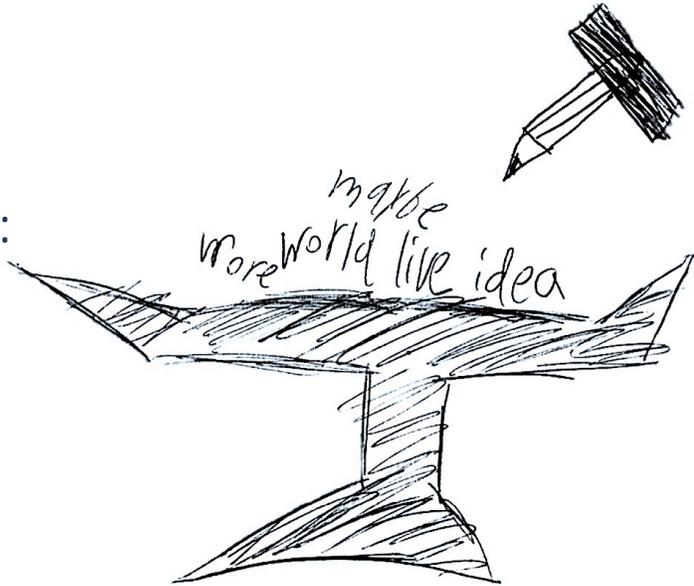


Make the Anvil Theirs: When Poetry Meets Folklore

by Dennie P. Wolf



If you said poetry doesn't matter, you would be wrong. Poems praise, preserve languages, name injustices, mock tyrants, and give voice. At this moment, we live surrounded by powerful short poetic forms doing just this kind of work: protest signs ("Science not silence"), posters ("Black Lives Matter"), T-shirts (Trans-national), song lyrics ("The Blacker the Berry"), spoken word, and Twitter wit (Lamar 1993). Beginning with the force of these everyday, everywhere forms, and moving out to other kinds of poetry, young people could learn to "do language" as Toni Morrison once said: using their words to call down injustice, raise questions, and conjure a different future (1993).

But not as poetry is usually taught. Open a language arts textbook or look at online worksheets and see how young people are introduced to forms like *haiku* and *renga*. There you will find poetry taught as algorithm:

Renga is an ancient Japanese style of poetry made up of stanzas. It is usually created by several people, each one taking a turn coming up with a stanza that relates to a single theme for the whole poem. The first stanza is three lines long. The first line is 5 syllables, the second is 7, and the third is 5. The second stanza is two lines long, both are 7 syllables each. The poem goes back and forth between the three- and two-line stanzas and ends with a two-line stanza. (Education.com n.d.)

This is *renga* as pattern, lifted out of its history and use. It is not the centuries-old contest, played out in front of scribes and panels of poet-judges. Gone are the crowds of thousands who traveled miles to watch contestants battling within the confines of form and theme as the stanzas mounted up. There is none of the suspense or legend of the famous poet Bashō and friends delivering

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hundred-stanza *renga*. Nor is there any sense of the trans-subjective links to a subject and mood that guide the collaborating poets who create the "rolling" of a *renga* (Ogawa 2009).

Or consider what happens to the song lyrics of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." They become the hunting ground for identifying figurative language ("What does the River Jordan stand for?" "What are the many meanings of home?"). In this format, metaphor and allusion are vocabulary words, not strategies for double-coding resistance silenced by enslavement, then sharecropping, and now the persisting structures of racism. Taught this way, poetry lessons reveal how poetry *works*, but not what poetry *does*. By teaching the cogs and wheels of poetry, we cut young people off from understanding a poem as an opportunity to notice, speak out, and choose words in ways that will make them heard. Thus, we narrow and blanch what could be a major route to learning to *do* language.

However, the work of City Lore, a center for urban folk culture in New York City, suggests that we have options for teaching poetry that come from outside conventional definitions of literature and literacy. For the last five years, City Lore has brought extended poetry residencies to classrooms throughout Queens, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions of the city. These residencies, Roots, Routes, and Rhythms and Homer 2 Hip Hop, have been carried out by a corps of teaching artists who are rooted in oral traditions ranging from the duels of Lebanese *zajal* and the *extempo* traditions of Trinidad and Tobago, to contemporary hip hop battles (City Lore 2021). In long-term residencies, these artists do their work in ways that are deeply informed by core folklore tenets: the power of context; the beauty of everyday use; the anchor of candor, public imagination, and love.

The Power of Context

In folklore, objects or performances get their meaning from context. Place the lyrics of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" in the context of 19th-century chattel enslavement, and it is no longer a hunting ground for figurative language. It is the work of unnamed musicians, passed along orally in a world where it was a crime to teach enslaved people to read or write. In that context, it carries the legend of being one of Harriet Tubman's favorites, whispered or sung softly, but expectantly, to announce the coming of "a conductor" who would lead enslaved people North. It uses the imagery of a Christian journey to heaven to project their fierce determination to reach the free territories.

