

The background of the top half of the cover is a light purple color with a pattern of radiating lines emanating from the top center, creating a sunburst effect. In the center, a dark blue semi-circle contains a silhouette of a tree. Below this semi-circle, a white banner with a dark blue border curves across the page, containing the text 'LEARNiNg Landscapes'. The letters 'L', 'E', 'A', 'R', 'N', 'I', 'N', 'G', and 'L' are in a bold, serif font, while 'i', 'N', 'G', 'L', 'A', 'N', 'D', 'S', 'C', 'A', 'P', 'E', 'S' are in a cursive script. Below the banner, a faint, light purple map of the United Kingdom is visible.

*LEARNiNg Landscapes*

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*Poetry and Education:  
Possibilities and Practices*

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Autumn 2010 Vol. 4 No. 1

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Managing Editor: Mary Stewart  
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Graphic Artist: Maryse Boutin  
Technological Direction and Support: Timothy Scobie and Jeremy Dubeau  
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Comments to the Editor: [landscapes@learnquebec.ca](mailto:landscapes@learnquebec.ca)



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## Statement of Purpose



LEARNing Landscapes™ is an open access, peer-reviewed, online education journal supported by LEARN (Leading English Education and Resource Network). Published in the autumn and spring of each year, it attempts to make links between theory and practice and is built upon the principles of partnership, collaboration, inclusion, and attention to multiple perspectives and voices. The material in each publication attempts to share and showcase leading educational ideas, research and practices in Quebec, and beyond, by welcoming articles, interviews, visual representations, arts-informed work and multimedia texts to inspire teachers, administrators, and other educators to reflect upon and develop innovative possibilities within their own practices.

## Review Board


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## Editorial

A poem is like a butterfly. A moment seeds itself inside us. A memory. An experience when we saw, we felt, perhaps even, we knew. It touches deep in us. Deeper than words. And something begins, in that inner space. Something that is uniquely ours to speak of ... There is a poet in all of us. However unknown or neglected that part of us may be, it is there often just waiting for the right conditions to present themselves. (Ramsay, 2009, pp. 1–3)

Poetry concisely registers on the nerves the whole skein of human emotions. It harrows, enthralls, awes, dazzles, confides ... The soul is the depth of our being and poetry is one means of sounding that depth ... A poem doesn't wile away time; it engages our fleetingness and makes it articulate. It seizes and shapes time. (Wormser & Cappella, 2000, p. xiii)

 In this exciting and seventh issue of LEARNing Landscapes on poetry and education, our contributors make these quotations come alive. Through their voices we are propelled into memories, reflections, connections and understandings—embodied nuances of poetic possibilities.

Our wonderful array of commentaries from outstanding poets and poet educators weaves together a tapestry of poetic thought and experiences that provides an excellent backdrop for what follows. Dr. Maya Angelou, renowned poet and writer, a “phenomenal woman,” and the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, describes in an interview how at a young age, with the support of her grandmother and brother, poetry became her lifeline to the world around her. Poetry literally gave her a voice with

which to speak and to break out of the silence to which she had withdrawn to escape the darkness that had enveloped her early years. Dr. Patrick Dias, Emeritus Professor of Education at McGill University and well known for his longtime contribution to the teaching of poetry, argues that poetry is the “sustaining genre of our literary tradition” and wonders why, and for so long, poetry has been relegated to the margins of the curriculum, and even when included, is frequently incorporated in stilted and disengaging ways. He offers helpful suggestions for change. Dr. Corrine Glesne, a former Professor at the University of Vermont and currently an independent educator, researcher, and author, explores her journey of poetic inquiry illustrating how increasingly researchers have turned to both “found” poetry (using the words of others) and “generated” poetry (using their own words) to gain insights into and to represent their work (Butler-Kisber, 2010). These narrative and embodied forms of research produce different and important understandings in inquiry. Sophie Hillcoat, an eleven-year-old student attending elementary school in Montreal and a budding poet, discusses in her interview how the poet within us emerges when given space, time, opportunity, and encouragement. She talks cogently about her poetic process and provides excellent suggestions for other young poets in the making. Jane Hirshfield is another renowned poet who has taught in a variety of disciplines. For five years she was a poet-teacher in the California Poets in the Schools program. She discusses the “three keys” she believes are necessary for “opening the gates” of poetry to young writers. The first is the passion of the teacher, which when communicated to students, fires their imaginations. The second is freedom of the mind which encourages exploration without pre-determined limitations. The third is the invitation to write where she provides some innovative ways to get students engaged by letting their imaginations and creativity lead the way. Dr. Laurel Richardson is a poet, a sociologist, and a Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University. In the early 1990s, her use of found poetry in qualitative research had a dramatic impact on the field. While poetry had been used in research circles before then, it was Richardson who moved it into the mainstream and opened the doors for others to follow. In this commentary she provides a poetic overview of her journey through academia and illustrates the instructive function of poetic memoir. John Stewig, who is the Director of the Center for Children’s Literature at Carthage College in Wisconsin, and a longtime teacher of language arts and children’s literature at both the elementary and university level, shows with examples how poetry can be used in pivotal ways to develop early literacy learning.

The first group of authors in this issue turns to poetry as a means of life-writing or self-study. Carl Leggo is a poet and Professor at the University of British Columbia. He weaves together poetry and text to illustrate the importance of knowing the self and how poetry in its poignancy, simplicity, and ambiguity, provides an

ideal vehicle for this work. Sheila Stewart is a poet, an adult educator and a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. By letting fragments of poetry infuse her text, she shows how she uses her poetry to explore relationships and delve more deeply into her understanding of her voice and self. Ahava Shira is a poet and recent recipient of a doctorate from the University of British Columbia. Using poems, photographs and texts in a “loving inquiry,” she explores her life journey as it moved from a place of pain to places of serenity, tranquility, and gentleness—at one with nature, other, and the self. Cynthia Morawski, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Carleton University in Ottawa, illustrates how thoughtful teaching emerges from a thorough “mapping” of the self. Her poetic/photographic inquiry portrays the beauty in the dailyness of life, and provides a pause to live and teach poetically. Margaret Dobson is a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. Margaret transforms her childhood memories into poetry. She discusses how this unlocks and conveys the “invisible,” “immeasurable,” “intrinsic,” and “essential elements of education.” In so doing she argues for knowing thoroughly the self for authoring a poetics of education.

Madrone, Molnar, and Leavy use poetic inquiry in their research with others. April Madrone is a Ph.D. student in the Art Education Department at Concordia University in Montreal. After discovering the compelling nature of found poetry in research, she relates how she was catapulted back to her early experiences of creating poems and became inspired to work with her young participants to gather narrative field texts and transform these into found poetry. She suggests this produces a “less filtered” way of knowing and understanding for both the researcher and the participants. Tim Molnar is an Assistant Professor in curriculum and instruction at the University of Saskatchewan. Molnar builds on the philosophy of Derrida and Levinas and describes how he used found poetry to help remove the distance of difference between a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators. Found poems allowed him to return recursively to his research and to retain participant voices and their cultural beliefs at the forefront. Patricia Leavy is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts. She discusses how she used a variation of found poetry to produce a “tri-voiced poetic” approach to her research to include participant and researcher voices, as well as those from literature, to represent the complexity of the inquiry process and to reach a wide variety of audiences.

Guiney Yallop and Cappella provide an excellent transition from the world of self-study and other research into the world of poetry in education. They each show in wonderful detail how poetry is sculpted from its birth to product while tracing the creative process. John Guiney Yallop is a poet and Assistant Professor in the

School of Education at Acadia University. He gives unusual insight into the research/thesis process by opening up to scrutiny how he crafted two evolving poems through a number of iterations that were scaffolded by his supervisor, others, and his own reflective process. David Cappella is an Associate Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University. He examines the poetry revision process, from “impulse” to words and then how a poem is subsequently altered over time. He illustrates that the creative process is shaped profoundly by re-visioning, reflecting, exploring, distancing, and risking. He concludes that the “miracle” of poetry is usually the result of a birthing process and not a particular eureka moment.

The work of the final cluster of authors, Sze, Wiebe, Pasquin, Gannon and Nguyen, MacKenzie, and Tracey turns to the teaching of poetry. Gillian Sze is a poet and a Ph.D. student at the University of Montreal. She suggests ways to debunk the stereotypical notions of poetry held by young students and to free them up to risk, explore, and play with language. Sean Wiebe is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island. Wiebe describes how his encounters with poetic inquiry inspired him to let go of teaching poetry units in secondary school. He replaced them with an inquiry approach that included creating and exchanging poems with other students and taking ownership of the creative process. Wiebe argues that with agency in the poetic process, the students were moved to more democratic and critical perspectives that also may extend agency beyond the walls of a classroom. Lesley Pasquin is poet, a former elementary school principal, and an instructor in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. She believes strongly that poetry matters and that undergraduate education students need to develop a passion for poetry by “breathing in, and breathing out” poetry. She illustrates with examples how she uses her passion, poems and prompts to inspire and build confident teachers and lovers of poetry. Susanne Gannon is a Senior Lecturer of English education and Diem Chi Nguyen is an M.A. student in secondary teaching. They are both at the University of Western Sydney. Together they show how students were able to take fragments from their reflective journals about student teaching experiences and translate these into meaningful and insightful poems that pushed the reflection further. Sarah MacKenzie is an Assistant Professor at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. She describes how she has built on her own reflective process in writing poetry to engage students in her literacy methods. They use the creation of Haiku poems to cull meaning from their course readings. She suggests that this process “creates space for varied perspectives and possibilities.” Shelley Tracey is a poet and teacher educator in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She shows how she risked and overcame her reluctance to share her identity as a poet with her education students. Her merging of the personal and professional inspired and engaged her students in poetic practice and in deeper and more critical reflection.

Last, but certainly not least, it is fitting to end this issue with a contribution from David Lewkowich who is a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. He turns to Tom Wayman's poem, "Did I Miss Anything?" to act as a prompt for critical reflection and a philosophical discussion about education. Lewkowich suggests and shows how a poetic encounter may unsettle and disrupt, and generate agency, voice, and possibility. His article harkens back to the opening commentary of this issue by Dr. Maya Angelou.

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**Lynn Butler-Kisber** (B. Ed., M. Ed., McGill University; Ed.D., Harvard University), a former elementary school teacher, is a Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education in the Faculty of Education at McGill where she is Director of the Centre for Educational Leadership and the McGill Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership Programs. She has served as Director of Undergraduate Education Programs, Director of Graduate Studies and Research in Educational Studies, Associate Dean in Education, and Associate Dean and Dean of Students, and on numerous committees inside the University and in the educational milieu. Just recently she was appointed to the Board of Directors of St. George's Schools. Winner of the 1997 YWCA Women of Distinction award (Education) and 2008 Canada Post award (Educator), she teaches courses on language arts, qualitative research, and teacher education. She has a particular interest in feminist/equity and social justice issues, and the role of arts-informed analysis and representation in qualitative inquiry. Her current research and development activities include the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) Efficacy Study, as well as projects with Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, England and Indonesia, and teachers and school leaders in Quebec. The focus of this work is on literacy learning, student engagement, leadership, professional development, and qualitative methodologies and she has published and presented extensively in these areas. Most recent is her book entitled, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Formed Approaches*, published by Sage.

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## Commentary: Poetry Is the Human Heart Speaking in Its Own Melody

Dr. Maya Angelou

### ABSTRACT

In this interview Dr. Maya Angelou shares some early pivotal events and the important role her grandmother and brother played in supporting her spirit and encouraging her potential. She speaks of her strong conviction that poetry is essential, not only for students but also for everyone. She believes that reading poetry, which she feels should be read aloud, helps us to understand that we are not alone and that others have experienced and survived similar situations. The students in her poetry class bring what they learn to their respective disciplines because they come “to realize that nothing human should be alien to [them].”

*As a world-renowned poet, author, performer, film producer, and social justice advocate, I know readers of LEARNing Landscapes would be interested in knowing what pivotal events in your early life contributed to your work as a poet and writer?*

Well, I'd rather say the pivotal events which took place in my life made me who I am, and that I turned out to be a writer was secondary. That is to say my mother and father separated when I was three and my brother, five, and they put us on a train with tags around our arms without adult supervision and sent us from Los Angeles, California to a little village in Arkansas, to my paternal grandmother. We were torn, of course, as small children alone and in a wild world, but my grandmother was so soothing. She was a very tall black lady who wore long clothes, having dresses down to her shoes and she spoke very softly. She had a huge

voice but at home she spoke so softly that I remember people saying, “Speak up, Sister Henderson” (*laughter*). And whenever I find myself in stress and I speak softly, my grandson used to say, “Turn up the volume, grandma.” Knowing her and being in that ambience of love and calmness, serenity, had a serious impact on me. Why, I think that I and my brother stopped missing our mother and father but we had something so steadying—there was that—and then at seven, I was picked up from my grandmother and taken to St. Louis to my mother’s people, and I’m sorry to say her boyfriend raped me. I told the name of the rapist to my brother, who told it to the family. The man was put in jail for one day and night and was released. And then the police came to my mother’s mother’s house and told her in my earshot that the man had been found dead and it seemed he was kicked to death. My seven-year logic told me that my speech, my talking, my telling his name, had killed him—and so I stopped speaking for almost seven years. I thought my breath could kill anybody, go through the keyhole and out into the air and kill somebody. So, save for my brother, I stopped speaking. My mother’s family, they did their best to talk and get me to talk, to woo me away from my mutism, but they didn’t know what my voice could do. So, they sent me and my brother back to my grandmother in Arkansas. And my grandmother told me that she didn’t care that people said I probably was an idiot or a moron because that I didn’t talk. My grandmother told me, “I know when you and the Good Lord get ready, you’re going to be a teacher, sister, you’re going to teach all over this world.” I used to think, this poor ignorant woman, doesn’t she know I will never speak? I have taught in Italy, in Egypt, in England, all over the United States, and in West Africa. My work is used in South Africa and President Mandela said that during his imprisonment some people would smuggle my books into Robben Island, into the prison, and he would read them and be uplifted. So that grandmother, and her belief in me, formed me, you see what I mean ... This is why I can’t say that that made me a writer but all those things, all those events, directed me into writing, because I didn’t talk, I listened—I *listened*. I sometimes would think of my whole body as an ear, and I could go into a room and absorb all sounds. I think because I listened, learned to listen, that helped me. That has helped me to learn many, many languages and to speak a few, and even teach in a few. So books, words ... words meant the earth to me, and still do. I love them—they helped me to define myself to myself and helped me to define my world.

*Can you tell us about the first poems that you wrote and how that came about?*

I wrote first because I fell in love with poetry. I liked it so much, and I thought, well (I was about nine), I can write some of that (*laughter*). I probably wrote the silliest conglomeration of words west or east of the Rockies, but in any case there’s some



evidence in the rare books room at my university of my work writing when I was nine. I memorized Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, the great African-American poets, and I memorized Shakespeare, some of Shakespeare, especially the sonnets. I memorized Edgar Allan Poe and Langston Hughes of course, and the poetry in the African-American spirituals, in the old Negro spirituals. I knew that that was poetry ... and I loved it. What I wrote I don't remember ... my first essay into that wonderful, mysterious world. But I did continue to write and my brother, who was two years older than I about, and who was the closest my family ever came to making a genius, my brother told me when I was maybe about ten or eleven (he was so intelligent), he told me that I shouldn't worry about people calling me "dummy, dummy, dummy" as kids would do on the way home from school or around. He said, "Don't worry, you're smarter than all of them; you're smarter than almost everybody, except me—you're not as smart as I am, of course (*laughter*)." And he was right! He also told me, and I don't know how he found this (he must have been twelve): "All knowledge, expendable currency depending upon the market ..." He used to go around proclaiming, I guess he'd read them and he'd like them and he'd memorize them, and then he'd tell me these great ponderous declarations and I believed anything he said. I believed him, for one, he couldn't lie to me: he loved me so much. He was so arrogant about knowing everything, so he wouldn't lie, so I believed that to be so. I read everything there was to read.

*Poetry is not always included in the school curriculum as often as it should be. What are your thoughts about poetry and education?*

I think every child, every young person, should be weaned on poetry. Each person, especially growing up when you're so insecure, each person needs to know someone was there before you, someone was lonely before you, someone was confused before you, someone was maybe brutalized before you, and miraculously someone has survived. So then that's possible for you to survive. I teach a class called, "World Poetry and Dramatic Performance" and I meet my students and we read the French poets and the Hindu poets and the African-American poets, women's poetry, men's poetry, we read Asian, we read Spanish-speaking poetry. We read everybody and then I take my students from the universities, I always insist on having one or two freshmen and/or sophomores, the rest are upper-class people, seniors or graduate students, and they are in all the disciplines from medicine and hard sciences to English to drama, and so forth. Many of them have never been on the stage, spoken, but I give black students Robert Burns to recite, and white students the Southern black poetry to recite, and men women's poetry to recite and women men's poetry, to

realize that nothing human should be alien to you. If they can ingest that idea and then go out and proclaim it on the stage, open to the town and the gown, then they go into their science classes with a new view of the subject: "Oh, I see human beings did this. Oh, I see since I am doing math and algebra and statistics, I see, these were done by human beings just like me. I see." I think that the poetry allows young people to see they're not alone and also to find that they can take inspiration, and even aspiration, from human beings who happen to be dead, and some who happen to live in China, some who live in Mississippi, some who live in Montreal.

*What suggestions can you give to aspiring poets?*

I really encourage all poets—and that may be everybody (*laughter*)—to read poetry and read it aloud. Go into your bedroom or into your den or your study, in your kitchen, and read poetry that you like, *loud*. Hear how the language sings. It's almost impossible—if possible at all—to translate poetry, yet it's imperative that we try to. We have to try to translate it. Every language has its melody, and so poetry is the human heart speaking in its own melody, in its own language. I have a book called, "Still I Rise," which really means to say after all that has happened to me, I rise. And when it was first completed in French the title was "La tête haute" (*laughter*)—it had nothing to do with pride. But it's still better to try to read and write poetry and read it aloud, whatever you like, so you can hear the music in the poetry.



**Dr. Maya Angelou** is one of the most renowned and influential voices of our time. Hailed as a global renaissance woman, Dr. Angelou is a celebrated poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, filmmaker, and civil rights activist.

Born on April 4th, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, Dr. Angelou was raised in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, Dr. Angelou experienced the brutality of racial discrimination, but she also absorbed the unshakable faith and values of traditional African-American family, community, and culture.

Dr. Angelou has served on two presidential committees, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000, the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and has received 3 Grammy Awards. President Clinton requested that she compose a poem to read at his inauguration in 1993.

Dr. Angelou's reading of her poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" was broadcast live around the world.

Dr. Angelou has received over 30 honorary degrees and is Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University.

Dr. Angelou's words and actions continue to stir our souls, energize our bodies, liberate our minds, and heal our hearts.





## Commentary: How and Why Does Poetry Matter? And What Do We Do About That?

Patrick Dias, McGill University

### ABSTRACT

While there is a long and widely held belief that poetry matters and is a necessary component of the school curriculum, such convictions are at odds with the way poetry is taught and the general antipathy that students, especially in secondary school, hold towards it. Such disregard is well established among most school teachers who have been similarly schooled and consequently distrust their own competence as readers of poetry and unwittingly perpetuate such insecurity. Teachers need to act with some urgency to determine why poetry is such a valuable cultural and social good, and consider the easily accessible means by which poetry can be enthusiastically embraced by their pupils.

Some readers may wonder why there is any need to defend the status of poetry as an essential component of the English curriculum from early childhood to post-secondary education. Most readers may have serious misgivings about my assertion that poetry receives merely token recognition in school programs and that it is in fact dying of neglect. Yes, it is true that through the long history of teaching poetry in school, the value of poetry and its place in the curriculum has never been seriously disputed, and yet? And yet in many schools hardly any poetry is read and/or given serious study.

While we may profess the importance of poetry as quite likely the sustaining genre of our literary tradition, such acknowledgment does not accord with the

neglect of poetry in schools. If poetry matters to us, why is that conviction not reflected in the amount of poetry that is offered in our programs and the frequency with which it is offered in our classrooms? How do the ways poetry is taught in schools accord with our convictions about its place in the curriculum. Maybe there is little enthusiasm for poetry among our students and, it follows, a corresponding reluctance on the part of teachers to teach poetry. Surely, we need to repair the disconnect between our enthusiasm for poetry and the lack of reciprocity on the other side of the desk.

On initial inquiry into the current situation in schools, it appears that the possibility of such repair holds little promise. In England, when a large number of teachers were polled to provide a sample list of the poems they usually used in their classrooms, the titles they listed were not significantly different from poems I and most other teachers had used some decades ago. Shocking but not surprising because superannuated anthologies resident in school book-cupboards provide easily accessible poems; and shouldn't teachers casting around for poems to teach turn to the ones they know so well, however tired and stale they might be? And familiar also were the themes these poems were grouped under: Nature, War, Children, and Animals. Not that more recent poets and their poetry had not flowed into the curriculum. Among later additions were Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, quite likely because of a very popular anthology *Rattlebag* edited by the two poets and first published in 1982. But what is significant as well as discouraging is that the teachers listing poems they had probably met *during their own schooling* suggests that most of them had not considered it worth their while to enlarge and rejuvenate their repertoire of the poems that might appeal to their students (OFSTED, 2007).

Just as established and even more disconcerting are the suggestions for classroom practice offered by curriculum planners and educational publishers. If I can generalize from a sampling of their institutional websites, typical approaches to teaching poetry seem not to have altered ever since poetry was offered in school textbooks in the fifties and early sixties. Introduce the poem with a brief biography of the poet, thereby signalling what the students may expect to read and identify in the poem; then introduce the class to some of the specific formal features that the poem displays, such as, depending on the grade level, rhyme schemes, meter, relevant figures of speech. A particular goal is for students to arrive at the theme of the poem by, as one guide puts it, a process of induction. The induction is drawn out through a series of questions that are meant to lead to an already determined theme. Sequences include a brief biographical introduction, an examination of formal features (ballads or sonnets, for instance) and viewing a specific poem in terms of those

features, and if and how the poet may have deviated from the form and to what effect. All these several points of recognition are directed towards enhancing understanding of the poem and appreciation of how the poem works. In most cases identifying “the theme” of the poem is also recognition of “the universal truth” implicit in its statement.

What I have described as typical procedures that I discovered from my sampling of curricular practices over the last decade is no more than going full circle and reviving what had been sloughed off over four decades earlier. The sequence moving from parts to wholes contradicts our typical stance before a work of art, where we *apprehend* (there’s a physicality about that word that goes beyond “comprehend”) the whole, and then cast about again as we read the poem recognizing those lines and those phrases which have drawn our attention and compose the larger picture we are constructing with the aid of those signs. But it is not a step-by-step process; it can happen or be intuited in an instance. Instead of following a path from basic information (difficult words, references, background information) to the key issues the poem addresses, readers need to be communing with the poem as a whole, sounding and hearing the words, attentive to the feelings they stir in us, the images that take us unawares. If we are working in small groups, as I prefer to do, my students read the poem aloud a few times to get their bearings; they draw from a variety of observations and slowly the composition takes shape and identity. This is not a process seemingly laid out for unimaginative teachers, the yellow brick road that takes students to “the theme.” I must say that one formulates a theme at the certain risk of reductiveness. The very pithiness of a poem is its virtue; not a word or an image in excess; so why simplify or reduce the poem and have our neophyte readers of poetry lose the complex whole and force of the poem?

It is at this stage of realizing (“understanding” seems passive by comparison) or grasping the poem, that we can now speak of the actual images (the metaphors, comparisons, the verbal play), where these figures of speech find their force and meaning.

I had begun by asking how and why poetry matters, and postponed exploring that question simply because the poem’s mattering, more often than not, is compromised or impeded by the countervailing interventions (all well intentioned) of the teacher. That is another way of saying poetry cannot matter when the reader’s response is filtered through or directed by the teacher’s directive questions or comments. If the poem is to matter, the reader(s) must be engaged by the poem, actively involved in remaking that poem. That engagement is a developing outcome of being

attentive to and having confidence in one's own resources as a reader. I have described at some length in an earlier issue of *LEARNing Landscapes* how readers at all levels can be engaged by poetry and become confident and articulate readers (Dias, 2009). Reading and responding to a poem is a creative act, and I cannot emphasize this enough, *it is enabled as a creative act only when one is reading for oneself, registering whatever feelings, associations, and memories the poems evoke*, and is not inhibited by the guiding questions of the teacher (even with the best will in the world) or by the anticipated pattern of questions to follow.

Imagine how off-putting it would be if you were listening attentively to a piece of music and at the same time had to keep your mind on directions as to how you must attend and what you must attend to as you listen. Consider also one of those audio guides available in art galleries, which give a running commentary on what we are about to see and how we must look at it. There are two aspects to this attending to music, to visual art, and to a literary work. One is that we need to be engaged, and the other, that we need to trust ourselves as listeners, viewers, and readers. This involves a process of familiarization where poems become familiar objects, where they are read without the injunction that they must be fully and clearly understood, where one learns to set a poem aside to return to, if one wishes, at a more propitious time. Susanne K. Langer, a philosopher who has theorized about art and the place of art in our society has written, "The entire qualification one must have for understanding art is responsiveness" (1953, p. 396). Perhaps cultivating responsiveness is the agenda we must commit ourselves to if poetry is to matter.

The title I had set to guide my argument engaged two questions: "How and why does poetry matter?" and "What do we do about it?" To even attempt cogent answers would be far too presumptuous, given that the questions can apply to other art forms as well. I proposed the questions simply because poetry performs an important function in our society and neglecting poetry is denying a value to our developing young. The importance of poetry to our daily living is trenchantly caught in Wallace Stevens' "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (Introduction to *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, edited by John N. Serio. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, p. xiii). In my own middle age, as I watched my children rollick in the pile of leaves I had raked, I felt the sadness of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Spring and Fall" and knew what ailed me and that I had to move on. I know also that young people can contemplate such reality and get "the world right," particularly against the draw of escapist fantasy.



## So How and Why Does Poetry Matter

I keep returning to these questions about the importance of poetry simply because I believe there is a lack of correspondence between public assertions about poetry as a cultural value and how poetry is generally regarded and taught in schools. Once again, Susanne Langer is helpful. In "The cultural importance of the arts," an article she wrote for the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Spring, 1966, she makes several key observations; I need to refer to just two of them:

The primary function of art is to objectify feeling so we can contemplate and understand it. (p. 9) ... As soon as the natural forms of subjective experience are abstracted to the point of symbolic presentation, we can use those forms to imagine feeling and understand its nature. (p. 11)

Towards the conclusion of her essay, we come to:

Wherever art takes a motif from actuality -- a flowering branch, a bit of landscape, a historic event or a personal memory, any model or theme from life -- it transforms it into a piece of imagination, and imbues its image with artistic vitality. The result is *an impregnation of ordinary reality with the significance of created form*. This is the subjectification of nature, that makes reality itself a symbol of life and feeling. (italics mine)

The arts objectify subjective reality, and subjectify outward experience of nature. Art education is the education of feeling, and a society that neglects it gives itself up to formless emotion. Bad art is corruption of feeling. This is a large factor in the irrationalism which dictators and demagogues exploit. (p. 12)

Objectifying "feeling so we can contemplate and understand it" resonates with Stevens' "the daily necessity of getting the world right." But the rest of Langer's assertion helps us understand exactly how poetry can work for us and what we ought to expect poetry to do for us and our students. In the end, contemplating the small group discussion procedure I have promoted, I know that students know what they know not because I have told them or showed them or guided their inquiring, but because they have been engaged and mystified and are curious and therefore have looked hard because they know they are accountable to one another and to the other groups and certainly not to the teacher, who can be assured that what has been realized by the students has been realized (you may want to call it learning) solely by

their speaking and listening to one another because they have felt the need to know. So the student can truly say, as one did with some frustration to a seemingly sceptical me who was devil-advocating for returning “teaching” to the teacher, “This way I know it for myself!”

So how do we translate our love of poetry, our valuing of poetry into the kind of teaching that enables students to develop a sensibility, so that their feelings can be educated, so that they can discover over and over again in their own lives, from their experiences, “how ordinary reality can be impregnated with the significance of created form.” So that their perceiving, their recognitions are fresh and not second-hand. So they can turn away from the easy clichés that encapsulate reality into pastiches of cliché-ridden phrases. Perhaps it is not easy to live with such heightened sensibility so much so that politicians and advertisers and radio and TV hosts grate on our ears, and even more so because they have themselves become blind and deaf to their own larding-over reality. So we turn to a poet for insight:

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,  
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.  
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.

From: T.S. Eliot (1963), *Burnt Norton*, *Four Quartets*

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**Patrick Dias** is Emeritus Professor of Education, McGill University, Montreal. He has been variously, Visiting Scholar at Wolfson College, Cambridge and part-time Lecturer, Department of Education, Cambridge University, Visiting Professor at UNB, UBC, and most recently at Carleton University, Ottawa. He also served for several years as consultant on curriculum development to the Quebec Ministry of Education. At McGill, he founded the Centre for the Study and Teaching of Writing and was its director for 12 years. He has lectured widely across Canada, the U.S., and in the U.K. He has researched response to literature among children, adolescents, and adults and the development of writing abilities in school and in workplace settings, publishing six books and several articles in these areas.





## Commentary: Disappearing Into Another's Words Through Poetry in Research and Education

Corrine Glesne

### ABSTRACT

Increasingly, researchers turn to literary and artistic forms such as drama, short story, and poetry to present data interpretations. Artistic representations of research highlight the contextual nature of knowledge, interconnections between research tale and teller, role of language in creating meaning, and serve to communicate with audiences beyond academic communities. This paper discusses use of poetic representations in qualitative research and then explores ways in which poetic representations could be used in public schools, their contributions to learning, and how they can be evaluated. Of most importance is that a sense of "play" be maintained so that language, form, and data become avenues for discovery and creativity.

I started attending poetry workshops and classes during the 1990s when I was desperate to integrate creativity into my life. One-third of my years, at that point, had gone into obtaining masters, doctorate, and tenure and I was left depleted rather than full with accomplishment. Writing poetry was as difficult as writing academic papers, but the process rewarded me with energy and excitement as it probed unexplored parts of myself, engaged my imagination, and constantly surprised me when I would begin with a word or image, lose myself in writing, and emerge in some unpredictable place. I assumed that poetry would have to be a hobby, something I did on the side, until I found Laurel Richardson's (1994) "Nine Poems" in which she wrote up interviews as poetry. These nine poems led me to other works of Richardson's and inspired me to use poetic form to analyze and write up my

interview research with Puerto Rican educator Doña Juana. The resulting publication (1997), along with Richardson's work, was at the beginning of a poetic turn in qualitative research. Referred to variously as poetic representation (Richardson, 1992), poetic transcription (Glesne, 1997), poetics, and excerpted narratives (Mears, 2009), the process generally involves reducing interview transcripts to the words most essential to illustrating the speaker's story and then arranging into poetic form (see Glesne, 1997 and Mears, 2009 for examples and directions). In this commentary, I reflect briefly on poetic representations in research and then extend their use into public schools, exploring what it is about poetics that educate and how they might be evaluated.

## Playwrights, Poets, and Poetic Representations

"If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally." (Smith, 1993, p. xxvii)

Anna Deavere Smith, dramatist and playwright, disappears as she inhabits the words of those she interviews to bring their personalities and perspectives to life. Playwright and qualitative researcher Johnny Saldaña (2005) chooses words and phrases from interviews to shape ethnodramas. Similarly, poets have used interviews and conversations as the origins of their poetry. Ted Kooser (1986), thirteenth poet laureate of United States, based the poems in *The Blizzard Voices* on recorded reminiscences of men and women who witnessed a great storm in January 1888. Each poem, in the voice of a different speaker, builds the drama. The first few set the scene and then the storm begins. People find their way home, if lucky, by following a row of dead sunflower stalks, or hearing children banging on pots and pans. Robert Frost's poems are full of conversations. I imagine him eavesdropping and jotting in notebooks phrases he heard spoken by men and women in a general store.

Similarly, qualitative researchers increasingly shape words they hear through interviews and conversations into poetic forms. Playwrights, poets, and researchers all seek to "inhabit the speech pattern of another" to experience and help others experience someone else's individuality. Doing so takes "attention aided by craft," Poet Eleanor Wilner's (2007) description of poetry. Attention means slowing down, looking at the world with "the naked, obstinate, defenseless eye of my near-sightedness" (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 3). It is being alert to the words and

worlds of others. Alert, you are ready to hear poetry in the utterances spoken to you. But you must also craft what you hear to reveal the spirit of the conversations. This involves paring down transcripts to what Mears terms the *only* words: "those words that are critical to communicating the essence of the narrator's experience and response" (2009, p. 125). Through attention and craft, you sometimes come to know something that was not seen or realized before.

When I created poetic transcriptions out of the interviews with Doña Juana, I began with her metaphor: "I am a flying bird." This metaphor fit her small frame and active nature. Delving into and selecting "only" words throughout the transcripts led me deeper into her essence:

moving fast, seeing quickly  
so I can give strength,  
so I can have that rare feeling  
of being useful.

Doña Juana's life had been shaped by her need to be useful. Entering into her words provided me with this insight. When I began the poetic transcription, I did not know where, together, we would alight. I did not know that the piece would include disparate parts of the ten hours of interview, including students sleeping in school after working at night or parents picking green worms from tobacco. These images aided in portraying Dona Juana's compassion and understanding, highlighting her commitment to the fleeting sense of being useful.

In more recent work in Oaxaca, Mexico, I began shaping observations and conversational interactions into poetic forms, translating from Spanish, and yet staying as "true" to the speakers' words and intentions as I could. *What We've Lost* is an example. I had been taking students to Oaxaca for a decade and had stayed in villages of different indigenous groups there. I knew that *harmony* was a major cultural value in the communities. I had talked with many who believe in *nahual* or animal allies. I had heard various stories involving *Quetzacoatl*, a god that was both bird and serpent. I had read that when the Spanish arrived and found crosses in village plazas, they assumed that the people had once been Christianized, but had been lost to the devil. Years ago, I rejected the path of Western development and I knew that much wisdom was held within communities that continued in the same locations where their ancestors had dwelled for 1000 years or more. I had not, however, put all this and more together in the way that the weaver did, revealing a cosmic map.

## What We've Lost

*The man in the market selling rebozos,  
huipiles, and embroidered baby shoes  
told me that Oaxaca is said to be  
the poorest state in Mexico,  
but that the people  
are not poor.*

*"One day, others will turn to us  
to learn what they've forgotten."  
"What have we forgotten?" I asked  
of this Zapotec weaver, his hair turning gray.  
"We know the body is divided in four, he replied,  
"and each have to be in harmony."*

*Pointing at an undulating line in a shawl,  
he said, "The serpent is a sign  
of the belly on down---  
earth, sex, life power.  
If a man is a coward, he has no  
cozones, his energy, gone.*

*The body from the waist up holds the spirit  
shown by los aves, the birds.  
Quetzacoatl was half bird, half serpent,  
the greatest of our gods.  
When we dance La Pluma,  
we wear headdresses of feathers  
while bells on our feet  
marry us to the land.*

*But, we are not just serpent and bird,  
we have left and right sides too.  
The right is the part that reasons.  
In the West, logic overtakes all,  
the Occidental is not in harmony.*



*The left enters our dreams—  
intuitive, nahual, animal allies. But,  
we need this side in our waking state too.  
Our ancestors knew this. They had the cross  
before the Spanish came.  
When four directions join,  
they create a soul."*

*In one palm, he held a baby's slipper  
And traced an embroidered cross of blue.  
"Many villages are lacking development,  
villages high in the Sierras.  
No, they are not poor.  
They are the ones to lead the way  
to recover what we've lost."*

## Poetics in the Classroom

Similar to poets and researchers crafting poems from observations, conversations, and interviews, students in public schools can be urged to do so as well. A topic would be selected and each student would interview someone, take as close to verbatim notes as possible or record and transcribe, and then shape the words into poetic pieces, returning to the interviewee for responses. This process fashions a forum for learning observation, interviewing, and editing skills, along with the art of shaping poetry. Together, the class's writing creates a collective perspective of the community to be distributed back to participants. Additionally, students may develop relationships with people in the community who feel valued and listened to in return.

Poets listen carefully to what is said and how it is said—to rhythms, refrains, and internal rhymes. They hear spaces between the words, pick up on words unsaid, and find meanings beneath the words. With such a mindset, poetry appears everywhere. With less of a focus on research and more of one on poetry, students can be encouraged to stay open to hearing poetry in conversations. John Lederach (2010) works with mediation in conflict-torn areas and speaks about the role of music and poetry in eliciting voices that are not present in the interviewing format. As he travels and works, he takes notice of poetics in conversations and, in particular, listens for the haiku form. He sees the haiku as capturing the complexity evoked in "ah ha"

moments of realizations and understandings. A few words convey the epiphany of an experience. Haiku, the three line form with 5 syllables in the first line, 7 in the second, and 5 again could serve to begin students on a search for poetry in conversations. Or, they could shape longer poems.

Here's an example. Some years ago, my younger brother moved to Hawaii and worked as a baggage porter at various hotels while looking for other work. He called one day and, taking a poetry class at the time, I heard a poem in our conversation. Struck with his images, I put down the phone and wrote Cockatoo in his voice, remembering his words as best I could. I could see him fastening his wind sail to his car, I could hear the cockatoo. And I could feel my brother's longing for the cockatoo, as well as the unstated yearning for connection and affection as he made his way in a place where he was mostly a stranger.

### Cockatoo

*The way I figure it,  
I'll never afford a house on Maui.  
It's \$1000 a month in rent, just for the view.  
But I can tell when the waves are right  
and I tie the sailboard down.  
Since I don't have to save for a house,  
I'm thinking of buying a cockatoo.  
She's expensive  
but so pretty, all white.  
They don't forget, you know.  
She got so excited when I visited--  
bent her head into me as I scratched her neck.  
I hadn't been to the hotel since I worked there,  
three months ago.  
They're selling their birds,  
and she'd be good company--  
probably outlive me.  
Did I tell you she can talk?  
"Aloha." "Hi Babe."  
When she saw me, she screeched,  
"I love you, I love you, I love you."  
I really want that bird.*

Students can also create poetic pieces from self-narratives. This process often transforms energy in the classroom as classmates and teacher come to know each other in new ways. Marleen Pugach (2010) asks students to create autoethnographic poems in her writing ethnography course. After many false starts and having read already about poetic transcription, one of her students considered how such poetic pieces begin with a text that is shaped into poetic form. So he wrote a personal narrative about coming to the United States from Vietnam as a child. Then he began culling the words, achieving more distance from his life and yet slipping into a poetic portrayal that revealed aspects of himself to himself as well as to his classmates.

## Evaluating

"...the reading that makes us happy is...reading that transports, with which we go off on a voyage, not knowing where." (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 8)

Students, teachers, and manuscript reviewers are often at a loss for what makes "good" poetic representations and tend to perceive them as unavailable for critique. The process of rendering interviews or conversations into poetic form is often more important than the outcome when it causes the writer to think about data, conversations, or one's own life in new or deeper ways. But neither poetic representations nor poems are beyond critique. Here are a few of my guidelines:

1. Form. What do line breaks and white spaces signify? Do they correspond, at least in part, to breath or pauses?
2. Word Choice. Are active verbs and words that convey vivid images used rather than the abstract? Are words used in a more metaphorical way than remaining concrete and linear? Do pronouns have clear referents? Does the writer pick up on repeated words and phrases and use them as refrains for emphasis?
3. Story Line. Does the writer tell a story, of sorts, conveying tension, conflict, thought, or emotion? Is enough included so that the speaker's intent is conveyed to a reader?
4. Feeling. Does the work engage mind and body? Does it move the reader?
5. Complexity or Depth. Does the work contribute to new perceptions? Does it capture a sense of complexity or something greater than the words as spoken? Does it surprise?

6. Time in Field. Did the researcher develop relationships that allowed entry into deep thoughts, experiences and feelings? Was enough data collected to compose poetic renderings that illuminate events or perspectives?

Most important is to enter into poetic representations with a sense of creativity, enjoyment, and openness to what the other has to teach you. No one right way exists for rendering transcripts or narratives into poetry. Experiment, given your needs and desires in your classroom, and reflect upon how the process itself is educative. Poetry informs when, as writer or reader, you enter a space of intuitive imagination and disappear into another's words.

