

Revolutionary Cento:  
A MiniWorkshop With  
Lehigh Valley Poetry

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A Program of the 2020 Easton Book Festival

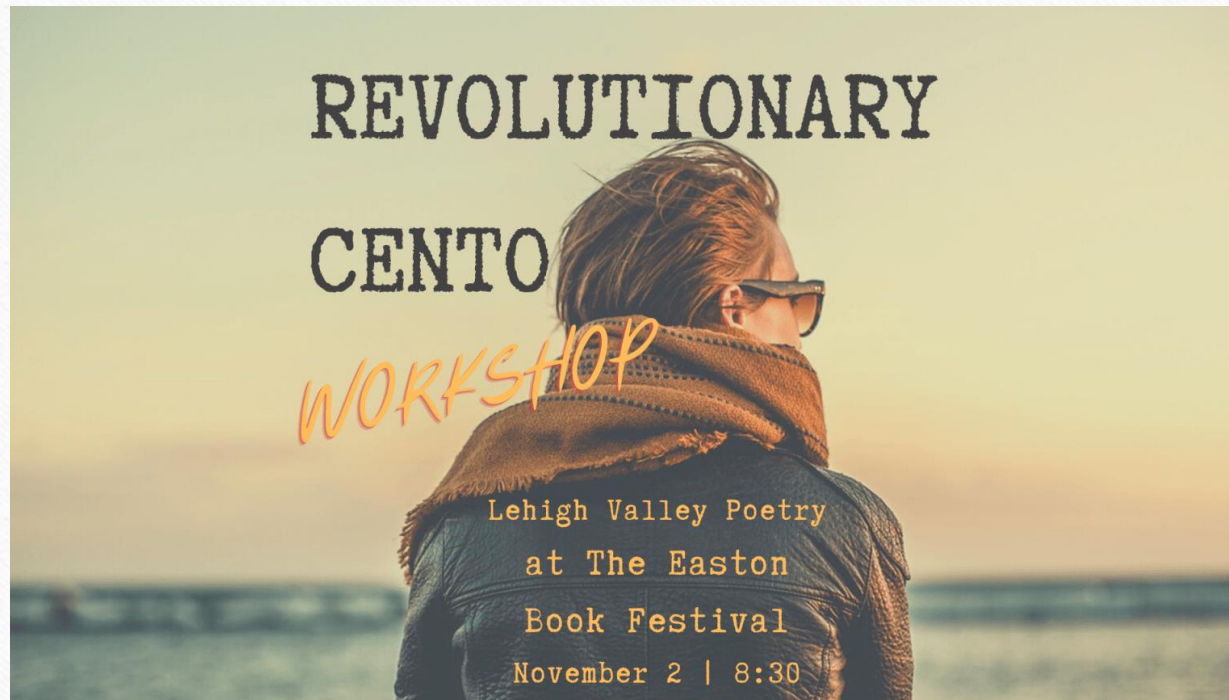
Book Festival Information: [www.eastonbookfestival.com](http://www.eastonbookfestival.com)

Lehigh Valley Poetry: [www.lehighvalleypoetry.org](http://www.lehighvalleypoetry.org)

Lehigh Valley Poetry Virtual Salon and Open Mic: Mondays at 8:30 EST

Hosted by Lynn Alexander and Darrell Parry

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# Lehigh Valley Poetry Virtual Salon and Open Mic

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- \*Weekly on Monday evenings, 8:30 EST on Zoom
  - \*First Monday of the month features a “mini workshop” or prompt
  - \*Guest performers and workshop presenters TBA
  - \*All are welcome to share poetry and short fiction in an open mic format
  - \*Free, respectful, positive, and community minded space
  - \*Events are publicized on social media- please like/follow/share
  - \*Submissions open for your poetry, short fiction, essays, reviews, etc. on the LVP Press website- reach out for more information.

# REVOLUTIONARY CENTO

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- Since this is an election period, the idea here is to look at creative expression as a political act and examine a method that pushes the writer to explore political/radical/revolutionary source material to “comment”, through a collage of words, on any aspect that we feel compelled to address.
- Examples: Authority, corruption, systemic racism, reproductive liberty, labor, health, pandemic, civil rights, ideology, censorship, discrimination, capitalism, violence, protesting, activism, exploitation, education, journalism, etc.

# What is a Cento?

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- A cento is a poem made from verses, passages, lines etc. from other authors, a “collage” approach to using source material to craft your own poem.
- Text can be from the same poet/source or several  
The form goes back to the late second century, with different opinions on when and how poets used this technique and “authority” on what is correct. (Ausonius, 310-395, *Centio Nuptialis*, Faltonia Betitia Proba, *Centio Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, both from Virgil, Justus Lipsius, Alexander Ross-examples.
- Like all art forms, thinking has evolved over time and “rules” change.

