



Taking (A)Part: Poetic Counternarratives for Troubled Times

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How do we "read the world" after September 11th? As the event was mediatized into abstraction, this article provides a framework from which poetry as counternarrative may be used to challenge the media monologue on what emerged as standardized September 11th discourse. In the aftermath of the event, the media constructed an acceptable, sensible-sounding lexicon that may also have foreclosed on social critique in the form of vernacular expressions. And if the media set the terms of acceptable language, what happened to the non-mediatized experience of September 11th? Does such an experience even exist? What is the role of schools in fostering student critique? Based on a narrative approach that includes examples of the author's own experience and writing, this piece takes a poetic look at a different kind of literate meaning: the sense of empowerment rooted in the language of everyday experience.

Everything shifts and you are part of that shifting...

- bp nichol

Two weeks after September 11, 2001, I presented a paper on poetry and resistance. In the work I draw upon my experience as a teacher and poet to explore the potentially creative elements of critical theory, the protest elements of poetry, and the potential for both to bring experience into the foreground of learning. Central to the work is the notion that poetry is a transformative protest that allows people to reclaim everyday experience. In this way, the inclusion of vernacular poetry (in language classrooms, in literacy programs, in academic discourse) provides a response to Paulo Freire's view of literacy as the ability to both read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Defending my work, I could easily anticipate the question, what is the relevance of this work in a world post-September 11th? In my response, I considered the televised reaction to the events that quickly became a nerve-shot aftermath, even as many struggled to grieve and personally deal

with such a large-scale event. I also considered the question of experience and the words of Paulo Freire, who urges educators to remain with the events going on at the center of students' lives (Freire, 1998). In the midst of responding, it occurred to me that, in order to serve students, part of that recognition might include allowing them a non-mediatized reaction to a larger than life national tragedy at the level of their own experience. As the media turned to the usual adventure film script-worthy expressions such as "America Under Attack," inevitably followed by "America Strikes Back," it seemed even more crucial to allow students to interpret events as they were lived, in the (often smaller scale) contexts of individuals and communities. But as the public took up the televised rhythm of the tragedy, where were the everyday words? And where are they now?

A Case for Ordinary Poetry

In troubled times, what language will allow a humane response that has no motive except to *be heard*? Muriel Rukeyser suggests that the knowledge of poetry is "never to be used" (Rukeyser, 1949, p.121). Perhaps there is something in the experience

of poetry that, as a living language, will not be used; that whether the business of educators is to consume, translate, supplement or supplant the language of curricula, poetry somehow defies traditional notions of use. Rooted in the occurrence of oral rhythm, poetry remains unmangled despite manglings; unjustifiable, despite justifications. When experience enters the classroom through poetry, looming messages are subverted and students are invited to consider events through their own eyes, in the midst of others' meaning and text. New, smaller meanings emerge. When I reflect on my teaching experience, few students start out believing (or caring) whether or not their own experience is legitimized outside their social group. Yet many students (and teachers) feel empowered when their experience is expressed in their own seemingly ordinary words, when those words are heard and legitimized by teachers and other students, through poetry.

*Heart sick for America,
two towers unzip, human
as matchstick, human as
concrete, building, dust,
cloud, silver lining, office
space, wind -- human
as syllable, human as
idea as pilot as hero
as something to think
as word as plane as day
cut in two. (1)*

As an oral form of expression, poetry has the potential to interrupt mainstream messages and contextualize social debate in classroom praxis. In a comparison of oral and text-based communities, Ong suggests that oral language keeps "knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld... (and) situates (it) within a context of struggle" (Ong, 1988, p.37). Poetry readings allow students to reclaim this human struggle (and right) to question and make sense of the world by working with a language that facilitates both personal and shared interpretations. Moving away from fixed, abstract notions, Freire calls teachers to take up what goes on in the midst of students' lives and troubles, instead of imposing definitive teacher versions. He discusses the value of concrete expressions and asks, "Why not...take advantage of the students' experience of life in those parts of the city neglected by the authorities...Why are there no rubbish heaps in the heart of the rich areas of the city?" (Freire, 1998, p.36). These words bring to mind my own first day experience teaching in an inner city school, where, despite my efforts to direct attention to English and Social Studies texts, the students remained preoccupied with questions about the polluted fumes flowing through the classroom window from a chicken rendering plant