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**Corrine Glesne** did her doctoral work at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign in qualitative research methodology and educational anthropology. She has carried out ethnographic research in Mexico, Costa Rica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Author of the text *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, Corrine was a professor at the University of Vermont (UVM) for seventeen years, teaching qualitative research and educational foundations courses. She published "That rare feeling: Re-presenting research through poetic transcription" in *Qualitative Inquiry* in 1997. She has worked as coordinator and traveling anthropology professor for the International Honors Program, affiliated with World Learning, and as director and professor for UVM's semester program in Oaxaca, Mexico.





## Commentary: Recesses of the Young Poetic Mind

Sophie Hillcoat

### ABSTRACT

In this interview young poet Sophie Hillcoat shares her story of how she began writing poetry during recess. She talks of her sources of inspiration and the important role that her friends play in contributing to her creative process. She has suggestions for young people who would like to start writing poetry as well as for teachers who teach poetry. Finally, she reads one of her poems.

*Can you tell us when and how you first became interested in poetry?*

first became interested in poetry at the start of grade five when I had the idea for my first poem. I read a lot of books and so I get ideas, sometimes randomly. And I decided to start writing that but I had homework so I couldn't do it at home. So I started during recess at school and I wrote a few poems there and then I stopped for a while. Then I got an idea for another one and that's how I really got interested in it and that's how it turned out.

*How long have you been writing poetry?*

I've been writing poetry since the start of grade five. I haven't really been doing it very long I'd say and I haven't done it in a while because I haven't had many ideas lately but in grade 5 it really was something that I did every recess.

*Can you share with us how you get an idea for a poem and then how you actually create the poem?*

Well, the idea for quite a few of my poems came from the Percy Jackson series which is a story that has to do with the Greek gods and that's how I learned a lot of Greek mythology. And because of that I had the idea for many poems drawing from and interlocking with different creatures that I learned about and different gods or whatever that appeared in that story.

*When you create a poem, what do you do?*

Well, I guess I have to wait until recess. I first write down the story, the poem, and once I start it gets easier but I don't do it alone. I have friends who watch me write the poem and then if I can't find a word I'll ask, "Who knows what rhymes with the word before that?" and I get a bunch of different answers and I'll make up a sentence with the answer that I like the most.

*What do you do with your poems after you write them?*

I kept them in a pocket folder that I read over and as this activity became more popular and more kids realized what I was doing, somebody would ask for my pocket folder to read. So it spent time in my bin at the back of the class with a lot of other things and then I'd take it out for recess, bring a dictionary and a pencil and an eraser and I'd write it down.

*What is it about poetry that you particularly like?*

I like the way I connect with the creatures and how I can fall into the story that I'm weaving and yet be able to know what's ahead and be able to decide what I want. A book is interesting except, and I like the mysteries except, that you can't really change it. You're making up your own stories when you write poems and I enjoy that.

*What would you suggest to a friend if she wanted to start writing poetry?*

I would suggest that you need to have the subject and maybe the first lines before you started writing it and I would suggest that you know what kind of poem



you're writing first. The poems that I write it's AA BB, meaning the first two lines the last words rhyme and then the second two they rhyme again, but they are on the same subject. So that's what I would recommend.

*What would you suggest to teachers to get students writing poetry?*

Well, I would suggest not to make too many restrictions because that would keep other children from showing their creativity and freedom in making the poems, the freedom is what makes it better and what really makes it something special.

*You spoke about involving your friends in your poetry writing. Can you explain why that is helpful and important?*

Well it is helpful because they help me a lot to write my poetry and they give me ideas. Plus I don't like taking everything for myself. I like giving credit to other people, which I also like to do when presenting my poems. It's very important to me for those reasons. There are a few friends who are more deeply involved in it. I have a friend named Lily who will outline things in black because she wants to help me and we have a lot of fun. And sometimes she'll suggest lines or something to write about and that's also very important and special.

### The Messenger

With a beautiful but terrible cry  
A shadow reaches toward the sky  
The rhythmic song of its wings  
The beat of the song it sings  
Oh mother nature shining bright  
Goddess of day, goddess of night  
Man is here  
He brings nothing but fear  
Then with a terrible sound  
It falls to the ground  
The hawk is dead, the messenger gone.



**Sophie Hillcoat** attends an elementary school in Montreal. She loves to read, preferring fantasy adventures over other genres. She enjoys writing poetry and fiction and has several unfinished novels on the go. She also loves to do anything artistic, bake, hike, ski, snowboard and camp with her family and friends. She has a dog named Jasper and a cat named Caramel. Sophie plans to be both a veterinarian and an author when she grows up.



## Commentary: Three Keys: Opening the Gate of Poetry to Young Writers

Jane Hirshfield

### ABSTRACT

The author draws on her experience as a poet and a teacher to offer three key elements for teaching students poetry. She believes that the teacher's own passion about poetry is the first key to letting the imagination rise. The second key is freedom of mind, both for the teacher and the students, which allows students to explore in many directions, without the constraints of pre-set rules, conventions and grades. The "writing invitation" is the third key. In this part, she outlines several innovative ways to invite students to write poetry, giving them guidelines to start from while allowing their creativity to flourish.

**M**y first job as a poet was working in California Poets in the Schools. In that superb and still thriving program, entering poets apprentice with other poets already teaching, then, once they have been authorized, offer workshops to schools in their local community. The system of local, rather than visiting, writers allows long-term relationships and long-term instruction—many schools have poets return year after year, to work with every class for five or ten sessions. I saw generations of young people fall in love with words, their expressive powers, and exhilaration of imaginative thinking. This way of teaching offers a broad entrance to creative writing and the appreciation of poetry. It also opens a gate into a genuine and lasting literacy: students feel written language as their own to use freely and joyfully, they find it a part of their lives as intimate, empowering, and useful as their own hands or feet. Years after I stopped teaching in the local schools, three

now-adolescent boys came up while I waited in line outside a movie and begged me to listen to their poems.

The first key to teaching poetry writing is the teacher's own passion. As a practicing poet, I came into the classroom filled with joy in the art and its possibilities. Many classroom teachers feel this as well, of course—it doesn't matter if a person is a "published poet"; what matters is that they have known for themselves the exhilaration of words. The yeast of passion is what lets imagination rise.

The second key is freedom of mind—for students, and for the teacher. During the classroom hour of poetry, writing wants to be an open field. Spelling does not matter, punctuation rules do not matter, rules of grammar do not matter. It's far better if poems are not graded. The sigh of relief is palpable, but something more important happens as well: students can remember for themselves that the point of language, written or spoken, is, quite simply, to express, to understand, and to be understood. It is true, the rules do need to be learned, but writing time free of concern for pre-set rules allows students to discover that the conventions of comprehensibility exist to serve them, not vice versa. As for freedom of subject, for whatever reason, I never had any serious problem with "transgressive" writing. The teacher's unshockability takes away the incentive to shock perhaps. If a student is pushing the limits, the teacher can just encourage something more imaginative, more original, more daring in a different direction; and mostly, the original invitation to write can be set up in such a way that the problems just don't occur. A last part of this freedom of mind is that you cannot ever know which student will astonish. Time after time, I've seen the students who were not the "good writers" be the ones to write poems that amazed themselves, their classmates, their homeroom teachers. Good poems slip through the cracks where they are most needed. Such a moment of self-surprise can be life-changing. The route to this kind of surprise is praise—whatever is on the page, there will be some strength to encourage further. The first draft of a poem is a failure-free zone.

The third key is crafting the writing invitation itself. A good writing suggestion will be simple to grasp, but profound in its possibilities of fulfillment. I found that I always needed to structure my own lessons and choose my own model poems; this was part of coming into the classroom with passion. Still, what follow are a sample few of my own ideas for some poetry "starts." I tried, in each, to have some underlying skill I was also introducing, sometimes by name, sometimes—especially in the younger grades—without calling it "simile," "extended metaphor," or "ode." With older

students, these concepts can be taught more explicitly, though lightly: the poem itself is always the point. Awareness of the skill or underlying concept was useful for me as a teacher, as well; it gave my classroom ideas a kind of backbone and rigor. I was not asking students to write arbitrarily, and I was honing my own understanding of the way that good poems actually work. It also made me aware of the variety of approaches I could take, so that each writing session was quite distinct from the last. I wanted to convey the limitlessness of poems, and to set out enough variety of possibilities that every student would find at least one way of writing that thrilled.

There are two basic styles of writing invitation—one begins with an idea. The basic strategy here is often to read aloud a few model poems that work in some connected way, then ask the class to do something along the same lines. The through-line could be a subject matter (a poem that starts with a fact from science, a poem about losing someone or something loved). The through-line might equally be a rhetorical or grammatical strategy. One example: the poem as recipe for doing something—a poem titled “How to Dance,” for instance, would almost necessarily be written as a set of instructions, and most students would intuitively use the imperative voice. For this kind of invitation, I might first have students make a list of five or ten activities, then read them some published poems couched as instruction or recipe; then I would ask them to pick an activity from their list and perhaps write a poem in the form. A variation might be to suggest the poem be titled “How to Begin to \_\_\_\_\_.” The “begin to” opens and broadens the imagination in a certain direction. But mostly this invitation would be simply “How To Dance,” or “How to Eat Breakfast at 3 P.M.” or “How to Sing to an Owl.” It’s helpful to have a broad set of model poems, with a broad range between them, or else a set of your own example titles, as here, to suggest.

The other basic mode of invitation is to offer a template or structure of some kind. This is what you are doing if you ask students to write a haiku, or sonnet, but it is not only a matter of musical and metrical form. For very young writers, for instance, those just learning to write, I might write on the blackboard or hand out copies of this “grid”:

The taste of \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ .  
\_\_\_\_\_ looks like \_\_\_\_\_ .  
The sound of \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ .  
When I touch \_\_\_\_\_ it feels like \_\_\_\_\_ .  
The scent of \_\_\_\_\_ makes me think of \_\_\_\_\_ .

Before asking the students to write, I might ask the class to suggest names of emotions of all kinds: joy, anger, loneliness, restlessness. At this stage you can encourage freedom as well—"What are some less usual emotions? Some strange ones?" There is the chance also to invite in the "negative" as well as the positive—"fear," "shame." All get written on the board. All are welcomed as part of what it means to be human. The students are then told to pick one emotion, either the one they suggested or any of the others, and to write about it, using the pattern above, with all five senses. I encourage them to make the second blank a noun (a thing) rather than an adjective, since the hope is that the result will be a series of similes rather than judgments. All the electrical energy is in the unexpected connection, present in "The taste of an apple is a large house in summer with its windows wide open," not present in "The taste of an apple is sweet." It may help, especially in the youngest grades, to do one or two of the poems verbally first, as a group, before asking the students to write or dictate their own. Under the surface of this seemingly simple invitation are two different intentions. One: the imagination cannot help but be engaged. Synaesthesia is unavoidable, freedom of mind inevitable. Yet every first grader can do this, especially once he/she understands there are no wrong answers. "The taste of anger is a charging elephant." "The sound of loneliness is an icicle hanging from a roof in the dark." The second undercurrent intention is that the child who may have something he/she needs to explore for personal reasons has the chance to do that. A frightened child might choose to write about fear, or might choose to experiment with "courage." In either case, there is a safe vessel for taking that emotion and looking at in new ways, gaining some mastery over its life in the mind and heart, gaining the sense of some breathing room around it. This is part of the real work of poetry, whether for a seven year old or a seventy year old.

The same exercise could be used in an eighth grade classroom, but as preliminary. The first task (creating five similes, one for each sense) isn't the poem, it's just taking some things out of the cupboard to have on the counter. Once the template of an emotion approached through the imagination and senses is there, students can then be asked to choose the one they like best and turn that into a full-length poem. The exercise becomes one of extended metaphor or narrative, and the student is continuing to deepen his/her relationship with the underlying reason this emotion, this image, was chosen to explore.

Very often, in my poetry teaching, I begin with a step in which the writer chooses something for him or herself. This seems to me important—no one should be asked to write about what they don't care about, and subject matters and attitudes cannot be imposed. Making a list or choosing a subject also means that the

students have already “signed on” before they are asked to do anything. The psyche is already in motion before it is then given the deeper request.

Another teaching idea: the ode, a poem of praise. For this, you could ask the students, before they know the task, to simply write down a list of ordinary things, “nothing special.” Then bring in a series of Pablo Neruda’s odes to common and unexpected objects. Neruda’s “Ode to a Watch Ticking in the Night” or “Ode to a Dead Fish in the Market” or “Ode to the Onion” throw open doors and set the spirit toward both the wild and the generous tunings. Odes might also be written to something the student may be ambivalent about—the initial list to draw a subject from could be “emotions I’d rather not feel.” (It’s best here to make clear the poems cannot be about people, and the invitation generally works better if the ode is not devoted to something that the student feels forced to praise because it is already condoned as “good.”)

One writing invitation (I think of it, for reasons that will soon be obvious, as “The Concrete of Abstraction”) invariably startles students with the power of language itself to both surprise and cohere. Have the students write two columns of words next to one another. First, on the left side of the page, ask them to list ten concrete nouns (objects, things you could see or hear or taste). Once that is done, ask them to make a list just to the right of that one, with ten abstract nouns (the concept, if unfamiliar, is a bit harder to explain—I’d usually suggest “any subject you study in school, ideas, the names of emotions,” and then get some examples onto the board for students to draw from). Once both lists are complete, ask students to write between each pair of words in the two columns, the word “of.” After a moment or two, the laughter begins, students start showing them to one another. Hear some—“the jazz piano of history,” “the icicle of sorrow,” “the high heels of judgment”—then have them pick a favorite, and write a poem with the chosen image-phrase as either the title or the first few words.

One example of what might come out of this invitation, from a fourth grader:

### The White Horse of Winter

The white horse of winter  
With a mane of snow  
And eyes of ice.

The green horse of spring,  
Green for the grass and green  
Of the trees.

The many colored horse of  
Fall,  
With eyes of red leaves  
And a mouth of fog and coldness.

And last but not least,  
The horse of summer,  
The horse of children playing.

This essay is a skimming of the surface—but there are many books available with other ideas for writing suggestions. The basic thing I hope I've conveyed is a spirit and an expectation of astonishment. A person is never mechanical, nor is a poem. The only reason to write is to know the world more fully and more newly, and to be known more fully and newly. The last thing I will suggest, then, is always to have some time for hearing what's been written. There is a line in a poem by the Polish poet Adam Zagajewski: "Poems from poems, songs from songs, paintings from paintings, always this friendly impregnation" (1985, p. 19). Good poems themselves create the hunger for more poetry. In the end, the teacher wants to disappear, a listener as entranced as any other by the words that have come into the room, dipped from some river of limitless perception, knowledge, and feeling that is always flowing into and from us, if we only can turn our ears towards its musical voice.

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**Jane Hirshfield** is the author of six published books of poetry, including *After* (HarperCollins, 2006, US; Bloodaxe Books, 2006, UK), named a best book of the year by *The Washington Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and England's *Financial Times* and *Given Sugar, Given Salt* (HarperCollins, 2001). Her book of essays, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (HarperCollins, 1997), has become a classic in its field, read not only by those interested in poetry, but in classes in such diverse fields as architecture, choreography, and painting. She has taught at Bennington College, U.C. Berkeley, and elsewhere, and for five years was a poet-teacher in the California Poets in the Schools program.

LINK TO:

[www.barclayagency.com/hirshfield.html](http://www.barclayagency.com/hirshfield.html)





## Commentary: Academia: A Poetic Memoir

Laurel Richardson, The Ohio State University

### ABSTRACT

A sociological maxim is that one sees from a particular position. As my position in academia changed, I saw differently. In this piece, I offer brief descriptions of my experience in four positions—Untenured Professor, Tenured Associate Professor, Full Professor and Professor Emeritus—and illustrate those with poems written during each of those positions.

In this little text, I want to share with you, the reader, some of the poetry I have written at different times in my academic career. I offer them here, not as great poetry—but as markers of my shifting academic identity, and as an encouragement to you who might be in the throes of academic upheaval, personal or institutional. Any of us might come into academia with a certain set of mind or set of questions and a vision of what we think academia will be like. Many of us find we need to change our minds—if we are not to lose them.

### Untenured Professor

I did my graduate work in sociology with emphases on statistics and social theory. Those specialties gave me an entry into a university position. I was always hired on as temporary or visiting or adjunct, because, in those days, 1962-1970, women faculty were not welcomed into social science departments.

I was frustrated and angered by my academic situation. I used that frustration to propel my research on gender issues, and expressed my anger in poems. I published my scholarship and my poetry under two different names. Here are two poems from that period:

### Even the Knives Sleep

If I were a fork, I would know my place,  
to the left of the plate, tines beckoning  
a hand to cradle me,  
me holding meat for the knife.  
The blade slips between my tines  
scraping edges.  
There is no pain, and after  
I am bathed in water  
and returned to the space  
I share with others of my kind.  
We nestle together, edges cradling edges.  
I am safe in the drawer.  
Even the knives sleep.

### The Men in This Garden Have Rimpled Skin

Gray, mostly. And slimy. Even now slimy  
crouched as they are in this garden's nearlight.  
Hunched. Talking in pulses. Gullets rounded.  
Bulbous eyed. Secure. Lips half-closed.

I kissed one once:

He became an urban revisionist and a  
high energy physicist and a resident  
Zen Buddhist and a motorcyclist, and

He invented a cure for the common gnat  
and won the Nobel Prize for peace and  
literature (both in the same year), and

His lips were cast in bronze, hole bored  
in the cleft, strung on golden chains  
and worn in a hundred thousand gardens  
by gray men in rimpled suits rubbing  
Haunches in the after light.

I got warts.

## Tenured Associate Professor

My interest in gender coincided with the social movement for “Women’s Liberation.” One of my articles, “The Door Ceremony,” was featured in the *New York Times*. A member of the Board of Trustees at my University saw the article when he was in Japan, and he let the provost know that I was “world famous.” I was tenured and promoted. And, I merged my two *nom de plumes* into one, “Laurel Richardson.”

Once tenured, I discovered that being an Associate Professor is the most exhausting and demanding job in the university. Institutionally, I could now serve on Important Committees and direct graduate students’ dissertations. As one of a small clutch of tenured women, my “service” was widely desired. And internally, I felt that I had been “invited” into the academic world, but I was not “fully” a member. I had to work, work, work. Get grants. Write articles. Here are two poems from that period:

### The First Sign of Spring

a powder beige moth  
flying toward me  
wing span a full half inch  
or less  
or more  
I didn’t look very closely  
before I smashed it

## While I Was Writing a Book

my son, the elder, went crazy  
my son, the younger, went sad  
nixon resigned  
the saudi's embargoed  
rhodesia somethinged  
and my dishwasher failed

my sister, the elder, hemorrhaged  
my brother didn't speak to me  
my ex gurred and overdosed  
hemlines fell and rose  
texans defeated the e.r.a.  
and my oil gaskets leaked

my friend, the newest, grew tumors  
my neighbor to the right was shot  
cincinnati censured sin  
and my dracaena plant rotted

I was busy.

## Full Professor

I celebrated becoming a Full Professor. It meant that I was now *fully* accepted into the academic world. I had made it. No more steps to climb. I felt different; I was treated differently. For me, it became a time to integrate, heal, mentor, do good, say "no" and say "yes." A time to recognize the irony of it all. Here are two of those poems:

## Gem of an Academic Woman

My  
facets  
polished  
reflect  
decades of wisdom

Ground  
Beveled  
Deflawed  
Registered  
Certified  
Purchased  
Displayed in Haggerty Hall,  
Room 114D  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1-3

Not only ivy can climb the walls.

## Academia

(Found Poem, Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary)

The Raptor Barn houses  
Various Birds of Prey  
That are being Rehabilitated  
for release. Those that  
cannot be released  
successfully  
are kept  
as Educational Birds.

## Professor Emeritus

In my garden, there is a sundial. Carved into it are these words: "Grow old with me. The best is yet to be." That is how I feel about being a Professor Emeritus. I

invite you all, when your time comes to “grow old with me” and the other released birds. Here is a professor emeritus poem:

### Retired Birds

A migration of turacos  
A citation of owls  
A figment of swans  
A pigment of herons  
A chance of condors  
A branch of jacamars  
A goodness of terns  
A dressage of penguins  
A love of doves  
A squawk of hawks  
A stark of martins  
A carton of larks

What a mighty chorus  
Are US!





**Laurel Richardson** is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at The Ohio State University. She is an internationally renowned qualitative researcher with specialties in gender, arts-based research, and contemporary theory. Her writing crosses the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities. She is well grounded in theories of knowledge, and well practiced in sharing knowledge through alternative formats, such as poetic representation, dialogue, and essay. Her innovative work has brought her, in recent years, to Denmark, Italy, Canada, Finland, France, Iceland and Australia, as well as to conferences in the United States and to honors for her books, teaching, and community outreach. Her current work is a collection of interlinked essays about “Seven Minutes From Home.”

LINK TO:

<http://sociology.osu.edu/lwr/>





## Commentary: Off the Diving Board: From Poetry Into Literacy

John Warren Stewig, Carthage College

### ABSTRACT

Ours has become, in the United States, an era when evaluation of school success: of students, teachers, and entire systems, has devolved into derivative fact—emphasizing paper-and-pencil tests. Each of these components suffers from such limited evaluation. Teachers, administrators and policy makers need to assert that a literacy program cannot be successful unless it is evaluated to highlight a wide variety of problem-setting and problem-solving processes, many of which cannot be measured exclusively on paper.

Writing this was a poetic challenge, not in the language that I produced, but in that the specified limit was 2000 words. That is brief compass indeed, but parallel to what poets do. Poets routinely compact images and distill language, to elicit response.

The assertions on which this piece is based are not surrounded here by extensive citations, though the literature is full of such sources. When Edward Lear asserts in “The Owl and the Pussycat” (2007) that the two “ate with a runcible spoon,” there was no need to provide supportive data that such a thing exists, though in fact the etymology of that object is quite interesting.

These assertions/assumptions are certainly not universally accepted. Yet they lead me to a central question. Is being “educated,” and “literate” more than simply being able to answer questions written by other people, accurately, at a particular time decided upon by someone other than the answerer? For some people, doing

this task is indeed a sign of an educated, literate person. Instead, I'd like to suggest that if we want to develop literate children, we must provide different ways to determine if we have accomplished the task.

For me, literacy is evident when children use their imaginations to create something new, which does not happen on a schedule, and does not always (or indeed often) fit easily into what ever standardized measures are the soup de jour.

What I'd like to do here is use a single edition of a poem, "The Owl and the Pussycat" by Edward Lear, and base what follows on that. My purpose is to show how it might be used with a group of children to develop myriad literacy skills, more sophisticated, and hence more usable in real, adult life, than questions like, "Where did the cat and owl get the wedding ring?" or "What two foods did they eat after they married?"

## Listening

One such literacy skill is listening. We want children to listen to the teacher, not just to follow directions but to revel in the "flow of speech sound through time." Beautiful sound, more imaginative than the utilitarian speech which serves us well enough in ordinary everyday interactions. We develop listening skills by reading interesting things to children: poetry, fiction, nonfiction, plays. We read, having rehearsed what we will read, so we can shape the sounds: articulating unfamiliar words and making the sentences into music. How can we emphasize the variety of sentence patterns the skillful author uses? By making sure we take time to read aloud to ourselves in preparation. This is obviously easier with a four-line poem selected to open the school day, than for the ten-page chapter we use to settle the class after lunch.

We provide time for children to listen to themselves, as they partner and read something they have enjoyed with another child in the classroom. Never mind if the reading isn't as fluent as when the teacher reads—it is the process which is important. It's a shared experience, "I like this so I want to read it to you."

Listening to other children, beyond the home classroom, is also important. One of the glories of the one-room school was the interaction of younger with older and the reverse. Going forth into a different environment, even if just across the

hallway, is an adventure. Not all children will enjoy it at first, but it can build confidence for all children when the process is skillfully managed by the teacher.

## Speaking

Children need to talk to discover what they know, what they believe, and to wonder about unknown parts of the world. Talking to answer someone else's questions is only a small part of becoming fluent in speaking.

Recasting from a piece read aloud into their own language is important. How could students retell a poem or a story using their own words to capture a listener? With very young children this needs to take place in the context of a more experienced scribe, an older child or perhaps a class aide. With older children, recording with a machine lets them reflect on their own voice quality. Discovering the process of recapturing the people and events in something they have heard into their own language can be reinforcing for children.

## Storytelling

Beyond retelling, children need experience with creating from "scratch" (i.e., making up characters they care about doing things they find interesting, scary, or in other ways compelling to them). We need not be concerned that some will take to this more easily than others. Putting children in small groups so they can spin a story line for only one or two other listeners, can move into slightly larger telling/listening groups as the teacher observes the time is right.

## Choral Reading

One of the saddest losses in our push to measure everything that happens is this very old art of using voices together to intrigue an audience. The Greek playwrights used chorus groups because reading literacy was uncommon. We can use it for the aesthetic purpose of working on important qualities of oral language: pitch, stress, and juncture to present a poem or a longer piece of prose to delight an

audience. Important social skills can develop as the teacher guides the group to decide who will say what, and how.

## Dramatizing

Until the middle of the last century, important experiences in dramatizing were going on in schools. Not simply formal drama (i.e., the scripted play), but more casual though directed experiences of building a character and a plot done right in the classroom with no written script at all. Unfortunately this happens less often now, simply because it can look too disorganized to an outside observer. Skillful teachers can help children decide what they will make a classroom drama about, and who the characters are that will enact that drama. A long line of drama practitioners have written about their techniques so that inexperienced teachers can find helpful direction. A more challenging task for teachers who want to do drama is to understand, and be able to talk about the myriad benefits such drama experiences provide.

## Reading

My approach to this particular literacy skill, whether writing about it now, or in previous years spent working directly with children, is to remain aware that ideas of when and how to teach reading vary greatly around the world. In the United States we are currently caught up in a “basic” skills mania, which emphasizes using prepared commercial materials that will pull children up to a certain level of prescribed accomplishment in a specified amount of time. In so doing, we ignore that, for instance, in the Scandinavian countries and elsewhere, children are not taught to read until they are seven years old.

An alternative to current approaches would be to immerse students in the model of fluent, adult, standard language as available in children’s books. Seeing an adult enjoy reading is one of the most critical factors in encouraging children to want to read. Not all children come from homes in which they see such adult models. Making a commitment to read aloud daily to children, at a particular time and for a particular allotment of time, is critical. It is interesting that years after college students have left my classes, one thing a majority remember and remark upon is the reading aloud I did in every session.

We provide regularly scheduled opportunities for children to use their developing reading skills to read to others. Certainly there is a ten-minute block in any class day to let students read to their partner. When an acceptable skill level is reached, those who are willing to volunteer should be able to sign up to read to other listeners via the school intercom system. What an amazing outcome would result with a "Poem a Day" practice, reaching to every child in the school.

## Writing

Children write a lot in schools, but it is mostly writing from outside the experience. Rewriting as if one of the characters involves children not in writing "about" but rather writing "as if." It is always interesting to ask children questions like: "What did the cat feel as she was serenaded by the owl?" In the poem, the owl "sings" but the teacher as oral vocabulary model, purposely uses an alternative like *serenaded*. "Why would the pig be willing to sell his ring?" This sort of question stimulates thinking, rather than searching for a particular answer.

It is always profitable to stimulate thinking by extending in either way beyond the poem. What happened before, and/or what happened after? We could ask, for instance, "How did the cat meet the owl?" "When they sailed away, who did they leave behind?" "After they finished dancing, where did they live?"

## Visual Literacy

In all types of literacy, we are concerned with helping children receive messages, evaluate, and create their own messages in response. In an increasingly visual world, where messages arrive with increasing speed, we help children become visually competent by using the art in picture books. We move through stages in which we ask children to

DESCRIBE what they see;

COMPARE what they see to something else they have seen; and

VALUE, which they prefer.

We start with picture books including art that is easy to respond to. But then we move to art in which the illustrator challenges the viewer. The art in the version I'm using, by Stéphane Jorsch (Lear, 2007), isn't easily anticipated. That is both the challenge and eventually the delight of this art, as children come to experience what the illustrator has created on the page. In a small format (5 1/4" h by 10 1/2" w), unusual in picture books, the artist begins with "O let us be married" on a translucent sheet before a couple shown on the following page, which isn't the owl and cat. Why? The reason isn't clear, though the two main characters appear (heads only) on the title page. Four double wordless spreads—in watercolor sharpened with fine pen line, show eccentric landscapes finally leading to the first text page. Again, why? There's lots to speculate on here, and throughout the book.

The art by Beck (Lear, 1996) and by Knight (1983) are more easily understood, and for most children, probably easier to respond to. Beck's watercolors are heavily crosshatched in naturalistic colors and the owl and cat do not appear in human clothing. His double-page spread showing the passage of time and varying weather is clever. Knight's whimsical art sets the poem in the frame of an eccentric professor who beguiles two children with the tale. They are transformed into the cat and owl, wearing human clothes in a rococo fantasy land.

## Conclusion

There are two caveats about this approach. First, I would never do all of these things with one poem, or one class. Overkill is too easy, as we see in many commercial literacy programs. No poem should be so burdened with "activities" that children, even if they are becoming more literate, never want to return to that particular poem again. Second, there are so many things to do with any one class, that there needs to be a balance between literacy-driven activities and other experiences. Helping children swim around in a sea of poetry will certainly ensure that when they climb out, they will be more literate adults.



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**John Warren Stewig**, Director of the Center for Children's Literature, Carthage College, Kenosha (WI, USA) taught creative drama, language arts, and children's literature at the university level, after a career as an elementary school teacher. He did speeches and workshops with teachers and librarians in twenty-six states and two provinces of Canada while writing fourteen books for teachers/librarians, as well as eleven books for children, which reflect these experiences.

LINK TO:

<http://faculty.carthage.edu/jstewig>





## Lifewriting: A Poet's Cautionary Tale

Carl Leggo, University of British Columbia

### ABSTRACT

I am concerned about the hegemony of certain kinds of discourse in academic research. We need spaces for many kinds of research, including lifewriting research that focuses on narrative, autobiographical, fictional, and poetic knowing. Nevertheless, for all my enthusiasm for the value of lifewriting, I also recognize that lifewriting is fraught with dangers. There are many dangers in lifewriting, but there are also many dangers in avoiding lifewriting. Therefore, I promote poetry as a discursive practice that invites creative ways of writing a life in order to interrogate and understand lived and living experiences with more critical wisdom.

*The text you write must prove to me that it desires me. (Barthes, 1975, p. 6)*

*Going into a narrative—into the narrative process—is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead. (Atwood, 2002, p. 176)*

*This is my story. But it is not my story only. (Miller, 2005, p. 176)*

We are awash in stories. We live stories all the time. We attend to the stories of others. We linger in the stories of dreams, imagination, fantasy, and memory. We read stories in school and at home; we hear stories from friends and strangers; we view stories on television and the Internet and movie screens; we understand the past in terms of stories, just as we seek to understand the future in stories. And so, we need to acknowledge the stories in even the mundane events of our lives, to invest significance in our stories by attending artfully to how the stories are composed. We need to hold fast to Heaney's (1995) experience of "the thrill of story" (p. 10). As Naipaul (2000) understands, "the value of the experience lay in its particularity. I had to render it as faithfully as I could" (p. 50). Life is abundant, and

lifewriting is a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance in order to recognize some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experiences. For stories to be creatively effective, they need to be shaped generatively and offered generously. This is the heart of lifewriting (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) and this is the heart of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). Our stories need to be told in creative ways that hold our attention, that call out to us, that startle us, so we know our stories and the stories of others with renewed attentiveness. Lifewriting and poetic inquiry are ways of living in the world.

As a poet, fiction writer, teacher, and education researcher, I promote connections between lifewriting, poetic inquiry, and research in the social sciences. I support a poetics of research by investigating ways that creative writing (including poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, lifewriting) contributes to knowing and understanding. In my writing, I seek to live attentively in the moment, and to know the momentousness of each moment. I seek to enter lived experiences with a creative openness to people and experiences and understandings. Above all, I seek to write and tell stories in an ongoing process of dialogue with myself and with others. Like Freire (1997), I am eager to “produce forms of knowledge that do not exist yet” (p. 31). I am concerned about the hegemony of certain kinds of discourse in academic research. We need spaces for many kinds of research, including lifewriting research that focuses on narrative, autobiographical, fictional, and poetic knowing.

Atwood (2002) suggests that “there’s one characteristic that sets writing apart from most of the other arts—its apparent democracy, by which I mean its availability to almost everyone as a medium of expression” (p. 25). The democracy of writing is increasingly experienced and expressed in a diverse and ever-expanding range of possibilities. As Amis (2000) reminds us, “we live in the age of mass loquacity” (p. 6). With the unprecedented proliferation of digital literacies and social networks, such as Facebook, blogging, and YouTube, many of us live in a time and place when more and more people (at least economically privileged people) are telling more and more stories about their experiences, clearly confident that their experiences deserve to be storied and shared with others, including family and friends, but also reaching out to strangers, potentially millions of unknown others. Amis is convinced that “nothing, for now, can compete with experience—so unanswerably authentic, and so liberally and democratically dispensed. Experience is the only thing we share equally, and everyone senses this” (p. 6). So, as I eagerly check out my daughter’s blog, ostensibly written by the family basset hound, Mr. Burns, but actually written by my daughter’s husband, I can participate in the almost daily visual record of my granddaughter

Madeleine whose life has already been stored in thousands of digital images (even at thirty months old). Of course, I can also walk down the road, minutes away, and visit my granddaughter and her parents, and indeed, like any grandfather mesmerized with love, I often do, but what I know daily is that I have an insatiable desire to share in the experiences of my family, and in the experiences of many other families, too. As Amis suggests, "we are surrounded by special cases, by special pleadings, in an atmosphere of universal celebrity" (p. 6). And as I attend to my granddaughter's blog in an age of ubiquitous celebrity, I can also watch myself reading poetry on YouTube. While I confess that I did not post the video to YouTube (I was taped during a poetry reading, and the organizers of the poetry reading posted the video), I also confess that I occasionally check myself out on YouTube, in much the same way that I might deliberately catch a glimpse of my image in a shop window.

So much research in the social sciences has been developed from the frameworks and presuppositions of science, and since science has been misrepresented for generations as a reliable, valid, and objective means of inquiry, other modes of inquiry have often been ignored or dismissed. Yet, as Baldwin (2005) reminds us, "science and story have always been partners. The impulse to understand our lives and the world through science is almost as ancient as the impulse to understand our lives and the world through story" (p. 58). I agree with Baldwin that we need both "the cognitive and the creative, the statement and the story" (p. 64).

As an education researcher, I am not attempting to spell out a clear, linear, coherent, logical, rational, scientific exposition of issues and dynamics involved in teaching and learning. I am not researching functions of the brain, or clinical supervision of teacher candidates in classrooms, or strategies for supporting second language learners in understanding idiomatic English. My narrative research is connected to understanding how stories present possibilities for understanding the complex, mysterious, even ineffable experiences that comprise human living. I am especially interested in understanding how stories can help us live with more creative, ethical, and political conviction. Atwood (2002) wisely suggests that "writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light" (p. xxiv).

Like Calvino (1995) I am seeking a "pedagogy of the imagination" (p. 92) by writing about lived and living experiences, and by ruminating on those experiences in questions, poetry, stories, and conversations with the words of others. Calvino muses:

Who are we, who is each of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a

library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable. (p. 124)

In this essay I present a combinatoria full of glimpses into a lifetime of teaching and reading and writing and becoming human. And in presenting this combinatoria, I am full of reservations, concerns, and fears about lifewriting. Hence, I present a cautionary tale.

Lifewriting is fraught with dangers, wrought with tensions, bought with tears and laughter, always caught up in mysteries beyond all telling. Lifewriting is much like living life. Of course, there are many dangers in lifewriting, but there are also many dangers in avoiding lifewriting. The subtitle “a cautionary tale” suggests a prophylactic or defensive or protective intention, but “cautionary” can also be understood as monitory and admonitory and exemplary. Lifewriting lives in the intricate interstices of all these adjectives; lifewriting is adjectivally adventurous. Even if I hold to a Derridean conviction about the undecidability of language, the impossibility of auto/biography, I am still always immersed in stories. In my stories I am dreamy, delusional, deceptive, and dangerous. I don’t trust my stories—sentimental, sinuous, serpentine, full of specious spells and simulated sense. Nevertheless, I live stories and tell stories and live each day with a zany zeal for walking the line like a tightrope that stretches from one unknown to another unknown.

In Adiga’s remarkable novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), the narrator Balam Halwai—servant, driver, philosopher, entrepreneur, murderer—tells his story to the Premier of China, Mr. Jiabao, who is going to visit Bangalore, India. Balam Halwai spends seven nights writing or narrating his story. At the beginning of his story, he promises: “... I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore. By telling you my life’s story” (p. 4). Like Balam Halwai, in my lifewriting I claim to tell the truth about growing up in Newfoundland, or living as a scholar near the edge of the Fraser River, or learning to be a teacher, or becoming a grandfather, by telling my life story. But what am I really doing?

## Lifewriting Is Exculpatory: Whose Story Am I Telling?

In her novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels (1996) writes about how “the present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative” (p. 48). She also writes about how

...the hindsight of biography is as elusive and deductive as long-range forecasting. Guesswork, a hunch. Monitoring probabilities. Assessing the influence of all the information we'll never have, that has never been recorded. The importance not of what's extant, but of what's disappeared. (p. 222)

I engage in lifewriting as a kind of research that provides stories for living by, not stories of fact, not historical stories, not hysterical stories. My stories are hopeful. When I tell a story, I know I am really telling my story, even when the story is significantly about somebody else.

So, as a part of my ongoing lifewriting, I offer a poem about my father, a poem that continues to cause me difficulty because it recounts a personal experience that casts a negative light on my father. I have written many poems about my father, but I have always cast those poems in a positive light. Even in this poem I am able to write it as a poem that has a happy ending. In fact, I almost always look for a happy ending. If I could not write this poem with a happy ending, I probably would not share it at all. I think this poem is truthful, an accurate accounting of events, at least as I remember them. I did not share this poem with my father, and now he is dead, so I never will. I think that the value of the poem for me is that I can use the poem to make sense of events in my relationship with my father. I don't actually need to share it with him because this is not a poem about my father as much as it is a poem about me in my own pedagogic experience of seeking to understand the views and values of others regarding diversity and sexual orientation—views that I regard as unjust and reprehensible, but must also recognize as entrenched and incomprehensible. The purpose of this poem is not exculpatory in the sense of clearing guilt or blame or shame; it is exculpatory in calling attention, in naming the shame, in declaiming from a place of shame.

### Knots

one long summer ago  
I returned to my father  
who was tying knots  
in the backyard,  
hitches, loops, bends,  
never know when  
you might need to tie

a knot, he said, like  
this fisherman's bend,  
a simple, secure knot  
for mooring a boat,  
and at day's end  
we drove to Curling  
to see my uncle Jim,

and on the way passed  
 the new Anglican rector,  
 Ichabod Crane's twin,  
 already suspect because  
 he was tall, skinny, single,  
 pale, pinched, and Skipper,  
 with his face twisted  
 like he had a toothache,  
 muttered, another faggot,  
 and I didn't know what  
 to say, almost gasped  
 with the cut of the blood  
 knot on my bare back,  
 the noose cutting my throat,  
 I'd never heard my father  
 speak with a hornet's fire,  
 but also knew I hadn't heard  
 him say much for years  
 since I left home young  
 and returned seldom,

mostly for meals and money,  
 too busy with growing up  
 to hear my father,  
 and I wondered what  
 he would say if I told him  
 my best friend was gay  
 or my son was gay  
 or I was gay, but I said  
 nothing, as usual,  
 and a few months later,  
 Skipper phoned, now  
 the church warden  
 for the new rector,  
 chuckled, he's a good  
 fellow, but needs me  
 to look after him,  
 and I remembered Skipper  
 in the backyard tying  
 a figure eight knot even  
 Houdini could never escape

In his eloquent novel, *Jackytar*, Gosse (2005) writes about "paradoxes. Half-truths. Fictions we fabricated, then accepted as truth, and tried to pawn off to others. Fake and fragile, like so much of our knowledge" (p. 140). The narrator Alex Murphy composes "A Misandrous Queer List," a sad litany of the challenges gay people face. He writes: "When I die, no one will ever have truly known me" (p. 125). In all my lifewriting I am searching and researching the interstices of fiction and fact, possibility and impossibility, silence and revelation.

