

# *An Aesthetics of Language*

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*Two things happened to me recently that made me reconsider the turbulent vastness of language that can be spoken, scratched in dirt, bloodied onto walls, written, stuttered, laughed, gestured, sung.*

– Hoogland (2003, p. 11)

Literature's specialized use of language is its art. Poetry is the most heightened use of literary verbal structures that thrive on immediacy, multiplicity of meaning, colour, sound and other sensory data, emotion, and images of the concrete, material world. Its conventions include similes, assonance, dissonance, diction, fantasy, make-believe, puns and word play, and most notably, metaphor. In its broadest definition, metaphor is speaking of one thing as it is experienced in terms of another. Zwicky (2003) says metaphor "is one way of showing how patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another," (p. 6) and also, is a "species of understanding, a form of seeing-as: it has, we might say, flex. We see, simultaneously, similarities and dissimilarities" (p. 4). Of course, metaphor is neither limited to aesthetic language, nor to language; but of all the language forms it is literary language that makes metaphor its centre of gravity.

The general field within which the literary arts occur is called aesthetics, that is, a field of practice that values imaginative, sensory, and emo-

tional experience for the intellectual thoughts, connections, and expressions that such experience enables. I am interested in how metaphoric language works within its aesthetic domain (i.e. its conventions, structures and content), what it enables, the questions it asks, the parts of the human psyche as well as the parts of experience that it values, how it conducts inquiry, and the forms and structures of a sustained metaphoric language artifact (or performance), as these features occur within the mental processes that produce literature. My emphasis on form attempts to partially redress the misuses of literature as contents divorced from their verbal structures. Catherine Belsey (2002) says,

Recent theories and practices of interpretation readily revert...to an account of thematic content, neglecting the text's mode of address and the position it thereby offers the reader-subject. Going straight to the signified, confined to what the text *says*, such a reading is unable to recognize what the text *does*. (p. ix)

I interpret Belsey in several ways. First, to regard literary texts merely as contents, to the exclusion of their forms, is to dismiss their aesthetic aspects. Second, any text must be considered as a whole work; we cannot criticize part of a work without considering that part's relationship to the whole. Third, certain "mode(s) of address" have specific methods of proceeding and work within certain conventions.

Such examination of method and specific language use is what I believe is underprivileged in what is generally known as narrative inquiry as it is practiced within Faculties of Education. Besides examining my own practice, I hope to show: what distinguishes literary language from other language forms; something of its social function; as well as the basis of the poet's authority, which Frye (1985) says, is the "authority of poetic language" (p. xxi). I claim poetry's authority as its interest in expanding the boundaries of what can be conveyed in language.

I am an artist, a poet and playwright. I work within a Faculty of Education in an institution that states that it values artistic production equally to conventional scholarship. The interdisciplinary nature of Faculties of Education is a strength as well as a challenge in that within the broad range of discourse—from scientific (descriptive) to poetic (metaphoric)—scholars must always be redefining what counts as scholarly discourse. Narrative inquiry has long provided pressure to those language forms associated with the social sciences and related methods of inquiry. I believe that in order to mature as a form of inquiry, narrative needs to examine its use of the aesthetic within its research forms.

When scholars engage a literary structure, they enter the field of metaphor and aesthetics. When students talk about their current research, it's clear that the *critical* aspect of their critical narratives is supported by elabo-

rate theory, intensive framing strategies, and great attention. However, when I ask about the literary considerations of plot, character, point of view, they shrug their shoulders. While they obviously do their best to write well, they most often haven't researched the story-making aspect of critical narrative. This is unfortunate on many levels, not the least being that researchers miss the myriad structural options available in formal schemes that could support their research claims. In this paper I elaborate a first step of detailing ways in which poetic forms change, but contemporary poetry continues to change as it aligns with current understandings of how the world works. Although narrative researchers can mostly ignore the traditions as well as the new developments, as well as the conventions and practice of poetry and fiction, it is nevertheless true that each poem written is a part of a great continuum of all the poems ever written, and all that people have understood and hoped poems might be and do. Not only are the opportunities that new narrative conventions provide overlooked, the more conventional ones are often poorly understood and practiced.

Also, understanding of poetry and fiction's conventions as practiced within narrative inquiry within Faculties of Education has arrived not from the literary arts (as one might expect), but from anthropology and its connected fields.

