

The Blacksmith's Feet: Embodied Entextualization in Northern Italian Vernacular Poetry

HOW DOES ONE KNOW IF POETRY IS GOOD? While there are many ways to answer this question, and as many arguments arising in response to each answer, here I take a linguistic anthropological approach to discuss the production and evaluation of good poetry and good poets—specifically vernacular poetry and poets—as social and cultural processes. I want to undertake, in other words, a cultural poetics or ethnopoetics, explicating a culturally specific structure of evaluation that depends on local understandings, practices, and values.¹ Such projects have a long history in anthropology, at least since Franz Boas's *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages*, which included an investigation of poetry as part of anthropological inquiry, and Edward Sapir's writing on the anthropological importance of portraying a group's aesthetics, or their "feel" for the rightness or wrongness of fit of form to function.² To consider poetry as a social practice is to consider the local aesthetics within which such poetry comes into being, is evaluated, and circulates. As such, it necessarily means to consider the social positioning of genres as well as social groups, since any local aesthetic practices and standards are built upon connections across genres, environments, texts, speaking contexts, types of speakers and listeners, and modes of evaluation particular to a group.³

This analysis focuses on the particular connections that are grounded in bodies, the bodies that appear in poetry and the bodies that produce poetry, as well as how these two categories may or may not align. Briefly, bodies enter into and engage with texts—they write, perform, evaluate, and listen to them—in culturally specific ways that are the intertwined processes of

ABSTRACT Vernacular poetry is generally evaluated according to culturally specific aesthetic standards, what anthropologists call ethnopoetics. This article offers embodied entextualization—the culturally specific ways bodies are incorporated into as well as produce texts—as a means for analyzing how ethnopoetic systems reflect social and political histories and contexts. The poetry of the northern Italian town of Bergamo, and specifically a poem by a locally celebrated poet, Piero Frér, provides an illustrative case. REPRESENTATIONS 137. Winter 2017 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 68–87. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.137.4.68>.

embodied entextualization. How bodies and texts are connected is embedded within local aesthetic systems, such that evaluations of good and bad poetry will at least in part be based on which bodies produce and encounter texts, how bodies are portrayed in texts, and how these two categories may or may not align with each other as well as with culturally specific aesthetic standards about bodies.⁴

Connecting Texts

Poetic forms and practices are threaded through human history and recur across vastly different cultural contexts, and yet they are also and always specific to those historical moments and cultural environments. Humans, it seems, turn to poetry for reasons as diverse as cultural and linguistic revitalization, personal reflection, political critique and denunciation, and interpersonal displays of virtuosity. Poetry may help create historical memory or obscure it, reinforce power or push against it, reveal passionate intensity or conceal it, act upon the world or suggest a retreat from it. Paul Friedrich has noted that “poetry—poetic images, tropes, *materia prima*—informs, channels, and structures culture,” while Steven Caton has referred to poetry as a cultural, ideologically informed practice, where cultural meanings emerge from communicative action in times of flux and change.⁵ As such, poetry may also establish connections: between feelings and texts; across texts and performances; among writers and readers; and between texts, persons, and places.⁶

Connections such as these have long interested linguistic anthropologists in particular, as they have explored the nature of links between and across speech events (particular categories of language activities), among speech events and particular texts or text artifacts, and across mediated and face-to-face contexts through a focus on interdiscursivity. Judith T. Irvine defines interdiscursivity as “links between one episode of talk and another, real or imagined.” Such links exist not just between “episodes of talk” but with and across texts as well.⁷ Interdiscursivity is the way in which texts, both spoken and written, are taken out of their ordinary contexts, or decontextualized, and reincorporated into new contexts of use (re-entextualized).⁸ It is also the links across texts and contexts these processes produce. While these connections may take various forms, such processes always involve culturally specific patterns of transformation in order for the newly re-entextualized texts to count, in some way, as the “same” thing and, hence, as linked.⁹ Entextualization and re-entextualization are ongoing semiotic processes that occur and are construed within metadiscursive frames or ideologies that shape what counts as a text, how such texts can be evaluated, and who

produces and controls them. That not all texts are created equal—that some are better than others—is not just a literary judgment but also a social one, for, as Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban observe, “entextualization both reflects and constitutes asymmetrical social relations” (*Natural Histories*, 4).

Genre is a particularly important mechanism for creating interdiscursive links. Building on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Richard Bauman refers to genre as “a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text.”¹⁰ In this way, the formal features that distinguish particular genres—in English, for example, the use of iambic pentameter, the opening sequence “Once upon a time,” the repetition of particular rhyming patterns—must recur across instances of that genre in order for them to count as belonging to it. For those who both produce and encounter particular texts, such formal features will be markers that signal not only what type of text it is but also how it should be taken up (with humor, scorn, awe, and so on). Relative adherence to generic prescriptions will be tied to “hierarchies of value and taste (which genres are evaluated as relatively higher, better, more beautiful, more moral) and to the social regimentations of access to particular generic forms (who can learn them, master them, own them, perform them, and to what effect).”¹¹ Lauren Berlant emphasizes the emotional and variable nature of people’s encounters with genre, defining it as “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme.”¹²

Vernacular poetry as a genre and social activity operates within hierarchies of taste that set it apart from literary canons in standardized languages, such that it is generally evaluated according to aesthetic judgments based on perceptions of authenticity. Its acceptance as a valid and potentially pleasurable social activity may be enabled at least in part because its forms appear culturally “rooted” and are judged stereotypically in relation to “authentic” performance contexts. Authenticity is a value system built on evidencing connections between authors and identifiable places and histories, as well as particular material settings, practices, and objects. Bakhtin claimed that “poetry always behaves as if it lived in the heartland of its own language territory, and does not approach too closely the borders of this language.”¹³ This is perhaps most true of vernacular poetry, which is what Roman Jakobson called “auto-referential,” pointing to the form of the message as well as to its content.¹⁴ The form of vernacular poetry must, perforce, be vernacular—that is, constructed out of nonstandard ways of using language associated with a particular community of use. Vernacular poetry, then, always belongs to some group and is sometimes held up as evidence of the distinctiveness of that group. At the same time, there is often debate

within these communities about which forms of their vernacular are the best, most authentic, or most suited to poetry.

