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HOME AS POEM: THE ARTISTIC AND METHODOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES OF A POETICS OF SPACE

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Abstract: What does it mean to be home? We began asking this provocative question well before COVID-19, well before the collective crisis the world experienced which sent both of us back into our current homes. Exploring such a question through poetry writing may provide insights about individuals' lived experiences, and, therefore, we contend it is worthwhile for scholars, artists and educators to widen possibilities for poetic method

and craft related to writing about home. In this paper, we, two poets, arts-based education scholars, and Pittsburgh natives, offer pathways into exploring notions of home through the writing of poetry grounded in the ideas of Gaston Bachelard's (1958/1964) seminal text, *The Poetics of Space*. To do so, we each offer and discuss two original poems on the topic of home to illustrate a number of compelling avenues scholars and research participants; educators and students might explore as they write poems evoking their own unique conceptions of home.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; poetry; place; home; poetics of space

Opening the Door

"A threshold is a sacred thing." –Porphyrus

As we wrote this article, much of the world was under some version of a stay-at-home order as a result of COVID-19, the pandemic affecting not only those who were quarantined or self-isolating in their homes, but also those individuals who simply could not go home because of travel restrictions. During this time, we noticed a wellspring of poets going online to share their poems as a way of artistically reaching out in a time of seclusion. If the poem was in the form of a video reading, which it often was, viewers were sometimes able to see parts of poets' habitats: a front stoop, a bookshelf, a tree in their yard, a screened-in porch. Before reading their poems, poets often commented on their surroundings, whether it was noisy birds after a recent rain, a rare plant on a side table, or the honks of cab drivers from a street below. Unsurprisingly, poets sheltered-in often wrote poems about their homes, whether past or present.

But what is home? Ultimately, the answer is not for us to say, but rather for each individual human being, for each writer. Naturally, many may think of home as a dwelling, a shelter, a structure, but it can also be a community: local, regional or national. Home can be one place; it can be many places. It might be a birthplace, where one grew up, or where one fled from. It might be where one feels as though they belong. It might be a homeland, a landscape, a geological location, a state of mind. Former U.S. poet laureate Juan Felipe Herrera, son of migrant farmers, explained how home to him was not so much a dwelling with walls, but a landscape of images and sounds that triggered an emotion or a memory. He recalled "stars at night, the howling of coyotes, dew on the grass in the morning" (Griswold, 2009). It is through similar reflections and renditions of home that we – two authors who are passionate about teacher education and poetry, curious about our shared birthplace of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – use poetic inquiry to engage in discussion with Bachelard's (1958/1964) poetics of space. In doing so, we not only stayed connected and engaged during a time of self-isolation, but we hope our musings offer additional ideas for scholars and research participants; teachers and educators to explore the notion of home through poetry. Such explorations, we contend, promote more creative and inclusive work that invests in the diverse and complex human voice and gestures towards new ventures in educational research and practice.

The Landscape of Home

Poet-scholars writing about place is not a new phenomenon. For example, emerging from the bi-annual International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, Sameshima, Fidyk, James, and Leggo (2017) co-edited the volume, *Poetic Inquiry: Enchantment of Place*, with illustrations of scholars and educators engaging with poetic forms and methods to understand themselves and others in relationship to place, and many of the contributors to the volume wrote chapters evoking memories of home and family. Similarly, writing poetry about place in K-12 and teacher education settings is far from a new idea. As example, Hermsen (2009), through his extensive work as a poet-in-residence in K-12 U.S. schools, offers literature, art, and nature-inspired paths to writing about place. As further illustration, in K-12 and teacher education settings, "Where I'm From" formula poems (Rosaen, 2003) are near ubiquitous. Our modest contribution here is an approach focusing on honing figurative language drawing on Bachelard's (1958/1964) *The Poetics of Space*, a text which is highly concerned with the subjectivity of nothing other than the image.