This baffles me, particularly because I too first learned about the possibilities of using the literary strategies of my poems and plays in my scholarly research in an early edition of that huge tome, the *Handbook Of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Writers such as Laura Richardson (2000) have influenced my understanding of the relationship between writing as "a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis" and research forms (p. 923). Scholars from other non-literary fields of research have also figured into the *founding fathers club* of narrative research: educator Eliot Eisner, psychologist Jerome Bruner, neurologist Oliver Sacks, and philosophers Alasdair Macintyre and Charles Taylor. Not to undermine the value of these contributions—they are valuable and important—it is nevertheless necessary, I believe, to ask poets and writers to inform the understanding of the tools narrative researchers embrace. Let me offer one reason. At the very end of the same article referenced above, Richardson advises scholars to "enroll in a creative writing workshop" (p. 941). The hierarchical positioning, as well as the content of this advice is emblematic, I believe, of the entire text's premise. The suggestion is that the narrative aspect of narrative writing is something scholars acquire as they go, or on the side. That is like suggesting to the students engaged in critical narrative that they take a workshop, when they can, on critical approaches; hopefully somebody in the community will offer such a course. This would never happen—we would deem ourselves and our faculty as neglectful and unprofessional.

What follows is my attempt to clearly articulate aesthetic practice as I embody it in my own literary text, *Cuba Journal*. Although I offer it as an example of narrative or poetic inquiry, my main purpose is to better define my field, and to articulate the particulars of my process. As a language form that plays with, and extends, meaning, I hope my examination of my poetry makes clear alternative forms of thought-making. I use the metaphor of traveling (*Cuba Journal* is based on my travels in Cuba) and a traveler's disposition (or *aesthetic attention*, defined below) as an approach to everyday experience.

Brian Boyd (2001) speaks of two kinds of attention—individual and communal—which shape a literary work and which ensure its audience. Literary features aren't simply extravagant or stylistic choices a writer makes; rather, to Boyd, a good story ensures human survival. Evolutionary theory adds imperative to the literary arts in two distinct ways. The teller or writer must remain invested in completing the literary problem she sets before herself (individual attention), and her story must engage her audience to stay and listen until the end, at which time, hopefully, its members have learned something about what being human means to the writer (communal attention). Anybody who enjoys a novel understands the desire to find out how the hero solves her problems. Reading is not simply fanciful nor frivolous entertainment. Boyd implies that a healthy society is composed of people eager to learn how others have solved problems, and how others experience the world. And so, it seems that people in all cultures have decided that it's important to tell or write compelling, attention-grabbing literature, rather than simply compiling long lists of the important facts and information we deem necessary for a good life. Literature accomplishes this by performing itself in relation to the engaged reader. Boyd states that the imperative upon tellers and their tales for novel ways to engage their audiences has changed over time only in terms of delivery. As human beings shifted from oral to literate cultures, from the spoken to the written word, so did oral storytelling features such as eye contact and bodily gesture become encoded into literary text.

It may be useful at this time to clearly demark literary language from other language forms, such as descriptive or philosophical. Northrop Frye identifies three main language modes (1988):

One is the descriptive way that we find in science and everywhere else where the aim is to convey information about an objective world. Then there is the language of transcendence that we find in large areas of philosophy and religion, an abstract, analogical language that expresses what by definition is really beyond verbal expression. And there is the language of immanence, the metaphorical language that poetry speaks, where anything can be identified with anything else, where natural objects can become images of human emotions. (p. 159)

Frye (1990) says that metaphoric language is valuable because it brings to consciousness, within a temporal sequence of events, complex situations and ideas. It brings attention to itself as a mode of expression that has to do with “a more open-ended world, breaking apart the solidified dogmas that ideologies seem to hanker for” (p. 22). Frye called metaphoric language the most primitive mode of thought and speech. “The distinction between the emotional and the intellectual has disappeared”, he said, and “subject and object are eliminated, in that everything is potentially identifiable with everything else” (p. 22). Poetic responses, too, are different from responses in other language modes in that fantasy and reality co-exist, and “ordinary consciousness is only one of many possible psychic elements” that comprise our responses (p. 22). Thus stories depend “on a half-voluntary, half-involuntary, integration of the conscious will with other factors in the psyche, factors connected with fantasy, dreaming, let’s pretend, and the like” (p. 99). Given their appeal to different dimensions of the human psyche, stories elicit a broad range of responses. While they provide information, they are also aesthetic works. Poetry is the most heightened form of language use.

