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Experiences with Poetry, Pedagogy and Participant Observation: Writing with Students in a Study Abroad Program

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Abstract

Many anthropologists have turned to creative writing as they struggle to represent experiences/encounters with other cultures. Study abroad students, while not necessarily anthropologists-in-the-making, are also representers (and representees) of exotic cultures while abroad. This paper explores creative writing as a strategy to help study abroad students engage questions about cultural representation, reflexivity and identity while immersed in the other culture. It examines a semester-long pilot project in which both students and the author explored poetry as a means to reflect upon and represent experiences with the Other in Central Mexico. It suggests that creative writing as an arts-based method of qualitative inquiry, while not a panacea for the representation crisis, provides students and researchers a powerful way to reflect upon cross-cultural experiences and offers many directions for further research.

"The moment of change is the only poem."—Adrienne Rich

The anthropologist's traditional task has been to represent cultural Others for a home audience, to explain the exotic in ways that we can understand and fathom. However, since the 1986 publication of Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture*, anthropologists have become increasingly uneasy about their own claims to truth and the

power dynamics that go into writing about the Other. As a result, many now tend to enter into near paralysis when it comes time to write, not sure where they have expertise, what their research means to all involved, and how to honor both their own and Others' experiences in the research process.

More positively however, this crisis of representation has provoked a notable willingness and desire to experiment with new forms in the hopes of producing thinking that extends beyond the usual paradigmatic limits. While older works of anthropology followed fairly traditional outlines, recent anthropology now sometimes reads like fiction or poetry. We also find collaboratory, dialogic projects where "subjects" have become co-authors in unusual ways, and see an expanding range of even more hybrid, fragmentary forms of writing that challenge how we present knowledge. The final products of anthropological attempts to represent cultural Others and their realities look more varied than ever, and interpretation is left increasingly in the hands of the reader.

Study abroad students, while not necessarily anthropologists-in-the-making, nonetheless share many of the same tasks while they are in the field site. Indeed, one of the most important challenges they take on (consciously or not) is that of cultural representation. They represent the Other daily in emails home, in conversations with friends and family, in essays and in class. They are called upon to discuss what the Other looks like, acts like and may even think like, from the moment they arrive in a new site – notably, *long* before they feel anything like experts. While they are abroad, they also represent the US for locals, whether physically just by being observable, or verbally, in conversations with homestay families, peers, and professors. When they return to the States, students continue to represent the Other often in contexts that call for extremely concise responses to extremely broad questions, such as "So, what are Mexicans like?" In more than a few ways, they lack the advantages that anthropologists theoretically have – articulation that *follows* experience and reflection; a longer page limit or more floor time; and an educated, interested audience.

That said, students' multiple acts of representation become especially significant since perhaps even more than anthropologists, students "take home the news" to a segment of the population that might not normally hear about such things. They thus play a role of public intellectual in a more intense, less elitist sense than most anthropologists usually do. And one could argue that representing exotic cultures to such characters as the roommate who hates travel, or the ever-so-slightly racist grandfather, may indeed do more to change the status quo than flashy academic publications and presentations. Study abroad experiences, which play a rapidly expanding part in US higher education, are intended to give university students increased understanding about cultural Others, which ideally will be transformative at both the personal and social level. This understanding is desperately needed in a multicultural society that has limited conceptualizations and skills for interacting with cultural difference. Although pedagogical work in study abroad is scant, researchers have noted the key role that writing serves as a way to learn while sojourning in another culture (Wagner and Magistrale, 1995; Hess, 1997). To date, however, there has been little critical work to examine *what* students write, *how* they write, and whether or not they have actually challenged any of their previously held ideologies

in the process. In this author's teaching experiences, all too often, the "A" paper is well-organized and nicely written, but only serves to reaffirm the student's identity as culturally superior and the host culture's identity as weird, inefficient, dangerous, or wrong.

Getting US study abroad students thinking critically about cultural representation, then, is a rather immediate and urgent concern with the potential to contribute, however modestly, to social change. If anthropologists, cultural representers by profession, are finding the need to experiment with creative forms and arts-based methods of inquiry in order to transcend their own paradigmatic limitations and to find more ethical ways to represent Other cultures, perhaps study abroad students would be well-served to do the same.