Some readers may be thinking that poetry may be too challenging a genre for non-poets, for novices, to write. We disagree, for even when children are given open-composing time to write about their homes and their lives, their poems can contain sophisticated metaphors of how home (and leaving home) is perceived. For example, a ten-year-old, Owen, wrote a poem entitled "House on Catherine Street," where he drew up the details of a memory to describe what it was like to drive by his former home. In Owen's poem, metaphors ("the house was as/empty as/my toy box") and images of neglect ("rusty gate"; "holes in the/walls"; "a cut down tree") give a sense of verisimilitude, but they also contribute to the poet's sense of the transitory and impermanent nature of home and place (Certo, 2018).

We argue that because of the flexibility associated with poetry, it is one of the most generative kinds of writing for individuals to express deeply felt thoughts and experiences of home and place, what Hanauer (2012) termed "meaningful literacy." Indeed, a growing literature evidences how poetry can be a place to explore and express culturally lived experience. This extends to studies of teachers (Rosaen, 2003) and K-12 students (Cahnmann, 2006, Hanauer, 2010; 2012, Jocson, 2005) as well. Certainly, writing about home and place can have expressive affordances for the writer, but such texts can also nudge communities of learners to explore language and further understand the diversity of human experience. As an example, Flint and Laman (2012) found that when culturally diverse poetry was shared in school, students' original poems became fodder for the rest of the class to engage in discussions about the relationship between language, politics, and the importance of expressing lived experiences.

Home as Foundation; Home as Proposition

In this article, we not only draw on Bachelard (1958/1964) as theory, but also on home as a site of theory (St. Pierre, 2008). Although we do not conceive of home as a stable construct, we argue that home is a primary character in shaping human beings' experiences, voices, perspectives, and identities. As Conway (1989) noted, "I learned that I am attached to the place itself, to the land, which I now understand will always serve as the literal 'ground of my consciousness'" (p. 198, as found in St. Pierre, 2008, p. 120).

Bachelard's (1958/1964) classic book on how people experience place may help writers and readers explore the various homes inhabited, left, abandoned, and/or returned to. In the text, Bachelard guides readers through an actual or imagined home, its comforts, uncertainty, and, yes, darknesses, in a place and at a time undefined except by the limits of one's own daydreams, longings, or memories – those inner landscapes from which new worlds (or we would say, poems) can be made. Home and place are phenomenological keys to an inner self.

So now we have gone home. We have opened the door. Bachelard (1958/1964) describes how a "mere door can give images of respect, hesitation, temptation and desire" (p. 224). Any image in a poem might harken to one or more of Bachelard's "door" categorizations, including *House and Universe*; *Dialectics of Inside/Outside; Intimate Immensity, From Cellar to Garret*; *Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes*; *Corners*; and *Miniature*. These categorizations can support poems evoking narratives and myths of individuals' real or even imagined experiences. Given such a framework, one can come to poetry writing by asking such questions as: What experiences and stories frame your experience of what you consider *home*? In your home community, have you been confronted with otherness – that is, with differences in language, appearance, identities, habits, beliefs and memories that made you feel apart from the rest of the population? How have you or those in your family constructed home as a space of domesticity, work, leisure, togetherness, or escape?

It's important to note that Bachelard's (1958/1964) *Poetics of Space* renders a nostalgic version of rustic Mediterranean peasant living, and, on the surface, the text privileges a romantic rendering of home, one that has havens, sanctuaries, or shelters. In other words, Bachelard's concern is largely with images of "space we love," "eulogised space," "images that attract" (1958/1964,p. xxxi-xxxii). However, many writers may not have positive feelings and experiences about particular spaces they've lived in, and, in fact, such spaces may be ones of abuse and trauma. Home varies as

much as the person who lives/d inside it and who else inhabits that space. Home might be the secret door in a closet, a backseat of a car, a bunk bed, a relative's guest room, or anywhere one wanders to survive and sustain. We see Bachelard's ideas as still having wide applicability, for any nook or cranny, with its light and darkness, can be a source of poetic inspiration.

