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The poetic is political … and other notes on engaged scholarship

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ON ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

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The boldness of imagination is the courage to relinquish one's own coherent experience of the world for another's unexplored, unplumbed, potentially volatile viewpoint.

—Charon (2006, p. 112)

Instrumental and objectivist logics maintain a hegemonic place in Western scholarship, reasoning skills powerfully equipped to address certain dilemmas even as they may obscure other ways of knowing. In this chapter, we enlarge dominant notions of rationality by offering an aesthetic view of knowledge as vital for engaged communication scholarship. Our interest in aesthetic logics parallels concerns that have led scholars to develop feminist practices of inquiry (e.g., Harding, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 2007), interrogate the aesthetics of representations in West-centric knowledge structures from postcolonial and Subaltern Studies standpoints (e.g., Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Dutta, 2007, 2008), focus on autoethnographic and poetic accounts (e.g., Carr, 2003; Ellingson, 2009), introduce reflexivity and the politics of personhood in the scholarly process (e.g., Harding, 1991; Reinharz, 1992), and adopt narrative and dialogic understandings of knowledge constructions (e.g., Frank, 2005; Harter, 2005). Loosely coupled, these research trajectories
advance alternative rationalities for witnessing and answering salient social issues. We argue for the theoretical and practical incorporation of aesthetic rationalities in engaged scholarship—logics of possibility that cultivate individuals’ capacities to imagine otherwise.

Reimagining scholarly inquiry to reflect and embrace aesthetic logics requires us to rethink our methods of data collection, analysis, and representation and our own roles as researchers and writers. When we resist the art/science dichotomy, opportunities abound for sensemaking and representation that embody aesthetic ways of knowing. Furthermore, rejection of dichotomous thinking opens up possibilities for listening to ways of knowing that lie beyond the realm of Eurocentric knowledge structures (Dutta, in press). Even after the interpretive turn, instrumental and objectivist logics often underlie and sometimes constrain the processes and products of social scientific research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Traditional structures and modes of research offer important but limited conceptualizations of knowing. We can open ourselves to other ways of asking questions that include overt attention to aesthetic sensibilities. We need not reject or abandon traditional modes of research. Instead, we can enlarge the realm of possibilities for what counts as accepted research practices and advance methods for studying the aesthetic nature of communal life (Ellingson, 2009).

In this chapter, we develop an understanding of rationality that incorporates imagination, and we explore methodologies that draw on creative sensibilities. We then articulate the salience of creativity for rendering credible previously subjugated voices, and we articulate its value for engaged communication theory and research.

THE CREATIVE NATURE OF KNOWING

We understand rationalities as modes of reasoning, knowledge-producing resources that guide our daily choices and actions as scholars, the processes we engage in the production of knowledge, and the value judgments we make about knowledge claims (see also Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008). Any epistemological standpoint is contextually conditioned. Material circumstances, assorted constraints, and cultural discourses give rise to contingencies of social life—including the way scholars develop knowledge claims about the world. During the 20th century, the enveloping discourses of (post-)positivism, and scientific forms of inquiry that stem from such philosophies, tangibly enabled and constrained the questions asked and answered by scholars. Positivist logics generally were guided by the desire to develop, verify, or falsify universal laws or principles. The value of “objectivity” and a disinterested, impartial stance on the part of the
researcher was viewed as necessary for the promotion of social scientific ideas (see Miller, 2000, for a thorough treatment of post-positivism).

The authors of this chapter came of age at a time when positivist logics in their pure form were rejected in the communication discipline. This was also a time when the Eurocentric normative ideals of post-positivism came under scrutiny in light of intersections among knowledge production processes and imperialism. Postcolonial scholars increasingly questioned the narrowly defined scope of dominant epistemic structures and ways in which research methods maintained and served hegemonic structures (e.g., Spivak, 1987). We witnessed the development of methods of inquiry that reflect the interpretive turn within the social sciences, including dialogic, postmodern, and feminist scholarship. Furthermore, postcolonial and Subaltern Studies approaches openly deconstruct the taken-for-granted logics of mainstream post-positivism.