Vernacular poetry, often called dialectal poetry, in Italy has been studied by historians and literary critics and extensively anthologized, generally from a perspective that compares it to poetry in Standard Italian.¹⁵ Against the prestige of poetry written in Standard Italian, the language of the *tre corone* or three crowns of Italian literature (Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio), vernacular poetry is often dismissed as provincial, small-minded, and trivial, concerned with everyday worries and themes and rarely able to address the more grand universal concerns.¹⁶ As Franco Brevini, in the introduction to one such anthology put it, vernacular literature (*letterature dialettali*), poetry especially, has had “the task of keeping the door open toward descriptions which lacked stylization and idealization, to bring to the page the comic, the economic, the everyday, the popular.”¹⁷ Vernacular poetry, in other words, is seen as an entextualization process that includes certain topics and perspectives, but not others. It is also more straightforward and immediate than Italian poetry in this reckoning, providing a window onto a culturally specific world without the distortions of “stylization” and “idealization.” Providing the metadiscursive frame for these processes, Brevini observes that this tendency has had as much to do with the “instruments” themselves as anything else, as historically the vernaculars were close to everyday reality, while Standard Italian was removed from the mundane and quotidian, suggesting a neat fit of form to function. Brevini, then, sees the interdiscursive links between everyday speaking in the so-called dialects, and poetry written in them, as based in their co-occurrence, which in turn is taken as evidence that dialect poetry is different from poetry in Italian. That is, dialect poetry is what it is because of how dialect is and has been used in everyday life. Poetry in Italian is different from dialect poetry at least in part because Italian historically was not a medium of quotidian communication, something that has changed only since the 1950s. Observations such as Brevini’s naturalize links across linguistic forms—their deployment, semantic or topical content, and hierarchies of prestige that orchestrate their use—and may obscure the historical and political circumstances that contribute to what seem to be simply differences of genre. Briggs and Bauman observe that “by virtue of the profound social and ideological associations of genres, hierarchies of genres are tied to social hierarchies.”¹⁸ The social and political hierarchies that ranked Italian as more prestigious, more universal, and more fit to be a uniting, national language also shape generic hierarchies that anchor vernacular genres to particular culturally specific locales.

Social hierarchies in Italy, then, rank Italian speakers higher than dialect speakers, but these social mappings are also rooted in long-standing regional distinctions.¹⁹ Who you are has long been equated with where you

are from in Italy, via a cluster of associations among place, cultural practices, political leanings, and linguistic difference that is usually referred to as *campanilismo*—the assumption that everyone who lives within sight of the same *campanile* (bell tower, usually attached to the church) is in some essentialized way “the same.” Regional valences have long played an important role in establishing and evaluating poetic forms, even as Italian has been the most prestigious literary language in the country since the canonization of the *tre corone*.²⁰ Some vernacular literary traditions, such as those of Milan and Sicily, enjoy certain levels of prestige in Italy. However, the vernacular poetry written in the town and province of Bergamo—a densely populated and prosperous area in the north close to Milan—has not enjoyed the same distinction as other regional forms.²¹ Bergamasco poetry is almost never included in anthologies of vernacular poetry and is often dismissed by outsiders (and some Bergamascos themselves) as petty, provincial, and not very good. In its poetry, as in most other things, Bergamo is considered narrow-minded, backward, peasant, and unsophisticated. As such, Bergamasco poetry offers an intriguing case of a genre and vernacular tradition that struggles to construct its value against dominant hierarchies of taste and according to specific local aesthetic values. My goal here is not to recuperate Bergamasco poetry as “good” but to examine the evaluative protocols that mediate its restricted circulation.

Apparently incapable of addressing universal poetic themes without coloring them with provincial particularities, vernacular poetry traditions like Bergamo’s find value in their authenticity, a metadiscursive evaluative frame grounded in overlapping referential, indexical, and poetic links to particular places, culturally important events, local histories, specific families, and historically salient professions. What I mean is that vernacular poetry may both represent these cultural traditions, places, and ways of living and also take place within them—poetry may be recited at particular events or may commemorate a particular person or happening, for instance. The use of a particular phrase may recall a culturally important song or person, may resound of a site where it was originally spoken.

Authenticity is frequently placed on an axis of evaluation different from status or prestige; linguistic anthropological and sociolinguistic scholarship has often differentiated between status and solidarity, prestige and intimacy.²² In Italy, the potency of local places and their relative positioning vis-à-vis the (allegedly) placeless and national values and histories play an essential part in such fields of meaning. Contrasts between alignment with particular places and the histories and values associated with those places—generally expressed as possessing not only “authenticity” but also “realness” or tradition—and alignment with the nation and its lack of emplacedness permeate everyday speaking.²³ Whether individuals sound smart or sexy,

stupid or scintillating in conversation has everything to do with how they locate themselves within particular speaking contexts on a continuum between sounding anchored in Bergamo—in their code selection, accent, turn of phrase, or choice of word—and sounding “Italian” and relatively unmoored from such indexical emplacements.