## Lifewriting is Emancipatory: What Stories Am I Telling?

In *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller (2005) asks, "Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?" (p. 16). Miller responds to his own compelling question with the claim that writing is "a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional,



are always inextricably interwoven" (p. 31). Throughout his wonderfully wise book, Miller narrates the story of his father's depression, suicide attempts, and death. Miller's personal story weaves through his insightful analyses of the narratives of Chernobyl, Columbine, the Unabomber, 9/11, among others. Miller calls for institutional autobiography as "a brand of intellectual inquiry that is centrally concerned with ... 'the felt experience of the impersonal'" (p. 26). This is what I especially like about Miller. As a student of English literature in the 1970s, I was taught by professors who had imbibed the gospel of the New Critics. Texts were to be read with a single-minded attention to rhetoric or construction. There was no allowance for discussing how you responded to the text, how it made you feel, how it triggered memories and emotions. This kind of reading promoted the notion that the text held a secret message that just needed to be decoded. So, as a reader I was like a spy who sought to eviscerate texts with a skilful scalpel. In effect, I could not address my emotions, I could not investigate my heart. Instead, I pretended that the whole world was constructed in clear and logical and coherent ways. My feelings and experiences were always outlawed. Miller claims that the goal of institutional autobiography is "to locate one's evolving narrative within a specific range of institutional contexts, shifting attention from the self to the nexus where the self and institution meet" (p. 138). This is the goal of lifewriting.

### Written on the Back of a Safeway Slip

I am a lonely poet  
who seeks a reader  
who will loiter with  
me long enough  
to hear my words.

We insist on clear  
words, interpretable  
(Apostle Paul's idea)  
but I want to  
play with words  
like an alchemist  
polishing the stone  
that might transmute  
dross into gold.

So my searching  
always fails  
(we are not  
kind to failures).

Engineers all wear  
a ring to remind  
them that one  
engineer once  
failed.

I don't need a ring  
to remind me

I fail all  
the time.

By emancipation I mean that I liberate myself from illusions and delusions by recognizing I am deluded, enmeshed in the ludic places of amusement. There is no other emancipation. In Hamilton's (1988) harrowing novel, *The Book of Ruth*, the narrator is compelled to tell stories filled with violence and hate. Ruth notes that,

...we were the products of our limited vocabulary: we had no words for savory odors or the colors of the winter sky or the unexpected compulsion to sing. The language I had to speak to be understood is not the language of poetry or clear thinking. (p. 2)

Near the end of her horrendous narrative, Ruth still confesses:

I imagine ... that I'm ringing a bell, and someone will hear, but to tell the truth, I also know that it isn't very often that people change their ways. Still, I have to ring the bell, keep it sounding. (p. 284)

So, how do we learn to tell all the stories, to ring the bell, even if no one is listening, even if no one cares, even if no one responds?

## Lifewriting is Exclamatory: When Do I Tell Stories?

In the mid-eighties when I resumed graduate studies after eight years of school teaching, I was introduced to poststructuralist critical theory by Dr. B. Cameron at the University of New Brunswick. An exemplary scholar and teacher, Cameron introduced his students to Althusser, Barthes, Cixous, Derrida, Eagleton, Foucault, Gramsci, Irigaray, Jameson, Lacan, and many more stretching to the end of the alphabet. I was enamoured with Derrida. Recently I read Mikics' (2009) *Who Was Jacques Derrida?* Mikics claims that Derrida sought to separate philosophy from psychology. According to Mikics' persuasive arguments, Derrida was opposed to exploring the inner life, the emotional life, the personal life, especially as expressed in lifewriting. I understand how Derrida's antipathy for biography and autobiography is supported by many traditions, conventions, and expectations in the academy, but after reading Mikics' intellectual biography of Derrida, I am reminded how much I have been shaped by the academy, by the scholars I have read, the teachers who have taught me, the colleagues who have guided and guarded my academic journey. Now I understand that if I hope to understand Derrida, I need to understand the life stories of Derrida, even while understanding that he would have regarded such an intention

and attention with derision. I now enthusiastically agree with Miller (2005) who argues

...for a return to 'personal' or 'non-academic writing' as a way to reclaim a form of expression that really matters—writing that reaches beyond the walls of our conferences, that eschews jargon to make a bigger tent, that dismantles the sense that the writer is the master of her past or of all that she surveys. (p. 30)

In 1995 Kofman and Dick made a documentary film about Derrida titled *Derrida*. Mikics (2009) comments on the film:

In Kofman and Dick's film, after a tantalizing, quickly dropped reference to his courtship of Marguerite, Derrida remarks, 'I can't tell a story ... I just don't know how to tell them.' This is a real moment of insight into Derrida's philosophy, which is supremely nonnarrative (or even antinarrative). Throughout his work, Derrida remains relatively uninterested in the stories people tell to explain themselves. He lacks Nietzsche's fine hand for the summary psychological portrait; as I have argued, he would like to reject psychology altogether. Instead, he thinks of his own history, and anyone's, in terms of little details, mostly linguistic. Such details are for him ways of hiding personal identity rather than revealing it .... (p. 242)

Mikics claims that "Derrida retained his hiddenness to the end. His readers were left to wonder, at the last, who he was" (p. 243). Perhaps we all retain our "hiddenness to the end." I think I am trying to avoid retaining my "hideousness" to the end. I want to be responsible. I want to respond and be responded to. But perhaps I just linger in the dark recesses of a cave, telling my story to an orator who is deaf and mute. Most days, that seems accurate, but even if that is the case, I will go on telling my story anyway because ultimately it is still more captivating than anything on TV. But I am not ignoring Miller's warning about "the profound sense of discomfort that can be produced when, in an academic setting, the request is made that one see or hear the actions, events, or details of another's life as warranting sustained attention" (pp. 40–41).

## Voyeurism

In Big T's Rib Place in Calgary

I saw a woman who reminded me  
of you without make-up, at least  
a little. Odd how sometimes I still see

somebody who looks something  
like you, a trace of memory, at least.

The last time I saw you, I was in Zeller's,  
years ago. You wore a pink hoodie, laughed

with a man I knew was your new partner,  
and I hid behind a shelf of DVD's, where  
I rehearsed a few lines I might use  
if you saw me, but you didn't, and I was

glad because I knew my lines weren't very good.

A long time ago, I saw you framed  
in your bedroom window like a camera  
knows a scene in the moment

of the shutter's precise smooth movement.

I saw you from the Tim Horton's across the road.  
If you looked out your bedroom window  
you would have seen me seeing you

mad with love and guilty with spying  
or the other way around, but I knew  
you'd never look, not alone.

I watch the world through dark glass

windows, mirrors, cameras, seeking to see while  
not being seen, the poet's lonely obsession where  
all the lovely stories are made up like Timbits  
from frozen dough shipped from Toronto

In McCarthy's (2005) novel, *No Country for Old Men*, the Sheriff considers his life with wisdom and candour:

People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they don't deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did. (p. 91)

And near the end of the novel, the Sheriff continues to think about his life in ways that are at the heart of lifewriting (at least my lifewriting):

I tried to put things in perspective but sometimes you're just too close to it. It's a life's work to see yourself for what you really are and even then you might be wrong. And that is something I don't want to be wrong about. (p. 295)

In my lifewriting I will continue to declaim, exclaim, and proclaim, not in order to blame and defame, not for fame and a well-cited name, but in order to claim that I have known, intimately and gratefully, the privilege of walking on the earth.

## Lifewriting is Evocative: Where Are the Stories I Am Telling?

Miller (2005) claims that, "soon enough and sure enough, the educated person feels at home nowhere" (p. 185). A while ago, I visited Whitehorse in the Yukon. I told my friend B. McClelland, a psychologist, that Whitehorse reminded me of Newfoundland. Then, in a burst of memory, I told him that everywhere I go reminds me of Newfoundland. He said, "That's rather egocentric of you." I said, "I think it is geocentric." It is important to know our backyards. Google satellite images of the backyards where I live and have lived remind me how the whole beautiful earth is connected, and how we need to know the stories of others, not as the Other, but as human beings I am connected with in myriad ways. How does where we are help to make us who we are?

So, I invite my students to write about their homes, especially the myriad spaces that compose their domestic architecture, including their backyards, kitchen tables, closets, basements, and studies. As a location, home is always geographical and emotional. In *Belonging: Home Away from Home*, a moving memoir, Huggan (2003) ruminates on home and places as a Canadian who has lived in the south of France and Tasmania for many years. Huggan confesses that "it is becoming a bit of

an obsession, this quest to know what and where home is" (p. 89). But Huggan also understands that "actually, it is not that small white house I mean when I write the word home, but the subtle kinetic familiarity that comes from situating oneself in recognizable terrain, the feeling of *knowing who you are*" (p. 90). Regarding the different versions that she and her sister Ruthie have about family experiences, Huggan writes that "slowly, with age, I am learning a great truth about recollection; there is no truth, and inconsistencies only add to the richness of mutual memory" (p. 228). Huggan knows that her "stories are only partial truths—but insofar as they exist, they change life into language and keep it firm" (p. 25). In a similar way, Naipaul (2000) reflects on how writing each of his books took him "to deeper understanding and deeper feeling" and how "that led to a different way of writing. Every book was a stage in a process of finding out; it couldn't be repeated" (p. 27).

A few summers ago, I visited Labrador for the first time. The main goal of this family vacation and adventure was the isolated town of Battle Harbour which is now a Canadian national historic site. I stayed overnight in a refurbished house that once served as a stopping place for Dr. Wilfred Grenfell on his medical journeys up and down the coast of Labrador. Spending a couple days in Battle Harbour reminded me to ask many questions about the places where we live, especially about experiences of geographical intimacy.

### Battle Harbour

After a few winding hours up the Viking Trail along the coast of the Great Northern Peninsula like a broken index finger pointing north, and a ferry ride from St. Barbe to Blanc Sablon, and hours more along the Labrador Coastal Drive, mostly on a gravel highway with boulders that could break Goliath's head or a windshield, to postcard perfect Mary's Harbour, and another hour on the *MV Iceberg Hunter*, we arrived in Battle Harbour, a restored remnant of the town that was once the unofficial capital of Labrador, the mercantile hub of a lucrative salt cod fishery.

Battle Harbour is a rock that can be walked,  
end to end, in less than an episode

of *Law and Order* without commercial breaks,  
 a place without trees, and little sun where  
 the midnight blue ocean wraps its arms  
 around the island like a hug or choke-hold.

People once lived here all their lives, like Harold,  
 the tour guide, who grew up here till 1967  
 even when only three families remained, and  
 tells us his uncles always said about his father,  
*My son, he's some stun.*

Because Battle Harbour had a Marconi station,  
 Commander Robert E. Peary stopped by often  
 on his Arctic expeditions, and in 1909 announced  
 he was the first person to reach the geographic North Pole  
 (even though it is likely a few generations of Inuit  
 probably hiked over it without making a fuss).  
 I have stood in the net loft where Peary stood, and  
 if he lied (as many think he did), there is no way  
 anyone could have known, will ever know.

And walking Battle Harbour on an intricate network  
 of boardwalks, old cart roads, and footpaths in the tundra,  
 visiting the restored churches and graveyards, picking  
 partridgeberries, remembering my home in Vancouver,  
 I think, Why not fall in love with a place the way we fall  
 in love with another—a romance with geography:

Be faithful to a place with all the lovely  
 and lonely moments of fifty or sixty years, decades  
 of recapitulated delights and steady savoury surprises.

In her novel, *Creation*, which narrates the adventures of John James Audubon in Newfoundland and Labrador, Govier (2002) presents an intriguing conversation between a character named Captain Bayfield and Audubon. Bayfield explains his understanding of triangulation as “an act of imagination” (p. 81): “Three points. Where you stand, where you strive to be and the unreachable star by which you measure” (p. 81). Audubon responds, “You have laid down the coordinates of my life” (p. 82). Bayfield continues,

'Of mine as well. Where I stand, where I strive to be and the fixed point which defines both. Between these three is a relation. Once you know it, it can be used to discover any distance you have not yet travelled.' (p. 82)

Lifewriting is all about recognizing (as in knowing again) one's position and the possibilities of relationship that emerge from a keen sense of location.

## Lifewriting Is Enlivening: Why Do I Tell Stories?

According to Miller (2005), "now that we inhabit the age of the memoir, we find ourselves surrounded by those who write to distinguish themselves from the crowd by capturing the deep particularity and pathos of their own past experiences" (p. 20). I'm not sure that those of us who write autobiographically are really seeking to distinguish ourselves from the crowd. In much of my writing I think I am seeking to understand how I am part of the crowd. Most of the time, I feel eccentric, idiosyncratic, unique, alone. What I want is to feel like I am a part of a crowd, a network, a collective, a community. Like Miller (2005) I think,

...the memoir allows one to plunge into the darkness of the past; it provides the means both for evoking and for making sense of that past; and it can be made to generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured. (p. 20)

As Miller (2005) understands,

...every shoe salesman and waitress, every school teacher and cop, every politician and pundit has a story to tell and wants to share it now via the Internet, on some television talk show, or on the printed page. The chosen media doesn't seem to matter. The stories will out. (p. 20)

In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggars (2001) shakes up memoir with a keen subversive delight:

Further, the author, and those behind the making of this book, wish to acknowledge that yes, there are perhaps too many memoir-sorts of books being written at this juncture, and that such books, about real things and



real people, as opposed to kind-of made up things and people, are inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad, but would like to remind everyone that we could all do worse, as readers and as writers. (p. xxi)

In Ionesco's (1962) drama *The Chairs*, two characters named Old Man and Old Woman plan to commit suicide. A third main character named The Orator sits on the stage. Old Man explains: "My life has been a full one. My mission is accomplished" (p. 173). Old Man and Old Woman expect The Orator to recount their life stories. Old Man:

So make my philosophy known to the Universe. And do not omit the details of my private life, whether they're comical, painful or touching, my habits and my tastes, my gorgeous greed ... tell all you know ... speak of my dear companion ... of the way she used to prepare those marvellous little Turkish pasties of hers, and her rabbit *rillettes à la noman-dillette* ... and don't forget to mention Berry, where I was born .... (pp. 173–174)

In response to Old Man's narration, Old Woman sobs and calls out: "Yes, yes, let us die in our moment of glory ... so that our names become legendary ... at least we shall have a street called after us ..." (p. 174). As Old Man and Old Woman eagerly share their stories with The Orator, he remains silent. After Old Man and Old Woman jump out a window, the Orator indicates he is deaf and mute. In Ionesco's world, our stories are absurd, and nobody is listening. He might be right, but most of us will not stop telling our stories, filled with inextinguishable hope that somebody might be listening, some time, somewhere.

### Window Seat

I'm squat in the window  
seat of an Air Canada Airbus,  
a cigar tube with wings, flying  
from Halifax to Vancouver,  
while claustrophobia seeps  
into my swollen feet, my luck  
to be squashed in the worst seat  
after my assigned aisle seat  
disappeared in a new plane's  
design (the plane is full, sir),

panic about needing the lavatory  
(airplanes, the only place I use  
that word), and the woman in  
the middle seat smells like Avon,  
or my long-gone grandmother,  
and waves through the window  
at people she can't see, who can't  
see her, a kind of hopeful, hopeless  
sentimentalism, and I know I need  
to breathe, in and out, but I want

to scream, at least histrionically, and last night while visiting my parents, Uncle Bert dropped in as he does on Sunday evenings, and told stories about all the fights he's had and continues to have (he listed a veritable *Who's Who* of local businesses, bank managers, bureaucrats, a litany of complaints about almost everybody, a victim of a convoluted vicious conspiracy, even though it always seems to me my uncle lives a charmed life), and suddenly my complaints about my seat and the waving woman are Uncle Bert's complaints. Everything works or doesn't work according to laws of physics or philosophy or fate or faith. Things work out, at least sometimes, at least somehow, in some ways, perhaps. I could

spend my entire life being upset, fighting with people and ghosts, and while I want my aisle seat, and I want somebody to show more interest in my poetry, and I want to publish more, and I want to be cited, and I want to lose weight, and I want clerks at Wal-Mart to smile a little more, and I want people at Silver City Cinemas to turn off their phones and chatter and translations, I mostly just want to grow enough wisdom for deciding when to speak up and when to ignore stuff. So, I smile at the woman crammed into the seat beside me, and I wave through the window just in case somebody in the terminal can see us, even though I know they can't.

In his memoir, *A Magpie Life: Growing a Writer*, Bowering (2001) explains that he

...learned essay writing from Warren Tallman. He taught me that an essay was what Montaigne knew it to be—writing a life, living a life. He did not have much use for the usual academic essay because he could not find delight in it. (p. 217)

I like the reminder to attend to writing that knows delight.

## A Final Word: I

Miller (2005) calls for “pragmatic pedagogy” (p. 140). He calls on educators “to provide our students with the opportunity to speak, read, and write in a wider range of discursive contexts than is available to them when they labor under the codes of silence and manufactured consent that serve to define the lived experience of subordinates in the culture of schooling” (pp. 140–141). But Miller is no wide-eyed zealot with an infomercial for enhancing literacy. Instead, he reminds us that “the danger of the written word is ... its promise; the fact that it can't be finally and completely controlled means that it forever retains the power to evoke new possibilities” (p. 194). Lifewriting is full of danger and promise. Indeed, the danger and promise are one. Lifewriting can evoke new possibilities, but only as we are willing to enter into the crowded, busy, frenetic, frantic places where misunderstanding, misreading, and misrepresentation are inevitably and inextricably interwoven with interaction, interrogation, interruption, interjection, intercession, interception, interference, interdependence, interfusion, interpellation, intersection, interchange, intercourse, intervention, interdiction, interlocution, and interpretation, all imaginatively interdigitated with the immeasurable idea, identity, and ideology of I.

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**Carl Leggo** is a poet and professor at the University of British Columbia. His books include: *Come-By-Chance*; *Lifewriting as Literary Metissage and an Ethos for Our Times* (co-authored with Erika Hasebe-Ludt and Cynthia Chambers); *Being with A/r/tography* (co-edited with Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin, and Peter Gouzouasis); *Creative Expression, Creative Education* (co-edited with Robert Kelly); and *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (co-edited with Monica Prendergast and Pauline Sameshima).

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## The Grief Beneath Your Mothertongue: Listening Through Poetic Inquiry

Sheila Stewart, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,  
University of Toronto

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of writing a first poetry collection, *A Hat to Stop a Train*, as an example of poetic inquiry that has taught, and continues to teach about listening in and through language. It explores language as mothertongue, beginning with our relationships with our mothers and entwined with developing a poetic voice. Poetic inquiry brings insights into issues of silence and voice, loss and grief, for the author and her own writing, and also for the adult literacy learners she works with, whose circumstances and cultural and linguistic dislocations require careful listening.

My work is in loving the world.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Oliver,  
from "The Messenger"

english is  
my mother tongue  
is my father tongue  
is a foreign lan lan lang  
language

/anguish  
anguish  
a foreign anquish...  
mothertongue<sup>2</sup>

Marlene NourbeSe Philip,  
from "Discourse on the Logic of Language"



oems punctuate this paper. I attempt a dialogue between the poetry and prose. The poems can also be read in relation to each other as interior voices.

### In the beginning

*word leapt from body  
and never returned. Body said, You're mine.  
Word said, I'm free. Page waited patiently  
knew word would want to lie down in time, would  
fall in love with crisp white sheets, with making a mark.  
Edge along the page, and lie,  
still.<sup>3</sup>*

A story has a beginning. A poem begins. We begin in the middle of things, our bodies holding our histories, our words struggling to know themselves.

A scholarly paper begins with an abstract, which summarizes and contextualizes the paper. Poems have different ways of beginning: they may leap in with both feet or slip in gently, knowing some things are best approached cautiously. Poems work with a sense of discovery and surprise, a showing, rather than a telling. They might hint, tease, captivate, shout; they rarely explain.

Here, I examine the process of writing my first poetry collection, *A Hat to Stop a Train*, as an example of poetic inquiry that has taught, and continues to teach me about listening in and through language. Language is our mothertongue; our relationships with our mothers are our first alphabet. What can poetic inquiry teach me about my relationship with my mother, with language, and how can it inform my

understanding of others' experiences of loss, their dislocations and grief? To speak, to write and to listen more deeply is to try to learn another language, the mother tongue beneath your mother tongue. Learning that mother tongue is closely tied to developing a voice that has both a tongue and a face. Through the use of poetic inquiry I am able to gain insights into issues of silence and voice, loss and grief, not only for myself and my own writing, but for those I work with, adult literacy learners whose circumstances and cultural and linguistic dislocations require my close listening.

## Poetic Inquiry

Poetic inquiry is a fairly recent branch of arts-informed research,<sup>4</sup> which has been developed in Canada by poet-academics Lorri Neilsen Glenn, Carl Leggo, Suzanne Thomas and others, working primarily in faculties of education. Poetry is an ancient art form, springing from oral language and song. Poems are already forms of inquiry; they don't need "poetic inquiry," but academia and sites of education need poetry. Academic inquiry needs the energy of the aesthetic and philosophical qualities of poetry. Lorri Neilsen Glenn speaks about lyric inquiry, a phrase she prefers to poetic inquiry. She says that lyric inquiry, "is informed by aesthetic and philosophical principles of writing; it is based on a conviction that using expressive and poetic functions of language creates the possibility of a resonant, ethical, and engaged relationship between the knower and the known."<sup>5</sup>

Others have shaped our understandings of poetic inquiry, notably Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima, as editors of and contributors to *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences for an in-depth examination of poetic inquiry* (2009).<sup>6</sup> I gravitate towards poetic inquiry or lyric inquiry partly because of its newness in the academy, allowing space for me to do the poetic inquiry I need to do. I investigate the process of writing of *A Hat to Stop a Train* as an example of poetic inquiry to learn more of what this poetic inquiry can teach me. In attempting to share the process of writing poetry about my mother, I re-enter that process, confronting my mother and myself anew, colliding with the complexities and conundrums of memory attempting to live in language.

## Mothertongue Beneath Your Mother Tongue

I use the word “mothertongue” partly out of homage to several important feminist poets,<sup>7</sup> including Marlene NourbeSe Philip who uses “mothertongue” in its compound form. NourbeSe Philip’s book *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1988) is written from the experience of a black Caribbean woman living in Toronto. Philip writes about colonialism, and the irony of the African Diaspora writing in English, the language of the colonizer. She says, “the excitement for me as a writer comes in the confrontation between the formal and the demotic within the text itself” (p. 18). Her work draws on the tension between these forms of language. She talks about how people of African descent “have been verbal or linguistic squatters, possessing adversely what is truly ours” (p. 21).

If the language is to continue to do what language must do; if it is to name and give voice to the i-mage and the experience behind the i-mage – the thing we conceive in our hearts – and so house the being, then the experience must be incorporated in the language and the language must begin to serve the re-creation of those i-mages.” (p. 20)

NourbeSe Philip teaches me about the pain entwined in language for Canadian African Caribbean women. I return to her work hearing a complex meditation on grief, shame, and silence, which takes up the poet’s task of re-creating the “i-mage.”

The word “mothertongue” burrows into the layers of our complex relationship with language, created through our cultural and social histories, begun with the relationship with a parent or parents, held in our bodies, and present in our voices. At the same time, the relational quality of language and learning as being between and among people is with us, even in its absence in settings where education is individual and competitive. Reading and writing poetry can take us back to the beginning of our relationship with language, the rhythm, the beat, the babble and bubble of learning language.

I explore the grief beneath my mothertongue out of a desire to embrace language and learning more fully. Through writing poetry that inquires in my mother’s life and my relationship with her, I dwell with Irish idioms, the “craic” of my mother’s generation, and stories about the Gaelic roots of some Northern Irish words amid a group of people many of whom see themselves as British. A *Hat* is part of the



process of placing my story within individual and collective stories of grief, silence, and colonialism, as they relate to the complexities of language.

## Coming to Writing

*A Hat to Stop a Train* is about my mother's childhood among her large family on a farm in Northern Ireland; her immigration to Canada with my father and my two older brothers; her work as a United Church minister's wife; and my relationship with her. There are many stories I could tell about the writing of my first book with certain key landmarks: my first writing course, Women's Writing Workshop, at George Brown College in 1991; my first poetry publication in *Contemporary Verse 2* in 1992; performances done with the women in my first writing group; starting to see themes developing in my work; sending out my manuscript. But, the story I need to tell this time is about how my mother and my entwined stories relate to writing as a lifeline helping me uncover aspects of myself.

I went to that first writing class as a long-term journal keeper, nervous about writing pieces to share with others. I was expecting my first child. Those early writing years were connected with maternity leaves—putting the answering machine on when the baby slept, getting just enough time to start or revise a poem on a good day. Having grown up in small-town Ontario in a traditional Irish family, where my father's work was highly valued and my mother supported his work, I struggled to value my own words and find space and time for my writing. When I went to Sage Hill Writing Experience in Saskatchewan in 1997, a big part of the joy was ten days away from family and domestic responsibilities. Writing gave me some space and time away from family and work.

Meeting with my writing group supports my writing. My first writing group was a group of women prose writers and poets who originally met in the writing course at George Brown College. We met monthly in our homes. We read our work aloud. We learned how to listen to each other's work and give constructive feedback. We began to have our work published. I was writing poems about my mother while she was still alive.

My poetry is partly about the tenuousness of our connections with each other and with our selves. I write myself into existence in a certain sense, writing down what can so easily slip away, trying to craft something of daily experience,

thoughts, and feelings. For me, writing is inquiry, craft, meditation, desire—the desire to fill, shape, know myself, and the desire to speak and be heard by another. I write alone, but I try to feel I write in the company of writing friends, colleagues, and loved ones, people who would like to listen.

Beneath the book's more obvious narrative themes is the theme of "voice." My voice has been bound up with my mother's. In *A Hat* my voice is entwined with the restraint of my Northern Irish background and childhood living in United Church manses in the small, southwestern Ontario communities of Stratford and Waterloo. The following poem from *A Hat* speaks about the complexity of voice.

### What if a Voice

I

What if a voice feels small,  
doesn't want to say, doesn't  
know how to sing, a voice in love  
with song but without a tune, a throat clogged  
up bad, words clunky and leaden, smell of  
untold stories, unformed words stuck  
mid-throat. No place to go.

What if a voice whines and attacks, picks  
and prods, can find no good, can't keep  
secrets, can't tell lies, can't hear  
herself.

What if a voice wants to hide in a child's  
choir gown, up in the balcony  
at the candle-light service, middle  
of the middle row so the words don't  
matter, mouthing *Gloria* in the dark,  
the tune her own.

What if the service is over but a voice  
won't come down, wants only the balcony  
and blown-out candles, hides under the pew

singing to herself, sleeps on a choir  
gown pillow until light comes in through  
the stained glass, humming the hymns by  
heart.

II

What if a voice takes her own time, then  
startles with rush and flow.

What if a voice wants new  
snow, welcomes cool points on her tongue  
falling, long and lapping, fresh  
water in air, washing her face, single  
flakes and clusters rushing earthbound, thick  
along thin branches, cool song  
melting, claiming and changing  
the landscape.

I read this poem now a decade after writing it, dwelling in its current resonance as I wrestle to know what kind of academic voice I wish to have. Voice can feel small, want to hide, and turn on itself. In the second part of the poem, “voice takes her own time, then / startles with rush and flow.” In a more embodied relationship, voice has a tongue and a face. She claims the landscape. Poetry builds on the physicality, cadences, directness, and sounds of spoken language. Poetry believes in the body as an instrument of knowing, its rhythmic awareness and sensations a gift.

In four years of undergraduate philosophy classes, I didn’t speak. This was at the end of the 1970s/early 80s and feminism had not reached humanities classes at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario. In *A Hat*, I spoke to my mother, I spoke for her, I spoke with her, I spoke in her voice, I spoke as a child, and I spoke to the child I was. Though I didn’t name them at the time, I was working to dislodge shame and silence, lodged in “a throat clogged / up bad.” How do we lose and/or hide our voices? How can poetry and other forms of expressive writing help those of us who do? These large questions are beyond this paper; but an inquiry into writing is an inquiry into self, culture, and the possibilities of language. I tried to be very good throughout

school, good girl becoming good student. I blushed when called upon to speak, never feeling my speaking was adequate.

*I dreamed of being mute, dumb –  
not a sound out of me*

In writing this article I let poetic fragments interrupt my prose. I could do this writing in a separate document, but I am trying to let this poetic voice take me further into my inquiry.

## Writing Mother, Writing Loss

How do we write about such a complex subject as our mothers? My mother, Winifred Louise Ward, was born in 1919 in County Down, Northern Ireland and died in 1993 in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Between the few facts of a life, lie story, memory, conjecture, interpretation. In "Signs of her" I sort her clothes after her death and wonder about "What I know and don't know about her." In "Two chairs" I am "trying to get closer to her." The first poem in the collection, "Ladybones," speaks of my longing for my mother, "Why do I want you, *Skinamalink Malone, Skinny Bones*. You the slim, delicate one." I, too, am a mother in this poem, "hip bones letting forth daughters." Another fact: when I was four years old, my mother underwent open-heart surgery with a fifty-fifty chance of living. She survived and lived another thirty years in delicate health. I don't write about the surgery directly in my poetry collection, but it is part of what fueled the book. After first meeting with the Wolsak and Wynn editors, amazed that they had read my manuscript, I wandered downtown Toronto and found myself having tea at Toronto General Hospital, the site of my mother's surgery.

### In the middle

*word wrestled with body. Body said, Word,  
you're a sham, a heady thing passed down from the fathers.  
You have forgotten your birth. Word was confused, wanting  
body's approval, a nod, a look, wordless  
admiration.*

*A Hat to Stop a Train* is grief-work, a photograph of my mother as a young woman and her hatboxes on the cover. I speak to, with and for my mother, crafting this speaking over a decade as I was learning how to write poetry.

*in a seniors' home, an old man calls  
for his mother*

Words comfort me. I attempt to create something from loss. When I started re-reading *A Hat* to write this article, it was as if my mother had died yesterday. I have read from the book in all kinds of venues to all kinds of audiences, but this was quiet reading to myself. On the one hand, I am happy that the book is still alive for me. On the other, I don't want to start missing my mother again. I don't want to dwell in thoughts of my mother. I don't want to think about her body. The book may have acted as a kind of container and I wanted the lid closed. Moving into my life as a writer attempting to use my mind and body as instruments of knowing, I am still learning to separate from my mother, attempting to leave behind her extreme politeness and restraint, and wifely ways of supporting others and diminishing herself.

A multitude of emotions lie within grief over the loss of a parent. It took time for anger to emerge, as it did in "Dress," written during my second time at Sage Hill Writing Experience in a Poetry Colloquium with Don MacKay in 1999.

### Dress

You left me a thin flowered dress and a box of hankies. I can sit in your dress, sleeveless in the Canadian winter. Put it on and head to a strawberry social. Thank my lucky stars I'm in a pretty dress just my size. They can look and say, hey, she's been to a lady's dress shop in downtown Ontario.

I could sniff around the entrances of dress shops, or glide in the way you did. Never bat an eyelid at the prices. Pretend royalty.

Or I can sit in your dress and play with my box of hankies. A blue Birks' box about the size of a bread and butter plate. Take them out one by one, examine the embroidered garden scenes, the tatted edges, fold them up again, put them back. I could iron them all. Fold them in triangles. Sort them in piles. And crumple them. Use them as face cloths, dish cloths. Dirty them.

Throw them out the windows of trains. Toss them like confetti from the top of the Royal York Hotel.

I'd still have the dress: I could hoist it up a flagpole. Hello, air. Let it grow grey, limp. Or yank it down. Pull out the threads one by one, bare the interfacing, rip out the zipper, knock its teeth crooked. Cut on the bias, it might rip real nice and smooth down the middle, or around the waist.

Rip it up, or cut it. You'd prefer I use pinking shears to cut zigzag edges in perfect circles, like the gingham ones that top jam jars at the Kitchener market.

Any scissors would do. Scraps of dress. Reds, greens, pinks. Purple poppies, variegated leaves, snips of stem.

A perfect plate for a tiny scone beaded with the red of strawberries.

I began to let anger emerge at my mother's high sense of decorum, and her version of being a woman. But, when I look at *A Hat*, I feel I am hiding behind my mother. The book is an *early* attempt to think and feel my way into understanding my relationship with my mother.

My mother left Ireland reluctantly with my father who wanted to immigrate to Canada. They crossed the Atlantic with two small sons. In the next poem, we hear something of my mother's loss, missing her six sisters and two brothers, who lived on nearby farms.

## Reading the Blues

She called them Blues. *Any Blues?* Thin blue  
airmail letters from her sisters.  
*Any Blues?* she'd call  
to whoever brought in the mail. Sometimes  
we'd pretend there were none, then draw them  
from pockets or sleeves with  
a flourish, or present them on a silver  
tray — *voila!* — with a cup of tea and a digestive  
biscuit. *Any Blues?* she'd call from her bed.

What do we do with Blues?  
Smell them, hold them tight,  
read them slow, tuck them  
under a pillow to re-read at night.

She wasn't a lady to cry  
the blues. What didn't she say  
to me, or herself? What can you tell  
a mother anyway? Unwritten letters. *Don't go  
crying, she'd say.*

What we tell  
each other: a pale  
picture, a slight blue.

How does a daughter bear witness to her mother's grief? How did the distance between my mother and her sisters affect my relationship with her? My writing contains a longing to connect and awareness of the partiality and flimsiness of words in our connections: "What we tell / each other: a pale / picture, a slight blue." Extraordinary grief lies in so-called "ordinary" losses, such as the death of a parent. Like so many emotions, grief can slip and slide into other emotions<sup>8</sup> and pool in experiences which aren't even our own. For years I looked at my parents' photograph album of their early years in Ireland, an album which ends with pictures of my parents and brothers on the boat in which they emigrated from Ireland. Loss of homeland ripples through generations. In the case of my family, coming to Canada was chosen by my father. A job as a minister awaited my father and a manse awaited my mother and brothers. My parents didn't leave Ireland in the famine. They didn't pay a head tax or arrive in Canada as refugees or need to learn English on arrival. But their emigration marked my family, including myself born in Canada. I attempt to look up close at the grief within my relationship with my mother, her grief as she missed her family and homeland, her fragile health, my early care giving—grief an undercurrent in the language between us. I inquire into the nature of loss within a family, hoping the poem creates the space for the reader to do the same. Familial grief is set against the background of the sectarian violence of Northern Ireland and my mother's unpaid, rarely acknowledged work as a minister's wife.

*In the middle**page sent an invitation.*

One of the poems “Not a body about” refers to a phrase my mother used when needing the zipper done up at the back of her dress. She said that her mother used to say, “not a body about to help me dress.” I read the book now, looking for my body. I find my mother’s.

In “She started to shed,” I wrote “She started to shed / after her mother stopped breathing, after her mother’s body, which she loved more than her own, was no longer in the world.” What does it mean that I loved my mother’s body more than my own? I use “I” here though the narrator and myself are not interchangeable. I am using first person as opposed to the academic tendency to talk about “the body.”

In the manse we did not discuss our bodies. We read books, escaping family conflict and the disconnection among us. I learned to sit very still in church and day-dream. I was the youngest daughter with two older brothers. In the manse, I learned to leave my body. I was worried about my mother’s body. In a recent poem I write about the scar from my mother’s surgery.

## Learning the alphabet

I’d always known  
the letter T, the lines on my mother’s chest, one across, another down  
between her breasts. A Roman cross. T for Turtle, Trunk, Time, Taste,

Trust. Never mentioned it, never touched it. “No,” she said, “I can’t wear  
a neckline that low.” My chest is uncut, skin intact. My children have all  
their limbs. The tiny suture on the last born is a faint thread.

“Inguinal hernia,” they said. “Better safe than sorry.” The most recent:  
a squiggle above her eye, stitches from a slam against a window.  
We watch each other, my generation. What are the signs? Quiver

at the neck. A bit thinner. Talking, Truth, Touch. How do we keep each  
other alive? Look back at the seniors’ home and my great-aunt is waving.  
She waits to hear if they’ll operate. Her thin arms score the window.



Our mothers' bodies are our first alphabets, usually our first connection to sustenance, intimate connection, and language. Poetry grows from the rhythm and rhyme of sound, which for most of us begins with our parents. Looking back at my book, I see how I was wrestling with a sense of my convergence with my mother.

### It wasn't me

who left

*the Ballymena Manse, packed up my two small sons, arm in my husband's, stepped onto the boat. Landed in Montreal, took a train to Toronto, followed my sons from one car to the next, as they rubbed their good clothes along the floor. Not me arriving in Brechin, walking through the rooms of our new house, thank goodness the church ladies had made up the beds. Dinner at a parishioner's home and we watched to see how Canadians eat corn still on the cob. Not me*

*back at Carnlough, sitting mid a row of my friends, arms folded in our laps, husbands standing behind. There between Lily and Evelyn, ocean salt spraying our hair. That's not my first-born in the arms of his cousin. Not me with my mother. Here with an arm around each niece. Luminous at the Ordination Day of my husband-to-be. Not me picnicking at Curlingford Castle, in front of the Round Tower at Navan. Me sitting in the long grass with Josephine at Portstewart, eyes on the ocean. At Bradda Glen, in front of Balmoral Hotel, the Isle of Man, Ballyferris. I wasn't there. Sunday School picnic, my wide-brimmed hat, our big circle at Blackrock Beach.*

In examining my mother's life, telling a version of her story, I use a refrain "not me" attempting to write myself out from behind my mother toward aspects of myself.

### In the midst

*of words, a body breathes,  
says, I want a word to call my own.  
Words aplenty: orbicularis oculi, nasalis,  
levator labii superioris alaeque nasi, lips.  
The Anatomy Colouring Book's*

*muscles of facial expression.*  
*Face moves*  
*with*  
*(out) a word.*

## Loss and Listening

Going through this process of writing poetry has opened me to learn more about the nature of literacy work. I worked for many years as an adult literacy practitioner at Parkdale Project Read, a Toronto community-based program, helping students tell and write their stories. The students had English as their first language, and were primarily born in the Caribbean or Canada. I was attracted to this work out of a desire to contribute to social justice, learn about poverty in Canada, and help people in an alternative education setting. As educators, how do we “read the blues” of our students? How do we hear their loss as different from, and in some ways similar to, our own? They may live far from family or have been without their support. Literacy students may have been labeled stupid, lazy, disabled, or “special” at home, school, and/or by other institutions and social relations. Students of colour experience racism and may have their language belittled as less than so-called “standard English.” Our society fixates on so-called “normal,”<sup>9</sup> marginalizing groups and individuals, seeing some people’s minds in some bodies as less likely to learn. Who is listened to? Who is accustomed to being heard or not being heard? I am still examining the reasons I was drawn to listening to literacy students’ stories. I want to understand more of how listening to self and other are entwined.

Growing up in the manse, I listened to my father’s sermons on Sunday morning and often heard versions of them during the week. My father and older brothers discussed the sermon over Sunday lunch. My sense of injustice at who is listened to and who is valued has roots within my family story, as I observed whose backstage work supported whose voice.

One day I was awaiting a friend’s poetry reading while writing a course paper on listening. I was struck with the sense of expectation I had before the reading, a kind of anticipatory preparing of my psyche. I settled in at the venue on arrival so that I would “receive” her reading. We often bring this kind of attention to art. We anticipate a poetry reading or a concert and we *listen*. We are open and hope to be surprised, startled, or moved. How differently we often listen to each other, at school,

work and home, sometimes with weariness, imagining or unconsciously believing we know what the person will say before they speak. Our listening may be filtered through the narratives and stereotypes that crowd our heads.

Listening can be blocked by unexplored grief and shame sitting between students and teachers. A kind of space needs to be brought to listening, making it bearable and helpful. Writing poetry helps me create a kind of interior space which I want to filter into how I am in the world, including how I listen.

### In the middle

*a story builds, turns,  
(an argument develops)  
a body softens.*

A body listens and some things in this world are hard to listen to.

Poetry and learning are both about making meaning and asking what it means to make meaning. Poetry can break away from narrative. It can subvert our story-making impulses. Certainly poetry and narrative are entwined, particularly in narrative poems and poetic stories. Another way to think of their domains is that poetry dwells in the moment and narrative over time. Narrative needs a beginning, middle, and an end, even if it questions these. Poetry is more irreverent with time, playing with it, less observant of it as a constraint. Poetry has a different relationship with narrative expectations and demands. It is akin to that part of our self which is below the worn-out stories we tell about ourselves, and which are told about us.

Listening can be heartbreaking, whether as a teacher listening to students and colleagues, or as a poet, listening to what is happening in the world. How do we respond to what we hear? What do we do with what we know?

