Bringing back emotion, imagination and the senses: Creative writing in journalism research

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Creative writing for academic purposes

In the last fifteen years, across the social sciences, there has been a proliferation of creative writing applications to research. Examples of this trend, which has recently been referred to with the umbrella term of ‘poetic enquiry’ (Prendergast et al. 2009), can be located across a range of disciplines, from nursing and social work, to anthropology, geography and feminist studies, just to name a few (Prendergast 2009: xxi). Monica Prendergast, in compiling a detailed annotated bibliography of existing academic research incorporating elements of creative writing finds not only that Poet’s Corner sections figure regularly on the pages of a range of peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Social Work, American Anthropologist, or the Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies) (2009: xx), she also identifies a sheer variety of terms and practices: among 40 different labels she lists are ‘data poetry’, ‘field poetry’, ‘research-generated poetry’, ‘poetic analysis’, ‘investigative poetry’…(2009: xx–xxi).

This development, which is based on both acknowledging and exploiting for analytical purposes a researcher’s engagement with the senses, feelings and the surrounding reality, also reflects a broader attention in the humanities at large towards materiality, practice and emotions. These aspects have become the subject of study and debate, respectively, in the so-called ‘material turn’ (Hicks 2010), ‘practice turn’ (see e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001) and the ‘emotional turn’ (for instance, Davidson and Milligan 2007). Ivan Brady, an anthropologist whose poetry has been widely published in academic journals and books, talks about research complemented by the use of poetry as an ‘artful science’ (2004). Paul Stoller, another well-
known name within this investigative genre, writes of ‘sensuous scholarship’ (1997, 2004).
Both authors refer to the opportunity offered by creative writing to account for the ‘plurality
of meaning that we experience’ (Brady 2004: 632). They particularly emphasize the need to
overcome the Cartesian separation between mind and body that has been at the root of the
development of modern science. As they explain, because human beings, and with them the
researcher, are both sensual and intellectual creatures (Brady 2004: 624; Stoller 1997: xi–xv),
academic enquiry alone is able neither to capture nor to convey the full complexity of reality.
In this respect sensuous scholarship, as ‘a mixing of head and heart’ (Stoller 1997: xviii), is a
more comprehensive research practice.

This article examines thus the role of creative writing in understanding journalism. It argues
that non-academic writing – poetry in this case – can play a much more significant part in
journalism research than that of an entertaining genre for disseminating a study’s findings,
mainly to audiences beyond academia. Not only can poetry complement traditional
‘academic’ texts by filling the gaps of the vivid details of the situated practices of journalism
as they are lived in real life. It also has far-reaching epistemological and ontological
implications: it raises, in other words, fundamental questions related to what we assume the
world where journalists operate to be, the role of imagination, sensory perceptions and
emotions in everyday practice, as well as the very place of the scholar in the research process.
The benefits of creative writing are illustrated through examples of actual poems written
while conducting a comparative investigation of foreign journalists’ practices in the United
Kingdom, Norway and Eastern Africa.

**Poetry and journalism: Not an odd couple**
Poetry and journalism would seem, at first glance, at the opposite ends of the writing spectrum. Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, journalism tends to be seen as being about objectivity, the facts, the detached observation, ‘bearing witness’ to history. This is regarded as the quasi-scientific enterprise of revealing truths which ‘stay the same no matter who speaks about them’ (Burt 2013: n.p.). Poetry, on the contrary, is most strongly associated to subjectivity, art, the uniquely personal and creative viewpoint of the writer, the sphere of emotions. Yet this tension between activities, professional missions and ways of writing that, one would think, are so clearly and diametrically opposite, is only illusory (Archetti 2013b).

To start with, over history, there have been plenty of examples of journalists who were also poets (Nelson 2007). We can think of Archibald MacLeish, who both received multiple awards (including two Pulitzer Prizes) for his poetry and worked part-time for *Time*, the Toronto *Star* and *Fortune* (Nelson 2007: 166–68). Henry Luce, founder of both *Time* and *Fortune*, was in this respect convinced that it was ‘easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers’ (Nelson 2007: 170).

