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Concern With Craft
Using Ars Poetica as Criteria for Reading Research Poetry

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This article contends with the question “what is good poetry?” The author argues that those interested in poetry as a means to represent research must be aware of poetic traditions and techniques and engage critically in a discussion of how an understanding of poetry informs their work. One means by which to accomplish this is through the use of *ars poetica* (art of poetry). The author presents a discussion of the function and utility of *ars poetica* for poetic craft, means of articulating one’s own *ars poetica*, examples of some poets' conceptualizations of poetry, and the implications of *ars poetica* as artistic criteria. In addition, the author demonstrates how three versions of her own *ars poetica* written at different times may be used as criteria for assessing research poetry.

*Keywords*: *ars poetica; poetic craft; research criteria; research poetry*

Poets are people too—sentient beings in a sensual world who know it and write about it in ways that can teach all of us something important both as individuals and as members of the human collective.

—Brady (2004, p. 624)

Hirshfield (1997) believes poetry has an ability to clarify and magnify our human existence. She wrote that “each time we enter its word-woven and musical invocation, we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry’s knowing, and to the increase of existence it brings, unlike any other” (p. vii). This observation about poetry as a means to enlarge understanding and move closer to what it means to be human elucidates the impulse of some researchers to use poetry as a means of representing research. The way we use language in poetry demonstrates and discloses the human mystery allowing us to “find ourselves in poems” (M. Richardson,
1998. p. 459) making it a viable alternative to prose. Miles Richardson (1998) tells us that, “Poetry wants us to see. To see what? Those instantaneous sights, when things stand so clearly before us, when truth shows its face” (pp. 453-454). He considered poetry to be useful when we experience epiphanies in fieldwork that show humanity, and we wish to relive the instant, to show a moment of truth. As such, poetry may be considered a “special language,” a language that researchers want to access when they feel that other modes of representation, such as prose, will not capture what they desire to show about their work and research participants (Faulkner, 2005), when they wish to explore knowledge claims and write with more engagement (Denzin, 1997; L. Richardson, 1997), and to reach more diverse audiences (L. Richardson, 2002).

The use of poetry in research has been variously labeled poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997; Madison, 1991; L. Richardson, 2002), ethno- graphic or anthropological poetics (Brady, 2004; Denzin, 1997), narratives of the self (Denzin, 1997), investigative poetry (Hartnett, 2003), research poetry and interpretive poetry (Langer & Furman, 2004), autoethnographic poetry (Furman, 2003), or simply poetry (Faulkner, 2005; L. Richardson, 1997). All of these labels describe a method of turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experience, and reflections into poems or poetic forms. Hartnett (2003) referred to scholarly work and poetry combined in a persuasive way using critical ethnography, autobiography, and politics as investigative poetry; the goal is that of social justice. Ethnographic or anthropological poetics are shaped by the anthropological experience; the poet reflects on it and reframes it through poetry, and narratives of the self can be categorized like interpretive poetry where the personal experiences of the researcher are connected to the ethnographic project (Denzin, 1997). Langer and Furman (2004) defined research poetry as poems that utilize a participant’s exact words in a compressed form excluding explicit reference to the researcher in an effort to convey the central message (what some would call a narrative poem), whereas interpretive poetry includes the researcher’s subjective responses for a fusing of perspectives, researcher, and participant. Laurel Richardson (1997) distinguished between narrative and lyric poetry; narrative poetry is akin to the idea of the research poem, and lyric poetry is that which represents actual experiences in such a way that the distance between self and other blurs, and others experience and feel “episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures” (p. 183). Simply put, narrative poetry refers to poems that are most interested in storytelling, and in lyric poetry the goal is to stress moments of subjective feeling and emotion in a short space.1
Concern with Craft

Whatever we call the use of poetry in research, a critical issue for me and others interested in poetic representations is the evaluation of such forms (e.g., Furman, 2006; Percer, 2002). I am not as interested in adopting a singular term for referencing poetry in research presentations (though, most often I use the term research poetry in the sense of poetry used to represent research), as I am in entering and weighing in on the debate over what constitutes good (research) poetry. I paused when reading Craig Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) article about the importance of praxis and/or craft in autoethnography and performance, and the double bind between knowledge and aesthetics, particularly a section on poetry.