down the street. And, despite my efforts to focus on the text based curricular components of a wall map and a Shakespeare sonnet, one student demanded: "Why do they always put everything that smells gross in the East end?" Instead, we decided to leave Shakespeare and write some poetry about our own learning context in the shade of the chicken plant. Working with poetry in inner city classrooms this way has led me to wonder how the inclusion of written and spoken vernacular language, and the *counternarrative* (2) it promotes, can also provide a powerful basis for literacy and social awareness.

Definitions and Rationales: Local Meaning and Poetic Counternarrative as Social Critique

The term *counternarrative* is defined by critical theorists as "the little stories of those individuals and groups whose knowledge and histories have been marginalized...or forgotten in the telling of official narratives" (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p.2). From this critical term, it is worth considering how alternative, vernacular literacies might be encouraged and devised in ways that won't simply echo the official telling. Consider the Latin derivations:

Vernacular. a. L. *vernaculus* born in one's house, native, fr. *verna* a slave born in his master's house, a native...Belonging to the country of one's birth; one's own by birth or nature; native; indigenous...
Vernacular. n. the vernacular language; one's mother tongue; often, the common forms of expression in a particular locality.(Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary 1913).

The first meaning shows how notions of the vernacular have been associated with places that were not chosen. In the second, if the vernacular is associated with enforced localization of "common" people, perhaps it is also used as a definition to keep those who use "common forms of expression" "in place." But who occupies the larger, public world, the freely chosen space? Read this way, a starting point for counternarrative must be to realign, to reclaim the public space of language. If language is the door by which outsiders and insiders are allowed or denied access to a "location," then, from a pedagogical perspective, it is also worth considering the implications of relocating the access point itself, of reclaiming the sites of vernacular language as the location of experience and expression. As a practical manifestation of critical theory from the works of Giroux, hooks and others, the devising of local, vernacular meanings from the sites of those meanings becomes an insurgent act that might finally interrupt "official narratives."

What is *poetic counternarrative*? Possible definitions might include: counternarratives rendered in the forgiving grammar of poetry; the inclusion of local goings told in local (even household) language; the inclusion of local rhythms in world events; a record of experience, in imperfect words. Teaching in the inner city, I did not find abstract historical representations and the removed language of textbooks suited the urgency of the location. Only vernacular counternarrative told from the oral, open-ended perspectives of poetry would do. From a practical perspective, how else could I have communicated with students on that first sweaty-palmed day of teaching, where a teacher presentation of "literature" took back seat to the students' pressing environmental and social concerns? This was a tactile teaching moment, difficult to express in quantitative terms or even in terms that would make sense within the official version of schooling, curriculum and research. As practicing teachers know, online diagnosis of classroom situations, in other words, teaching that responds to live students, often necessitates on the spot development of intangible curricular goals. And although a statistical study on the placement of schools in lower income neighborhoods in relation to waste plants might be helpful in changing school policy, the daily narratives and small records of teachers' experiences remain vital in understanding the basis for those changes. In other words, instead of exploring that wall map, we critically located and examined the site of our learning.

Think

*of rubber boots, engines
and ladders who climb stairs
break backs dig for us who
stand and understood and
stood under. Us. The people
deciding between sprinkled
glazed dunked or cinnamon
sticks, between blue white
or red, people who'd just
said, Hold on, I'll meet you
back at my desk, or Steve,
come on in.*

Poetic counternarrative is a way of encouraging students to think of living forms of language in order to create concrete representations rooted in ordinary life as they live it. Poetic counternarrative is also about returning language to its' vernacular origins linked to place. It is not about knowing how to manipulate traditional poetic devices or debate rhetoric, not about knowing the ins and outs of traditional poetic rhythms, of getting language "straight" before it is even explored. Poetry as counternarrative is not language at its finest, nor is it

for the exclusive use of the most advanced, privileged language users; it need not be beautiful. In fact, it is about working (imperfectly) with language where teachers and students create their own sites of legitimacy to counter larger than life, specialized, or "official" interpretations of public events.