These stories are more than coincidences dictated by the need, as it has often been the case, of exploiting one’s writing skill to pay the bills or the fact that both poetry and journalism respond to events – think of war poetry about World War II (Roberts 1996) or writing inspired by 9/11 (Johnson and Merians 2011, for one example) – and, more broadly, to life. Poetry and journalism ultimately share the same aim of engaging the reader and revealing that what is not immediately apparent. As Irish political journalist and writer Olivia O’Leary wrote talking about the Northern Ireland conflict: ‘Journalism and poetry at their best try to state the truth. Journalism and poetry at their worst do the opposite’ (cited in Greenslade 2011).
There are several examples of projects where poetry has been used to contribute to journalism, particularly to invite the public to observe everyday life with different eyes (Anon. 2009; NPR 2012). In February 2014, to make one example, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Centre for Investigative Reporting and the young residents of a public housing in San Francisco were brought together in ‘Off/Page’, a project designed to encourage the reporting of issues that would normally not make the news through innovative forms of storytelling (Off/Page 2014).

It can be argued, however, that all good journalism involves to some extent a poetic angle. Beyond merely informing the reader through the who, what, where and when of a news beat – which nowadays could even be written by a robot (Clerwall 2014) – good journalism is ultimately about enabling *understanding*. And this, in a world saturated with information, where our attention is dulled by both the amount of distractions and the impression of having heard it all before, needs to include the *how* and *what it feels like* (Burt 2013).

This is indeed confirmed by the foreign correspondents I talked to. As Tristan McConnell – foreign correspondent based in Nairobi who works for *The Times* of London, *Monocle* and the *Global Post* among other organizations – describes his writing:

> I do not want to bore the readers quoting from a bunch of reports or anything like that. What the reader wants is to share the experience of being in that place with me, so I try to put as much colour and description […] as I can. If I am writing a story, you know, about following the British ambassador [in Somalia] I want the reader to feel like they are sitting in the car with us. (2015)
Here is what he actually wrote in reporting that story for AFP, powerfully describing the atmosphere as one arrives at Mogadishu’s airport: ‘The four-square kilometre (1.5 square mile) base is a bizarre expatriate ecosystem of muscled and tattooed private security contractors, ambitious young diplomats, jaded aid workers, furtive spies, uniformed soldiers and businessmen with an unusually high-risk threshold’ (McConnell 2015).

**Creative writing *about* journalism: The benefits**

So there is a connection, in the writing practice and even in the aims of showing a hidden reality to the reader, between poetry and journalism. But why writing creatively *about* journalism? Creative writing and storytelling could be used not only to promote greater public involvement with academic research. They are also an opportunity for researchers to reflect on their data. In this section I am spelling out the methodological benefits of creative writing in journalism research. They are accompanied by examples of poems that illustrate different ways in which creative writing can complement academic texts.

Poem 1, related to a comparative study of foreign correspondents in London and Oslo (Archetti 2014c), particularly highlights the thinking processes of the researcher and the opportunity to bring the interviewees to life through anecdotes and small details that would have not been included in the academic text. Poems 2 and 3 are used to create a vivid and sensorial picture of key locations where correspondents covering Eastern and sub-Saharan Africa research their stories: poem 2 refers to Mogadishu (Somalia); poem 3 to Nairobi (Kenya), where most foreign correspondents are based. The focus here is highlighting the deceptive nature of the environments the journalists work in, both highly safe and –
especially for white westerners – highly dangerous, as well as giving the reader a sense of what it feels like to be there.

A first opportunity for the researcher to reflect on the data

Poem 1 is one example of a set of creative pieces I wrote, each, straight after an interview. My aim was to write them on the basis of what I remembered from the exchange with the journalist. Each piece simply had to loosely revolve around the focus of my study – the way the environment, including the organization of the urban space, affects the newsgathering routines and practices of foreign journalists. These poems were not only a first opportunity to reflect on what I had heard and my experience but also, as I found out, a way to do so in a free and unconstrained way. As such, poem 1 reflects what I instinctively perceived as important and worthy of attention, as well as some of the questions that popped into my mind. Both poem 1 and 2 borrow from ‘found poetry’ (Glesene 1997; Lahman and Richard 2013) in so far as they rearrange the interviewee’s words.