## Listening Through Poetic Inquiry

As an arts-informed researcher, I attempt to enliven inquiry through a process of dialogue between poetry and prose, a conversation between strains of

thought and ways of expressing thought, complicating how we view content and form. I use poetic inquiry as a process of coming to know, a way of thinking-feeling, and being with my material, through a form of writing that creates space for a more embodied knowing. Poetry embraces partial knowing and imagistic knowing. Like a good open-ended question, it draws the reader/listener in, to create their own meaning by dwelling in complexity and often contradiction. It draws on aspects of the reader's conscious and unconscious thinking-feeling selves, and uses pleasure, play and humour as part of what makes engagement and learning possible. I read and write poetry because I feel accompanied by the paradoxical nature of poems. Poetry helps me say things I cannot say in other forms. I use poetry hoping it will reach a wider audience than more conventional academic writing. Poems punctuate this paper, helping to punctuate and possibly aerate thought.

### In the end

*no end for word, no end  
of words, word games, word wonders, no  
need for word.*

*body needs care  
like at the be  
ginning  
someone  
to sit with  
speak listen  
wait for words  
take up end  
less words*

To speak, to write and to listen more deeply is to try to learn another language, the mothertongue beneath your mother tongue. Poetry, like other art forms, creates space to work through aspects of self in relationship to others and the world, to find more satisfying ways of relating to language, and new forms of language.

*Mothertongue*

*needs*

*attending*

*let your spine relax*

*from your tender*

*arches*

*to the roof*

*of your mouth*

NourbeSe Philip, and other poets writing from marginalized communities, point to the way language is implicated in the process of categorizing people. It can exclude, humiliate, and distance people. Language reflects and shapes what we know and what we think we can know. In attending to language, we notice our binary thinking, either/or, normal/abnormal, good/bad and so on. Poetry's facility with paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty can be our teacher. I want to move beyond an out-worn binary of poetic/academic language.

Poetry attempts to reckon with how the everyday world matters, the here and now. It helps us see afresh what is happening around us. Oliver's words inspire me: "My work is in loving the world." To edge toward knowing what "loving the world" might be for me, I examine the way I attempted to uncover more of the nature of the love between my mother and myself. *A Hat* let me write toward my mother and eventually away from her, toward a clearer voice of my own. This poetic inquiry helped me begin to create more space for "loving the world." Poetry contains a freedom. It is less confined and prescribed than other forms of writing that are often hijacked by the need to tell official stories. As educators, the institutional writing we do, such as funding applications and activity reports, can cramp or confuse our thinking and practice. Poetry's irreverence and spacious listening helps us hold on to the way learning is life giving.

Poetry is a call and response. The poet *and* listener create the poem in the listening. Learning is like that too. We lean toward another, the learning alive between us. Sometimes we lean toward an aspect of self or the world and enter a dialogue.

I end with a passage from Mary Oliver's poem, "The Messenger":

### Let me

keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. This phrase is from the poem "Messenger" in *Thirst* by Mary Oliver, 2006.
2. "Discourse on the Logic of Language" is from *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* by Marlene NourbeSe Philip, 1989. NourbeSe Philip examines how colonialism affects Black people, particularly Black women living in Canada, and the ways language, colonialism, and racism are entwined.
3. "In the beginning" first appears in *Educational Insights*, Volume 13, No. 3, 2009 as the first in a suite of poems entitled "How I want to keep saying it." This special issue on poetic inquiry is an excellent resource.
4. See *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, J. Gary Knowles & Ardra L. Cole (Eds.) and *Creating Scholartistry: Imagining the Arts-informed Thesis or Dissertation*, J. Gary Knowles, Sara Promislow, & Ardra L. Cole (Eds.).
5. Neilsen Glenn, Lorri. (2008). "Lyric Inquiry." In *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, J. Gary Knowles & Ardra L. Cole (Eds.). (London: Sage Publications). p. 94.
6. See Lynn Butler-Kisber. (2010). "Poetic Inquiry." In *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-informed Perspectives*. London: Sage; and Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima (Eds.). (2009). "Poetic Inquiry" *Educational Insights*. Volume 13, No. 3 for an in-depth examination of poetic inquiry.

7. Daphne Marlatt used the word “mothertongue” first in “with Mothertongue,” in *Room of One’s Own*, 8:4. (Jan. 1984, 53–56).
8. See Ahmed, Sara. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge.
9. See Titchkosky, Tanya and Rod Michalko (Eds.). (2009). *Rethinking normalcy: A disability studies reader*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc. for a discussion of how disability studies helps us understand the problematic concept of “normal.”
10. From the “Messenger” in *Thirst* by Mary Oliver, 2006.

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**Sheila Stewart** is an adult educator, poet and PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Sheila has worked in adult literacy for many years. Sheila's poetry is widely published across Canada. Her collection *A Hat to Stop a Train* was published by Wolsak and Wynn in 2003. Sheila's thesis uses poetic inquiry to explore shame, grief, and silence as they relate to learning and language. Her literacy research includes work on the effect of violence on learning and the need for literacy practitioners to reflect on their identities.

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## Through the Gates of Loving Inquiry: Discovering a Poetics of Relationship

Ahava Shira

### ABSTRACT

I am a poet, arts-based researcher and healthy relationships educator. After many years of teaching about healthy relationships in the classroom, and writing poetry about my relationships with people, I moved to Butterstone Farm and discovered a new place of learning. *Through the Gates of Loving Inquiry*<sup>1</sup> develops the conversation on how we may engage in loving relationships within and beyond the scope of our human relationships, expanding this pedagogical practice from the walls of schools and universities out toward our experience with nature.

*Once in h[er] life a [wo]man... ought to give h[er]self up to a particular landscape in h[er] experience, to look at it from as many angles as [she] can, to dwell upon it. [S]he ought to imagine that [s]he touches it with [her] hands at every season and listen to the sounds that are made upon it. [S]he ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. [S]he ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colours of the dawn and dusk.*

(Momaday, 1993, p. 83)

## Preparing to Enter

I am a poet, arts-based researcher and healthy relationships educator. For many years I have been teaching myself and others to love, to move through the barriers that interfere with opening our hearts to each other. As a healthy relationships educator I have facilitated workshops with middle and high school youth for ten years, engaging them in activities and conversations in order to support them in making the shift from harassment to respect, aggression to compassion.



Fig. 1: Entranced

I teach this because this is what I have struggled to learn and unlearn. Before I became a healthy relationships educator I was passionately engaged in writing—both journaling and poetry—and in performance. My personal experience as a teenager and young adult with unhealthy familial and intimate relationships was, in large part, what led me to the page. Meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein (2002) offers:

It is our own pain, and our own desire to be free of it, that alerts us to the suffering of the world. It is our personal discovery that pain can be acknowledged, even held lovingly, that enables us to look at the pain around us unflinchingly and feel compassion being born in us. We need to start with ourselves. (p. 143)

In my book of poetry, *Womb: Weaving of My Being* (1998), I wrote about my experience of violence and the post-traumatic symptoms I struggled with as a result. Writing poetry enabled me to explore the complex feelings I carried from the abuse, to understand its roots in systems of gender and cultural oppression, and to envision healthier models of relationship for myself and others.

When I returned to school to pursue a master's degree, my supervisor Antoinette Oberg encouraged me to write poetry about my experience as a healthy relationships educator. As social justice educator William Ayers (2004) suggests: "Working on autobiographical texts can be a way of making values, beliefs, and

choices accessible to teachers and prospective teachers alike. These texts—complex, idiosyncratic, alive, and changing—provide the kind of detail from which one can interpret practice” (p. 105).

These research poems developed into my final master’s project, *Lines of Flight: Notes on Becoming*, in which I wrote about the joy and the challenge of interacting with the diverse beliefs and identities of my students and colleagues; the despair I felt from teaching within a socio-cultural context that promotes violence as a form of entertainment and conflict resolution; and the vulnerable recognition that within me lay those same impulses toward violence that I encountered in the classroom and in the world. As Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron (1994) shares:

Therefore the exchange—putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes—doesn’t come from theory, in which you try to imagine what someone else is feeling. It comes from becoming so familiar and so openhearted and so honest about who you are and what you do that you begin to understand humanness altogether and you can speak appropriately to the situation. (pp. 102–103)

As a PhD student I continued to engage in a practice of critical self-awareness through writing, expanding the context to include my relationships with friends and community members as well as with strangers I sat beside on the ferry or encountered on the bus. Further exposed to the arts-based practices of narrative, poetic and performative inquiry, I was also keenly influenced by the writings of feminist post-structuralist and writing process theorists who offered a new perspective with regard to theories of subjectivity, identity and how we are shaped and reshaped through language.

Then, in the fall of 2007, at the end of a course on the arts-based research practice of Living Inquiry with Karen Meyer, I realized that all of the field notes I had written during the course demonstrated a creative and contemplative practice of shifting my experience in relationship from violence to love. Recognizing this, I shifted the “i” in Living to “o” and identified my research practice as Loving Inquiry.

At the same time that I declared my research practice Loving Inquiry, my partner and I moved—together with another couple—to Butterstone Farm. After many years of teaching about healthy relationships in the classroom, and writing poetry and essays about my experience of relationships with people (Shira, 1998, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009), Butterstone Farm became a new place of learning, and a new environment in which to learn.

## Gates of the Heart

*Whoever knows the gathering together into the most intimate only through suffering, does not know the illuminating grace of love.*

(Irigaray, 2002, pp. 172–173)

Butterstone Farm is a magical place: 23 acres of valley and forest, pastures and hayfields, ponds and creeks, gardens and orchards. As I walk through the farm, I am surrounded in every direction by fences. Arranged around the perimeter of the forests, gardens and pastures, these fences protect the gardens and orchards from the appetites, and deceptively far reach, of the white-tailed deer that wildly inhabit the island. Each fence has its own particular, handcrafted gate.



Fig. 2: Glow

Many artists (Hirshfield, 1997; Lauterbach, 2005; Whyte, 1997), educators (Fels & Meyer, in press; Meyer, 2006), and spiritual teachers (Arrien, 2005; Loori, 1992; Merton, 2008; Shibayama, 2000; Yamada, 2004) have used gates as a symbol and metaphor for creative, pedagogical and spiritual learning. Zen master and teacher John Daido Loori (1992) developed a path of training for monks called the Eight Gates of Zen, using gates as a symbol for entering into exploration of the nature of the self.

As I practice Loving Inquiry on the farm, I observe a similarity between my experience of opening and walking through the gates and my experience of opening and entering into relationship. Both require me to pause and to listen to what is happening inside myself as well as outside. Both need me to practice letting go of anything that is keeping me from being present—whether it is an internal belief or emotion, in the case of relationship with another, or an external barrier such as too much snow or ice in the case of the gate. Both demand my sensual, embodied awareness, and invite certain contemplative, spiritual qualities of attention.

Walking through the gates on the farm becomes a journey of encounter, marked with a tone of sacred possibility. Attending to the ongoing sensual, visual experience of opening and closing the gates, I attend to the relationship between self and other. Each moment I practice Loving Inquiry, I walk through a gate. Sounds, smells, visual cues, sensations as well as images, metaphors and linguistic resonances all become openings into relationship.

## Appetite

1.

I was house-sitting  
for my farm-mate  
when yesterday I lost  
one of her cats

neglected to assure  
both indoor cats  
were present and  
accounted for

forgot to wonder  
why the cat bowl filled  
with crunchies went  
untouched

why I saw only one cat  
most evenings

2.

This morning Thomas  
our outdoor cat  
perches on the roof  
above the barn

he usually gets his pets,  
and food next door, where  
one of the indoor cats is  
missing

but last night he  
rubbed his fur along  
the sliding loft doors

caress after caress

we left the doors  
open, invited him in

his front right paw raised  
like a hand to be kissed

he kneaded the front step  
like a blanket

hesitated

3.

I scoop him up in my arms  
like a bundle of kindling

he warms my mangy heart  
with his soft purr

*Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to all expressive bodies, not just to the human. Our own speaking, then, does not set us outside of the animate landscape but...inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths.*

(Abram, 1996, p. 80)

### Listening to Leaves

1.

Walk outside  
to the yard  
now layered  
with hundreds of  
fallen leaves

startled hues of mustard  
brick, coral, carrot, banana

each tree, bush, leafy plant  
displays their own  
distinctive shades of fall

2.

In the museum of  
modern art

in New York City

sit on a bench before  
the Monet triptych  
stare across at  
the two Bonnards

to you they are more  
alive, soulful

regardless  
you are not a spectator

you are being painted

the artist strokes your  
hair with a thick brush

dabs a swath of copper  
for the leaf that just fell  
on your lap where the cat

once lay, out of the picture now

leaves have taken his place

the painter prefers them anyways  
she has had enough of cats

she wants leaves in your lap  
where your hands are resting

## Touching Wood

*Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.*

(Palmer, 1983, p. 8)

Loving Inquiry is premised on the understanding that we are all engaged in relationships, and that—because of our connectedness and interdependence as human, and more-than-human beings—it is our ethical responsibility to engage in those relationships in a loving way.



Fig. 3: Fallen

In *The Way of Love*, feminist philosopher and writer Luce Irigaray (2002) says, “Silencing what we already know is often more useful in order to let the other appear” (p. 165). In order to enter and embrace the reality of another, I have to let go of my ideas of who that other is, and/or who I want them to be. Irigaray suggests we find “gestures or words” that “touch the other in his, or her alterity” (p. 151).

Through my practice of Loving Inquiry I search for those gestures or words that touch the other in their alterity, to approach the other in what Irigaray refers to as a “poetic way of dwelling” (p. 152). Ecologist Stephan Harding (2006) offers a similar understanding with regard to our relations with the natural world:

We need to allow ourselves to be open to the subjective agency at the heart of every ‘thing’ in the world so that we can speak and act appropriately in their presence and on their behalf. We must keep alive and nurture a sense of ‘otherness’ of whatever phenomenon we might be considering, allowing a strange kind of intimacy to develop in which the urge to control is replaced by a quickening awe at the astonishing intelligence that lies at the heart of all things. (p. 37)



## Bird in the Palm

This morning as I cleaned spider webs from the corners of the window, smoothed away little cocoons with a dry cloth, I heard a bang on the glass. Another little bird hit. Quick step into boots then outside onto wet cedar deck, climb over lattice to reach the shivering body.

My palms curve around grey and white stripes. Soft down falls on the deck. I wipe a fleck from its face, caress its head, eyes open and close through a veneer of gossamer. Underneath a swatch of yellow feathers. I don't know what kind it is.

I quiet my mind, listen for other birds, wonder if it hears them too as it clutches my palm with its small black talons. I attempt bird sounds to comfort it, fail miserably.

It's only stunned, flies away before I slide the loft door open. It lands on a branch in the big leaf maple and from a distance it looks like any of the birds that perch there.

*Poets make things, but they don't make poetry; poetry is present to begin with; it is there, and poets answer it if they can. The poem is the trace of the poet's joining in knowing.*

(Bringhurst, 1995, pp. 53–54)

## Little Deer

As I walk out to the back of the farm, my rubber boots sink into fresh tracks. The gardener told me where to look. I stop within 500 feet, let the ravens flee.

I don't mean to spoil their dinner, just want to have a closer look.

I see its ribs all bloodied the insides of its stomach brown and gelatin-like. I'm not sure what I am looking at. I step back, tell myself it is okay this is a part of life, what the body is—blood and feces and guts and ribs and we just don't see it.

Then I am able to step closer again.

Ravens squawk in surrounding trees. Eager to get back to their dinner?  
 I pray for this little deer, wish it peace. It might have been the one that found  
 its way through our fence into the garden, where it ate up the rest of the  
 raspberries.  
 It escaped us. Death never does.

Through poetry I seek to enter into relationship with an openness and intimacy that keeps alive a sense of “otherness,” which requires a willingness to listen, to watch, and to notice. Prendergast (2009) names it “a calling between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’ (p. xxxv). Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo (2009) expand: “We learn to practice this generosity of spirit in relation to ourselves and others, acknowledging how we are all inextricably and ecologically connected, all of us needing to be heard” (p. 154).

## Break the Glass<sup>2</sup>

Last night I dreamt  
 of marrying my  
 long time lover

in a ceremony out  
 in the frozen pasture

beneath the halo of a  
 brimming January moon

before us a crystalline field  
 cocooned guests exhaling joy

everyone dancing and  
 breathing in persimmon light

the chupah held up by  
 larch and lombardi poplar  
 fir and maple

steady limbs  
 for a crowd of ravens  
 their beaks open in awe

I promise to live here  
 amongst the slugs and swallows  
 stinging nettles and california quail

pinch me

here I will thrive  
 till death do us part

tending our hillside orchard  
 singing songs of pear and apple  
 cherry and fig

go ahead wind,  
 break the glass

## Seasons of Relationship

*Meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.*

(Abram, 1996, p. 75)

As I walk through the gates of the farm at each season, I am exposed to each season's interpretation of sun and soil, wind and water. Daily I encounter birth, death and a full range of experience in between. Thus I learn patience, to wait the seasons out. I engage with the bitter months of winter knowing that surly spring will surely come when it is time. Walking steadily, I learn to see and appreciate the beauty of each season.



Fig. 4: Sprung

### Ode to Woodpecker

*After Pablo Neruda*

1.

Busy bird

I cannot decipher

your sounds

as your beak breaks

through rotting wood

beside you, lombardi poplar

rustles and shakes

accompanies your pecking

other birds follow

from the garden

robins poke choke cherry tree

yellow jackets wheedle

snapdragon's royal reds

pounding from the

farm next door

a shot

yet stillness

reigns

2.  
Construction on the farm  
Tyrannosaurus Ex-  
cavator rips trees  
devours your nests, ants  
fledglings

3.  
Being human is a misery  
given power to destroy  
we erect new buildings  
to create again

oh woodpecker  
you shred rectangles  
dig out food

other creatures depend  
on your labours

like men who wield  
the saw and back hoe

so that families may live  
more comfortably

*What if we stopped assuming that to be powerful means to require worship and obedience? What if we imagined that it might mean the ability to participate in pain and joy?*

(Ostriker, 2000, p. 15)

## Passover

It is Passover and as a Jew  
I am called to remember

that once we were slaves  
in Egypt, and Moses saved us

(aided by his sister Miriam,  
& brother Aaron)

who led us 40 years through the desert,  
brought us to a land of milk and honey.

I wonder how my grandparents' parents celebrated  
in the *shtetls* of Romania and Poland,

what songs they sang at the *seder* table  
who was chosen to ask the Four Questions.

All this I will never know

because Hitler invaded, led my  
family into gas chambers, went through  
their personal objects, sorted their gold  
rings and glasses.

This morning I contemplate different questions:

In what language did they sing?

Did any of my great great aunts write poetry?

Who opened the door for Eliahu?

What kind of jam did they eat on their *matzoh*?

As I practice Loving Inquiry on the farm, I also enter into the heart's expansive repertoire of feeling. As the gates open and close, as the breath moves in and out, so my heart knows sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure. I learn to recognize the seasons of relationship, to honour the constant shifts and changes, and to have compassion for the journey we all must take through the gates of our own hearts.

### What the Heart Leaves Behind

Sun slaps your cheek like a heavy rain,  
forces you to turn,  
look another way

A thin coat hangs off your shoulders, wind picks  
it up,  
sails it across the yard.  
You see through a periscope of weather.

Fortunately dinner is already planned:

broiled fish in lemon juice and olive oil,  
baked baby beets & new potatoes,  
fresh mint and chives from the garden.

About ten minutes ago you were in bed with your lover,  
flannel housecoat wrapped around  
you.

Now scents of purple italian plums and basil mingle with August coolness.

Contemplate change.  
It can happen so quietly, without billboards or pendulums.

It happens so quietly,  
the night sweats,  
thickening around your hips,  
breasts befriend waist, become accustomed

to meeting halfway.  
Belly juts out awkwardly.  
You resent its forthrightness, have always preferred  
mellow, reserved.

Local creatures comfort, inspire.  
Their songs wobbly, undelicate.

Your body temperature rises with the moon.  
As do your prospects for better pay, shorter hours.

Someone finally recognizes your wisdom,  
understands your humour.

It is all about a house on a hill in a valley,  
all about a man and a woman, several, a pasture,  
orchards, a handful of ponds.

How can it be all about *anything*?

Everything buzzes.

The refrigerator, morning chickadees, your purple vibrator.

Sounds you

have come to trust, rely on.

Fire all your ex-bosses

Climb down their ladders

Find sturdy flagstone paths that snake past

lilac

roses

clematis

honeysuckle

lupine.

Their names mean something.

This morning you open a new gate,

the last one almost closed behind you,

a remaining sliver of green

where the wood splinters at the clasp.

It's out of your control.

This new one

creaks when you push your hand against it,

reminds you of screen doors on camping trailers with  
family in Swanton Vermont.

It is a good sign.

Nothing moves forward without taking some of the past  
with it.

## Reframing Connection

*In entering the domain of the heart, I yearn for a language.*

(Denton, 1998, p. 33)

Walking through the gates I engage in artistic and contemplative practices in order to keep opening my heart into fresh and fruitful understandings of my experience of relationship. Poet and educator Carl Leggo (2004) asserts: “[P]oetry invites me to breathe, to attend, to slow down, to embrace the healing of body and spirit and imagination” (para 1). By employing poetry, I seek to promote a diversity of stories and meanings within these relationships.



Fig. 5: Listen

Through sharing this nuanced practice of engagement in relationship between self and other in the particular context of Butterstone Farm, on Salt Spring Island, I seek to open up connections with researchers and scholars who are similarly and diversely located within and among the field(s) of education including spirituality, ecology, arts-based practice, violence prevention/healthy relationships and social justice education.

### Reinterpret

You want to tell everything that happens  
each day on the farm

this poem has other plans

what you have to say is not irrelevant  
it is giving up one world for innumerable others



this is your joy  
the birds and your disappearance  
the empty vase each season's blossoming  
self-forgetful  
as if your next breath were  
as if you belong to this  
as if the world hinges on the slant  
of your right hand  
here  
as if there never was a better moment to  
and you explain it to us  
what it means to feel this  
then you hear something  
scatter yourself  
reinterpret

*It can be very awkward to move from between seeing with the eye of judgment and the eye of the heart, half caught in an old way of being and yet sensing, even remembering, that a larger and more generous vision is possible.*

(Gendler, 2007, p. 109)

This work develops the conversation on how we may engage in loving relationships with ourselves and others within and beyond the scope of our human relationships. It expands this pedagogical practice from the walls of schools and universities out toward our experience with nature. I write of my particular location and

situation with the desire to inspire and educate others to attend to their relationships within their particular personal, political and pedagogical locations. As Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) assert: "To write is a political act. To write in the particular is deeply political" (pp. 86-87).

*Through the Gates of Loving Inquiry* communicates a transformative vision of loving relationship as a passionate practice of ongoing attention to the generative possibilities available within our moment to moment experiences of being in the world. There is always another gate to open, another opportunity for the *heart* to move into relationship.

## Notes

1. This article is based on the research from my doctoral dissertation, *Through the Gates of Loving Inquiry: Where the Heart Opens into Relationship* (UBC, 2010). Some of the text and images in the article also appear in *The Art of Poetic Inquiry* (Backalong Books).
2. In the Jewish tradition, the groom breaks a glass at the end of the marriage ceremony, symbolizing the destruction of the Second Temple in the second century BCE. As the couple celebrates the joy of their new beginning, they are also asked to remember the adversity of the Jewish people.

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**Ahava Shira** holds a PhD from the Department of Language & Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her poetry and essays are published in the journals *Educational Insights* and *Arts-Informed*. She is also the author of a book of poetry, *Womb: Weaving of My Being* (1998), and a poetry CD, *Love is Like This* (2010). Ahava is the founder and educational director of the Centre for Loving Inquiry, offering online courses, trainings and retreats for educators & professionals interested in developing their skills in the creative & contemplative arts.

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## Through the Lens of One Day Last December: A Poetics of Narrative Teaching

Cynthia M. Morawski, University of Ottawa

### ABSTRACT

Thoughtful teaching requires the mapping of one's own life, a land marked with features of recalled sites. In the studio of my own classroom practice, working material resides in the poetic groundwork of after-school treks along contours of a New England shoreline. A black stone library. A harbor sound. The placement of a dog-wood by a marshy pond. Through the lens of one day last December, read on...

While composing her own story of growing up, Annie Dillard (1987) came to realize, "When everything else has gone from my brain—what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that...the city poured rolling down the mountain valley like slag..." (p. 3). Within the terrain of a lived story, the curriculum of the present emerges from selected texts of recollected pasts—narrations in returning futures. Thoughtful teaching requires the mapping of one's own life, a land marked with features of recalled sites. In the studio of my own classroom practice, working material resides in the poetic groundwork of after-school treks along contours of a New England shoreline. Treads of white-walled radials wear a path through crushed asphalt and marsh. Stopping along the way, I place chosen moments in a wire basket attached to the chrome of rusting handlebars. Back on my turquoise bike, I ride off, charting chosen scenes of life in teaching. Read on...



Through the lens of one day last December  
The aperture of memory takes photographs without a flash,  
A succession of scenes  
Spread along a coastal breakwater.

From a distance  
Tankers watch the rocky shoreline,  
Where shutters of July homes catch snowflakes  
Drifting into currents of offshore ferries.

Standing near a boat house window  
Painted metal pail in hand,  
A sea glass collector sifts through the presence of low tide  
Past images catalogued in current color.

At the side of a beach wall landing  
Stone steps bring her to limestone benches,  
Time pieces fixed in fragments of inner conversations  
Slipping by like sailboats unnoticed.

Across salt stained slats of late summer tables,  
She arranges remembered moments  
Culled from curricula  
Of never forgotten time.



Next to a cedar street hedge  
A library stands in memorial of black stone marble,  
Rooms of casement windows fill walls with fables long ago  
Biographies of familiar strangers.

Footing a narrow stairwell  
Alcoves of shelves store geographies next to world globes.  
Stacked newspapers hold readers' attention  
As lights flicker in between iron laths of an upper floor.

Stacked on a check-out counter overlooking oak stained chairs  
Books take turns being stamped by fines of overdue dates,  
Front foyers opening up into metal carvings  
Lean against the remembered meanings of another day.



On the branches of a feral apple tree  
Hammered pieces of plywood act as the fort's sentry,  
To the right, tall grasses border an eastern hill  
Pushing sleds onto icy mats of a reedy field.

Undetected from above  
An underground hideaway carves into earth with borrowed shov-  
els,  
Ladders lashed together with found string and sticks  
Permit entry into secret quarters.



Across the mowed lawn  
The lilting call of a red-winged blackbird  
Perches on pulleys attached to a clothesline railing,  
A metal milk box awaits delivery unopened.

Looking back through sketch pad pages  
Forsythias color lilacs with the pastels of a painter's box,  
Willows weep next to dogwood trees on distant hills  
Backing onto a deserted barn filled with paper.

Raked into uneven piles in front of a detached garage  
Mosaic tiles leave red and orange maples,  
Hours later, an unsuspecting swipe of a double-pawed calico  
Slinks into the shadows of a public motorcade.



After replacing one more moment  
Into her metal pail,  
The sea glass collector  
Packs up and turns towards another poem.



Without warning an unexpected moment of memory  
Tilts sun umbrellas staked next to a harbour road,  
Pinwheels circle the front entrance of a candy store  
Shaded by the weather of striped awnings.

Installed next to a sunken barge  
Whirligigs set down in sand bar waters,  
Moving out of tune  
Timed to the dials of transistor radios.



Placed on the striped towel of an early evening swim  
A beach ball slips away from the pull of incoming tide,  
Footprints fade into the cadence of waves  
Leaving latticework of salt and seaweed.

While winkle shells disappear for the night  
Fireflies blink the last call of a lemonade stand,  
Porch lights pursue pebbled paths ending in screen doors  
Opening and closing against the frames of another day.



When Georgia O'Keefe taught, she wanted to show her students a way of seeing. She told them that there was meaning in "...the way one addressed a letter, combed one's hair, or placed a window in a house" (Lisle, 1986, p. 71). In the lines of poetic observation, past experiences act as reference maps of topographies in future presents. Working material of memory makes meaning in the teaching of curricular plans. Icy mats of a reedy field become fables of an apple tree. Rooms of casement windows stage puppets beside a chalkboard wall. Sketchpads draw words in colors, shapes, and other ways to know. Adler (1958) observed that we are both the picture and the artist. I say the poem and the poet, moving within selected moments of perceptual time. A black stone library. A harbor sound. The placement of a dogwood by a marshy pond...

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**Cynthia Morawski** received her doctorate from Columbia University Teachers College. She is currently an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, where she teaches integrated language/arts, literacy, disabilities studies, and literature, and researches literacy learning; bibliotherapy; women's lives; and arts-based learning, including poetics of memory work in teaching narratives and learning differences.



## The Poetics of Self-Study: Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Margaret Louise Dobson, McGill University

### ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates what poetic inquiry may contribute to teaching and learning. By using four samples of my own poetry, I demonstrate how the poetics of self-study can release the inner voice in ways that perhaps more conventional forms of research may not. Poetry removes the insulation between me and my experience to reveal what is “true” for me. Reading my own poetry as text has reinforced my educational convictions: It is *who* we are, not what we do (Arendt, 1974, p. 179) that will determine the success of our best classroom practices.

Life without poetry is unimaginable. Imagery is to poetry what fact is to prose. Hard, cold facts are necessary, but without imagination, life would be unthinkable. When I was a child it was poetry that put the bounce in my step, the skip in my stride, and the pump in my swing. To this day I can still find delight in the magical beat and wondrous images of favourite nursery rhymes: “Hickety Pickety My Black Hen/She lays eggs for gentlemen” (1955, p. 39) or A.A. Milne’s “They’re changing guard at Buckingham Palace/Christopher Robin went down with Alice” (1924/1958, p. 8). A secret garden of verse reverberates at the very core of my childhood memory. The poetic memories of my now-grown children, I am sure, would go more along the lines of Dr. Seuss’ “Green eggs and ham/Sam I am” (1960, p. 7). My Québécois neighbour, perhaps, would recant a litany of “Bée, bée mouton noir/As-tu de laine? Oui monsieur, oui monsieur, trois poches pleines” (1976, p. 1). (It is all the same. In whatever form, poetry is the voice of the heart. Poetry touches the essence of what it means to be human in any generation, in any language, in any culture. We cannot live without it. Poetry is what binds our humanity together.

Educators are faced with the seemingly impossible task of unifying human diversity in the pluralist Global Era in which we now find ourselves. How do we educate our youth for an individual life of meaning and purpose while maintaining a viable comprehensive community that will protect the living Earth home that we share interdependently? Theories abound. Political philosophers suggest multiple versions of Liberalism, Universalism, and Cosmopolitanism, to name only three ideals advocated by Western educational thinkers. Expansive, detailed proposals for civic education are hotly debated in the academic literature of modern educational thinkers. No matter how brilliant the ideals, it will be the *largesse* of compassion in the hearts of teachers in the classrooms, and educational leaders in the schools, that will determine the well-being of present and future generations. Political theories are needed, and we have them, thankfully; however, we must also turn to the arts and humanities if we are to truly transform education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In this paper I propose self-study and poetic inquiry as two powerful agents to assist in the revitalization of our profession. We need, finally and literally, to get to the heart of the educational matter. It is who we are as teachers, not just what we do, that will determine the success of our best classroom practices. All arts-based research will be useful in that regard; but poetry, in particular, serves as a vital medium for self-study because the poetic expression requires a different orientation of thought than most of us non-artist types have been used to. Poetry seeks to retrieve the *intuitive*, an all-too-often ignored sensibility that many years of formal schooling and adult living may have dulled, or even dismissed altogether.

I have spent many rewarding years in Quebec and Ontario classrooms and schools. Over time, I must confess, I have grown weary and wary of the newest and latest programs designed to accommodate the forces of change and touted as "Reform." Like old bottles with new wine, they break. The potent wine of today has real legs! I am not certain anymore that we can organize and formalize humanity into behaving herself in a reasonable fashion according to our latest political theories about what is, and what is not, acceptable. Despite our best intentions, most people, like poetry, seem to want to go their wayward way. They are no longer inclined to follow a predetermined "garden path" to "whatever." Whatever it is, they want to do it "My Way!" Doesn't that sound like free verse wanting to escape the confines of the more traditional poetic structures of the past? Are educators to try to convince their students otherwise? Or, can we give them permission to discover their own free spirit and to live their own uncertain lives? Can we find it in our hearts to understand that it is no longer our business to mould and shape future generations in what was once, perhaps, just our own fearful quest for certainty? Can we actually release the

imagination of human potential? The answer lies in “Only if we can do it for ourselves, first.” Shakespeare, a great poet and *connoisseur* of the human condition, strongly urged many years ago, “To thine own self be true ...” (1599-1600 / 1947, p. 31). Of all the knowledge that we have amassed over time, “self” and “true” seem to be the last frontiers, and the hardest to get at! Going forward on the journey of self-discovery, I am convinced that we will need more than science and technology; we will sorely need the poetics of the heart.

Two main “events” caused me to choose poetry and self-study for my current research. First, it was the unplanned “accidents” of my own poems that put me more closely in touch with many of my heartfelt educational convictions. As an educational leader I was in the habit of writing up matter-of-fact reports, school plans, grants and letters to parents. When I had the chance upon my “retirement” to take a creative writing course at McGill, I wanted to see if, after all these years of writing on others’ behalf, I could still find a “voice” of my own. Was there an original creative thought? Throughout the course, each week’s exercise was to write creatively using a particular “assigned” word. We would then read the prepared text to the nineteen other participants in the class and receive critical feedback. Of course I was expecting to write prose; but more often than not, what I got was poetry! Poetry told me forgotten secrets that lay dormant under the surface of my life. Poetry seemed to remove the insulation between myself and my experience in a way that felt “true” as no other form of expression did. The element of surprise in creative writing piqued the interest of my educational instincts. The other aspect of intrigue was the fact that I kept returning to childhood memories whenever I searched for creative inspiration. Why? Is there no creativity in my adult life experience? What is there about the intensity of childhood memory that seems to get lost in adulthood? Secondly, I have learned in my doctoral studies the value of self-study as an entry point to a deeper understanding of the human condition. What is true for me, may also be true for you, and possibly, for us. I share the following poems with you, not for their aesthetic value, as you will see, but for their possible educational value. The selected poems, and many others not included, have taught me priceless lessons about myself, and, therefore, potentially, about the human condition. They touch on *topoi*, the common everyday concerns of people everywhere: spiritual and social identity; imagination and achievement; freedom; time. I offer some of my own reflections as part of the self-study as well as the ideas of others. My intention is to better understand my own human nature and to discern from that understanding a new direction and possibility for a revitalized educational experience that will be vibrant, creative and beautiful, not just political, instrumental and practical. My hope is that you will enjoy the poems for what they are, and that you may see something in them of our shared experience

and educational concerns. Perhaps you will even be inspired to try your hand at the poetics of self-study!

## Identity Rooted in Childhood

The first poem in the series is “Wild Violets.” It was while writing this poem three years ago that I became aware, through memory, of the powerful presence of the past radiantly affecting the present. “Wild Violets” came as a surprise because of the accuracy and intensity of the feelings it conveys about a particular space, place and time of my childhood. So vivid is the memory, in fact, I am certain that I could take you on the road today to the field, and find the exact spot where, as a four-year-old, I lay down in the grass to become better acquainted with the violets. This little poem conveys my experience of what poet John O’Donohue (2007) calls the “inner music” that never abandons us. Henri Bergson (1907) might have called the phenomenon *élan vital*, or the vital essence that animates our lives. The wild violets, known throughout the world as uncultivated meadow flowers, are barely noticeable in the grand scheme of things; yet, this lovely little flower represents for me the quiet, assured endurance and confidence that is well rooted in my memory of childhood.

### Wild Violets

Purple and mauve  
Newly born shy  
Nestled sweetly in the meadow grasses  
Safely hidden  
From the irreverent eye

(I must fall down  
Flat on my belly  
Just for a glimpse)

The large grey field stone  
Stands solid there  
Shielding the tiny protégés  
While revealing,  
By gracious contrast,

The tender reticence  
Of crimson blue

Do not be fooled  
By their naïveté  
There is nothing shrinking  
About this savage bunch!

Slowly and surely  
Throughout the years  
Their tiny roots  
Have grown strong and deep  
Insisting their way  
Through my restless sleep

What once appeared harsh and dark  
Is now overcome  
By the lavish hue  
Of wild violets

“Attention to life” is described by Bergson (1991) as “a greater dilation of the whole personality” ... “the unscrewing of the vice in which it has allowed itself to be squeezed” (p. 14). A state of consciousness that has not been “narrowed down,” says Bergson, is “whole and undivided, spreads itself over a wider and wider surface” (p. 14). Why is there a “narrowing down” of consciousness? What part has schooling played in squeezing out the vitality of the “greater dilation”?

I see “the large grey fieldstone” as possibly representing the solid institutions of society, in their own way providing a safe haven for children. A problem can arise, however, when the protective structures of society become overbearing and stifle the creative energies of their protégés. Only when the innate intelligence of our intuitive nature is allowed to interplay with our learned intellectual nature is it that life takes on a glow, or “lavish hue,” that shines from within and illuminates the world around us. I find the self-reflection of the above poem to be reassuring. It signifies a gradual awakening in consciousness that was rooted in early childhood.

## Imagination and Achievement

The following poem conveys another intensely felt childhood memory. “Musical Musing” differentiates between the innocence of inner imagination and the experience of intellectual achievement. One without the other is meaningless, as this poem signifies. The musical musing points to the fact that most people do not “hear” the inner music; nor do they seem to discern the empty sounds, accurate in execution, perhaps, but totally void of meaning. The poem is also a reminder that children live in a world that is rich in imagination, a sensibility that is often derided and dismissed by the insensitivity of jaded grownups. Sadly, adulthood for many has meant losing touch with the “inner music.”

### Musical Musing

Little strips of ivory paper  
Pasted neatly side by side  
Along the thick dark edge of the country-kitchen table  
My imaginary piano

Head tossed back in sheer delight  
I play with all my might  
Up and down the carefully crafted keyboard  
My imaginary song

Laugh all you want  
At this childish game  
Bewildered by your merriment  
I wonder  
Can you not hear the music with no sound?

\*

A Baby Grand piano  
(RCM) Levels I to VIII  
Taught by a professional  
Spine straight  
Imaginary oranges under the palms  
Scales, chords, arpeggios  
Extraordinary technique



Exclaim all you want  
Over my digital agility  
Surprised by your acclaim  
I ponder  
Can you not hear the sound with no music?

## Freedom

The following poem reflects aspects of self-awareness that are as true today as they were when I was five years old. "Life doesn't move toward goals, but away from restrictions," is an adage I relish. I like the fierce spirit of determination and the strong sense of identity in the face of conformity. There is a truth that defies conventional wisdom. Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994) writes in *The Poetics of Space*, "Contemporary poetry has introduced freedom in the very body of the language. As a result, poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom" (p. xxvii). For Maxine Greene (1998), education for freedom is "perhaps the main theme of my life" (p. 18). "Freedom ... is the capacity to take initiatives, to begin" (Greene, p. 55).

## A Runaway

People say  
that running away  
is cowardly

They say  
that we should stay  
and face the music

Not I

I pride myself in running away  
Each time I run away  
I run closer to myself

I run away from pettiness  
and narrow-mindedness

I make a mad dash away from sameness

I leave behind

Oppression

Outdated rules and regulations

Stifling beliefs

Stalemates (and stale mates!)

Organizational restrictions

And external restraints

Irreverence and irrelevance are not for me

I am a runaway

In the “protest” literature of the 1960s, Greene (1988) recalls, there were strong arguments against the institutional presence of the public schools:

...schools were meant to impose certain value systems and constraints so that energies would be appropriately channelled to suit the requirements of society... There was something basically at odds, it was said, between the demands of society and the requirements of human growth. (p. 53)

The argument still holds true in conversations about education today. “How much does the possibility of freedom depend on critical reflectiveness, on self-understanding, on insight into the world?” “How much does it depend on the integration of the felt and the known, the subjective and the objective, the private and the public spheres?” (Greene, p. 53)

## Time

The next two poems are about time, “Nowhere” and “Now Here.” How do we find a fruitful interaction between our original spiritual identity and our constructed and reconstructed social identity? Finding the interaction or what I prefer to call a “synthesis” between who we are and what we are presents a significant challenge. “What is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance” (Arendt, 1974, p. 182). Reading the two poems out loud, I can feel the difference between artificial man-made time, “nowhere,” and natural time where past, present and future are fused, “now here.” The feeling speaks volumes.