Poetic Counternarratives in Troubled Times

On September 11th, and in the days after, there was little teachers, parents, friends and colleagues could say to one another that fit the scale of the event itself. People listened to and comforted one another; by necessity, used small words and engaged in small transactions to make sense of the event. That day, perhaps the definition of knowledge, of what makes sense, did change. Yet the media responded with a daily theme ("America Under Attack") already shaping fears surrounding the so-called new knowledge of life in North America. Within days, I heard an economist on the radio speak of "the new normal." Still, for most, life continued to present itself in the various forms of old normal, in the bare bones of daily experience; and there were few "official" or "larger than life" interpretations that could represent that experience.

So, months later, how may teachers read the world with their students? Even as people struggle to name a dislocated experience, they must remain part of it. And even the most fractured attempt to create local records of experience in plain words is recognition of a tactile link between people and place, a re-placing of people into vernacular experience where the story is so often told by television. In this way, students and teachers might be able to create a place in the context of the tragedy, where, instead of playing the role of audience to media sound bites, the same public who lived the event, rightfully move alongside, take up place as participating observers.

Talking about "It"

Teachers may still ask themselves, what was a "professional" pedagogical response to September 11th? Especially in the days after, many may have stood before their students searching for the right words to publicly examine an event that very few could rationally comprehend. There were those who tried to do what the politicians said, to "carry on as usual," determined to stay on track, but for many this proved difficult. In any case, the students, in their usual way, would not let teachers "carry on as usual"; they wanted to talk about it. At this time I believe students demanded (and deserved) more. As the media hesitated before launching into "the new language," it was time to put language and learning into the hands of students, to engage in a reflective process that would not necessarily end in clear-cut, official answers.

This was the time to welcome spontaneous vernacular expressions so that new meanings and language could emerge alongside the new events. Here was a chance to grapple with student ideas in meaningful ways, where the lesson and expectations remained "unplanned," by necessity. The professional role for teachers that day was clear: to stand by their students in this story; to remain aware that the media was writing their story for them; to encourage them to use whatever private, exploratory, tentative, spontaneous language they needed to use, and, wherever possible, to help them create an imperfect record of the event that would eventually be read aloud.

*People who
were reaching for a pencil.
People who never heard
the news; people still in
August who just heard the
words, Sorry or Laid off or
Dad I got in or Mom she
said yes or Thank You or
One moment please or,
You going to answer this?*

The Interpreters of Public Events

My works are like water. The works of the great masters are like wine. But everyone drinks water. - Mark Twain

Whether the media or politicians interpret events as an act of war or terrorism or just "plain evil," it was still lived through by everyday people. And how did *people* interpret it? A few weeks after the event, a businessperson, one of the few survivors in his office, appeared on television. He had just set up a makeshift office near his old site, and was in the process of arranging to attend the funerals of co-workers at the same time he was trying to salvage the business. At one point he helplessly looked at the camera and said, "This is what I do. I have to do something. Artists can paint pictures, writers can write stories, and I can do this. I plug in the phone and I work."

Even in times of public crisis, there is a prevailing view that the "gift" of interpretive response belongs only to those pre-immersed in the business and craft of interpretation or abstract representation. In the days after, the mainstream media paraded an array of politicians, celebrities, and interpreters of pop culture, in short, anyone *known* to interpret this most *unknown* event. As the months (and years) pass, it is increasingly obvious that since this was a public event, people should have felt permitted to take part in official interpretations, even if their role was to disrupt it. Perhaps this is why, in schools, teachers are left with a sense of unfinished business, that the media interpretation, the rationales

for war and the ban on dissenting opinion created a sense of lingering bewilderment. Ironically, because the enormous weight of the media's words left no room for voicing human-sized experiences of the event, they may have not only predicted but also created and advanced "the change" announced September 11th.