Any serious student of poetry, however, soon recognizes the profound erasure at work in the paucity of metapoetic discourse in autoethnography’s metamethodological talk. When they write about how to do autoethnography, autoethnographers rarely acknowledge, for example, different poetries, movements, conversations, controversies, or debates among poets about the risk and rewards of autobiographical poetry (p. 308).

This same conversation had ignited and been roaring through my work and writing in the 9 or 10 poetry classes I inserted myself into since 2000. The incessant question, “What is good poetry?” yammered by various teachers and poets acted as kindling, and now I saw a version of the debate displayed in the pages of a communication journal. A year and a half before, I had read Lisa Hayes Percer’s (2002) concerns about researchers’ incorporation of poetry into research without a concomitant interest in the study of poetic craft with a similar intensity.

In an earlier version of this article, I didn’t explicitly state my personal engagement with this issue; rather I hid inside my social scientist cloak covered with vital citations and talked around the issue to argue the importance of attention to craft. As much as I love wearing this cloak, let me throw it off now, for a moment: I am tired of reading and listening to lousy poetry that masquerades as research and vice versa. And to be honest, I have written my share of such poetry and received criticisms from poets and colleagues of sentimentality and/or cuteness, triteness, melodrama, and especially, a “ruthless adherence to research language at the sacrifice of line.” I need to confess as well that I have read and listened to what I consider good research poetry. For example, Nicole Cooley’s (2004) collection
of poems about the Salem Witch trials blends historical research with voices from the past and present in narrative and lyrical lines full of music. These poems are good because aesthetic considerations dominate, yet they simultaneously present and interpret some solid historical research. This is precisely why I am invested in the issue of poetic craft and the potential of research poetry.

If we are going to use poetry in our work, I concur with Percer (2002) and Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) suggestions that we engage in a critical discussion about how we understand poetry, how it informs our work and scholarly endeavors (e.g., Faulkner, 2006; Furman, 2006). Researchers interested in poetic representation must be aware of poetic traditions and techniques and study the craft as they study research writing (Percer, 2002); studious concern with the craft of poetry can keep us from underestimating and misusing poetry in the name of alterative representation. Poet Mary Oliver (1998) pointed out that, “Every poem is a statement. Every poem is music—a determined, persuasive, reliable, enthusiastic, and crafted music” (pp. viii-ix). To understand this music requires some knowledge of the workings of metrical poetry and pleasure in it. Oliver wishes the experience of such poetry to be “comprehension accompanied by felt experience” (p. ix).

What I am arguing is that poetic truth is not only some extraction of exact words or phrases from interview transcripts or our personal experience but rather requires a more focused attention to craft issues. Such attention will facilitate the accomplishment of good research poetry and further the connection between science and art. Laurel Richardson (2000) argued that rigorous standards of art and science applied to poetic representations are relevant and important, and we should continue to create criteria and new criteria for selecting our criteria: “I believe in holding all ethnography to high and difficult standards” (p. 254). I agree with her and others who call for attention to craft and praxis (Carr, 2003; Furman, 2006; Percer, 2002; L. Richardson, 2002). With this aim, I discuss how *ars poetica* (i.e., the art of poetry) can demonstrate a concern with craft and suggest a way to read and evaluate research poetry. More than reflexivity, more than statements about the goals of research, *ars poetica* contends with aesthetic and poetic craft issues and constitutes one way we can enter the conversation about poetic criteria.

I am addressing researchers and others who are most interested in the aesthetic or “artsy” concerns in their work, those who label their work as research or interpretive poetry, autoethnographic poetry, and ethnographic poetics, which to me, seemingly differ from those interested in
poetic transcription. Many researchers have eloquently discussed their goals for using poetic transcription as a way to enter into the world of the storyteller by preserving their speaking style and capturing the spirit of a story to portray its range of meanings (Carr, 2003; Madison, 1994), to make the shaping of stories more evident (L. Richardson, 2002), to give “ownership of the words” to the speaker rather than the researcher and to privilege orality (Calafell, 2004), as well as capture the depth of indigenous performances (Madison, 1991). I read their goals as focused more on notions of authenticity, social justice, and power critiques of social structures, including the academy, and less on aesthetic concerns. Of course, attention to the aesthetic dimension of research poetry may ignore the aesthetic and/or epistemic dialectic (see Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005), however I feel a pull toward the aesthetic dimensions and wish to explore Percer’s (2002) assertion that “evaluation can be done most effectively when ideas about craft have been explored, implemented, and disclosed” (¶ 19).