Nowhere

"I'm late; I'm late  
For a very important date  
No time to say  
Hello Goodbye  
I'm late; I'm late; I'm late."  
(Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit)

It's a post-modern habit  
We're short on time  
We're out of breath  
We have no rhyme  
Or reason left

Hurry, scurry & worry  
We quicken the pace  
Of frantic endeavour:  
The human race

We must save the planet  
We must win the war  
On terror, on greed, on problems galore  
We must get ahead  
Be fast on our feet  
We must beat the crowd  
To make our ends meet  
a.s.a.p.  
No time for delay

For time is money  
The bankers say

(We are running  
Out of both  
The naysayers say)

There has to be another way!

Now Here

Once upon a time there was time  
Do you remember that time?  
There was time for tea  
Time for play  
And time to just be

Time to climb a tree  
Or lie in the grass  
And gaze at the clouds  
And fly  
High in the sky

Time for a song to sing  
Time to reach for the tips of the leaves  
With the tips of your toes  
On the old rope swing  
To and fro'  
The ebb and flow  
The natural rhythm  
Of time

Time to bake a cake  
Time to contemplate  
The shape of an iris  
Beside the lake

With time on your hands  
You could hold the baby chick  
And feel and smell  
The soft pungent promise  
Of magic

The robin's song tells  
The time to go to bed  
The kitten purrs  
The time to get up  
There is always time  
Once upon a time

How do we bring together the stillness of inner being with the *bus-i-ness* of outer achieving? I am grateful to remember a time when I felt at home in time, at home in the universe. For many of us, that time was childhood. What is time? Or, where is time? "However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves, consequently, an effort of memory which prolongs, one into another, a plurality of moments" (Bergson, 1991, p. 34). The duration of time is a key to the resolution of who I am and what I am. I am certain that this phenomenon is what John Keats was writing about in a letter: "I now feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds." (1818/1963, p. 383). I am still present now in my memory of time "now here." As a result, I see children in a different light. Children may be small in size and inexperienced in the ways of the world, but they are wholly present in time.

## Conclusion

In turning to the poetics of self-study to represent my research interests, I have been able to explore language in an effort to break out of the traditional moulds of academic investigation to get to the heart of the matter. I want to convey the invisible, the immeasurable, the intrinsic as essential elements of education. I feel that half the picture has been left out of the educational equation because we haven't been able, or quite ready perhaps, to talk about things like "intuition" or "heart" or "soul." Scholarly writing with its matter-of-fact intellectual tone can be a harsh medium for the expression of the delicate and passionate matters of the heart. "... poetry, rather than being a phenomenology of the mind, is a phenomenology of the soul" (Bachelard, 1958/1994, p. xx). Poetic inquiry has given me a certain permission to begin to uncover what I perhaps could not have conveyed in more conventional forms of research methodology. The methodology has also allowed me to examine *topoi*, topics common to our shared humanity. Whether we are consciously aware of the fact or not, we put our heart and soul, not just our minds, into teaching and learning. My poems about childhood memories have put me in touch with my "original way of being... that cannot be socially derived, but {is} inwardly generated" (Taylor, 1991, p. 47). Poetry has given me the courage and the vocabulary to begin to talk about what I know of "self" and "true."

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**Margaret Louise Dobson** is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. Prior to entering the doctoral program, she was a high school teacher of French and English, language supervisor for the Simcoe County Board of Education, and co-author of a K-13 audio-visual program, *Le français partout*, published by Holt, Rhinehart and Winston. While raising her family and teaching in Ontario, she animated an ETV series for teaching FSL across Canada. Returning to her native province in 1984, she taught English literature to adult students before taking on leadership responsibilities as center director, vice-principal, then principal for the English Montreal School Board.



## Children's Poetic Voices

April R. Mandrona, Concordia University

### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creation of found poetry using the narratives of children. The author proposes that poetic inquiry offers a place of understanding where the words of children speak volumes. Through this process, she explores how one may connect not only with young people, but also with the often forgotten aspects of the self.

Poetry is an anchor in the present, in the moment where everything unfolds. It reaches to places deep within the psyche to shake free our emotions, memories and alternate levels of awareness. Inherently ambiguous, poetry begs interpretation, while at the same time rejecting such analysis. It is a place of communion between the world, each other and ourselves. In the past few decades, poetic inquiry, or the use of poetry to produce, collect, analyze or explore data, has gained prominence as a powerful tool of discovery capable of revealing the connections and subtleties often overlooked by conventional research approaches. As an effective reflexive or self-study technique, poetic form articulates the tensions and complexities of lived experience. It challenges our engrained modes of thinking and expression as it breaks from the confines of linear ways of knowing. "Found poetry," also called "participant-voiced poetry" (Prendergast, 2003), utilizes the original words and phrases from participant transcripts, reorganizing the text into stanzas and playing with line, meter, repetition and pauses (Richardson, 1992). Writing found poetry is an immersive process: as we ruminate on the words of others we are momentarily engulfed, catching glimpses of a different subjectivity.

A short time ago, I began to use poetic inquiry in my own professional practice in an effort to better understand the children I work and research with. While pursuing a PhD in Art Education and teaching art to elementary students, I identified a need to shed light on the often disregarded insights and perceptive abilities of these young children. My standard reductionist methods of representation and analysis no longer seemed tenable, as the original luster and intensity of the children's experiences was often obscured. I was unsure of how to move beyond this obstacle until in the Spring of 2010, as part of a found poetry exercise for Lynn Butler-Kisber's qualitative inquiry class at McGill University, I revisited the video-taped data from my Master's thesis. The research focused on young children's drawn and sculpted representations of people, but I had not examined in depth the discussions they had with me while creating their artworks. Previously, I glossed over their accounts as they appeared impulsive, tangential and often unrelated to the task at hand. Upon re-examination of the video footage however, I was immediately struck by what had eluded me before: the rich, poetic quality of their utterances. The children recounted their experiences; although often short and fragmented, their narratives revealed a playful poignancy. Something stirred within me, I was re-awakened—a true “eureka moment” (Butler-Kisber, 2010). From this data I produced several “untreated” poems, “conserving virtually the same order, syntax and meaning as the original” text (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 84). This first poem was taken from the narrative of a young boy who told me about an experience using clay and the resulting objects that now adorn his home. The second was created using the words spoken by a five-year-old boy as he constructed an environment from clay complete with people, a car, and a garage. Although both poems are rather simple in their message, they each possess a mysterious resonance. There is a movement beyond purely analytic thinking to a form of intuitive-associative understanding.

### A ship in a jar

I made a ship in a jar,  
a pirate ship in a jar,  
a ship made with clay.

With blue all around.

I made a small ship,  
with straws for posts,  
that hold paper sails.

With blue all around.

(By a young boy, age 6)



## Garage

Garage, like a car  
 trying to get out of a cage  
 and then it opens.  
 (By a young boy, age 5)

Creating the poems involved the application of a modified version of the “Stonebanks method” (as cited in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 87). The process is as follows:

- After listening to the recordings several times and transcribing the data, conduct a close reading of the transcript allowing themes to surface.
- Pull out phrases and words that “breathe life into the poem,” highlighting any words that might help to shape the poem (see Figure 1)
- Immerse oneself in the world and words of experience and successful attempts of writing poetry. (In this instance I read Adrienne Rich, Carl Leggo, Christian Bok, Margaret Atwood, William Carlos Williams, and Leonard Cohen)
- Combine phrases from the transcript, experimenting with line breaks, rhythm, etcetera.
- Use key words from the transcript in the title to help give meaning to the poem.

17: I'm not making a person yet. I'm making a car. It has a **garage** (begins to squish clay with his  
 18: fists). Yeah, a **garage!** You know, a **garage, like a car trying to get out of a cage. And then it**  
 19: **opens** (motions with outstretched palms).

Fig. 1: Excerpt from transcript with words and phrases highlighted

Through this exercise, I was carried back to a frame of mind that I had forgotten, to a time when I was a young child who would often tell stories filled with imaginative musings intertwined with observations from my surroundings. For the

first several years of my life my mother kept a journal documenting my newly acquired behaviours and language abilities. Before I learned to write myself and in the time that followed, she acted as my transcriber, noting each discovery, developmental milestone and addition to my vocabulary. Wanting to be heard, at times, I would request that my words be written down, so that others and myself could examine this tangible trace (see Figure 2C). Figure 2A constitutes what my mother calls my first haiku, which I uttered upon realizing that wild animals, unlike humans, wore no clothes. Figure 2B describes my amazement at seeing tiny particles of dust catch the sunlight as they floated through the air. I created the typewritten poem using the family's large, authoritarian manual typewriter to express my alarm that hardly anyone around me believed in fairies any more.

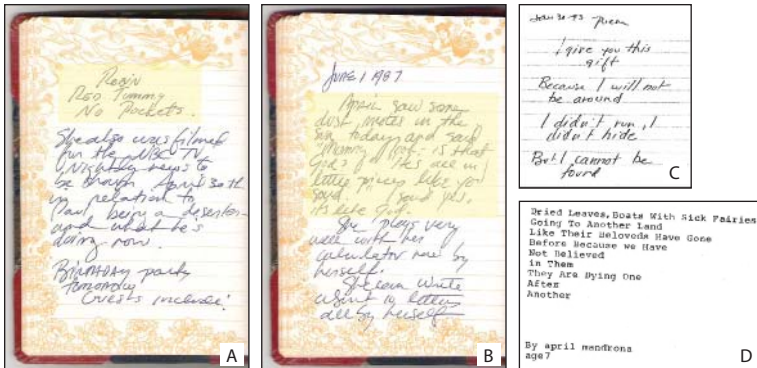


Fig. 2: Preserved journal entries and documents. Panel A shows a “haiku” or a description of a robin: “Robin red tummy no pockets.” Panel B shows observations of dust in the sunlight: “April saw some dust motes in the sun today and said, ‘Mom, look—is that god? He’s all in little pieces like you said’. I said ‘Yes, it’s like god’”. Panel C shows a poem on the subject of death. Panel D shows a typewritten poem on the existence of fairies.

In rediscovering these entries and poems, I was witness to a part of myself, the part that views the world as miraculous, that is surprised at the chances of existence. I could see the delight I had experienced as a young learner, and the delight of my mother as she watched this unfold. While I place great value in a well-trained mind, I also believe that to reach a state of deepened understanding requires a freeing from the rigidity of engrained patterns of thinking. One must once again be open to fresh input and see the world anew. My own reflexive process represents the spiralling and recursive nature of learning and experience. We continually move outward, gathering knowledge and skills, moving away from the self, but must circle back to call upon the prime planes of the self.

But how quickly we may dismiss from mind these childlike meditations and enter into a realm where we are expected to think rationally, sensibly. The words of children, the language we once used is outgrown, often deemed trivial, empty or fanciful. In becoming adults we position ourselves outside the worlds of childhood, and there is a tendency to speak for children or about them rather than with them. In our state of disconnect, all too often we become patronizing and overly didactic. As asserted by Wareing (2003), "language actually creates power, as well as being the site where power is performed" (p. 11). Applying this concept to the construction of children, Peccei (2003) states that children "are differentiated within society not only by their special social, economic and legal status but also by the language that is used to describe and categorize them" (p. 117). This system of representation reflects the societal status of children and subsequently determines their level of participation within the various spheres of knowledge production. It is only recently that the experiences of children have been viewed from outside the parameters of traditional knowledge, revealing the power systems embedded within the dominant research constructs. More critical and diverse approaches, such as art-informed methods, have helped to bring attention to the marginalization and silencing of children. The concept of "voice" or "voicing experiences, claiming the right not only to speak but also to be listened to—has become a metaphor for political recognition, self determination, and full presence in knowledge" (Thorne, 2002, p. 251). However, as maintained by Punch (2002), one of the problems with involving children in research is that "[I]t is difficult for an adult researcher to totally understand the world from the child's point of view ... As adults we were once children but we soon forget, unlearn and abandon elements of our childhood culture" (p. 235). Adults are separated from children by a perennial distance, which stems in part from the rapidly changing social and cultural contexts of childhood, and the diverse experiences of individual children (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This presents a difficult dilemma for those who work with children, however, I believe that it may be possible to significantly reduce this "adultist" bias by becoming more in touch with the realities of the child.

I do not wish to suggest that the categories of "child" and "adult" are fixed, dichotomous entities, but agree with Thomson (2007) who drawing on the work of scholars such as Paolo Freire, suggests that we are all human "becomings" as opposed to human "beings," that is we are inherently incomplete, continually learning, growing and expanding. Thomson further contends that "the competent adult is a myth, that all individuals are human becomings, regardless of age, and that identities are multiple, fluid in nature and continually negotiated within and through space (including research space)" (p. 214). Learning does not follow a pre-described, linear path but is meandering and lifelong. Identity is layered and dynamic and individual

realities are constantly shifting and overlapping. For me, the poetic space offers a form of distillation, a stripping down to the core of being and as such represents a possible point of convergence or place we may share with children. Poetry can expand the boundaries of language, thus challenging and subverting the dominant reality. Leggo (2004) proposes that:

Truth is composed in the open places broken open by art ... art calls forth the unfamiliar. And so this is why I recommend that writing poetry is crucial to sustaining a creative flexibility in language and discourse, and hence the composing of truth in our living. (para. 23)

I would hasten add that to put oneself in a state of poetry, does not require the learning of a new language but a return to one deeply lodged in memory, a lesser known, once familiar, basic form of communication. Poet John Steffer (1995) posits that, "poetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life's miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning" (p. 47), something which is known intimately by children. Sullivan (2009) suggests that:

poems must be concrete. There must be things to see, hear, smell, taste touch ... Concreteness is about embodiment. We experience life in all its grittiness and pleasure through the sensory mechanisms of the body ... The human voice, authentic and resonant with experience, has its own concreteness. (pp. 112–114)

There is something retained in the talk of children. Children offer a freshness, unpretentiousness, an un-mediated whimsy that we as adults might struggle to emulate. Their stories are anchored in the world of the concrete and the immediate, while simultaneously pointing toward the prophetic and the profound.

I returned to my split grade one and two art class at a local elementary school with a renewed curiosity and direction. I felt a need to pay closer attention to what the children were telling me. However, with the large number of students, it was difficult to balance the normal teacherly duties of classroom management and assisting with cutting, assembling and designing. Breaking the class up into smaller sessions allowed me to concentrate on individual children and talk with them at length about their ideas and experiences. I transcribed the recorded discussions, then transformed the text into several poems, arranging the narratives into stanzas to emphasize the rhythmic quality of speech and the children's unique ways of speaking.

Poetry “clusters” or a series of poems around a given theme blend the general together with the particular. As stated by Butler-Kisber,

Poetry clusters help to show the tentativeness of individual interpretations, that is, how each understanding of a theme, topic, or concept is limited by the time, place, context, and stance of the researcher at the time it is written. A poetry cluster that represents different events, moods, topics, etcetera, can acknowledge the 'truth' of each poem in the series while simultaneously uncovering something more. The 'something more' is the revelation that often occurs in the unveiling of a poetry cluster. The reader, and/or author(s) herself, can see for the first time dimensions of a theme that might otherwise not be revealed. (2009, p. 4)

Many of the children created and discussed art that focused on animals and their knowledge of these creatures. I chose to present the poems that resulted from these experiences in the form of a poetry cluster as a means of representing the mosaic of specific viewpoints. Read together, however, this cluster appears to express the children's special relationship to animals and their understanding of the subtle, yet surprising aspects of the natural world. The words of the children are accompanied by their artworks on the same topic.

### Huntin dog

Mine's a special dog.  
He likes to eat dog food and biscuits.

He howls when he's scared.  
Someday he's gonna be a huntin' dog.

He howls when he smells an animal.  
And then the hunter shoots.  
(By a young boy, age 7)



Fig. 3: Artwork depicting “Sniffy” the dog by a young boy, age 7. Panel A shows a print of “Sniffy.” Panel B shows a drawing of “Sniffy.”

## I know

how

frogs jump

Sometimes

very far

They are

green

blue

red

blackish

(By a young boy, age 7)



Fig. 4: Clay sculpture of a frog by young boy, age 7

## Tadpoles

turn into frogs  
when they are older  
they will live  
in green water

there's a difference  
between us  
we can't breath  
inside water  
they can't breath  
outside

so we have to be  
in different places  
to be able  
to live  
together  
(By a young girl, age 7)



Fig. 5: Clay sculpture of a tadpole by a young girl, age 7

## Pig Poem

I dream about you,  
I talk about you,  
and I love you.  
From the pig to you girl.

(By a young girl, age 7)



Fig. 6: Work by a young girl, age 7. Panel A shows a poem she wrote in her journal. Panel B shows the girl with the “pig” described in her poem.

The final poem in the cluster was written by one of my students. In my art classes, I encourage the students to write poems and stories if they wish. I also share poetry with them that I find interesting or compelling. Each of them is given their own journal where they can draw or record their thoughts, dreams and reflections.

The following collection of poems, while not a true poetry cluster, clearly shows the children's personal perceptions of the world. The children's words are bittersweet, as they demonstrate an attentiveness to life's wonders but also an acknowledgement of its limitations.

## A country house

I had a country house  
and I went to the water

My mother had it when she was tiny  
She had it for such a long time

But now it's sold  
And I got a condo in Florida  
(By a young girl, age 7)

## Polkadots

I am drawing polkadots  
around you  
with different colours

I think it's special and unique  
It kinda takes long time  
but I'm being patient  
(By a young girl, age 6)



Fig. 7: "April surrounded by hearts and polkadots," drawing by a young girl, age 6

## I am different

from the  
other people  
in my class.

I made  
a kind of creature  
a unicorn-jaguar.

It has  
a horn  
it's fast  
and flies.  
(By a young girl, age 6)

## Running out of magic

We are running out  
of magic.  
This is crazy  
science.



We are running out  
of magic.  
We got the wrong  
one.

We are running out  
of magic.  
I want to go  
back.  
(By a young boy, age 7)

Through the distillation of the children's words that took place in writing these poems, it became possible to identify the before unrealized ambiguities, dualities and complexities that these children embody. The children and their worlds begin to be revealed to me. At once they appear both foreign and familiar. These little beings, so full of joy and woe. They are wise and naive, vibrant and latent. I borrow from them this flexible state of being and step into a space of fluctuating borders. I become both teacher and learner, straddling the worlds of reality and imagination. The creation of poetry has become a way for me to document and explore the multiple layers of the educational contexts that I share with children. When viewed in conjunction with their artworks, their words move beyond the purely descriptive and offer insight into their emotional and intellectual processes. I believe this has helped to develop my ability to understand the experiential and dialogical activities of my classroom. As a result, my teaching practice has become even more delightful, more dimensional. I am more trusting and respectful of my students' decisions as the frequency and depth of exchange has increased.

On creating found poetry from interview transcripts Richardson (1992) writes:

I am better able to step into the shoes of the Other, as well as into the Other's body and psyche. I am more attuned to lived experiences as subjectively felt by the Other. This has affected my willingness to know myself and others in different ways ... In writing the Other we can (re)write the Self. (pp. 135–136)

Poetic inquiry with children offers an opening for conversation, questioning and learning. Children seem to speak from the subconscious, moving within a less

filtered way of knowing. Their perceptions appear closer to a form of “truth,” as if they function as a kind of oracle speaking to the essential aspects of existence, evoking the imaginative and the creative. Transforming their words into poetry can create a shifting, shared and interactive space. The result is an attempted blurring of boundaries, not only between the external imposed constructs of “child” and “adult,” but also those between the child and adult that exist simultaneously within the self. This form of exploration gives credence and voice to their stories and allows me to dwell, even temporarily, within a renewed, spontaneous state of understanding.

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**April Mandrona** is a PhD student at Concordia University in the Department of Art Education. Her research interests include arts-informed participatory methodologies, artistic development and elementary art education. She also teaches art part time to elementary students.





# Hospitality and the Hôte: Revealing Responsibility Through Found Poetry

Tim Molnar, University of Saskatchewan

## ABSTRACT

This work provides insight into the experience of a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and their sense of responsibility. This involves discussions concerning the use of found poetry as well as how found poetry aided in fashioning an interpretation of educator's experience of the hôte: a guest-host who accommodates and negotiates the difference of others and self.

## The Hôte

Who did I want to be and need to be credible to?

What kind of Indian was I to give up the sacred place for children?

*Saying that out loud sounds bizarre  
Being half and half - it's always a tension  
Damned if you do and damned if you don't*

-----  
*What did I do first? Panicked! I was lost  
It was supposed to be  
'Everybody showed up - I taught - we left  
They came back homework done - We went on to the next thing'  
That doesn't happen!*

Kids will ask me if I am Métis

They think maybe I belong - I tell them I am not

*It was really bizarre because I wanted to say, 'Yes!'  
I wanted them to go 'She fits'*

I would go home after school and say something to my spouse  
And they look at me and say, 'Who are you?'

*Well I don't know!  
I have been here long enough I have soaked it all in*

-----

I had finally started to be considered an insider  
The kids were calling me Kokum

*I know I truly don't truly ever completely belong  
Inclusion will be extended to me or not  
When it is extended to me I feel like I belong  
Not as an equal but as a respected part...  
I don't know how to explain what I am saying*

-----

I can be a First Nations and still wonder,  
'Is it my job to be doing it or is it an Elder's job?'

*You have such a variety within the First Nations  
Traditional, Christian, a few that really don't bother  
I really have to watch  
I can't force them to believe or to value the things that I do  
I try to speak to it as a person, as a human you know*

As First Nation's people we have to fit into society I know  
Nothing has really changed only they have put us in their spots

*We are really doing it to ourselves  
We are doing their work for them now and they have made us...  
I shouldn't say 'they'!  
It's like who are 'they'?*

## Introduction

**A**s I look over the poem "Hôte," composed from the words of several of my former teaching colleagues, I remain captivated by the strained sensibility evident concerning identity, role and responsibility. These four people, whose words comprise this poem, some of Aboriginal and some of non-Aboriginal heritage, were teachers I worked closely with for several years. We worked in an inner-city school in Western Canada, with a small student population of around 200 students, mostly of First Nation heritage. These students faced the typical academic challenges and pursuits of those in a high school, but also frequently dealt with

circumstances in their lives involving death and violence, and socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and transience.

These teachers, along with several other educators in this school, eventually became participants in my research on responsibility—research undertaken after I left teaching in this school. This research involved a series of interviews and conversations with participants over two years, as I investigated their experience and the notion of responsibility (Molnar, 2009). Part of this process involved exploring the feasibility and suitability of the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1961, 1981) for understanding teachers' experience. To this end I created a theoretical framework for understanding responsibility, based on Levinas' ideas but also that of Derrida (1999, 2002), and Todd (2003c, 2007, 2008). I employed this guide to both examine the experience of these teachers, and to gauge the helpfulness of relying on Levinas' work for understanding responsibility. Hospitality and the experience of the hôte was one of several themes I investigated through the creation of found poems.

In what follows it is not my intent to provide a detailed philosophical interpretation of responsibility and the role of the hôte, nor to extensively support my claims that Levinas' work can be helpful in understanding teachers' sense of responsibility. This writing exists elsewhere (Molnar, 2009). Neither will I suggest a method for creating found poetry. However, I will provide comment as to why and how I employed found poetry in fulfilling the dual task of crafting both interpretation and representation in research—a sharing that I hope will be helpful to the reader.

To accomplish this I offer a brief overview of found poems, my reasons for employing them, followed by a brief discussion concerning the nature of hospitality and the hôte as a way to conceive of human responsibility. These discussions give way to my reflections on the experience of crafting found poems as part of a philosophical hermeneutic or interpretation (Caputo, 1987, 2000; Gadamer, 1976; Gadamer & Silverman, 1991), and as a way of representing the experience of research participants in support of such interpretation. I end with some thoughts concerning research and the experience of the hôte.

### Why Found Poetry

During my research, while surveying various literature concerning qualitative research methodology, I happened upon the use of found poetry. Here I found

writers such as Richardson (1994, 2003) and Sparkes (2002) suggesting poetry was a meaningful way to provide insight into the words of others or oneself that had a place in research. They suggested poetry is helpful in re-telling “experiences in such a way that others can experience and feel them” (Richardson, 2003, p. 197) and in a manner invite the reader “into the interpretive realm where the writer (and the reader) make leaps” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 116) or connections in meaning. Such representation also seemed useful in being similar to how people actually talked and conveyed meaning (Richardson, 2003), which allowed further accessibility for readers to the intended meaning and lived experience of others. What might be a third argument for their use involved giving the reader an alert “that it is the author who is staging and shaping the text” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 116), and in this realization readers can recognize the writer is offering a singular interpretation among many possible interpretations. This, if we believe Gadamer (1976; 1991) and Caputo (1987, 2000), acts as a healthy guard to any attempt to claim absolute truth in regards to human understanding, a perspective that may actually subvert what utility and meaning we may gain from a text.

Despite such supporting literature, one can still ask why they were meaningful for my work. My larger research piece, of which investigating hospitality was only a portion, was an exploration concerning the feasibility of employing a particular philosophy to understand responsibility. However, my interpretive efforts often involved intuition as much as reasoning and I find it difficult to separate the rational and intuitive in responding to the question I just posed.

However, given that my philosophical investigation involved exploring the very intimate experience of responsibility, I felt a need to reduce the emotive distance there may be between participants and readers—a distance perpetuated perhaps, given the more technical and analytical approach to interpretation that typified other parts of my research. Like Steffler (1995), I desired “through the convenient portability of words” to offer a “semblance of direct experience, a recovery or approximation of emotional experience that engages our sense of the numinous and the aesthetic” (p. 49). My research participants were more than convenient and knowledgeable individuals to talk with, but had been supportive colleagues and friends, who shared their lives, hopes and aspirations with me intimately, and to whom, in a most Levinasian manner, I owed a debt—a debt not merely for their participation, but because of their humanity. I sympathized and empathized with their efforts, their dignity and their desire for the best for their students. Through the use of poetry I hoped to more fully honour and respect the words and presence of these people, to provide a fuller sense of their struggle and thoughts. I desired to accurately portray



the uncertainty and questioning nature in their sense of responsibility, as they struggled to aid their students, and each other, amid the frequently daunting challenges of their work.

The choice to craft poetry also emerged from my creative urges; these were ever at play as I read and considered the words of participants and various interpretations and presentations for conveying meaning. There is something about poetry that pushes, as Leggo (2006) notes, “at the edges, sometimes even extending beyond the edges, even to the places where language refuses, comprehensibility, clarity, coherence...” (p. 89), and with the use of poetry I hoped readers might also push beyond the edges of a casual consideration of peoples’ experience.

The processes of interpretation and creating poetry seemed to compliment and support each other and resonated with my sense of research as artful, intuitive and spontaneous—as an endeavor involving connoisseurship and judgment (Eisner, 1991; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990).

This is a partial response as to why I employed found poetry, there is still left to consider, how this approach works itself out in the context of a theme such as hospitality. Therefore, the following section discusses briefly the notion of responsibility as hospitality, a discussion that will help in considering the suitability and resonance of “The Hôte” and positions us to examine further the challenges I encountered in employing found poetry.

### Responsibility as Hospitality

In considering the experience of teaching amid the tensions of ethno-cultural difference, ideas of community, communing and belonging evolved into an interest concerning the nature of responsibility. This led me to explore Levinas’ philosophy of the Other (Levinas, 1961, 1981), a journey involving related work by Jacques Derrida (1999, 2002) and Sharon Todd (2003b, 2003c, 2008). Fashioning a philosophical interpretation of responsibility I realized the experience of hospitality might be potentially helpful in understanding the experience of participants. There was, however, a particular aspect of hospitality that seemed especially meaningful. This was the idea, sensibility and experience of the hôte.

## Hospitality and the Hôte

Levinas talks of responsibility as a welcoming, and Derrida in turn discusses hospitality as a feature of such welcoming. But what do they mean by this? Derrida, in speaking of hospitality, is alerting us to a deeper reality concerning our encounter with others as he explains,

The word “hospitality” here translates, brings to the fore, re-produces...a sort of periphrasis, a series of metonymies that bespeak hospitality, the face, welcome; tending toward the other, attentive intention, yes to the other. Intentionality, attention to speech, welcome of the face, hospitality—all these are the same as the welcoming of the other, there where the other withdraws from the theme. (1999, p. 22)

In other words, responsibility involves an encounter that is typified by an attentiveness to, and accommodation of, what is the infinite and ultimately unknowable difference of other human beings. This involves a person’s enactment and embodiment as a host who “knows what it means to be at home, and that at home one receives, invites, or offers hospitality, thus appropriating for oneself a place to *welcome* [*accueillir*] the other” (Derrida, 1999, pp. 15–16), but simultaneously finds themselves a guest in their own home or circumstance, changing to accommodate others. In other words, the experience of hospitality involves the sensibility of no longer being at ease and certain in one’s home. This, as Derrida suggests, is where “the head of the household, the master of the house, is already a *received hôte*, already a guest in his own home” (1999, p. 42). What exists here is the

implacable law of hospitality: the *hôte* who receives (the host), the one who welcomes the invited or received *hôte* (the guest), the welcoming *hôte* who considers himself [sic] the owner of the place, is in truth a *hôte* received in his [sic] own home. He receives the hospitality that he offers *in* his own home; he receives it *from* his own home—which, in the end, does not belong to him. The *hôte* as host is a guest. (Derrida, 1999, p. 41)

What does Derrida mean by this? Derrida is not merely referring to the simple courtesy of inviting another into one’s physical home but how the difference of others is welcomed and accommodated by us, found active within ourselves, residing within our psyche, existing alongside and altering our identity. This situation is not one of ease but is typified by uncertainty, ambiguity and questioning.

I found myself facing the challenge of seeking out this sensibility in the words of participants. Providing quotes from participants in the manner of a more traditional argument would help substantiate my interpretation but I wondered if there was a way to present the sensibility of the hôte in a manner that conveyed the commonality of participants, yet revealed their diversity and difference as individuals.

In what follows I provide some explanation concerning how I crafted the found poems in my work, the process that emerged in terms of interpretation and presentation, and the challenges I encountered. In other words, I address the question, “What were the processes and challenges in using found poetry, what was it like and what did it mean for you?” A discussion of the structure of “The Hôte” seems a convenient starting place for beginning such a discussion, so I will begin there.

## Crafting Found Poems: Structure, Process and Challenge

### Structure

The poem “The Hôte” contains four sections fashioned from my conversations with four teachers. An initial reading of this poem may leave one unsure of who is talking for I offer no descriptions or background to the speakers, however a careful reading reveals that two of these individuals are of Aboriginal heritage, while the others are not. I crafted the poem to present four voices that were unique, yet similar in experiencing the uncertainty and unease of the hôte.

The structure of the poem attempts an interplay or movement between question and answer, description and explanation, and consideration and reconsideration. Such structuring was both an intended and unintended out come of working with the words of participants, and emerged both from the way conversations with participants flowed, but also from my efforts to craft the words of participants to reveal poignant and meaningful moments of the hôte.

In each section of the poem and in the poem as a whole, lines on the left and above lead to those on the right and below, from non-italicized text to italicized; a modification offered with the hope of alerting readers to a transition in who is “speaking” and signaling a shift in the thinking and emotion of participants. The participant conversations that gave rise to the poem were in essence critical reflections that

carried with them a sense of unease and uncertainty concerning peoples' understandings of self, role, identity and others—a central feature of the sensibility of the *hôte*. Structuring the found poem in this manner was one way to illustrate important sensibilities of the *hôte*, such as uncertainty and unease.

While this format is obvious to the reader, and provides some coherence and poignancy to the poem, arriving at this form was not so simple, and emerged only as I revisited participants' transcripts, participants' recorded conversations and my interpretive guide; a document I will discuss below. However, another factor influenced how the poetic structure occurred. Even before crafting the "Hôte" and other poems, I had already been busy questioning, substantiating and gauging the helpfulness of Levinas', Derrida's and Todd's work and this interpretive effort involved this structure of question and response. Unsurprising perhaps, this mode of presenting found its way into "The Hôte." This structure of questioning or stating, followed by further elucidation emerged as a consistent feature in all five found poems I crafted in my research (Molnar, 2009).

In "The Hôte" there is also movement or transition that builds from strong instances of the *hôte*, to what I consider an exemplar of the sensibility of the *hôte*; an exemplar that is nuanced and extremely poignant. Here my efforts are direct and calculated as I attempt to expand on participants' sensibility of the *hôte*. This movement begins with Pat, who like other participants to follow in this article, I have given a fictitious name. I relied upon Pat's words to introduce and reveal the unease and uncertainty of the *hôte*. I knew Pat well and Pat's words held deep meaning for me, as an example of the struggle and questioning of the norm of contemporary schooling among my colleagues, especially those of First Nation heritage. In presenting Pat's thoughts such as, "What kind of Indian was I to give up the sacred place for children?" and in "*Being half and half — it's always a tension*" I wished to illustrate that the dilemma of role and identity is not necessarily resolved by self-identifying with an ethno-cultural group and that no matter how strong one's self identification may be, in being responsible, the experience of the *hôte* may exist.

Jordan, a non-Aboriginal teacher, whose encounter with students leave Jordan's spouse asking, "Who are you?" reveals again the tension of the *hôte*. We can again witness moments where the *hôte* "is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (Levinas, 1961, p. 36).

With the third speaker also non-Aboriginal, Kerry, despite feelings of belonging and inclusion with First Nations culture reveals the tension of the hôte. This sensibility is found in the discrepancy between Kerry's intellectual acceptance of difference, contrasted with a sense of emotional belonging. Kerry possesses a sense of shared identity and inclusion even while acknowledging, "I know I truly, don't truly, ever completely belong." However one chooses to employ the notions of belonging and inclusion or of identity or role, for participants such as Kerry, Pat and Jordan the tensions and contrasts of the hôte exist.

I chose the words of Blair last. Among these colleagues there is perhaps no more poignant example of the hôte than Blair's final statement. Blair's words reveal the uncertainty of a person who senses the difference of others, the "they," who must be accommodated with one's conception of self. We see with Blair, if we believe Derrida, the contending of a self with the "He [I] in the depth of You [Tu]" (1999, p. 60). Blair identifies the "they" as self even while seeking to remain part of an "us." This struggle to accommodate is a prominent feature of hospitality demonstrated by experience of the hôte.

While found poems may be presented in variety of ways, and those who employ them will craft them according to their purposes, there was on my part a very specific goal. This goal was to support and illustrate my philosophical arguments by presenting vivid instances of the hôte. Others will do differently for their needs.

In discussing the structuring of the "Hôte" I have already begun to touch on other aspects of the process of crafting found poems. The following discussion offers further insight into how this occurred.

### Process

The crafting of "The Hôte" and other found poems in my research began even before I knew I would employ them. In other words, a priori to my conscious decision to employ found poetry, certain processes crucial to the development of found poems were active. In the necessity of developing the interpretation sections of my work I was already reading transcripts, listening to recorded conversations of participants, and compiling working notes. These activities, while not initially done with the crafting of found poems in mind, formed the foundation of the crafting process and were part of an evolutionary process of meaning-making involving both poems and interpretive guide. I am uncertain just how the crafting of these poems may have differed in development if I had begun my research with the use of them

in mind. I suspect this would have yielded a different outcome in terms of presentation. In any case, these interpretive activities provided me with a nuanced meaning of participants' thought and were crucial in allowing me to identify, select and edit, cogent and poignant passages in crafting the poems.

To aid in making sense of transcripts and audio recordings I developed an interpretive framework or guide. This guide helped, not only with interpreting participants' experience, but also in judging the suitability and quality of particular passages from participants' transcripts. The guide consisted of several pages of key ideas and questions regarding hospitality, the sensibility of the *hôte*, and other features of responsibility. In crafting "The *Hôte*" I used this guide to query the participants' information, in a manner "testing" for the sense of uncertainty and discomfort of the *hôte*. The initial development of this guide was the result of a lengthy process over four years of reading, thinking, discussing with colleagues, and writing about the ideas of philosophers such as Levinas, Derrida and Todd. My use of this guide in tandem with crafting found poems happened in the latter part of this time frame. This guide encapsulated my understanding of responsibility, however, this document remained a work in progress and further alteration and more sophisticated renderings of this document continued to evolve.

Having such a document aided me in maintaining my interpretive focus amid the intriguing and interesting, yet distracting information that often emerges when reading and listening to the stories of others.

As I realized my desire for, and the potential benefit of crafting found poems for my research, a process of creative reciprocity emerged between my development of the guide and the poems. Though not initially conceived as a tool or method for aiding in the crafting of found poems, the interpretive guide acted as touchstone and catalyst in making judgments concerning the selections of text and how the text was presented.

In the process of selecting passages and structuring the found poems, I was continually faced with considering how well I understood the sensibility of the *hôte*. The urge to craft poems in a manner complimentary to my interpretations, was an impetus in developing a more acute sense of the *hôte*—an acuity more keen than perhaps might have arisen from my only forming and presenting a philosophical argument. With the purpose of crafting poems becoming a central feature of the presentation and introduction to my discussions of responsibility, some comments and passages from participants, initially overlooked, now took on significance while others seemed less suited for my purposes.

My description may seem to suggest a simple application of technique, where there is the reading of a guide with the words of participants and the simple selection of pertinent passages. However, the process of composing the poems was far from a systematic, linear and lockstep procedure. While there was a certain level of “technique” (Ellul, 1964) in crafting the found poems, no set of guidelines, processes and the like would free me from a reliance on judgment—a judgment that involved a mix of intuition, reason, an intimate understanding of Levinas’ and Derrida’s work, and my high degree of familiarity with participants and their experience of their school context. In my case, the crafting of found poems seemed less a matter of technique and more a matter of acting on one’s judgment; where there was no right or wrong way to proceed or present, just levels of sufficiency in sharing the intended meaning of a poem and prompting readers’ engagement.

While one can sense in this discussion of structure and process some of the challenges I encountered, there were particular concerns that persistently came to my attention as I crafted poems and considered these poems in relationship to my research. The following section describes some of those I faced, what I thought of them, and my attempts to resolve them.

## Challenges

I faced challenges on essentially two fronts. First, there was what I would term practical and aesthetic challenges and secondly, challenges of an ethical nature. These challenges were not discrete from each other.

In the first instance, there is perhaps no surprise to be found concerning the significant time and energy required for crafting a series of found poems or even one such as “The Hôte.” This involved many hours of reading transcripts, listening repeatedly to recorded conversations, rewriting my guide and assembling possible participants’ quotes, before sorting selections, judging their worthiness and finally putting their words on to paper. In my case, regardless of how it played out, this commitment was unavoidable and especially so in dealing with the words of others, for if one is to be confident in the presentation of others’ words, then the time and energy required to prepare and craft the poem is not only well warranted but also necessary, for both practical and ethical reasons.

There is, however, the chance that at some point this effort becomes a matter of diminishing returns. In crafting found poems, people must guard against over extending their effort, especially given a researcher’s enthusiasm for their subject, for

such over extension may easily occur and potentially hinder their overall effort. This depends of course on whether a person is crafting a single poem or many, in what context and for what purpose. Judging how far or how much one needs to go can be challenging. One remedy for this may be found in how well a researcher knows the participants in his or her research, and knows the context of these participants. In my case, an in-depth understanding of former colleagues and their teaching situation helped in building confidence and in limiting the time and energy required for crafting poems. Despite this, I admit to falling prey to reworking poems frequently, fearing that what existed was still insufficient for illustrating the sensibility being discussed and in portraying the voices and experiences of participants accurately and respectfully.

Another challenge emerged involving the philosophical “language” of Levinas (Davis, 1996; Hutchens, 2004) and even Derrida; their terminology, though instructive, was often difficult to decipher and comprehend. I wondered if my grasp of this “language” and my efforts to transpose the meaning found there, via found poems, actually portrayed the sensibilities to be discussed. To check the validity of what I was crafting and to develop further trust in my crafting abilities, at various times, I provided copies of poems to critical readers, such as teachers and scholarly colleagues and on occasion participants. Their responses aided me in assessing the worthiness and meaningfulness of the poetry.

For a time I struggled with whether using found poems as a feature presentation for evidence of the *hôte* would be sufficiently insightful for the reader. Would the poem alone provide enough information for people to fairly judge the validity of the interpretation offered? How detailed did the passages in the poems need to be in order to aid in the following discussion? If I offered too little would the readers be left confused and frustrated? If I offered too much detail would they become resentful or disinterested? Such questions left me considering how I would develop the relationship between poem and discussion. Initially I had planned on relying only on found poems as evidence, citing parts of them as necessary, but realized that a more powerful and well-informed interpretation, perhaps less obscure to the reader, might be rendered by including in discussions the enclosing or surrounding text from which the poems originated. Therefore, I introduced each discussion section on responsibility with a found poem using the passages of the poems to introduce an idea and then linking to the original quotations so as to expand the discussion.