In Italian vernacular poetry, interdiscursive connections to place often trump other evaluative bases. Indeed, a commentator during a poetry festival I attended in the early 2000s described vernacular poetry as “una pura espressione geografica.” These connections to place—as a means of demonstrating authenticity—may be direct and referential, as indicated in the numerous Bergamasco poems that describe a particular location, such as the *Città Alta* (Upper City; the historic city center), an enduringly popular topic. These links are also achieved at least in part through processes of embodied entextualization. I mean this in two senses. First, there are entextualized—in the sense of represented—bodies. As is common in many poetic traditions, bodies play a central role in Bergamasco poetry. Lips, hands, cheeks, bellies, brows: all are commonly found in numerous forms of poetry, often playing metonymic or other symbolic roles. What is important here is that these bodies are entextualized according to particular aesthetic, generic, and cultural norms, and thus should be particular types of bodies, engaged in the right types of activities, located within the right types of places, both social and geographical. In Bergamo, the bodies that are entextualized in poems frequently align with a particular stereotypical depiction of Bergamascos as hardworking male peasants or manual laborers.²⁴ These may or may not be the bodies of particular individuals, but they are “typed” as Bergamasco bodies, with big hands, strong backs, and deep rough voices. Second, in Bergamo, verbal poetry performance is the most valued form of poetic engagement. Thus, bodies produce texts, in the sense that they both write and recite them, as it is nearly always the poets themselves who recite their own poetry. These two processes of embodied entextualization dovetail in that the best poets are those whose own bodies are most harmoniously entextualized, that is, when the bodies represented in the poems *and* the bodies producing the poems align with this common stereotype, most often in the self-depiction of the performing body itself. I will demonstrate this process by looking closely at one poet and poem in depth, but I will first give an overview of Bergamasco poetry as a social practice and process more generally.

Entextualizing Bodies

In Bergamo, poetry consumption is rarely an individual, private practice. People there may own poetry books, lined up on their bookshelves

alongside other texts evidencing their positive orientation toward their place and language, such as bulky Bergamasco-Italian dictionaries, locally published recipe books, or even collections of the most common local surnames. In the course of my research in Bergamo, I discovered that local poets and other residents make a point of collecting texts in their vernacular, including volumes of poetry. But the act of privately reading a book of poetry, even individual poems, is rare. Instead, poetry is a social activity, best accomplished with a poet reciting his (or her, but generally his) poems to an appreciative audience. In newspapers and on websites, one can track a florescence of public poetry events since the 1990s. These include poetry competitions (more than a dozen yearly competitions just in the province of Bergamo since 2000), individual or group recitals, sometimes as one component of larger social events, like celebratory banquets. The poem I discuss here, for instance, was often recited at informal social gatherings held in the homes of friends of the poet or at community events, such as meetings of a local Alpine club, or during festivals for a locally important saint's day.

Poetry recitals similar to these are well documented in Bergamo since at least the 1920s, though they became less frequent between the 1940s and 1990s. Articles from the 1920s and '30s in a local cultural newspaper, *Giopi*, describe gatherings that involved poets declaiming their verses over long dinners with plenty of food and wine, often composing them on the spot, poet answering poet as a raucous audience called out their appreciation or critique.²⁵ The origin story of the community's leading cultural organization, which has published *Giopi* since the 1920s, includes not only numerous poets orating but also a now rather muddled story about the coronation of the first formal leader of their organization, the so-called *Duca* (duke), which involved the construction of an impromptu crown assembled from napkins, menus, and rolled up pills of bread to adorn each peak of the crown. When two of them fell off in the middle of the improvised ceremony, they were quickly reattached with pieces of string to hang from the crown, symbolizing male genitalia and mirroring the male nature of both the activities and the group, acting as a type of "priapic icon," perhaps reassuring, authenticating, boasting, adding humor to a persistent social exclusivity. An image of this crown is now incorporated into the group's insignia, appearing on the front page of *Giopi* and elsewhere. The exaggerated seriousness with which I was told this story, on more than one occasion, belies how raucous and ridiculous these events probably were, but it also indicated that there were restrictions on who could properly participate and who could not. The repetition of this account and its centrality in the origin story—and continuing self-identification—of this locally-important cultural organization also hint at how much the bodies of those participants matter. It seems

no coincidence that there has never been a female *Duca*—indeed, I was often told that such a thing would be impossible—nor have women served in other prominent leadership positions in the organization, which remains, in many ways, the same old-boys club that created and elevated this priapic icon to represent themselves.

The link between male bodies and Bergamasco poetry was further clarified in a variety of ways: explicitly, as a local expert on the vernacular told me that women cannot be real poets because they cannot feel things deeply enough, gesturing toward his own body to indicate where such feelings originate and should reside. This link was highlighted implicitly as well, such as during a private conversation with a literature professor who had just served on a jury for a vernacular poetry contest that gave the award to a woman, when he told me that they had done it just to shake things up, because it was unexpected, explicitly *not* because of the value of her verse. The link was clear in the paucity of women writing poetry, a few of whom seemed to have achieved model minority or mascot status but were rarely, if ever, recognized as experts or included in lists of important Bergamasco poets.

These indexical, referential, and interdiscursive connections between maleness and the poetry of Bergamo are consonant with recurring stereotypical representations of Bergamasco-ness as maleness: when Bergamasco figures appear in national media, in television commercials or comedy sketches, they are male; for the people themselves, the quintessential Bergamasco figure is a (male) shepherd in a mountain meadow, attending to his flock. Maleness—in a culturally specific embodied semiotics—becomes a crucial part of the metadiscursive frame within which Bergamasco poetry takes shape and is evaluated. Poets' bodies, in other words, should be male bodies, which produce the right types of texts, properly frequent the right types of contexts, and are “naturally” built to feel and express themselves in the right ways.

