



Poetry Is Politics

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Poetry Is Politics

An Autoethnographic Poetry Manifesto

Sandra L. Faulkner

Abstract Through an autoethnographic poetry manifesto, the author makes the case for poetry as political, poetry as feminist practice, poetry as social research and autoethnography, poetry as the personal that becomes the universal, and poetry as visionary activism. The use of personal poetry engages the political power of poetry to present embodied, nuanced, and myriad scenes of marginalized and stigmatized identities.

Keywords: *autoethnography, manifesto, poetry, politics*

Poetry and politics are both matters of verbal connection. (Orr, 2008, p. 409)

Poetry is political. Writing, performing, and publishing poetry is important political activity. Jay Parini (2008) wrote that poets' work is politically powerful because the language of poetry provides deep understanding in ways that other writing does not. Many poets engage politics through their writing, bypassing stifling social structures (Orr, 2008). Poets represent marginalized groups and positions in nuanced, sensitive, and myriad ways (Archambeau, 2008; Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes, 2009). As Fisher (2009) argued, the "political task" of poetry is "a visionary one, the work of making way for new worlds and words" (p. 984). Poetry confronts social structures to engage audiences and activate poetry's political potential; poetry engages a "political voice" (Orr, 2008, p. 416).

I use poetry as a form of activism, a research methodology, as a marriage of my social science, poetry, and personal identities, and as a teaching tool (Faulkner, 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2014). As Denzin (2014) notes, "the poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways ordinary social science writing does not allow. The poet is accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage" (p. 86).

Poetry as Visionary Activism

Ballad of the Young Woman

More than 3 million US women at risk for alcohol-exposed pregnancy.

Sexually active women who stop using birth control should stop drinking alcohol, but most keep drinking—Centers for Disease Control (CDC), U.S., February 2, 2016

Young woman stops at her local bar to see men drink
and look for some thoughtful or maybe even good advice,
she finds instead a pink-washed command: "Do not order that drink, girl!"
The CDC condescends with what is best, no vices

for her, do not swallow until you take that pill.
She asks them about bodies of consent
and blinks back an urge to still
those explanations so smug, and bent.

She walks like this and tries to walk like that:
"Drink like this but don't drink like that!"
Her uterus feels like an overpopulated people-container
driven too far by too many captains.

She strolls away with a beer and a light
ropes her rage and straps it tight
takes her tank out for a spin with her friends
to find a doctor—anyone—to kill this bitter pill.

She leaves no note and recruits the scouts, *Girls,*
dump those cookies and sing with me
and this armload of babies we will free
and stick the man with the bill.

Young woman drives her own free mind, her plans
laid just right to piss on and off the patriarch.
She jumps a rope and skips the class with her right hand
ladies who find a shovel to dump this load of barf.

Poetry Is Feminist Practice

Poetry matters, in part, because of its potential for political expression. . . . It is important for poets to read the world around them and to respond to that world in their own fashion: not in slogans that can be printed on posters or slapped onto bumpers but in urgent, astute ways that reflect the injustice and immorality everywhere in evidence, even sad abundance. At their best, poets suggest useful ways to think and feel about these things, and picture them clearly. Poets do not offer solutions, however. They offer a depth of understanding, and a language adequate to the visions they summon. (Parini, 2008, p. 116)

Poetry taps into the universal through radical subjectivity. The poet's use of personal experience creates something larger from the particular; the concrete specifics become universal when the audience relates to, embodies, and/or experiences the work as if it were their own words (Faulkner, in press). Poetry that gives voice to gendered experiences can be a form of poetic consciousness-raising, a distinct form of political activity (Strine, 1989). As Strine (1989) notes, "poetic discourse is quintessentially a site of personal and ideological struggle within the on-going cultural dialogue" (p. 26).

Poetry Is Social Justice

Feminist Theory Class Cento¹

Poetry is feminist practice:
movement comes first
the central focus a radical body of thought.

The individual is the problem,
theories between a division of the sexes
a matter of fitting women:

lesbians must become feminists
feminists must become lesbians
 the triple threat—racism imperialism sexism.

Concerned with women's bodies,
poetry was consciousness-raising;
poetry was theory,

private and public
emotion and intellect.