This article discusses a pilot project in which study abroad students and the author, director of their study abroad program, explored poetry writing as a method to reflect upon and represent experiences with the Other in Guanajuato, a university town of about 75,000 in Central Mexico. While both the process and products of this project turned out to be quite unexpected in some ways, I suggest that poetry writing as an arts-based method of qualitative inquiry offers us a powerful way to reflect upon experiences in other cultures and to re-think cultural representation, an insight that could be usefully applied in both anthropology and international education whether one remains specifically within poetry or turns to other creative forms.

Creative Writing and Learning: Pedagogical Possibilities¹

There are several ways in which creative writing can enhance learning during an immersion experience in another culture, all of which have pedagogical implications as far as how and to what ends we might incorporate this sort of writing into a curriculum. First, students can use creative writing like qualitative researchers, as a means through which to collect, organize and reflect upon data obtained in a field experience, which contributes to their learning process. Second, they can use writing as a way to represent what they learn, or as a research product, which many anthropologists and others are doing. And finally, creative writing could also be used as pedagogical tool with which to push learning in empowering or resistant directions. Because the poetry project engaged and often blended all three of these possibilities, a brief review of how creative writing lends itself to learning can frame the more specific insights gained through poetry use in this project.

Creative writing as a qualitative research method

One way in which students could use creative writing is as a method. As a qualitative research method, creative writing forms part of what educators call arts-based methods of inquiry, which conform a set of qualitative methods that have been discussed

1. Written permission to cite student work was obtained from all students whose poetry and comments appear in the article.

and practiced since the 70's, rooted in the pioneering work of such authors as Elliot Eisner, Tom Barone, and Maxine Greene. These researchers use the arts as conceptual tools to understand the self, the other, and social realities, searching out new ways of knowing and new ways of representing or communicating this knowledge.

They argue that by working with different methods, it is possible to move out of closed ways of thinking and writing that are constrained by cultural biases and disciplinary practices or discourse. Indeed, some arts-based researchers affirm that using these methods leads to the development of other intelligences and other types of literacies. Eisner claims that there exist “artistically rooted qualitative forms of intelligence” that include an “ability to compose qualitative relationships”, a refined capacity of attention to how relationships are constructed, and a deeper sense of the relationship between form and content (2004). Maxine Greene, critical scholar and arts researcher, has also posited that creative projects help us move beyond the barriers that impede us from imagining other realities than our own (1995).

One can easily see the attraction of these methods for crisis-entrenched anthropologists and other qualitative researchers. Delving into literary or poetic forms while doing research, as a form of field work or field writing, researchers find that: “the tightened focus on language and a variety of writing styles not only enhances the presentation of ideas, but also stimulates and formulates the conception of ideas themselves” (Cahnmann, 2003, p. 31). Writing in creative styles to capture speech also enables researchers to identify patterns and particularities of Other ways of speaking, much as mapping allows us to see patterns that are invisible to us until graphed out. Researchers have also noted that emotion, something so central to the fieldwork process, can be brought back into depictions of experiences with cultural others in creative writing. As Canadian researchers Langer and Furman (2004, par. 15) write, a poem in particular cuts to “the emotional intensity and poignancy” of human experience. And a poem also achieves this in an economy of space – capturing the essence of larger bodies of field data. So Langer and Furman write both what they call “research poems,” culled without editing from interview transcripts, as well as their own poems, written from the same experience but now including their selves and own words along with the words of the interviewee. In both efforts, research data is re-represented, now not in the long, unwieldy transcript, but in short, tighter poems that nonetheless open more interpretive possibilities.

Writing “research poems” (Langer and Furman) or “field poems” (Cahnmann), or engaging in other types of “field writing” (Agar, 1990) provide researchers with a way to organize and reflect upon cultural data, as well as a way to think about their own presence and emotions that are always at hand in the field. For both study abroad students and the researcher in this study, this sort of writing will be shown to offer a valuable method for doing the same.

Creative writing as research product

Another way students could use creative writing is to eschew traditional formats for “writing up” their analyses of their experiences in other cultures in favor of more creative ones. As a research *product*, creative writing and other arts-based creations are becoming

ever more common, especially in fields such as anthropology, sociology, and education. Researchers find that creative forms allow them to acknowledge their own and Others' presence in the texts they create. These less rigid forms also make possible a more overt recognition that no one is neutral in the research process, and that indeed, the whole writing process (from experience to final editing), is situated firmly within the researcher's personal and professional identities. Discussions of the power dynamics that go on during this process have been made front and center in work such as Behar's *Translated Woman* (1993) and many other works since then.