Other challenges involved addressing whether there was a need to use the “voices” of all participants for each found poem, or whether to employ the voices of



Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in all poems, or only some, in what proportions, or in what order. I wondered, how was I to weave the words of various participants together and what should the length of poem be? Questions such as, "At what point was a poem no longer a poem but only a listing or collection of quotes and if my poems were the latter, what does this imply?" or "Is the trustworthiness of a poem degraded as a participants' words are de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the poem?" The resolution to such questions usually involved thinking carefully upon my original research questions and interrogating myself about the purpose and intent of my research, trusting the expertise I possessed and my intimate understanding of participants and their context. Perhaps paradoxically, the more attentive I became to my research questions when met with the challenge of how to proceed, the more clearly I understood how to deal with questions like those above.

Aside from more practical challenges, ethical challenges also emerged in crafting found poems such as "The Hôte." As a White male researching the experience of others, some of different ethno-cultural backgrounds, I was alert to the concerns researchers such as Smith (1999) discuss regarding the potentially disempowering and colonizing nature of research. I could and needed to ask to what extent, even with the consent of participants who described themselves and identified as First Nations, did I have a right to re-arrange, edit and alter the sequence of the words of participants? An initial response to these concerns involved minimizing such activity. Maintaining a vigilance regarding the purpose of my research was also important, where I operated with the understanding that the use of participants' revelations was not a testing of the veracity, or questioning, of their experience, of the truth or meaningfulness of their thoughts and emotions, but remained a scrutiny of what Levinas and Derrida suggest concerning responsibility. By sharing their words more fully in the discussions that followed each found poem, and allowing their words to show the unique nature of each person, I safeguarded participants from being merely objects.

What also helped in being sensitive and attentive to concerns of misuse and misrepresentation of participants' words was my close association and familiarity with the participants borne in our many years of working together. While imperfect, such sensitivities were further informed through my involvement with First Nations communities and with having family of First Nations heritage. Ultimately, in fashioning found poems I attempted to let my participants' words stand on their own, avoiding any direct identification of persons or labeling of them as Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, female or male, or teacher or administrator. The discovery of these roles and identities I left to the reader. This resonated with a general goal with the use of found poetry and in my research in general, which was to provide insight into the

shared human experience, such as the *hôte*, through the examples of individual's experience and words. While atypical perhaps, in avoiding the description and categorization of persons I hoped readers would focus on sensibilities and meanings resident in the words of people. In a manner similar to Levinas, and Kumashiro (2000), who suggest our identities are multiple and intersected and that no category or grouping is sufficient in defining people or ultimately understanding their experience, I chose to present participants' experience and words in a manner that did not position ethno-cultural realities as the central focus but their experience as human beings. My hope in this regard was to not just stand alongside participants, being with them as they related their experience, positioning their voices to be heard, but to "be-for" them, a state of togetherness that "is entered for the sake of safeguarding and defending the uniqueness of the Other" (Bauman, 1995, pp. 51–52).

## Concluding Thoughts

While this article deals with crafting found poems, the challenge and process of crafting such poetry might in itself be considered an act of hospitality inhabited by all the uncertainty and tension of the *hôte*. Ruitbenberg (2005) suggests that hospitality exists not only "in the common and literal sense of a welcoming of flesh-and-blood guests and strangers, but also, in a more abstract and metaphorical sense, as a welcoming of intangible guests and strangers" (p. 15) who leave our identity "ajar" or in flux. In a way, as readers consider "The *Hôte*" they are engaging in a similar welcoming. Reading "The *Hôte*" is an invitation to consider the difference of others, to challenge what we know and how we think of ourselves. Here, even as the reader may focus on the experiences of identity, role and responsibility, identifying similarities with the experience of others, the poem provides a challenge to what the readers think of themselves, their situations and responsibilities. Despite my familiarity with this poem, this holds true for me as well.

However, if reading a poem is a hospitable act, perhaps the act of crafting a found poem is also a hospitable act, for the writer has invited in the presence and words of others, making a place for them and seeking to accommodate and deal with what they bring. In crafting the "The *Hôte*," and each time I read this poem, the faces of participants, their struggles, insights, challenges and triumphs visit me. Despite their presence as "intangible guests and strangers," they are not passive and quiet. Their presence and thoughts have dislodged and discomforted me and I realize while I have been crafting, believing I am the host and in control, I have been crafted, a

guest in my own home, responding to the direction of guests. I find myself a guest in my own home, the guest-host, a hôte.

My efforts to secure insight and knowledge are productive yet remain uneasy and uncertain for the presence of these others, my participants, and their knowledge, while polite and well mannered, always push against and resist how I would craft and present their reality. The poem “The Hôte” is especially meaningful for me for the presence of others is alive within it; these people are in a struggle to find their way as educators but more importantly as human beings.

In crafting poems I realized my responsibility to these people has not ended, for their difference remains within me, affects me, and I am bound to them more tightly. While the crafting of poems allowed me to come to know participants more intimately, paradoxically, I also came to understand I will never know them, for even as I get comfortable in what I think I know about them, or what their experiences seem to reveal, dissonance and surprises emerge. I find the difference of others discomforts me and is beyond me. I find some comfort here, however, for acknowledging this paradox and accepting the uncertain and ambiguous nature of this situation leaves me, if we believe Levinas and Derrida, ethical. I understand that my responsibility to others such as my research participants lies not in unreflectively following research methods, but in attending to, accommodating and living with the uncertainty and confusion their arrival brings. In crafting poems such as “The Hôte,” the difference of others teaches me that my responsibility as a researcher exists in opening “the way to the humanity of the human” (Derrida, 1999, p. 72), avoiding “the neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or object...reduction to the same” (Levinas, 1961, p. 43).

## Leaving the Discussion

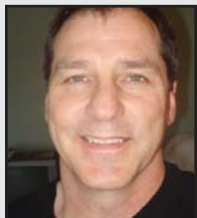
I have attempted to offer some insight into hospitality and the sensibility of the hôte as a way of conceiving of responsibility, and there is much to explore concerning this alternate understanding in educational contexts—explorations that can be accomplished by examining the work of philosophers such as Levinas and Derrida most likely aided by others such as Bauman (1993, 1995), and Todd (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2007, 2008).

In my use of found poetry, I believe that the creativity, artfulness and judgment involved in crafting poems made my work richer and more meaningful. The process of crafting poems and knowing they would foreground my discussions, motivated me and enlivened and informed other necessary tasks involved in interpretation. For me there was great value, utility and reward in found poetry and so, if my brief work here has prompted even a small spark of interest or a desire to learn more concerning found poetry or how an exploration of responsibility might emerge with their use, then I will count my efforts successful.

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**Tim Molnar** is currently an assistant professor in the department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Saskatchewan. Prior to this he taught for over twenty years in a variety of contexts in public school systems from kindergarten to grade twelve. His teaching and research work involve the areas of science, teacher and technology education, curriculum theorizing and ethics.





# Poetic Bodies: Female Body Image, Sexual Identity and Arts-Based Research

Patricia Leavy, Stonehill College

## ABSTRACT

This article reviews the use of a poetic form of analysis and representation of interview data collected on the topic of women's body image and sexual identity. The researcher developed a *tri-voiced poetic method* that merges participant, researcher and literature voices. In this article the author advocates tri-voiced poems as a way of sharing researcher viewpoints, opening up dialogue, challenging stereotypes, and reaching and educating broad audiences.

a prism of reflections  
a mirrored world  
fractured femininities  
refracted back

that is what I see  
when I look at the girls  
surveying themselves  
surveying me

(excerpted from "Girl Screens" by Patricia Leavy, 2009b)



his paper<sup>1</sup> emerges as the third and final phase in a larger project, exploring lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual college-age women's body image development within the context of their sexual identities.

The initial interview project was represented in a traditional research article format (see Leavy & Hastings, 2010). However, after completing the traditional write-up I felt the project was unfinished. I felt that while the traditional write-up may be useful for other scholars studying this topic, it had little potential to reach broader audiences, in every sense of the word “reach.” For example, it was highly unlikely that college-age women would read the academic journal or that the writing would resonate with them. Therefore, there was little hope of using the research as a catalyst for education or dialogue. Further, I felt that I had not yet clearly communicated what I had learned based on this research as well as prior research in this area. I had learned a lot and developed a perspective that I wanted to share. Having written extensively about the importance of methodological innovation and emergent methods (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; 2008) and arts-based research practice (see Leavy, 2009), I decided to cycle back through the interview transcripts and literature review. After a second self-immersion in the data I decided to turn to a poetry-based method of analysis, interpretation and representation. This too ended up taking two phases in order to figure out a way to accomplish my goals. I begin with a brief review of the original project and then I move into a discussion of poetic inquiry.

## The Project

For the original study my research assistants and I conducted in-depth interviews (Berg, 2001; Weiss, 1994) with 28 college-age women in the northeast part of the United States in order to learn about their body image within the context of their sexual identities. We employed convenience sampling, soliciting local college students on their campuses and seeking participants via personal networks. Our sample consisted of 18 participants that identified as heterosexual and 10 participants that identified as lesbian or bisexual. An open-ended, unstructured interview approach was employed. After transcribing the in-depth interviews, two researchers coded the interview data for intercoder reliability. The result was a lengthy list of metacodes (large code categories) including such codes as: Attractiveness, Body Image, Family, Dating, and so forth. Under each metacode category there was a larger list of smaller, more specific code categories (also referred to as focused codes) such as: Attractiveness Ideals Others, Attractiveness Ideals Self, Body Satisfaction, Body Dissatisfaction, First Date, Date Preparation, etcetera. We then interpreted the data inductively from a feminist perspective. Our major findings suggested that women’s internationalization or rejection of dominant femininity, the availability of viable (validated) alternative femininities, and one’s place in subculture groups (as a mediator



of dominant values) all converge to contribute to overall body image satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Moreover, through their largely unmitigated internalization of hegemonic femininity, the heterosexual participants experienced significantly more dissatisfaction than the lesbian and bisexual participants.<sup>2</sup>

After publishing the traditional research article I felt strongly that the “messages” and “feelings” of the women’s stories had not been fully expressed in the traditional academic form. The “me too” moments women at times experience, did not come through in the academic prose. I also felt personally unfulfilled by the resulting academic writing. I doubted that the article would benefit other women. It was at this point that I decided to revisit the data and apply an arts-based approach to interpretation and representation.

## A Brief Review of Arts-Based Research Practice

Arts-based research practices emerged from the 1970s to 1990s and now constitute a methodological genre within the expanded qualitative paradigm. Arts-based research developed out of a confluence of factors including: the social justice movements, the rise in autobiographical data, the rise in narrative inquiry, critical theoretical perspectives, and advances in embodiment theory (Leavy, 2009). Arts-based research has developed in an interdisciplinary methods context involving the crossing of disciplinary borders as well as cross-disciplinary collaborations. I define arts-based research practices as:

a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. Arts-based methods draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film, and other mediums... Although a set of methodological tools, this genre of methods also comprises new theoretical and epistemological groundings that are expanding the qualitative paradigm. (Leavy, 2009, pp. 2–3)

For social researchers the appeal of the arts is in their ability to transform consciousness, refine the senses, promote autonomy, raise awareness, and express

the complex feeling-based aspects of social life (Eisner, 2002, pp. 10–19). Arts-based research also draws on the oppositional, subversive, transformational, and otherwise resistive capabilities of the arts. It is not surprising that some critical scholars, feminists included, have an affinity for arts-based practices.

Free from academic jargon and other prohibitive barriers, the arts have the potential to be both emotionally and politically evocative for diverse audiences. The arts, at their best, can move people to see things in new ways or promote self-reflection. Moreover, the arts can promote dialogue which cultivates understanding or critical consciousness, can problematize dominant ideologies, and can unsettle stereotypes. In all of these respects, the arts can be used to educate.

## Poetic Analysis and Representation

After considering various possibilities, I decided to use a poetic form of analysis and representation. I primarily turned to poems for their ability to emphasize, punctuate, merge multiple voices, and dislodge stereotypes. Poems open a space to represent data in ways that, for some researchers, are attentive to multiple meanings, identity work, and accessing subjugated perspectives. Differing from other forms of expression, in poems, the word, sound, and weighted space merge and it is this convergence that is critical to the construction and articulation of social meaning. In contrast to scientific assumptions that science clarifies while art obscures, Pelias (2004) suggests just the opposite: “Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree” (p. 9).

In this regard poems can cut through the clutter and jargon that weigh down academic writing. This dimension of poetry particularly appealed to me in this project because of my commitment to reaching broad audiences in an effort to open up a dialogue and develop critical consciousness as well as highlighting diverse women’s “realities” in accessible ways. I was after a way to distill down the data and reach audiences of women for conversation and education. Kristeva (1984) posits that poetry can create a “traversal” by penetrating the symbolic order, creating a revolution in the linguistic and social spheres (p. 83). In this way poetry can be used for recognizing and rejecting patriarchal constructions; this was also a goal underpinning this project.

There is a rich history of using poetic forms of analysis and representation for the reasons I have noted. While I will not attempt to replicate that history here, I offer a brief review. The idea of narrative poetry, or something similar to it, has also been labeled “research poetry” and “interpretive poetry” (Langer & Furman, 2004), “investigative poetry” (Hartnett, 2003), and “ethnographic poetics” (Brady, 2004; Denzin, 1997). The term “poetic social science” used by Ellis and Bochner (2000) also speaks to these practices. Ethnographic poetics relies on taking ethnographic data (field notes, memo notes, and so forth), meditating on the data (as field researchers typically do), and presenting the results in the form of poems (Denzin, 1997). Similarly, Langer and Furman (2004) discuss interpretive poetry as a method of merging the participant’s words with the researcher’s perspective. This method of poetic representation therefore offers researchers a new way to account for merging the “voice” of their participants with their own insights, perhaps informed by a literature review and/or theoretical perspective. Alternatively, Langer and Furman (2004) present research poetry as a practice of creating poems from the research participant’s words and speech style in order to produce a distilled narrative. Investigative poetry, as described by Hartnett (2003), combines critical ethnography, autobiography and political underpinnings in service of social justice oriented goals.

Sandra Faulkner (2005) suggests that a researcher considers using poetry when prose is insufficient in communicating what he or she wants to convey. This is exactly why I ended up turning to a poetic form of representation in this project. Further, Faulkner proposes using poetry as a means of provoking “emotional responses in readers and listeners in an effort to produce some shared experience” (p. 9). This too was a goal of mine insofar as I wanted to use the poetic works as a point of departure for a conversation with other women about the issues that emerged in the interviews (such as the pressures some women feel to conform to dominant and subculture norms of femininity). According to Miles Richardson (1998) poetry is also useful when we want to reveal a moment of truth. This form captures “moments” because “the intensity and compression of poetry emphasizes the vividness” of a moment (Ely et al., 1999, p. 135). Similarly, Laurel Richardson (1998) explains a part of humanity that may elude the social scientist, which reveals itself in poetry, allowing the audience to connect with something deep within them. The human connection, resonance and emotionality fostered by poetry results from the unique form poems occupy as compared with other styles of writing. Poems present a porthole onto an experience, one that may be shared by the reader or one that is new (Leavy, 2009). Again, these sentiments all underscored my turn to poetic representation.

## Body Image and Sexuality: A Poetic Analysis

Overall, the heterosexual research participants were significantly dissatisfied with numerous aspects of their bodies while the lesbian and bisexual participants were largely satisfied with their bodies. The heterosexual participants were particularly focused on “getting thin” and “getting a boy.” The lesbian and bisexual participants noted important experiences linked to being both within and outside of dominant culture. In this vein many participants discussed traveling from subculture groups to dominant groups. I wanted to represent these issues poetically.

At first, I decided to employ a method of poetic transcription. “Poetic transcription” is an approach to analysis and writing that is derivative from a grounded theory perspective, where code categories develop inductively out of the data. The selected words and phrases become the basis of the poem. In addition to using participants’ language, this approach is also meant to preserve narrators’ speech patterns (Faulkner, 2005; Glesne, 1997). This technique relies on extensive thematic coding, constituting a process of reduction where single words may come to represent segments of an interview transcript. According to Madison (2005) this approach developed out of feminist and multi-culturalist concerns with respect to allowing the narrator’s “voice” to emerge, concerns that are central to the larger project of feminism. Researchers committed to accessing subjugated voices might be especially inclined towards this interpretation style. Furthermore, as many critical scholars believe, the participant’s narrative occurs at the point of articulation and therefore capturing the speech style of the narrator not only preserves his or her “voice” but also assists in communicating the performative aspects of the interview (Calafell, 2004; Faulkner, 2005). I employed this approach by selecting several “focused codes” from which I created poems using participants’ words only (see Leavy, 2009, pp. 75-81 for an example of this process and resulting poem). While the benefits of this approach included focusing on participant perspectives and distilling the data down to main points which could be easily communicated to broad audiences, there were many limitations as well. For example, by relying only on verbatim transcript the creative and aesthetic possibilities were greatly limited. Also, my goal of teaching what I had personally learned from the research experience was still unfulfilled. It was at that point that I returned to the data for a third and final time.

## Tri-Voiced Poems

During my final immersion in the data I created poems that merge the transcript data, my own voice, and the literature review (which is informed by a feminist social constructionist perspective). This method is closely tied to “interpretive poetry” in Langer and Furman’s terms; however, I term this method *tri-voiced poems* to denote the explicit merging of participant, researcher, and literature voices (Leavy, 2009b). This kind of poetic interpretation and representation merges my understanding of the data as a whole with voices from the literature review and thus fulfilled my desire to share my perspective and “teach what I had learned.” This method of “tri-voiced poems” links the participants’ words, the literature and my perspective. Prendergast (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of poetic forms of inquiry and determined that three voices emerge in the different forms: the researcher, participants’ and literature. Therefore, it seems natural to create an approach that is attentive to all three voices. In this regard Faulkner (2009) suggests that researchers can create their own poetic forms as they explore research-driven poetry. Two sample tri-voiced poems follow, the first derived from the interviews with the heterosexual participants and the second based on data from the lesbian and bisexual participants (for the complete set of poetic works, see Leavy, 2009b).

### Girl-Box

I never felt pretty  
looking in the mirror  
all I could see  
is what I longed to be

girls are supposed to be pretty  
beauty bouncing off screens  
and onto all their eyes  
a laser onto me

the boys should look at me  
so I focus on what I wear  
but they don’t see me  
and I feel the girls stare

we are in competition  
to be the thinnest  
the best package  
so I put my game-face on

I paint my face  
with protection  
and try to blend  
into their projection

### Bi-Locate

In her eyes  
I finally saw  
someone seeing me  
and I tried to see myself

Where do I begin?  
Where do they end?  
I never quite fit  
the girl-box

so I discovered  
how to walk in it  
carve my way through it  
and build a third space

with Pride  
I learned to bi-locate  
in their world  
and hers

## Conclusions

This article has developed out of a project that investigates female body image within the context of sexual identity. The original interview data suggested that three factors converge to contribute to overall body satisfaction and dissatisfaction: 1) the internalization/rejection of dominant femininity, 2) the availability of validated alternate femininities (that do not preclude dating/partnering), and 3) one's place within a subculture as a mediator of dominant beauty norms and values.

Overwhelmingly, the heterosexual participants accepted the dominant construction of femininity and its prescribed beauty ideal as the only legitimized enactment of femininity. Accordingly, the participants idealized thinness, feared musculature, but desired large breasts (all congruent with patriarchal constructions of femininity). Most notably the participants viewed adherence to dominant femininity as necessary for procuring dating opportunities and correspondingly viewed "getting boys" (a phrase uttered in many interviews) as a necessary precondition for happiness or ultimate happiness itself.

The lesbian and bisexual participants differed greatly from the heterosexual women, noting high levels of body acceptance. Overall, several interrelated points emerge from their interviews. First, these women live both inside and outside of the dominant culture. As such, they understand the dominant construction of femininity; however, their internalization of it is mediated by both their feelings of exclusion from it and by the availability of viable alternate "lesbian" femininities, that do not preclude (and may foster) dating opportunities. Second, due to their immersion in both dominant culture and a subculture, these participants developed a "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903) in which they negotiated the appearance values of two cultural groups, with competing and contradictory body norms. Third, inclusion in specific subculture groups at the community level, such as PRIDE, served as a mediator of dominant femininity and provided a supportive environment in which women came to develop self-acceptance.

The question undertaken in this article is how to best represent this data. What I have learned is that the best form for data representation is intimately linked to one's goals. In this project I had multiple goals that developed over time and thus I needed multiple forms of representation. With respect to my goals of sharing the research findings with diverse women (including college-age women), using the data as a vehicle for conversation with women and ideally education, and sharing what I

learned from the research project, I found the tri-voiced method of poetic representation very useful.

I have presented several of the tri-voiced poems that emerged from this project at an international women's studies conference. The poems opened up the most robust conversation I have ever been a part of at a conference. In fact, the post-presentation discussion period was dominated by discussions surrounding these poetic works. International researchers and students from vastly different settings were able to relate to the poems. Session participants spoke about how much they could relate to the poems, how the poems reminded them of issues they discuss in their classes, and in one instance how they could use a similar poetic form in their research in order to reach public audiences. Additionally, I have used the poetic works in sociology courses I have taught as a means of beginning conversations about body image and media. Students have responded very strongly to the poems and they have stimulated great intellectual exchange in the classroom. In these ways, the poems facilitated my goals of opening up conversation, promoting critical thinking and educating. Given the subject of the study, I also think the artistic form helped mediate possible stereotyped thinking, if not directly challenging that kind of thinking. In this regard the poetic works can help build empathy and create understanding across differences—a theme which emerged in my classroom conversations about the poems. Of course there are limitations to this approach as well.

First, readers have no way of knowing how much of the emphasis in the tri-voiced poems is grounded in the researcher's perspective, the literature or the interview data. The process of their creation is invisible. In this instance, my voice dominates the poetic works. I emphasized my perspective (because participant and literature perspectives had been emphasized in earlier works). However, my perspective was intimately shaped by the interview data and my immersion in the related literature and I feel the resulting poetic works are "true" to the participants' stories. With this said, the process remains invisible to readers or audience members. Researchers working with this poetic form may consider giving drafts of their poems to their research participants for feedback. This may add a dimension of authenticity to the resulting work.

Second, I am not a skilled poet, nor are many researchers or students who may wish to engage with poetic analysis and representation. While some researchers suggest that poems used in social research must meet aesthetic and artistic criteria developed in the arts (for example, see Faulkner, 2009), I disagree. While ideally research-driven poetic works are attentive to the craft of poetry, they need not be



“great” poems per se in order to be useful. Again, the question is: “What is your goal?” In this project my goal was to share what I had learned, reach diverse audiences of women and promote dialogue, understanding and education. The poems facilitated these objectives. While the poetic works are not great works of art, they are effective tools. I suggest when evaluating research poetry that researchers shy away from questions like: “Is it a good poem?” and rather ask: “What is this poem good for?”

## Notes

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2. The full research report (Leavy & Hastings, 2010) can be retrieved at <http://www.ejhs.org/volume13/bodyimage.htm>.

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**Patricia Leavy** is Associate Professor of Sociology and Founding Director of Gender Studies (2004-2008) at Stonehill College in Easton, MA. She is the author of *Iconic Events: Media, Politics and Power in Retelling History* (Lexington, 2007), *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (Guilford, 2009) as well as co-author of *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (Sage, 2007) and *The Practice of Qualitative Research, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Sage, 2011). She is co-editor of several books, including *Handbook of Emergent Methods* (Guilford, 2008). She is the editor for the Oxford University Press book series *Understanding Qualitative Research*.

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## Through the Words of a Poet: Experiencing a Writing Journey

John J. Guiney Yallop, Acadia University

### ABSTRACT

My PhD dissertation (Guiney Yallop, 2008) is an arts-based, autoethnographic, queer study. I wrote poetry to generate the data for my research. The first section of my dissertation consists of 46 poems, the first 23 of which are *my Catholic terrain* and the other 23 are *my Education terrain*. The poems are followed by an exegesis divided into 12 pauses. This article comes from the fifth pause where I explained the process I engaged in while writing the poetry and when I was putting the poems together in my dissertation. While each writer has her or his own processes when writing, I believe that making our processes explicit allows us and our readers to more fully appreciate how we construct our writing. As well as reflecting on the process, the reader may consider the content and the form of the writing; what are the poems saying and how are they saying it?

### First Confession—Conversing With My PhD Dissertation Supervisor

The chickens didn't seem to fit because I was looking in at them...I needed to be inside/contained. The peeping tom seemed to fit with the screen on my bedroom window and how I was exposed in the church. I'll wait to hear from you. I may have to put the chickens back in. I guess I could do the bedroom and the chickens.

I'm having a little chuckle here. The content of our conversation is a poem in itself.

Re: 'On Being A Teacher': I am trying to look back at my M. Ed. research (Guiney, 2002) and tease out some poetry to describe/show my journey to, in, and through a teaching career. I want to keep it to four poems maximum (maybe just three...one for *to*, one for *in*, one for *through*). Of course, these poems will help as I begin the more focussed writing once the proposal is accepted. The more I read (and write) the more comfortable I am becoming with the artistic aspect of my work (not that it's necessarily separate from the scholarly). What I mean is that I am becoming more comfortable with not reporting or even narrating about my life as Catholic and as Educator, but rather using those experiences to create a piece of work, a piece of scholarly work, that is evocative...educative...useful.

(E-mail communication to Cornelia Hoogland, May 18, 2006)



In the above e-mail, to my PhD Dissertation Supervisor, Cornelia Hoogland, I described some of my struggles and some of my decisions, and some of my reflections on those struggles and decisions, as I edited two specific poems I was working on at the time. The first poem is one that I was writing and editing for a presentation (Guiney Yallop, 2006a) I was giving at the *Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies Celebration of Creative Works*, a forum that has become a popular annual event held during the *Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference*. The second poem was one of three I wrote for another performance at the conference itself (Guiney Yallop, 2006b). I share below some of the process I engaged in while writing those two poems.

I should mention here that some of my poems are composed using a computer from the beginning of the writing process to the end, while some are initially composed using handwriting. Such is the case with these two poems. "First Confession" was composed using a computer as my writing instrument, while "What Hate Is" (originally called "On Being A Teacher") was first composed and edited in handwriting. I do not have any particular preference for one of those practices or the other, but I do find myself more frequently writing poetry using handwriting, perhaps because I more often than not find myself in situations where I need to write but I don't have a computer available, it seems easier to carry a journal in my bag than a computer, but that may change.

## First Confession—Development Of Early Drafts

The original version of “First Confession” was sent to Cornelia for feedback on March 31, 2006. It was as follows:

### First Confession

I wanted my first confession to be perfect;  
I had practised my sins,  
and the telling of them.

The t-shaped partition  
brought to the front of the church  
pretended to hide me and the priest  
from the community.

I spoke quietly through the screen that framed the priest’s profile.  
I spoke too quietly for the priest.  
“Get over here,” he shouted.  
“I can’t hear a word you’re saying.”

Kneeling now  
on the cold hardwood floor  
with my tiny joined hands in the priest’s lap,  
looking up at his massive body  
covered in a black cassock  
and draped with a stole,  
symbol of power,  
I called out my sins,  
the ones I could remember  
and maybe more.

Absolved,  
I returned to my place in the community  
and recited in silence  
my penance;  
three Hail Mary’s and one Our Father.

Cornelia sent back the following reply on April 27, 2006. I want to note that this length of time between e-mails was not usual and that Cornelia was, at that time, also replying to drafts of my PhD dissertation proposal. Cornelia's comments were included in the document using a tracking feature. For ease of reading, I have typed the relevant comments below.

- To the lines "Get over here," he shouted, / "I can't hear a word you're saying." Cornelia wrote, "Did he really shout? Go back to the experience and be as exact as you can. Where is "over here"? bit confusing.
- In response to the line "I called out my sins," Cornelia wrote, "This is one of those energy lines I was talking about. Try this line first and see what happens. Be that young boy calling out his sins. Try it in your study. Get into the feeling of it. See where it takes you."
- Following the final verse, Cornelia wrote, "What in this shows your perfection? Show your desire to be perfect, don't tell."

Although I replied with another version the following day, I did think deeply about what Cornelia had written. Depth is not necessarily measured in time, although time also allows distance, as I discovered with the more time that elapsed between when I originally wrote the poems and when I wrote about the process of writing them. I laughed when I read Cornelia's suggestion to be "that boy calling out his sins" and to try calling them out in my study. I did. I was alone. I checked to make sure that the windows were closed; I didn't want the neighbours to hear me calling out my sins. I walked up and down the hall outside my study calling out those sins. I was reminded of practising my sins for confession as a child and as an adolescent—not so dramatically, but still convincingly. Confession is a performance.

The *show, don't tell* message came up often in my conversations and e-mail communications with Cornelia. I thought I was showing. I wasn't telling how frightened I was—how humiliated. What is a shout to a child? I knew that I had the pieces of the picture, the various parts of the story, but now I needed to place them together. How could I take my readers and listeners into the moment? In the second version, which I sent back to Cornelia on April 26, 2006, I took Cornelia's advice and began my poem with what she calls "one of those energy lines." I also listed the sins I was calling out in the hall outside my study.



## First Confession

I called out my sins  
with my knees pressed  
into the cold hardwood floor  
and my tiny hands joined  
over the priest's lap  
as I looked up at his massive body.

"I told a lie one or two times, Father.  
I said bad words four or five times, Father.  
I disobeyed my parents two or three times, Father."

I had wanted my first confession to be perfect.

My sins were supposed to slide through  
from my mouth  
to the priest's profile  
framed in the screen that reminded me  
of the one dad had put over the window to our henhouse.

Behind the t-shaped partition  
which stood at the front of the church  
I whispered my sins  
like I would whisper to the chickens through the window.

"Get over here," he barked.  
"I can't hear a word you're saying."

And like the frightened chickens  
when the dog put his paws up to the window  
I recited my penance:

"Hail Mary  
and  
Our Father.  
Three times.  
Amen."

Before Cornelia replied, I sent another version on May 18, 2006. It was at this point that I had decided that this poem would be the one I would be presenting at the *Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies Celebration of Creative Works*. The changes were significant. Below, I show the changes, in brackets, I made to the poem.

## First Confession

I called out my sins  
with my knees pressed  
into the cold hardwood floor  
and my tiny hands joined  
over the priest's lap  
as I looked up at his massive body. (No changes to the first six lines.)

"I told a lie two or three times, Father. (Quantity changes to sins.)  
I said bad words four or five times, Father.  
I disobeyed my parents once or twice times, Father." (Quantity changes to sins.)

I had wanted my first confession to be perfect. (Line moved to speed pace / show anxiety.)

My sins were supposed to slide through  
from my mouth  
to the priest's profile  
framed in the screen  
like the one over  
my bedroom window. (From the verse above, I removed "that reminded me / of the one dad had put over the window to our henhouse.")

A moment earlier (This is a new line.)  
behind the t-shaped partition  
which stood at the front of the church  
I had whispered my sins  
like I would whisper my prayers at night. ("my prayers at night" rather than "to the chickens through the window" seemed like a better contrast to confession, and a better link with it, since the priest in confession represents God.)

"Get over here," he shouted. (Back to "shouted" instead of "barked.")  
"I can't hear a word you're saying."

With my head bent  
and my eyes tracing a path along the church floor  
I walked back to my pew,  
back to my community  
that had listened  
like a reluctant peeping tom,  
and I took my place  
to do a perfect penance. (This verse replaced “and like the frightened chickens / when the  
dog put his paws up to the window / I recited my penance:”)

Hail Mary  
and  
Our Father  
Three times.  
Amen. (Again, as above, I pushed the last lines together to quicken the pace and show anxiety.)

What is absent, I hope, from this poem, what I did not want to put in there, is my anger. My anger is present in me as an adult. It is not the child’s experience. The child is afraid and humiliated. I want the reader to feel that fear and that humiliation, just as I felt it as I wrote the poem, and just as I feel it whenever I read the poem. But it is difficult to put my anger aside, to not allow that adult experience of that emotion to influence me as I write. “Be that boy,” Joan Barfoot, Writer in Residence at The University of Western Ontario, 2006-2007, told me later (in conversation) while discussing other poems that I would include in my dissertation. Joan’s advice echoed what Cornelia noted in her written responses to my first draft of the poem. “Be that boy” was something I tried to remember as I edited all of my poems written from or about the experiences of my childhood.

In her next reply, Cornelia asked, “What happened to the chickens—I really liked them” (E-mail communication from Cornelia Hoogland, May 18, 2006). That was followed by my reply—the passages from the e-mail at the beginning of this article. Two days later, in a very detailed reply, Cornelia highlighted the importance of this struggle I was having in writing my poems.

JOHN THIS IS MATERIAL THAT YOU NEED TO COLLECT, IE THE STRUGGLE TO WRITE YOUR POEMS IS AS VALUABLE AS THE POEMS IN TERMS OF THE DISSERTATION. Using those experiences to create a piece of work — IS YOUR CONCERN. FINDING THE DIFFERENT WAYS TO DO THAT, THE DIFFERENT

VOICES, TONES, RELATIONSHIPS.

(E-mail communication from Cornelia Hoogland, May 20, 2006, emphasis in the original)

The next—the fourth—version of the poem I sent to Cornelia on May 25, 2006. This is also the version that I performed on May 28 (Guiney Yallop, 2006a). In this version I changed the title to “Confession.” This, I stated, was “an effort to transplant experience” (E-mail communication to Cornelia Hoogland, May 25, 2006). By that I meant that I was moving the poem to a more general experience, an experience that I would have had many times with many priests, to protect the anonymity of the priest to whom I had made my first confession. I also thought that the new title would make the poem more evocative because it could be any confession, as opposed to just a first confession. I subsequently changed my mind again and, in the next version, changed the title back to “First Confession.” I realized that I was not really sure when this event took place. It could have been my first confession or it could have been another confession. The priest to whom I had made my first confession was long since deceased, and there were numerous priests to whom I had made other confessions. Also, it did not matter when I actually had this experience; it was the content of the poem that mattered. Finally, I believe that the evocative power of an experience is not in how general it tries to be, but in how real it feels.

### Confession

I called out my sins  
with my knees pressed  
into the cold hardwood floor  
and my tiny hands joined  
over the priest’s lap  
as I looked up at his massive body.

“I told a lie two or three times, Father.  
I said bad words three or four times, Father.  
I disobeyed my parents once or twice, Father.”

I had wanted to make a perfect confession.  
My sins were supposed to slide through  
from my mouth

to the priest's one-eyed profile  
framed in a screen  
like the one Dad had put over the window  
to our henhouse;  
the priest sat inside  
enthroned  
like some giant bird  
staring,  
an oversized crow.  
(One for sorrow.)

But I had whispered my sins  
like I would whisper my prayers at night.  
"Get over here," he shouted.  
"I can't hear a word you're saying."  
I entered the henhouse,  
now the crow's sanctuary,  
and then to the dispersed flock  
that had gathered round outside  
like reluctant peeping toms,  
I turned and took my place  
to attempt a perfect penance.

"Hail Mary  
and  
Our Father.  
Three times.  
Amen."

The henhouse was back, but without the chickens specifically mentioned.

## First Confession—Thoughts From Don McKay

On October 13, 2006, with the title changed back to "First Confession," I sent a copy of this poem, and nine others, to Don McKay, Writer in Residence at Memorial University of Newfoundland during the Fall Term of 2006. The generosity of Don's handwritten comments on this one poem alone was enormous. Equally detailed

responses were handwritten on the other nine poems. As well, Don included a personal letter with some general comments about the poems. I was honoured that Don McKay was even looking at some of my poems. That he would give them such attention was overwhelming. I remain truly grateful to this man who Cornelia described as “one of the best poets in Canada” (E-mail communication from Cornelia Hoogland, October 13, 2006).

Don, like Cornelia, brought up the “show don’t tell’ principle” particularly with regards to the first verse. He also suggested a sharpening of the image, from the child’s point of view, of “the massive body.” Don felt that I “should emphasize the difference between the standard scene in the confession box and what happened.” Don suspected that my “narrative structure (flashing back)...[was] getting in the way of the powerful story and the child’s p.o.v.—which would likely produce a story.” Don suggested “starting with the henhouse comparison, then the confessional with the crow replacing the hens, then the scene kneeling before the priest.”

After a careful reading of Don’s comments, I further revised the poem on November 27, 2006.

### First Confession

The shutter opened  
to the priest’s one-eyed profile  
framed in a screen  
like the one Dad had put over the window  
to our henhouse;  
the priest sat inside  
enthroned  
like some giant bird  
staring,  
an oversized crow.  
(One for sorrow.)

In a good confession  
sins would slide through  
from my mouth  
to the priest’s alerted ears,  
but I had whispered my sins  
like I would whisper my prayers at night.

"Get over here," he shouted.  
"I can't hear a word you're saying."

My knees pressed  
into the cold hardwood floor  
and my tiny hands joined  
over the priest's knees  
as I looked up over his belly.

"I told a lie two or three times, Father.  
I said bad words three or four times, Father.  
I disobeyed my parents once or twice, Father."

## First Confession—Finding The Final Version

This would remain the version of the poem I would use for my dissertation, except for a few other changes. In an e-mail on December 13, 2006 Cornelia asked that I search for another way of saying "had put" in line four of the poem. She also suggested that I make the last two lines of stanza two present past instead of conditional. In another e-mail communication on January 22, 2007, in regards to the last line, in brackets, at the end of stanza one, Cornelia writes, "This tempers the image considerably, tender(izes) it. Perhaps omit." I agreed. The most recent version of the poem appears below and on page 16 of my dissertation. After reading the most recent version of the poem, Connie Russell, one of the members of my PhD Dissertation Committee commented, "Hmm, the bird imagery evokes for me connections to human relationships to animals, sometimes oppressive (in eg of hens)" (E-mail communication from Connie Russell, February 26, 2007). This was a reminder for me of how my poetry might connect with people in their experience and their values; Connie's research involves how we humans relate to the other creatures with whom we share this planet.

### First Confession

The shutter opened  
to the priest's one-eyed profile  
framed in a screen

like the one Dad fitted over the window  
to our henhouse;  
the priest sat inside  
enthroned  
like some giant bird  
staring —  
an oversized crow.

In a good confession  
sins would slide through  
from my mouth  
to the priest's alerted ears,  
but I whispered my sins  
like I whispered my prayers at night.

"Get over here," he shouted.  
"I can't hear a word you're saying."

My knees pressed  
into the cold hardwood floor  
and my tiny hands joined  
over the priest's knees  
as I looked up over his belly.

"I told a lie two or three times, Father.  
I said bad words three or four times, Father.  
I disobeyed my parents once or twice, Father."

## What Hate Is—Developing Early Drafts

The development of the poem "What Hate Is" was similar to that of "First Confession." This poem, however, started off on May 17, 2006 in handwriting (or printing) in one of my journals. On May 17, 2006, I sent the following version, with the title change, to Cornelia:



## On Being A Teacher

Hate was biting at my heels  
from the first day  
I started teaching,  
and I ignored it.

Hate nudged its unwelcome elbow  
into my back.  
Hate left spit on my desk  
and graffiti on the walls of our classrooms.

Hate sent notes  
and made telephone calls  
to administrators  
to express concern,  
and some administrators had concerns, too;  
Hate didn't have a problem  
with me being gay,  
but it wasn't appropriate  
to tell the students.

Being gay has nothing to do with teaching,  
after all;  
nothing at all.

Hate was biting at my heels  
from the first day  
I started teaching,  
and I ignored it.

I ignored it  
until one day when Hate  
put its long fingers around my neck  
and I couldn't speak,  
words jamming in my throat  
like an apocalyptic rush hour.

I ignored it  
until it was almost too late.

Now,  
when I put my hands to my neck,  
I can feel the scars  
left by Hate's long fingers;  
shirt collars wrap around pain,  
and my throat remains raw  
where words travel  
always aware of risks,  
and the bite marks  
on my heels  
cause my feet to fit uncomfortably  
inside any shoes.

Hate contours the body.

Having told me that I can switch points of view in "First Confession," Cornelia writes,

I think this is also true when it comes to difficult subject matter such as 'On Being A Teacher.' How is the narrator positioned in that poem? Who is hate? What are the characteristics that hate takes on in your poem? Are they consistent? are they various? (ie if you suggest a vicious dog "biting at my heels" do you develop that metaphor? How? Do you drop it?)