While I am most concerned with articulating aesthetic (or arts-based, or simply artistic) research, my underlying claim is more far-reaching. I believe that critical thought should be based in experience (and thus the body) in order to be truly critical. Although I subscribe to mainstream conceptions of critical literacies composed of the following capacities: disrupting the commonplace; interrogating multiple viewpoints; focusing on socio-political issues; and taking action and promoting social justice (Lewison, Seely, Flint and Van Sluys, 2002, p. 382), I place these capacities within an aesthetic framework in order that they be engaged with the body’s sensory, emotional and imaginative dimensions; in short, upon aesthetic aspects of inquiry.

I describe the processes of the artist engaged in his or her inquiry as follows:

- 1) The artist moves from originating impulse, through the mediating frames of the tradition in which he or she is working, and produces what must be a mutually intelligible artifact or performance. By this I mean her intended audience must be able to access the work at some level or in some way in order to respond to it. If this is not the case, the work is meaningful to one person only—the artist—and is therefore an unsuccessful work. A successful, completed, work, on the other hand, is one that is potentially shared with an audience.
- 2) The artist’s questions at the beginning of inquiry are typically open and broad, rather than predetermined. As the artist moves through her artistic process, her framing question or major concern becomes clear(er) to her. She finds an artistic problem to solve and the means and materi-

als with which to solve it. "In its essence an interesting poem is an epistemological and metaphysical problem for the poet" (Simic cited in Zwicky, 2003, p. 2).

- 3) The artist depends upon factors other than cognition. While thinking is a major part of her process, she also depends upon other aspects of the psyche, asking imaginative questions such as *what if, let's pretend, let's imagine*. Also important in her process are emotions and feelings.
- 4) Besides cognition, feeling and imagination, the artist utilizes her senses in creating her composition or work. In the case of poetry, language is seen as performative, that is, as embodied in the physical, sense-based "original act" the poet hopes her readers will re-create as they read her poem, and to which they will offer their own response (Attridge, 1994, p. 245). The visual artist's eye, which she uses to inform and guide her creation, is, at times, more intelligent than her cognition.

Let me describe something of *Cuba Journal: Language and Writing*, the book under discussion. Published by Marty Gervais of Black Moss Press, 2003, this work's origins as a journal are signaled by the actual journal pages in the front and in the back of the book. In the process of its creation, and in achieving its particular voice or style, the book has "tried on" many genres, and so it exists at the intersection of the genres of fiction, poetry, travel writing, and journal writing. Each draft of the book informed it and shaped it in genre-specific ways. Overall, the desired quality of the final product/performance of the work is for the reader/listener to hear a personal journey—with its human, critical themes, dilemmas and concerns—in poetic form. I analyze the process of making *Cuba Journal*, explaining how I solve my artistic problems and the ways in which my methods are critical. I organize the following discussion around several phrases of the artist-at-work.

### Originating Impulse and Artistic Problem

My trip to Cuba in 1998 was structured as a series of informal meetings with people and institutions—a family doctor, an outdoor education centre, a classroom teacher and her students, small towns—and not as a research trip. But the place and the people attracted me, and I wrote copious notes in my journal. I felt strongly engaged with being on an island (my home is Vancouver Island), and with the ocean (also familiar). In the artful and industrious relationships Cubans have to the place they live and to work (such as their desire to achieve, abilities to live by their wits, to make do and never give up), I recognize something of my parents' own immigrant disposition. These background emotional factors prepared me to hear and understand the significance of what happened next.

"You are writing."

I look up, squint through the light shaft that falls around a young Cuban man poised in front of me.

"You are writing," he says.

"Yes," I say, holding up my journal to him. "I'm writing." (Hoogland, p. 31)

This seemingly insignificant yet nevertheless challenging incident was the originating impulse of *Cuba Journal*. The young man's statement in a small Cuban town in 1998 grabbed my attention and challenged my foundational understanding of literacy. What did this young man see as I bent over my black journal, chewing my pen, and writing? What is the effect of such acts? Where do they occur and not occur? I saw myself as an expert in the area of literacy and it was suddenly clear to me that I had taken my daily, literate actions for granted. Cuban society is highly literate yet as I looked around (for the first time as it were) there was little evidence of text or signs in the square of the small town where I sat writing. These were the questions that followed on the heels of the Cuban's simple yet startling observation. I had found my artistic problem, although I had not yet conceived of it as a book.

