

A Review of *The Art of Poetic Inquiry*

Susan M. Manning

Mount Saint Vincent University

The Art of Poetic Inquiry, a collection edited by Suzanne Thomas, Ardra L. Cole, and Sheila Stewart (2012), is a wonderful contribution to the existing literature on arts-informed methodologies and the use of poetry in academic research and teaching. The editors explain the goals of the collection in their introduction: “Readers will encounter poetry as a mode of being, knowing and telling; ways of using poetry in research; and examples of how poetry and poetic inquiry combine for personal and social transformation” (p. xii). *The Art of Poetic Inquiry* certainly fulfills that promise. The latest in Backalong Books’ Arts-informed Inquiry Series, and emerging from the 2009 Second International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, the collection will appeal to those who have been immersed in poetic inquiry for a very long time as well as those just beginning their journeys. Students, teachers, and researchers who are unversed in poetry or poetic inquiry but open to the possibilities of poetry as a way of knowing and representing, will find this collection an accessible and broad introduction.

The collection consists of 39 different pieces. Most are written by individual authors, but several chapters are collaborations between two or three co-authors. Readers who have come to this book after loving the first edited collection of poetic inquiry, *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009), will find many familiar voices alongside welcome new ones. The 39 chapters are arranged in three sections, “Poetry As Inquiry,” “Poetry In Inquiry” and “Poetry For Inquiry.” The contributions in the first section illustrate how poetry can function as an epistemology and ontology, and many writers describe how they came to poetic inquiry. The relationship between teaching, research, and poetry is explored in the second section, with authors showing multiple ways they have been using poetry in their own inquiry processes. The third section highlights poetry and poetic inquiry’s power in creating social change, a way of processing feelings, teaching from a vulnerable space, confronting inequality, and shifting the stories we tell to subvert dominant discourses that work to uphold oppression. Readers with limited time or who are daunted by the 553 pages of the full collection, might read each section individually, which would provide a more manageable way to meaningfully engage with the text.

The editors must be commended for choosing pieces that showcase the variety of disciplines and academic fields where authors have engaged with poetic inquiry. Education, with its many subfields, is certainly the discipline that dominates within the collection, perhaps reflecting the positionality of the editors who are situated within the field of education themselves as well as the organizing bodies of the symposium from which the collection emerged—the Centre for Education Research at University of Prince Edward Island and the Centre for Arts-Informed Research at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Thus, the book is particularly well-suited to readers pursuing studies or research in education. However, other writers in this collection can be found in such diverse fields as visual arts (Aitken; Oughton), neuroscience (Sullivan), critical disability studies (Davis Halifax), health research (Galvin & Todres), nursing (Sameshima, Vandermause & Holliday Santucci), communication studies (Faulkner), psychotherapy (Bloom), community development (Larabee), and sociology (Dark). The scholars and students using poetry within such a variety of

fields illustrate poetic inquiry's potential as a research methodology within and across the social sciences and humanities. The collection also features many writers who are not affiliated with an academic institution, showing that poetic inquiry, as a way of engaging with the world, is not limited to the halls of the "ivory tower." I would argue that this inclusion demonstrates the capability of poetic inquiry, as with many other arts-informed inquiry approaches, to bridge the gap between the academy and community and to ensure that our research and teaching provoke action and work toward social change.

One of the strengths of the collection is the incredible variety of forms that the writers have adopted for their pieces. Some, like Ukrainetz and MacLeod, offer only brief words of introduction and then allow their poetry to speak for itself. Others, including Cochrane, Davis Halifax, and Leggo, weave poetry with lyrical prose reflections and thoughts. Some chapters are collaborations between authors, like Wiebe and Snowber's two-voiced contemplation on the pedagogical implications of vulnerability. Within the collection, the diversity of poetic forms range from many works of free verse, prose poems, and found poetry, to less common forms including: a collaborative renga (Wolff), glosa (Graham), playful 160 character text messages (Tracey), haiku (Fidyk) and performance poetry (Dark). Still other writers, such as Susan Walsh, use multiple poetic forms within one piece. Walsh develops her reflection on the connections between writing as inquiry and Shambhala meditation through prose poems, free verse and found poetry. The creativity present and high aesthetic quality of the poetic writing throughout all pieces in the collection speaks truth to the title *The Art of Poetic Inquiry*. This diversity of forms also ensures that every reader will be able to find multiple pieces within the collection that resonate with them and their experience. Readers looking for inspiration for their own work in poetic inquiry will likely find their spark in one of the writings within this book.

