mr. Yeakey has already slit his wrists: “As blood runs down my hands, I feel exhilarated,/ until I remember who I am--/ a man with rat’s eyes,/ pink rimmed and sensitive to light” (*Vice* 201). These lines serve to reinforce the idea that *Vice* is not for the faint of heart, and readers will need a strong stomach to digest some of the truly despicable descriptions Ai infuses into more than a few of poems that
appear in the collection. More importantly, however, these lines become the most crucial moment in the poem. Readers are engrossed in the piece because we hope it might offer us some insight into why Mr. Yeakey decided to end his life, and these lines, though we won’t know for an additional three pages, provide the closest we ever get to a reason.

For the moment, we are left wondering why this police officer identifies himself as rat-like, and Ai busies herself with recounting several episodic snapshots of the narrator’s life: his adoption six months after his birth, a tour of duty he served in the first Gulf War, his experience the day of the Oklahoma City bombing, and the tremendous physical and mental anguish he felt afterwards in the form of what has come to be called survivor’s guilt. Throughout the poem, Mr. Yeakey has been tormented by the ghost of a childhood neighbor’s cat, and readers aren’t sure why until the final culminating snapshot: he confesses his responsibility for the cat’s death toward the end of the poem. The effect of that act has had a profound impact on his life, until “I realize I can’t rescue the dead,/ or erase the zero of my life/ and make it count” (204). This moment of the poem commands a long pause from the reader: we realize why he envisions himself as a rodent, and we have to remind ourselves of the semi-fictional (he really did commit suicide after all) nature of the piece before yelling at Yeakey not to sweat so much over a stupid cat. Ai’s innovation lies in the way she fills in the fact of the event with such intimate details that readers can’t help but develop an affinity for the character. And after reading poems told in the voices of stalkers, murderers, sexual predators, and criminal ex-presidents, to refer to a cat as the single embodiment of guilt and remorse in the entire collection is almost too much for readers to bear. It’s horrific, awful, infuriating,
effective, successful, and finally, tragically beautiful. And she does all this with people we actually remember, not just people we’ve read about.

I approached the revision of my own collection, *Zulu Time*, with a mixture of the techniques of both Ai and Dubie in mind. Though not typically a writer of public figure persona poems, I used the example of Ai’s work to incorporate a more humane feel to a piece I had written about Mata Hari, which was the product of several different biographies I had read about the famous Dutch exotic dancer convicted of espionage during World War I. For the revision of a poem written about my last day in the United States before heading to South Korea, I was determined to employ Dubie’s epistolary element in an attempt to create an active narrator more intimately and actively engaged with the environment of the piece.

Ultimately, “Release” exchanged its detached narrator spouting off factual details for a far more humane (and credible) sounding narrator speaking from the point of view of Mata Hari herself in the moments following her execution. In “Nostalgia, Part One,” I was able to lose the touristy tone once I incorporated the voice of a former New Orleans Police Department Spokesman who engages in the writing of a last letter before shooting himself in the mouth during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. For the former, the technique worked to keep me zoomed into a particular event so that I didn’t get lost in the specific facts; for the latter, I was able to pull out of the particular moment and speak about how history arrives at a calamity that reaches far beyond the individual. Both poems have come closer to achieving what I had originally intended for them, and I am much more satisfied with the end results of both pieces in terms of both content and tone.
After reading the work of Ai and Dubie and taking advantage of their techniques in my writing, I thought the possibilities for using the persona poem to inform public event-driven work had been exhausted. Then I came across Fleda Brown’s *The Devil’s Child*, a collection comprised of one long poem rather than several seemingly unrelated ones, and limited to the viewpoints of just four different fictional characters rather than a plethora of historical or contemporary public figures.

Compared to the writing of Ai and Dubie, the public event seems forced to take a back seat to the plot in *The Devil’s Child*. Instead of communicating directly to a particular headline or moment of breaking news, Brown’s personae mirror those events and respond to each other in an active, engaging way that both captures and sustains the reader’s attention.

One particularly compelling piece that represents the only time in which any character speaks directly about the impact of public events in our lives occurs when Suzanna, who has been documenting the stories of both the priest and the protagonist while they all wait out a snowstorm, begins a poem with the following lines:

> At the end of suffering—well, just before the end of it—
> I see there is a door. Everyone’s sick and tired of wars, of rapes,
> of people cutting up other people on the multiple TV screens
> of the twentieth century—but the door, I swear, seems like the last
> thing... (Brown 56)

Suzanna has spent her time stuck inside a church recording and responding to the shaded personal histories of both Barbara and Father Andrew. This piece allows her to make connections between Barbara’s story and the society in which they both live, and marks the collection’s move more toward redemption rather than just a continued recounting of
various horrific events that have come largely to define all of the characters within the book.