Interlocking women's bodies, systems
of oppression, what we believe—
black feminism as logical:

we struggle together.

Romanticism works as a cultural tool
love corrupted sex class a diseased form of love
the citadel of privacy pulls women.

Who decided the norm?

Women's organizations heard
population and family planning
negating class and race.

We struggle together
against racism
about sexism,

the patriarchal bargain shaping relations
gender ideology as classical patriarchy:
the infractions of demands to choose our own self-definitions.

Poetry Is Theoretical Practice

Make Your Own Plate

—after Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party"

Pull up a stool and start your dremel,
begin by smashing your art,
there will be no waitress wearing a dirndl,
or a girl with a smile to please your date.

Eat from these plates full of butterfly parts,
all of these vaginas and all of this smart.

Women line up and wind the spindle:
Weave a runner out of hair, beards, and thread,
embroider your name next to a cup of blood
and drink to the trouble without any head.

Stand on the tiles not scrubbed clean of mud
 and paint with the names of the not-yet-dead
 here at this party of the earth-goddess thugs.

Poetry Matters

Poetry is not sloganeering, and when poets directly confront a particular political crisis they need to do so carefully, even warily. They rarely put forward direct solutions to problems. Instead, they offer a kind of understanding that is distinct, as well as useful, by creating a language adequate to the experience of their readers. In this sense, poetry matters because it can waken us to realities that fall into the realm of the political. (Parini, 2008, p. xii–xiii)

The personal is poetry. Poetry matters. Poetry of personal experience is vital. Poetry has the power to highlight slippery identity-negotiation processes and present more nuanced views of marginalized and stigmatized identities (Faulkner, 2014) to demonstrate embodied experience (Faulkner, 2015a) and to be social research and auto-ethnography (Faulkner, 2016).

Poetry Is Engaged Social Science

I Explain Things to Men²

The reporter needs a line
 so like a good daughter of Athena
 I muse a metaphor about sexism 101:
 beauty pageants are like dog shows

though my mutt of a dog
 with mats of tangled hair
 and farts that cloud a room
 can never be your pretty;

she whines with abandon
 guards the bacon pan,
 and growls with loud intent
 at the kitchen appliances.

Whistled at for her hind
and quarters, she preens
and licks (in)appropriate parts
by the open window,

will never win this contest
with a smile like a lithe poodle
and knock-out breath, she's
not all small and tamed quiet.

Poetry of the Personal

As a language adequate to our experience, poetry allows us to articulate matters of concern in such a way that they become physical, tangible, and immediate. Indeed, the finest poems become indestructible objects in their own right, taking on a life beyond the immediate circumstances of the poet to create them. (Parini, 2008, p. 25)

The Personal Is Poetry

The Interview³

—for Sylvia Plath (after “The Applicant”)

Can you separate lights from darks,
gabardine from linen?
Too much bother? I cannot care

if your hands are
warm like Georgia hot springs
capable of sparing my feet

the Sisyphean walk over broken
crayons and wine glasses,
the laundry room of dog and dust.

Do you know how to make coffee,
float a river of cream
in my capacious cup?

Forget the sugar and call
 my name with an accent auf Deutsch?
 But speak only ein bisschen,
 patch the noise of domestic bliss
 with a steady pour and two clinks of ice.
 Will you wait for the repairs,
 bury the hamster with the holey
 blanket, behind the dying Holly?
 Never mind if you dig too shallow,
 I want a wife, too.

Notes

1. Lines from this Cento are taken from various chapters in McCann and Kim (2013).
2. "I Explain Things to Men" first appeared as Faulkner (2017).
3. "The Interview" first appeared as Faulkner (2015b).

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About the Author

Sandra L. Faulkner is professor of communication at Bowling Green State University. Her interests include qualitative methodology, poetic inquiry, and the relationships between culture, identities, and sexualities in close relationships. Routledge published her books *Poetry as Method* and *Inside Relationships: A Creative Casebook on Relational Communication*. Sense published her poetry memoir, *Knit Four, Frog One*, and her co-authored book (with Squillante) *Writing the Personal: Getting Your Stories Onto the Page*.