Across disciplines, scholars have broadened their understanding of research logics to include knowledge that derives from storied, emotive, and embodied experience (e.g., Ellingson, 2005; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). Feminist scholars forged the way for work that redresses dominant tendencies to ignore logics and subjectivities often relegated to private spheres (e.g., Naples, 2003). Yet even within these movements, few contemporary scholars have noted or been inspired by aesthetic sensibilities (for exceptions, see Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Clair, 1998). West-centric binaries (e.g., science/art, labor/leisure, utility/beauty) remain deeply rooted in the academy, and their lingering presence continues to undergird the standards against which knowledge is evaluated. We join other scholars interested in fostering alternative logics by highlighting creativity as a form of sensemaking that fosters individuals’ capacities to stretch beyond taken-for-granted scripts. We explicitly position aesthetic rationalities as worthy of consideration alongside other ways of knowing social life by drawing on the pragmatist writings of John Dewey.

The term aesthetic derives from the Greek aisthanomai—to perceive and feel with the senses (Dewey, 1934/1980). Humans’ experience of communal life remains a sensory one. Organizations and relationships selectively develop our senses, enhancing some of our perceptive and creative capacities at the expense of others. The writings of Dewey leveraged aesthetic experiences as ways of knowing. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, Dewey positioned instrumental and objectivist rationalities as narrow views of reason and recognized dimensions of human experience constricted by formalization and routinization. Even as he acknowledged the value of rules and patterned interactions, Dewey sought to develop individuals’ creative capacities to foster a full and free interplay of ideas in communal contexts. Decades later, Strati (1999) argued that aesthetic sensibilities constitute a form of human knowledge—sensemaking yielded by the perceptive faculties
of hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste, and the capacity for aesthetic judgment (see also Gagliardi, 2006). Aesthetic rationalities form knowledge relying primarily on individuals’ intuition and imagination. From this perspective, the imagination is a “muscular mechanism” (Charon, 2006, p. 12) by which we partake in another’s life world. Aesthetic experiences invite us to stretch our imagination to grasp events befalling another individual and craft previously unimagined possibilities. To exercise our imagination is to affirm our capacity to move beyond the boundaries of our own bodies and truths, appreciate others’ experiences, and interrupt automatic patterns reinforced through communal living.

The cultivation of diverse rationalities can enhance scholars’ abilities to offer nuanced (albeit partial) insights on the workings of social worlds. The false dichotomy between the knower and the known becomes conflated when we invoke alternative rationalities; opportunities open up for narrative co-constructions that engage with the personal (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b). Through moments of reflections, the privilege rendered in the scholarly position becomes a subject of inquiry (Basu, 2008; Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008). Scholars bring and create selves in the field as we become trusted actors in the lives of participants. At times camouflaged and in other moments visible, we co-narrate other people’s lives—and advance our own lives—within our creative renderings. By expanding our methodological toolboxes, we stretch our own capacities as scholars and invite alternative representations of selves from participants.

**ENLARGING RESEARCH METHODS TO ENGAGE AESTHETIC RATIONALITIES**

The routine, obvious, and largely unproblematic ways of knowing in academic inquiry can deter and/or suppress rationalities that are essential for fuller and richer “imaginative renderings of pressing issues, experiences, and inequities” (Harter, Norander, & Quinlan, 2007, p. 107). Although traditional ways of sensemaking and representation remain valuable, the time has come to enlarge the realm of research possibilities to include ways of framing questions; gathering, analyzing, and reflecting upon data; and representing findings that blend aesthetic sensibilities with social scientific structures. A broader repertoire of research rationalities and strategies can deconstruct taken-for-granted epistemological assumptions that perpetuate oppressive inequities, reclaim muted voices, break the closure of produced narratives, and recover silenced conflict.

