

Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love: Exploring Shusterman's Writing Identity in the Discourse on the Art of Lovemaking and Body Aesthetics

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Abstract

*Standing in marked contrast with Foucauldian notion of “the care for the self” which seeks bodily pleasure by advocating violent practices of consensual homosexual sadomasochism and drugs, Shusterman’s *Ars Erotica* takes up the notion further by unveiling the idea of somaesthetics that alternatively favors such tranquil, less violent somatic practices as a pursuit of bodily pleasure and cultivation. Rich in its cross-cultural perspectives of how artistic body practices (including the art of love making) are cultivated, *Ars Erotica* combines important ideas from different philosophical traditions with literary works emanating from varied cultural, religious, and linguistic legacies. The mixture of both philosophy and literature in the book helps reconcile the long-standing disputes regarding the divide between the two scholarships, thus making Shusterman’s writing worthy of investigating. Drawing on these notions of aspects of identity – “self as author” and “discoursal self” (Ivanic, 1998), this article is an attempt to explore these aspects of identity. Thematic coding was used as a technique of data analysis. Findings revealed that aspects of identity can be categorized and suggested as follows: (1) taking control by evaluating while averring to reliable sources, (2) interfering credible sources by infusing personal positioning (3) translanguaging to create aesthetic textual postures.*

Keywords: *Ars Erotica, aspects of identity, self as author; discoursal self*

Article information

Received:
4 September
2024

Revised:
17 September
2024

Accepted:
1 October
2024

Introduction

The notion of aspects of identity such as *self as author* and *discoursal self* in writing has been deemed significant in composition scholarship, as by researching it we can reveal

writers’ agency in writing, their representation of self which is manifested in the written texts they produce (Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Shand & Konza, 2016; Park, 2023; Kobayashi & Rinnert 2023), as well as the individual and socially-

constructed nature of writing (Tardy, 2010). The production of texts, as Hyland (2010) contends, is always the production of self.

Self as author is defined by Ivanič (1998) as an identity reflected by the construction of a voice – the stances, opinions, and beliefs they wish to convey, while *discoursal self* refers to “the impression – often multiple, sometimes contradictory – which [writers] consciously or unconsciously convey of themselves in a particular written text” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). It is important to note here that identity is not simply a by-product of a discourse, be it dominant and non-dominant one, but it also has performative potential (see Hyland, 2011).

As for voice it is manifested in a varying degree; some writers take a full control of the contents of the writing, claiming authority of them by establishing an authorial presence, while other attribute them to other sources, treating knowledge as impersonal entities. Taking up the vital issue of voice in writing, Matsuda (2001) further defines voice as “the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users use, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever changing repertoires (p. 40). Tardy (2012) classifies self as author as individual aspect of voice, whereas discoursal self as social aspect of voice.

Recent studies on both aspects of identity in both academic and non-academic writing have indomitably cast important and constructive light into how writers represent their agency and identity in a considerably different manner depending on their language proficiency, rhetorical traditions, socio-cultural background, and ideology. Park (2023), for instance, has investigated how first-generation students of color exercised agency in writing by leveraging their social and discoursal identities. Using a translingual perspective in academic writing where students can integrate different discourses and forms of knowledge to confront the dominance of academic writing as a monolithic entity, Park (2023) found that what the students wrote was informed by their awareness of writing and awareness of themselves as writers and cultural beings (p. 227). This

finding generates important insights into the advancement of the notion of agency in writing.

In a similar vein, Kobayashi & Rinnert (2023) have carried out a study on the construction of identity of both Japanese novice student writers and skilled student writers, revealing that self as the aspect of identity is never static, but always in flux and dynamic, and is influenced by the topic and context of writing. Novice writers, as they have found out, have the tendency to project themselves as “a subjective, self-reflective writer identity,” whereas skilled writers are able “to project their identity through both direct and indirect self-representation in the text, regardless of the language they are using” (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2023, p. 133).