This shift to creative formats has allowed anthropologists and others to produce unusual and highly creative texts where imagination and aesthetics are allowed back into the writing, and the question of Truth is left more overtly open-ended. To mention just a few publications, one can see the rather astounding scope of work. For example, Dennis Tedlock's *Days from a Dream Almanac* combines dreams, poetry and field experiences working on the Mayan calendar. *Enigma Variations*, by Sally and Richard Price, is a detective mystery–slash-ethnography about art in the Caribbean. Ivan Brady's, *The Time at Darwin's Reef* is a collection of poems, letters and paintings that play with the reader's ideas about time and place, and Randy Koch's *Composing Ourselves* tells about teaching English composition on the Texan border through a series of sonnets. Finally, in *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies* (DeLoache and Gottlieb), the authors worked from ethnographic data about childcare to create fictitious caregivers who each in her own voice, “wrote” a chapter on what practices were best for newborns.

While the style, form, and content of each of these works varies tremendously, all represent experience and knowledge in innovative ways that challenge the reader. Similarly, within the poetry project, our poems as final products served as new representations of otherwise “standard” study abroad themes, such as language learning or confrontations with varying gender norms, that are usually represented in rather standard ways that keep us from thinking in new directions.

Creative writing to enhance empowered learning

A final area we could draw from fruitfully are experiences in which creative writing has been used to promote specific types of learning that foment empowerment and resistance as students create more reflexive visions of the world and their place in it. This sort of creative writing has been applied in projects with university students, schoolchildren, prisoners, middle aged immigrants, teachers and others.

Empowerment models frequently use creative writing formats with groups as a means to drive both personal, and as an implicit co-product, social change. In these cases, the main emphasis is often autobiographical, and participants may write narratives, poetry, plays, etc. Participant writers are validated as experts about a given phenomenon or type of life experience. Written work is usually shared orally which provokes discussion about both the particularities and shared nature of the experience at hand. As Benmayor writes, (1991): “When testimonies are generated in an organized, group context, they have the

potential of impacting directly on individual and collective empowerment. They become more than empirical data and transcend their static destiny as archival documents.” (p. 9).

In related fashion, critical pedagogy followers/practitioners have also used creative writing in the classroom as a means through which to question the status quo, deconstruct one’s ideas, and work towards social change. These too valorize personal experience as expert knowledge, and highlight the relationships between the personal and the social with a keen eye towards unmasking how power and ideology function in this relationship. Words are seen as shaping reality and society, so it follows that learning to write in new ways could lead to re-thinkings of society. Following Dewey, language recovers its dynamic power to communicate and challenge ideas, rather than simply reproducing the ideas of others (Shor and Pari, 1999, p. 10).

Although the question of empowering students of (relative) privilege who come to Mexico to study abroad is exceedingly tricky in terms of power, it is important for students and researchers to be able to take ownership of their cultural experiences and difficult times that occur while in the field. It is equally important to be able to confront the images that the Other makes of Self, and these themes will also come up in the poetry project.

The Poetry Project

In the fall of 2004, about a month into the semester abroad, I proposed to my students that we form a poetry group. I was exploring the theme of “students writing culture” for a panel I was going to be on in the spring, and serendipitously, the members of our small semester group all happened to write stories and poems for pleasure at least occasionally. They agreed to participate in weekly meetings unconnected to class or other program affairs and to bring in their writing¹ to share as a group. I told them that I would participate not as a teacher, but as a researcher and (very nervously) as a writer. The meetings provided us all with a point of intersection that would not have otherwise occurred, since despite the small size of the group and the fact that it was all-female, there was considerable diversity and a certain respectful distance between the participants. While they were also in a class I taught, it is unlikely any of us would have shared our work and our thoughts in this particular way and in so much depth.

There is a rather long history of previous attempts to incorporate creative work into the study abroad programs I have directed, however, I had stopped using creative work for several reasons. First, while much of the student work was wonderful, much of it was not. Poor work was certainly useful – for example, if at mid-semester, students produced maudlin, over-romanticized (positively or negatively) portrayals of a culture, this provided a good indicator of where students were intellectually. It could also be argued that while in essays, students can posture and orient towards what the teacher wants to hear, in more creative formats, the tricks are less known, so there is a possibility that an original form might lead to more authentic / less contrived content. However the question of how to evaluate the quality of their creative work for a grade needed more addressing since most students were not formally trained in this sort of writing.

