

GIRAFFES OF DEVOTION by Sarah Mangold
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Conversation Starters

1. *Giraffes of Devotion* uses as a source text an oral history transcript from my great-grandmother. Do the poems read like the story of a family, or a wife, or both? How does your knowledge of US history inform or inhibit your reading of these poems?
2. Read an alphabetized list section fast, and then slow. How do you (do you?) read the “extra” spaces? Do the poems shapes affect the way you read the poem? Do you read the poems differently if you read them silently to yourself or out loud?
3. What happens if you read the poems in a different order? Can you piece together a narrative from the alphabetic sections alone—do you need a narrative to experience a poem?
4. If I used a personal diary from my great-grandmother as the source text instead of the transcript, do you think that would change your reading of the poems? What is implied by using a transcript? Does it matter that the words come from a transcript rather than a diary—does one have more authority than the other, why?
5. How are the different poems constructed? Do they use the same language and tone? Do the alphabetized list sections inform the more narrative poems or the other way around, why?
 - Have you or your family served in the military?
 - Have you or a family member been deployed? How was your experience living abroad similar or different to the experience voiced in *Giraffes of Devotion*?
 - In the time between the World War I and World War II, where did your family live?
 - Have you inherited a family record of some kind, a diary, a scrapbook, photograph album, bible? How does history get recorded officially and unofficially? Who gets to decide whose story is told?

Further Reading & Watching

The original inspiration for *Giraffes of Devotion*

[*Testimony: The United States \(1885-1915\): Recitative*](#) by Charles Reznikoff . Based on thousands of pages of court records spanning three decades around the turn of the twentieth century, the poems use the original language from court case summaries to tell the stories of the people from urban and rural America.

[*U.S. 1*](#) by Muriel Rukeyser. The poems use court records, interviews, and poetic narratives to tell the stories of mine workers afflicted by silicosis in West Virginia during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

An American view of China in the 1920s

[*The Sand Pebbles*](#). The movie starring Steve McQueen and Richard Attenborough. The 1966 Hollywood adaptation of Richard McKenna's novel by the same title. The story of a gunboat and men assigned to patrol a tributary of the Yangtze in 1920s China

[*Profiles from China: Sketches in Free Verse of People and the Things Seen in the Interior*](#) by Eunice Tietjens. Published in 1917, Tietjens traveled extensively in Asia throughout her life and was the Associate Editor of *Poetry Magazine*.

Recommended poetry books that use source texts as part of the composition process

[*Coal Mountain Elementary*](#) by Mark Nowak. Remixes testimony, school curriculum, newspapers accounts, and photographs to tell the stories of coal mining disasters in the US and China.

[*dream/arteries*](#) by Phinder Dulai. Poems draw on ship records, nautical maps, and passenger manifests, to fuse the historical fact of migration with the fictive.

[*The Ground I Stand on Is Not My Ground*](#) by Collier Nogue. The poems erase historical documents related to the development and aftermath of the Pacific War, especially on the island of Okinawa and includes QR codes linking to original archival documents.

[*Hardly War*](#) by Don Mee Choi. Uses photographs from Choi's father, a professional photographer during the Korean and Vietnam wars, to tell the story of war and nation.

[*Olio*](#) by Tyehimba Jess. Part fact, part fiction, the poems examine the lives of African American performers just before and after the Civil War.

[*Voyager*](#) by Srikanth Reddy. A series of three erasures (in which all but a few words are deleted from the source text) of the memoir of Kurt Waldheim, the U.N. secretary general who was found to have been a Nazi SS officer.

[*Woodnote*](#) by Christine Deavel. Particularly the last section which weaves passages from a diary inherited from a distance relative about daily farm life in the American Midwest.

[*Zong!*](#) By Nourbese M Philip. Poems created solely from the words of a legal decision, the only surviving public document, related to the massacre of 150 African slaves on the slave ship Zong.

Writing Experiments

Fast Poems (after the initial prep)

1. Take a print magazine of your choice—I like the *New Yorker* for this exercise but *Science*, *The National Enquirer*, and *US Weekly* will work just as well.
2. Cutout at least 100 phrases or individual words that seem interesting or are grabbing your attention. Put the words in a small box or bag.
3. Pull out 50 words at random from the box—line them up in front of you.
4. Make a poem as fast as you can using as many words as you can—aim for at least 40 words. Do not overthink it, see where each phrase leads you.
5. When you're finished, tape the words down on the paper before you switch anything else around. From here you can type it up and edit/revise/delete at will.
6. Keep your word box going and replenish as needed. I like to spend some time gathering words to have a stash on hand at all times for emergency poem building.
 - After you selected your 50 words, was it hard to start building a poem without self editing?
 - Did you find yourself stuck at any time? Did it get easier as you went along or more complicated?
 - Do you like the first draft you came up with?

