

## ***The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez: Poems***

**Iliana Rocha**

Writing Prompts and Activities by Alexandra Sladky

### *Archival Poetry*

**Target Audience:** College and Beyond

**Materials:** *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha; pen or pencil; paper; white board and markers (or some way to create a group list); archival materials (newspaper, magazine, published journal, flyer, etc.). (You may also ask students to use computers, tablets, or smart phones that they have in their possession to perform research.)

**Time:** 45 mins (you might lengthen or shorten parts of these lessons to accommodate your own time restraints)

**Location:** This lesson is designed to take place in a library or archives. If you do not have access to a library or archives, you and your students may bring materials to share: newspapers, magazines, published journals, flyers, etc.

### Overview

This lesson asks students to consider the poems of *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* as archival poems, to engage in a kind of archival research of their own, and to write their own archival poems.

### Before the Lesson

- Ahead of the class meeting, contact the library or archives at your university, or the local library in your community. Make a reservation to hold your class meeting at the library or archives. (If this is not possible, ask students to bring objects such as newspapers or flyers, magazines or published journals.)
- Communicate your plan to hold class in an alternative location with your students in class or via email.
- Ask students to read “Historical Traces in Archival Poetry” by Rachel Kaufman.
- Ask students to review the images on pages 2, 30, 72, and 98 of *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*.

### In-Class Activity

- In the “Notes” at the end of the book, Rocha acknowledges that “the autopsy report, medical examiner notes, & newspaper article reprinted in this book are from original documents in [her] grandmother’s possession” (99).
- Revisit the images printed throughout the book and the poems that they accompany.
- Many of these poems are archival poetry, defined by Rachel Kaufman as “poetry which grounds itself in a historical narrative, historical characters, or the language or materiality of archival sources” (“Historical Traces”).
- As students reread the poems by Rocha, ask them to discuss in small groups (or as a class): what makes these poems archival poetry? What is the historical narrative that

Rocha explores in her poems? Who are the characters Rocha identifies in her poems? (You might also refer to the “Notes” section of the book.)

- In a library or archive that you can meet for class (or using materials that students have brought to share in class):
  - Ask students to explore articles or objects or journal entries and to make note of quotes, events, questions, or pieces of information that don’t match up.
  - Ask students to free-write about why their chosen article is important to them and what other research needs to be done for them to understand the situation most clearly.
  - Compose a poem based on or using the article, journal entry, or historical event or characters.
- Use this as a starting point: consider writing a series of poems based on the research begun with this activity.
- Reflection: Leave five to ten minutes at the end of class. Ask students to reflect individually on the experience of using an article, journal entry, or historical event as a starting point for a poem. What is the experience of using archival material to create a poem?

#### Further Reading

Kaufman, Rachel. “Historical Traces in Archival Poetry.” *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*. 12 May 2021. <https://jhiblog.org/2021/05/12/archival-poetry/>.

*Writing is Rewriting*

**Target Audience:** College and Beyond

**Materials:** *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha; pen or pencil; paper; white board and markers (or some way to create a group list).

**Time:** 45 mins (you might lengthen or shorten parts of these lessons to accommodate your own time restraints)

Overview:

*The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* contains many poems by this title. This activity asks students to re-read some of these poems with the same title and to explore what happens when they write and rewrite a poem using the same title or the same scenario. Melissa Febos writes: “there are so many ways to write a thing, so many ways that only I could possibly write it. Over time, we start to narrow our thinking about what a piece of writing – what a certain story – can be, how it needs to be told. Partly, this is because we get attached to the most familiar narrative” (31). Allowing oneself to write and rewrite the same scene, starting over every time, allows the writer to push past ideas that might be too familiar to the writer, causing them to become stuck in a single way to describe that scene or idea.

Before the Lesson:

Ask students to review a few of the poems with the title “The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez.” You may assign specific ones, or you may allow students to choose three or four of their favorites.

In-Class Activity:

- After re-reading a few of the poems titled “The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez,” discuss with a small group (or the whole class): what similarities do these poems contain? What differences? What else do you notice about these poems? How are they organized throughout the collection?
- Choose a poem you’ve been working on, or start a new poem. For five minutes, write that poem. After five minutes, stop writing.
- Next, on a clean sheet of paper, write a poem using the same scenario, or the same title, as your first poem. Write for five minutes. Stop after five minutes.
- Repeat, again. A fresh page, the same title or scenario. Write for five minutes.
- Repeat as many times as you and your students would like.
- Leave enough time at the end of class for reflection: first, independently reflect on what it was like for you to write a series of poems using the same scenario or title? What did you

learn about yourself, your poem, your scenario, and/or your title? Then, share your experience with the class.

### Further Reading:

Febos, Melissa. "Mind Fuck: Writing Better Sex." *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*. Catpult. 2022.