**Ars Poetica**

Poets contribute to the cultural, spiritual, and political health of society by writing well, with music, passion, honesty, depth, and much courage (Buckley & Merrill, 1995). To describe an effective or good poem, however, is a seemingly impossible task; often the definitions are elusive, variable, and highly personal. Nonetheless, I begin with B. H. Fairchild’s (2003) definition because it stirs me to read, write, and listen to poetry. “A poem is a verbal construction employing an array of rhetorical and prosodic devices of embodiment in order to achieve an ontological state, a mode of being, radically different from that of other forms of discourse” (p. 1). His definition highlights the importance of poetry as embodied presentation (as opposed to representation) that “depends on discovering, moment by moment, ways of being: improvisation, not recitation” (Buckley & Merrill, 1995, p. xi). Poetry is about showing, not telling, our (in)humanity and all of its mysteries. Or as echoed in one of Czeslaw Milosz’s (cited in McHugh, 1995, p. v) stanzas in the poem, *Ars Poetica*?

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.
Ars poetica is often used to introduce one to writing poetry. Many poetry workshops begin with an *ars poetica* assignment where student poets articulate what poetry means to them, their own aesthetic and process. These can be statements and definitions in prose form, or most often, poems that articulate the art. Writing (and examining) *ars poetica* provides one mean of expressing poetics and practicing poetic writing because unlike research methods texts that demonstrate how to conduct and evaluate research, rarely do you see poetry writing or “methods” books that minutely detail how to write a good poem. Thiel (2001), for example, began her book on writing poetry by telling the reader that writing cannot be taught, it is “something we must often stumble upon on our own. But the suggestions which follow will point out different paths you might follow . . . for when the stories and poems come in search of you” (p. 11). The advice for the beginning poet usually includes references to finding your own voice by reading widely, seeking out writers whom you admire and mimicking their style, and practicing through the use of writing exercises. The goal is to “write like you” and focus on the pleasures of writing, rather than any extrinsic reward, to live the writerly life (Hugo, 1992; See, 2002). Strand and Boland (2000) considered good poems to “have a lyric identity that goes beyond whatever their subject happens to be. They have a voice, and the formation of that voice, the gathering up of imagined sound into utterance, may be the true occasion for their existence” (pp. xxiv). Voice, or style, in a poem shows an inhabited world where we see an idiosyncratic and recognizable presence (Hirshfield, 1997). Addonizio and Laux (1997) urge poets to consider their subject matter, diction, form, syntax and grammar, and imagery when finding their poetic voice.

One entrée into writing your own *ars poetica* is to read, study, and borrow other poet researchers’ work and *ars poetica* to define, refine, and test your own conceptualizations. Who are your favorite poets? Why are they your favorite? What are they doing in their poems that make you excited? I pose these questions and offer additional ones adapted from Goodall (2000) by changing one noun: Who are your favorite researchers? What research books are on your shelves and why? What are they doing in their work that makes you excited? With whom do you want to start a conversation? When answering these questions, I believe considering alterative research criteria by those engaged in this work will benefit your *ars poetica*. For example, L. Richardson (2000) suggested five criteria by which to consider the scientific and artistic merits of ethnographic texts: substantive contribution to understanding social life, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact on emotions and intellect, and expression of a reality. Similarly, Bochner (2000) offered
six things that he looks for in “poetic social science” when asked to render
judgment: concrete details that include facts and feelings; complex narratives
that rotate between past and present; the author’s emotional credibility, vul-
nerability, and honesty; transformation of narrator; ethical consideration;
and work that moves heart and head. Ellis (2000) played up aesthetic con-
cerns with her desire for good plot, verisimilitude, authenticity, showing not
telling, and coherence. She also wanted to know what a writer’s goals are
to ask if they are achievable. Clough (2000), Denzin (2005), and Hartnett
(2003) focused on social justice and political action as prime criteria.