A context for innovation

The practice of creative writing can work as a method for establishing more imaginative connections among ideas and reading unusual patterns in the data gathered. As Melanie Jasper writes, ‘reflective writing enables the researcher to draw together and express fledgling ideas and connections and build these as they become more substantial’ (2005: 252).

Map the evolving thinking of the researcher

The poems make apparent those gut feelings and impressions that inevitably guide the researcher in the interpretation of the results. As Ivan Brady explains, objectivity is
‘fictional’: ‘because all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as personally situated sensuous and intellectual being’ (2009: xi). Providing these verbal sketches is a way to document the thinking processes and perhaps even the emotional aspects of research that would otherwise be hidden. This ultimately enables to researcher to achieve greater intellectual honesty. The poems, in this sense, are the equivalent of stating who funded the research at the end of an article to make more transparent the processes through which conclusions were drawn from the data – what again Melanie Jasper calls ‘a verifiable audit-trail of the research process’ (2005: 250, original emphasis).

**Bring back the ‘researcher’ into the research**

Academic writing removes the ‘I’ from the writing in the attempt to present findings as objective. However, as Stefanos Mantzoukas explains, although the positivist paradigm is based on the belief that bias can be eliminated, this is never possible: ‘all research starts not just from anywhere, but from somewhere specific, and that is the specific individual researcher’ (2005: 284). As he continues: ‘To suggest that the researcher can be the central figure of the research, responsible for every decision made regarding the study, and at the same time argue that those decisions did not bear the researcher’s personal input is […] schizophrenic’ (2005: 290–91).

**Poem 1**

‘London – 20 minutes to the City/1 minute to oblivion’

20 minutes train journey

from Surbiton to the City.
If anything happens on the way
there is always the internet
or an iphone
to catch it.

8 hours time difference to Japan
means tweeting late at night
her 8,000 followers
who like
to read her lines
early in the morning.

She write for websites, magazines, a blog,
the Huffington Post Japan,
Yomiuri Shinbun, radio, TV
a column on Yahoo.

Technology, celebrity,
human interest:
what Japan likes to know,
and how the country is seen
from the outside world.

I have stopped asking old questions.
They hardly apply any more:
‘Do you use newsagencies?’

If I think that it seemed interesting
just two years ago…

News leads, she says,
come from: the Guardian, the Financial Times,
the Economist, the BBC
the 2,000 organizations she follows on Twitter
her colleagues friends’
the Facebook newsfeed.

She gets financial rewards
from media in print,
only scrapes little writing for the net.
Sure she can live,
albeit she’ll never be rich.

Struggling to add the value
of the knowledge matured
for having lived 12 years
in the same place
– although when consumers are so busy
is there any quality at all to produce?

One might have taken three days
to research a story.

Yet, no matter how good the article is,

‘after a minute’

it is forgotten.

Complement the academic piece of research, i.e. the traditional article or conference paper that has been produced as a result of a study

The poems offer an opportunity to include what did not ‘fit’ into the academic article, in this case offering a rounder, more nuanced, and perhaps more entertaining view of the practices described in the article and the locations in which they take place. As Bloor writes, ‘sociological poetry’ can ‘capture the imagination and convey the human meanings of social facts’ (2012: 43).

Bring back vividly the ‘individual’ and the ‘everyday’ into academic research

The poems offer a glimpse, albeit fleeting, into the life of the correspondents who have been interviewed. There is a tendency in academic research, in its attempt to achieve generalization of results, to strip people of their individuality. In so doing academic researchers also drain real life from their data. In the poem the interviewees are being brought back to life through their voices as people, not just as ‘sources of data’ of a journal article. The creative writing pieces thus restore what Paul Stoller calls the ‘choppiness of everyday life’ (1992: 508).
Poem 2: This example of found poetry is based on an e-mail exchange with a Somali journalist and former politician.

‘Exchange’

It feels so odd
for us Somalis
to meet people like you
who came to help Somalia
and we could not invite you for a meal
at a restaurant
or take you for a walk
around the city
with its nice beaches.