Slow Poems

1. Interview a family member, or start with a diary or family history you might have inherited.
2. Write a linear narrative using the document on hand. Stick to the facts and chronology of the story. Save a copy.
3. Take a copy of the straight story and cut-it-up (physically or on your computer). Make the words into a poem. Save a copy.
4. Mix it up again and write another version with the exact same words. Save a copy.
5. Pick a version to continue working with and revise
 - Which version do you prefer, which would your family prefer?
 - Can you create multiple versions of history?
 - Was it difficult to mix-up the poem order, or freeing?
 - What other source materials could you use?

In Conversation and Review with rob mcLennan

(first published on [rob mcLennan's blog, July 12, 2016](#))

*I had a terrible time because I was not taking
the liquor in those days and they'd say Now
what will you drink Of course naturally my
dear husband would drink whatever they
offered him like most naval officers And I*

*said Nothing thank you And they would have
a fit and say You must have something I'd say
no no I'm not thirsty It doesn't make any
difference you must have something This got
to be terrible you know Then they started
saying What will we give Mary to drink Can
you feature ("Yes but not—")*

[Seattle, Washington poet Sarah Mangold's](#) third full-length poetry collection is [Giraffes of Devotion](#) (Tucson AZ: Kore Press, 2016), a collection described as an experiment "to present a rebelliously voiced witness and investigator into U.S. history, its families and war. Framed within the domestic sphere of military service, facts and speech are misheard, whispered, indexed and reassembled to reveal the word make spirit." As [Kore Press editor Ann Dernier](#) writes in the press release:

In the mid-1920s, Sarah's great grandmother Mrs. Roy Smith followed her husband Lt Commander Roy Smith with their four children to Shanghai where he was stationed with the US Navy in the years following the Boxer Rebellion. In the tradition of family stories, *Giraffes of Devotion* is the patient work of collage created from oral history archives and a lifetime of letters, and in that tradition, this narrative incorporates lapses of time. It sputters, pauses, rushes ahead, but all of the gaps fade with each new letter, each new poem and each plunges the wealth of memory of a lifetime of service, of military service and in service to husbands and fathers in land both occupied and occupying.

Giraffes of Devotion follows Mangold's previous collections, [Electrical Theories of Femininity](#) (Black Radish Books, 2015) [[see my review of such here](#)] and [Household Mechanics](#) (New Issues, 2002) ([a chapbook was recently released through above/ground press](#)); an earlier section of the new collection appeared as a chapbook under the project's working-title, [Boxer Rebellion](#) (Bainbridge Island WA: g o n g, 2004). The "Boxer rebellion," for those who don't know (including myself), [Wikipedia describes it thusly](#): "The Boxer Rebellion, Boxer Uprising or Yihequan Movement was a violent anti-foreign and anti-Christian uprising which took place in China towards the end of the Qing dynasty between 1899 and 1901. It was initiated by the Militia United in Righteousness (Yihetuan), known in English as the 'Boxers,' and was motivated by proto-nationalist sentiments and opposition to imperialist expansion and associated Christian missionary activity. An Eight-Nation Alliance invaded China to defeat the Boxers and took retribution." [In an interview conducted in 2013, posted at seventeen seconds: a journal of poetry and poetics](#), Mangold specifically discusses the chapbook, and more generally, the work-in-progress that ended up being *Giraffes of Devotion*:

SM: Rukeyser's *US 1* and Reznikoff's *Testimony* were very present as I started working with historical documents and an oral history transcript for my long poem *Boxer Rebellion*. They both use historical source texts with many voices and they both use documents that could have been filed away as bureaucratic documentation. George & Mary Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Beverly Dahlen, Susan Howe, and of course John Ashbery were also instrumental in how I go about writing and thinking about writing.

[...]

rm: What was the process of composition for your chapbook, *Boxer Rebellion*? You mention a love for documentary poetics, and this short work is strongly influenced by very specific historical fact, yet I'm intrigued at how the work isn't written out as straight documentary. It's almost as though the facts themselves are broken down into language, and reshaped into the poem on that level. How do you manage to use real information without composing poems (like so many others have done) simply regurgitating story?

