

ON THE ORALITY OF POETRY

It was not during but “some years after school,” Rebecca Luce-Kapler confides, “before I ventured into poetry in a sustained and engaged way,” coming to it “in a community of poets who wrote, met and read their work aloud,” an experience presumably absent school-associated “searching for meanings, parsing lines, or identifying rhythm structures.”¹ Now, “when I hear teacher candidates express fears around teaching poetry, I understand,” as many of them have come from similar schooling structures to mine; that is, an emphasis on the silent text within the pages of anthologies followed by dissecting questions.”² Acknowledging her own past writing concerning “the importance of poetry in school and about the interrelationship of rhythm with image and word,” Luce-Kapler tells us that “this time I want to go past the text, past the writing of the poem, or the reading of it on the page to consider the oral origins of poetry,” allowing her “to argue that poetry, beyond being an engagement with literature, can offer our students a more powerful way to think and understand; and that by marginalizing the gifts of poetic orality, we may be limiting the possibilities for learning in our classrooms.”³

“We remember with bones—the bones of our bodies, the bones of our language, those mnemonic creatures,” Luce-Kapler continues, noting that “before the development of writing, there was a particular quality to the words that needed to be remembered and that we still find in language today,” one of which is “repetition within variation often accomplished through meter and rhyme,” as in “30 days hath September, April, June, and November.”⁴ Luce-Kapler reminds readers that “through other structures like lists or patterns of words (once upon a time) or alliteration (She sells seashells . . .) or paratactic structures—that is, using ‘and’ rather than subordinate clauses,” poetry structures “remembrance.”⁵ Referencing Eric Havelock’s interpretation of Homeric poems as “encyclopedias of the Greek world,” Luce-Kapler notes that “remembrance depends on acoustic rhythm,” citing also Havelock’s suggestion that such rhythm constitutes “a component of our nervous system’s reflexes, a pleasurable biological force reinforced through our musical chants, melodies, and dances.”⁶ She also cites Susanne Langer’s support for this perspective, quoting her assertion that the rhythm of language is a “mysterious trait that probably bespeaks biological unities of thought and feeling,”⁷ adding “that the rhythms of life, organic, emotional and mental, compose a dynamic pattern of feeling.”⁸

These insights travel through time, as Luce-Kapler seems certain that “successful retention in memory is built by such rhythmic repetition,” asking us to “think about the child who requests the retelling of a story over and over again in her desire to remember it and to retell it herself, relishing the experience,” cautioning,

however, that: “Mere repetition of content, however, is not enough in an oral culture to create memorable structures.”⁹ What is “key lies in the acoustically identical sound patterns which can alter their content to express diverse meanings.”¹⁰

“In primary orality,” Luce-Kapler explains, “function and pleasure are intertwined,” as “content”¹¹ – now quoting Havelock - is “cast in verbal forms designed to assist the memory by conferring pleasure,”¹² an assertion Luce-Kapler decodes as denoting “a partnership of social and aesthetic purposes.”¹³ “Once written language emerges,” Luce-Kapler explains, “the social responsibility begins to shift to the textual: a move from the acoustic to the architectural as vision takes precedence over hearing.”¹⁴ Reading rather than listening, and “the privileged form becomes prose, and eventually poetry too spills into printed pages and becomes silent and studied as an aesthetic object,” and “knowledge of what is known is separated from the person,”¹⁵ and a chasm appears “between theoretical discourse and the rhythmic narrative of oralism.”¹⁶ “In narrowing the role of poetry,” Luce-Kapler suggests, “we forget its oral power in our embodiment and its ability to develop our ways of knowing and remembering.”¹⁷

Despite having “been born into a print world, and some have born into a digital world,” despite all of us having been “shaped by our technologies of language and writing,” there remain, Luce-Kapler contends, “traces of an oral culture.”¹⁸ In schools, she asserts, “we pay less and less attention to orality, as we forget to teach its strategies,” asking: “are we losing something that is potentially valuable and important ... losing an aspect of developing our minds in a powerful way?”¹⁹

Luce-Kapler identifies “two aspects of poetry’s oral nature ... important for educators to consider,” the first the fact that “poetry offers verbal forms that can work with and develop our memory,” and second,” poetry reminds us of the relationship between words and action—the embodied nature of language.”²⁰ Embodiment Luce-Kapler emphasizes, worrying that “in our enthusiasm for a poststructural description of the discursive body and our textual subjectivity, we sometimes forget that, even before language, our bodies lived in the world and in community with other human beings.”²¹ She references Merlin Donald’s affirmation of “embodiment” as “what grounds our consciousness, our sense of personal reality,” including “the rhythms of existence, those perceptual templates that express temporal relations originating in sound, feeling or sight,” adding: “And it is through our bodies in relation to others that we develop our mimetic skills.”²²

