

A Review of *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*

Vanessa Tse

University of Victoria

Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences, edited by Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo, and Pauline Sameshima (2009), surveys the landscape of poetic inquiry as a research method in qualitative social science research. Drawing from some of the foremost scholars in the field, this collection plunges into and probes poetic inquiry as both a medium for representing data and for attending to lived experiences. As qualitative researchers continue to grapple with the complexities of representation, poetic inquiry advances an increasingly holistic way of knowing and being in the world, one that does not exclusively privilege cerebral understanding, allowing for the visceral stirrings that comprise human phenomena. *Poetic Inquiry* makes a significant contribution to the field of arts-based research.

As articulated by the authors of this anthology, poetic inquiry serves as a way to emote, evoke, and provoke experience. It works with rather than against the complexities of experience, which researchers are always mining for understanding that is not easily extrapolated. As such, poetic inquiry is a way of dwelling in nuance and intricacy. The powerful entwining of prose and poetry in this collection is highly accessible to a diverse audience and a pleasure to read. *Poetic Inquiry* is comprised of three sections: *Vox Theoria*, *Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia*, and *Vox Participare*. The opening foreword by Ivan Brady and introduction by Prendergast prepare readers for the collection to follow by addressing how poetic processes operate in social science research and by attending to the central question: *What is poetic inquiry?*

The concert of voices enfolded in these pages demonstrates that through the membrane of poetry one can cease to simply read about experience, but might, as Sullivan describes, have an experience. Insights into the use of poetic inquiry as a way to collect and analyze data and represent findings are accentuated with the infusion of poignant verses. They can at once bruise the heart and make the spirit spark and tingle. Mirroring the expression of the methodology under study, *Poetic Inquiry* is an invitation to enter into “relationality and the ever-opening question of how to live well in the world” (Prendergast, p. xxx).

Vox Theoria

The selection of pieces gathered here were “written from or in response to works of literature/theory in a discipline or field. Or, alternately, these may be poems about poetry and/or inquiry itself” (Prendergast, p. xxii). The writing spans a varied range of topics, but themes emerge with regard to diverse approaches to poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber & Stewart; Dancer; James; Thomas), tensions between research and craft (Cahnmann-Taylor; Piirto), practices of poets and poetic process (Luce-Kapler; Sullivan), poetically pursuing and representing theory (Elza; Pelias; Shidmehr), and finally, the possibility to cultivate empathy (Weems). These chapters philosophically engage with a poetics of research—its possibilities and potentials. The following chapters did this work particularly well (while surrounded by many fascinating pieces) and they are attended to in more detail below.

Rebecca Luce-Kapler’s chapter affirms that through the practice of poetry, one can become a better researcher, and as one strives to relay experience to one’s audience in a meaningful and significant way, serendipitous insights can occur. She illuminates the power of

poetry to cradle and convey experience, exploring the current findings of neuroscientists with regard to consciousness. Integral to this investigation is the notion of *qualia*, which is defined as the “specific nature of our subjective experience of the world” (Lodge, 2002, as cited in Luce-Kapler, p. 76), and it is suggested that in lyric poetry one might come nearest to imparting an experience. Luce-Kapler describes how language is always an approximation of experience and asserts that she is the nearest to imparting or receiving *qualia* when she is writing or reading poetry.

The core of Jane Piirto’s chapter resides in the question: “Is not the concept of quality and qualification to be taken seriously in arts-based research?” (p. 96). Piirto articulates the tension between poetically engaging with social science research and respecting that poetry has its own way of knowing. In essence, is it enough to use poetry in research or must one also succeed in the art of poetry as well? Piirto humbly offers up her own work as a way of demonstrating the combined efforts of the rigors of research and the rigors of art. She assesses the impact of three of her own pieces as they progressively grow in their effectiveness as poems. Each is prefaced with a description of the context in which the poem emerged, followed by a discussion of how and why it may or may not succeed in the world of poetry. Piirto asks those interested in pursuing poetic inquiry to respect the domain in which they are situated and remember, “The arts have their own ways” (p. 97). Piirto’s contribution is an important one: desire is not enough; while a researcher may earnestly attempt to convey data poetically, that does not guarantee an artistic achievement.