Once I recognized this as a focus of research, other foci became more obvious. If Cuban/Canadian notions of literacy were vastly different, what other differences were making themselves known to me? I began to notice the differences among the Canadian tourists, gender differences within that group, and those same considerations cross-culturally. But mainly I continued writing in my journal, unaware of any larger patterns and significance. It was only when I was home again and working with my notes that I began to organize my writing concerns.

### Editing and Traditional Forms

In its first manifestation as journal entries, *Cuba Journal* was spontaneous, erratic and sporadic. Literally all over the page, scratched while I leaned against my bicycle on the sides of roads, in restaurants or in the plaza central. While the content stayed roughly the same, the various versions of the book required different aspects to be emphasized and realized. Once I was home and reworking the material, the journal entries became, as they often do, the hearts of poems. These heart-kernels called out for more detail, which I recollected or researched in the library, and completed. I then decided that I wanted to make stronger connections among these poems; and create a stronger plot line. This required writing the connections between events, be they events-in-time, character development or emotional shifts. I didn't allow the poems to leap beyond the realistic bounds of the story as much, and so the poems *flattened* (as it were) into prose-poems, a form more able to carry narrative

continuity as well as interpersonal tensions. My writing for theatre and desire to perform poetry rather than read it from the page enhanced its theatricality at the editing stages. And so when I perform this book, as I have at an arts festival in Holguin, Cuba, and to a room full of directors, actors, and playwrights in Manila, the Philippines, it is a dramatic monologue. Each genre-version of the book informed it and shaped it in genre-specific ways.

In *Cuba Journal* a number of the story lines are cast competitively along gender lines. In the following list I have arbitrarily moved from the personal to the global in highlighting a few of the tensions or conflicts that occur. Conflicts of:

- sexual prowess—how will Bob—as stereotypical male—try to dominate? Or will the narrator outwit him?
- the myth of the Latin lover—will the narrator fall for Ernesto, the 24 year-old Cuban linguistics student?
- native/tourist relations— will Peter ‘get’ the Cuban, cultural signals? Does Peter become a more enlightened tourist or will he dig himself in deeper?
- Cuba as repressed dictatorship or desirable country—will Ernesto see Cuba in a new light when it is mirrored back to him through the Canadian’s observations of it?
- what the revolution means today—is Castro’s revolution still ‘on’? Or has its socialist ideals changed in light of tourism, market economies, and the incredible pressure on Cubans to obtain the advantaged American dollars.

The messy but fundamental themes of love and power, as well as high stakes, danger, problems and tensions partly compose good works of literature; these have not changed since we started writing down stories. What I’m highlighting here, however, is the story (or poem’s) form. I want to draw attention not just to *what* the work says, but *how* it says it: its artfulness, its inherent appeal. I’ve prepared a short conversation between writer and reader to illustrate. I provide the complete quote first (Hoogland, 2003, p. 11):

Two things happened to me recently that made me reconsider the turbulent vastness of language that can be spoken, scratched in dirt, bloodied onto walls, written, stuttered, laughed, gestured, sung. The first event was misreading a sign hammered into a tree in the gully behind Julie’s grandparent’s place. I read

No Writing

Reading the first page of *Cuba Journal* might go something like this (the quote from *Cuba Journal* in italics is followed by parentheses that contain the reader’s imagined response). *Two things happened* (Events suggest story. The text is asking whether I want to hear a story) *to me* (the events happened to

the narrator) *that made me reconsider* (the narrator will change—there will be character growth in this story) *the turbulent vastness of language that can be spoken, scratched in dirt, bloodied onto walls, written, stuttered, gestured, sung.* (there are actually many stories here—some dangerous, some embarrassing.) *The first event* (here we go...what happens next?) *was misreading a sign* (unreliable narrator? who is telling this story?) *hammered into a tree in the gully behind Julie's grandparent's place.* (Even though we don't know who Julie is we do have a sense of the place of this story, and that's good. We want to know where we are). *I read No Writing.* (this is weird. Is this narrator weird?)

