Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work
Knit Four, Frog One (Poems)

Sandra L. Faulkner
Bowling Green State University, USA

This book is a memoir in poetry about family stories, mother-daughter relationships, women’s work, mothering, writing, family secrets, and patterns of communication in close relationships. Family stories anchor family culture and provide insight into relational and family life. They also create family; communication takes place inside families and offers us a way to sustain, create and alter family culture. This work may be used as a teaching tool to get us to think about the stories that we tell and don’t tell in families and the importance of how family is created and maintained in our stories. Faulkner knits connections between a DIY (do-it-yourself) value, economics, and family culture through the use of poems and images, which present four generations of women in her family and trouble “women’s work” of mothering, cooking and crafting. The poetry voices the themes of economic and collective family self-reliance and speaks to cultural discourses of feminist resistance and resilience, relational and personal identities. This book can be read for pleasure as a collection of poetry or used as a springboard for reflection and discussion in courses such as family communication, sociology of gender and the family, psychology of women, relational communication, and women’s studies.

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FAMILY STORIES, POETRY AND WOMEN’S WORK
Social Fictions Series

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

The Social Fictions series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

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Family Stories, Poetry and Women’s Work

*Knit Four, Frog One (Poems)*

By

Sandra L. Faulkner

*Bowling Green State University, USA*
ADVANCE PRAISE

“Faulkner’s *Family Stories, Poetry and Women’s Work: Knit Four, Frog One* takes readers into the personal lives of four generations of mothers and daughters, poetically uncovering concrete aspects of social processes of family, motherhood, relationships, and writing. A fusion of social science and art that invites engagement of all your senses to understand the felt truth of lived experience.” – Carolyn Ellis, Distinguished University Professor, Department of Communication, University of South Florida

“Captivating, nuanced, and often surprising, Faulkner’s work is a vital contribution that bridges the chasm between traditional interpersonal communication research and brave new artistic worlds for relationship studies. Readers will find that *Knit Four/Frog One* offers as much for the heart as it does for the mind: a poetic, candid, and highly personal glimpse into feminism and family. I cannot wait to share this book with others!” – Jimmie Manning, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Communication, Undergraduate Program Director, Department of Communication, Affiliate Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program, Northern Illinois University

“Through this book, Faulkner presents a refreshing way of understanding, researching, and teaching about the communication in families. Scholars, practitioners, and students will find critical insight into important issues including women’s roles, privacy management, stigmatized identities, and the influence of social structure on personal relationships in this volume. The discussion questions and exercises make this book an excellent tool for teaching interpersonal communication, family communication, and women’s studies in an innovative way.” – Pamela J. Lannutti, Associate Professor and Director, Graduate Program in Professional and Business Communication, Department of Communication, La Salle University

“Born from Faulkner’s own ambivalence about her pregnancy and personal difficulties transitioning to the role of mother, *Family Stories, Poetry, and Women’s Work/Knit Four, Frog One (Poems)* re-imagines the meaning(s) of motherhood in the context of family
storytelling. Sandra’s innovative arts-based social science text demystifies poetic inquiry, providing readers both an embodied example of excellence and detailed exercises for use when practicing one’s own craft.” – Elizabeth A. Suter, PhD, Associate Professor, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of Communication Studies, University of Denver

In *Knit Four, Frog One*, Sandra L. Faulkner knits her life as mother, daughter and granddaughter; as wife, runner and lover into a rainbow-hued shawl of lived experience the reader can wrap around herself—balm and body armor, both. By turns fierce and funny, coolly observant and tenderly vulnerable, these poems show Faulkner’s great range of subject matter and form. From transcriptions of dinner time conversations with intractable four-year-olds, to instruction manuals about how to survive an infant; through sonnets written to a husband’s newly diagnosed cancer, and visual collages that bring together family ephemera and photos, the landscape of the book is nubby and various and truly tactile. This is a writer who knows how to wield her tools—memory, pen and needle—and with them creates a worthy portrait of a family who paint their “church-house doors harlot red on Easter weekend,” who resist, smartly and beautifully, “the messy art of containment.” – Sheila Squillante, author of *In This Dream of My Father* and *Women Who Pawn Their Jewelry*, Editor-in-chief of *The Fourth River Literary Journal*, Associate editor of *PANK Magazine*, Associate Director MFA Program in Creative Writing and Assistant Professor of English at Chatham University
For all of the Miriams, great and small.
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This book is a memoir in poetry about family stories, mother-daughter relationships, women’s work, mothering, writing, family secrets, and patterns of communication in close relationships. It can be read for pleasure as a collection of poetry or used as a springboard for reflection and discussion in courses such as family communication, sociology of gender and the family, psychology of women, relational communication, and women’s studies. Family stories anchor family culture and provide insight into relational and family life. They also create family; communication takes place inside families and offers us a way to sustain, create and alter family culture. In addition to a collection of family stories, this work may be used as a teaching tool to get you to think about the stories that we tell and don’t tell in families and the importance of how family is created and maintained in our stories. I believe that the use of poetry to tell family stories reveals the emotions and the rhythms of family life and narration in ways that prose alone cannot. Poetry lets me goodwill my secure cloak of citations, argue in verse that there is space for critical work and personal experience in the study of close relationships (Faulkner, 2012a). I begin this introduction by telling you how I came to write “social science poems” and how you can use them in your own writing, reflection, and understanding of family stories.