Much more important however, had been my own increasing unease with the knowledge that I had never been asked in my academic life to represent anything creatively in verbal or non-verbal ways. Pedagogically, the critical notion of being a co-learner on a more equal footing with one's students made it seem patently unethical to assign what I had never tried to do for school/public consumption, or was not also in the process of learning.

My main goal with this pilot project in Guanajuato, then, was to create a grade-free environment with more or less committed writers in which I would also participate to see what the ideal situation could look like. From this experience, in which students would have a less constrained voice than in graded, class assignment work, I hoped to later think about how to insert creative writing into the curriculum in more intentional ways that would have greater chances at being successful on the different levels at hand, and eventually incorporate other art-forms as well.

Within our group, we agreed to bring in poetry to share with one another. The students did not have a particular set of issues in mind for discussion, so the questions I suggested we analyze when looking at each piece, were:

- What does it say about your experience in another culture?
- What does it say about the other culture?
- What are you getting here that would be harder to capture in a traditional essay or assignment?
- What might you not be getting?
- How close can we get? (Where are the ethical, empathic and other limits we bump up against in this sort of writing?)

I was particularly interested in this last question. The idea of writing from other points of view sounded anthropologically downright dangerous, and I was not sure about where I stood on this issue.

Our initial discussion involved some heated debate over *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a story of a Japanese geisha written by American male author, Arthur Golden, in which we immediately broached the question of who has the "right to write" what. I also provided students three poems about immigrants' language-related experiences in the US, deliberately cutting out the names, immigration status, and genders of the authors. No one was able to tell simply from reading which author was the *anglo* researcher-poet, which was the recent immigrant, and which was second-generation, and genders were guessed incorrectly in at least two cases. This unsettled the idea that a cultural outsider could never acquire knowledge and develop enough sensitivity to actually write a credible albeit fictional piece from the Other point of view. It also humbled us as readers and interpreters who might think we could easily see through any pretenses. So this established both the possibilities in writing and the limits of our own interpretive powers.

Over the next few weeks, we read several poems by different authors writing about foreign cultures. Rapidly however, we moved away from reading others' works and more

towards simply coming together to discuss and get feedback on our own work. Preparation was not needed to keep things going or to stimulate discussion, and while I would bring questions to meet my own agenda, I also became, frankly, much more interested in reading and learning about students' work and writing processes. While a more structured – *write this, try that, now this model, now that format* – style would have created data that was easier to analyze, as a pilot project, it seemed important to let students take their writing and take me wherever everything naturally needed to go. In this way, no one was writing “for the teacher” or writing towards research goals, nor were we forcing inspiration to mould itself to a given path, which hopefully will translate into a better-conceived second phase of this project.

The Process: Writing Experiences into Poetry

What sorts of things happened in this process? As we all wrote our experiences in Mexican culture into poetry (and in one case, prose), many interesting issues emerged. The three themes that I will discuss here each show that poetry writing and discussing produced qualitative data about students' experiences in Mexican culture (which has qualitative research interest); produced new relationships within the students-culture-teacher triad (which is the critical and pedagogical interest), and lead us to new reflections about creative writing as a way to represent experiences in another culture (which is the anthropological or representation interest). These three interests will be woven into the discussion of each theme.

Insight into the first person – third person question: “Writing at arm’s length”

One of the most relevant discussions that developed from student writing focused how close and in what ways writing allowed us into the experience of an Other. The questions I most hoped to get answered – *could we find new in-roads to empathy?* – and *could we/should we represent the Other in the first person?* – did not get fully answered, in part, because they are so complicated, and in part, because somewhat against my expectations, the poetry group did not provoke a large quantity of writing from other viewpoints. Only one poem was written in the first person about a local community member, and only a few poems were written explicitly about local views even in the third person, which students stated that they viewed as a safer way of writing about the Other since it still acknowledged the cultural and personal distance between writer and subject.

However, while there were few first-person poems, these few were exceedingly well done. For example, one student wrote a poem entitled “Low Visibility,” from the point of view of a woman sitting on the street begging.

Low Visibility

The empty cup of my hand
 means nothing to you;
 the dusted rust of my complexion
 is one you feel
 slyly corroding a deep hole,

into your jingly pants pocket-
that patter of pesos
you'd rather me not hear
as you hurry past.

Like a raw, aged broom,
the tired threads of my shawl
sweep these illusory streets of cleanliness
into this breathing pile
of fixed filth at your feet;
those same two hesitant feet
that dodge the grays of my eyes,
but in their blindness
wonder if the poverty
beneath me is cushioned by the pillow
of my other, invisible hand
filled with riches.