SM: Yes! That's exactly what I tried to do—happy that comes through. *Boxer Rebellion* is a long poem about my great-grandmother's life as a Navy wife in China during the early 1920s with her four children. I had heard stories about moments in China from my grandmother and my mom throughout my childhood but I hadn't heard the story laid out from start to finish within an historical context. The source text is an interview my great-grandmother gave to the US Naval Institute as part of their Navy wives oral history project, complete with index. The facts had such an emotional connection for me I decided the only way to start working with it was to break everything back into language, not a story, not history, not a family biography. That's how the alphabetical sections started—I retyped the index and did an alphabetic sort just to free up the language and it read like a condensed oral history, complete with stutters and repetitions. With the rest of the transcript I wrote down the phrases that caught my attention and used those as the building material for the poems. My first experiments started in 1998 and a few years later I had a chapbook together but I've also recently spent more time with the transcript to make the poem book-length so hopefully a new book will be in my future.

Mangold has engaged in the poem suite for some time, constructing chapbook-length, and now, book-length, manuscripts out of lyric fragments, and her *Giraffes of Devotion* follows this path, shaping and reshaping threads of family history and story into a documentary collage that opens into a series of foreign and long-forgotten histories. Her poems are wonderfully playful, utilizing the materials of language and story to create a series of delightful sound-fragments and poem-shapes, re-telling a series of seemingly-random stories in the voices (pauses, repetitions, warts and all) that once told her. There are moments I think the poems in this collection might serve as a series of monologues, for the sake of a staged performance of the entire text.

*the missionaries kept pointing out that if we weren't there
things would be peaceful and lovely
it was our fault
and Roy was terribly upset*

*they were going to the Shanghai American School
but his father said Now if you like you can take two friends
down aboard ship I'll be home for the weekend You can go
down and stay in my cabin You can have movies and be aboard
ship*

*to Roy age twelve a weekend on the ship was just heavenly
he asked two friends first one and the other to his horror
carried on as if he'd asked them to visit hell ("But we were not any more popular than nothing")*

About the Poet

SARAH MANGOLD is the author of the full-length poetry collections *Giraffes of Devotion* (Kore), *Electrical Theories of Femininity* (Black Radish Books) and *Household Mechanics* (New Issues Press), selected by C. D. Wright for the New Issues Poetry Prize. The recipient of a 2013 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship, she is also the recipient of residencies and fellowships from the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, the MacDowell Colony, Seattle Arts Commission, the Virginia Center for Creative Arts, and Willapa Bay AIR. From 2002-2009 she founded and edited *Bird Dog*, a print journal of innovative writing and art. She received her BA in English Literature from the University of Oklahoma and MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Originally from Oklahoma via Nebraska and Kansas, she now lives in Seattle and works as a program manager for online learning at the University of Washington.

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“all action, all current, all magnetic field atomic excitement Mangold truly does introduce a new genre of theory—that which is electrical in its consideration of gender and language (“if the hero is a girl”), that demands a space for the female pronoun in this age of machines (“The name of this heroine is mass energy”).”—erica kaufman, on *Electrical Theories of Femininity*

“When I think of an obvious alignment, I think of the Objectivists. Especially, the lone woman affiliated, the geographical isolate, Niendecker. I had always wished there were more of them, because they introduced a brand of lucidity, rare, oh rare in these dis-united states of poetry.”—C. D. Wright, from the foreword to *Household Mechanics*

“Mangold’s language sparks and flies, collides and flows in poems that fragment the lyric into impossible shapes”—rob mclennan

“[the poet] John Olson once quipped that Mangold’s poetry was “like Reznikoff at a sewing machine,” which seems an apt description, if one bears in mind that the machine is guided by a human hand. In Olson’s analogy, the machine is the writing process: the joining of two planes to form a shirt, an airplane wing, or a recollection. Her poetry is a kind of testimony, one in which an historical context is introduced.”—Chris Pusateri

“splices together an account of, and argument for, the individual voice our larger notion of history so often effaces.” —Noah Eli Gordon

“I don’t know. I don’t know her. Did Fairfield Porter die walking his dog. I don’t know. But this is the second time I’ve been ‘drug’ in. ‘Beauty is inevitable. Salvation is totalizing and salvage is pulled and put back into your heart.’ I can’t even find those lines now.”—C.D. Wright on *Electrical Theories of Femininity* at *The Volta*