Sugiharto (2024) has conducted a similar study on the construction of self in academic writing of Indonesian novice student writers. His study found that self was constructed by venerating established authorities, depersonalizing knowledge, personalizing knowledge, and through discursivity and linearity. This in turn yields different rhetorical postures, which can be classified as either discordant or coherent potential. His study concludes that self as the aspect of identity is invariably unstable, ambivalent, and even conflictual, as it always undergoes changes over time motivated by the dynamics of social contexts of writing.

Different from the studies mentioned above which traced the developmental process of non-native speaker student writers in making meaning during writing, the present study focuses on the writing product of a native speaker professional author, the reason being the aesthetics of writing in integrating both linguistic (dictions, styles, syntactic complexity, among others) and non-linguistic elements (socio-cultural, political, and cultural constructs) is most apparent in a writing product of a highly skilled-writer.

In addition, the self in writing can be perceived not only linguistically, culturally, and maybe politically (as has been demonstrated in previous studies), but it can also be viewed philosophically (as will be

shown in the present study). I argue in this article that the aesthetics of written discourse can be visibly seen from one's self as author or "authorial identity" (Hyland, 2010). Thus, it is the aesthetics of an authorial identity in integrating intricate linguistic and non-linguistic aspects that the previous studies have not investigated. To feel the presence of the dimension of the discursal aesthetics in written text, the construction of self, I maintain, needs to be approached by incorporating the idea of philosophical self.

To fill out this void, the present study aims to find out aspects of identity of a highly skilled writer-cum-philosopher Richard Shusterman, especially those related to *self as author* and *discursal self*, not just in light of linguistic and cultural aspects, but also in terms of philosophical vantage point. In doing so, the article provides new insights into how the merging of linguistics, culture, and philosophy can contribute to a rich perspective in composition scholarship.

Methodology

This study employs hermeneutic as a form of "relativism's methodology" (Silva, 2005). As such, it is interpretive in the sense that it provides the construction of certain phenomena as accurately as possible. It is also dialectic in that the phenomena under investigation are "elicited and refined hermeneutically and compared and contrasted dialectically with the aim of generating one or a few constructions on which there is a substantial tentative agreement" (Silva, 2005, p. 8).

The present study is textual and based on the written data, which were extracted from the Shusterman's (2021) *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Art of Love*, a book that blends "philosophy and cultural history of ideas" (p. xii). The reason for choosing this book is because its contents, as a product of well-written literary piece, consist of an assemblage of thinkings of one topic (sex and somaesthetics) emulated from different cultural and religious traditions, thus making us remiss not to peruse and analyze it from the perspective of authorship. Further, an analysis of the piece can make us become appreciative

of the richness and the aesthetics of the textual realizations where the perceived literature and philosophy divide is reconciled. Perusing the book, we can get a sense that Shusterman is a scholar who straddles the philosophy and literature divide.

Data were elicited in the form of textual constructions (i.e. the written by- product) that comprise culturally and religiously diverse erotically loaded languages. They were then analyzed using a thematic coding analysis where the researcher tried to identify the recurring salient patterns or themes by reading and rereading through the data reiteratively and to search for related connections among the patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The procedure of the analysis is *first* reading and identifying the recurring salient patterns of the textual constructions in each chapter of the book. In this step, the author read and reread each chapter in order to identify common patterns that emerge. The emerging patters were then classified based on their similarities. *Second*, categorizing the emergent patterns tentatively by looking at the connection among patterns and then unitizing them as a thread. *Third*, refining the patterns, formulating, (re) interpreting categorizing them as themes and theorizing. Once the emerging patterns were categorized and interpreted, they were thematized and theorized in light of the theoretical insights of the aspects of identity discussed previously.

Results and Discussion

From the thematic coding analyses of the textual realizations of the data, three salient recurring themes of the aspects of identity can be categorized and suggested, namely: (1) taking control by evaluating while averring to reliable sources, (2) interfering credible sources by infusing personal positioning (3) translanguaging to create aesthetic textual postures. Each of these will be expounded and discussed below.