# On Rules:

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- If there are different opinions and techniques, how do we know what is “correct”?

That is part of what makes any form a challenge for the creator, and how rules are used and interpreted/accepted/rejected is part of the process!

- What is your intention? What do you want to achieve, convey? Why one form, or another? Why a particular technique?

Techniques are tools. Experimenting with techniques, tools, rules, examples, formats, and styles can support structure and direct the intention.

# Sources and Constructing

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- We will take a look at some sources, take note of some lines that stand out, and spend a few minutes on a quick practice exercise. The goal here is to experiment, as this is a “mini-workshop”. You are encouraged to spend some time on further experimentation, and share your results at a future salon.
- We will have links to examples of poetry and materials on the LVP website. Searching for poems, essays, and materials on your own can be part of the process. It is up to you to decide what sources to use, and what text. You might decide to focus on one essay, or poet.

# Sources?

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- Poetry, essays, lyrics, newspaper headlines and articles, reference materials, instructions, political pamphlets, novels... Search for source materials that you want to use.
- On credit: While some argue that all text, all words are “creative fodder”, many poets include references to their sources and feel that it is appropriate to disclose that the work is a cento from source materials. Notes at the bottom of the poem can provide the original authors and sources.



# Example

Excerpt from: A Cento on Emma Goldman's "Anarchism and Other Essays", Chapter Ten: The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation. Second Edition, Mother Earth Publishing, 1911. "Quick, Everybody Out of the Typing Pool", E. Lynn Alexander)

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"Quick, Everybody Out of the Typing Pool"

Glorious, is privilege! Glorious, the disregard for Her.  
For submission. Choice, Yes?  
Commands, conventions, an elopement of yardsticks.  
Propriety measured by ladder.  
Hindrance. Satisfied. Hindrance: That either/or.  
Reckless life? Typing pool or wife?  
Either/or/both/some/all/none  
All, unendurable. None, unendurable.  
We find the Neither and the Or  
In poetry, in psychological sketches, in comment, in subsistence,  
In the inner life, in the artificial, in barriers broken,  
in growing empty and dead.

She, as the rope in moonlight  
She, as the stone walls  
Who fail to lay stress  
On their own ground

## REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #8

Everytime you pick the spot for a be-in  
a demonstration, a march, a rally, you are choosing the ground  
for a potential battle.

You are still calling these shots.

Pick your terrain with that in mind.

Remember the old gang rules :

stick to your neighborhood, don't let them lure you

to Central Park everytime, I would hate

to stumble bloody out of that park to find help :

Central Park West, or Fifth Avenue, which would you  
choose?

go to love-ins

with incense, flowers, food, and a plastic bag

with a damp cloth in it, for tear gas, wear no jewelry

wear clothes you can move in easily, wear no glasses

contact lenses

earrings for pierced ears are especially hazardous

try to be clear

in front, what you will do if it comes

to trouble

if you're going to try to split stay out of the center

don't stampede or panic others

don't waiver between active and passive resistance

know your limitations, bear contempt

neither for yourself, nor any of your brothers

Diane diPrima:

## Revolutionary Letter #8

...go to love-ins

With incense, flowers, food, and a plastic bag

With a damp cloth in it, for tear gas, wear no jewelry

Wear clothes you can move in easily, wear no glasses

Contact lenses

Earrings for pierced ears are especially hazardous

Try to be clear

In front, what you will do if it comes

To trouble

If you're going to try to split stay out of the center

Don't stampede or panic others

Don't waiver between active and passive resistance

Know your limitations, bear contempt

Neither for yourself, nor any of your brothers

## TRAJECTORY

suffering, sd the Lama, is the greatest blessing  
because it reminds us  
to seek the disciplines, like:  
I don't drink coffee 'cause I once  
had an ulcer; and of the four  
"continents" of humans, this, the South  
Continent (planet Earth) he says  
is best because hardest. So this  
1970 must be  
an excellent time  
when even the telephone poles scream in agony  
when the streets are fire beneath  
all our windows,  
when even the Bodhisattvas stop their ears.

as if they could,  
as if we could, we sit  
zazen, retreat to the woods  
fast, pray, remember bardos  
unwritten, even in Tibet.  
they come again.  
they have us by the throat.

we break before the image of the future  
now no more blood runs  
from the wounded Earth. our hope  
lies in the giant squid that Melville saw, that was  
acres across. our hope  
lies in the insect world, that the rustling  
Buddah of locusts, of ants, tarantulas  
of scorpions & spiders  
teaching crustacean compassion might extend it  
to our species.