Within the next three pages the reader learns the mystery of the *No Writing* sign, but is also introduced to memoir writing, feminist ideas, and will spend one full page in the gully where, within the context of an actual physical world, the ideas of language and writing are given fuller play. On page 15 a more conventional story—characters, plot, and place—are outlined. Also the second “event” is told,

The second thing that shook up what I knew about language was falling into the ocean. Not diving, not walking, but arms-raised collapsing into the folding water like the lucky child into a father's arms. Arms that hold, and hold up. I'd just arrived in Holguín, Cuba.

One of those last-minute travel agency sell-offs. Twenty-four hours to pack. Bob took care of the travel details, arranged the transport of the bicycles we took. Arranged to have Ernesto, a 24 year-old linguistics student whom Bob met on an earlier trip, meet us the first day. I thought travelling with Bob would be okay; I thought he was my friend (Hoogland, 2003, p. 15).

It appears that the reader can trust the narrator to keep her promises—but again, “falling into the ocean”, although it is an event, is not normally associated with learning about language. So a metaphoric puzzle is introduced: how is falling into the ocean like learning how to relate to, or understand, language?

Some of the larger forms of the text have to do with the narrator's rhythm of entering and returning from the sea, and indeed, the rhythm of the sea itself.

But instead I think of my literary foremothers who swam deep into a foreign text. All that churned-up, wide-open water, and they like white caps making everybody angry. One stroke at a time, one breath, one self-bestowed permission, then the next. (Hoogland, 2003, p. 22).

And again,

The women vanish. Like West Coast Orcas, their broad whale backs arc then disappear beneath the stirred-up surface. (p. 23)

Underground. Underwater. Undersea. They're growing dorsals, flippers, flukes, blow holes. They're working the text, teaching it to fall fluid over their backs, to buoy them up. (p. 27)

The narrator invites identification (as reliable narrator, for instance) and resists identification (as unreliable narrator) right up to the last line in the book. She resists her own expectations and those of her readers for the discursive patterns that might make them feel entirely at home. *Cuba Journal* also resists its own ideological commitments. *Revolution* takes on as many identities as there are characters, and the narrator's relationship with Ernesto, the 24 year-old student shifts and shifts again. These rhythms of language, integral to poetry's form, have the effect of distancing. The writer gets close to her subject—the writer moves away from that subject position (perhaps offering the same event from another's point of view).

This is the crucial distance (and often dissonance) built into literary forms. Imperfect of course, but so are all research forms. A more subtle distancing effect is language itself. All writing is representational—language is, after all, a symbol system. Even though there are obvious biographical similarities, it is beside the point to confuse the narrator of the fictional account that is *Cuba Journal* with Cornelia Hoogland the writer. Nevertheless, it is useful and prudent for the writer to include an internal distancing mechanism into her writing in order that she ensures a critical context. To address the need for distancing measures to be built into the work, Barbara Kamler (2001) has developed what she calls a “politics of space” that

foregrounds the location and the locatedness of the writer, as well as the need to create distance between the writer and the experience written about, so that experience itself is relocated in other spaces—political, social, cultural—rather than understood simply as the province of the private and individual. (p. 171)

I find her construction of place useful. My coordinates for being a writer, a theorist, an educator, are always my being—which includes my body—in the particular place in which I find myself. It was my sensory, emotionally responsive, imaginatively relational body which gathered the data for *Cuba Journal* as the scholarly part of me wanted to better learn the themes of Cuban/Canadian relations, gender relations, orality as literacy, writing as literacy, my literary foremothers, and something of the lives and desires of several Cubans whom I came to know. Perhaps more conventional methods of research could have achieved a similar understanding, but I think not. The nature of what I could understand evolved from being in, or practicing, my writing mode. That is, being attentive to my surroundings, to myself in my surroundings (my physical experience), and to others, within the critical framework of political, cultural, as well as language and artistic concerns.