I came to the poetry project I present here because I needed a way to write about my grandmother and mother when I gave birth to my own daughter in 2009. I resisted and (re)played their questions and advice about relationships in my stubborn head as I struggled with my ambivalence about pregnancy and the mother role (Faulkner, 2012b). I wrote an essay about the first year of my daughter’s life and my difficult and anxious adjustment to role of mother (Faulkner, 2014), but I need to add a poetic rendering of what mother means to me in the context of family and my relationships to women. The social scientist turned to poetry as I had done during other stressful times in my life. This collection of poems represents my marriage of social science and art, the culmination of thirteen years of poetic inquiry, using poetry as/in/for research (Faulkner,
I wrote (bad) poems during my adolescence and even corresponded with an English teacher for a summer in middle school about my poetry. I picked up poetry (again) when I was doing post-doctoral work at Penn State and continued with community-writing workshops in Syracuse, NY when I worked as an interpersonal communication scholar in a tenure track position. Writing poetry helped me recover from my training in graduate school and the numbing realities of academic writing. It helped me reclaim creativity and its rhythms.

I write poetry because I am a “bad” social scientist. I believe in poetic truths more than social science Truth punctuated with a capital T. I study and teach about personal relationships, but I’m most interested in relationship-ing, what relationships feel like and sound like and smell like more than how they function as an analytic variable. I imagine poetry ripples like the waves of an MRI scan to mirror the stories of our relationships. Poetry can be the waves. Poetry can help us see a relationship bleeding out, hemorrhaging from the inside, spilling outside the neat axioms of theory in a puddle of messy fluids. Poetry can have us experience the social structures and ruptures in situ as we read, as we listen, as we hold our breath waiting for the next line. Poetry is salve.

In the poetry collection titled *Knit Four, Frog One*, I knit connections between a DIY (do-it-yourself) value, economics, and family culture through the use of confessional poetry (i.e. poetry of the personal/I). The poems and images trouble four generations of women in my family and “women’s work” of mothering, cooking and crafting. I write the story of Miriam (my maternal grandmother), Barbara (my mother), Sandra (me), and Miriam May aka Mimi (my daughter) in what I call “a memoir in verse.” The poetry voices the themes of economic and collective family self-reliance and speaks to cultural discourses of feminist resistance and resilience, relational and personal identities. The memoir plays with the tensions of aesthetic value and epistemic worth through the use of personal and academic voices (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005).

I wrote these poems and present them in an academic forum as poetry to show what poetic inquiry can do. I wrote this book to record stories for my daughter, as a love letter to the women in my
life, and an explanation for why my daughter is named Miriam for
my mother’s mom, my grandmother, Miriam, the first and great. I
wrote this book as arts-based social science.

I write poetry because I miss my nineteen year-old self, and
in particular, the self without formal social science training. She sees
things that Doctor Faulkner cannot see, and she comes out to play in
my poetry. I like Faulkner’s poetic persona, how writing poetry
provides an escape for her into my everyday world. I like that poetry
is a conversation between my personas, a recognition of how
identities are multiple, fluid and sometimes contentious. I remember
to pay attention to the pauses, to laugh when there are no words.
Poetry becomes my way to voice the ineffable and reminds me when
it is okay to let my passive aggressive side out to roar.

*Family Stories as Women’s Work*

I learned to knit from a Stich ’n Bitch Handbook (Stoller, 2003),
what I consider to be a kind of hipster guide to knitting, in the car on
the way to my spouse’s family farm. I never learned from my mother
or grandmother, both of whom tried to teach me on more than one
occasion. I am unable to pinpoint what my resistance to their lessons
stemmed from, but I suspect that my young adult self found it too
feminine and too domestic, too much like women’s work. Besides,
Nanny (my mom) and Grammy (my grandmother) gifted me hand
knit and sewn items that were too beautiful to reproduce. I gave into
knitting after Grammy died in May 2007. Stitching is a way to feel
closer to her, to remember her in a way that she would have approved
of because when I visited her near Philadelphia during my time as a
graduate student at Penn State, we crafted together. And we talked
about relationships as I present in the poem “1975 Singer Athena
2000 Electronic Sewing Machine.” She worried that my anti-
marrige and anti-children zeal would portend a life as an old lonely
woman.

The poetry in this collection theorizes how family stories
serve multiple functions from protective to stifling. What stories get
told, by whom, and to what effect is a form of creating the rules;
what we need to coordinate behavior, guide action, tell us what is
obligatory, what it means to be a member of the family, what is
prohibited, and what is appropriate or irrelevant (Stone, 2003). Women are the ones who often promulgate and preserve family love, stories and rituals (Stone, 2003). Stories connect and promote a sense of family responsibility, even when family members have nothing in common. When read together, the poems present stories of confirmation and disconfirmation, humor as resilience and distraction, mothering as friendship and resistance to authority, craft as love, and love as useful work. Family themes are recurring attitudes, beliefs, and outlooks on life that can be seen by examining rules and looking at stories (Wilmot, 2003; Galvin, Brommel, & Bylund, 2004). My use of concrete poems (i.e., shape poetry that conveys the meaning of the poem through the typographical cues), which depict knitting stitches as section breaks focuses attention on the larger themes of family origins (knit stitch), becoming mother (purl stitch), relational difficulties (hurdle stitch), and crafting coherent narratives (Kitchener stitch).