On a more general level (which is more to the point of a doctoral dissertation which requires this kind of discussion) poets need to ask questions such as: who are the characters in this poem? Who is privileged? Where does that privilege appear in the poem? Who is introduced but then dropped? Who enters late in the poem? Who is given lines of dialogue?

(You can see these are the very questions that gender studies and gay studies might be concerned with. The poets are not looking at this from the point of view of *group behaviour* however but importantly from the pt of view of *language*. How lines in a poem also engage struggle, inclusiveness, anger, distance, control, etc.).

(E-mail communication from Cornelia Hoogland, May 20, 2006, emphasis in the original)

## What Hate Is—Thoughts From Two Other Writers In Residence

Cornelia's comments helped me shorten the poem, to get rid of what was unnecessary. Although Joan Barfoot did not read this particular poem, *this getting rid of excess* was something, when I met with her about the selection of poems that she had read and commented on in her role as Writer In Residence at The University of Western Ontario, that she also reminded me to always do with my poems. Joan told me that she liked my poems because they were clear, that I was to-the-point, that I didn't use flowery language. She added that "complex language doesn't necessarily come from complex thought" (in conversation, November 23, 2006). Although when I first met her, Joan referred to herself as "not a poet," her words regarding complex language were similar to those of poet Louise Glück:

The poet is supposed to be the person who can't get enough words like 'incarnadine.' This was not my experience....What fascinated me were the possibilities of context. What I responded to, on the page, was the way a poem could liberate, by means of a word's setting, through subtleties of timing, of pacing, that word's full and surprising range of meaning. It seemed to me that simple language best suited this enterprise; such language, in being generic, is likely to contain the greatest and most dramatic variety of meaning within individual words. (Cited in Silberg, 2002, p. 138)

It was a lack of clarity in one of my poems that Christopher Dewdney, Writer in Residence at The University of Windsor 2006-2007, referred to earlier that month when I spoke with him by telephone about some of my poems that he had read. He said that that poem needed to be more concrete. "Obscurity," he said, "is unfriendly to the reader, but ambiguity can be a mystical friend" (telephone conversation, November 13, 2006). It was this tension between the extremes of telling and being obscure, aiming to balance with clarity and ambiguity that I was dealing with and striving for as I edited my poems.

## What Hate Is—A Shorter Version For The First Performance

The third version of “On Being A Teacher,” the version which became part of my presentation at the *Canadian Society for the Study of Education Conference* (Guiney Yallop, 2006b), contains just five more than half the words of the previous version. (Note: Those five words are in the new, longer, title.) The other two poems in that presentation were not included in the poetry for my dissertation.

### On Being A Teacher (or What Hate Is Like)

Hate is like a mad dog  
biting at my heels  
from the first day  
I started teaching.

Hate is like an unwelcome elbow  
in my back.

Hate is like spit on my desk  
and homophobic graffiti on our classroom walls.

Hate is like letters  
and telephone calls  
to administrators  
to express concern.

Hate is like administrators’ concerns, too.

Hate is like long fingers around my neck  
and not being able to speak,  
words jamming in my throat  
like an apocalyptic rush hour.

Hate is like some well-oiled apparatus  
that contours the body;  
we get used to it.

## What Hate Is—More Thoughts From Don McKay

It was the above version that I sent to Cornelia as part of draft five of my PhD dissertation proposal on July 4, 2006 and as part of draft six on July 13, 2006. It was draft six that my PhD Dissertation Committee received and which I defended in September 2006. This was also the version of the poem that I sent to Don McKay on October 13, 2006. Again, Don was enormously generous with his comments. Don asked that I [c]onsider moving into full metaphor from simile." He stated that this "creates a more dramatic emphasis." Don also suggested enjambment later in the poem, or even earlier. He concluded with, "I wonder if this poem is finished with you yet. You might revisit it, try for occasional specificity and nuance."

"No, Don, this poem is not through with me," I thought after reading Don's comments. Taking Don's advice, I went *full metaphor*. I also worked at showing, rather than telling; I think this is what Don meant when he wrote "try for occasional specificity and nuance." On November 29, 2006, I even considered changing the title to "Homo Hatred" but eventually decided to focus on the word hate; I titled the poem "What Hate Is."

### What Hate Is

Hate is a mad guard dog  
biting at my heels.

Hate is an unwelcome elbow  
in my back.

Hate is spit on my desk  
and *This teacher sucks cock*.  
on the chalkboard.

Hate is letters and telephone  
calls to administrators  
to express concern about me wearing *that* t-shirt,  
or kissing a man in the parking lot,  
or looking at construction workers outside school, hate is

long fingers around my neck  
not being able to speak,  
words jamming in my throat  
like an apocalyptic rush hour.

Hate is a well-oiled apparatus  
that contours the body;  
we get used to it.

## What Hate Is—Finding The Final Version

Further changes were made in the December 5, 2006 version, which was sent to Cornelia as part of my collection(s) of poetry, and to which she had no suggestions for additional changes. Responding to another revised version of the poetry for my dissertation, Cornelia noted in an e-mail communication on January 22, 2007, “Gee, this poem has improved 100%. What a difference!” One considerable difference was size; at 102 words, the poem was now 100 words shorter than the original typed version. Another significant change was the use of metaphor as opposed to simile and the inclusion of more specific instances of what hate is. This was the version that went to my PhD Dissertation Committee, and the version which appears below and on page 54 of my dissertation.

### What Hate Is

Hate is a mad guard dog  
biting at my heels.

Hate is an unwelcome elbow  
in my back.

Hate is spit on my desk  
and *This teacher sucks cock*.  
on the chalkboard.

Hate is letters and telephone calls  
to administrators

to express concern about me wearing *that* t-shirt,  
or kissing a man in the parking lot,  
or looking at construction workers outside school, hate is

long fingers around my neck  
not being able to speak,  
words jamming in my throat  
like an apocalyptic rush hour.

Hate is a well-oiled apparatus  
that contours the body;  
we get used to it.

## When Is A Poem Finished?

Margaret Atwood was once asked, in an interview conducted by Norm Sacuta, how she knew when a poem was finished. She responded, “When nothing more can be done. It’s the same with a novel. You come to a point where it’s either good or bad or mediocre, but it’s finished” (Bowling, 2002, p. 224). I had a similar experience with concluding the work on my poems. There came a point at which I felt nothing more could be done. Of course, there is always the possibility of doing something else with a poem, but that doesn’t necessarily improve the poem. If the poem is finished and I continue to chip away at it, it means that I am not prepared to let it go and I could harm the poem—I could limit the impact that it could have on others. I need to let go of a finished poem, so that it can do its work.

And it is this finished work that I want to speak to here. Arthur Frank (1995) grappled with the accumulation of editorial advice on his writing. While I invited and welcomed the comments I received on my poetry, the final decisions as to what to include in the finished versions of my poems were mine. That is not to say that I was not influenced by what others wrote or said about the poems. I was. I believe that such influence is a part, a welcome part, of writing, of reflecting, of researching, of living.

## Some Final (for now) Thoughts On (my evolving) Process

The purpose of sharing this part of this writing journey is to show the reader what the process of editing and reflection looks like for a poet—at least, what it looks like for this poet. It also shows how the poems, two specific poems, evolved over time. I identify with Richard Siken, author of *Crush* (2005) who, in an interview with James Hall (2006), describes his writing process:

I knew that I wanted this book to be cohesive, so I knew from the beginning that the poems would have to speak to each other. But generally my writing process looks a lot like everyone else's revision process. I get scraps of language in my head, either music or content, and I scribble them down. When I get a good sized stack of scribbled pages I type them up and start writing in the margins, overwriting, rewriting, annotating insertions, gluing parts over other parts. When the pages get too thick or too hard to read, I retype them and continue the process. When I've generated enough pages, I start making maps and lists of plots, themes, movements. Then I tape the text to the wall, continuously, at eye-level. That makes a horizontal line that usually circles a room or two. I tape versions and revisions vertically from their original, and then I've got a wall of text I can walk through, pace through, while I fine tune and polish. That's how I wrote *Crush*, and that's how I'm approaching the next work. When I got my copy of *Crush* from the press, I was strangely surprised. It looked so small. It fit in my hand. My version was a four-drawer file cabinet filled with versions, blueprints, appendices, collages, cartographies, and an exegesis. My version was a house of text I could walk through. (p. 234)

Cornelia described to me her process of putting a book together. She spreads all of her poems out on the floor and then works at finding poems that connect with one another, that might be seen as flowing from or into one another. If she finds beginning lines in one that have an image or a metaphor that was similar to the ending lines in another she "gets quite excited about that" (in conversation).

My own process is evolving and incorporates some of the practices of both Richard Siken and Cornelia Hoogland. For the poetry for my dissertation I used file folders. Initially I had two folders—one for *my Catholic poems* and another for *my Education poems*. I used two colours of paper clips (green for Catholic and red for Education) to keep versions of the poems together in chronological order with the



most recent version on top. The files were bulging, even though I know that I did not have hard copies of all the versions of the poems. I stopped trying to bring the two file folders to meetings with Cornelia. This process continued until I decided that I needed a separate file for each poem. I kept all, or most, of the versions of each poem in its separate file, again with the most recent version on top. This was useful when I wanted to work on one particular poem or when I wanted to change the order of the poems in my dissertation. For the order of the poems in my dissertation I was also attempting to follow a chronological order drawn from my remembered and imagined lived experiences. I did not always hold to this order, however; when a poem seemed to work better in another location, I ignored chronology and went for aesthetic effect. When the order of the poems changed in any given version of my dissertation, the order of the files also changed in my filing cabinet.

Rereading the versions of the two poems I discuss in this article, and indeed the versions of my other poems for my research, takes me through the experience in new, renewing, ways. While the experience is made explicit above, the experience is inherent in the most recent versions of the poems as they appear in my dissertation. The reader comes to know this experience by engaging with the poems, by listening to what the poems are saying, and by noticing choices—the choices I made in constructing the poems and how the poems construct me and my experiences.

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**John J. Guiney Yallop** is a parent, a partner, and a poet who was awarded his PhD in 2008 by The University of Western Ontario. His dissertation, *OUT of place: A poetic journey through the emotional landscape of a gay person's identities within/without communities*, is a poetic inquiry where he wrote a book of poetry and followed the book of poetry with an exegesis in which he reflected on the poetry and the experience of doing this type of research. Dr. Guiney Yallop is currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Acadia University. His research includes poetic inquiry, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and performative social science.

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## Of Jaguars, Anthropologists, and Cole Porter: Poetry & Revision

David Cappella, Central Connecticut State University

### ABSTRACT

The educational purposes of examining the revision process of a specific poem are significant and, to me, profound. It is a specialized teaching tool, one that burrows into the workings of the imagination by encouraging students to ponder specific changes to the various drafts and to discuss them. Such language talk about changes and close reading explicitly reveals those decisive steps that a poet takes in order to allow the *real* poem to emerge.

"Birds do it, bees do it/Even educated fleas do it," and as a person who grew up on Cape Cod, I know that "clams, 'gainst their wish, do it" (Porter, 1928). I would add to Cole Porter's song line, "Poets, givin' their heart to a poem, do it." I am not speaking necessarily of falling in love, as Cole Porter most definitely does, although no one would deny that poets are right up there with birds, bees, and clams in that regard. To give a poem true affection, poets do something else to it, something akin to falling in love, I suppose—they revise it.

The process of revision: the act of re-seeing a poem; the process of the writer, after drafting a poem, asking, what Baron Wormser and I ask in our book, *A Surge of Language: Teaching Poetry Day by Day* (2004): "What if? What if I change this to that? What if I take line four out? What if I add some more adjectives? What happens?" (p. 56). "The 'R' word" (p. 54). What is this act of revision, this singular process that elevates the poem from a mere act of self-expression to a work of art, to a finished piece with a purpose? That is, what does it mean to "revise" a poem? We know that revision for students can be a challenge, to put it mildly. After all, they want to

express themselves. They think if they express themselves in a poem, it must automatically be good. As we note, “the first draft is an impulse and impulses matter powerfully” (p. 57). Often for students, expression is all. Thus, all too often, they do not want to take that next step. They do not want to deal with the actual poem that they have produced. They cannot see it as a newly formed object on the page, and, as such, an entity in and of itself.

And to revise a poem demands that the writer “see” the poem *qua* poem. As Baron and I ask our students, “What if the poem wants to be honored as a poem, as a potential work of art that wants to be all it can be?” (p. 55). Revising asks the writer, any writer, student or professional poet, to determine what the poem really wants to be and where the poem really wants to go. Regarding the writing of poetry, the ultimate question becomes: “What is there to revise in a poem?”

There’s a lot to revise, as we all know. “Word choice, structure, syntax, form, point of view, metaphor” (p. 56), just to name a few aspects of a poem that must be considered. There are a myriad “what if” questions that, in terms of classroom pedagogy, become interesting for peer revision and general revision tasks. Here are a few: “What if one moment in the poem is expanded/shortened? What if the verb tense changes? What if the poem begins at a different place?” (p. 58).

As Baron and I point out, the educational dimension of revision can be explored in many ways as it allows the student to follow any path he or she deems necessary to improve a draft. We do give students a list of specific suggestions to guide them through the revision process. But it is important to keep in mind that “it isn’t prescriptive and it isn’t all-encompassing” (p. 59). The suggestions create interest in the poem and in poetry in general.

This is why when I teach the writing of poetry, whether to teachers or to students, I usually present an intensive session on revising and rewriting. I take them through the various stages of rewriting of a poem that I wrote, usually a poem that I have been working on for a few months or longer. With each version of the poem (I have scads, as I chronically revise every poem), I give a brief commentary on the revising strategy I adopted for that poem, analyzing salient points in the poem where revising changed the draft to bring out the “real” poem. Students are free to respond and comment on these various revision decisions. Teachers and students learn a lot about discovering the poem that often lies beneath the drafted poem, as Lucille Clifton would say.

By discussing and analyzing how a specific poem is revised, both the teacher and the student, as they tease out the whole revision process, begin to profile the relationship between imagination and rhetoric, so to speak. That is, when one examines the revision decisions of a poet regarding a specific work, one begins to see how the poet shaped ideas with words. Just take a look at the poet Robert Lowell's detailed revisions of his poems to see how imagination solidifies into rhetoric.

Examining a poet's revision process has many benefits. Doing so allows one to experience the poem from its inception. One becomes familiar with the work by examining its language. Assumptions about words are raised. One notices that some assumptions about the poem are false, while others are true. An idea of the poem begins to emerge, a sense of what it is about, what it is trying to do, and why it takes its particular shape. Initial exploration of the revising process fosters further analysis. As the poet redrafts a poem, each draft asks to be examined more intensely since every new revision, in effect, creates a new poem. Even the subtlest change profoundly alters a poem. As this process replicates itself with each new draft, one examining the process is left to wade deeper and deeper into the poem.<sup>1</sup>

Baron Wormser has often said that young writers (and lots of established poets, too!) tend to quit too early on in the revision process and so never get deeper into the poem. Thus they miss the real poem that lies within. By examining the stages of a poet's revising process, students can witness this in-depth exploration for themselves. And this is a personal endeavor, a subjective engagement with language. A poet friend and creative writing teacher, Jim Provencher, defines this encounter with revision for his students this way: "You meet the poem, you get to know it, you make assumptions, some false, you try to grow it like a self that emerges" (J. Provencher, personal communication, August 10, 2010).

Above all, examining the revision process allows students to come to terms with the time it takes to revise a poem. They get to experience how spending time on the draft of a poem distills and develops perspective. Such an experience induces reflection.<sup>2</sup> And such reflection focuses on the series of decisions made during the revision process. For these reasons, actively demonstrating how a poem is revised enables students to "see" the process in action, to actually participate in it, even though it has already occurred. By discussing and analyzing the various versions of a poem, by commenting on the decisions made by the writer in each version, students have the opportunity to create their own account of the revision. In other words, their personal commentary, as they discuss and assess the poet's revisions, enhances their understanding of revision.

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The educational purposes of examining the revision process of a specific poem are significant and, to me, profound. It is a specialized teaching tool, one that burrows into the workings of the imagination by encouraging students to ponder specific changes to the various drafts and to discuss them. Such language talk about changes and close reading explicitly reveals those decisive steps that a poet takes in order to allow the *real* poem to emerge.

For the revision exercise, as I stated above, I use a poem I have been working on for a few years. It was most recently used with a group of pre-service English students taking an English Methods class at an urban state university. I have chosen five versions of the poem. They are: UR-version, Version I, Version IV, Version VI and Version VII. The commentaries accompanying each version appear in italics. They represent a shortened version, impromptu shorthand so to speak, of what I might say to initiate discussion about the particular draft in order to trigger comments about the process of revising itself.

### [UR Version]

#### When the Shaman Kills the Jaguar

the shaman dissolves into the jungle's void  
 leading himself to a certain tree  
 where he sat and leaned against its trunk.  
 He chanted the jaguar to him.  
 The jaguar came as the shaman

What did both sets of eyes glimpse?  
 At the moment man and animal gazed  
 into the retinal fire of the other?  
 what profound sight did each traveler witness?  
 Did all things invisible become visible?  
 Did each drown in a vitreous sea of fear?  
 Did they careen down through cavernous innards  
 helplessly falling toward a shivering soul?  
 Did the shaman aim a question that struck  
 the jaguar like an arrow, locking his legs,  
 bowing his head in wounded reverence?

One fact is certain: the shaman asked to kill the jaguar.  
It was a deferential "May I kill you?"  
Beauty, strength, and force acquiesced because  
to live or to die is a submission to the world.  
The jaguar crushed the rifle bullet as much as it crushed his skull.  
Nature is every movement that we make.

life's hemorrhaging feelings

Dreams coat the Shaman's mind the way the taste  
of oregano or a pine nut  
That coats the mucused skin inside your mouth,

Nature abounds in every movement  
That we make and so the jaguar crushed.

*This version is the absolute beginning of a poem. It is the impulse put a feeling into words. In fact, this initial version is straight out of my journal. Background: A colleague, an anthropologist who works with the Yanomami Indians deep within the Brazilian rain forest, told me a story about a jaguar that was prowling their territory, had snatched some chickens, and had recently injured a hunter from the village. The tribe was afraid the cat would take a child, so the shaman had to "bring" the animal to be killed. In celebration, the tribe skinned the cat, then cooked it and ate it. My colleague arrived the day of the feast, and she partook of the meat.*

*As one sees from the title, the idea of the shaman killing the animal interested my imagination. I was captivated by how the animal was "caught" by the shaman. One can see from the notes that I began the poem by describing the events. But one can also see that my imagination wanted to go further because I began asking questions not only about the shaman but about the jaguar as well.*

*Now, this asking of questions about the jaguar seems very Blakean to anyone who has read "The Tyger," but we do not have to go there now. I mention it only as an instance of how the imagination works, how one's reading settles into the mind and becomes activated when certain images or ideas from experience interact with it. The ideas in the poem are obvious: the jaguar submitting to his own death; nature as movements that we make; the idea of dreaming appears, as does the soul. Something else is*

*going on in this preliminary draft worth noting: odd words or phrases appear: "vitreous," "pine nut," "oregano," "bullet," "hemorrhaging." Also, the draft falls off into fragments, detailed images, and figurative language.*

*Obviously, this version is not really a draft. It is an attempt at a draft. It is a basic imaginative impulse to deal with a story that was told, an attempt to chronicle an incident. Yet, it is more than that. It is an attempt to urge to peek inside the story, to explore some emotional truth behind it, maybe.*

*In any case, there are many, many questions: Are there any images, lines, or words worth keeping? Is a form emerging from the manner in which the lines were grouped? From this jumble of ideas and images what can be forged, if anything? And how does one begin?*

*With this initial draft, students begin reading to discuss the inception of a poem, that is, how one gets an idea for a poem. They become intrigued with the idea of what makes a poem, of what interests a poet, and why. They discuss what direction they think the writer will take, given this initial attempt to capture a feeling.*

## [Version I]

### Riding the Jaguar

Certain problems arise.

A jaguar has killed a chicken, then a dog.

Two Yanomami hunters heard its growl.

A lone hunter was mauled; children are in danger.

Hunted for days, the jaguar's lair was not found.

Problems thick as the rain forest are a Shaman's task.

He called the jaguar to him late one night.

He disappeared into the jungle,

leading himself to a certain tree

where he sat and leaned against its trunk.

The jaguar came as the shaman stared into the dark.

What did both sets of eyes glimpse?

At the moment man and animal gazed



into the retinal fire of the other  
what profound sight did each traveler witness?  
Did all things invisible become visible?  
Did each drown in a vitreous sea of fear?  
Did they careen down through cavernous innards  
helplessly falling toward a shivering soul?  
Did the shaman aim a question  
that struck the jaguar like a poisoned arrow  
locking his legs and lowering his head?

One fact is certain: the shaman asked to kill the jaguar.  
It was a deferential "May I kill you?"  
Beauty, strength, and force acquiesced because  
to live or to die is a submission to the world.  
The jaguar crushed the rifle bullet as much as it crushed his skull.

The jaguar's body: held up and displayed,  
measured and danced around, skinned,  
his meat eaten by the entire tribe.  
The anthropologist ate the meat, too.  
Later that night, beside a dying fire, she wrote,  
"Magic happens every night and every day."  
Later still, fading into sleep, a thought  
scampered cat-like across her mind:  
Nature is every movement that we make.  
Nothing is a dream—  
even if a jaguar visits in your sleep.  
A dream, like the taste of oregano or of a pine nut,  
lingeringly tinges the mucused skin inside your mouth.  
Like a flavor, it abounds.

Nothing is a nightmare  
even if the jaguar, muscles rippling,  
froth dripping from his jaws,  
his Blakean eyes burning yellow-deep,  
stares into your aorta or lopes into a ventricle  
hunting your soul, his powerful claws  
scratching your veins as he lingers,  
smelling for the soul's musky scent.

As she watches in her sleep, the jaguar leaps,  
 runs down her soul and with one swipe  
 mauls it like some jungle peccary.  
 His spike-like eyes transfix her, his crouch  
 on padded feet, his sudden spring and gapping jaws.

His bite into her soul carries a fear  
 which ripples down into her bone marrow.  
 He rends it, shaking it from side to side.  
 Her soul's peculiar dangle from his mouth.  
 Her soul's limp bounce as he drops it.  
 He nudges its carcass with his nose, rolls  
 on it, arching his back. He trots away  
 to a private place to devour his catch,  
 a true and mysterious meat.

Swaying slightly in her hammock, eyes wide  
 and surrounded by night, the anthropologist  
 recalls leaning down from his back to sniff  
 his eyes and mouth, to touch his stark whiskers;  
 recalls the raspy gush of his deep breath  
 as he ran her full stride into her heart,  
 straight into her life's bloody miasma  
 where her true feelings hemorrhage  
 where inside each blood cell her soul laments.

*After a period of a few days, I did try to make some sense out of the UR Version. I gave my notes a narrative form, adding details and a chronology. I added a reportorial perspective, thinking that such a stance would narrow the scope of the subject for the reader. So, in effect, I tried to give a form to the poem, and I tried to connect the form to the reader. I was thinking of audience. It was as though I was talking to the reader.*

*I also went further. After telling the story, I began a sort of disquisition about it. Beginning with "Nothing is a dream," I veered off into the idea of the anthropologist dreaming about the jaguar. I wanted to explore, obviously, the effect of eating such an exotic animal, maybe? Or, I thought that the emotional state of the anthropologist made the poem more personal for the reader, maybe?*

*Version I is more of a shaped piece, an actual draft, however spotty in terms of lines or rhythm or conflated and confused images. It is interesting to note that from the line "Nothing is a nightmare," the poem wants to be about the anthropologist's dream and its effect on her as she sleeps and just how eating the jaguar's flesh affected her soul. I am veering away from the shaman and toward a new topic by the end of this version. This is obvious because I have retitled the draft to focus attention on the anthropologist's dream where she is riding the jaguar.*

*The image of the anthropologist swaying in her hammock seems like a keeper. Also, the whole extended image of the jaguar in her dream preying upon her soul seems worthwhile, but is it rendered well? The stanza seems too weighty in the sense that it is too crowded with images.*

*There are some horrible lines that must be excised at some point. One notable one is, "It was a deferential 'May I kill you?'" No comment needed here. It is amazing what a writer will do, what odd particulars he or she writes down in order to capture the whole. Still, this draft has a flow to it. It has a beginning and end and it seems to be coalescing into a narrative poem. Maybe.*

*With a look at Version I, students begin to tackle the structure of a poem, keeping an eye on what the poet is trying to say, and whether he or she is saying it. With this version, students begin the true work with language. They can see word choices, how certain lines might work or not. A myriad of questions arise as they try to decipher the poet's intention and try to find the actual poem.*

## [Version IV]

### When the Anthropologist Ate Jaguar Meat

Choice is a poisoned dart. In the jungle,  
where nothing is a dream and nothing is  
a nightmare, when night strikes and fires blaze,  
the dead cat cooked. Amid shouts and dancing,  
the anthropologist swallowed the meat.  
Later that night, beside a dying fire, she wrote,  
"Magic happens every night and every day."

Later still, as she fades into sleep, the jaguar leaps,  
 runs down her soul and with one swipe  
 mauls it like some jungle peccary.  
 His spike-like eyes transfix her: his crouch  
 on padded feet, his sudden spring and gaping jaws.  
 His bite into her soul carries a fear  
 which ripples down into her bone marrow.

He rends his prey, shaking it side to side:  
 her soul's limp bounce as he drops it,  
 as he nudges its carcass with his nose,  
 as he rolls near the broken neck, arching his back;  
 her soul's peculiar dangle from his mouth,  
 as he trots away to a private place  
 to devour his catch, the true, mysterious meat.

She sways slightly in her hammock, eyes wide  
 now in the surrounding night. A feline dream  
 scampers through the anthropologist's mind.  
 She recalls leaning down from the jaguar's back  
 sniffing his eyes and mouth, touching his stark whiskers,  
 recalls the raspy gush of his deep breath  
 as he runs her full stride toward her own heart,

that miasmal landscape of lamenting  
 where her spirit, thrall'd, alone, witnesses  
 the chewed bones of her emotions now strewn,  
 splintered, blotched red with clotted drops of love.

*Here, we jump into a tighter, more focused version of the poem. Now a full-fledged draft (and students discuss how to distinguish a solid draft from one that is not so solid), the poem, as indicated by, among other reasons, yet another title,<sup>3</sup> both strangely startles and directs the reader. The poem has been cut down, telescoped so to speak. I have begun to explore the inner world of the anthropologist, excising the shaman and how the jaguar was killed. I had overwritten terribly. But where would I have been if I did not do that? Students are curious about this idea of writing too much. They want to know how one knows when one is overwriting. Here they have this draft to compare to the previous draft to figure this out.*

*Now I have a poem of four seven-line stanzas and a four-line ending stanza. The rhythm is steady, conversational. Each line has four or five beats. The narrative is condensed. The poem begins with a metaphor, a solid image. I rewrote and rethought the opening of the poem and basically discarded each version. They were not the poem. They were a warm-up, written, it now appears, to arrive at the effects of jaguar meat on the anthropologist. Whether this was a good move or not, it was a decision that I made in my revising process. And, I did stick with it, as you will see. Again, students discuss this decision and come to see that decisions are important, and each decision builds upon a previous one.*

*What most concerns me in this draft is the ending, with which I am still having grave problems. Some lines continue to embarrass: "that miasmal landscape of lamenting." Okay, I like the sound of this line, but, I mean, does the line actually work, given the rest of the stanza? Actually, does this last, short stanza really work at all? I think we all agree that it misses the mark. Aside from being a bit over the top, structurally it directs the reader away from the emotional state of the anthropologist and to the jaguar in the dream. The poem does not want that, does it? The poem wants the focus on the anthropologist.*

*Such analysis brings the student deeper and deeper into the structure of the poem in relation to what the poem wants to say, wants to be. It is important to note that students arrive at this point organically. They have begun with a journal entry, an impulse, and by this version, they are questioning whether stanzas of the poem are necessary or, if they are, whether they are well written.*

## [Version VI]

### When the Anthropologist Eats Jaguar Meat

Choice is a poisoned dart. In the jungle,  
where nothing is a dream and nothing is  
a nightmare, when night strikes and fires blaze,  
the dead cat cooks. Amid shouts and dancing,  
the anthropologist swallows some sinew.  
Later that night, beside a dying fire, she writes,  
"Magic arises every night and every day."

Later still, as she fades into sleep, the jaguar leaps,  
 runs her down and with one swipe  
 mauls her like some jungle peccary.  
 His yellow eyes transfix her. On padded feet,  
 he crouches, all coiled spring and gaping jaw.  
 When at last he bites down, a glacial fear  
 ripples into her bone marrow.

He rends his prey, shakes it side to side,  
 nudges her carcass with his nose,  
 rolls near her broken neck, arching his back.  
 Nothing in her notebook will save her  
 from the peculiar dangle in his mouth.  
 He trots away to a private place  
 to devour his catch, the true, arcane meat.

Now in the surrounding night, she sways  
 in her hammock, eyes wide, the feline dream  
 scampering through the anthropologist's mind.  
 She envisions the jaguar's sleek back,  
 the smell of his eyes and stark whiskers,  
 the raspy gush of his deep breath  
 as he runs full stride toward her heart.

She is trying to sleep but the dream stares.  
 Her breath shortens. She shifts in her body,  
 her heart buried like a chewed up bone,  
 splintered, strewn, splotched in dried blood.  
 She opens her eyes to the hut's darkness.  
 "I am staring inside a dream," she thinks.  
 Alone, thralled, the anthropologist heaves.

*This draft comes much later. It has been reworked and discussed with a few poet friends with whom I share work. In this draft, a tighter form has appeared. I have five seven-line stanzas, a form that began to appear naturally in Version IV. I have a completed ending to the poem that comments on the state of the anthropologist. The narrative flow of the poem has strengthened; it is steady, sure of itself as there is a story to tell and a perspective to the telling.*

*At this stage of the revision process, it is time to scrutinize every single word in the poem. Words matter. At this stage of revision every word in every line counts, but I want to focus on the last line of this draft. There are two words that matter greatly: "thrall" and "heave." Ezra Pound often repeated a line he heard that meant everything to him: "Get a dictionary and learn the meaning of words" (Ford, date unknown/1971, p. 179). This is an absolute truth for a poet.*

*The word "thrall" in the last line intrigues. I use the noun as an adjective. It is a literary word, for sure, and it aptly describes both the emotional and the dream state of the anthropologist. Balancing "thrilled" is the word that ends the poem, "heaves." This verb is a harsh one and has uncomfortable connotations. Does this work? Do I want to end a poem on such a physical note? Will using such a word complete the poem? Let me just say that I walked around thinking about these questions off and on for well over a year while the poem sat in my desk drawer.*

*Students find themselves arguing about the use of these words, but they also find that this discussion leads to other issues with the poem. They begin to revise the entire draft on account of such specific talk about two words. Their investment in the piece is complete; their wrestling with this version of the poem adumbrates their own revision process.*

### [Version VII]

#### Jaguar Meat

Choice, that poisoned dart. In the jungle,  
nothing is a dream and nothing is  
a nightmare; night strikes and fires blaze,  
the dead cat cooks. Amid shouts and dancing,  
the anthropologist swallows the meat.  
Later that night, beside a dying fire, she writes,  
"Magic happens every night and every day."

Later still, as she fades into sleep, the jaguar leaps,  
runs down her soul and with one swipe  
mauls it like some jungle peccary.  
His spike-like eyes transfix her: his crouch,  
his padded feet, his sudden spring and gaping jaws.

His bite into her dream carries a fear  
which ripples into her bone marrow.

He rends her soul like prey, shaking it side to side:  
its limp bounce as he drops it,  
as he nudges it with his nose,  
rolls it, arching his back:  
its peculiar dangle from his mouth  
as he trots away to a private place  
to devour his catch — true, arcane meat.

The anthropologist sways slightly in her hammock,  
eyes wide in the surrounding night. The dream  
scampers like a feline through her mind.  
She recalls riding the jaguar's back  
sniffing his shoulders, the raspy gush  
of his deep breath as he runs into her own heart.

She tries to sleep but the dream keeps staring back.  
Her breath shortens; she shifts her body.  
Her heart feels like a chewed up bone,  
splintered and strewn, splotched with its own dried blood.  
She opens her eyes to the hut's darkness.  
I am staring inside a dream, she thinks.  
Alone, thrall'd, the anthropologist sighs.

*Students always ask, how to know when to end a poem. I usually smile and say, "You usually get this feeling in your gut." They smirk and go back to their work. There is that apocryphal quote, attributed to the French poet Paul Valéry, that "a poem is never finished, [it is] only abandoned" (date unknown). That is true, to an extent. Usually, the writer will recognize when a poem ends or will just go on to something else.*

*This version (by no means the last) shows several changes to lines to adjust for rhythm and sound. Stanza two has changed (again) for the better, I think, as have stanzas three and four. Line four in stanza five I do not like; I like the line in the same stanza from version VI, actually. I took out the quotation marks to keep the internal nature of the thought. These issues of sound and rhythm, stanza changes, punctuation considerations become in-depth discussions for the students. They are now fine-tuning their own ideas about the poem's progress.*



*Most important for me is the fact that I came up with a substitute verb for "heaves." "Sighs" is a gentler verb, easier to digest (no pun intended) perhaps. It changes the poem, makes it less haunting, I feel. I like "heaves." Poems do not have to be comfortable and I sometimes think "sighs" is a little too comfortable. I am still undecided about this change. I read a later version of the poem aloud at readings now, and I just wait and see which word I will use when I read the line. But now I do know that with whichever word I decide to use, the poem has ended.*

*Is this version of the poem finished? No, not at this point. But I like where I am headed. At this stage of the session, students find themselves totally immersed in the poem's direction. In fact, some are adamant about where and how I should proceed.<sup>4</sup>*

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After engaging with the revision process, students, whether pre-service teachers in English Education programs at the undergraduate or graduate level, or public and private school teachers, come away with the knowledge that re-visioning a poem, reflecting upon it, is a necessary task. Through a modeling of the revision process, they experience coming at a poem from different perspectives. They see that one cannot gain perspective without the benefit of time, distancing, and a sense of trusting one's own instincts. These are not easy lessons, and analyzing how a poem moves through the revision process gives them a glimpse into the nature of the beast. And the beast is mysterious. As Jim Provencher says, "Poetry, especially lyrical poetry, may be the most impervious to external editing" (J. Provencher, Personal communication, August 10, 2010). That's why students often do not think their poems need to be revised at all.

Students tend to think poems come into being whole and that's it. Interestingly, poets oftentimes claim this miracle, but it usually is not true, especially after scholars begin digging around. A poet is mighty lucky if he or she ever gets struck by lightning in that way. Though it does happen on occasion. But the reality is that poems are usually revised in some way; they are brought into being. In this sense, when one engages in revising a poem, one is a sort of midwife to it, as Provencher would say. Think of Pound's detailed editing of Eliot's "The Wasteland."

Through revision, my poem developed over time. That is the significant ingredient. Revising helps students *stay in the poem* and look at the words and think about them. Additionally, revision requires both a critical detachment and a letting go

of sorts. We might call this letting go *risk taking*. These two components of revision embody the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning.<sup>5</sup>

Revision also allows student writers (all writers) to play with language. I played with my poem, but within the bounds of word choice, syntax, details, and a host of other aspects of a poem. We must not forget that revision is a type of *play*—“not entertainment but play... a structured type of freedom” (p. 57), as Baron and I like to point out. Revision allows the writer “room to see how something might work differently” (p. 57). Also, I might add, it is just plain fun, as Provencher would say, “to edit and scrutinize the work of others” (J. Provencher, personal communication, August 10, 2010).

For students especially, revising a poem allows them the freedom to think about and play with words, a type of freedom with language they seldom are allowed to exercise in a school setting, especially in an English classroom. Since revision is a significant teaching tool that affords the writer “latitude and permission to feel how something can emerge over time” (p. 57) and since, for all poets, revision is paramount, I say to my students, “Let’s do it” and, above all, let’s keep on doing it.

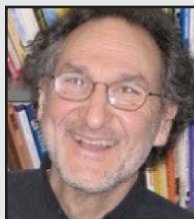
## Notes

1. A writer can, theoretically, rewrite until one overwrites. In fact, a claim can be made that it is only through overwriting can one find the real poem or truly discover where one wants to go with a draft.
2. The subject of reflection and its relationship to revision deserves its own essay. Simply put: reflection is the grease that lubricates revision.
3. The title of a poem is a uniquely important topic, deserving close attention during the revising process.
4. Once, I asked a class that had gone through my revisions to do a creative writing exercise and write their own version based on their experience of analyzing my revisions. The results were fascinating.

5. Risk and critical detachment, both inherent ingredients of creativity, are aspects of *interiority* that has been squeezed out of learning in our technocratic, standardized test-driven approach to learning in our schools. Why? Because these aspects of learning cannot be measured with statistics. Yet, no one will argue that creativity is composed of risk taking, failure, and critical detachment. Again, why? Because any major breakthrough in almost any field has involved these processes. Mike Rose, in his several books, discusses this very important aspect of learning.

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**David Cappella** is an Associate Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University where he teaches poetry and Young Adult Literature. He has co-authored with Baron Wormser two widely used textbooks, *Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves* and *A Surge of Language: Teaching Poetry Day to Day*. Cappella has led workshops on the teaching of poetry in public schools in Connecticut and throughout the United States, including the National Endowment for the Humanities. Cappella's poem series *Gobbo: A Solitaire's Opera*, won the 2004 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition and was a finalist for the 2006 Bordighera Prize and the 2008 Bright Hill Press Poetry Book Competition.





## Sense & Nonsense: Thinking Poetry

Gillian Sze

### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I discuss poetry as an important style of thinking and exploration. Poetry, I maintain, is a leap, a risk, a gambit that opens unexpected linguistic possibilities and imaginative opportunities. Based on my own experience of teaching poetry, I suggest strategies in this essay for encouraging students to take the kinds of risks that engender sense and confront nonsense. The central claim of this essay is that by creating new and surprising associations, poetry teaches us different and more interesting ways to live in and understand the world.

### Snow

Ask me where I was born. I'll say, *Winnipeg*. Think, *Winter-peg*. Bring to mind an expanse of white. A blustery cold. A heap of snow on the roof of a barn, its red paint faded by December. You saw that in a postcard somewhere. Or maybe it was from a free nature calendar put in your mailbox from some real estate agent. Be glad you didn't grow up in the middle of nowhere. Be glad you weren't buried by snow. Shiver at the possibility.

Ask me where I was born. I'll say, *Winnipeg*. I am a prairie cliché. I will first think of the mosquitoes and the plus forty heat and then the minus forty freeze. I will, admittedly, think of snow. I will remember first snowfalls and the yellow streetlight aglow at ten p.m. The slow flakes caught in the glimmer and a quiet that feels like sleep. I will remember shoveling a path from the back door to the gate, getting right down to the grass and piling snow high above my head. I will remember that time when I was nine and walked back home from school, the boulevard lengthened by

white. My older brother kept back a couple houses behind me and aimed snowballs at my head the whole way until I arrived home crying, ears red and the back of my neck numb and wet.

Poetry, at least its effects, is much like snow. Sometimes everything is subtle; the words come in slow motion, meditative and soft. It even needs the right light. Other times it is a more vicious attack: you are hit with the ferocity and rawness of its elements. Perhaps Denise Levertov put it best when she described poetry's function as something "to awaken sleepers by other means than shock" (as cited in Morley, 2007, p.200). There is, after reading a poem, a change. A shift in landscape. We all know how it looks the next morning after a night of snowfall: a frosted pane that affords a view to what is often described as "*a blanket of snow*," or what I like to focus on: a *blank*, or "having empty spaces."

William Carlos Williams says that, "a poem is made up of words and the spaces between them" (as cited in Barnstone, 2005, p.xliii). What is this space that poetry offers? Creative space. Emotional space. Reflective space. A space to profess. A space of sheer possibilities. "As the world shrinks, imaginative space becomes more important," states Jeanette Winterson (2005). We have all witnessed this shrinking. I won't list the many social platforms and networks that have become embedded in our daily routines. Some of us have Blackberries that notify us of traffic blocks up ahead just as we board the bus. Some of us have seen the photo of Demi Moore bent over while steaming Ashton Kutcher's suit on his Twitter. All of us are in contact with Google.