Bodies Entextualized

Whether male or female, only Bergamascos produce authentic Bergamasco poetry, indexically anchoring those texts to particular places; a past in those places as indicated by personal or generational continuity (and the ability to say, for instance, “my grandfather” or “my great-grandfather” about certain characters in those texts); and knowledge of practices and objects that are specific to that place. Bergamasco poetry also abounds with references to specific objects, such as knitting needles, ironsmithing tools, and shepherd's crooks, some specific to Bergamo, many not, but all put to particular uses by particular people. The bodies in Bergamasco poems,

in other words, are rarely generic, but rather specific, bodies, if not named, then drawn in culturally recognizable particularity, situated in part through their use of familiar objects or participation in culturally valued practices.

These bodies should be close to the poet, sharing a connection of contiguity created by kinship, shared residence, friendship, or at least shared place. Grandmothers and other predecessors, famous heroes and bandits, and locally important characters such as those drawn from the *Commedia dell'Arte* make frequent appearances in Bergamasco poems. They are generally depicted as engaged in some sort of physical activity: knitting, mountain climbing, herding sheep, cooking, and so on. For instance, in a recent issue of *Giopi*, on the page always dedicated to Bergamasco poetry, a poem entitled “Stasira ‘L Brèmb” (Tonight on the Brembo [a local river]) included the description: “Là ést fomne sō la rìa a làa i pagn, inzenöciade zó sura i pedàgn” (There are women on the river bank washing clothes, kneeling on top of their skirts). Another described the hard labor that went into building a mountain path, recounting the work of “portà sàbia a spala e ‘l cement” (carrying sand on the shoulders and cement).²⁶ There is no need for the poet to name the women on the riverbank, because they are culturally, if not personally, recognizable, undertaking what was once a common task for women who lived along the Brembo. The workers carrying the sand and the cement include the poet himself, as he remembers with fondness and pride the difficult physical labor that led to the current possibility of enjoying this mountain path.

Hard work, especially manual labor as in these examples, is one important means through which representations of people are grounded in particular places, especially places of work (meadows, mountains, and riverbanks, as well as mills and forges). These places include domestic locations, like the kitchen and hearth, and specific geographical locations associated with particular types of work, such as towns in the mountains in the north of the province known for their textile factories (now almost entirely shuttered). Many of these are, historically, gendered types of work, as shepherding, ironworking, and labor in the mills were almost entirely done by men. Some, such as work in textile factories or the fields, was done by both genders, while women were almost entirely responsible for domestic labor, like cooking and childcare. To whatever degree hard work is a nongendered value for Bergamascos—they regularly recognize and praise the hard work of both genders—the types of work most associated with men are also those most associated with the stereotypical Bergamasco. Indeed, one of the most frequent recurring images of people from this province (in poetry, but also in a range of other genres) is that of laboring male bodies: men who work with their hands and shoulders, wielding hammers, herding sheep, hauling sand and cement.

Most highly valued locally are poets who most closely embody these connections themselves, whose own bodies appear in and are the focus of their poetry. This is especially true of laboring bodies, poets' bodies that are or have engaged in physical, manual work, such that connections across texts, bodies, and places are direct, as the poet writes of his own experience in a Bergamasco place, undertaking Bergamasco activities. Again, not all of these bodies are male, but many of them, and especially those engaged in what are understood to be the most typically Bergamasco activities, are. Such characterological figures, to use Asif Agha's term, in turn find their meaning, at least in part, in becoming decontextualized and detached from particular people and circulating—in everyday speech, across mass media, and into poetic verse.²⁷ It is the recurrence of such figures, located in particular known locales, and their interdiscursive reproduction in poetry that helps to produce this poetry as "authentic," successfully anchored within a local place and its history. Agha argues that it is through such processes of decontextualization, circulation, and recontextualization—often via mass media—that characterological figures such as folk stereotypes, like those associated with British Received Pronunciation, are reinforced and become widely known. Indeed, poetry is one of the realms in which Bergamascos forge and reinforce these links, valorizing the activities that they often portray, in poetry and elsewhere, as most characteristic of themselves.

Poetry in/as Social Action

Let's turn now to look at a poem written and recited by Piero Frér, a (semi)retired ironsmith who was often described to me and to audiences for whom he performed as "a true Bergamasco poet." Although he was not the most widely known poet of the region when I knew him, as by then he was rarely publishing, he still frequently read his poetry at community and social events, such as the gathering of friends at a mountain *cassina* (farmhouse) at which I recorded this poem.²⁸ At seventy, Piero Frér's body carried multiple traces of the hard physical labor that had been his life's work, most strikingly in his gnarled arthritic hands and feet. Although no one ever said so directly to me, I believe this physical evidence of a life of labor was why the following poem, "I Mé Pé" (My feet), was one of his most popular and often requested.²⁹

I Mé Pé

(Bergamasco)

Quando che sére ü zùen, i mé pé
 A i éra bèi . . . ma bèi . . . de là de
 bèi . . .

My Feet

(English)

When I was a young man, my feet
 Were beautiful . . . but beautiful . . . beyond
 beautiful . . .

Stèss di cane de l'òrghen de la césa
Facc sò a scala: perfècc, pròpe zòmèi
De dovrà de modèi per ù scültùr
E per disègn 'n de stòde d'ù pitùr.

Same as the organ pipes in the church
Made up to scale: perfect twins
As if they were models for a sculpture,
Studies for a painting.

Gh'ère i dicc lóng e drécc e füsölàcc,
E i se mûia compàgn ch'i föss di mà:
Püdie ciapà 'n di dicc fina la pèna
E scriv bèl tónd, senza gna mai sbaglià,
E püdie stà sò i ponte di mé pé
Pròpe stèss de la Fracci... o zó de lé.

The toes were long and straight and shapely
And when they moved they could be taken for hands
I could even hold a pen in those toes
And write beautifully, with never an error
And I could stand on the bridge of my feet
Really just as Fracci³⁰... or even more.