The poem's physical form echoes the theme in that it is placed off to the side of the paper, away from the left-justified title. The student writes of the woman viewing the student, accusing her of looking away, even while she is able to observe enough to write the poem. This is model work on several fronts. First, it offers a concise *thick description* of one person. Second, it engages the observed and permits her to observe back. It is also empathic/compassionate writing that nonetheless takes a hard look at the power relationship tangibly there between the two. And finally, it is imaginative, because one does not know exactly what the woman is thinking, nor was a conversation initiated. On all accounts, it "rings true," and works in the way one would hope.

In another poem, the same student wrote in the third person about a woman selling hot dogs at a street stand that could be read as a cross between an ethnographic observation and a fictional portrait since we are permitted to know more about the woman's feelings and own sensory experience of this job than one could ascertain from simply observing. The writing is intense, and brings alive a person that many would not even notice since she is so much a part of the cityscape. This raises some interesting questions for practice, since many study abroad students tend to view local inhabitants who they do not personally know (or who are over the age of 22) as mere backdrop to their experiences. This slowing down even to imagine a stranger's reality has important empathic and intellectual potential, and serves to re-populate a sometimes people-less study abroad scene in a very real way.

But poems like these were few and far between, and, I believe, were written at least somewhat in the spirit of experimenting within our established purposes. Why hadn't more been written about specific individuals and encounters with them? Through

discussion, students readily admitted certain reluctance to adopting the Other point of view. One student found that she adopted local points of view of *things* or *places*, rather than people, imbuing them with human characteristics and sentiments. For example, she wrote from the perspective of a street dog, of tile, and most memorably, of the *Jardin*, the city's main gathering point. She was often literally present in her texts. For example, in a short vignette about routine bus rides that she re-wrote from several points of view, the narrator – a dog - observes a “young blond,” (her), who “spluttered broken pieces of a familiar language” as she got onto the bus.

While the student chose, in her words, to “write at arm’s length to gain perspective,” her writing provides qualitative insight into her personal experience as well. The recognition that cultural Others are observing us back is not an automatic given among students, so this 1) shows us something about where the student is in her own cognitive understandings of difference, while also 2) offers insight into the student’s perception of how she is observed by locals, which has useful ramifications for facilitation. This perceived opposition between a perfect native speaker (or listener since it’s a dog) and a “fragmented” student-speaker is extremely common among students, and calls for much more research since it affects the language learning and immersion processes on some deep levels.

When reconsidering writing distance or the avoidance of the first person and sometimes even the third, other students thought that it was simply too risky, and somewhat soon to attempt this. They also feared mis-representing. While this could be attributed to their short time in the culture, I have been in the culture for a long time, and in my own writing, I also found that I wrote from a local first person voice only when I forcibly assigned myself the task. Not surprisingly, these few poems were the ones that sounded most contrived, not necessarily because of poor content knowledge, but because the tone was too careful and too dull. So while more knowledge about the culture is certainly valuable, the question of comparative levels of knowledge does not seem to provide the full answer. As anthropologists/social scientists, we still fear misrepresenting, no matter what the format, and perhaps feel even more ethically obliged to represent well, even though we are not sure what that entails.

Yet, I might hypothesize that poetry does not provide the structure or space for long supporting arguments, nor does it permit us to hide behind the theory or even jargon that establishes our expertise. Poetic language is usually excluded from (or seen in opposition to) conventional academic discourse, and poems bear little in common with articles and reports. I think this is the leap where form influences thinking and content, and where both the risk and the excitement of doing new kinds of writing may evolve.

If “being here” did not provoke complete ventures into fictional Other points of view, I asked students how much being here had to do with their writing at all, since I had hopes or assumptions that being in another culture would catalyze imaginative possibilities not available at home. All of the students were quick to assert that local stimuli had *everything* to do with what was being written, but that much of the writing was located in ongoing experiences of self not confined to the exact present, so that the larger context took precedent. In other words, what began with a very specific local experience or

inspiration quickly got tangential during the creative writing process. Part of the processing work is just this, to take what is immediate and weave it into past experiences, something they were not purposefully trying to achieve in their writing, but that happened in the process. Students here were clearly able to recognize and articulate the link between their own subjectivity and writing as we had these sorts of conversations.