Traveling through Cuba also had the effect of distancing—the entire experience had that component built in. Not only did I miss most of the language transactions, I took a break from the main language-based performances that compose my academic existence. Gone was the barrage of print material

that crosses my desk each day. Instead my experience was more visual, more atmospheric, and thus conducive to writing simple images in my journal. The act of writing distances the experiencing self from the observing self, while at the same time, it brings the writer into intimate, close relationship with the object of observation. That which I selected to write down was brought into focus. John Dewey (1958) called this an act of perception, which he distinguished from more mundane, passing acts of *recognition*. *Perception* is aligned with consciousness, bringing the object or event close for a better look, in the same way that writing can capture an event from the domain of recognition into that of perception. Writing slows me down and makes me attend to details. I think that I have captured an event, only to realize I've missed so much. *What did that young man say to me? What exact words? What was he wearing?* Dewey's statement of the case in biological (physical) terms: "an act of perception proceeds by waves that extend serially throughout the entire organism" (p. 53) is echoed in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000), a book by the literary scholar, Isobel Armstrong, whose definition of perception is "physical arousal of sensuous life and the intellectual energies released by it" (p. 169). People are stirred, angered, and moved in many ways in response to a work of art. Perception also involves a yielding of the self and of the so-called rational defenses: "Perception is an act of going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take in*" (Dewey, 1958, p. 53). And not just summon energy, and not just *take in*. Perception demands a response, or more accurately, perception *is* a response that can be externalized. And this is what I am hopeful for: that through learning to pay aesthetic attention, all researchers become better observers; that they become and remain conscious. We are all guilty of sending students to collect data without helping them understand that the *looking* part of *critical looking* is as important as the *critical* part. In other words, perception is as important as the framing structure of the inquiry. Indeed, each must be developed so that they can continually interrelate and inform each other and true *critical looking* can occur.

The act of careful looking ties into Boyd's key notion of what it means to attend. I believe that attention, like response or perception, forms the fundamental exchanges that make education and thinking—with its conjoined creative and critical aspects—possible. As an educator and writer I know attention is essential to everything I do in the classroom. What kind of attention is desired, I ask myself as I prepare a class, and how will I gain the students' attention? As a writer I ask: What else have I missed? To what or whom have I not attended? How will I keep my readers' attention to the end of the book? And at the beginning of the book, how will I grab my readers' attention away from the million distractions available to them? What is my hook?

Because *Cuba Journal* is a book about travel, and because my work as an arts-based researcher has parallels with the best notions of what it means to travel, there is a wonderful opportunity for metaphor here. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's main character, Viola, lands on the shores of Illyria and asks: "What shall I do in Illyria?" (1942, p. 282). Her first act is to question her purpose and name the place in which she has set foot. In this open-ended way Viola invites response from the place itself. Her question embodies the spirit and form of artistic research.

But traveling comes in many forms and requires further definition. My traveling metaphor is based upon an alert and socially aware traveler; however, each traveler intersects with the place and culture to which she travels in accordance with the arrangements made prior to the travel. Backpackers have one experience; luxury hotel guests have another. Elderly or disabled travelers would each have different experiences in accordance with their particular situations.

Similarly, different research paradigms foreground certain kinds of desired experiences and devalue others. At the beginning of inquiry the artist asks, metaphorically speaking, what shall I do in Illyria? This open-ended quality marks artistic inquiry from the predetermined questions and hypothesized outcome of conventional scientific inquiry.

While the narrator of *Cuba Journal* calls herself a tourist, her adventure is set apart from the packaged and predictable tourist experiences in which a predigested experience is bestowed upon the guest. At its best, tourism puts the traveler in the way of perception, but the truth is most travel experiences are a bit of both predictable and adventurous packages. The earnest traveler comes back to his or her lodging with its good tourist food and most often sheets on the bed. By *best notion*, then, I mean travel in which people are more open to their assumptions and aware of their own limited versions and visions of the world.

To focus on traveling as a constant, sometimes overwhelming, source of new stimuli and insights, makes the traveler's task one of interpreting, or of creating meaning through the unknown. What does it mean when somebody takes expert care of your bicycle? What do the men who gesture with their hands at their genitals mean, and is this meaning different from similar activity on Dundas Street in London, Ontario?

Traveling in Cuba or in another country is, for me, a chance to be a full-time writer, where writing is not something I do in the evenings, but is a way of life. Much that I do, observe, and record, is data. Almost every place is the research setting. The conversations that I have are also data, and repeated visits to people and places are similar to interviews or focus groups. The emphasis, method and lens of my research is perception; seeing clearly, asking good questions, listening, watching, gaining clarification, revisiting,

seeking the nuances, being quiet and observant. These are, of course, only the beginning stages of a work. Another is the process of selecting among the data for those which best illuminate the main themes, as well as the shaping processes of tradition.

Having discussed the kind of attention available to the traveler, I now argue that this kind of attention—which I have been calling *aesthetic attention*—can also happen in domestic settings in everyday life. The difference is that in the first, the strange and new elements vie, unavoidably, for one's attention while in the latter one decides to attend, and does.