Mé curìe a pé nüd sira e matina
De sima a fònd de tôte ste contrade,
E sènsa mai pròa gna ù dulturì
Anche a ciapà de bròte sigolade.
Püdie infilà i scarpe come ù guant...
E, ai mé pé, ghe ùlie pròpe é tant.

I ran on my bare feet evening and morning
From the top to the bottom of all these streets,
And without ever suffering even the smallest of pains
Nor brutal stubbings to mar them.
I could slip on shoes like putting on a glove
And I loved my feet, I wished them well.

Adèss i ròbe i s'è tûte cambiade:
I dicc i è slargàcc fò, quase òn'entàia;
Fiache, cai e dÛrù 'mpó sura e sòta;
E 'nfina tôte e ónge i me se scàia...
I va decòrde sèmpèr tra de lur
Dóma per cassà fò... impó de udùr.

Now, all is changed completely:
The toes have widened out, almost a fan;
Slow, whining and hardened a bit above and below;
And the nails even splinter on me...
They never get along amongst themselves
Except to throw my way... a bit of odor.

I me fa sènt d'ùlùr "scapa diàol!";
Û l'völ indà de ché, l'óter de là;
Chèl mansì a l' me döl a la matina
E l'óter a la sira l'fa cridà;
E cae fò i scarpe con d'ù tal fastòde
Che pròpe i pé i m'è vegnìcc in òde.

They make me feel pain "Devil Begone!";
One of them wants to go here, the other go there;
That left one gives me pain in the morning
And the other makes me cry out in the evening;
And getting off my shoes is such a pain
I'm actually beginning to hate my feet.

A la sira me slónghe sura 'l lècc
E i mète còmocc sura ù gran cüssì,
Pò ghe fò sò sta béla romanzina:
"Ve recomande tant... lassim durmì!";
e 'ntat con d'òna mà, èco, i carènse
e ai dé passàt e a tót ol rèst a pènse...

At night I lay myself down to bed
And lay them comfortably on a big pillow
Then I tell them a good night story:
"I mean it, really... let me sleep!";
Meanwhile with one hand, there, there, I caress them
and I think of the days past and all the rest...

A pènse ch'i è nassìcc apròf,
Cressìcc tòcc du pròpe 'n de stèss
ambiènt,
E crède che a capì sto cambiàmènt
No l' sièss gnamò riàt che tal sapiènt...

To think that they were born together,
Grew up both of them in the same place,
I believe that to understand this change
Doesn't take a wise man...

Opör i fa pò a lur compàgn de mé:
Urmai i è dré... a ragiunà co i pé.

After all, maybe they're just like me:
At any rate, it's up to me... to reason with my feet.³¹

There are many reasons why "I Mé Pé" is regarded as an especially good—and especially Bergamasco—poem. Most obviously, it is written entirely in the vernacular, and contains a number of vernacular idioms and

plays on words.³² Turns of phrase, like referring to stubbing his toes as “sigolade,” a play on the Bergamasco word for onions, received much appreciation as acute instances of older terms that have fallen into disuse. The use of particularly Bergamasco phrases, such as Frér’s advice to his feet, “Ve racomande tant . . .” (I mean it / I’m telling you)—a phrase that a mother says often to a child, or that may begin the words of advice an elder dispenses—sounded cozy, homelike, and familiar to his listeners, who could hear their own voices and those of their loved ones saying the same phrases.³³ The poem deals humorously with a serious subject: getting old and the physical difficulties that accompany this process. Humor is not unique to Frér’s poem; in fact it is common to Bergamasco poetry in general, and laughter is both a common and an accepted response.

This playfulness extends to gender, as well, as the poem paints a sharp visual contrast between the grace and strength of a ballerina’s feet and the old arthritic blacksmith’s smelly extremities. While his own masculine body remains at the center of the poem, the poet uses this and other potentially feminine images—addressing his feet as a mother would a child, caressing them in a tender, perhaps motherly gesture—to illustrate the dissimilarities between what his feet once were and what they are today.³⁴ In his words, gender becomes another tool for marking difference, used humorously, as a joke that reinforces, or at least does not compromise, the poet’s maleness by calling on its opposites.

“I Mé Pé” is also situated in a particular place and time(s): the *Città Alta* during the poet’s lifetime. The *Città Alta*, a potent sociogeographical symbol of local identity that is commonly reported by Bergamascos to be the best and most beautiful thing about Bergamo, is a common topic in their poetry. Piero Frér’s poem stands out in that it describes a lived relationship to this place; more common is the tendency to describe the *Città Alta* in aesthetic terms, as if it were “ü quàder” (a painting) or “sura ü pedestal” (upon a pedestal), as other Bergamasco poets have described it. Although there are no place names in the poem, it is clear that Piero Frér is talking about a specific place, a place with which his audience will be familiar, the “same place” in which he and his feet grew up together. He refers to “all these streets” (töte ste contrade) that he ran down as a child, as if pointing them out to his listeners, remembering how he used to run, and indicating the streets down which he no longer can. The morning and night, when he used to run as a child, are contrasted with the pains that his feet give him now at those times. The outside arenas in which his feet used to carry him so effortlessly are compared to the private atmospheres in which he suffers the pain of his feet now: “sura l’ lècc” (on the bed) as he tells them a bedtime story, just as he would tell his own children or grandchildren.

Piero Frér's feet afford an especially embodied view of past and present due to the evident material changes they have undergone, as he reflects on the agility, speed, and beauty his feet possessed in youth and compares these apparent advantages of youth to the pain and deformities that afflict his feet now. No causes for his feet having changed are mentioned except the passage of time. However, Piero Frér's feet and hands had both by that time become painfully arthritic and misshapen through decades of hard work in his forge. Knowing him personally, hearing him recite his poems, meant also knowing his feet, seeing the specially fashioned shoes he wore and witnessing the slow, painful shuffle that was his gait when he wrote and recited this poem. His feet seemed to be material evidence of life spent in the forge, a fact reflected as well in his nom de plume: *Frér* (ironsmith). His age and the wisdom that it provides are connected to the physical pain of his body. His feet are portrayed as agents of their own, which he must cajole and treat tenderly. They are him, a synecdoche of the poet himself, but, like any body as it grows old, they have changed in their relationship to his own desires and abilities: carrying him fleetly in youth and proving stubborn and difficult in old age.