I liken the poetry here to a series of family stories, a memoir in poetry, if you will, a confessional tale for the ethnographers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), a (re)working of what is often women’s work, the crafting of family narratives. I label the poetry here confessional because it is autobiographical and hope that it addresses and plays with the critique of confessional poetry as narcissistic, trivial, and sensational to “embrace a larger social vision, achieving revelation over narcissism, universal resonance over self-referential anecdote” (Graham & Sontag, p. 6). The poems are intended to focus attention on these issues rather than resolve them to show how the use of personal family intimacies (or the impression of the use of personal family intimacies) may be a way of constructing empowering family narratives. Another goal with this project is to use confessional poetry to interrogate and alter attitudes and create social change through the visibility of stigmatized identities (e.g., family definitions, feminist mother, ambivalent mother, feminist bisexual).

The stories and metaphors we use to describe family may just protect them (Pipher, 1997). The things told over and over again reveal what families want to believe about themselves, and the telling can help reconstruct families, especially when dangerous secrets are
revealed and reworked for healing (Poulus, 2008). We see the adventure stories like in the poem “Mother/Daughter” wherein I show how my daughter craves action and being in charge just like her mother. We tell the award stories such as “SUBJECT: Becoming Midwestern Beige, PhD” with the narrator navigating the in-between world of the academy and home. The good deed stories are also important such as the care for others lauded in the poem, “Baby Ripple Blanket.” And there is, of course, the cautionary tale outlined in “How to Date Catholic Boys.”

Some of the poems in this collection use accidental ethnography as a technique to write about family, what Chris Poulus (2008) suggested as a method to story our lives and bring forward what may be lost in our unconscious—eating disorders, stigmatized identities, sexuality, abuse, and other difficult topics. This entails writing about dreams, clues, memories, and reflections from the unconscious, from seemingly “accidental signs and impulses that surge up and, from time to time, really grip us, take hold of us, call us out and throw us down, sweep us away, and carry us to places we may not have even imagined” (Poulus, 2008, p. 47). The goal of this kind of writing is to reveal and make conscious secrets that harm families and communities.

Accidental ethnography means writing and rewriting family secrets that haunt us and break into our day-to-day relating. If we write about hurtful secrets and reveal harmful patterns of interaction, then we may be able to tell better stories and offer more possibilities. For example, the found collage poem, “In the Court of Common Pleas,” represents discovery and silence. My mother gave me a box of family papers and photos, in which I found the court papers for a custody case. My mother’s maternal grandmother pleaded for custody of her daughters, but she lost the case because of accusations of adultery. I discovered (and reconstructed) a different and more nuanced tale than what my mother or grandmother had ever told me. I remember Grammy talking about her mother, Theresa, fondly (and not calling her mother may have been telling, too). The untold and court documented reason Miriam ended up living with her stepmother, Emily, and father was because of Theresa’s alleged adultery making her unfit to mother in the court’s eyes; I had always
been told it was because of the divorce and her financial situation. My mother whispered the story of a childless police officer and his wife wanting to adopt my grandmother after her father, Harold, died, but Emily got custody of Miriam and her sister, Ruth. Emily had two daughters with Harold, so Miriam lived with Ruth and her half-sisters (Helen and Betty) in what I consider a house-full of strong women. When I asked my Aunt about the court case recently, she told me that Harold had been sleeping with Emily before he married her, and further, he only married her because she was pregnant. Thus, Harold shouldn’t be considered as some wronged man, “He was just as guilty as Theresa.” The family themes seep through the inked stories.

Family stories are one of the cornerstones of family culture and can provide insight into relational and family life. Think about the stories that get told and the ones that are not told in families and you will understand the importance of how family is storied and what we consider to constitute family. Much of what you learn about family and family relations is implicit and mute, thus poetry makes a good vehicle for crafting a dialectic of silence versus voice because as the poet, Dean Young (2010) asserts, poetry’s strength is the ability to position dialectics. “A poem asserts itself as poetry by being in dialogue with what it resists” (p. 38). Young (2010) asked,

How do we understand each other when we say I love you? To simplify, this is a distinction between a communicative state and an expressive state … Poetry is in perpetual negotiation between these two urges. Between interior and exterior, between liberty and obligation, anarchy and order, self and community, referent and what it can refer to, sign and thing. (p. 39)

In the Appendix, I provide exercises designed to get you writing about family culture using poetry. Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) suggests that the revelation or concealment of family secrets depends on our motivation for disclosing, as well as what family disclosure rules are in place. For example, you may notice that some of the poems discuss sexuality, though a general family rule when I was growing up meant silence about personal family business to outsiders. The difference between
personal motivation and the need to disclose family secrets that violate family disclosure rules creates turbulence. However, topic avoidance can lead to dissatisfaction.