1. Taking Control by evaluating while Averring to Reliable Sources

One of the most obvious distinctive characteristics aspects of self- representation

which indicates a strong sense of authorial presence is where a writer takes control over the arguments he presents by critically evaluating the their validity while also averring to reliable sources (in this case Foucault's writing). Take for example the following excerpts:

*First, **it is wrong** to characterize the classical Chinese texts of *ars erotica* in sharp contrast to sexual science and the medical approach to sex (p. 153).*

*Why does Foucault so **gravely misconstrue** the Chinese *ars erotica* as primary concern with maximizing pleasure? (p 157).*

*Nonetheless, Indian sexual theory **cannot fully support** Foucault's sharp distinction between esoteric *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, because it defines itself in essentially scientific terms as providing knowledge about empirical matters based on observation (p. 202)*

These are bold statements asserted only by a writer who is authoritative in the field of literature and philosophy. Making such evaluative statements, Shusterman is already prepared with counter-evidence to expose his self as author and discursal self. The use of evaluative phrases such as **it is wrong**, **gravely misconstrue**, and **cannot fully support** is indicative of the projection of an authoritative authorial voice where Shusterman performatively makes an evaluation of the arguments he quoted. These are powerful evaluative phrases to express evaluative meaning in academic discourse. In employing them, Shusterman also represents himself as a knowledgeable scholar who can provide alternative arguments that possibly serve as correctives to the arguments of other scholars he presented. Also, such use of rebuttals *wrong*, *misconstrue*, and negation *cannot* reflects a construction of "a distinctive identity" where the author attempts to display "an alternative position into the dialogue in order to reject it" (Hyland, 2011, p. 171).

However, going beyond identifying the stance through these evaluative linguistic signposts, we can dig deeper into

Shusterman's self as author from the useful "hinge" metaphor introduced by Brooke (1989) in order to capture the "control taking" aspect of identity exemplified in the above excerpts.

Applying this metaphor in analyzing the writings of professional writers (renowned compositionist Linda Flower), Brooke (1989) has argued that the idea of "control in writing" can be best understood by the metaphor "hinge," defined as "the place where the text "breaks open" because it is the place where the words "hinge," where they fold, admit multiple meanings, work against themselves" (p. 406).

Applying the same metaphor to understand control taking as one of Shusterman's aspects of writing identity, we can infer that it is precisely his adeptness in searching for "hinges" from the literary texts he reviewed and examined (i.e. from the averred reliable sources), and then breaks them open that he is able to take control over them.

We can furthermore surmise that the employment of the evaluative language serves as the signal (to the readers) for the writer's breaking open of the averred sources. In doing so, Shusterman tries to deconstruct the sources, infuse his personal opinions and beliefs to the deconstructed texts. In fact, as Brooke (1998) referencing Derrida (1974), contends that "A deconstruction of a text begins with a search for hinges in the seemingly coherent organization, purpose, meaning, and argument of the text." (p. 406)

2. Interfering Credible Sources by Infusing Personal Positioning

In presenting *ars erotica* practices in different cultural and religious traditions, Shusterman ineluctably resorts to a large number of literary works from these diverse traditions, attributing them as the credible sources so as to comprehensively narrate, explain, examine and compare and contrast the arts of lovemaking practices cross-culturally. For Shusterman (2022), blending both philosophical and literary works has a transformative potential in that the latter rescues the self from the privacy of one's

thoughts, feelings, and imaginative efforts of self-knowledge and self-care (p. 18). This is certainly a philosophical conception of self, as self is embodied in the writer's whole being – not just cognitive, but also affective and imaginative aspects.

Attributing practices is a typical academic writing convention which a writer employs to strengthen his positioning and to rebut other writers' arguments and positioning. While in certain chapters, Shusterman clings almost exclusively to the authority of literary works he quoted without a relative interference of his personal stances (probably all information from these literary pieces is trustworthy and thus no need to be interrogated further), there are occasions where the author pauses (before elucidating the arguments further), and infuses his personal positionings as is evidenced in the following excerpts:

*The answer, **I believe**, lies in recognizing the enormous educational potential of erotic love, not only through its aesthetic pleasures of form, meaning, and quality but also for its intense motivational force...*(p. 58)

*Ars erotica, **I therefore maintain**, was not only crucial to the central Chinese quest for health or "nurturing life" (yang sheng) but also key to the project of aesthetic self-cultivation* (p. 177).

