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What Our Work Is For: The Perils and Possibilities of Arts-Based Research

For the last few evenings, my night table has been occupied by an extraordinary rhetorical study of language, identity, history, and memory. That study is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 1982 book-length work *Dictee*. Originally published just a few days before Cha was inexplicably murdered in New York City, *Dictee* examines the rhetorical imprint of the Japanese occupation of Korea and Manchuria through the histories of the revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, of Cha's mother, and of Cha herself. Cha employs Western myth and Catholic mysticism as a few of her lenses, and in her search for story examines a multitude of texts: personal letters, official documents, handwritten notes, photographs, images, calligraphy, transcribed dialogues. Cha presents her hypotheses and findings holistically, weaving in the narrative threads of her own positionality and leaving the resulting representations of her research replete with the inscriptive traces of her methods. *Dictee* is both risky and resonant; its impact on the intellect *and* the emotions is palpable, and it persists in the reader's memory in a way that many research studies do not.

Dictee bears little resemblance to many if not most research studies that appear within the pages of our peer-reviewed academic journals. *Dictee* as artifact is a complex textual hybrid of prose and poetry, epistle and edict, word and image. Within its pages are lyrical meditations on trauma and identity, but also comprehensive biographies of historic figures and alphabetic and graphical documentation of the Korean War and the subsequent national division, framed as impartially as any research that claims objectivity. And yet, *Dictee* is fragmented and punctuated by silences. Its sections correspond not to methods, results, and analysis, but to the nine muses of Greek mythology. In the research that dominates the humanities—including my home discipline of rhetoric and composition—a nonfiction work like *Dictee* has a better

chance of being positioned as a subject of someone else's inquiry rather than as a singular, self-legitimized research study itself. While rhetoric places much value upon a certain kind of making—Aristotle's *techné*, introduced in *Nicomachean Ethics*—the discipline still tends to frame research as something that is simply *done* and its results reported, rather than deliberately and creatively crafted. This begs the question: is research merely an action, or is it an act of creation? If so, what kinds of restrictions should we place on what is being created, how it is being created, and who is creating? Such a question might be uncomfortable; perhaps we balk at the word “restrictions,” finding it unseemly. But we comfortably apply a multitude of constraints, both in method and in representation. We define and restrict variables to increase control and to flatten and refine methods for future reproduction. There are good reasons for these acts of restriction; they help us to produce accurate and research that is legitimated both within our disciplines and outside of them (most of the time, anyway). And yet in the kinds of research we typically do, I wonder if we have overlooked some powerful and vital ways of engaging and representing the very acts of making we seek to understand.

One of the many reasons *Dictee* remains so vital is that it stands now as an example, in both its methods and the representation of its findings, of a phenomenon known as *arts-based research*. According to J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole's 2008 text *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, arts-based research is a “systematic use of the artistic process [. . .] as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by researchers and those involved in their studies” (29). Patricia Leavy's 2009 text *Method Meets Art* continues, stating that arts-based research positions these artistic processes as a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation and representation” (ix); this differs from research practices where the arts are subjected to research but are not in and of themselves regarded as epistemic tools. Arts-based research methods arise, in part, from a desire to create a new methodological genre within the quantitative paradigm for social science research; this quantitative paradigm is in turn is historically situated in a critique

of positivist science and, according to Leavy, “comprises new theoretical and epistemological groundings that are expanding the qualitative paradigm” (ix). In and of itself, arts-based research represents a set of implicit values and tacit critiques of particular kinds of meaning making, and that those values and critiques are in many ways congruent with our current research practices in rhetoric and composition, English studies, and other humanities disciplines. Therefore, arts-based research has the potential to help us ask productive questions about what research is, and what exactly our research is for.

What is striking—and useful—to me about reconsidering and reframing texts such as *Dictee* in the context of research is the kinds of questions that they invite us, as researchers, to consider. They are the kinds of questions that we must ask of any breakdown of research methods, but the “outsider” status of arts-based research gives the genre a unique advantage; as we study arts-based research, we are invited to reflexively view the assumptions behind our own disciplinary research while exploring the ideas behind the works. We may ask how researchers could remain appropriately skeptical and “objective” while opening to expanded possibilities for building knowledge. I have found that arts-based research methods are in many ways congruent with the aims and values of research in rhetoric and composition, at least; both kinds of research honor diverse acts of making meaning (arts-based research seems to place heavier emphasis on the “making”) and are cautious of positivist claims for objectivity. It may not be realistic to believe that arts-based methods can achieve reproducible results in ways that quantitative studies can, but perhaps through the ingenuity of our various disciplines, arts-based research methods could be adapted in useful ways.

The possibilities offered by arts-based research practice are no doubt liberating for some, but prohibitively risky for others. Professionally, using methods that could be considered aggressive At this moment, it is difficult to say definitively whether or not our disciplines *need* arts-based research, but its under-explored status in English studies may reveal a potential to offer substantial alternative possibilities and benefits—if researchers choose to study its methods and experiment with their application. In

rhetoric and composition, quantitative research is becoming progressively more popular; the replicable, aggregative, data-driven (RAD) research model research is a topic of much discussion and excitement. In order to better understand the RAD model, we might ask how arts-based research studies position their researchers, and how these studies position their subjects; this could help us to gain greater insight into the results of comparable or contrasting researcher or subject positioning in RAD work.

Of course, it becomes necessary to ask whether or not arts-based research could actually harm research in the humanities. The American university system increasingly relies on business models that privilege the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) disciplines, whose quantitative methodologies traditionally resist ambiguity, subjectivity, and multiplicity. Furthermore, disciplinary anxieties are a constant for many of us as we struggle for funding and resources alongside other colleges and departments; the fight for a self-determined identity occurs on scales large and small. With “hard,” positivist research offering a financial lifeline to higher education, it may become the trend to perceive arts-based research as “soft,” perhaps too highly contextualized and idiosyncratic, with results not guaranteed to secure the support of ever-more conservative administrations. The continued devaluation of the arts in higher education perhaps prompts these kinds of attitudes, leaving us with no incentive to mine the arts for new uses by re-examining their various transformations and distortions. But what assumptions are behind such trends? Who is served by the kinds of research that our administrations tend to support most uncritically, and what is gained by perpetuating the belief that research and art are fundamentally opposed? Whose ideas and voices and communities are being left out of the research conversation, and does arts-based research have a chance of lifting them? Arts-based research is, as Knowles and Cole document, And, after all isn't seeking the truth—which includes exposing and questioning long-held assumptions—part of our task as writers, as English studies scholars, and, indeed, as academics?

In the introductory chapter of *Method Meets Art*, Leavy reveals that a group of University of British Columbia graduate student researchers employing methods of arts-based research produced work

engaging “love, death, power, memory, fear, loss, desire, hope, and suffering” (4). Both within and outside of the context of research, this description could easily be applied to a work such as Cha’s *Dictee*. This is not to say that quantitative and qualitative models cannot powerfully engage these substantive human phenomena. As a poet and essayist, I am excited by Leavy’s description of her students’ research; as a rhetorician, I am compelled to critique it. However, as an academic who straddles disciplines, I am ultimately moved by this description to question the motives behind and the fundamental values of the great depth and breadth of research in humanities. The possibilities and perils of arts-based research move me to ask—in a generative way—*what our work is for*.

Works Cited/Referenced

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