The act of focusing attention on an event and interpreting it culminates in form (e.g., an essay). Conferring form is an aesthetic process by which the
artist/author represents experience (Dewey, 1934/1980). Of course, artists conceptualize happenings by virtue of a variety of processes, including speaking, writing, drawing, painting, photographing, singing, and dancing. Moving beyond the art/science dichotomy, researchers need not choose to be either an artist or a social scientist, but become both as they co-construct aesthetic processes and forms. We can follow in the tradition of great thinkers, performers, and inventors who saw science in drawing the human body as artwork (e.g., Michelangelo) or perceived artistry in the dance of subatomic particles (e.g., Albert Einstein).

Modernist conceptualizations of methodological triangulation frame multimethod work as able to transcend the limitations of any one mode of research by combining it with another, typically a quantitative survey combined with a qualitative interview study (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). But this approach does not rethink the qualitative/quantitative binary; it further inscribes it. If we enlarge sensemaking to include an aesthetic sense of creativity and possibility, we undo the need to triangulate a definitive Truth and move toward embracing multiple truths that inspire communal renewal and progressive reconstruction. These multiple truths also offer entry points for understanding those worldviews that have historically been erased and/or treated as subjects of inquiry to be written over and about (Dutta, in press).

Scholars typically focus on linguistic representations—for example, we invite participants to story their experiences in written forms or in interviews. Artful sensemaking can complement traditional written research forms through invoking more inventive use of language and expanding generic conventions. Ethnographic narratives (e.g., Tillmann-Healy, 2001), research poetry (e.g., Carr, 2003), fictionalized accounts (e.g., Frank, 2000), and autoethnography (e.g., Ellingson, 2005) are examples of written forms that enable scholars to represent aesthetic truths. Hybrid approaches weave academic prose with narrative, poetry, and/or other art forms in layered accounts that reflect multiple ways of knowing. They also offer rich possibilities for sharing research findings with diverse audiences (e.g., Minge, 2007).

An overemphasis on linguistic forms can obscure the invention and knowledge deriving from other aesthetic renderings. We have much to learn from artists whose habits refine and extend the reflexes and reach of speech. In material artwork "reside the traces and memories of our past, the witness to our present experiences, our desires and our dreams for the future" (Gagliardi, 2006, p. 708). Consider the following examples. For individuals with limited language skills due to developmental disabilities, the arts offer a range of media for self-discovery and expression (Harter et al., 2008). Artists at Passion Works Studio in Athens, Ohio, express sorrow, pain, joy, and love through the manipulation of paint, clay, metal, and even fabric. Numerous other examples abound. Victoria Marks, a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, works with U.S. soldiers returning
from overseas duty who are experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder. She facilitates workshops and staged performances that allow for improvisations between soldiers and artists. Veterans narrate their experiences in military organizations and “tell their stories through dance” (Joseph, 2008, p. E2). Dance as aesthetic form invites participants to inhabit another’s world long enough to achieve familiarity and imagine the vectors of life for someone whose body and experiences may be quite different from one’s own. For groups that are silenced and systematically denied discursive space because of political conflict, aesthetic performance serves as a means to reclaim voice and offer alternative narratives of hope and peace. Women in Black, a global peace organization, regularly stages silent protest vigils and performances that encourage audience members to reflect on what it means to take responsibility for violent conflict. These aesthetic moments challenge dominant (mis)representations of past events just as they unleash creative possibilities for a more peaceful future (Norander, 2008).

Scholars can marshal their imaginations in diverse ways to move beyond the spoken and written word to embrace other mediums of sensing and expressing lived realities. Participatory photography (Baker & Wang, 2006), documentary (Adelman & Shultz, 1991), music/sound (LeVan, 2007), and drama/theatre (Gray & Sinding, 2002) all offer a wide range of possibilities for reflecting an expanded sense of rationality. Various mediums differentially allow us to make sense of sensations—sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, and movement. Opening the door to novel ways of constructing and representing scholarship simultaneously leads to new ways of assessing the quality of our findings. Moreover, such collaborative and participatory projects and performances partially break down the researcher/subject dichotomy and carve out more space for participants’ voices.

