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Documenting the Undocumented: Hidden Truths in Stupni Do and Coal Mountain

Mark Nowak, an American poet and labour activist, published *Coal Mountain Elementary* in 2009 as documentary poetics that juxtaposes mining disaster reports, corporate training manuals, and first-hand testimonies to expose the systemic exploitation of coal miners in the U.S. and China. Merle Lyn Bachman, a poet and scholar of literature of the Jewish diaspora, explores themes of migration, displacement, and memory in *stupni do,* a poem published in Chain 2 (1995). Both works engage with ideas of documentation and record-keeping by challenging the supposed neutrality of documents and interrogating the authority of archival materials. Both texts use found materials, such as headlines from newspapers, historical records, and personal narratives, to blur the lines between fact and creative interpretation. By leveraging unique forms, they demonstrate that the act of recording history is never genuinely objective but instead influenced by cultural, institutional, and political powers. This becomes especially clear when considering how records are often superficial, shaped by what Louis Althusser terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), institutions such as media, education, and religion that subtly reproduce dominant ideology under the guise of neutrality. Rather than offering hard facts, the records are curated to fulfill a specific narrative aligned with the interests of those in power. As a result, individuals are often reduced to the status of Agamben's homo sacer, existing outside the protection of the law, in liminal spaces, stripped of political recognition and left to

endure discrimination and indifference. These writers bring these people to light, illustrating their lives, and their struggles for the full story of the archive.

Both writers expose how documentation shapes our understanding of the human condition. Nowak's work is a compilation, drawn from real journalistic and corporate sources to critique institutional silences around labour struggles and how these struggles are silently documented or erased within mainstream media and corporate records. Nowak utilizes direct excerpts from actual reports, such as the chilling procedural language: "…five miners dead in Xinjang yesterday, one day after 34 workers were killed in a pit..." (Nowak 70). This stoic tone contrasts with the raw emotion of the first-hand testimonies from miners' families, such as "relatives of the missing stood nearby in below freezing temperature, some crying or sobbing" (Nowak 82). The human costs of this procedural language are further exposed with children's activities such as when "Students will: re-create the historic process of making coal flowers" (Nowak 4) and "simulat[ing] the mining process using chocolate chip cookies and toothpicks" (Nowak 67), activities which serve to further the ISA's agenda to normalize and infantilize the real dangers of the occupation. The juxtaposition of sterile corporate language with personal loss disrupts the intended neutrality of these documents, exposing how control of education and documentation within these structures shapes narratives. Versions of the truth that depersonalize and erase human suffering.

Nowak's retention of this shifting voice exposes how bureaucratic verbiage can sanitize tragedy, turning human lives into mere data points. By stripping events of their human context, these documents serve the interests of corporations over individuals, prioritizing procedural clarity over empathy. His placement of bulletins like "29 fatalities... 13 injured..." (Nowak 152) next to "State-run Jingyuan Corp, has an annual output of 8 million tons of coal" (Nowak 152),

shows the disconnect between corporate indifference and poignant realities. By presenting these texts side-by-side, the readers can confront the stories with some context. The responsibility, too, is controlled in that "with a death toll of less than 30, it was only classified as a medium-sized industrial accident under new regulations issued in July and did not need to be reported to Beijing" (Nowak 70). An ISA is forcing the narrative that the exploited are okay. This, however, is false. As the miners remain homo sacer, their individual losses, trauma and stories remain hidden until investigated. Nowak's approach challenges readers to question the content of institutional records and their purpose and audience. The conditioning of children to normalize a dangerous occupation benefits corporations by creating a steady workforce that accepts hazardous conditions as standard. The neutral tone of safety manuals serves corporate interests by minimizing accountability and downplaying risks. By exposing institutional documentation as something that serves to maintain an ISA rather than preserving truth and honour, Nowak validates the experiences of those who suffer real loss.

Bachman's poem *stupni do* provides another set of silenced voices through a neutral tone, featuring lines like "two sisters, Amela and Suvada Likic, aged 19 and 22, appeared to have been assaulted" (Bachman 16) highlighting how the process of documentation, especially within diasporic contexts such as small villages like Stupni Do, often fails to preserve the fullness of the truth. The work disrupts the reader's comfort, within and between her feelings, definition, real occurrences and cryptic language, forcing an engagement with linguistic and cultural differences. ISAs have historically minimized the rights of people who do not fit into their grand narrative. Language operates as a mechanism of control; once something is named, it becomes categorized and understood and ultimately can be controlled within an institutional framework. Ideology invisibly structures institutional reality, the naming and categorization feel natural:

> What thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology (Althusser 118).

Often "reconstructed in our minds" (Bachman 17), poetry critiques and demonstrates the limitations of truth and language. Bachman's defiance in both form and medium challenges this notion, using fragmented poetry as an act of rebellion against an ISA's desire for uniformity and control. Through her work, Bachman critiques how language can be wielded as a tool of oppression and demonstrates how poetic form can resist institutional narratives, offering a space where marginalized voices can assert their presence and reshape historical memory.

The fragmented structure of her poem also invites readers to experience this sense of dislocation, mimicking the fractured fate of Stupni Do, Bosnia Herzegovina. Her use of fragmented lines like "been dynamited / a crawl space / lay open the wood planking that / cast aside, with a blanket & a jacket abandoned" (Bachman 16) suggests how trauma and displacement affect the rationality of humans and act as a poetic method to convey the disorientation and erasure inherent in diasporic narratives. Through her fragmented form, Bachman critiques the linearity of historical record-keeping that pushes an ISA that better suits their form of control.

Both Nowak and Bachman use existing texts within their own writing to critique the assumed authority of institutional records. Questioning ISAs and their control over children, workers, and the marginalized by simply providing facts, publicly printed, along with the real emotions behind the subjects' experiences, jolts the readers into a space that an ISA wishes them

to keep away from. *Coal Mountain Elementary* and *stupni do* approaches reveal how history is recorded and felt through fragmentation and contrasting prints about the same topic, highlighting the subjective nature of memory and the social gaps left by institutional archives. These works critique traditional archives but also propose a new approach to documentation that values personal memory and cultural resonance, offering a counter-narrative to dominant historical records. By drawing attention to what is lost in the politics of it all and often ISA's subtle repression and sometimes translation, it critiques the limitations of sterilized information, particularly when it comes to exploited, diasporic and erased narratives, highlighting what is not recorded, the silences and omissions, that can be as telling as what is preserved. By elevating these silences, Nowak and Bachman transform them from the undocumented in history into powerful spaces of resistance and remembrance.

Coal Mountain Elementary and *stupni do* reclaim documentation as a form of resistance, demonstrating how creative forms can fill historical gaps, challenge institutional narratives, and give voice to those systematically overlooked or silenced in ISA-sanctioned archives. By challenging the hegemonic control over people, they expose how institutional narratives often serve to maintain power structures by dictating which stories are told and which are left out. Their works exemplify how literature can serve as a means to think critically about the narratives given to us, an intervention in historical narratives, and a legitimate means of preserving stories. With insight into the undocumented, we can reshape how history is remembered and who gets to tell it.

Works Cited

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