Baba Israel and Grace Galu teach hip hop poetry in this context, tracing its roots from spirituals, through the blues, into Northern cities where jazz and popular music became the spoken word of hip hop, continuing the tradition of people using their words to resist given conditions and frame alternate worlds. Together and independently, they teach hip hop in that context. As Baba insists, "People took what they had—their bodies, their voices, the light poles in the streets—and created a music and an oral tradition that we are still listening to." They reference and honor this tradition of oral improvisation by teaching beat boxing and insisting that everyone does it as entry and interlude to reading their own and each other's work. Moreover, they insist on the generational and communitarian values that grow out of this tradition. When two groups of girls started dueling over their team names, each accusing the other of stealing their ideas, Baba intervened, "There's no stealing here. You got it from me, and I got it from my teachers, and they got it from the ones

that came before. You are part of a tradition. Honor it. Think about how we begin with a cipher, taking turns with what we've brought that day. Find names that say what your group is going to bring to that tradition." And they do.

The Beauty of Everyday Use

In folklore you can't understand a ukulele, a falconer's glove, or a kimono until you see how people use those objects to claim an identity or sustain the meaning of a tradition. You have to witness the musical evening, watch the hunt, or see women enrobing one another. An essential part of the beauty of everyday use is that it is live, daily, and constantly evolving. Poetry is no different. *Renga* poems may have begun centuries ago, scribed in ink on unfurling scrolls, but during the pandemic they returned on the back of cellphone technology, with writers linking their experiences of isolation via emailed stanzas that roll forward using the shared imagery of birds:

Jealous of two birds
perching (not even) one wing's
full distance apart?

Birds fly by in the shape of a hand.
All I remember is missing this.

Come here, little sinking heart. Yes, I used that word.
Look, the finches have turned from olive-drab
to lemon-yellow overnight. This is not nothing. (Smith College 2020)

Poet Sergio Jimenez translated this commitment to the beauty of everyday use into his sessions. To write a poem about where they are from, he asked his students to make a map of their homes, recording the dinner smells trapped in the hallway, the dip in the couch where they watched weekend cartoons, and their 1st-grade stickers that won't wash off. He shared his own tour, recalling the door through which his mother tried to talk to him and the hole in a wall where, once, he punched it. In a culminating event, Jimenez asked students to invent a poetry form of their own, naming it, outlining its structure, and explaining *how and when it is used*. As one student wrote:

The Mexico Firework Pop can only be done during fireworks are going off when
you write it and go to sleep you will dream about a man in a bright suit he will grant
you 3 wishes that will come true.

The Anchor of Candor

Folklore embraces all of living: births, weddings, and funerals; holiday noisemakers and winding sheets. The words of spirituals and especially the blues speak candidly to all aspects of living. Think of Billie Holliday singing "I Can't Face the Music":

Breeze, stop moanin' those weird melodies
My man has left me
And I can't face the music
Without singin' the blues

Rain, your rhythm on my window pane
Drives me insane because
I can't face the music
Without singin' the blues

(Koehler and Bloom 1938)

In that same spirit, City Lore teaching artists do not shy away from life in all its joy and sadness. Artists ask students to be open to poems that speak candidly to family fights, grief, and fears. With 3rd-grade students, poet Amira El-Behiri wrote a collaborative poem using the image of a house to speak to the need for hope while living in Queens, an epicenter of the Covid-19 virus:

We can build a house called tomorrow

A house that we can survive in

A house that can protect us

A house filled with happiness smiles and laughter

We can make a house called tomorrow together

A house that always has color

A house that gets hit by rainbows

With a similar frankness, teaching artist Kate Bell introduced classes of 7th graders to witness poems, using Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again," inviting them to take a turn speaking to their experiences of promise and reality with startling results:

Change

Opportunity, chance, possibility

A place to be who you want to be

At least that's what they say

And want to believe...

Nationality, status, inequality

This is what matters

And what they don't want to believe...

We are living in denial

Implanted in a society

Where racism roams mighty

The land of the free?

More like the land of the greed

The home of the brave?

More like the home of the misled

People with skin like dark, creamy chocolate

And eyes like black-gray coal

People with light, beige skin

With eyes that can slice your conscience open

Bodies are a range of fruits

With various different sizes

And countless different attributes

Do you want a change?
Exchange the negativity
For the positivity?
From bloody slavery
To written history
From discrimination
To communication
Small changes work together
To let harm surrender.