*Can still feel
the words climbing down
my own back, buildings
collapsed - turn on the TV.*

If it is the media's business to shape the language of an event, then it is the crucial business of educators to critically examine the language they shape. It is also their role to model and help create a vernacular record that will give voice to those who may not feel "gifted" enough to speak. A terrorist attack, even a war, remains a non-typical, yet *public* event. This is why the view that only the media or expert commentators can be trusted to interpret it also requires questioning. After the attack in New York, many news reporters picked up on the phrase, "The world has changed forever." But if the world had shifted, then why were the same people shaping the language and perception of the event? The phrase had the effect of magnifying anxiety (if that were possible) at the same time it kept people tuned in. But even at the onset of the so-called global change, weren't many people still watching TV, soaking up the language, waiting for the change? Even as the record of change was documented on television, as film footage of the destruction gave way to photomontages and grand musical accompaniments, the public remained a part of things, off-screen. Little stories were lived out. But where were these counternarratives, the non-hyped records that would form a social history of "the change"?

While televisions numbed the public with slogans, even shaping the debate in classrooms, it was important to remember John Dewey's words, that "language is primarily a social thing, a means by which we give our experiences to others and get theirs again in return" (Dewey, 1902, p.55). Especially for those of us who work in English and Language Arts at the ground level, I feel students must be allowed "in on" the business of language, to first critically examine the media's portrayal and then provide opportunities to talk and record in ways that will link students, events, and place. Otherwise, I fear that schools are helping to create a generation of extreme disembodiment, where the media interprets ever more complex world events in the same old language, drowning out local literacies. Still, the event remains a public one, ultimately endured by the

people, who should thereby have a chance to make sense out of it in their own words, not just the "right words" conceived by the media.

Then, rising, night of the rubble, night of the heap, night of the long day glued to the screen, camera pans down the street to apartment evacuees, asks, So what do you bring at a time like this? Answer is budgie, cat and one man holds up a sax, Where I go, this goes. Where I go. This goes. Camera rolls to the next guy -- That was Sonny Rollins, greatest saxophone player of all time and no one blinked.

Questions of "Authenticity"

Under normal circumstances, the media paradoxically creates, interprets, manages, performs, packages and perpetuates images of the world in its' own increasingly inflated, insider, "authentic" image. Maxine Greene suggests that society conditions people to think that their lives, personal expressions, and dreams have little value: "[s]tunned by hollow formulas, media fabricated sentiments, and cost-benefit terminologies, young and old alike find it hard to shape authentic expressions of hopes and ideals..." (Greene, 1995, p. 136). As a teacher, I think mainstream media control may form part of the reason why many students do not even bother to consider the legitimacy and validity of their own, small, storied counternarratives. Perhaps this is why promoting everyday, vernacular speech often feels like an act of dissent. It is also the reason why teachers must persist in the promotion of vernacular speech.

That the media is a constructed tool used to interpret public experience is usually largely forgotten. However, for a very brief time after September 11th, the media also exhibited a confusion that may have potentially allowed entry for North American public interpretation. People watched. In retrospect, it was also a unique (and perhaps one time only) opportunity to view television reporters at a complete loss in a way that belied their normally flawless, packaged construction. It was as if the fact of their constructed existence was briefly revealed. Here was a unique opportunity for teachers to observe with their students how a "stay tuned," seemingly authentic media lexicon is produced from scratch. (Who first publicly used the term "evil" to describe the terrorist event? How soon after were others publicly using it? And how soon after that did

"evil" become an entire "axis of evil"? In the midst of these large expressions we might have also asked, where is the diversity of common speech?) The media's important but brief linguistic lapse also served as an empowering reminder that public events are still open to interpretation by teachers, by students, by anyone.

Working with poetry as counternarrative, it also cannot be taken for granted that vernacular expressions are indeed more (or less) authentic. A race for (ever higher) high ground only misses the chance to debate and re-think mediatized meaning. Perhaps by engaging in poetry as a form of questioning in regular classroom practice, students will learn to engage in critical and open-hearted examination during troubled times. Instead of pre-packaged ideas that carelessly represent society's mainstream, poetic counternarratives are about the process of words and forms in flux, even as events are lived out. A poetic analysis is also in constant paradox because language of an ever-changing event is considered in ways that must allow for more change, and when teachers and students generate poems, their readings become part of the change. In this way, a poetic analysis provides the elasticity to examine an event in a way that does not preclude one's involvement or another's involvement. In other words, the goal is not to determine authenticity; instead, events are simply shaped by words from students' actual lives so that those events might be endured through shared, informed critique.

