

Comparative Modernist and Contemporary Long Poems

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*Poetry is a matter of life, not just
a matter of language*

Lucille Clifton

The long poem invites us to consider when poetry might read like a novel? Or what the “big poem” form might offer in terms of engaging weighty questions of history, politics, and subjectivity enabled by these larger structures (in contrast to the shorter, compact lyric we typically associate with verse)? Exploring this major innovation in twentieth and twenty-first century literary form—one that is taken up by poets across the globe from Canada to the U.S. to the UK to Russia to St. Lucia to Northern Ireland to Trinidad to Israel-Palestine, the course asks what insights we may glean from reading long poems transnationally and comparatively. As a dynamic hybrid and multi-genre form, the long poem may interweave elements of the epic, the novel, the lyric, theatre, autobiography, biography, history, photographs, newspaper articles, court records and diverse cultural and oral practices. The long poem is, as Virginia Woolf once said of the novel, “a capacious hold-all,” as it extends itself through juxtaposition, sequencing, and interrogative recontextualization of voices, intertexts, documents, and discourses. We will explore how the long poem’s expanded form and archeological depth may prove ideally suited to exploration of multi-layered concepts of subjectivity, history, language, memory, community, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, diaspora, and nation.