What I see when considering a small collection of poets’ *ars poetica* in
prose and poetry that I present in Table 1 is the importance of embodied
experience through attention to the senses, especially the imperfections that
often lead to discovery and surprise. Poetry is a precise way of seeing at the
same time that it is conditional and partial and interested in approximations
of something like truth. I also see the impossibility of articulating one
vision of good poetry.

On what specifically, then, should a poet concentrate? Examining these
*ars poetica* suggests to me that writing is about discipline, persistence, and
attention to craft with intense concentration (e.g., Hirshfield, 1997; See,
2002). Attention to craft is attention to images, to line, metaphor and sim-
ile, music, voice, emotion, story, and grammar. Poets use the line to speed
up or slow down, for emphasis, to fulfill and thwart expectations, to create
tension, relaxation; they use metaphors and similes to make connections
that expand and deepen our understanding (Addonizio & Laux, 1997). The
important thing about poetic craft is that skill comes with practice (Thiel,
2001), with revision, with knowing when to send work to the “toxic lan-
guage dump” according to Addonizio and Laux (1997). Good poets “rec-
ognize when they’ve written stuff that deserves to be dumped, and load up
the truck” (p. 95).

These considerations illuminate my own conception of poetry as fun and
messy embodiment. Carr (2003) claimed that poetry is an effective way to pre-
sent and validate lived experience “while challenging researchers to learn about
their abilities to communicate qualitative inquiry in a different way” (p. 1330).
In this spirit, I offer three *ars poetica* I wrote from 2001 to 2005 to reveal my
own sense of aesthetics, how that plays into my construction and use of poetry,
and to position myself in relation to the literature and poets with whom I am in
conversation. I also offer short writing stories about them to place my experi-
ences and emotions into context of my writerly life and demonstrate the inspi-
ration and constraints in operation (L. Richardson, 2000).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poet</th>
<th>Ars Poetica Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angelou, M.</td>
<td>“Poetry is music written for the human voice” (quoted by Thiel, 2001, p. 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrews, T.</td>
<td>“I find that if I insist on my original design, then ‘I lose something in the original.’ Increasingly I’m interested in letting my poems engage directly this tension between my own desire to speak and the language’s tendency to displace the speaker” (p. 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becker, R.</td>
<td>“The art of poetry allows us to fly as well as to walk, to be old and young at once, to be inside and outside personal experience. And in poetry, we may combine the real and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract” (p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop, E.</td>
<td>“Hundreds of things coming together at the right moment” (quoted by Thiel, 2001, p. 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, B.</td>
<td>“Poetry, I think, is an interruption of silence. The poem makes sense largely because it has this space around it. It is inhabiting a part of this space, but leaving space around it. So a poem is an interruption of silence, an occupation of silence; whereas public language is a continuation of noise” (quoted by Stewart, 2004, pp. 146-147).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferris, J.</td>
<td>“I’m not sure if I want all of my poems to limp, but I know this: all the interesting ones do, all the lovely ones do, in one way or another” (p. 10).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galvin, J.</td>
<td>“POETRY, IT’S OBVIOUS, REQUIRES NO COMMENT. AN ARS POETICA IS ALREADY, THEREFORE, a failure of character. To comment on an ars poetica would be a double failure to which, though now guilty, I am unwilling to admit” (p. 36).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hirshfield, J.</td>
<td>“Every good poem begins in language awake to its own connections—language that hears itself and what is around it, sees itself and what is around it, looks back at those who look into its gaze and knows more perhaps even than we do about who and what we are. It begins that is, in the body and mind of concentration” (p. 3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klein, E.</td>
<td>“Poetry is crossing a rickety old bridge, and a plank breaks beneath you” (quoted by Thiel, 2001, p. 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richardson, L.</td>
<td>“A poem is a whole that makes sense of its parts; and a poem is parts that anticipate, shadow, undergird the whole. That is, poems can themselves be experienced as simultaneously whole and partial, text and subtext; the ‘tail’ can be the dog” (p. 143).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macleish, A.</td>
<td>“A poem should not mean, but be” (quoted by Thiel, p. 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margolis, G.</td>
<td>“A poem needs to find a way into itself” (p. 151).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McHugh, H.</td>
<td>“Beckett says tears are liquefied brain. Poems had better come from that same place…One writes poems as one lives, with full attention to the partiality of things” (p. 98).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seibles, T.</td>
<td>“Poetry is scary because it whispers transformation–of self and world… If poetry is to be of much use to people, it must be bold and clear like a saxophone solo. I want students to understand that when you sing you don’t mumble and hope to seem clever, you sing goddammit” (quoted by Bingham, 2004, pp. 224-225).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following is the first *ars poetica* I ever attempted consciously. The spark ignited after a few poetry classes with the same poet teacher. I heard him ask the following: “Are you doing something stereotypically predictable in your work? If so, are you pushing yourself enough?” I wondered what these questions meant. Was my poetry that wretched? I did notice similar patterns in the past five poems I had written in his classes after those questions. All of the poems were about interpersonal relationships (not surprising given my scholarly interests I thought). All of the poems were free verse. Many of them contained the word *whip* in some form (e.g., *whip out*, *whipped up*). When another poet friend began her class by asking us to write what we liked about poetry, I thought of three words and the questions from the previous class. We were to begin our articulation of what we liked about poetry by listing words and then expanding on them.