"I Mé Pé" also relies extensively on vivid descriptions of the physical world. Clear, down-to-earth physical descriptions are common in Bergamasco poetry, a fact that supports the idea that the vernacular itself is particularly suited to quotidian types of activities. Comparing his feet first to organ pipes, long and straight, and describing them later as widening into "almost a fan," listeners are provided with physical descriptions that ground his images humorously in reality. Piero repeatedly refers to his feet in concrete physical terms: they are "nüd" (nude, bare), they tend to "throw odor" at him (*cassà fò . . . impó de udür*), and he puts them on "ü gran cüssi" (a large cushion). His feet, when he/they were young, could have been confused for hands, "mà," and they could hold anything, even a pen. He contrasts this youthful image with how "slow, whining and hardened a bit above and below" (*Fiache, cai e dürù 'mpó sura e sòta*) they have become, down to the toenails, which have begun to splinter. His shoes, instead of slipping on and off "like a glove" (*come ü guant*) as they did in his youth, in old age cause such pain or annoyance ("fastöde") that the poet has come to almost hate his feet.

But why feet and not hands? Certainly ironsmithing is intensely manual work, and a poet must work with his hands as he puts pen to paper, as Piero always did. Hands were the tools of his trade and would have provided a more straightforward metaphor for this labor and the changes of getting old—his hands were also painfully arthritic by this time in his life. Perhaps this is one of the "twists" of this poem, as it focuses on mobility and the long ago ability to run against the necessity of shuffling now. Pens and gloves,

things that belong in and on hands, help to emphasize the former virtuosity of his feet (and himself) in contrast to the slowness that has come with age.

Another Bergamasco hallmark notable in “I Mé Pé” is a relatively simple poetic form. The rhymes and metric system of the poem are relatively uncomplicated, though consistent. The rhyme scheme for each of the seven stanzas is the same: ABCBDD. Many of the rhymes revolve around “pé” (feet), the central theme of the poem. The metric structure is *endecasillabo* (eleven syllables), a classic form in both Bergamasco and Italian poetry. This form traditionally demands that line-internal stresses fall either on the fourth, sixth, and tenth syllables; the fourth, seventh, and tenth syllables; or just the tenth syllable. Piero Frér mostly adheres to this structure, but he is not overly strict with it, as he is not always faithful to the dictate that the stressed syllable of the final word be the last counted syllable of that line. While the printed artifact/transcript suggests a lax attitude toward the strict rules about poetic structure, Piero Frér’s recorded performance demonstrates the centrality of verbal recitation, for, as he recited the poem, all the structures and rhymes lined up and were smoothly resolved. The spoken form clearly takes precedence over the written form in this, as in all of Piero Frér’s poetry.

To press the metaphor, it is not just his own feet or the feet in the poem that need and receive care from the poet but also the (metrical) feet of the poem. In his performance, Piero Frér cajoles the metrical feet to align perfectly, treating them tenderly so that they behave as they should, with not a rhyme out of place. Perhaps here, within the realm of the poem, he can still hold sway over these often-rebellious feet, ordering the poetic structure through his performance as he would once have bent molten iron into whatever shape he desired. Through perfectly placed pauses, slyly effected emphases, rising and falling pitch and volume, Piero Frér knit together a poetically perfect whole, eliciting appreciative laughter—and occasional sympathetic sighs—from his friendly audiences the many times I saw him perform it, including the performance at the mountain *cassina* at which I recorded the version presented here.

Indeed, this is one of the most indicative and definitive aspects of how “authentic” and thus “good” this poem is judged to be, as this performative aspect of the poem is essential to its—and Piero Frér’s—*Bergamaschità* (Bergamasco-ness). In addition to the elements of the poem itself, “I Mé Pé” and the other poems of his own that he recited that day at the *cassina* seemed especially Bergamasco due to the setting in which they were performed and shared; they “fit,” like the shoe on the foot or the glove on a hand. Bergamascos consider gathering with friends and family for a large meal on Sunday afternoon to be very traditional, as it is in many parts of Italy, an activity that in Bergamo is most properly executed if there is polenta and

red wine, a large group around the table, and at least one poet at the head of it to stand up and perform for the group, give them something to talk about, and make them laugh. Piero Frér's audience wanted to hear him perform, to see the expression on his face as he did so, and to be able to raise their glasses to him as he finished. The written form of his poems mattered little in this context (though, of course, a number of them may have had a book of his poems at home in their bookcases); it is the experience of shared sociality through its performance that was most important.

All of these elements—the poem's content and imagery, its location in a particular time and place, its humor, its metric structure, the flexibility of its rhyme scheme aligned through Piero Frér's verbal performance, as well as the settings in which I recorded various iterations of this poem—are part of why many Bergamascos I know considered this an authentic and good poem, and so often requested that he recite it.³⁵ But central to this evaluation is also the presence of Piero Frér's body in the poem—with its traces of hard, manual labor extensively evidenced—as well as the alignment of the body in the poem with the body of the poet. Piero Frér's poem is good, in other words, because it is *una pura espressione geografica* (a pure geographic expression), expressed via the body depicted as grounded in that place. Through this entextualized and entextualizing body, this and other of Piero's poems are rendered authentic and, thus, good.