Poetic Inquiry

> *"Through poetry we are brought face to face with our world, and we plunge deeply into ourselves to a place where we sense the full value of the meanings of emotions and ideas in their relations with each other, and understand, in the glimpse of a moment, the freshness of things and their possibilities."*
>
> -Muriel Rukeyser (1996, p. xx-xxi)

Consistent with arts-based and contemplative practices in researching and teaching (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015), our call as scholars and artists "is to deeply listen and hold with great gentleness the sacredness of the work of creating" (xvi). To that end, this paper nods to poetic inquiry (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016), a young, but flourishing, branch of qualitative research that relies on the poem, that is, the word, the image, and lyrical invocation as a form of representation. In drawing on poetic inquiry, we are interested in the complexity and affordances of the process and product of writing poetry about home. Specifically, we draw on *vox autobiographia*, which is the personal voice reflected in researchers' poems (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016). Equally, the inquiry draws on *vox identitatis*, which are poems exploring self, identity and home (Galvin & Prendergast, 2016).

Poetic inquiry, once a marginalized method, has flourished internationally as an approach, methodology, and/or method for poets, scholars, and the larger community to generate knowledge and make claims that are difficult to capture with other methods. In the spirit of poetic inquiry, we use analysis of our own poems about home, as well as interpretation of our writing processes. As scholars, writers and poets, we drew on established criteria for the evaluation of creative practice, including investment of time (Richardson, 2000), attention to craft (Faulkner, 2007) and emphasizing lived experiences through philosophical grounding (Moran, 2000). To illustrate, we both worked on poems about our homes in Pittsburgh over the course of a year, workshopping the poem with other poets and each other. We revised the poem innumerable times at the level of the poem, line, image, and word. Additionally, through poetic inquiry's designations of *vox autobiographia* and *vox identitatis*, we build on Bachelard's (1958/1964) theoretical framing of the poetics of space and St. Pierre's (2008) shaping of home as a site of theory. To bound the article, we limit our discussion

to Bachelard's notions of *intimate immensity* and *the dialectics of inside/outside*. Through this process, we invite philosophical and methodological notions of home which allow for more extended and varied explorations of writing poetry of place.

A Journey Home

"*My house is somewhere/here, & I have scribbled myself inside it."* -Maggie Smith

Man Shoots Self Behind Dairy Queen: Janine Returns Home

I am a third generation Italian American (Calabrese and Napolitana) female who grew up in the small town of Elizabeth on the banks of the Monongahela River, about eight miles from Pittsburgh. I first drafted "Man Shoots Self Behind Dairy Queen" after reading Jean Bourdeillette's (1958) line of a prayer: "Your odor will sleep in my heart till the end, /Wilted armchair of childhood."

Man Shoots Self Behind Dairy Queen

"There are not enough seats in the
steel lifeboat for everybody."
-U.S. Steel Executive

Before the layoffs, we children watched
neighborhood men hefting coal,
huddling at the shore, their lunch boxes

flashing with flicks from an oiled sun
and their thermoses like rescue flares.
Facing the Works, we ate pizza and dust,

vines of crown vetch all around—one spill
of red blossom in our gray landscape.
The smell of sulfur still moves me. A blast

I never saw, colorless in the air, but I knew
something was lost, like benzene or fleeting
particulates: a train pushing Rt. 1 on the bank;

a barge steaming the Monongahela River;
an oak disappearing in the waters.

And Mr. Antonelli's funeral procession,

recalling how he mowed his lawn, nodding
as we walked past. The odor of my town
was sourdough, stale egg and fresh grass.