Self-Discovery/Curiosity/Generosity (Spring 2001)

I like poets who can make me laugh because they are honest (or seemingly so). I like to hear about experiences that remind me of my own struggles with relationships, with work, with politics. Sometimes, I like to see in ways I haven’t before—descriptions of experience that are not my own.

Always, I like surprise—the turning point and/or ending that shocks and brings deeper meaning that goes beyond simply being clever. Maybe I cry.

I like descriptions I can visualize and smell and taste and hear—playing to the senses so you feel a poem in your gut.

I like poems that make me wish I had written something that well crafted.

I wrote this *ars poetica* in a poetry class where the first writing assignment was to define poetry. I had madly been studying and writing poetry in an attempt to recapture some artistic voice I believed died during graduate school. I see that influence here. Notice my earnest insistence on emotion and connection and the agreement with Phil Memmer (personal communication, April 12, 2005), poet and editor, who conveyed during another poetry workshop that when poems are well constructed we *live* them instead of *read* them. The connection need not signal agreement, however.
This point I have learned in all of these poetry workshops that now blend together like a blueberry-banana-espresso-peanut butter smoothie.

**Faulkner Paints Her Nails**

*“Must be Mink”: An *Ars Poetica* in Prose (Fall 2001)*

“I don’t want to fuck I want to feel.” Eddie Vedder howls to the crowd, and those of us on the cheap lawn seats at the Pearl Jam concert. Rain hits us like spit balls under the clouds crowding the Philadelphia sky (or maybe the clouds are from Camden). Garbage sacks, umbrellas, and other assorted plastic bags offer little help. The owners of the amphitheater arrange venues so that one barely has to interact with the locals. You almost don’t notice the burned-out war zone feeling of the surroundings as you follow the police hands and orange flares to the parking lot safely tucked behind barbed wire.

At first, these lines about not fucking rankle my hedonistic plans. I have spent 2 years recovering from graduate school and concepts. I want to fuck. But maybe there is something to feeling and connection that extends beyond physicality. Those inner monsters that claw at your self-confidence—I envision them splayed out on pages in lines of poetry. Well, that is what I attempt to do when I write, to punish the demons that gnaw at my interior and those of others. The goal is to find an authentic voice, to characterize what I think of as ugly and joyous and fabulous. Some buy beer, make pot brownies to anesthetize those fears, make them sit, but I like explicitly whipping them out and depicting them in lines and verses—I want poetry to be the opposite of anesthesia. It is the place to show that fractured sense of identity and play with it.

More important, I want to connect to others through that cry of “ah-ha” recognition. Envision that moment of connection with masses of others you haven’t invited to sit on your blanket, the people who are outside the carefully orchestrated line to a concert venue in a “bad” part of New Jersey. Think of the oneness that happens outside, in the rain, bouncing to music that concomitantly jars and soothes you. I want you to feel my lines in your hips. I want to make you vibrate in your seat. I want you to read/hear my lines and experience them viscerally; maybe later you will think about them. The point is that you experience them, and you say to yourself, *I know that feeling.* And maybe, just a little, I want to fuck you.