Authentication as a Cultural Process

In conducting research among people who are so focused on and engaged with establishing, defining, and producing authenticity, it is perhaps not surprising not only that I would become equally interested in such processes but also that I would risk engaging in them myself. This is, of course, one of the things that I have done here, by focusing on Piero Frér and his poetry and presenting them both as representative—authentic—examples of Bergamasco poets and their practices. But I think this focus also helps to reveal an essential intertextual gap that characterizes processes of embodied entextualization. Because, surprisingly, Piero Frér is—or was, as he passed away in 2001—the exception: most Bergamasco poets, from the 1920s until today, have not been peasants or members of the working class, nor have they possessed the types of hardworking bodies that are so often represented and valorized in the vernacular poetry of the region. They have been elites or, more recently, members of the middle class, mostly older men who are settling comfortably into retirement. This poor fit between the bodies valorized in poetry and the bodies that produce it provokes a reflection in

turn on why poetry has, since the 1920s, been regarded as the means through which the vernacular itself would be saved. It must be observed that the vernacular was in no danger in the 1920s, when all Bergamascos, across classes, spoke it, and only those in the educated and elite classes spoke Italian as well. Since that time, however, those actively involved in cultural production, such as poets, have been looking backward in search of the authentic, at times turning their coevals into holdovers from a nostalgic past of hard work. Looking to the past to anchor authentication processes is a common practice in linguistic and cultural heritage salvage or revitalization projects, as the past is often held up against the present as the location of perceived cultural purity, political simplicity, or social homogeneity: “Once upon a time, we were . . .”³⁶ Such simplifications of the past grafted onto the present erase as much as they highlight, in this case producing a gap between entextualized and entextualizing bodies that complicates Bergamasco efforts to produce poetry that is at once authentic and good according to their own, as well as other, hierarchies of value and taste.

Poetry in Bergamo, at least from a certain angle, seems to be everywhere and flourishing, and indeed is often pointed at—especially to the interested ethnographer—as one of the most important means through which the local vernacular is being safeguarded. Its value as an authentic genre depends on poets’ and audience’s “emotional attachment to aesthetic forms” or what Anthony Webster calls “feelingful iconicity,” that is, “the felt attachments that accrue to expressive forms” that are anchored to particular places via the laboring bodies that inhabit them.³⁷ Seen from within the generic hierarchy that abides in Italian scholarly debate that values abstraction or universal, cosmopolitan values, however, Piero Frér’s poem is not “good” precisely because of these connections to particular places and the particularity of the body that appears within it. While I have never discussed this particular poem or poet with Italian literary scholars and could not say for sure that it would be dismissed out of hand, the clear distinctions drawn between volumes of or contests of vernacular poetry and that of just simply “poetry” (in Italian, that is), as well as the many conversations I’ve had about this topic, indicate that the provincialisms that make it so “authentic” and good within Bergamasco aesthetic systems are what exclude it from being considered “real” poetry within Italian ones.³⁸

Indeed, perhaps it is the mediating role of specific places vis-à-vis these entextualized bodies that can help us unpack the unwavering critique of Bergamasco poetry in general as not “good” or at least not “real” poetry (not to be confused with authentic poetry), unfit, for example, for inclusion in anthologies like Brevini’s *La Poesia in Dialetto* (Poetry in dialect). Since at least the time of Italian Unification, when the linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli noted that now that they had made Italy, they would have to make Italians,

Italians have worried about the potent role played by local places in grounding notions of identity, affiliation, history, and politics. Poetry, in one reckoning at least, is supposed to marry the universals of human experience with the particularities of individual lives. Bergamasco poetry uses the lens of local experience to filter perspectives on universals mediated through particular types of experiencing bodies. This is Piero Frér's body, and feet that once ran down those streets and now pain him and throw odors his way.

But they are also, and perhaps more saliently, the feet of a blacksmith, a vaunted Bergamasco profession of strength and manual virtuosity, that traced their path in the recognizable confines of the *Città Alta*, a particularly treasured Bergamasco place. The metrical feet that he tends to so tenderly are in his own vernacular, indexing his personal and familial history in Bergamo without reference to the nation-state within which it is located. As such, Piero Frér's poem points to a set of very specific cultural values and practices, just as affiliations to particular local places are seen to insert themselves problematically between individual citizens and the Italian state. Ongoing political struggles, then, help to shape the aesthetic frame within which vernacular poetry is dismissed as authentic and provincial. An ethno-poetic approach to poetry and poets like this may help us understand a group's feel for good or bad poems and reveal the potential of poetry to function as a type of social action, with particular risks, challenges, and rewards. At the same time, an analytical focus on the particular connections between bodies and texts may help us to understand how particular aesthetic systems not only are grounded in culturally specific ways of feeling but are also linked to broader sociopolitical structures and histories.

Notes

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1. For discussions of culturally specific evaluation, see Richard Bauman, *A World of Others' Words: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Intertextuality* (Malden, MA, 2004), 14; Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You* (Philadelphia, 1981), 337–41; and Anthony Webster, "Cultural Poetics (Ethnopoetics)," in *Oxford Online Handbook of Linguistics* (New York, 2015), 3, 5–7.