Luce-Kapler seems excessively enthusiastic about the educational potential of orality when she writes that “within an oral context, we can develop mimetic and linguistic skill along with a sense of selfhood,” allowing her to suggest that: “Poetry, with its demands for attention to rhythm, is one way to linger over and encourage oral

skills.”²³ In another sweeping generalization, she reiterates that poetry “is the language of action and articulation of emotion rather than precise logic, and it is the language of the world: its events, its songs, its rhythms,”²⁴ the former claim reiterating the either/or language (surely poetry exhibits its own quite precise logic), the latter claim ignoring so-called abstract poetry, not always obviously worldly or sonorous.²⁵ But here Luce-Kapler is not about classifying poetry; her target is “the current state of curriculum as it is commonly understood in schools, the most telling examples for me are the students that I teach in their final year of education,” in whom we find “the effects of such a curriculum more evident.”²⁶ She finds it “difficult to convince them that it is the experience of deep engagement with language and rhythm and text that is significant in their classes,”²⁷ a difficulty she ascribes not to the absence of orality – after all, school children were (at least in my era, in the public schools I attended) regularly reprimanded for being excessively oral (talking out of turn or talking too much or too little or about inappropriate topics). Instead, Luce-Kapler points to “a world where curriculum focuses on testing, textbooks, and time management,” a world “about as far from poetics as you can get.”²⁸ She continues:

To think about a poetics of curriculum, we have to invite the lovely concrete shapes, the evocative rhythms, and the close attention of poetry into our teaching and learning. Poetry reminds us of how rhythmic attention brings us into the moment, so we can see more clearly where we are and what lies before us before we go soaring off into abstractions. We need to remember that we are speakers and storytellers in a community that must hear each other speak, chant and sing as we move our bodies. We listen to and learn from each other engaged in the pleasures of embodied action.²⁹

I, too, have positioned poetry as primary in an era where even orality is tied to the economy, when curriculum is conceived according to economic payoff.³⁰

Luce-Kapler might concur, affirming the aesthetic – and by implication – lamenting the under-emphasis upon the arts in the increasingly economy-focused curriculum. So she moves from poetry to the curriculum overall, asserting that “like poetry, curriculum is stronger when it does not exist only on the page,”³¹ which for me – in my conception of curriculum as complicated conversation – is by definition the case, but such an idea does not itself make curriculum necessarily “stronger.” Luce-Kapler returns to orality, however, as it seems to replace the strawman – print – she has constructed, asserting that the “oral character of poetry reminds us of the power of the functional and the aesthetic.”³² Moving from orality to the curricular under-emphasis upon the arts in too many schools, Luce-Kapler concludes: “Sadly, most of our curriculum focuses on function and loses the aesthetic, and so we lose the

opportunity to engage our students in the ethical lessons of beauty.”³³ I wonder what those might be.³⁴

Anton Birioukov-Brant – the research assistant in this instance – found it “interesting to reflect on Luce-Kapler’s discussions of poetry and orality and the embodiment of poetry in the current context, arguably Luce-Kapler was writing at the end of the textual writing era; one that has arguably been slowly replaced by the multimedia era of the present (e.g., proliferation and accessibility of videos and self-recordings to replace text).” He continues: “In an age where almost everyone has a video camera attached to them, and the exploding popularity of social media platforms that operate on visual (e.g., photographic and video) mediums, it begs the question of the role of orality in the 21st century.” Then Birioukov-Brant backs off a bit, admitting that he is arguing that “text-based mediums are no longer the dominant method of instruction in the classroom, but education is notoriously slow to catch up to the lived realities of its students,” something I didn’t imagine education charged with doing. Birioukov-Brant point is elsewhere: “I do wonder about Luce-Kapler’s thoughts on the strengths and purposes of oral poetry in the more modern context, as opposed to mere 20 years ago, when much of our interactions were based largely on text.” Our everyday interactions may not be as print-focused – for much of humanity they never have been – as they were twenty years ago, but much of academic study remains print focused – as this project testifies.

References

Aoki, Ted. T. 2005 (1993). Humiliating the Cartesian Ego. In *Curriculum in a New Key: The Collected Works of Ted T. Aoki*, edited by William F. Pinar and Rita L. Irwin (291-301). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ciardi, John and Williams, Miller. 1975. *How Does a Poem Mean?* (2nd edition). Houghton Mifflin Co.