Poem 3

‘Nairobi – It’s All Fine’

No HEFAT\textsuperscript{1} certificate,
I nervously sign
the compulsory waiver
of liability claims.
It’s all fine:
\textit{We will not abandon you in the field}
\textit{if something goes amiss.}
I have attached
the State Department’s
crime and safety report
for your use and consideration.

Please understand
that many Americans
visit Kenya every day.

At the airport in Nairobi
people smile ‘jambo’ and ‘welcome’
with warm light in their eyes.
I wait for my driver outside
evying hairstyles that defy gravity,
watching girls laugh
in colourful dresses.
It’s all fine.

*Practice good situational awareness,*
*don’t wander down dark alleys*
*always walk with someone else*
*and you should be safe*
*for the time of your visit.*

Guards and bollards
and a brand new red light
at a checkpoint
before the fortified gates
of my hotel.

High-voltage barbed wire

hides behind the tropical plants
(I have only before seen in my mum’s pots)
of five-acres landscaped gardens

and the iconic water feature

advertised on TripAdvisor.

A British diplomat,
I later find out,
is not allowed to overnight here:
safety measures
do not meet

the FCO’s² standards

after all.

It’s all fine.

The hotel is located

in one of the safest neighborhoods

very close to the Israeli Embassy,

which has extremely tight security.

Bulging iron barrels

filled to explosion point

with concrete

line the entrance
to a restaurant’s car park.

‘How are you today?’ politely asks the man
inspecting the boot
and the passengers’ seats
with a torchlight.

It’s all fine.

*We were just doing our shopping*
says the woman
whose husband
was shot
in front of her eyes
at the Westgate Mall.

**Conclusion: The deeper questions**

This article is an invitation to question what we know about journalism: to realize that there are issues related to objectivity in conducting research that go beyond the mere correct application of a methodology; that a considerable part of the reality and practices of journalism we study can be neither captured nor expressed through academic enquiry (and texts) alone.

The poems helped me understand that I, as a researcher who should have been objective and detached, was in reality a product of all my previous life history combined: of all the literature I had read, of my own experimentation with creative writing (Archetti 2013a, 2014d, 2014f), of nearly 40 conversations with foreign journalists, of my contribution
(Archetti 2014e) to a poetry festival (Mamilla International Poetry Festival, Ramallah, October 2013), of my stays in Mogadishu and Nairobi meeting NGO workers and professionals engaged in countering violent extremism, of having taken a ride in an armoured vehicle… Just like my interviewees – foreign journalists working in the United Kingdom, Norway and the African continent – were the product of unique constellation of relationships that involved people, technologies and material infrastructure and this affected their practices – as I concluded in my academic writing, so was I. This meant that, within the research process, I was far from a neutral collector of information.

Writing poetry also primed me towards paying more attention to feelings and emotions. I started realizing that the very extent to which I was able to extract information from my interviewees did not depend on the mere execution of the ‘elite interview techniques’ I had been so thoroughly trained in. The ‘success’ of a conversation depended not so much on the structuring of my questions or on making sure I fitted them in the time available to the interviewee. A ‘good interview’ depended to a much greater extent on a subtle chemistry based, on either side, on varying degrees of trust, curiosity, a liking of the other person and gut feeling. Emotion and sensory perceptions during an interview seemed to be playing a crucial role. Why had I never paid attention to this before as a methodological aspect? How would have my data changed had it been a ‘bad interview’ day for either me or the interviewee? What was really my role as an investigator in the research process? What was the nature of the data that I had gathered? Was the very interview material really objective – information that I had picked and categorized according to systematic criteria, as I had always believed – or had I in fact co-created it with my interviewees? To what extent did my findings truly reflect the reality of the everyday practices lived by the correspondents I had
interviewed rather than my own bias? Was my study ‘scientific’? Indeed, could any investigation claim to be so?

Ultimately, the most important lesson of ‘sensuous scholarship’, as Stoller puts it, is that of ‘humility’: ‘No matter how learned we may become, no matter how deeply we have mastered a subject, the world, for the sensuous scholar, remains a wondrous place that stirs the imagination and sparks creativity’ (1997: 136).

**References**


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