THE POETIC IS POLITICAL

I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: The right to free access to imagination. I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine. (Nafisi, 2004, p. 338)

Artists appeal to our capacities for delight and wonder, beauty and pain, joy and sorrow, and fear and comfort. Through their storied renderings, they offer moments of sharing where audiences co-participate in stories of silence and suffering that are otherwise erased from discursive spaces. An epic novel, for example, can render in narrative form displaced or forgotten views and heighten our sensitivity to the complexities of life. We can never experi-
ence all that others have gone through, but good works of fiction demand that we stretch imaginatively to understand other life worlds (Bakhtin, 1981). The development of aesthetic rationalities is particularly salient for individuals whose experiences and standpoints remain on the margins.

Consider the work of Dr. Azar Nafisi (2004), author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. On a weekly basis over a 2-year period in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1995–1997), and after having resigned her positions at the University of Tehran and other posts due to fundamentalists’ seizures of universities, Nafisi met with several female students to read literature otherwise censored. In the midst of everyday terror, these women immersed themselves in the worlds of fiction. Literature as an aesthetic form allowed them to exercise their imaginations—to escape, survive, confront the brutality of the world outside their sanctuary, and sometimes counter forces that worked to limit their agency to narrate their lives. As such, we see a corollary between our argument for the inclusion of aesthetic rationalities and the call from Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) to engage postcolonial theory by turning to alternative rationalities.

Consider the experiences of Rigoberta Menchu as narrated in the testimonio *I Rigoberta Menchu*. The links between U.S.-sponsored neo-imperial violence in Nicaragua are juxtaposed in the backdrop of the personal experiences of a subaltern participant who has traditionally been written off in dominant Eurocentric frameworks as a subject of history, not as one that could participate in the making of history (Beverly, 2004). The testimonio speaks to us in the realm of the aesthetic and does so by rupturing our dominant notions of the aesthetic by engaging us through the voice of the subaltern. Beverly (2004) noted:

> Almost by definition, the voice that speaks in testimonio is not, in its act of enunciation, part of what Hegel would have understood as civil society or what Habermas means by public sphere: if it were, it would address us instead in novels, essays, films, TV shows, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces. On the other hand, testimonio as an enonce—that is, as something marginalized in the form of transcript of text—serves to bring subaltern voice into civil society and public sphere. If testimonio comes, like Antigone’s lament, from outside the limits of the state, it is also implicated in tracing the frontiers of the authority of the state and expanding the compass of what counts as expression in civil society. (p. 19)

As a cultural representation from a subaltern context, the testimonio disrupts our expectations of what it means to consume aesthetics and introduces possibilities for social change (see Dutta, 2008, for a discussion of subaltern aesthetics and social change).
The notion of the artist as an irreverent catalyst for social change has been noted by philosophers across time and space. Dewey (1934/1980) maintained a fundamental belief in the potential of aesthetic experience to reinvigorate communal life. For Dewey, artful encounters create a robust civic life to the extent that they break through "gulfs, walls, and barriers that other forms of communication cannot penetrate" (p. 105) and foster a full and unfettered interplay of ideas among diverse individuals. Drawing on Dewey, Harter et al. (2008) argued that imagining is a method of enhancing and transforming experience and inspiring creative thought: "aesthetic experience is knowledge producing insofar as it offers a heightened sense of reality pregnant with possibilities, a greater depth of insight, and fuller and richer interactions" (p. 426). To imagine is to envision otherwise. Even so, we encounter forces that deter creative capacity and activity (e.g., habituation, apathy, censorship).