The ethical implications of revealing and deciding to conceal secrets may be addressed if we talk through definitions of family and the function family serves in our lives. It may be obvious that there is no ideal family, that in fact, families are social constructions (Wood, 2002). The definition of family can refer to families of procreation and origin, including nuclear and extended family residing in one household, who have established biological or socio-legal legitimacy because of shared genetics, marriage or adoption. We can also consider family to be interdependent individuals who work to fulfill psychosocial tasks that help with mutual need fulfillment, nurturance and development. Family can be a network of people who live together over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise (Galvin et al., 2004). After Grammy’s father died when she was nine, her stepmother, Emily, and her stepmother’s friend, “Auntie Lou,” stepped in to raise her and her sisters. When I was growing up, family friends were often called Aunt and Uncle. My spouse and I also refer to close friends as Aunt and Uncle and celebrate family milestones together at “family dinners.” These are all examples of an expanded definition of family and the idea that there can be families of choice (Wood, 2002). We create family in communication; communication takes place inside families, creates and sustains them. Family is transactional and more than a string of dyads; family represents a group and can be studied from a group perspective (Beck, Miller & Frahm, 2012). Thus, it may be best to consider family as a group of intimates who generate a sense of home and group identity, experience strong ties of loyalty and emotion, and share a sense of history and a future (Wood, 2002).

Once you understand family patterns represented in stories, then you can see if you repeat any of them and can understand how family helps resist or adapt to outside forces and crises that arise (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2008). Thus, the storying of relational (and family) life is important. Discourse within families may be especially important in non-traditional families (Galvin, 2006). Relationships are enacted and formed through the relational members’
communication processes and, in turn, the nature of the relationship is influenced by ongoing communication between the members. Relational messages influence our self-concepts; talking to others in our families about our feelings for them can increase or decrease self-worth (Dailey, 2010). We can enact affection through the use of confirming messages that make one value the self more, directly acknowledge the other, offer supportive and positive feedback, and clarifying responses better than disconfirming messages that make one devalue the self (Dailey, 2006).

POETIC INQUIRY AS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The poetic representations of lives is never just an end in itself. The goal is political, to change the way we think about people and their lives and to use the poetic-performative format to do this. The poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways ordinary social science writing does not allow. The poet is accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage. (Denzin, 2014, p. 86)

The poems I offer you here can be considered a poetic inquiry into family stories. Poetry can be used as a tool and method for presentation of research data, as a source of data, and as a source for data analysis (Faulkner, 2009). In a meta-analysis of 234 poetic inquiry sources, Prendergast (2009) uncovered three kinds of voices present in poetry used as social science research, that of the researcher, the participants, and the literature. She argued that the majority of the work used researcher-voiced poems, which emphasized the experience of the poet-researcher using field notes, journals, and reflective writing as data for the poems. This is the kind of poetry you find in Knit Four, Frog One. I constructed these poems from family documents, my memories, conversational interviews with my mother and aunt, and events I witnessed and/or heard about from family members. The poems represent family stories voiced from my perspective, though the poet and essayist, Mark Doty (2010) reminds us that perception is always limited; “All accounts, it seems, are partial; thus all perception might be said to be tentative, an opportunity for interpretation, a guessing game” (p. 5). I wish to
emphasize the idea of perception to demonstrate my concern with relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). I sent my mother the collage poems for Mother’s Day, and I admit to being nervous about her reaction. They were already published in an on-line literary magazine. She called me to say that she liked them and that she may, in fact, be the only person who would understand them and find them meaningful. I am not sure how she will react when she sees the rest of the poems together in this collection, but again, this is my telling, and the details and scenes I selected to represent are the ones wherein I am a central character.

As you read the collection, you may notice it is not always entirely clear whose voice you hear. This is intentional to show how stories become part of a larger conversation when they are spoken and to show the limitations of perception. The ambiguity also speaks to the way that memory works and the difficulty of describing our experiences.

We cannot rely on words to convey to another person what it is like to be ourselves … But we have nothing else, and when words are tuned to their highest ability, deployed with the strengths the most accomplished poets bring to bear on the project of saying what’s here before us—well, it is possible to feel, at least for a moment, language clicking into place, into a relation with the world that feels seamless and inevitable. If this is a dream so be it. (Doty, 2010, p. 10)

**Poetic Inquiry Goals**

I use poetry as/in/for social science research, in particular interpersonal communication research about families, to accomplish three goals: (1) to marry social science and poetry; (2) to effect social change through a focus on the aesthetic; and (3) to use poetry as a pedagogical tool for the study of relational communication.

**Social Science + Poetry.** First, I wrote these poems to connect the personal with my work life, the creative work with my social science training. I use dialogue poems as a way to incorporate dialectics into this collection and to give voice to the both/and. When I had an
infant and no maternity leave, it became a necessity to adopt dialogical thinking and refute the false binary between private and public conceptions of relationships (Baxter, 2011). I did not have time to think of the social scientist and the poet as mutually exclusive roles. My life situation required the ability to do work in my head while I nursed my child, struggled to stay awake between classes, and generally not lose my (work) mind. All of my work had to fit into smaller pockets of time. I discovered that poetry writing fits into small spaces, and that social science theorizing can be poetry, especially if we consider that “the ethnographer’s writing self cannot not be present, there is no objective space outside the text” (Denzin, 2014, p. 26).