I couldn't wait to get out.
I can never go back.

from *Third Wednesday*

"Man Shoots Self Behind Dairy Queen" gestures Bachelard's (1958/1964) notion of *intimate immensity* in that I pull the camera lens far away to see the immense landscape of my childhood, and, in doing so, promote myself "to the dignity of admiring being" (p. 184). The poem has a descriptive-meditative structure (Marks, 2007), which is a poem beginning with a description of a landscape or scene with emphasis on the image. In meditating on this poem, I know, as Bachelard (1958/1964) does, that "to give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectively" (p. 202). In reflecting on this poem, the small steel mill town I grew up in did not have "crown vetch" (a flowering vine) "all around–" only in patches. My reverie toward childhood allows me to see my hometown beyond the lack of conventional beauty it had.

The process of writing "Man Shoots Self Behind Dairy Queen" was like opening a door: a complex pull I continue to have to both return to and escape from Pittsburgh. At the end of the poem, I re-describe the landscape through smell and make a final meditation on home, harkening to Bachelard's (1958/1964) notion of the *dialectics of inside/outside*. In the course of this meditation, I realize I was facing up to loss – the loss of a neighborhood father who killed himself after being laid off from the mill, the loss of a thriving coal town, and, ultimately, the loss of childhood.

Drag Heavy Pot to Shed (Ars Poetica)

Yet another path into exploring one's home is to simply, without censorship or judgment, jot down images, sounds and silences, tastes and smells. I constructed the poem, "Ars Poetica (Drag Heavy Pot to Shed)," from a seemingly disparate list of memories, beginning with my childhood and ending with the death of my father a few years ago. I knew it could only be through poetry that I would be able to position

moments of trauma (finding a grandmother who had attempted suicide), times of pleasure (a plate with cheese and peach), and the relief of joy (a lost dog's return) all alongside each other. In the poem, the speaker travels to a hill in her neighborhood where kids would sled in winter and run down in summer. In writing the poem, I traveled to my basement, where I would find my grandmother, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, who had attempted to take her life again. Just as Bachelard's (1958/1964) text, *The Poetics of Space*, takes readers on a journey through houses and other shelters, the process of writing "Ars Poetica" allowed me to wander similarly. In a single poem, I find myself in the woods near my suburban neighborhood, the kitchen in the house where I grew up, my front yard, my childhood bedroom, Round Hill Park where I would go with my family to feed the ducks and geese, and in a corner of the basement where my parents kept a rocking chair. In the poem, I vacillate between past and present: a travel memory in my homeland of Italy, my regular jogging route in my current hometown of East Lansing, Michigan, my parents' apartment in Pittsburgh the hours after my father's death, and the entrance of the current house in which I live.

Drag Heavy Pot to Shed (Ars Poetica)

Squint at the barred owl, then race down
the steep hill of your childhood. You lost
the dog but found your grandmother
who drank a bottle of rubbing alcohol. Shake
her ten times. Prepare a fine cheese, sliced peach,
hazelnuts. Drizzle with honey. Slide it under
the bed to the monster. Hear the crack in a mother's
voice who says it would be so easy to go down
to the garage, turn the ignition on. What will you do with all this
moonlight on the pond, at once galaxy, scattered photons,
shards of glass? If you want truth, see
how the Pope's Swiss Guard curses at tourists,
throws stones at pigeons in the square. Play a game
of Chase the Trees for leaves like wine in a human
heart—darker than the blood it pumps, the beating silence
in those hours cleaning after they took away
your father's body. I tell you, we cannot say love
enough times. The vacuum's defective, so it sings.
Write until the sage & fir candle kills the smell
of the wall's rotting mouse. Look over your
shoulder for the child you never had, the sibling
you left in the front yard, the dog returning, bread
in her mouth. Revisit title. Now your words are the

loose parts of a rocking chair, the longing for meadow—
some ground of consciousness, what the philosopher
called the dialectic of inside-outside. And when you're
close, smear the shapes of ghosts. Draw grief a warm bath.
Lately, there is little spring or fall, but keep the large bright
mum in its pot until the flowers are dull, their necks broken.

Questions that provided an entry point into writing the poem included: What do I most remember about childhood that haunts me, that moves me? What is it that I can do with loss and what remains after those losses? As an artist, looking back on the poem now, I realize the release is not so much the exploration of loss, as it is simply having the blank page available in which to name loss.