The Public Face of Imagination

David Drake was poet, potter, and an enslaved Black man who made some of the most impressive ceramic jars to come out of 19th-century North America. In defiance of laws forbidding literacy to enslaved people, Drake not only signed his jars, he often inscribed them with poetry, declaring himself as an artist and author:

I wonder where is all my relations
Friendship to all—and every nation (qtd. in Noyes 2020)

This speaks to a deep belief in folklore that imagination and invention are not rare, but universal—they belong to cooks, day workers, and aunts who whittle, play trumpet, and sew wedding dresses. In that spirit, all kinds of word work—lullabies, jokes, proverbs, and prayers—are worth rapt attention. Folklorists extend this encompassing view of imagination to children—hand clap and jump rope games, the rules for stickball, riddles, and taunts are taken seriously as examples of traditions passed down as ways of holding and evolving the values and energy of a given community (Dargan, Zeitlin, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990).

Along with this belief in the pervasiveness of imagination comes a second value: Imagination is not a private good, but a public activity in which people offer, learn, borrow, and add—exactly as in the *renga* tradition. In many City Lore residencies, this commitment shows up as collaborative poems. With primary school students, Libby Mislán and Samira Sadeque asked children to contribute to a list of wishes. Once harvested, the wishes yielded a giant, jointly built catalogue of what children long for (of which the following is only a slice):

I wish I was a scary box.
I wish I was a golden fox.
I wish I can spill like ice tea.
I wish I was a purple bat,
I would have a nose that was flat.
I wish I was the fire you seek and fear.
I wish Wendy's would bring back chicken nuggets.
I wish I could be a medicine that makes people feel better.
I wish I was a green box of chocolate foxes.

Throughout Baba Israel's residencies with older students, which ran online during the lockdown months of 2020 and 2021, they worked on collaborative spoken-word poems, with each student adding a final line to a common chant:

Gratitude is in my blood and veins
Gratitude is in my blood and veins
Gratitude is in my blood and veins
ESCAPING SOLITUDE LIKE GETTING OUT OF A STORM

Gratitude is in my blood and veins
Gratitude is in my blood and veins
Gratitude is in my blood and veins
APPRECIATE THIS LIFE I WAS BORN TO FEEL WARM

Love

Love runs through folklore—it is about a deep affection and curiosity for what people make, do, and speak. As Baba Israel taught during the pandemic months, he regularly asked students to read their work aloud. Sometimes he listened closely, making short but specific responses to their work, acknowledging the courage and originality of their contributions (“Got the rhythm going there and words on top.”). In every session, he urged students to respond to one another with claps and praise, “Show them some love.”

Building on this exercise in mutuality and gratitude, Baba introduced young people to praise poems dedicated to someone close to them, asking them to write the story of their name, offer a telling incident, and compare the person to something in nature, an animal, and an object. Many students praised their mothers:

In praise of Elside

She is smart like Wonder Woman
Wise like an owl
Strong roots like a tree

What Now?

Is it just an exercise to see poetry in the light of folklore? Again, Morrison’s words help. She writes of an old woman trying to teach the children of her village that language is a living thing that will let them act in and on the world—if they care for it:

Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences.
(Morrison 1993)

Or, in the words of one student in a City Lore poetry residency:

I will remember that writing poems can affect people by their emotions or feelings
and also that writing a poem you can tell people what to do and what not to do.

To confirm this, I asked an 11-year-old writer, “If a poem could be a tool for doing things, what tool would it be?” He was not at all confused by the request. Straightaway, he drew his ideas to help him as he talked:

An anvil. You can forge words and ideas on it. All the time, you have these thoughts floating around in your head, sort of soft and messy and not real. When you try to put them into a poem, you have to forge them out. The hammer and the heat of it gets the shape you really want—you get more world-like ideas.

Taught in the light of folklore's values—context, use, candor, imagination, and love, writing poems that notice, praise, and witness, young people could forge language as an act. They could *do* language, as Morrison urges. They could author “an act with consequences” (Wolf, Holochwost, Bar-Zemir, Dargan, and Selhorst 2014). But not unless we:

- Teach poetry as regularly as mathematics.
- Teach its composition as if it were bread. Reading poems is only half a slice.
- Convince living poets to do the teaching, remembering: “the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy” (Heidegger 2013).
- Draw on the oral traditions of the world, the ear's the deepest well where close listening begins.
- Insist that words are deeds.

In short, make the anvil theirs.

Dennie Palmer Wolf is a researcher and author committed to exploring how opportunities to imagine and create are distributed in our contemporary world—to whom, for how long, and how deeply. She questions and writes about the stubborn inequalities in who gets to write, make art, or create and perform music. Together with colleagues she investigates how we can challenge this hoarding of creativity and its recognition. For more visit www.wolfbrown.com.  ORCID 0000-0003-0134-4537

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