Through poetic analysis, a technique of using poems as data for qualitative research, I make an explicit connection between poetry and interpersonal relationships by detailing what it means to be a woman in my family and the demonstration of crafting relationships as vital women’s work. This analysis and subsequent representation serve as an exemplar of how poetry offers interpersonal communication practitioners an explicit demonstration of individual’s needs to poeticize their everyday relational challenges (Pelias, 2011). This critical writing helped me articulate personal experiences and connect to larger culture structures to explain the meaning of mothering for a white, middle-class, highly educated, snarky feminist woman (cf. Faulkner, 2014).

The communication scholars, Leslie Baxter and Dawn Braithwaite (2008), contend that interpersonal research and theory is biased toward post-positivist methods. Their content analysis of published studies in two popular relational journals from 1990-2005 showed that 83.3% took a post-positivist stance, with 13.9% adopting an interpretive stance and 2.9% a critical perspective. This suggests to me that there exists room for poetry as/in/for relational research. Prendergast (2009) argued that the best poetic inquiry is that which concerns itself with affect as well as intellect and deals with topics grounded in the “affective experiential domain.” The use of family stories as a basis for autoethnographic poetry represents human thought in an affective context (McAdams, 1993). The impulse to create poetry is like the impulse toward narrative, and narratives
provide, at least in part, a window into our thoughts, behavior, and experiences. Narratives allow a way to examine identities, the communicative behavior that externalizes our thoughts about identity (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), how we make sense of our cultural and social worlds, and how we try and create coherence (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In many instances, we narrate particular life experiences where there is a rift between a real and ideal self, between the self and society (Riessman, 1993).

**Social Change.** The use of creative social science was important to evoke the aesthetics of change and for the poetry to resonate with readers, for audiences to experience the poetry as “evocative mediators” of painful relational experiences and recognize and tell their own stories (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 571). Because poetry focuses on the minutiae of language use and form to not only present but also create an experience for the reader, it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of personal relationships. Poetry matters because its powerful, the fact that it “serves up the substance of our lives, and becomes more than a mere articulation of experience, although that articulation alone is part of its usefulness…it allows us to see ourselves freshly and keenly. It makes the invisible world visible” (Parini, 2008, p. 181). It can hep us shape lives in ways that we want to live; we create and tell the stories that we need. As Denzin (2014) reminds us “to argue for a factually correct picture of a ‘real’ person is to ignore how persons are created in performances” (p. 13). The poet’s focus on form is important for meaning making in poetry.

Form is the visible side of content. The way in which the content becomes manifest. Form: time turning into space and space turning into time simultaneously…We name one thing and then another. That’s how time enters poetry. Space, on the other hand, comes into being through the attention we pay to each word. The more intense our attention, the more space, and there’s a lot of space inside words. (Simic, 1990, p. 85)

Form and language are also intimately connected. Pelias (2011) eloquently stated that “Constituted in interaction, I am formed by the
language that passes between me and others. And I make sense of my relationships by finding a language that provides some account of my personal observations and feelings” (p. 17). The language of poetry demonstrates how communication is relational, how we create identities, and how we feel our way through our relationships.

The use of poetry to examine family relationships can be categorized as performative writing because the personal experiences of the researcher are connected to the ethnographic project (Denzin, 2014), the writing takes shape through observation and field experience to bring the audience the most interesting and complex moments of our lived experience (Pelias 2005). “Language and speech do not mirror experience; rather, they create representations of experience. Meanings are always in motion, inclusive conflicting, contradictory. There are gaps between reality, experience, and performances” (Denzin, 2014, p. 37). Using writing that is both performative and poetic allows me to represent family stories in a “messy” format that speaks to representational issues of empowerment and disempowerment (Alcoff, 2003). Poetry as an experience can create empathy in an audience by allowing them to see and feel what the writer does (Pelias, 2005).

The radical subjectivity of my experiences can make larger claims of the importance of particularized experiences in larger structures of family. Using performative writing, specifically poetry, to examine family communication provides insight into underlying values of how to do relationships, and in this case, how communication plays a role before, during, and after they end (Pelias, 2011). The power of poetry to reconnect our selves to loss, conscious and unconscious hurts that manifest in our relational interactions, offers interpersonal scholars, educators, and those in relationships other ways of understanding. In another project, I interviewed poets about their conceptions of good and bad poetry. Phil Memmer told me that there is too much niceness in poetry and argued that good poetry challenges us; it has the potential to hurt feelings because “the stakes are high.”

Can you write the poem that’s going to make your mother weep? … And not because you hate your mother, not your mom who you can’t stand who would never let you do anything you
want to do and you don’t want to be around and haven’t spoken to in ten years … But your mom who does everything for you [and] who you love talking to and adore, and you know these poems will upset her. Can you push hard enough on your work to do that because it’s something you believe in and something you want to write, a story you think has to be told? And push hard enough to accomplish what you hope to accomplish with it, not let yourself off.