### *Research and Poetry*

**Target Audience:** College and Beyond

**Materials:** *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha; pen or pencil; paper; white board and markers (or some way to create a group list); a computer, laptop, tablet, or smart phone.

**Time:** 45 mins (you might lengthen or shorten parts of these lessons to accommodate your own time restraints)

### Overview

Many of the poems in *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* use outside research and give voice to men and women who have been victim to violence, sometimes giving voice to those who have died violent deaths and remain unidentified even in death. This activity asks students to consider how Iliana Rocha uses research in her poems and then try using research as a starting point for their own poems.

### Before the Lesson

Ask students to review the "Notes" section on page 99. You might ask students to return to some of the poems where Rocha references or writes about real people or real situations. Or, you might ask students to do a little bit of research ahead of class by assigning that students Google one or more of the people Rocha has written about.

### In-Class Activity

1. Ask students to report back on what they observed in their research from the night (or class) before. This can be done as a class. You can also assign students to work in small groups, give each small group a character or situation to look up, and make notes to share with the class.
2. Read the poem associated with the character or situation that students researched.
3. Ask students to work in small groups to answer the following questions:
  - a. What have you learned about the character or situation?
  - b. How does the poet use research or details found through research in her poems?
  - c. Why is it important to tell these stories?
  - d. How does (or, how can) poetry work to establish justice for victims of violence?
  - e. Share your findings and responses with the class.

4. Choose a particular topic, character, true crime event, historical event, etc. (The instructor might assign something, or leave this open for students to choose on their own). Then, using research as a starting point, write a poem that brings to light some truth about the person or event that you have researched.

### *Critical Paper Assignment*

**Target Audience:** College and Beyond

**Materials:** *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha; a word processor

**Time:** 2-3 weeks: this may be assigned early in the unit, giving students two or three weeks to complete it, so that students know how their reading of *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez* will culminate. Alternatively, you could assign this as an in-class assessment (in which case it would be important to change the grading requirements to account for this).

### Overview

This paper assignment may be given as the culmination of a unit, or of the reading of *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*. Students focus on taking a stance or forming an argument around a poem or set of poems from the collection and exploring some of the ways that poetry impacts their everyday lives, how poetry acts as a kind of activism, or how poetry shares a message with its audience.

### Assignment

Compose a 4-5 page paper that analyzes one or more poems from *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha. In your analysis consider one or more of the following:

- the use of real-world events and characters
- the use of found objects and materials
- the impact of speaking for people who are unable to speak for themselves
- the messages that the poems share with their audiences
- the use of figurative language

### Requirements

Your essay should illustrate that you have a clear understanding of the poem(s) that you are analyzing and should include:

- a clear thesis statement that takes a stance on your interpretation of the poem.
- a clear argument that adds perspective to an ongoing conversation.
- supporting evidence from the text.

- a coherent organizational structure.
- proper MLA style: including double-spaced, 12-pt font, Times New Roman, proper citations, a works cited page including the text and any outside resources.
- attention to proofreading.

### *Creative Writing Portfolio: Revision and Reflection*

**Target Audience:** College and Beyond

**Materials:** *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*, by Iliana Rocha; a word processor

**Time:** This may be assigned early in the semester/class, giving students ample time to think about how to proceed and which pieces to include. By assigning the portfolio early, students will know what to expect for the end of the course or semester.

### Overview

The goal of a creative writing portfolio is to provide students with an opportunity to compile their work together in one place allowing both instructor and student to see how their writing has changed over the course of the semester. Pair the portfolio with a reflective essay, allowing students to consider and reflect, in their own words, on their writing and how they feel it has changed over the course of the semester. The portfolio is usually given as a culmination of the work over the semester or course. Assign this project early in the semester to give students enough time to plan and know what to do with their writing.

### Assignment

This assignment consists of two main parts:

1. a portfolio of *all* your poetry from this course.
2. a reflection essay.

Compile the poetry that you have written (over the course of the semester, or from the activities assigned around *The Many Deaths of Inocencio Rodriguez*) in a portfolio. The portfolio may be digital or printed. You may be creative around its formatting.

Choose 3-5 poems to revise and make those revisions. Indicate that these are the poems that you have revised.

Then, complete a 2-3 page reflective essay that addresses the following questions:

- a. how has your view of writing poetry changed over the course of the semester?
- b. how has your poetry changed over the course of the semester?
- c. how has your writing process grown or changed over the course of the semester?
- d. what is the experience of revision like for you?

Refer to specific instances in your writing, your writing practice, or from poems we have read during this course. The reflective essay should follow MLA style.

### Requirements

A complete portfolio includes the following:

- all poems you have written this semester
- revisions of 3-5 poems
- indicate which poems are your revised poems
- a 2-3 page reflective essay
- attention to detail, proofreading, MLA formatting (where applicable, specifically the reflective essay).