Sharing our writing: “my tongue should wear – a layered callous”

Another relevant finding in the process was that the act of sharing and discussing our work played as important a role in our learning as the writing itself. Hearing how each person conveyed similar experiences highlighted differences and provoked dialogue that took us to new understandings we would not have achieved as individuals. For example, all wrote (independently of one another) about the difficulties of living in a language they did not always understand. One student wrote of the sheer physical and mental effort involved: ...“my eyes sweep / the grey un-grouted space / between each cobblestone tile / for those invisible words... my shoes have the deep scuffs / that the soft buds of my tongue / should wear – a layered callous / from words would be ideal...”.

Another depicted the incredible loneliness one can feel when surrounded by what is still to great extent, a *foreign* language. She wrote of her “solitude juxtaposed / with the chatter of students... .. those phrases / that enter one ear / and exit the other / in the center / of so much / confusion.” She closed the poem with a sense of despair that everyone has felt at some point when linguistic comprehension dies - “my self / is crushed / into a fine / white powder / that dissolves / in a glass of / clean, clear / water.”

The discussion that followed these pieces was fascinating, because it did not degenerate into self-bashing or a critique of the language courses. Rather, the discussion stuck close to the *words*. We talked about not what happened, but how it was articulated, and we deliberated at length over why a particular word or phrase so precisely summed up a personal reaction or a common, repeat experience. This became a truly dialogic process in which helping each other re-articulate and edit permitted us to create very finely nuanced portrayals of what it means to live in another language.

From an anthropological standpoint, the unique ways in which each individual expressed parts of a similar process are a reminder of how we filter what we see, hear, remember, etc., within our own cognitive and affective experiences. This leads to a more critical awareness of the author-text relationship. For students to be able to lay their work side-by-side and really see this allowed them to grasp this relationship in a way they probably would not have otherwise. From a critical pedagogy standpoint, observing variations in experience allows us to complicate ideas about the nature of the student experience, which resists the rather homogenized representations of this in much study abroad literature where “the student” is often not thought of in terms of different genders, ethnicities, previous experiences, desires and so on. Finally, student writings also produced what critical pedagogues refer to as “student-generated themes” – themes for discussion

that come out of students' stated interests, fears, and concerns, that are often not previously identified by those who make curriculum.

Another, more personal effect of this sharing and discussion, was that students' writings prompted me to "write back." It sparked a dialogue of sorts in which I tried to untangle the distance between their linguistic and cultural experiences and mine. For example, their struggles to articulate what learning a language feels like "at the beginning" prompted me to articulate what it feels like to be a non-native speaker somewhere more "in the middle." One poem, "Phonological Pipe Dreams," begins with a rather violent desire to throw in the towel:

Watch me yank my
vocal chords out of my throat, pulverize
their dangling, weedy stems in a
molcabete, grind them
into a smooth, rootless salsa
for the now unhindered R's
that will roll off my lips the way pork
unravels off the spit.

While each of our moments of pain and triumph are quite distinct, this dialogue-through-poetry deconstructed ideas about starting and finishing points in language learning, a necessary thing since students were surprised that I could still feel frustration and pain more than a dozen years down the road.

Beyond a series of poems on the language and identity issue, another theme that I am working with is responding to the different takes on what it means to be an American woman in Mexico – something my female students regularly struggle with at myriad levels. In trying to figure out at what point and how my ideas, once like theirs, shifted so radically, I have used poetry to work on responses. In one poem, entitled, "Bigger Fish to Fry" I respond directly to them, showing how one's cultural adaptation and acceptance by cultural Others moves into different, larger arenas over time. In a second poem, still in progress, I use a glosa format which combines one stanza from a published poem, in this case Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's famous "You Men" with my own writing, in which I try to relate students' overwhelming inclinations to see *machismo* everywhere with my own over-zealous attempt to show just the opposite. From these works, I am beginning to identify my own biases and ideas more clearly, which will have a direct impact on my future writing and future teaching.

In the process of working on these poems and working with my students, I have come to realize how difficult it is to express such things as changing attitudes about language, gender, and identity, and how urgent it is as an educator to be able to articulate such things with one's students. In the field of study abroad, program facilitators are almost entirely invisible/unanalyzed in the literature, and the fact that we as educators are always *still* learning is almost never addressed. By writing about lingering fears, self-doubts, and frustrations – things I venture to say that we often only share with students within a given set of "safe" and of course encouraging stories, this made possible an entirely

different relationship with the students. So the poetry group pushed me to begin articulating things I normally would not have, but ethically and professionally should be able to.