Family stories mean that we are telling what we need to tell, even if they make your mother cry. I imagine that not every member of my family, actually any member of my family, would tell this particular story, but I pay close attention to craft to make the story resonant inside and outside the family boundaries.

*Ars Poetica.* Finally, I use poetry as a pedagogical tool because this kind of writing, in my experience, speaks more to students than traditional social science writing. I often begin classes with poems that spark the day’s lesson and decided to edit a collection of creative cases in relational communication for use when teaching about relationships (Faulkner, 2013). Thus, this book is meant to be a teaching tool in addition to a collection of family stories in verse. In the Appendix, I offer some discussion questions you may use when you read the poems. In the poetry here, you will notice a few *ars poetica* (e.g., Memo to Faulkner from the Fluff and Fold), poems about the art of poetry, that I include as a way to demonstrate my concern with craft, my ideas about poetry, and a way to read my poems (Faulkner, 2009). Alternatively, here is my latest *ars poetica* in prose:

> The language of poetry, when properly absorbed, becomes part of our private vocabulary, our way of moving through the world. Poetry matters, and without it we can live only partially, not fully conscious of the possibilities (emotional and intellectual) that life affords. (Parini, 2008, p. xiv)

Poetry, in particular, allows me to be a better social scientist. I want you to do more than think about your own live; I want you to critique how social structures scaffold your experiences of relating. Poetry
embodies experience to show truths that are not usually evident, to seduce and empower readers. Our deeply ingrained ideas about gender and culture and class and race, the seemingly natural ways of being are easier to unravel in verse (e.g., Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes, 2009). As the poet Jay Parini (2008) wrote, “As a language adequate to our experience, poetry allows us to articulate matters of concern in such a way that they become physical, tangible, and immediate” (p. 25). Poems allow me to show a range of meanings, which makes most sense to me as someone who is interested in people’s stories and how these stories make meaning(ful) lives.

I can say things in poetic lines that can’t be stated in other ways.

I think poetry because it is a habit. I cannot take a run without working out lines on the exhales. The interpersonal axiom, you cannot not communicate, transformed into a habitual I cannot not write poetry. Standing in line, taking a shower, feeding my kid, waking up before anyone else in the house, waiting and more waiting are all contexts for poetry writing. I am living the ethnographic poet’s life (Rose, 1990). The biggest challenge for me is to focus on the aesthetic dimensions of the writing, to merge the different selves that bring in empirical research, personal experience and observation with the need to expand my story to our story. “The pleasure of recognizing a described world is no small thing” (Doty, 2010, p. 11).
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The following poems will (re)appear in my chapbook *Knit Four, Make One* from Kattywompus Press: “Farm Trilogy,” “When the preacher came by the house after our year absence,” “Make Two,” “Letter to Faulkner from the Fluff and Fold” (renamed Memo to Faulkner from the Fluff and Fold), “Teachers” (renamed Mother/Daughter), “Pacifier Ode,” “Instructions for Surviving Infant,” “How to potty train when presenting a manuscript on maternal poetry,” “Baby Ripple Blanket,” “Bedtime Story,” “Invitation to a Dead Grandmother,” “HURDLE STITCH,” “Hoagland writes to Faulkner about Thingitude,” “Dead Leg Ode,” “At the Viewing,” “Suicide Window, Detroit” (renamed Suicide Window, Toledo), “Doing Dishes,” “Remodeling Dream.”


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CHAPTER ONE

KNIT FOUR, FROG ONE

Poems

Mimi: Mommy, did you know that some books are true
and some books are not true?
Some books are make-believe.
KNIT STITCH

pull the loop on the left needle in back with the yarn through the loop
Eating Dinner

Mom: If you do not stop KICKING the table, mom and dad are going to the store and leaving you here with the dog.

Mimi: If mom and dad go to the store and leave me at home alone, I will call the police, I will dial 911. They will come and put you in jail. Then they will take me away, and I will live with another family.

Mom: And would you be sad?

Mimi: No.
Farm Trilogy

I. Throwing Sticks at Cows

The boulder crouched between the pasture trees, mostly Georgia pines, as if waiting for us to bring the smell of summer, peanut butter or mayonnaise on white bread wiped with sweat. The trail through the woods was scratched on our knees, barbed wire torn shorts, the fun of kid made cammo, shimming around granite, hiding from old Vaughter’s shotgun and scowl. Do you remember when you were still Billy and those trees green above smelly ripe piles, our bouquets of honeysuckle for mom, pockets filled with roly poly and pine straw before the suburb bought the Farm cheap, marked it with a historic metal plaque? I can’t make myself see if the boulder is still there hidden from the groomed trail paved with traffic, waiting for us to leg-up with naked elbows and our impromptu sandwiches.
CHAPTER 1

II. Driving Miss Mimi

We drive south from the strange wet prairies, the Great Black Swamp drained for farms, ditches filled with grey pebbles and icy trash, young-green winter wheat sprouts before the wail of the tractor pulls,

from this unexpected open width of sky, dirt and fear of wet encasements, mosquitos and inundations where I moved for the love of naming letters birthed a girl and books despite a professed milk sickness.