Anne McCrary Sullivan examines the architecture of poetic occasions and specifically discusses “Concreteness, Voice, Emotion, Ambiguity, Tension, and Associative Logic” (p. 112). Her purpose is to inspect an intuitive process, and to comprehend and name the ways in which we distinguish an occasion for poetry. Through the nonlinear text, her work sways between autobiographical poems, her student’s developing poetry, and the verses of other poetic inquirers. Sullivan’s gifts as an educator are evident in her lyrical sensibility, whether she is describing an image as “a piece of sensory information—dingy water, trembling leaves, the nubbly texture of tweed, the siren’s shrill, the sweetness of watermelon, the lemony smell of your mother’s perfume” (p. 113) or the art of unlearning the custom of concluding, “to let the end of the poem be a window or a door, incorporating the honesty and complexity of ambiguity, inviting the reader to construct meaning” (p. 123). She importantly reminds us of the infinite possibilities for poetic occasions and the complex structures lodged within them. Whether one is a fledgling poetic inquirer or distinguished in the field, Sullivan’s chapter is insightful and compelling.

Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia

Examining the voices of autobiography and autoethnography, *Poetic Inquiry’s* second section explores poems that emerge “from field notes, journal entries, or reflective/creative/autobiographical/autoethnographical writing as the data source” (Prendergast, p. xxii). The wide array of subjects engaged by the authors demonstrates the endless stream of possibilities poetic inquiry can take up, whether it is connection to place (Gannon; Hurren), sexual harassment (Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes), the fears and hopes of a father (Guiney Yallop), teacher and nurse education (MacKenzie; Raingruber), audience responses (Dark), death (Brady), or love (Leggo). Here the researcher and poet blend together, and even while these poems often move into the victuals of conventional poetry, they are conceived in a research

context. They do well to remind us that the poet, like the researcher, is engaged in a continual cycle of exploration, analysis, and discovery.

Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia brings the presence of the subject into focus—the self that writes is not being neglected, not pretending to be invisible, nor is it relegated to a brief snippet of the author’s positionality. Rather, attention is drawn to her/his fingerprints within the research. This consideration of subjectivity is not self-indulgent, but is an important facet of poetic inquiry, as the constructor is made visible alongside the construct.

Carl Leggo is a giant in poetic inquiry and his work here does not disappoint. His poetic ruminations begin by questioning the absence of research on love, and he swivels between prose and poetry that is at once profound, playful, humorous, wise, whimsical, and always provocative. Leggo’s poetic ruminations dwell on the intersections of love in his own life and the ways in which poetry can act as “a way to connect with others, seeking always a living ecology in the vast mystery of the earth” (Leggo, p. 151). He speaks to the notion of surrender and claims, “I no longer try to order or govern or organize the world; instead, I seek to learn to lean into the circles of the sun and moon, the seasonal cycles of desires and frustrations that shape human becoming” (p. 149). Perhaps one of Leggo’s greatest strengths is the way he kneads his poetry and prose together. The poems are not girdled with explanatory text that negates the work of the poet; his writing invites diverse readings to create meaning in and through the poems. Leggo succeeds in the realms of research and art, and his work is a principal example of the way poetry and research can augment one another.

John J. Guiney Yallop’s piece, “My Daughter is Going to School” is incredibly moving and evocative. Guiney Yallop traversed school as a queer Catholic and later taught “as an out gay educator” (p. 219); his prayer-poem centers upon his hopes for his daughter. The lived experiences of Guiney Yallop slip into the poem like a palimpsest upon which the prayer is spoken; the voice is strong and the prayer-poem tingles with the fervor of the Psalms. Tender, naked—intimate surrender of all the suffering and joy crammed into the structure we call school. The form of the poem hints at the lines we often imaginatively conceive of vertically between God and humankind, creating the sense that these words were rising from one heart and floating into the heavens. Guiney Yallop demonstrates why many qualitative researchers are being drawn to poetic inquiry; it is because of the power of such representation to illuminate lived experience and to do so in a dynamic and affective way. Such work reminds us that poetry, while read with the eyes of the mind, is absorbed in the heart.