“We don’t have a language for the senses. Feelings are images, sensations are like musical sounds. How are you going to tell about them?” Anais Nin writes these lines in her journal, and I feel depressed, thinking of sex (again). Maybe we don’t have language to describe sensations, but surely
facsimiles melt and become part of the brain, part of our experience. Think of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that tells us how language shapes our thoughts, that part of how we think is determined by language. We think of snow in only one way whereas the Eskimo have many names, and therefore, they experience snow in a multitude of forms. If we concur with this premise, then poetry can become experience, it can be sensation. Perhaps, it is not the same as being at the football game on the 50-yard line or tasting the sweat of a lover, but it can evoke feeling. This feeling can become its own story and experience.

Ars Poetica #3

I articulated this third *ars poetica* during a research project where I discovered that poetry was the best means for me to accomplish my goals of examining how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Jews think of and manage multiple identities (see Faulkner, 2005, 2006). Obsessed with poetry that presents themes, narratives, emotions, and the tone of research at the same time it works as poetry, I made colleagues and poet friends read poem after poem and revision after revision of poems in the project for 2 years. Comments that the poems were too “researchy” drove me to more revisions. Hirshfield’s collection (1997) of essays about poetic craft lay beside my bed with a pencil sticking out of the spine. I loved many of her prose lines about poems, wondered how you could make it happen in your own poems: “A poem is a detour we willingly subject ourselves to, a trick surprising us into the deepened vulnerability we both desire and fear. Its strategies of beauty, delay, and deception smuggle us past the border of our own hesitation” (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 125). I decided to include my conceptualizations about poetic craft into the published work as a means to frame and evaluate the success of the project, to see if there were any surprises and beauty present.

Poet as Archival Activist (2003-2005)

My goal is to translate and reinvent Soniat’s (1997) vision of poet as archivist into poet as archival activist (e.g., Hartnett, 2003), that is, I want to use poetry to question and alter traditional representations of identity, to provoke emotional responses in readers and/or listeners, and create a sense of connection by “critically traversing the margin and center... opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces” (Madison, 2004, p. 471). And
as the former U.S. Poet Laureate, Billy Collins (in Stewart, 2004), said, “Poetry is an interruption of silence.” This work breaks the silence by adding to the representation of LGBTQ Jews. (Faulkner, 2006, p. 98)

Or perhaps, I could simply show you this poem I didn’t publish with the piece that represents my most recent articulation (somewhere during spring 2005) of the art of poetry.

Poetry is

when I lift my brown hemp skirt
in the packed metro car, show
some stripped tights in orange,
rusty red and plum purple.
But my fun flushed face and toes
are only a dream of a dream
I told you about just now,
like writing some poem.

This *ars poetica* is partly influenced by what I see one of my favorite poets, Kim Addonizio, doing with her work. A few lines from the poem, Good Girl, in her collection *Tell Me* (Addonizio, 2000):

Look at you, sitting there being good.
After two years, you’re still dying for a cigarette.
And not drinking on weekdays, who thought that one up?

She witnesses and wrings out love, relationships, and identity, the wild despair and black desire of it all through formal and free verse. I like her conversational tone, yet surprising use of formal verse for relational topics. I like the way her lines remain with me after I leave the poem.

*Ars Poetica as Criteria*

The art of poetry provides a point of entry from which we can discuss potential criteria for evaluating research poetry. Examining a researcher’s goals and consideration of poetic craft through *ars poetica* suggest these criteria. These presentations may accompany research poetry as appendixes in a researcher’s work, be discussed explicitly during the presentation of the work (e.g., Faulkner, 2006), or be discussed in an article such as this. I must acknowledge that conflict exists about the role of poet-as-critic, whether we
can view poets as reliable narrators about their own work and what goes
into the creation of their work given that poets have a vested interest in their
own aesthetics (Pack & Parini, 1997). However, what I am arguing is that
such statements provide criteria by which we may judge the relative suc-
cess of such work.

The criteria suggested in my *ars poetica* are those of artistic concen-
tration, embodied experience, discovery and/or surprise, conditionality,
narrative truth, and transformation. These poetic criteria blend artistic and
scientific concerns to create guidelines for evaluating research poetry.
This idea of feeling with, rather than about, is what Hirshfield (1997)
wrote of as artistic concentration, the direct and indirect attention to the
language of connection that is “penetrating, unified, and focused, yet also
permeable and open” (p. 3). The idea of *artistic concentration* focuses
attention on considerations of the history and presence of craft in poetry
(see Percer, 2002) and manifests itself in careful attention to detail (titles,
lines, punctuation, sound, rhyme, figurative language, and word choice)
and feeling (tone, mood); poets focus on usual as well as unusual details
that are fresh.