***I believe** that the courtly love ideal of ennobling, virtuous, obediently serving, and unlimited devotion parallels (while it also displaces) the dominant religious ideal of the pure, righteous, uplifting, and unbounded love for God* (pp.342-343)

Such highly personal hedges as **I believe** and **I maintain** demonstrate a clear personal stance where infusing one's belief and opinion is necessary to foreground one's authorial self in the textual realization. The self as author or the individual aspect of voice is most apparent in the textual interference shown in the above excerpts. As a professional writer-cum philosopher, Shusterman clearly projects and represents himself as one who hold authoritative voice in the act of this textual interference.

The use of personal pronoun "I" as "an opinion holder" (Tang & John, 1999) also projects a writer who is knowledgeable about the topic he writes. Different from novice writers who tend to avoid using this personal pronoun due to their lack of knowledge or expertise (Kobayashi & Rinnert 2023), a professional writer like Shusterman employs this pronoun at ease to represent himself as the one having authoritative knowledge about *ars erotica*.

It is important to stress here that by interfering it does not mean that the author diminishes the voice of the other authors he quotes in his book. Rather, the interference is meant to generate and present alternative perspectives that help broaden and enrich the available vantage points in the quoted literary works.

Interpreting self-representation in Shusterman's writing brings us to the conception of self in written text as philosophical – certainly an additional insight that complements the notion of self commonly construed in the myriad studies on writing identity, several of which have been reviewed previously. As Shusterman points out "Presenting one's views, oneself, in writing enables repeated critical assessment that can inspire and guide one's efforts of meliorative self-transformation" (p. 18).

Thus, in this new perspective of self, exposing the personal pronoun "I" with more subjective stative verbs *believe* and *maintain*, apart from signaling the presence of his authorial voice, Shusterman (2022) foregrounds his self as self-knowledge, the eventual goal of which is to attain self-unity. Writing in this regard provides a useful means to expose one's self-knowledge in order to achieve self-unity.

3. Translanguaging to Create Aesthetic Textual Postures

A final important aspect of self-construction as found in Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* is the way the author ingeniously shuttles among different linguistic codes by meshing or translanguaging them together to achieve desired communicative effects to the

readers. Defined as “the process of using language to gain knowledge, to make sense, to articulate one’s thought and to communicate about using language” (Li, 2018, p. 23), translanguaging in written texts can a useful and vital strategy for a write to style their writing, and thus adding the flavors to the texts – thereby enhancing its aesthetics. As an astute writer-cum-philosopher, Shusterman performatively translanguages almost all the chapters in the book by styling his native language (English) using a wealth of terminologies deriving from different languages such as Chinese, Japan, Arabic, and Greek. Consider the following excerpts:

*As **nanshoku** was mainly pederastic, so was it overwhelmingly anal, and could be extremely painful for the boy who was penetrated (p.303)*

*Many had learned **shudo** as monastic **nyake** and were well prepared to exchange that role for the dominant **nenja** role with a young **wakashu** (the preferred term for a youth in the samurai **shudo** context) (p.305).*

*The official history of the Former Han Dynasty lists eight sexual treatises under the category **fangzhong shu** (房中术, “inside the bedroom techniques”) in a separate section (p.159).*

*The **sunnah’s** corpus of reports on Muhammad’s sayings and actions is known as **hadith**, and each item of **hadith** includes both the content of the report and the genealogy of its transmission (p. 254).*

The variety of terminologies in these Excerpts is deliberately strategically performed to showcase *ars erotica* practices in different religious and cultural traditions. Varied linguistic codes such as **nanshoku**, **nenja**, **nyake**, **shudo**, **wakashu**, **fangzhong shu** (房中术), **sunnah** and **hadith** are meshed together or translanguaged in the English text so as to create a desired effect that might be expected by the readers who wish to know the true nuances of *ars erotica* practices in specific contexts. Translanguaging seems the only preferred strategy in this respect, because not

doing so will limit, if not stifle, the author’s effort to integrate his individual voice into the social one. Moreover, translanguaging serves as vital tool to elevate the author’s social voice, aside from his individual voice. It seems that Shusterman is aware that the voice he is projecting here “is not simply the property of the author but constructed by the social worlds that the author works within” (Tardy, 2012, 39).