We drive down 75 toward my familiar Georgia pines, long needles that smell like Girl Scout camp, damp polyester shorts. The pound puppy in the front seat snores, shifts and sniffs as his usual scents turn strange.

Stone Mountain lichens cling to granite: My infant’s head slithers down the restraint, spit glues paci to her chin suspended like an extra seat-belt. This first trip we stop too often, to feed, change and express

exhaustion, my over-active let-down means breast feeding is like shot-gunning beer—ball point pen jabs a hole in cold aluminum—gulps of bubbles and sweet liquid in the back seat. My spouse knows
my soliloquies about public lactating: convenience store magazines splashed with bared breasts, X. Conspersa exposed in pools of fluorescent light compete with my mossy mother rant: “I should feed her by the chips, candy bars and condoms.” The sneaky places we stole away from band practice, skipped school for the art gallery to buy laffy taffy, Tab, and rolos. Kids too tame to walk bad: my familiar South.
III. Running with Buddy on KK Highway, Rogersville, MO

Rexall drug pregnancy test crushed in the ditch,
directions peed on, Keystone and Bud Light
boxes, cans smashed, plastic tubes sunk
in mud from a deserted meth lab, this college bitch
runs the ditch along the dairy farm
that grew my spouse, where trash collects

this college teacher runs here
where trash collects because they work
with hands in the dirt, while I work
on my morning coffee, watch uncle Ed
get the gun and then the skunk
bent and already half gone

from some farm accident, already half gone,
some accident on the farm, this cautious
family planner only popped out one,
no accidents, no car accordioned in the ditch—
why the dog is on a leash—
my kid asks about all that poop

the collateral damage on her boots,
the high maintenance dog whines like a prince
as tractors and 4-wheelers whine
to keep the farm through drought
but it is not enough, the cows went, gone
since Tuesday, loaded and lifted into trucks

no more black and white dots canvassing the hills
When the preacher came by the house after our year absence

the adults stood
gerooted by the gardenias
too busy with the visit
to scold us
for big wheels upended
spokes bent and dead,
in the yard for the sandman,
forgotten, we pretend to play
to catch some words
they pretend we don’t hear
this Sunday after church
where we only attend
our driveway worship.
My dad’s voice as never:
Why so long—
did you not notice?
your Christianity means no
Black children at church—
Preacher’s voice rises in prayer:
—misunderstood, not so
long, no, not prejudiced—
They pretend we don’t hear,
no invitation inside
no coffee or mom’s fudge,
all the little children
not welcome in this world.
SUBJECT: Becoming Midwestern Beige, PhD

Dear Colleagues, Here’s to all things Midwest to canning and knitting to passive aggressive niceness (e.g., see memo below) to bringing you cold tea, a stack of plastic glasses and a pitcher of ice to quench the pain of moving here to tractor pulls and fried bologna, to only pretending to be a local if it helps and to really changing your license plates and address so the court knows where to call.

I find the flat green view of plants and more plants as particular as our neighbor’s love letters sent via the City on official letterhead with suggestions for how to maintain the lawn which must not creep onto the sidewalk, all overhung like the degrees on my wall.

So sorry you cannot decipher the police officer’s calling card tucked far inside the mailbox with a plea about your dog serenading the backyard sun, which I must note shines in such proximity to Indiana that Northwest Ohio may indeed be the Midwest despite your erudite objections (cite: census bureau data confirms).

I hereby present my Midwest Curriculum Vitae my tenured contributions:

2013 Canning total: 22 quarts of tomatoes; 12 pints of pickles; 7 pints of corn salsa; 10-1/2 pints mild salsa and 6 pints of peach salsa; 3 quarts of slow-roasted tomato spaghetti sauce.

Validity Data: burned knuckles and collapsed arches, one white, blue-eyed girl conceived on Black Swamp soil while cutting and pasting together a winning portfolio.
Awards: Blue ribbon for knitted poncho @Wood County Fair
(Most of which I knit in your meetings like your mom knit at practices and appointments, purling a fence to keep out the pretend dialogue—before my needles were confiscated at the grand jury. I am expert enough to consider a jab with a needle, a gash big enough to require some stitches.)

This is our Midwest where you can spit across the landscape for states and states with these misdemeanors, commit felonies in your mind, deny data with the research you word and spin.
CHAPTER 1

Dear Sandra,

My memories are

Dear Mother,

This is a weird time to be writing you a letter, it is 4 o'clock in the morning. I hope you are not trying to understand what I feel right now.

Thank you so much for those delicious cookies! Love,

Aunt Betty

Thank you for being a great mother. 

She never let me down. 

She was my greatest. 

She was so happy. 

She was very kind.

Love you,

Grammy

She was not much of a correspondent, as I assume you have gathered. Love mom.

June 6, 1989 

Your notes, cards, and pictures. Keep them coming.
Make Two

With two needles and a ball of string,
we learn the art of multiplication—

2 couplets, lovers, dyads, pet rats,
not twins like in my preggo horror movie.