Ideally we would be wide-awake in our familiar settings and daily occupations but we are not. Most people no longer see what once was the new and even exotic in the place in which they live. Whereas the shops in my neighbourhood were once *old world* and brightly painted, they've become absorbed into the functions they serve. The orange and blue shoe repair shop that once made me stand and stare in delight is now subservient to my concern to get my shoes into the shop before it closes at 5.

We all impose such "grids of interests" on the places we live, that prevent us from seeing whatever is excluded in our grid (de Botton, 2002, p. 251). Although life would be incomprehensible should we be open to all stimuli, it's important to beware of our conforming tendencies, and further, to explore the realms that lie beyond our daily grids. Alain de Botton, in speaking of his own neighbourhood, says,

The power of my primary goal had drained me of the will to *reflect* on the layout of the park or the unusual mixture of Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian architecture along a single block. My walks along the street had been excised of any *attentiveness* to beauty, of any *associative* thoughts, any *sense of wonder* or *gratitude*, any *philosophical digressions* sparked by visual elements. (p. 25, italics added)

Reflection, attention, associative thoughts, wonder, gratitude, and philosophical digressions can inform and educate the person taught to pay *aesthetic attention*. Cheaper and more readily available than travel, it is a way of reversing the processes of habituation. When De Botton imposed such an artistic perspective on his neighbourhood he began to consider everything as potentially valuable. He says, "objects released their value" (p. 251) so that shapes became people, buildings became architecturally noteworthy, adverts became philosophically interesting, and people became imaginatively connected to him. Concurrent with his sensory and imaginative data gathering came *ideas* about his observations of objects and relationships: their qualities, commonalities, differences. Sensory input and thinking are thus conjoined. De Botton's account posits aesthetic attention—observation and perception—as a way of thinking, or a means of knowledge, that can be taught not just within the context of artistic practice but as a way of

being in the world. It should be noted that perception itself is potentially verbal, as illustrated in the phrase, *I wonder if*. Frye (1990) says that “any perception that leads directly to reflection must be a verbalizing impulse from the beginning: the ordering of words does not suddenly appear in the middle of the process” (p. 7). Implications for the connection between sensory input and thinking for this present discussion are large. At the least it questions the origins of thought—how humans create thoughts.

I consider attention as an advantageous form of behaviour in two ways. First, there are the personal rewards of engaging one’s own attention. A poet writes a poem about an experience because she wants to uncover more of its aspects, or she wants to know her own feelings toward her experience, or she wants to discover more about her relationship with it. It feels good when our curiosity about a subject is satisfied. We become disposed to enter into such relationships with language and the poetic form. The work pays off. The nature of all these interactions is neither simply expressive nor therapeutic, that is, people do not write to bare their souls. Rather, writing poetry is a cognitive act of stimulation that provides the energy to uncover, explore and hopefully find the right words that enables the poet to share her research and vision of the world with others in a mutually intelligible way.

How does the writer (or artist—other art forms are applicable here) attract attention, and once she has it, maintain it? Much like their oral storytelling forebears, writers shape their stories and poems in an attempt to get readers’ attention. While they can’t depend on eye contact and physical gestures, as can oral storytellers, writers depend on the literary conventions of plot, character and place which have never lost their appeal. Readers still want to know what happens next, how the hero will overcome her challenges, and where the story takes place. Boyd (2001) argues that there are two essential forces behind the power of plot to command our continued attention to a story, and that these forces are best explained in evolutionary terms: first, our interest in whether or not agents achieve their goals, which arises from the natural sympathy creatures at a certain cognitive and social level can have for others of their kind; and, second, our unique human interest in knowing the full situation that will explain the whole story (p. 6).

Boyd’s phrase, “the full situation that will explain the whole story,” reminds me of the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who, in *Love’s Knowledge* (1990) explores the writing of Henry James for the complexity of experience it provides. She demarks the limits of philosophic language to capture the fluidity and complexity of human experience, and states that philosophers need to turn to the novelists for more complete, detailed textual performances of experience. Like Belsey, Nussbaum asserts the importance of form and content.

Literary form is not separable from...content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part.