Some features of the collection that will be reassuring to many readers who are not well versed in poetic inquiry, and researchers who do not necessarily consider themselves poets, is the number of writers who discuss how they came to poetry later in life and the frankness of several authors as they reflect on the challenges they have faced in their work. Neilsen Glenn writes that she was in her fifties before she immersed herself in poetry. Other writers were led by strong emotions. For example, the loss of a loved one and the search for a way to process that grief brought Bloom and Graham to poetry. In a different way, Prasad came to poetry as a way of resolving some dilemmas of ethical and accessible representation in her research on linguistic and cultural diversity in literacy and teaching. However, she writes that this coming was not without anxiety. "Somewhere along the way, I had learned that there was but one correct way of reading or writing a poem. I feared getting it wrong" (p. 218). This feeling is one with which many beginning poets and poet researchers will likely identify. Likewise, Mantas shows that one does not need to be a poet per se to use poetry and poetic language in inquiry. "I am not a poet, but I sense (when I am having) a poetic moment" (p. 228). Many readers will also probably find familiarity in that sentiment. What the collection makes clear is that there is no one way to *do* poetic inquiry, but instead multiple points of entry, depending on a writer's context and intentions.

The Art of Poetic Inquiry will be of special interest to teachers and teacher educators because a number of writers within the collection discuss the value of poetry within their work as teachers and teacher educators. Leggo offers this perspective on the value of poetry to education, teaching and research: "As an educator, I am convinced that all of us—students, teachers, parents, artists, administrators—need to attend to multiple ways of knowing and becoming.

Poetry offers significant ways for learning and practicing our living in the world” (p. 380). In his piece, Guiney Yallop writes that emotions are central to the work of teaching and learning. Poetry is one way to bring others into our emotions. MacKenzie’s chapter is a reflection on her learning when her attempts to engage in poetry in a literacy course did not proceed as expected. Similarly, Wiebe and Snowber use poetry as a way of exploring their vulnerabilities and see that process as leading to fuller forms of engaged pedagogy in their classrooms. These examples are just four within the collection that would be particularly intriguing to readers within the field of education.

I would issue a note of caution to readers who might come to this collection as a starting point for their own journeys in poetic inquiry. While I would unequivocally recommend the text for that purpose, I must issue a disclaimer that it in no way resembles a “how-to” guide for poetic inquiry. Instead, the collection shows the full range of artful possibilities for what poetic inquiry might look like and sound like, reflecting the positionalities and contexts of individual writers. Those readers looking for more detailed or step-by-step instruction would likely do better to look elsewhere. However, a good starting point within this collection for those readers would be the chapter written by Lynn Butler-Kisber. Butler-Kisber offers a helpful overview of the differences between found and generated poetry within research and describes some of the different processes used by graduate students in writing their own poetry in the context of their coursework and dissertations. She also explores the issue of measuring quality in poetic inquiry, which is not addressed in such detail in any other pieces. Reading Butler-Kisber’s chapter first might provide new readers with a useful framework for beginning to recognize the processes used by the writers of the other pieces in the collection and think about how to adapt these processes in their own work.

The Art of Poetic Inquiry is a beautifully curated and diverse contribution to the field of poetic inquiry that will be enjoyed by many readers, from the “old hands” whose pieces are featured in the collection, to students just beginning to explore poetic inquiry in their studies. The heavy emphasis on contributions from scholars, artists, students, and researchers working the field of education makes it particularly relevant to readers within that field. It will become clear to all readers as they engage with that text that poetic inquiry, as stated by Larabee, is a “form of inquiry full of heart and emotion in ways that resonate and speak to a deeper way of knowing that most listeners/readers can relate to” (p. 474). The collection is a pleasure to read and does an excellent job of showcasing the potential of poetry and poetic inquiry for our everyday lives, our research and our teaching.

References

- Prendergast, M., Leggo, C., & Sameshima, P. (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.
- Thomas, S., Cole, A.L., & Stewart, S. (2012). *The art of poetic inquiry*. Halifax, NS: Backalong Books.