*Embodied experience* recognizes the need for poetry to make audiences
feel with, rather than about a poem, to experience emotions and feelings in situ.
“The more you practice with imagery—recording it in as much vivid detail
as you can—the more likely it is that your poetry will become an experience
for the reader, rather than simply talk about an experience” (Addonizio &
Laux, 1997, p. 91). A poem should use images to transform the way that we
look at the world; a good image is one that brings something previously neb-
ulous into the “realm of the expressed” (Hirshfield, 1997).

*Discovery* means that a poem teaches us to see something familiar in
new ways or ways that may be surprising; we learn something about our-
selves and the human condition. The partiality of the story should also be
recognized through poetry, point of view is conditional while presenting
what we may call *narrative truth*. The facts as presented should ring true,
regardless of whether events, feelings, emotions, and images “actually”
occed. And finally, poetry should transform by providing new insight,
giving perspective or advocating for social change. It should ask the ques-
tions: “Why am I being told these things? What will I know by the end of
the poem I did not know before? Toward what end?” (Hirshfield, 1997,
p. 13). Why is there a reason for speech rather than silence?

These criteria do focus on craft and sublime considerations, yet they are
also flexible enough to be written in pencil, acknowledging that our con-
ceptions of good or effective poetry may alter through time, experience, and
changing tastes. Researcher-poets may need to articulate *ars poetica* with every poetic project. Or quoting the poet Richard Hugo (1992):  

> Ink tends to give the impression that words shouldn’t be changed... That is the advantage of making up rules. If they are working, they should lead you to better writing. If they don’t, you’ve made up the wrong rules. (pp. 37, 43)

Of course, the idea of “good poetry” presents a potential quagmire as it creates a divisive dialectic between criteria and freedom. This dialectic of criteria restricting creativity and possibilities is not endemic to those interested in research writing as poet and author Gabriel Welsch (personal communication, May 24, 2004) conveyed to me when we discussed the possibilities of criteria for good research poetry:

> And the notion of vagueness is endemic to writing texts, since no one wants to go on record saying DO NOT, and therefore suffer the ignominy of some upstart winning a Pushcart doing the very thing they said not to do. SO you get vagueness, qualifiers, the kinds of things that social scientists tend to deal with in footnotes but writers wring their hands over in actual paragraphs not unlike this one. Where does that leave the enterprising ethnographer? In the same place it leaves writers: somewhere between intuition and hubris.

Some researchers have argued persuasively that criteria limit alternative forms of research writing by constraining freedom and possibility because of the connection of criteria with situated power structures (Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000). Given these concerns, I recognize the caveat of constraint when suggesting the use of *ars poetica* as one potential vehicle by which to evaluate research poetry. However, I believe we need to consider the poetic process and the implications for research poetry because as Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) stated:

> Such writing helps refine and develop our thinking about what doing and judging research entails, acts as an heuristic device for teaching others about these things, and represents a key part of the research tradition of which we are a part. (p. 535)

The use of *ars poetica* as one means of evaluating research poetry recognizes that criteria are mutable, dependant on particular communities and situations (Bochner, 2000; L. Richardson, 2000). L. Richardson (1997) proposed that the “central imaginary” of validity for postmodern texts would be a crystal “which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety
of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach” rather than the triangle in more traditional texts (p. 92). She reminds us that crystals may alter their shape but are not amorphous. I adopt this crystal analogy that positions criteria as fighting nebulosity yet flexible, open to critical reflection and dialogue given that criteria and our use of it is “influenced by the nature of the research report, the standpoint and dispositions of the reader, and the socially, culturally, and historically located interaction between the two” (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998, p. 532).

Notes

1. Of course, this truly is a simplistic explanation. The distinction between narrative and lyric poetry is not this clear as B. H. Fairchild (2003), for instance, pointed out. In fact, we can talk about lyric elements in narrative poetry and vice versa. He argued that narrative and lyric poetry are often mixed forms, and the blending of the two promises to achieve “the radical potential embedded in the language of poetry” (p. 1).

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References


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