Contemporary scholars grapple afresh with how an artistic mindset can enable scholarship to be more responsive to external stakeholders' interests and needs as well as broader economic and institutional contexts. "Research is a creative, social act," argued Eisenberg (2007), "and the images of the world we create have important consequences for how humans think about themselves" (p. 36). Scholarly narratives—poems, articles, photographs, plays, songs, and dances—are never neutral. Like any historical work, our imaginative renderings remain part of a larger group of cultural productions and repressions. For example, the work by Nafisi and Rigoberta Menchu described earlier is mired in controversy as individuals wrestle with the texts from postcolonial and feminist standpoints (e.g., Brooks, 2005; DePaul, 2008). Creative work positions individuals in particular times and places even as it punctuates moments, endings, and transitions. In turn, palpable consequences materialize as the scholar-as-artist responds to and enlarges discourses and circumstances already at play. In short, the poetic is political.

We find this argument—the poetic is political—liberating in two ways. First, acknowledging the political nature of our artistry demands that we reflexively account for how participants' social locations/positionality shape the process and products of discovery. Every representation is a reduction: "Even if any terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (Burke, 1966, p. 45; italics original). Historical, economic, and social forces inscribe themselves on participants' frames and choices, including those of researchers. By acknowledging the politics of our poetic work, we can practice scholarship as an intersubjective effort to offer contingent interpretations of experience and recognize the partiality of our claims.

Second, we are motivated in large part by scholarship that is useful to multiple stakeholders and answerable to everyday, practical circumstances.
Lived inequities often inspire our inquiry, and in our best work, our poetic renderings of pressing issues question the consequences of inherited institutions and engender political change. Lynn, along with several graduate students, worked with Passion Works for several years to redress discrimination faced by individuals biomedically marked as disabled. Their work explored how the studio offers artful experiences for both expressive and economic purposes, and their findings revealed complicated difficulties that arise from the implementation of guidelines from the Medicaid and the Fair Labor Standards Act (see Harter et al., 2008). Lynn’s recent efforts involve partnering with the studio and legal experts to stretch the “deficit” perspective that underlies social service models and limits the creative potential of people served by the studio. Lynn’s engagement with Passion Works has inspired her to search out collaborative and aesthetic methods, including video voice. She is producing a documentary (with director Casey Hayward and associate producer Courtney Cole) on narrative approaches to pediatric cancer care (see http://coms.ohiou.edu/stories-of-cancer-care). As part of the project, participating families have been given high-definition cameras to create a video diary of daily living amid cancer. Participants’ footage ultimately will be woven with footage shot by the director to offer a multivocal portrait to share with health care providers and the general public.

Laura continues to explore the possibilities of multigenre representations that both enrich and problematize research findings on clinical communication. Research on a geriatric oncology clinic (Ellingson, 2005) yielded a combination of ethnographic narrative, grounded theory analysis, autoethnography, and feminist critique that articulated interdisciplinary team members’ informal, backstage communication practices as a crucial (yet devalued) form of teamwork. At the same time, representations reflected the conscious and unconscious manifestations of disciplinary power within participants’ (including Laura’s) communicative choices. More recently, an ongoing study of a dialysis clinic involves a layered account, poetic transcription of participant interviews, and grounded theory analysis to explore routinization of communication, the social construction of dialysis time, and the meanings of professionalism among paraprofessional dialysis technicians (Ellingson, 2008). In both studies, Laura seeks to improve the experience of health care delivery for providers, patients, and patients’ loved ones while generating a critical posture toward taken-for-granted norms of caregiving and care receiving.

Stephanie’s (Norander, 2008) dissertation about Kvinna till Kvinnan (KtK), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Sweden, explored the role of a feminist boundary-spanning organization in postconflict contexts. She is now working with KtK to articulate for a wider base of stakeholders how their postcolonial and feminist ideologies shape their peace and reconstruction efforts. One aspect of this project involves researching how prac-
ticing reflexivity within an organization allows for peace initiatives to be imagined and carried out despite politically oppressive circumstances.