Unlike the contributions of Ai and Dubie, the persona poems in Brown’s collection speak to each other, albeit mostly from an indirect point of view. Each of Brown’s characters seem to be directly based on events which have permeated American conscience in recent years: the molested priest in the book alludes to the scandal that sparked a class action lawsuit against the Catholic Church; the passive writer represents a growing number of Americans who have become disillusioned with the more traditional sects of organized religion; and the protagonist, a woman suffering from multiple personality disorder, gives a voice to various subversive religious groups that make up a very real part of our society.

Despite such colossal differences between works, however, all three collections are able to effectively prompt readers to ask themselves larger questions: Dubie’s poems encourage us to reconsider history’s lessons actively, instead of treating them as if they exist outside the time and space of today. Ai’s poems are a different reflection of an American society that includes the incidence of violent crime broadcast to an increasingly ambivalent public. Brown’s poems comment on the state of organized religion in America, alluding to recent public events, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, which have been documented both in the news and the legal system.

Regardless of where writers choose their sources—from history or from the newspaper—or whether or not they adopt an epistolary element, graphic imagery, or some larger context for the persona poem, its importance to work generated by public event cannot be emphasized enough. Persona poems have the ability to lend additional
credibility to the writer and can effect the tone of a piece in profound ways: they can provide writers an opportunity to incorporate firsthand experience of a particular event without adopting an overly authoritative tone. And finally, persona poems may be able to give shape to the construction of larger projects because of the opportunity they allow for writers to create active participants capable of interacting with each other, providing a strong cohesive arrangement.

Writers of public event-driven poems have a variety of different possibilities to consider when it comes to composition. Paying close attention to the aspects of time, form, and narrator when writing event-based poems can produce a wide range of interesting and impressive results. Effective employment of techniques designed to inform time, form, or narrator in an event-driven poem can solve a number of different problems for the writer: they can place the reader in a historical frame of mind within a particular context of time—six months after an event occurred, twelve years since the onslaught of the event, or even the span of an entire lifetime dealing with a series of events; they can create added dimensions for the poem, one in which the physical structure mirrors the emotional content, or one in which two seemingly dichotomous subjects are married to each other for the space of the poem; they can lend additional credibility to the writer by offering choices for perspectives, not just limiting narrators to the role of outsiders looking in on an event. When writers pay close attention to these aspects in their event-driven compositions, the results inevitably eliminate some of the larger concerns associated with this type of poem: namely, the dangers of having the triggering event or set of events overtake the piece, or of providing readers with poems
that sound too detached and reporter-like or too authoritative and alienating become obsolete, replaced by more careful consideration with regard to time, form, and narrator.

It’s because of these challenges that I think some of the best public event-based poems come from poets who attempt them only occasionally. Of over thirty books read, only four collections revolved entirely around public events or figures: Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Oktenberg’s *The Bosnia Elegies*, Ai’s *Vice*, and Brown’s *The Devil’s Child*. Curiously, while all four of these collections represent relatively contemporary ways in which to approach the public event-based poem, they all seem to lack the stylistic variety we might expect to find: Nye’s overcrowded poems can start to feel overwhelming at times; Oktenberg’s repetitious structure can get tedious; Ai’s graphic imagery and unusual perspectives can make readers feel more than just a slight uneasiness; and Brown’s titles, which rotate between character names, can start to feel more like a game of ping pong rather than poetry.

Although I admire the efforts of Nye, Oktenberg, Ai, and Brown, these observations only serve to reinforce the ideas that not only is this type of poem a challenge to write, but also that poets who choose to base their poems on public events need to include a variety of combinations with regard to time, form, and narrator in an effort to sustain the attention of the reader. Instead of finding one particular style to employ as the cohesive feature of a collection, my goal became to include as many different kinds of stylistic devices into my work as possible.

I began this research wanting to know how to compose a memorable piece of work based on my experiences before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. I ended up keeping company with some of the most respected names in poetry—Robert Lowell,
James Dickey, Norman Dubie, and Charles Simic to name a few—as well as others whose work I met with the kind of happy enthusiasm of having found long lost friends. I found that work generated by public events performs a number of different functions, both for the poet and the world of poetry at large. On an individual level, this kind of work can be therapeutic for the writer, can serve to place the writer within a certain historical context, and can offer legitimate subjects for entire collections rather than limiting them to the space of single poems or a short series of pieces. Regarding the larger world of poetry, public event-based work can give voice to social and political concerns, and can serve as a vehicle for change. In the fast-paced, ever-changing reality of the twenty-first century, public event-driven work might just be the only opportunity readers get to linger over events and their implications for more than a two-minute news clip.
Works Cited


W. H. Auden was admired for his unsurpassed technical virtuosity and ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form; his incorporation of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech in his work; and also for the vast range of his intellect, which drew easily from an extraordinary variety of literatures, art forms, social and political theories, and scientific and technical information. More W. H. Auden >.

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