Resistance, empowerment, ownership: “For once, I sure did”

A final process-based learning outcome was the recognition that poetry offered a powerful tool for resistance and empowerment. Through writing, one could resist images the Other made of Self – something that is not frequently talked about when the Self is posited as more powerful than the Other. One student wrote a prose poem, entitled “Sincerely Yours,” that resisted images of the easy gringa student-traveler, responding (albeit fictitiously) to the range of male comments that run from outrageously romantic to downright lewd:

I'd like to smile and thank you for the crude comment sopping with your self satisfaction in hopes that it would make me all wet. So thank you random car driver, casual spectator and occasional “wasted” man. I relish the fact you think my ass is great as cherry pie and am more than flattered that you would also like a piece of it. But even more, you're right on the money because my body does move like that in the sack. What's that? Yes, I just so happen to gyrate better than most Maytags. I'm a regular Stretch Armstrong if that's what you're thinking. But enough about me. I'd like to return the flattery of filth favor in hopes it'll do the same for you. I could tell you something nice like “the sparkle of your smile made me think of a freshly landed comet,” but why say something like that when I could really get my kicks from saying that me and your malodorous man-sex would be some romp in the hay. Or better yet, that I'm just plain hot over the thought of your bulge as you walk past. But wait, I think you'll really like this one; that the brillo pad you have for chest hair would virtually do a number on my pots and pans, if you know what I mean. Yeah that's what I'm talking about. I had a feeling you might like the mutual masturbation of our exchange because for once, I sure did.

This inspired and sarcastic poem resists the Other's images, something that Mary Lousie Pratt (1999) encourages as a way of engaging power relations within contact zones, which study abroad certainly sets up. In this re-making of repeated experiences in daily life, the student boiled down a set of observations, interactions, and occurrences to their essence, and in the process, regained the upper hand.

In the *Fifth Book of Peace*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes, “Each one of the veterans has had a moment when life blew apart. If he or she could write the explosion, its every smithereen, and narrate what led to it and came from it, the self and the world would become whole” (2003, p. 336). In effect, what the poetry offered all of us was a chance to reconnect ourselves with the chaotic world in a meaningful way that allowed us to gain ownership over our experiences.

The Quality Question and What to Make of It All

From this pilot project, it seems that there is much potential for poetry as a research tool, a learning tool, and a mode of representation that can move both researcher-writers out of their more traditional and constrained representations. One lingering and rather glaring issue, however, is the question of quality and how to evaluate this sort of writing.

If there is a historical bias that favors the quantitative over the qualitative in academia, seeing the latter as too subjective and unreliable, these prejudices reemerge when one considers arts-based modes of investigating. As Eisner (2004) reminds us, science in the US educational system has always been viewed as teachable and testable, but arts have been highly linked to talent and preference. Jane Piirto, a qualitative researcher and literary writer, asks directly:

How much should a person have studied or practiced an art before utilizing it in educational discourse...? What is the difference between accomplished art and art used for social purposes and personal expression in the field of social studies? ... (2002, p. 3).

Prompted by her studies of published poets and fiction writers which demonstrated that most did indeed earn advanced degrees in literature, she questions why qualitative researchers do not have to have some formal training in order to write poetry and fiction, or make art.

While this sounds a bit off-putting, qualitative researchers in general and ethnographers in particular know how it feels for everyone to just tack their areas of expertise onto whatever their day skills normally include. So quality - literary quality - is an important issue when trying to figure out if we as anthropologists/qualitative researchers or students as culture-representers, should engage in creative writing at all.

For example, what to do with the following situation? In a previous semester, one student wrote a poem entitled “Me-Yø” on shifting identities in another language. The poem is very literal— probably not the best in terms of literary quality - however she raises some key issues about this theme in a concise and engaged manner, allowing the reader into her perspective in the way that a formal essay would not. It also shows that she is raising important questions about what happens after the experience, when she will return to the States more conscious of how her language and culture mark her. She ends the poem imagining herself “back in my comfort zone, my need for / creative communication gone. / But is it the same as before? / What is my language now?” The ethnographic quality should be clear – this gives us some good information about her experience -- but what about the literary? What is “good enough”?

In Piirto’s phrasing, this would be an “inferior poem” that nonetheless serves an important field use. Here she takes us back to the difference between poetry as a research tool versus poetry as a research product, analyzing her own “inferior poems” that have qualitative research value in the way they capture essences, details, speech, and so on. This

would imply that what we do with our writing is the real question – where we shelve it, what we call it, and who the audience is.