Further, coloring the texts by blending different terminologies related to the arts of lovemaking and somaesthetics helps enhance the richness of the rhetorical postures of the text, hence its aesthetics.

Shusterman’s ability to shuttle among different languages here also indicates the performative potential of his representation of identity (see Hyland, 2011), as translanguaging is inextricably tied to the writer’s identity (Sugiharto, 2015). The translanguaged texts also suggest that Shusterman’s representation of self is “built up through participation and linked to situations, to relationships, and to the rhetorical strategies and positions *he* adopt in engaging with others on a routine basis” (Hyland, 2011, p. 160). [italics added]. That is, in the production of the text, Shusterman’s self as author (as individual voice) is intertwined with his discursal self (as social voice), thus giving rise to interactional voice which in the end creates a hybrid textual realization.

What is most significant here is this interactional or dialogical voice help Shusterman accomplish the aesthetics of the textual postures in his writing. The meshing of the different linguistic codes in written texts has been described by Young as “wonderful” because “It has the potential...to multiply the range of available rhetorical styles, expand our ability to understand linguistic difference and make us in the end multidialectical, as opposed to monodialectical” (Young, 2009, p. 65).

Finally, as we have seen from the excerpts, the translanguaged texts contain culturally- and socially-loaded vocabularies. It is apparent therefore that by translanguaging Shusterman exposes not only his self-knowledge as his self as author, but he also aligns it with the other

self to attain self-unity in writing. When one carefully peruses the book, one can easily surmise that the texts contain words deriving from literacy works he reviewed.

Here we learn that Shusterman's translanguaged texts are meant to infuse poetic and imaginative languages from other cultures into the realm of philosophy. For Shusterman, what lies beneath the language is the imaginative, figurative, and poetic foundation, on which rational truth rests. As we have recalled, the reason for integrating cross-cultural literature in the field of philosophy is that Shusterman (2021, 2022) views the latter as "a way of living", rather than as a mere academic inquiry.

Conclusion

This article has explored a writer identity of Richard Shusterman represented in his eloquently written piece on *ars erotica* and somaesthetics. It reveals three important aspects of identity, *viz.* (1) taking control by evaluating while averring to reliable sources, (2) interfering credible sources by infusing personal positioning (3) translanguaging to create aesthetic textual postures.

From these three aspects of identity, we can conclude that Shusterman's prowess in mingling philosophical insights with literary works from cross-cultural perspectives can be attributed to his writer's identity, especially the way he represents himself as a professional writer and author in written text. Yet, as has been alluded to previously, the self projected by Shusterman in *Ars Erotica* goes beyond an understanding of the self conceived from linguistic, social, and cultural points of view. Complementing these perspectives is self as construed philosophically.

Crucially, Shusterman is able to project himself as a writer unique to himself (the projection of individual voice), to accommodate and bring together multiple voices in a text (the projection of social voice), and to blend individual and social voices together to create hybrid voices, hence hybrid texts (the projection of interactional and dialogic voice).

The projection of individual voice through writing, as Shusterman (2022) (as body philosopher) recently avers, "serves the quest to find unity in oneself to promote philosophy's aims of self-knowledge and self-care." (p. 24). And, as for the representation of both the social and interactional and dialogic voice, Shusterman (2002) acknowledge the power of the self (i.e. self as author) in the production of a text, but this individual "actual inner self" needs to be aligned with "the outer representation" (p. 34).

All in all, it is the conglomeration of these three distinct voices that makes Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* linguistically aesthetic and culturally sturdy.

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