(the Hopi say that it's been done before  
and plant their last corn before coal mines  
destroy the water table) a child of mine  
waits to be born in this. *Tristesse. Tristesse.*

*Dolor.* Now is no star seen  
as it was seen by our fathers  
now is no color on the hills, no brightness  
in the bay. Now do sea creatures rot  
with oily fur  
with oily feathers choke on black sand.  
the hungry ghosts like a wind  
descend on us.

Diane di Prima

*Diane di Prima*



THE ALTERNATIVE PRESS  
Detroit

## REVOLUTIONARY LETTER #19

*for The Poor People's Campaign*

if what you want is jobs  
for everyone, you are still the enemy,  
you have not thought thru, clearly  
what that means

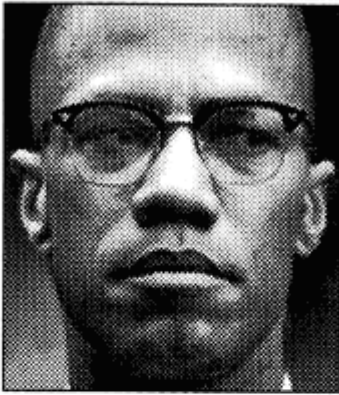
remember  
you can have what you ask for, ask for  
everything

Diane diPrima: Poetry Source Examples

By ODE COOMBS

## The Death and Life of Malcolm X

By Peter Goldman.  
Illustrated. 426 pp. New York: Harper & Row, \$13.95.



He would have approved

In a piece called "White Supremacy and Negro Writing" (The New Republic, March 9, 1968) Richard Gilman states that "there is a growing body of Negro writing which is not to be thought of simply as writing by Negroes. It is not something susceptible of being demeaned and assimilated in the same way that writing by Jews has been." And he ends his article with the following statement: "The kind of Negro writing I have been talking about, the act of creation of the article in the face of that self's historic denial by our society, seems to me to be at this point beyond my right to intrude on."

Many blacks lauded the article when it first appeared. They felt that it was a confession by a leading white literary critic of his inability to judge much black writing. His confession gradually became a kind of law: Black writing was to be judged and criticized only by blacks.

I was not taken with the argument in 1968. I thought, then, and think now, that any white critic who could see the "subversive" elements in the literary or intellectual tradition" of any "Education of Henry Adams" but could not see "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" in this stark light, was not worth his salt. Did blacks, I wondered, care to be vacuum? Did our pain and our ability to survive not spring partly from the warped means of the West's economic, literary and intellectual tradition? And if I could "understand" Faulkner, if I could see his brilliance behind his Southern shield of intruder, then whites, it seemed to me, should be ready to make room for Eldridge Cleaver in the same bookstore in which they displayed Gates.

Blacks jumped on Gilman's bandwagon because they understood the codes of the marketplace. Publishing is a very insular world where friends find out what trends seem profitable and get their acquaintances to exploit those trends. When the "black market" was lucrative, many blacks felt that they should have more than a passing right to make their voices heard and their pockets heavy. And if Gilman's piece were to be accepted as the gospel, then they would at least be in this particular race. They understood, after all, the endemic arrogance of many white editors.

Nevertheless, I have always doubted the value of this kind of wholeness—even in the short run. I felt that if it were accepted, black intellectuals who wanted, for whatever reason, to move beyond the confines of race would run into a wall of resistance in their own country. Give the current lack of moral energy.

Ode Coombs's latest book, a collection of essays, is "Do You See My Love for You Growing?"

gy and love of faddism on the part of many intellectual whites, we should know that they stand in the wings ready to dismiss, on ethnocratic grounds, the black economist's treatise on the American economy or the black psychologist's interpretation of white insanity. And blacks would have to abide by this dismissal since we spelled out the inability of white people to trust black life with common sense and intellectual rigor.

I say all this because I want to praise Peter Goldman's "The Death and Life of Malcolm X." It is a rich biography that pays little attention to Malcolm's early life, but elucidates in minute detail his last years, his death and subsequent aftermath.

Goldman, white, met Malcolm in 1962 when he worked for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat and later, as a national affairs writer for Newsweek, followed the minister's career in New York. The author does not pretend to have had Malcolm's ear or friendship, but he shows how Malcolm's vision of America allowed his perception of the world and forced him to abandon the borders he had seen when confronting the country's racial antagonism.