2. Franz Boas, *Introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages* [1911] (Cambridge, 2013), Edward Sapir, "The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society," originally published in E. S. Dummer, ed., *The Unconscious: A Symposium* (New York, 1929), reprinted in *Language, Culture, and Society*, ed. Ben Blount (Prospect Heights, IL, 1995) (Long Grove, IL, 1995). See also how these are discussed, for example, in Jane H. Hill and Bruce Mannheim, "Language and World View," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 383–406.
3. Jillian R. Cavanaugh, *Living Memory: The Social Aesthetics of Language in a Northern Italian Town* (Malden, MA, 2009), as discussed in chap. 4.
4. I base my evaluations of "good poetry" on various sources to which I had access during my extensive ethnographic fieldwork in northern Italy. This included attending and reading about (in local newspapers) local poetry contests; discussing poetry with local experts; talking at length with local poets; collecting and reading numerous published collections of poetry; as well as tracking my own responses to poems as I became more and more acquainted with aesthetic systems of evaluating poetry.
5. Paul Friedrich, "The Culture in Poetry and the Poetry in Culture," in *Culture/Contexture*, ed. Daniel Valentine and Jeffrey Peck (Berkeley, 1996), 55, and Steven Caton, "Peaks of Yemen I Summon": *Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (Berkeley, 1990), 250.
6. I am intentionally using *connections* to imply a range of semiotic phenomena, such as indexical presupposition and entailment, contextual co-occurrence, and interdiscursive chains. I'm grateful to Anthony Webster, with whom I formulated this anthropological view of poetry.
7. Judith T. Irvine, "Shadow Conversations: The Indeterminacy of Participant Roles," in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago, 1996), 131.
8. While the terms *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality* are sometimes used interchangeably, they are distinct in that *intertextuality* generally refers to connections across and among texts, while *interdiscursivity* is a broader term that encompasses connections among text and speech events.
9. See Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, "Genre, Intertextuality and Social Power," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1992): 131–32 for an important discussion of these processes.
10. Richard Bauman, "Genre," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2000): 84.
11. *Ibid.*, 86.
12. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, 2008), 4.
13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), 399.
14. Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 350–73.
15. Such as, for instance, in Luigi Bonaffini and Achille Serrao, ed., *Dialect Poetry of Northern and Central Italy: Texts and Criticism* (Brooklyn, 2001).
16. What counts as vernacular may always be both relative and situated within a particular historical moment. When Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were writing, the form(s) in which they wrote were considered vernacular against the standard of the day, Latin.
17. Franco Brevini, *La Poesia in Dialetto. Storie e Testi dalle Origini al Novecento* (Milan, 1999), xxx. This and all translations are my own.

18. Briggs and Bauman, "Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power," 597. For discussions of this point, see the works in Silverstein and Urban, *Natural Histories of Discourse*.
19. While nearly all Italians now speak Italian, a shift that occurred on a large scale only in the 1950s and '60s, roughly 60 percent of them also speak local vernaculars. Istituto Nazionale di Statistico (ISTAT), *La lingua italiana, i dialetti e le lingue straniere. Statistiche in breve. Famiglia e Società* (Rome, 2007).
20. The establishment of a unified Italian language, generally called *la questione della lingua* (the language question), has been written about extensively. For a comprehensive overview see Tullio De Mauro's *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita* (Bari, 1972), or a more condensed one see Cavanaugh, *Living Memory*, 14–16.
21. I have carried out ethnographic and linguistic anthropological fieldwork in Bergamo since 1999.
22. This binary view has been rightly critiqued for potentially simplifying what might be a more complex field of selection and meaning-making. See for example Kathryn Woolard, *Double Talk: Bilingualism and the Politics of Ethnicity in Catalonia* (Stanford, 1989).
23. Cavanaugh, *Living Memory*, chap. 2.
24. Jillian R. Cavanaugh, "Accent Matters: Material Consequences of Sounding Local in Northern Italy," *Language and Communication* 25, no. 2 (2005): 127–48.
25. On Tuscan poetic duals, which function similarly but occur in very different contexts, see Valentina Pagliari, "Lands I Came to Sing: Negotiating Identities and Places," in *Sociolinguistics: The Essential Readings*, ed. Christina Bratt Paulson and G. Richard Tucker (Malden, MA, 2003), 48–69. For analysis of a similar situation in Madagascar, see Haun Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies* (New York, 2016).
26. Poems by Serio Fezzoli and Don Alessandro Barcella, respectively, in *Giopi*, 1 June, number 11, year 123 (2016).
27. Asif Agha, "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 38–59.
28. In order to analyze aesthetic systems across cultural contexts, particularly in terms of poetry, anthropologists have often relied on their performance, as culturally specific and socially powerful moments in which, for instance, meter and rhyming schemes contributed to the efficaciousness of verbal language. See Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Long Grove, IL, 1984), for a seminal description of this approach.
29. Piero Fr er passed away in the summer of 2001, soon after my dissertation research ended.
30. Carla Fracci (b. 1936) is a renowned Italian ballerina.
31. The form of the poem you see here is transcribed from a recording I made that day, accompanied by consultation of a printed copy of the poem given to me by the poet. The English translation is my own.
32. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* (New York, 1986), discusses African poetry, stressing the absolute centrality of its being composed and recited in a local African language, not a colonial European language.
33. Indeed, voice seems an important aspect of how poetry is valued in verbal performances such as these. See Nicholas Harkness, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea* (Berkeley, 2013), which illustrates this point.

34. Although they may seem so to English readers, references to beauty do not necessarily carry gendered overtones in Bergamasco or Italian.
35. It is interesting to note that in terms of the type of authenticity I am arguing for here, the most authentic form of this poem lies in its many verbal recitations, not in some particular written form, as is often the case when a poem exists in a number of forms. In this case, the most authentic forms would be those that occurred in contexts that most closely meet the cultural expectations that involve friends and kin, food and drink, and a poet at the head of the table rather than those of larger, public settings.
36. In Bergamo, the other important literary genre, plays, are frequently set in an unspecified past, *d'öna ölta* (once upon a time). See Cavanaugh, *Living Memory*, 110.
37. David Samuels, *Putting a Song on Top of It: Expression and Identity on the San Carlos Apache Reservation* (Tucson, 2004), 11; and Anthony Webster, *Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics* (Albuquerque, 2009), 9.
38. This is an important and complicated question, tied as much to histories of language hierarchy as to contemporary politics, which exceeds the scope of this article.