Bachelard (1958/1964) claimed that "immensity is a philosophical category of daydream," and that "daydream contemplates grandeur" (p. 183). An intimate immensity resonates in the lines: "What will you do with all this/moonlight on the pond, at once galaxy, scattered photons/shards of glass?" which are, in essence, the center of gravity of the poem. The interrogation asks the reader to consider what to do with our lived human experiences, which, through the speaker's imagination, encompass at once the immense calm of water and the grandeur of outer space, even as the planet is disturbed by violence ("shards of glass"). The spaces the speaker asks us to go are immense, for they are the bends in our histories, the edges and crooks of our imaginations.

In "Ars Poetica," the speaker's imagination extends to the longing to understand childhood, symbolized as a rocking chair, and the afterlife ("the longing for meadow") – a dialectics of inside/outside, for it is futile to make demarcations between spaces that can never "be shut in" nor "fit into one another" (Bachelard, 1958/1964). Bachelard (1958/1964) argued that "often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws it strength" (p. 229), such as a pot dragged to the shed.

Without Our Farm: Alecia Returns Home

I am an Italian American (Sicilian) woman who grew up in a blue-collar family about twenty-five miles northwest of Pittsburgh in a small industrial town scattered with

plants hovering along the Ohio River. In the poem, “Without Our Farm,” I explore the collapse of family through the loss of land and home. The poem takes up notions of abstract and concrete loss through the ways they are interwoven and varied. This poem speaks to my attempts to discern how my roots and realizations do not always take up linear space, but seem instead to be configured through threads and loops.

Without Our Farm

we burned for grass,
brown or green and bit
dirt from fingernails
when our hands were clean.

I was four; I knew it was over.
Brier bush free;
oat and horse saliva gone.
My brother mourned

for dirt and worm.
My father shucked corn,
tilled soil and carried on.
My mother took us

abandoned her shovel
and gloves. We crammed
into an apartment in the projects.
I fed Cheetos to squirrels,

striving to be near. Today,
I retrace muddy footprints.
On a crooked wood fence,
I leave a note:
Land I was yours.

“Without Our Farm” is a poem composed of narrative fragments rooted in a nostalgia for a home that never truly existed. St. Pierre (2008) attends to this notion of an imagined “home” and the yearning to restore it: “We maintain the myth of eventual return – to home, to our true selves from which we are alienated – when the time is right” (p. 121). The myth of home aids in an envisioning of our “true” self within a given moment; it is this envisioning, this intimacy with space that permits an assertion of past, present and

future forms of being. In “Without Our Farm,” the outside space becomes the only place intimacy is shown, and it is shown for the land. Therefore, understanding home through the lensing of inside/outside becomes ambiguous, for “the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting” (Bachelard, 1958/1964, p. 230). The end of the poem denotes this drifting. I had been moving within an indefinite space as a means to find a definite one. Within the process of writing this poem, I traveled between the inside/outside and began amalgamating the spaces. In reflection, it is this amalgamation, this rendering of home within the conflation, that I am able to conceptualize the layers of loss. I was searching for a literal home to belong when it was always a metaphorical home.

With the onset of the loss of a farm, I evoked a family moving into separate corners of mourning, each seeking solace in different ways. My father retreated into his work, delivering days filled with tree climbing and cutting. In the poem, “Tree Surgeon,” I explore my father’s performance of identity and how it impacted my own understandings of how to be and perform closeness in this world. I think this poem invites the dissipation and re-rendering of self through the process of knowing or thinking you know others. It rests in the corners of large questions like: Can we really ever know someone? Or how might we each interpret and enact connection? I negotiate the complex and contradictory ways we perceive closeness with others often entrenched in assumptions of physical proximity. This poem endeavors to disrupt those notions, and offers closeness as a conceptual rendering of our position to ourselves and to others. This becomes an important attempt as the research is often situated at the intertwined roots of who we are and who we are trying to understand. Importantly, it is a familiar understanding that home and conceptions of space are defined and drawn by the people as much as the physical location. This poem speaks to the formation of home (in broad terms) through self and other.