Because Malcolm made his case, Goldman becomes a man abused, and he cannot leave his mentor dead. He must seek out in interviews all the people who were close to Malcolm. Malcolm's wife and sister would not talk to him.) He must walk Malcolm's streets and, finally, he must spend those years of his life trying to get into perspective the phenomenon known as Malcolm X, because the man's shadow — looming over him — shows him that he came into contact with a giant even, the thinking of the second largest nation of black people in the world.

In the first section of his book, Goldman is more interested in showing Malcolm's spirit than in writing a straight biography. He tells and weaves through Malcolm's early years and shows us his lance-like wit, the richness of his tongue and his delight in behaving as Harvard. We see the glory of a man growing as the time tick around him, and it is our belief in his grandness and Goldman's indignation of them that make us tremble at his fall.

At the end of his life Malcolm was at war with the Nation of Islam, avoided by the copyrights lines of the canon, denounced as an antiwhite demagogue in the news media and according to Goldman, slowly coming apart under the pressure. He made a pilgrimage to Mexico and announced that he had met white Muslims who endorsed him self-consciously and that all white men were sat the devil he had formerly imagined them to be. (A footnote, it seems to me, that is as unconvincing now as it was then.) Unable to get the Organization of Afro-American Unity off the ground, evicted from his home by the Nation of Islam, seeing doctors all around him, Malcolm died ignominiously at the hands of black men—denounced, as Maya Angelou tells it, through the black quarter of San Francisco.

Goldman knows that not many blacks accept the official version of Malcolm's death — three Muslims were convicted of his murder — and that many believe that the C.I.A. had something to do with the assassination of this black hero. So Goldman, detective story style, reconstructs a map of the murder, pores over the minutes of the trial and is at pains to convince us of the culpability of the assassin.

It is in the final section of his book that Goldman, ably assisted, accurately gauges the impact of Malcolm's life on a whole generation of black people. He knows that Malcolm lives today precisely because of his unflinching denunciation of the quicksand on which black people stand and face their antagonists. In a chapter, "The Malcolm Legacy," Goldman writes that "what interested Malcolm first was the de-solution of the black mind—the weakening of a proud, bold, impetuous consciousness of color and everything color means in white America."

He is right, for Malcolm saw the erosion of our spirit as the emblem of racism destined us. He knew that we believed deeply that we were less than men because we could not see our beauty. And he understood that until every black man could say to any white "I am my black —," then there was no hope for our deliverance from white psychological bondage. But he knew, too, as Goldman points out, that "undermining the assumptions of this country's institutions was not enough. The black banner calling for sacrifice, for discipline and self-help would have to be unfurled, for believing in white largesse would be to perpetuate man's dependency and dependent man never loses their own strengths."

And so if Malcolm stood today in this dimension and bewildering time, would he echo W. E. B. DuBois' best (of his people) lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity? I don't know, but he would have, I think, approved of Goldman's biography and that would have been no faint praise. ■

## Source Ideas

- \*Poems    \*Novels    \*Excerpts
- \*News articles    \*Essays    \*Legal Briefs
- \*Policies    \*Manuals    \*Song Lyrics    \*Movies/Screenplays
- \*Public domain literature, articles, topic essays
- \*Journals    \*Letters

## Pushing Through Discomfort

- \*Articles and essays with opinions that we do not agree with
  - \*Political speeches or campaign verbiage that we do not like, and creating a statement
  - \*Unusual source materials
  - \*Challenging materials
  - \*Trying a method of rules that we establish for ourselves:
- Example: Opening lines, one character in a film

**Exercise:** Use a source that you can view quickly, or use the excerpt below. Think about the text and sections that you might want to use and create a few lines (practice) that might form the body of a future cento.

**Pete Seeger: “What Did You Learn In School Today?”**

What did you learn in school today,

Dear little boy of mine?

What did you learn in school today,

Dear little boy of mine?

I learned that Washington never told a lie.

I learned that soldiers seldom die.

I learned that everybody's free,

And that's what the teacher said to me.

I learned our Government must be strong;

It's always right and never wrong;

Our leaders are the finest men

And we elect them again and again.

I learned that war is not so bad;

I learned about the great ones we have had;

We fought in Germany and in France

And someday I might get my chance.

That's what I learned in school today,

That's what I learned in school.

## Onward!

Feel free to continue with your experimentation. Suggested resources are on the Lehigh Valley Poetry website:

<https://www.lehighvalleypoetry.org/revolutionary-cento-workshop/>

Please share your poetry at an upcoming LVP Salon and Open Mic!

Thank you to the Easton Book Festival for the partnership and community.

[www.eastonbookfestival.com](http://www.eastonbookfestival.com) for events, information, and more!