Vox Participare

The final section is comprised of poetry that brings forward the voices of participants. Created “from interview transcripts or solicited directly. . . the poems are co-created with the researcher. The voices in the poems may be singular or multiple. Also, inquiry poems may blend both the researcher’s and the participants’ voices” (Prendergast, p. xxii). The central concern of these authors is the illumination of the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized. The selections privilege the experiences of those living with addictions (Sameshima & Vandermause), of racialized women in education (Edghill; Washington), of mental health of nurses (Kidd), of those caring for a person with Alzheimer’s (Galvin & Todres), of incarcerated women (Ann, Danita, Devon, Julie, Lynn, & Shelley), of Holocaust survivors (Rapport), and of a Deaf-hearing family (West, Luke, Dora, Harper, & Maisie). The authors skillfully show the

power of poetic inquiry to trouble and disrupt, and readers may find that through engaging with this work hidden preconceptions are exposed.

Poetic inquiry “can join the creative with the researcher and allow them to work effectively together as catalyst for social action and change” (Edghill, p. 298). Indeed, in this method there is a felt sense of connection:

The re-presentation has to be able to connect to people in a heartfelt way and be complex enough to awaken not just a logical understanding, but also the sense of it as it lives. When it is living in this way, it is in excess for the words, and more than words can say. (Galvin & Todres, p. 309).

These chapters tread delicately on the tension between the researcher and the researched and how they operate together to produce knowledge.

The poem of Ann et al. that stands alone in their chapter is gleaned from a participatory action research project that examines the experiences of incarcerated women. The last names are omitted for confidentiality reasons, and the text does not enlighten the reader as to whom the researchers are and whom are the researched, “so as to not privilege any individual but to recognize that . . . we are all learning reciprocally within each other’s presence” (p. 305). The plurality of voices is adeptly crafted within the poem, much like a choir; there is one song but many tones and pitches.

Lots of people don’t want to change. Welfare wouldn’t support me . . .

you need to be—

know (no) where else to go (Ann et al., p. 304).

Their words are haunting. One of the most striking aspects of this piece is the ways in which the poems capture the voices of the participants and the rhythms of their speech. The participants’ words were not relegated to stale quotes in forests of jargon, but come alive: “**DRUGS KILL PAIN**. *And all of us in here are core-deep/ suffering . . .*” (Ann et al., p. 302). This chapter provokes the reader to consider whose voices are overrepresented in research and whose are excluded, and makes accessible the stories of those who have been silenced for too long.

The closing chapter of this collection is a stunning exploration of a hearing family with one Deaf child. Donna West’s study functions “to render Deaf lives visible, to counter pathological, disablist views of deafness, to celebrate Deaf-hearing family life and to tell—through text—a persuasive, emotionally charged, bilingual-bicultural narrative” (West et al., p. 338). The piece is also credited as multi-authored and collaborative and the stories of Luke, Dora, Harper, and Maisie shimmer in the poems folded within. The verses are all, save one, braided conversations, that are presented in a non-linear bouquet of poems. While these poems certainly can foster empathy, that is just one element of a rhizomatic encounter housed within these poems. The writing moves beyond what it means to experience life as a Deaf individual in a hearing family, to the human struggles of being and becoming. West et al. articulate their position as one that views, “the existence of Deaf people and Deaf children born to hearing families as vital for a fuller understanding of what it means to be human” (p. 334). The chapter is particularly meaningful in that it exemplifies one of the paradoxes of poetry: While embracing the singular one might simultaneously encounter the universal.

Closing

Poetic Inquiry makes an important contribution to the expanding field of arts-based research, situating both researcher and participant in fluid, dynamic, and relational terms. Whether one is a novice or a seasoned poetic inquirer, the editors' selection of works delivers passages suitable for those searching for an overview and those grappling with challenging theoretical and methodological issues. The chapters could be used individually for an instructor's specific needs in a course or would serve as a wonderful resource for a researcher or graduate student looking to explore poetic methods of qualitative research. This collection contains some striking poetry that serves as a testament to what is possible in this mode of arts-based research.

Why poetic inquiry? Why *poetry*? seems to be an explicit and implicit current swelling in much of the authors' works. The best answer to those questions comes through the *experience* of wandering through verse. In short, read some of these poems and you will know why.

Reference

Prendergast, M., Leggo, C., & Samashima, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.