But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident—but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises...And what if it is love one is trying to understand. (1990, pp. 3-4)

In *Cuba Journal*, the form of my poetry was shaped by my need to give full account of the character motivations and complexities of my Cuban experiences, and to shape that account in ways readers can experience in their hearts, imaginations, and through their senses.

I hope that my attempts to articulate my literary conventions and processes are useful to researchers interested in making their narratives speak powerfully and directly to their audiences. I want to end with positing *Cuba Journal* as a research project. I worked as a researcher; my tools (pen, perceptive abilities, attitude) and my methods (participant observer, interviewer) were that of a researcher. I was immediately interested in what I didn't know (about literacy, for instance), what was obscured by strange (to me) customs, and eventually, through writing, I found the courage to address a troubling aspect of my trip (not addressed in this paper). I did not obscure my position or my interest; I placed my desiring self in relation to the other characters. I moved back and forth dialogically between what I knew about the characters and what they revealed, through their actions, about themselves. Or what was revealed to me in conversation with other characters, or in relation to the land, or to tradition.

My understanding did not arrive full-blown nor did a muse deliver it. Even, or perhaps especially, during the editing process back home, with the many reference books I consulted scattered on the floor of my study, I moved back and forth between what I had written and the clarity and accuracy of phrase, sentence, paragraph, and ultimately the complete text that I needed. These activities were set within, and responsible to, the context of my overarching social, political and artistic concerns.

*Cuba Journal*, however, differs from other research in three important ways. First, the characters, while their origins are in real people, are fictionalized. When I am moving back and forth as I try to find my characters, as described above, I am moving between the parts and the whole of my work,

and the truth of presentation that I am seeking has to do with the individual character in relation to the whole story. As fiction, characters are subservient to the larger purposes, though the writer's task is to keep the unique sense of the character. Second, I have presented my findings in this odd hybrid of genres, but one that definitely falls under the category of literature. Whether this category could also fit the criteria of academic discourse, or how it could fit, I am not sure. It could be presented differently, although I would always insist that its performance component is as important as any other. I'm also unsure how the academic community feels about broadly accessible work with its high stakes of love and sex. Third (and to me the most revealing and important difference), is that a work of literature, while creating empathy, is also—and simultaneously—able to interrogate itself. The work offers images that challenge other images—sometimes in the same sentence. Characters contradict themselves, and offer alternative viewpoints from the other characters. The narrator invites identification and resists it. The text invites ideological commitment and resists it. In these ways literature can critique itself from *inside its own form*. And critiquing both the shape and the content of the text is vitally important to understanding how this is done.

This ability to simultaneously uphold diverse viewpoints is especially valuable in addressing, for example, the complexity of a teacher's action in a classroom. Artistic forms of research allow for that complexity. They allow for the questions hidden by the platitudes and slogans of curriculum documents and packaged educational materials. If the purpose of research is to clarify and expand our perceptions of our human selves and the world we live in, and to share those perceptions in a mutually intelligible ways, then it seems to me that artistic forms of inquiry offer themselves—along with approaches and frameworks from other disciplines—as suitable research forms. If there is to be a shift in educational research by means of an acknowledgement that the arts and the aesthetic are vital to critical inquiry, I, as an artist and scholar, must continue to study the artistic processes within, and of, literature, and to build theory that can adequately respond to “the authority of poetic language” (Frye, 1985, p. xxi).

I believe that we need to expose our methods of creation as much as possible, and discover the social and dynamic processes embedded within them. If possible, we need to more accurately locate the aesthetic in our endeavours, and discover how it effects and shapes a work. How does art require its participants to revisit and problematize its own processes? What forms of reflection, identification of issues and questions does it offer? What are the purposes of creating art, or artfulness in any endeavour? What is the effect of aesthetic elaboration?

We also need to ask questions of the art-based processes that we borrow from other disciplines. How are the words *art* and *aesthetic* used in narrative inquiry? Is narrative conceptualized as an art form? Has education consulted artists and writers in the process of including narrative forms of inquiry into mainstream research paradigms? Or has education been content to use these concepts and conventions from anthropology (particularly ethnography) without sufficient evaluation and analysis? If so, how are they defined and how are they used, and do these uses acknowledge their language origins? All those involved with narrative—its specific language, forms and conventions—would benefit from asking poets and writers about their processes. All concerned need to unpack their own assumptions in order to move understanding of the uses of metaphoric language to a new place that serves the variety of topics elaborated above.

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