Kaag, John and van Belle, Jonathan. 2023. *Henry at Work: Thoreau on Making a Living*. Princeton University Press.

Luce-Kapler, Rebecca. 2003. Orality and the Poetics of Curriculum. *Journal of Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies* 1 (2), 79-93.

Pinar, William F. 2019a. *What Is Curriculum Theory?* Routledge.

Pinar, William F. 2019b. *Moving Images of Eternity: George Grant's Critique of Time, Teaching, and Technology*. University of Ottawa Press.

Pinar, William F. 2023. *A Praxis of Presence in Curriculum Theory: Advancing Currere against Cultural Crises in Education*. Routledge.

Snowber, Celeste. 2004. *Embodied Prayer: Toward Wholeness of Body, Mind, Soul*. Northstone.

Snowber, Celeste. *Embodied Inquiry: Writing, Living, and Being Through the Body*. Sense Publishers.

Snowber, Celeste. 2017. An Embodied Currere. In *The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies*, edited by Mary Aswell Doll (137-143). Routledge.

Snowber, Celeste. 2022. *Dance, Place, and Poetics: Site-specific Performance as a Portal to Knowing*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Williamson, Ben. 2013. *The Future of the Curriculum. School Knowledge in the Digital Age*. The MIT Press.

ENDNOTES

¹ 2003, 80.

² 2003, 81. This a large leap, almost a projection onto students of her own experience, and assuming that she is correct in her interpretation of her own schooling experience of poetry. Without silent reading – admittedly insufficient in itself – how can a poem speak to reader's solitude, that inner space from which the poem itself probably formed?

³ 2003, 81-82. This seems an entirely reasonable, indeed non-controversial, assertion to make, requiring no "argument."

⁴ 2003, 84. This talk of "bones" reminds me of the phrase "worked to the bone." Henry David Thoreau seemed to think manual labor, specifically the labor of building one's own abode – he meant literally, but I can't help but hear a metaphoric echo – could cultivate a poetic sensibility. He wrote: "Who knows but if men constructed their dwelling with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally

developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?” (quoted in Kaag and van Belle 2023, 48).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in 2003, 84.

⁸ 2003, 84. This quoted passage would seem to be a paraphrase of Langer.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 2003, 84-85. John Ciardi famously argued that how a poem means is what it means (Ciardi and Williams 1975).

¹¹ 2003, 85.

¹² Quoted in 2003, 85.

¹³ 2003, 85. I should have thought this partnership would include personal pleasure as well.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quoted in 2003, 85. Luce-Kapler is quoting Havelock here.

¹⁷ 2003, 85. I wonder why poetry’s “role” wouldn’t likewise be narrowed when heard only.

¹⁸ Ibid. McLuhan affirmed the omnipresence of orality in human culture (Pinar 2019, 101), even when technologically mediated, increasingly technologically structured as inhuman, as in bots: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WB5grLMXkU>

¹⁹ Ibid. As evidence for this sweeping assertion, Luce-Kapler (2003, 86) examined “curriculum documents,” where she found “oral language exists on the margins.” Even the English curriculum she judges that it “is half-heartedly acknowledged, leading to the belief that if a teacher asks questions and the student answers or if class presentations are planned, that will cover the oral requirement. Often, the oral nature of an assignment is not even acknowledged, and so the role of orality in our learning is not considered or developed” (Ibid.).

²⁰ 2003, 86. Surely prose – especially poetic prose – can do the same. Not either/or but both/and as Aoki enjoined us: 2005 (1993), 295.

²¹ 2003, 87. Few have embraced embodiment more aesthetically than Celeste Snowber: 2004, 2016, 2017, 2022.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ For example: <http://www.thehypertexts.com/Best%20Abstract%20Poetry.html>

²⁶ 2003, 89.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 2003, 91.

²⁹ Ibid. To the power of poetry – exceeding the genre itself – Carl Leggo testified. See RB#37.

³⁰ 2003, 91. See Williamson 2013. Against STEM I affirm the study of history, poetry, and Latin. But I make no claims about their “payoff” as Luce-Kapler appears to do with the orality of poetry. And I can’t help but draw attention to that phrase – “the

pleasures of embodied action” – with which, stereotypically at least, post-pubescent youth have been preoccupied for centuries.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ George Grant, for instance, associated beauty with spirituality, implying but, however, not specifying ethics (Pinar 2019, 86, n. 216).