Tree Surgeon

After my father left,
I climbed trees. I do not know
what it means to be safe,
but I learned how it felt to be held –

woven in limbs, brushed in bark dust,
uncoaxed by the prodding of the wind
or the lulling certainty of ground
and it was here, hovering, that I felt closest

to him. He spent hours climbing trees,

maneuvering limbs to cut out damage,
ridding the world of one entrenched
in telephone wire or lingering near a roof.

I ate Handi snacks on branch tops,
pretended the red stick was a saw
and went at it, thinking I could
break tree bones.

I would move two-handed, driving
it until skin had broken, until
something lighter appeared, a dint
the size of my pinky nail.

Then, I would stop, wipe the matted hair
from my forehead, examine what living was left
and trace sounds of clapping leaves with my eyes.
I am left wondering at the ways we sprawl

and curl – how trees don't know what solace is
but sustain it anyway. I will never
hold a contradiction like that.
What I remember most from those days:

hollow never meant empty
and ants can't tell the difference
between skin and bark.

"Tree Surgeon" is a narrative poem embedded with parallel fragments of others' identities such as my father and the tree. The poem is one of longing, a longing for a closeness to the world around us and to the people we hold dear. As I write in the end, "...ants can't tell the difference / between skin and bark" – there is a yearning for the self and the body to be connected with no distinct markers of separation. This poem disorients the definable, "hollow never meant empty" and "how trees don't know what solace is / but sustain it anyway." As Merwin (1993) wrote, "Your absence has gone through me / like thread through a needle," and even the act of being separated never

meant without. And here, in the line, “I am left wondering at the ways we sprawl / and curl” could be translated to the ways we inhabit distance or cull closeness. We are within and outside this always as we move towards and away from our sense of home and self, and our sense of others and who they are and are becoming to us. Methodologically, this awareness and complexity is what engages the most interesting ways we can interpret and share the worlds we research. Through these moments, we may consider and “learn to what extent the effort to think one’s history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault 1984/1985 as cited in St. Pierre, 2008, p. 121).

Educational Significance

We hope that scholars and participants who have an affinity for poetry be invited to write from a sense of urgency in order to share the particularities of their histories. Such work, we know, is rigorous creative scholarship. Like Butler (1995), we contend that writing about home makes us “available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation which compels us to rethink ourselves, a reconfiguration of our ‘place’ and our ‘ground’” (p. 131). We argue that scholars and research participants, should they be so inclined, be given the invitation to offer up images that reflect the realities, tensions and identities of home, for, in writing and sharing poetry about home through open-composing, they can learn much about themselves through engagement with *intimate immensity* and a *dialectic of inside/outside*. That is, if one pulls the camera far back from their home, or a particular space, what images can be offered up as verbal art? What is one’s relationship to a former home(s)? How has home shaped one’s thinking about self and others? As St. Pierre (2008) argued, “If we wish to practice identity improvisation, attention to places may be required” (p. 122) and “home cannot save us but we may need to go there anyway to do our work” (St. Pierre, 2008, p. 121).

The writing of poetry is perhaps the genre that most evokes the diversity of human language, and, as is the case with all art, it develops human perceptions, enriches lives, and helps us make meaning of the world. Yet our world has been engulfed in changes and stresses ranging from poverty, racism, xenophobia, environmental stress, and all of the social dislocation and disorder they foster, including disease, pandemics, gun violence, terrorism, and war. Now, as ever, scholars, teachers and students will need the arts to provide understanding, intelligence, wisdom and the means for connection during challenging times. We imagine with the current pandemic more people, as they turn inward, as they stay home, will be exploring connections to and histories of their families, as well as the ways all beings are interconnected on our planet home.

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