Mohan grew up in an extended family of union workers and active members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This political party worked on issues of redistributive justice and had in the 1970s developed an active grassroots presence among the peasants of Bengal through a diverse repertoire of theater, songs, street performances, poetry, and other performative avenues. Since very early adolescence, he was actively involved in grassroots theater and performance directed at raising social awareness and bringing about social change. Mohan’s work with the Santalis in rural West Bengal, India, builds on this personal history and takes a performative approach to narrative co-construction in reflexive journeys of solidarity with members of the Santali community in understanding their meanings of health, and in (re)presenting their narratives of health in public arenas. As the Santalis discuss the broader social structures that constrain their health experiences, Mohan and participants explored possibilities for the performance of the narratives in public spheres through street theater and choreography to draw attention to structural inequities reified through unhealthy policies and corruption in the health care system (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b). Over the last decade, he has worked periodically as the artistic director of a grassroots organization called Rittwick, choreographing and co-scripting stories of resistance with subaltern communities in rural Bengal.

Collectively, we hope to model and support research and creative activity that legitimize empowering and livable scripts and engender the material resources necessary to support them. The spurious distinctions among the personal, academic, and political disappear as we explore opportunities for social transformation. Admittedly, one challenge posed by those who wish to extend the reach of aesthetic rationalities and methods is the extent to which such work is perceived as legitimate by broader audiences. We embrace our responsibility to put forward practical and/or policy implications based on our scholarly activities that are clear, firm, and accessible to multiple audiences.

The production and circulation of the AIDS Quilt provides an inspired model of how aesthetic renderings can raise consciousness and mobilize resources for political change. In Stitching a Revolution, Jones and Dawson (2000) chronicled how thousands of handmade testimonials put faces and imagined lives on an otherwise distant tragedy too often compartmentalized out of sight of mainstream societies. Jones talked openly about how an artistic mindset widened his repertoire of protest strategies:

For ten years I’d lived in a gay ghetto, shouted through the bullhorn, marched and been arrested and jailed... it was a closed world. But now
our goals demanded a different attitude, a wider reference. Certainly I wanted to startle Middle America and shake them up, but shocking people, hollering, "Look out America, we're coming!" just didn't work. Times had changed, and the Quilt was part of the way we could survive and possibly prevail. (p. 142)

The quilt has played an important role in United States and abroad in memorializing the lives touched by and lost to AIDS. From Washington, DC, to Cape Town, the NAMES Project Foundation also has rallied for governmental policies and nongovernmental support to address the AIDS epidemic.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we described the possibilities of aesthetic logics for enlarging and humanizing the scope of engaged communication research. Although each research project will necessitate improvisation and adaptation to its particular circumstances, we offer three guidelines for scholars who want to embrace aesthetics in their own research programs. First, resist the false aesthetic/rational dichotomy by producing a range of creative, artistic, and scholarly products aimed at a variety of stakeholder audiences. One need not sacrifice social scientific rigor while embracing aesthetic opportunities (Ellingson, 2009). We encourage scholars to produce work in a multitude of genres based on rich data, including scholarly reports and essays, accessible reports for community organizations and other stakeholders, literary narratives, street performances, poetry, and online materials. Second, we urge scholars to ask different types of questions than those limited by dominant logics. Join us in increasing the scope of inquiry to include aspects of experience that have to do with creativity, wonder, passion, inspiration, and other difficult-to-codify phenomena that nonetheless offer crucial insights into lived experiences. Third, we stress that the engagement of aesthetic rationalities in the service of social justice must be interrogated. As with other forms and representations of knowledge, we must ask whose interests are served by aesthetic processes and products. Material and relational consequences of our representations affect our participants, ourselves as researchers, and broader publics who consume our work. Please be ever conscious of how we as scholars invoke power and privilege, including when we use creative logics that can be subjugating when unthinkingly applied across the spectrum of organizations, cultures, nationalities, sexes and sexual identities, abilities, and (lack of) economic privilege.
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