The question of what we do with our knowledge and our writing is certainly important, and these are solid criticisms that should not be dismissed. However, others argue for some risk-taking in the name of positive change. Indeed, as one poet-researcher admonishes us, “we instruct students to use citations rather than teaching them to explore their own words and images” (Cahnmann, 2003). Similarly, Kramsch (2003), working from Bakhtin, finds that students and researchers need to learn how to become “authors of their own words,” to recognize how they reflect their own social-educational-disciplinary context, and to then “find new ways of expressing our thoughts in such a way that they are both understandable and original.” (p.27)

We do need to develop knowledge about the stylistic elements of poetry or structure of fiction, however I would argue that we are probably educable. We could also learn from our students or other research subjects for that matter, who may have less cultural or disciplinary knowledge than we do, but more innate talent. This sets up some interesting collaborative learning possibilities that unsettle traditional roles in the teaching and research processes.

Students unanimously felt that creative writing had served some purposes that their essay writing had not, and their reflections upon the differences between the two are especially illuminating. When asked to compare essay writing to poetry writing in their semester abroad, one said that while her poems had times and places, they ended at an open point, whereas her essays had all come to a definitive ending, a point she did not move beyond. The implication is of course, that once you write a conclusion, you probably don't think beyond it. It was also noted that a poem, while having a structure, is not forced to move linearly from point to point. Furthermore it can start not at the beginning and end not at the ending, which directly challenges typical American/Western narrative structure. This again suggests that different ways of writing will lead to different ways of seeing, or interpreting. The fact that students can articulate this is probably the strongest argument for re-inserting more creative writing into the curriculum abroad.

As Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College proclaims,

We are not going to learn how to engage “the other” – that is, understand and bridge the profound differences that divide and define us – unless we are willing to bring our curiosity and our full selves into an unfamiliar meaning system – an alternative epistemology – and try as best we can to make our own sense of it. If we expose our students to alternative methodologies for making sense of empirical observation, we can perhaps help them stay connected to a world “out there” that is also “in here,” a world of which they are an integral part, a world to which they have legitimate emotional connections and enduring moral obligations... (2005, p. 5)

Self and Other in the Poetry Project: Complicating Identities

Walsh's quote leads us to the final point that this project brought out which is that the identities of everyone were complicated over and over again. They became blurred and confused, and shifted frequently along the way, but in ways that did not isolate self and other, but rather, brought them together in some sort of complex world.

For example, the reader can probably hear my own rather schizophrenic identity in this paper. I entered as anthropologist-researcher, as critical educator, as program director, and as a writer. While one may assume I formed part of an American Self with my students to be held up to a Mexican Other, more times than not, I identified more with the Mexican part of myself which shifts me into some un-nameable place on the bicultural continuum. Further complicating this was the fact that one of my students was of Hispanic/New Mexican descent, so she had claims as well to some part of the supposedly Other Mexican identity.

In our discussion of writing about local people and writing from their viewpoints, students also complicated their own ideas about how the local Mexican Other has identities that overlap with the self since many local people speak English, have traveled and studied abroad, and so on. Finally, as we wrote, I was also sometimes the student and my students sometimes the teachers in that some of them knew significantly more than I did about formal poetry writing.

Thus, we ended up with more questions than answers, and were not always sure where identities and voices overlapped or diverged. I see this however, as the most positive result of the pilot project. One would hope that students (and researchers) would not walk away from the field saying that they have figured everything out definitively. One would hope that things get more complicated and nuanced. Representing becomes not a way to classify, control, or conclude on cultural Others, but rather, a way to engage both Self and Other in less binary or oppositional ways that remain open for interpretation and editing.

Choosing a Form That is Other

In choosing creative writing forms, we work, in the words of anthropologist-poet Ivan Brady, "against the sometimes academically resistant idea that there is more than one way to say (and therefore to see) things". Stated another way, choosing to write in a form that is Other pushes us towards different forms of literacy.

Indeed, this is simply making the ordinary – writing about other cultures – into something extraordinary. In the same way that we immerse ourselves in other settings to deconstruct our ideas of what is natural, normal, or valid, we can immerse ourselves into other ways of writing to expose our assumptions and to reconstruct our ideas about how to represent culture.

If we allowed ourselves to sojourn in Other forms of writing, then like the study abroad students, we too could re-think cultural representation, become culture-representers to larger and less elite audiences, and serve a role as public intellectuals alongside of our

other roles. Arts-based methods on inquiry and representation may offer us one of the best ways to begin.

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