Poetry written in the vernacular is an unplanned, spontaneous language and, like other live constructions, it can be wrong, inappropriate or inauthentic. In time of mass social mourning, when most are without words or only able to express themselves in limited, near gibberish, it is worth remembering how the media and others re-compose the discourse back to orderly binaries with a lexicon of authentic-sounding interpretation. It is also worth remembering: at least it is the people's gibberish.

*First time out, heart sick,
poet on the street says,
How's things? Song goes,
You've changed. Fireman
says, No. We drive to work
go home cry drive back to
work and cry again -- who
are the dead. Now, night
before is the night before,
where nightmare meets
the nightmare at the turn
of the stairs and the TV
tells us it's big, how big,
bigger than this me than
you, until we howl with*

*ham fists at the moon
as the dead grow, by days,
more delicate.*

Instead of unachievable goals of authenticity, poetic counternarratives force a look in a different direction from the ones typically portrayed by the media, revealing that there is neither one answer nor one simple, linear description of human events. While the messages of war and political counter measure are by now media-delivered in neatly composed packages, poetry as counternarrative stands in the mud and says: judge me. And when students engage in the action of making stories, they might begin to wonder whether the sensible-sounding stylings of the media are as sensible or even as "actual" as they seem. Perhaps this way a poetic counternarrative gives students a chance to also engage in the process of "what seems."

Conclusion

If there were no poetry on any day in the world, poetry would be invented that day...
- Muriel Rukeyser

Even when the media said the world had changed, even when the expression "the new normal" was touted, some still asked, am I a part of this change? As student, teacher, poet and reader struggle with vernacular language to examine important moments, they forge a link between language, place and experience. When poetry is brought into the classroom after a large-scale event, students are permitted to make their own connections, read aloud their own interpretations that will challenge media, politicians and the pop culture interpretations of celebrities. Poetic counternarrative is knowledge of the world from skewed angles, rooted in the contradictions the world presents. In the months and years after, it becomes more obvious that meaning and authenticity are not necessarily to be "found" or "defended" but rather permitted, questioned or simply lived out.

The inclusion of vernacular experience in the classroom is an insurgent act. But if educators find themselves engaged in student discussions using the media's hyped word patterns (even to describe a non-typical event), then it is time to locate (or relocate) their language. Caught up in the media word-cycle, what language and questions remain missing or unsaid? By examining world issues this way, educators and students might invite others into the debate, allowing language and meaning to remain open to possibility. And since personal experience is usually expressed humanly and imperfectly, it interrupts discourse, thereby pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable classroom discourse.

It is time to turn to poetic expressions that will allow wider interpretations of the "acceptable"

version of lived experience, which will allow ground level interactions with speech and text. In times of social upheaval, there is a need to act with courage, to bring forward teacher and student experience in creative, imperfect ways. As Paulo Freire says, adaptation to the world means "humanizing the world by transforming it" (Freire, 1970, p.399). It now seems critical, even more relevant, to take part in that transformation, to remember that *everything shifts* and yet we remain *part of that shifting*.

*Night of
the burning shell, stirring
in skin without others,
words are small. We are
tiny, loved. We reach for
pencils in the middle of
things as they did. Lying
still, we see it every time
we blink, slide between
two slides, where there
was something, nothing
and nothing, something.
It sinks in. It sinks in:
we are words and we remain.*

Notes

[1] Samples of poetry in this document were composed by the author.

[2] For further analysis of counternarrative, see: Giroux, H. A., Lankshear, C., McLaren, P., Peters, M. (Eds.) (1996). *Counternarratives: Cultural studies and critical pedagogies in postmodern spaces*. New York: Routledge.

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Note from the 2015 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber

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