Two tickets to a concert, a table for 2.
Not my favorite number-the rent is past due.

II, 2, two ways to write the number, my favorite
curvy because you can lie

in the bottom, the bowl. The number of bites
you need to share, a joint account. Two.

The usual number of cake layers, the pieces
of toast you get with eggs, the # of eggs

in the daily special, my good and bad side,
dichotomy, either or (not both/and),

one part of a compound sentence. Two sides
to the bed, two dimensions, two favorite colors,

the number of legs Dad once had,
knit in front and back=M1, 2 stitches,

what you need to erase a day, not the number
after birth, 2 parts water, 2 ounces of bourbon.
CHAPTER 1

On My 30th Birthday, I Leave Paul for the Plane to the Sex Conference

I tell myself to breathe, but his celery-scented kiss won’t dim; shuffled conference papers, a raisin bagel, and piped in mandolin force me to think about the awkward bore, the crusty worries of dishes and birthdays that steal our sex will. I consider this as I fly south to the sexy conference where I will talk about sex without getting down.

I ask why this raging feminist feels knocked down (like the cliché in my last poem), eyes dim when he walks away to straddle his bike, all sexed-up for mindful pedestrians like Madeline, our neighbour with the bumper sticker—Wild-Women-Will. She probably gets laid by a truckload of boars.

I tell him my work is a bore, that talk about sex is not like eider down you snuggle into at will, it can’t make me a Happy Hooker or dim my thoughts about degrees of freedom or Mandy, the super sexologist from Kinsey who’s research is even sexy.

Paul leans in to tell me I’m sexy, but I remind him of the truth, how boring our daily details get, the man who controls his child-support will hunt us down with salty licks and unpaid bills, the dim light of romance can kill our will.

I want him to read the paper I will present on sex talk with couples that get sexy, do it without condoms, with the lights dim, while people like me tell them the boring details. I can’t get this part down and simply listen to the mandolin.
You want me to be the mandolin
and play myself at will,
the papered academic who lies down
with theory and pretends it’s sexy
as she peels banana-flavored condoms like it were a bore:
I want to tell him to stay that sexy man
who will ride me into thunderstorms
while I bore down the dim talk of this.
My Feminist Valentine

And when you have forgotten your birthday party, the cocktails that churned your stomach like a polluted lake and most especially when you have forgotten our tired talk, how you blurted “let’s just get married,” a curled question (in bed). My queries about marriage always unfolded in bed.

Notice gag straddles the middle of enGAGement?

Can bisexual feminists be married and be feminist?

Or the fun of not telling how we shacked up after the lure of my Moroccan food, couscous scented with the triumphant cilantro, turmeric, and cinnamon, any food after hours of sex and philosophy in bed for the love of my pet rat who lapped latte foam, mornings we snuck to work with different routes to confuse and keep love cool. And if we forget the question from the bored court clerk who missed our smirks how we both held our names with strong hands, the legal wedding Monday at the criminal courthouse planned over a delicious weekend; the call to our friends, the cheap silver rings, grocery store bouquet tied with gold ribbon, new skirt, shirt and pants, the receipts pinned into our album.

Then recall the real wedding, the love we cemented in Madrid where only voices were required to wed, vows penciled on paper and read with squinted eyes on the edge of the park, too dark to wander in further.
Painting the Church-House Doors Harlot Red on Easter Weekend

My good people of the Midwest walk-by
with their kids and dogs properly leashed
while I paint the doors of my church
Red. And by red, I mean the kind of red
you dream of on the day your husband is diagnosed
with cancer, when your child screams in red
because the only thing you can do
is make coffee, keep appointments, do the daily
things that hold you together. Red shouts
welcome if you believe in Feng Shui
and gave a place to stay in earlier American times,
though I prefer the Scottish idea of paid-off-mortgage-red
and superstitious church folk’s screw-off-evil-red,
a place you want to take-off-your-shoes red.
When you live in a once church, the door as mouth metaphor
means there is no other color to decorate a door;
red means you manage the messy art of containment.
Memo to Faulkner from the Fluff and Fold

“Assumptions lie behind the work …”
Richard Hugo, The Triggering Town

Dear Sandra, you know poets still believe
in hand-crafted words, write slowly in pen
on blank pages with spiral bound notebooks
lifted from the coffee shop next to school.
They never write in pen because it seeps
like a grease stain on the twelfth revision.
Poets sit in empty rooms, make it up.
They write on screen about their successful affairs
talk for hours about the failed ones
make mothers weep with all that blasphemy.
Listen Faulkner, you must fold poems like sheets
think in iambic for hours without sleep
take a crayon and scribble it all out.
Wait for weeks, the words will tumble in dreams
to the mind’s ridiculous arenas.
That is how the writing is done. XOXO, Dick.
Stubborn @ Dinner

Mom: If you don’t eat your dinner, you are not getting ANYTHING else to eat tonight.

Mimi: I don’t want dessert. Yay, no dessert for me. I’m EXCITED about no dessert.

Mom: And, you get to eat your dinner for breakfast, too.

Mimi: Can I have what you have for breakfast?

Mom: I’m having coffee.