I am not suggesting that anybody throw their belongings out the window of their second-floor apartment and hit up the woods far from Wi-Fi. Nor am I promising any student that he or she will be the next Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore or Yehuda Amichai. What I want to clarify is simple: the pause that poetry offers. All art requires alertness. Reading a poem, writing a poem, even thinking about writing a poem requires one to pause and think. In a time where we are blasted with all types of notifications beeping and buzzing in our pockets, art, including poetry, is, as Robert Frost describes it, "a momentary stay against confusion" (as cited in Morley, p. 200).

## A Quick Portrait From Our Anxiety

"Compared to what I do, what you study is more difficult," a medical resident once said to me at a party. He went on to explain that in med school, learning is

mechanical: one absorbs and then spews out the same material come exam time. "But you people read, digest it, interpret it and then produce something that includes something of yourself. Give me a 7 a.m. surgery any day." For all of our sakes, I hope a passionate doctor is far from being a robot in his or her education. Nevertheless, one has to wonder what he found so fearful about the process a literature student goes through—how the exhaustion of reading could be more terrifying than blood. What is it about language that can bring one face-to-face with an internal landscape and then emerge with "something of oneself"? Why doesn't calculus carry the same effect? To figure out how a poem works is for a student to connect with it on some emotional level. A creative writing teacher trains students to *read*, to *write*, and (perhaps above all) to risk: that is, for a young reader to confront a strange inner landscape and to experience the inexplicable events of sense.

"The heart is a rage of directions," Leonard Cohen writes (1988, Poem 50). One can simply get lost. But for now, tell me what you feel and know. It is easy to type "TMI" to everything else we encounter. Here's a suggestion: paparazzi yourself. Here's a promise: nothing is too nonsensical. Just give me something derived honestly from a moment of thought. Think about this week's grocery list. Ponder its items and their possible connections to old love tokens. Tell me what scares you. All the ugly we avoid. As Robert Bly once said, "A poem is something that penetrates for an instant into the unconscious" (as cited in Gioia, 2005, p. 398). One easy way to begin is by reading the poem, "After The Event, But Before The Thing That Happened," (p. 3) the first poem in Stuart Ross's book, *Farmer Gloom's New Hybrid* (1999). A series of sentences beginning, "I ran from..." The speaker runs from a range of material objects ("lightning," "legless duck," "incorrect professor"), states of growth ("adolescence"), and ideas ("collapsing democracy," "Immanuel Kant," "cost-effectiveness"). Get students to write their own. Begin running away from something other than "home." The most popular ones I hear are "math," "exams," "recess." Experiment with juxtaposing the believable with the impossible. Find humor between the sacred and the profane, the expected and the unexpected. Run from sheer curtains, a mallard, *90210*. Run from Sunday school, recurring nightmares of drinking blood, familial pressure. The result of writing out of one's own anxiety can be therapeutic and cathartic. More often it opens a unique space for perspective, discovery and a better understanding of self. This "I ran from" exercise allows students to take a moment and think about themselves in a way that is undemanding, confessional, and discreet. Tell me what you run from—no explanation needed. Let the reader try to find you in the spaces between the sentences.

## Anything Else but Jack in the Box

They say our mother's heartbeat is our first encounter with rhythm. Watch a child sit silent, enchanted by nursery rhymes, Mother Goose, all those counting songs emitted from a doll by the push of a button hidden in its stuffed hand. Rhythm resonates. Like most adults, it doesn't take us very long to summon up the verses of our childhood. But let's get to the strange. None other than Shel Silverstein amply provided the earliest visceral reaction I've had to poetry. It blew Mary and her little lamb out of the water. Any Mary can have a pet lamb. But give me Silverstein's Melinda Mae who spent her life eating an entire whale with the diligence and determination of a scholar or Olympic swimmer. When my teacher read that to the class, my seven-year-old stomach turned and nausea overtook. I couldn't read it without feeling sick and, at the same time, I couldn't stop reading it.

How shall we revitalize our world and provide new ways of seeing? "Surprise in language is poetry's open secret," states David Morley (2007, p. 194). Not only in the use of language ("whale-road" as a synonym for sea) but also new associations for words we thought we knew, a parallax. Take a heart attack, for example. Any medical dictionary will tell you that it is "the death of heart muscle due to the loss of blood supply," but Larissa Andrusyshyn's poem, "The Heart Attack" (2010, p. 34) offers another perspective:

### The Heart Attack

*jumps as if from behind a parked car,  
wears the long coat of a ringmaster,*

*is not invited to the performance review  
or the birthday party or the long drive home in traffic.  
He'll come anyway*

*for the elevator repairman who drops to his knees  
and in the long strange silence  
becomes sad, succumbs*

*like the elephant does as he is led to a stool  
and told to stand there in a brightly colored hat.*



Set in a carnival landscape, the heart attack sheds its expected state as trauma. There is no mention of blood or muscle. It is both ringmaster and entertainer, both in control and passive. Yet the reader not only feels sympathy for the elevator repairman whose suffering is felt in "the long strange silence" but the poet is also aware of the possibility that if personified, the heart attack is a pathetic character, standing always accused and alone.

To be alert in writing is to be alert in all senses (including nonsense), to be free in imagination, to remove all filters (especially the one that makes us say, "This sucks") and encourage utter liberation. What happens to our imaginations as we grow older? After working with adults, I wondered if a creative reservoir could solidify like stiffening epoxy. Perhaps bombarded with clichés, Hallmark cards to say it for you, age and increasing responsibilities, a number of us access that world less and less. My friend, artist Roberutsu, once said, "Survival first, art second." I would have to agree. Not everybody will be an artist. Needless to say, even fewer will become poets. Don't argue in haikus and search for an apt image to express your frustration, but the mere task of finding precision and originality in expression, how is that not a responsibility to ourselves as thinking creatures?

## Monkey Bars

You face the page and tell yourself that you are going to write something. Anything. Or maybe someone else instructed you to do so. They opened up your cage and said: *Fly. Go.* Chances are, you won't get anywhere. There's too much freedom, too sweeping a space for you to navigate through, not a single landmark in sight.

Complete liberation doesn't always work and there are times where you won't be suffering or feeling any heightened emotion that prompts you to put your thoughts down creatively. "A poet finds himself caught in some baffling emotional problem," says Robert Graves (as cited in Geddes, 1973, p. 507). Sure, fair enough, but poet or not, playing with words is everyone's right. Writing poems won't make one a poet. Let's shuck off the exhausting theories surrounding Poetry with a capital P and just have the language play for us.

I try to build monkey bars for the students—and this, on its own, requires creativity and quick thinking. I set horizontal mounts for their hands to go, but let them swing however which way they want before reaching the next bar. The space

from one swing to the next is theirs. In one game, the alphabet is set as my bars. Telling them to write a twenty-six word poem, each word following the letters of the alphabet, may result in the following:

*aardvark battles cow down.  
 even fat goats have iguana jokes.  
 kangaroos love mice.  
 not only ponies quack.  
 run! silly tapeworm,  
 under valley with xono you zebra.*  
 — Danielle Penney, 11-years-old

Danielle, one of my campers at Centauri Arts Camp, decided to stick to an animal theme and had she written this poem in free verse, she may have never found these strange little gems such as: "not only ponies quack," and a very fine internal rhyme: "fat goats/iguana jokes."

For those young writers who still think poems need only be about death, misery and heartbreak (and a fair share of them are), pull them away from such lines as: "I loved you. Why did you leave me? I *loved* you. Love love love. For *you*." Tell them to compose a poem about love or any other emotion of their choice without using the word "love" (or their chosen emotion). Tell them that you want to see *it*—that pebble stuck in their shoe that they have to shake out. Stir up surprise; give them a kick in thought and articulation. Make it a little difficult for them. Let them whine and tell you it's impossible.

Finally, after some groans, witness them produce the following. This is an excerpt from another poem written by Danielle: a speaker's final thoughts before dying.

*a hand print:  
 the time I pressed my hand into the wet cement to leave a print that's still there  
 today.*

*donuts:  
 my regular diet as a wanderer.*

*the waves of the water:  
 the time I fell asleep on the beach and was almost taken to sea by a giant tidal  
 wave.*

Mixed with sentiment and humour, this camper does an exemplary job at seeking out the concrete, bringing to life the speaker's memories and suggesting the significance of his or her existence. Simultaneously, in a mature turn, she touches on human temporality in the hand's impression and the tidal wave.

## Back to Snow

In April, I did a reading in Toronto in celebration for Poetry Month. I was on a panel with four other poets and someone in the audience raised the question: *What should poets do for society?* One of the poets took up his microphone and responded: *I think the question is: what should society do for poets?* He went on to say that we should aim to produce creative individuals. Art is to be alert—it is also to be sensitive to surroundings, to self, to beauty. It is to suck us out of dullness and at the same time, it is to find secret buzzing in the tedious.

How did I answer the question that day in Toronto? I am rarely prepared for a question that seems to be looking for a momentous answer. Somewhere in my response I mentioned that during the golden age of Chinese poetry, poets were important state officials but, somehow, six hundred years later, poets were ranked ninth on the social ladder, between beggars and prostitutes (Barnstone, 2005, p. lxvii).

"For poetry makes nothing happen," says W. H. Auden (Geddes, 1973, p. 134), an oft-quoted sentiment. What's the point? Aside from the importance of thought, surprise, play and pleasure—basic components of poetry accessible to all—I continue to write because I am driven by my need to connect sincerely. Paul Horgan (1988) says it flawlessly: "Art is an analogy of life by example and parallel: I will be *felt* and *known*, so that *you* may *feel* and *know*" (p. 96). It is always a game between me and the reader, the poet and me. More than that, it is a means in which one can do the most travelling—in ideas, emotions, places, and time.

Poetry doesn't do anything. It is somewhere between necessity and fulfilment. It is much like snow. Not everyone needs to live with snow. Go live your placid lives in Florida or Arizona. People do it—all year. But ask me what stops my breath. I'll say, *Poetry*. Think, *Poetry*? Bring to mind the grueling English classes in high school when you were forced to memorize and recite a minimum of three of Shakespeare's sonnets. Or that poem your Grade 8 teacher told you to write, something *A-B-A-B*, something *like* or *as*, something exaggerated. Or that essay you wrote where you

analyzed some poem about spring being like a hand. Think about how it went way over your head. Maybe this afternoon you'll flip open William Carlos Williams' *Imaginations* (1970). Your eyes will land on the words: "Five miscarriages since January is a considerable record Emily dear" (p. 77); or, further down the page, "Syphilis covers the body with salmon-red petals." Wonder how syphilis can produce such beauty on one's body. Wonder what sort of sicko would suggest such a thing. Decide to tell your friend about this. You won't reach him because he's hiding in his room, which he does every Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. Maybe you'll finally tire of your friend's behaviour and decide to make up your own superstitions. I don't know. I think you can see where I'm going with this.

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**Gillian Sze** is the author of three chapbooks published by Withwords Press. Her poetry collection, *Fish Bones* (DC Books, 2009), was shortlisted for the QWF McAuslan First Book Prize and her work has appeared in a number of national and international journals. She is co-founder of *Branch Magazine*. She has taught creative writing at the Centauri Arts Camp, Blue Metropolis, and through QWF's Writers in the Community program. Gillian has a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Concordia University and is currently pursuing a PhD at Université de Montréal.

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## A Poet's Journey as A/r/tographer: Poetic Inquiry With Junior High School Students

Sean Wiebe, University of Prince Edward Island

### ABSTRACT

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I explore the connection between a/r/tography and poetic inquiry, and how together they cultivate multiple ways of understanding. I further claim that classroom situations are most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness when each student participates in the classroom conversation from his or her lived situations. While difficult, teachers who can facilitate rich interchanges of dialogue within a plurality of voices are genuinely creating communities of difference and thus imagining real possibilities for social change.

### An Emerging Theory of A/R/Tography and Poetic Inquiry

In a noteworthy collection of essays, editors Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, and Gouzouasis (2008) have extended the notion of a/r/tography, linking this rhizomatic way of art/teaching/and research to identities, and the many ways one as artist, researcher and teacher might *be* in her or his identities. The appeal of a/r/tography to artists is immediately apparent in the *art* prefix, particularly artist-researchers, who, being themselves teachers, are also researching the arts in art education. The complication of identity offered in a/r/tography also appeals to me as an English teacher who loves teaching and writing poetry.

For example, as a poet, who introduces himself as an assistant professor of education, with research interests in the intersection of poetry and curriculum theory, the issue of identity is ever-present, not just coming before as a prelude to who I am, but also setting out those methods by which I might practice poetry, do research, and

inquire with students. Bearing in mind this presence of identity, an attention to how it might be done *a/r/tfully* as “*graphy*” raises a number of questions: In the secondary English classroom, what education practices are implied by *a/r/tography*? How might a new generation of English teachers teaching in such diverse classrooms benefit from doing *a/r/tography* with their students? What does it mean to research *a/r/tographically*, and then represent findings *artfully* with attention to the process of *graphy*? As I seek to answer these questions, not only in this paper, but also in a life-long journey of inquiry, I know I do so incompletely, and rarely in order.

What follows are not theoretical and methodological points one, two, three, four of teaching *a/r/tographically* in the secondary English classroom, but rather an artful and hermeneutical investigation into what it was like for me (the autobiography of the *graphy* of *a/r/tography*) to “be” an *a/r/tographer* with grade 9 students who were “being” *a/r/tographers* with me. Thus, the theory and implied method of *a/r/tography* is woven throughout this paper as I explore the complication of identity in *a/r/tography* on my *journey* of teaching poetry to grade 9 students during the 2007-2008 academic year. A pedagogical journey, says Aoki (2005a), looking to the Greek roots of the word, represents theory as something which emerges on the way to understanding (p. 191). For Jardine (2008), what is worthwhile is worth lingering over: understanding happens in the midst of our discipline (para. 2, 4).

## Questioning the Traditional Writing Economy

In the midst of the discipline of Secondary English Education is the question of what counts as rigorous, academic writing. Students often wonder whether reading and writing poetry will increase their academic success. When I tell them with certainty that it will, many have stared back with skepticism. For them, higher marks on their essays and, at the end of the year, a higher score on their provincial English exam are not readily associated with poetry. Who can blame them? It was a position I once held, thinking that the best preparation for both university and employment success was a rigorous writing program, and by that I meant assigning essays once a week and marking them with as much red ink as possible.

I came by this belief honestly, if not altruistically, thinking that hard work in writing resembled the hard work of athletic training. I thought to myself that when a basketball team loses a game because its players miss too many free throws, of course they must practice free throws, over and over, until they don’t miss. And if



needed, I surmised, the skill is broken down into smaller parts such as balance, arm motion, and arc on the ball. The logical leap from athletics to academics proved to be quite simple: to improve essay writing, write essays. To improve more, write more. And if needed, break it into steps: like drafting, revising, editing; or introduction, body, conclusion; or thesis statement, evidence, emphasis. Year after year, class after class, I thought that in my academic and rigorous writing classes students were doing good work because it was hard work. With an emphasis on outcomes and exam scores, few in my school context questioned that belief.

## A/R/Tography and Poetic Inquiry as Classroom Pedagogy

Knowing the hegemonic hold academic success has on schools, I find myself writing about poetry and critical thinking, poetry and engagement, poetry and inquiry, poetry and research, poetry and... anything, as long as it sounds as academic, hard, rigorous, and critical as the essay. Poetic engagement, in all its possible contexts, is a kind of translation of experience, particularly the inner, often unseen experience. A creative engagement where poetry is "a site for uncovering the self and in some ways recovering the self" opens spaces of inquiry "to excavate the complexities of the human heart, soul, and body" (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, p. 16). I often link poetic inquiry with a/r/tography because when engaging poetically in the classroom students find links, make connections, and develop ideas through "multiple artful means" (Wiebe et al., 2007, p. 6). William Ayers (2004) says "art challenges and transports us; it offers an invitation to transformation and an opportunity to see things anew" (p. xiii). I believe that poetic engagement, as Greene (1998) argues about the poetic encounter, has the capacity to offer the reader "a new perspective on what it is to come to know, to draw forth the kind of knowledge that is always in process" (pp. 18–19).

Complementing the academic rigour of poetic engagement in the classroom, is the poetry of lifelong learning, that is the multiple poetic identities of being a poet, of living the poet, of thinking, playing, and living poetically. Leggo (2004) says of poetry that it invites him to embrace imagination and attend to language, "especially how language shapes and animates knowing and understanding" (para. 2). Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind (2005) say of a/r/tography that it is "full of curiosity punctuated by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions" (p. 901). Translating my life poetically requires the utilization of an

artful and poetic means to inquire and theorize, to form and reform, to question and trouble, to suggest and imply, and to enjoy both the meaning and process as the inward and inner awareness of pedagogy emerges. For the poetically aware teacher, pedagogy is replete with interstices which represent the spaces of possibility between the teacher and students. Recalling Ted Aoki, Daley says that teachers “need to live in the third space...between the structured and the playful” (Daley & Wiebe, 2002, para. 25).

As an educational researcher, attending carefully to poetry as a language of reflexive knowing and lived experience, I believe a heartfelt poetic mode of writing and living are particularly needed for disrupting the overly reductive forces of the rationalist discourses, such as privileging linear thought over intuition; or teaching as if thinking is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative; or neglecting and downplaying emotions. It is necessary for poets who are researchers and teachers, those who live in/ with/ by/ and through language, to write poetry so a poet’s understanding of the world can celebrate its difference rather than sameness, can offer ongoing hope for change, which is ongoing difference, and can thus engage in “richer interchanges” of diverse cultural inheritances within a plurality of voices in a democratic world (Chinnery, 2006). While not speaking specifically about poetry, Greene (1995) underscores the importance of imagination; she says that where educators enliven “plurality and multiplicity” what emerges is a democratic community where silences are shattered, where “long repressed voices are making themselves heard” (p. 155).

So these days I am no longer surprised that students’ voices are stifled in this present academic and prescriptive style of teaching English. Many of my creative writing students came to find academic success by writing creatively rather than composing essays within the limited organizational structures and styles offered by the outdated five paragraph essay. Too many teachers, writes Harp (1991), believe that prescriptions will make composing easier. They do not consider the socially constructed nature of language, assuming students are devoid of language ability. If they did acknowledge “the amazingly rich and varied linguistic ability that all students bring to the learning context” (Harp, 1991, p. 31), perhaps writing a poem would count just as much as writing an essay.

My views on teaching writing changed largely because I witnessed time and again the academic successes of creative writing students, who, after being encouraged to engage the world poetically, found a way of being with the world that reconciled the artificial separation of their creative self from the writing process. What

helped me make that shift was moving from teaching poetry units to inquiring into the world with poetry. This was the blending of poetic inquiry with a/r/tography. In my last three years of secondary English teaching, I returned often to poetry as a practice of inquiry to create for my students a kind of classroom that supports critical engagement with the texts we read and the texts of our lives (Fowler, 2006). What follows is an autobiographical account of doing poetic inquiry with grade 9 students.

## Poetic Inquiry in a Grade 9 Classroom

Wanting to break away from my own fears and misconceptions about the arts being too soft to properly prepare my students, and knowing in studying poetry there was opportunity to heighten student imagination in my classroom, I was looking for a new kind of approach to teaching poetry. Going into my fifteenth year of teaching, I wondered if previous years of fun poetry activities such as having poetry/song presentations, performing the poetic devices, or presenting a few enthusiastic lectures that included "Poetry is O" or "Write in the cracks and crevices of life" could be repositioned with an inquiry learning approach. I wanted fun to count academically. I hoped that my students might see that poetry was not a distraction to the more serious business of academic preparation or acquiring job skills. To do that, I knew I had to not only release the imagination, but also release my mark book. I knew that shifting my perspective involved a rigorous commitment to unlearning, to letting go of 15 years of expertise, to keeping in the file cabinet all those tried-and-true activities, to giving back the possibility for my students to discover the discipline for themselves (Jardine, 2003).

Using the artist/teacher/researcher model for classroom inquiry (Springgay et al., 2008), I proposed to my students that we write some poems together and send them off to another class of grade 9 students who would read our poems, give feedback, and rate them. In turn, we would do the same for the other class, and in doing that I hoped notions of quality, taste, and style would develop within our community of poetic inquirers (Wiebe & Daikow, 2008). Not surprising to those who have reflected deeply on their teaching practice, it was not the students' commitment which almost derailed this inquiry, but my own. Irwin (2008) urges artists to "trouble and address difference": in my poet/artist role—no problem, in my researcher role—no problem, in my teacher role—the implicit power structure and inclination to perform my expertise almost got in the way (p. 98).

There was one moment in this inquiry that was pivotal. Receiving the first poems from the other class, I asked my students to select those they liked and come up with reasons for why they liked them. Later we would then vote on the best poems. Their answers were thoughtful, showing that previous years of language arts teaching had given them the skills and attitudes to speak about poetry intelligently. They liked imagery, rhyming poems, poems with emotion, and poems which addressed issues pertinent to adolescence.

But I disagreed with their selections, particularly their preference for rhyming couplets. I wanted my students (forgetting they were fellow inquirers) to see why my selections were better, and almost made the fatal error of teaching a lesson comparing their selections to mine, revealing to them the sometimes hard-to-see characteristics of good poems. Looking at the provincial curriculum guide, I would have had a well-justified rationale in helping students see what I could see; I would have passed on important knowledge readying them to participate as informed literary critics later in their academic careers. However, authentic inquiry depended on avoiding such an approach.

More than other classroom activities, evaluation positions students as beginners and makes more acute their awareness of lacking knowledge (Wiebe & Guiney Yallop, 2010). The poetic moment I mention above helped me learn that in order to genuinely inquire with students and together develop into a community of practice, I as the teacher needed to let go. Before this poetic inquiry, I thought I had moved on from the pedagogies that are coupled with outcome-oriented mandates which emphasize standards, norms, grade-level equivalents and the like. I thought my classes emphasized creativity and student response, and was appalled to learn how quickly I was tempted to teacher-directed outcomes.

I wish I could say that it was my love of poetry, its discipline and playfulness in exploration that rescued me. But it was the students. They were more readied for this inquiry than I was. For Greene (1995), the democratic community is always in the making. It depends on the emerging and radiating awareness of future possibilities. Teachers looking through multiple perspectives can help young people build bridges among themselves. This means letting go of those tried-and-true activities and listening to students to find their understanding, content of thinking, or issues of confusion to move beyond the narrow limits of lesson plans. Letting go of a lesson plan to experience the lived curriculum means provoking dialogue within the classroom space (Aoki, 2005b). If teaching can be thought of as an address to another's consciousness, it may be a provocation or summoning from one to another to reach out to new

possibilities. To pose questions, to seek out explanations, to look for reasons and to construct meanings is challenging classroom work, but to be so engaged with learners as distinctive, questioning persons, persons in the process of defining themselves, while difficult, is a necessary difficulty.

Contrary to my fear of being stuck in a spiral of endless end rhyme and cliché, students quickly found their own sophistication. The second set of poems shared were evaluated differently. After selecting their favorites, students talked about what was shifting for them. They now wanted poems with thoughtful, natural rhyme. The appeal of rhyming couplets soon wore off. They had now read 60 poems, and they wanted poems with humour, ones that utilized metaphor to describe things in an interesting or new way.

At this point, I was pinching myself. They owned these preferences. They weren't repeating back to me words I'd written on the board. I still wonder about how important my first silences were. The clincher, for me, was when one student volunteered this advice: We want poems that convey emotion, but not too much emotion. We don't like poems that are corny. Say what you mean to say. After completing this inquiry with my students, I claim now that our ethical responsibility as teachers is first and foremost to value students' opinions and tastes—rather than *teach* them what is supposed to taste good. To not do so, says Greene (1995), makes students simply comply and serve (p. 10).

## Student Agency in Poetic Inquiry

Repositioning poetic inquiry so that students had agency over what counts gave them a chance to participate in the production of knowledge in ways that preordained activities usually deny them (McAuley, 2008). By re-imagining how the subjective experience of students could be nurtured in equitable and just ways, I also needed a strong commitment to shifting teacher-student power structures. Huebner (1972) advises teachers to question policies, standards, assessments, and outcomes for they too often inhibit student achievement: he says, "established ways of thinking, of doing, of being with others are always, and must always remain questionable [or we] destroy [our] capability to act" (p. 126). What does destroy our capability to act, he says twenty-four years later, is lack of courage "to look beyond one's self and one's tradition and to recognize that others and their traditions can enrich and transform both self and community" (Huebner, 1996, p. 582). I wonder to what extent shifting

power structures in the classroom might make its small difference in changing the impact of power and privilege on students' experiences *outside* the classroom. Greene (1995) believes that educational policies dominated by standards lead to family deterioration, neighborhood decline, racism, joblessness and addictions (p. 9). Perhaps rejecting the curriculum frameworks where all problems and all uncertainties can be resolved and instead cultivating with students multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues might spark the imagination to see differently and make a difference outside the classroom as well (Luke & Feedbody, 1997).

Like Liora Bresler (2003), I believe the arts, specifically poetry, enable us to realize that our experiences hold more than we can predict; there is always more in our experiences than a classroom can hold. Poetry, like the arts, connects us to past, present and future in efforts to better understand ourselves. The classroom is a ready community for negotiating personal engagement with others (Irwin, 2008). Moving to community-centered learning, according to Cole (1996) and Engestrom (1987), increases motivation and the likelihood that classroom activities will matter outside classroom walls. In textual kinds of inquiry, such as poetic inquiry, students are constructing social worlds (Beach & Myers, 2001); they are defining the traditions, practices, and purposes which constitute meaning not only for themselves but also for each other, not only with the texts but also with the texts of their lives. The arts resist fixing and fixation, and through them students can predict, classify, and theorize beyond skills-oriented activities and assignments. When teachers share power and learning students rarely have to ask, "Why are we doing this?"

Too often the answer to the question above is "because it's on the exam." Perhaps today's educationalists (to borrow a term from Huebner) fear poor school performance as a threat to national economic security (Pinar, 2004). Recent national discussions have overlooked the value of something artsy, like poetry, and are instead overly focused on learning outcomes, rigorous assessment practices, and higher achievement (Block, 2007). To some, it might seem odd to be promoting *a/r/tography* and poetic inquiry when today's schools are mandated to stay competitive or risk losing their funding, but the oddity is only superficial and results from an artificial bifurcation of the arts and academics. In schools that bifurcation plays out in the preference for students to write essays, reports, summaries, and the like, as these are perceived to be more rigorous than composing a poem (Stanley, 2004). Perhaps this is because it is difficult to assess a poem, or put a value on one's imagination?

## Concluding Thoughts

Poetic inquiry is a gateway which helps young people break with ordinary classroom expectations. Whether experimenting with poetry from a critical literacy stance (Lensmire, 2002) or writing poetry with a view to participating in the activities of the discipline (Wiebe, 2008), or sharing poetry as a means of building classroom community (Edelsky, Smith, & Wolfe, 2002), poetry as a genre and a form of inquiry is particularly well suited to classrooms. Yet the skepticism remains. In this last section of the paper, I turn to some key educational theorists as a means of explaining, and maybe even shifting some of that skepticism.

Walker (2003) says that our task as scholars is to make theories explicit, to clarify them, work out their consequences for curriculum practice, compare them to other ideals, and justify or criticize them (p. 60). To read Walker's claim poetically is to add into the mix of educational theorizing a possibility for new blends and bends for each teacher's individual classrooms. In this way, poetry can have a restoring influence on structures which tend to reduce possibilities with justifications. Greene (1995) believes that education needs imagination. She recognizes the power of the imagination "to open new perspectives, to identify alternatives...our encounters with the world become newly informed" (p. 18). During an interview with Maxine Greene, Braman (2004) asks her to explain how the "imagination awakens" (para. 2). Greene explains that a pedagogical approach which produces an endless supply of information does not constitute learning, as such an approach is based on concepts. By contrast, Greene says the "imagination goes even further than concept...to disclose the unseen and unexpected" (para. 2). The poetic imagination encourages the discursive journey, and opens additional spaces for personal histories and identities, for those places of pedagogy intimately connected to time and place (Chambers, 2003). The imagination is a gateway to a more heightened, perhaps more critical participation. Greene (1995) writes, "participatory involvement with many forms of art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become [more] conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have oppressed" (p. 123). Greene's connection of the imagination with participatory involvement has not always been lost in English language arts classrooms (Engestrom, 1987; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Hagood, 2008). Perhaps today's renewed skepticism is linked to the trend of valuing only the knowledge that can be assessed objectively, an unacceptable assumption held by policy makers. Pinar (2007) states, "education may be neither measurable nor predictable" (para. 9). Pedagogical approaches which lack imagination treat knowledge "like a perfectly transparent

commodity, one that can be treated and dispensed independent of particular actors in context" (Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 2). Eisner (2002) stresses the need for a complete change in the direction of our educational practices, "to sail against the tide," away from the "industrial culture" of standardized measuring towards a creative culture (para. 46, 29). What Eisner proposes instead is "a greater focus on becoming" (para. 42). He urges teachers to place "more value on the imaginative than on the factual" and assign "greater priority to valuing than to measuring" (para. 42).

Educational theorists who stress genuine engagement often foreground multiple perspectives in multiple conversations. In my own classrooms where multiplicity has had sway, where student agency has been nurtured, students come to believe that something new might arise, and believe in their own imaginations for making that newness possible. Greene (1995) claims that "this is how learning happens" ... [it is our] educative task" (p. 6). Blau (2004) notes that learning happens when teachers become fellow inquirers and leave their expertise at the door. It is welcome change when teachers create situations where students are genuinely engaged and begin to ask in their multiple, various, and curious tones, "why," "why not," and "so what." Be advised: These questions slow down learning (Honore, 2004), disrupt the planned lesson, and require different pedagogies. How much easier to reply, "because I said so," and get through the day's material. Eisner reminds teachers to regard "the quality of the journey as more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached" (para. 42).

Eisner's valuing of the journey reminds me of a student of mine, an English 12 student, who was also in my Creative Writing 12 class, who was preparing for his provincial examination. He said to me, "Mr. Wiebe, I've forgotten the techniques you've shown me to improve my poetry, but with the poetry you definitely got me thinking, and that has helped me in every class, even studying for finals." What mattered to this grade 12 creative writing student, for a few important days, was scoring well on his English exam. But just as important to him was how we had inquired into poetry. I've come to believe that there is value in searching out how a poetic imagination, and more generally an arts-enriched curriculum, cultivates multiple ways of knowing and being while still being as rigorous and critical as any exam preparation activities. No doubt, definitive answers are elusive, and while we search for what is plausible, I rest assured that the poetry goes on doing its good work, goes on affecting this student's approach to studying (and now living) as he continues on as an English major, writing about literature and living poetically as what matters slips into and out of his life in always changing ways.



All of us have taught precocious, poetic writers who seem to relish the thought of crafting new responses to the world around them. We have been invigorated by their energy, their use of language, their intrinsic desire to write essays that transcend the perfunctory. How often, we must ask ourselves, have we allowed scholastic pettiness to alienate these students and blunt their sense of wonder. Cixous and Calle-Gruber (1997) say that injustice has spread to our imagination, that as human beings we are "not just with the earth...[because we] order everything according to a scale" (p. 11). In an educational world where provincial mission statements emphasize the economic value and global influence of graduates, there is a need to question how emphasis on scales and measurements may enculturate a school climate of injustice based on fear (Wiebe & Daley, 2006). The student I mentioned above was studying for his exam to make something of himself in the world. He was also writing poetry as a way to lean into his motivations and follow his nagging thoughts. One such thought was fear. That is, fear of insignificance or of failure, sometimes articulated as lack of employment prospects, the impossibility of property ownership in Vancouver, Canada, and an overall diminishment in hope. Somehow, school had unfolded unjustly for him. In a genuinely just curriculum, there would be meaningful contribution for everyone; there would be a myriad of reasons for being alive; there would be calling, and purpose and value.

I turn again to Greene because it is her insistence on cultivating the imagination which provides fertile ground for creating change. Greene (1995) says, "boredom and a sense of futility are among the worst enemies of education. At a time of diminishing opportunity in so many lives, at a time when upward mobility cannot be guaranteed, feelings of futility are widespread" (p. 141). My hope, like Greene's, is that imagination will lead students to the confidence to live outside of school and societal structures. Rather than see this as a form of individualism, or narcissism, students can feel empowered to "reach beyond...[and find] dimensions of experience disclosing themselves in wholly unpredictable ways (Greene, 1997, p. 391). Through inquiry into the arts, meanings derived from past experiences find their way into the present; it is, says Greene (1988), the "conscious adjustment of the new and the old" (p. 124). Student and teacher experiences are a rich soil we can come back to again and again, continually restructuring, looking for different connections and overlaps. Whether writing poetry or reading children's stories or playing music or dancing to it, there is always the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise. Aoki (2005c) says that "through ambiguous, ambivalent space" (which I understand as present in all the art forms), which he calls the space "between this and that" (p. 421), there are generative possibilities. Often located at the margins and boundaries, the arts offer this edge, between space.

For me, as a teacher bringing an artfulness to my classroom through a combination of a/r/tography and poetic inquiry, my pedagogy is enlivened through acknowledging the multiple tensions in identity, and it is also intensified through the imaginative lens which can “disclose alternative ways of beginning in and thinking about the world” (Greene, 1995, p. 164).

## Notes

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**Sean Wiebe** is an assistant professor of education at the University of Prince Edward Island, teaching courses in language and literacy, curriculum theory, and global issues. His research explores issues in writing pedagogy, autobiography, teacher narratives, and arts-based methodologies. He is currently working on a two-year project conducting research on poets' pedagogies and alternative forms of knowing.

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## Poetry as Breath: Teaching Student Teachers to Breathe-Out Poetry

Lesley Pasquin, McGill University

### ABSTRACT

Poetry is a form of creative expression that exists to share a truth, an insight, or a feeling that enriches our humanity. “Teaching” poetry requires us to be readers and writers of poetry ourselves. It requires that we are saying, “Poetry matters.” I work with second-year student teachers in my Language Arts Methods class at McGill University to develop a passion for the poetic; to learn what Muriel Rukeyser refers to as breathing-in experience and breathing-out poetry. Using my own writing process and immersing my students in the genre, they begin to construct the complex understanding of why poetry matters and why that understanding is crucial to teaching it.

*Breathe-in experience,  
Breathe-out poetry.*

– Muriel Rukeyser

**T**here is no “how to” in teaching poetry. It is not a transmission of knowledge, it is an awakening of passion. What is key is the understanding that poetry matters. In order to create that true understanding, we must first be able to articulate why it matters for us and why it will matter for the children we will teach. In my Language Arts Methods course in the Faculty of Education at McGill University, poetry as both an expression of self and a genre to be taught are on the syllabus. I arrive one afternoon for class laden with heavy bags of books. Poetry books. Anthologies of poems for children that somehow my twenty-something

students had never seen in their elementary or high school years. I ask them about their memories of poetry in school. Some remember rhythm and rhyme. Most remember picking the poem apart line by line, understanding simile, metaphor, personification, iambic pentameter. Some remember the terms alliteration and onomatopoeia—such a word could be a poem itself. Even today, on the cutting edge of one of the finest curriculums in the world, the heavy slogging through a poem is all they seem to know. Few remember that poetry mattered in any personal way. Perhaps one or two still read it. Some want nothing to do with it. Muriel Rukeyser admonishes us. “The fear of poetry,” she says, “is an indication that we are cut off from our own reality” (1996, p. 30).

The student teachers devour the books I bring. The assignment is to read to each other in groups and after the initial uncertainty of the simplicity of this task, the room is a hubbub. Poetry in action, catching the reader sometimes off guard with the message or the language. Imagine these university students coming across Yeats for the first time in a book for children.

*There was a man whom Sorrow named his friend  
And he, of his high comrade Sorrow dreaming,  
Went walking with slow steps along the gleaming*

The Sad Shepherd (Allison, 2002, p. 8)

What did I mean that they were not to analyze Yeats? After all, they had struggled with the meaning of poetry all through their high school years and now a poem presented itself as a problem to be solved, in a fashion that must please the teacher and the examiner. Just read, I say. Just listen to the beauty of the language, let it roll over you. This is one of their favourite classes, this freeing up of meaning. The group must pick one and read to the entire class. Many say this is the first time they have read a poem out loud to a group. They tend to choose poems that are light-hearted to avoid the work that must be done to get at meaning. How will you be able to do this with children I ask? If we are to teach this genre, we must live it.

However superficial this introduction to poetry seems, it is a way of first getting poetry into the hands of those who will teach it. The student teachers leave with a list of poems and poets they could use in their own classrooms. Now, the key to understanding what matters is to sit with the work, reading and rereading to create a deeper connection between reader and text. A poem, by its very definition, a



verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way, characterized by the use of language chosen for its sound and suggestive power, calls us to the detail of the words, so carefully chosen over prose that they create a kind of order from chaos, a way of looking that will cause the reader to rethink the world or to identify with something within calling for meaning.

We move from the surface to the undertow. In groups and then individually, the students respond to poems I have brought. Depending on the year and my own reading close to the course, I may be reading them poems by May Sarton, Mary Oliver, Lorna Crozier, Gwendolyn McEwen, Leonard Cohen, Rilke, Rumi, Anne Michaels, Anne Carson or local Montreal poets they did not know existed, including me. The list is open to all possibilities, as are their collective responses to the poems. They are startled back into adulthood. Take a chance, I tell them. There are no wrong answers. We want to move from immersion in the genre to specific responses, to another reason why poetry matters: it calls the reader to think, to be involved, to connect, to understand for ourselves what Mary Oliver means when she asks the reader,

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

(Oliver, 1992, p. 94)

In *The Life of Poetry*, her ground-breaking work on the subject, Muriel Rukeyser declares, "I wish to say that we will not be saved by poetry. But poetry is the type of creation in which we may live and which will save us" (p. 213). I share student responses from a grade six class, on how poetry may have been both necessary and helpful.

*The thing I liked most about this year was poetry. I liked how we explored all sorts of different forms of poetry. The thing I was disappointed with, in poetry, was that we didn't get into deeper poetry. What I mean by deeper poetry is more personal. There are already kids on our grade who need to get things out, but don't no [sic] how, so give them the choice.*

Shannon (pseudonym), age 12

At the age of twelve, Shannon has already understood that poetry matters. She is in fact breathing in poetry, and breathing out experience. She uses poems to "get things out," and wants others to have that experience, that choice. She wants to know, in the words of Deena Metzger,

how very dark the woods are, because we suspect we will have to face how very dark the woods are ... how dangerous and how miraculous are strangers, and how reliable or tricky the kingdom of nature ... how more than anything we want to be awake. (1992, p. 136)

*I shall start with my first opinion. The guy is mentally sick. I got this from, "They shall miss the whisper that runs any day in your mind." But then we finished reading it. The guy only wants to know who he is. He wants to know the meaning of life. He wants to know why he was put on earth. It's like God made him underprivileged and maybe a little too civilized. His mind wants him to give up hope but his heart won't let him. I got this from. "Maybe I'm a king." We're all a king in one way or another.*

Brian (pseudonym), age 12

What is Brian telling us about his interaction with William Stafford's *A Story That Could Be True*? He is using what he knows to understand at a deep level that we can all claim who we are, that hope is tangible and that the heart is what drives us, important concepts for a twelve year old. He is not a passive reader, but rather one who is "concentrating his attention on the world he has evoked" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 86). *Breathe-in poetry, breathe-out experience*. This is what Brian has done. His reflection is what James Britton refers to as:

virtual re-enactment ...poetic discourse (which) presents contemplative reflections upon experience ... these reflections are not analytical in manner rather they constitute reflection by re-enactment—or, in the case of imagined experiences or other people's experiences, by a kind of rehearsal that might perhaps be called virtual re-enactment. (1993, p. 126)

As teachers, and poets, we must listen to voices like Shannon's and we must understand that the Brians are capable of deep response.

Poetry is a form of creative expression that exists to share a truth, an insight, or a feeling that enriches our humanity. It is part of an emotional ecosystem. We know the poem matters when it creates what Louise Rosenblatt calls a live circuit, when it, "comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and the text" (p. 14). "No one," says Rosenblatt, "can read a poem for you" (p. 86).

If no one can read a poem for you, then certainly no one can write a poem for you. Naomi Shihab Nye puts it this way; “You can not order a poem like you order a taco.” (1994, p. 70) We ask children in classrooms to write poems. Why not do it ourselves to understand what it requires. Young children will write poems the way they paint or draw—with confidence that they have something to express. My class is not so sure, so we begin by picking a line as a prompt. For me, the line someone has chosen at random, “I have to go to bed by day,” from Robert Louis Stevenson produced:

I have to go to bed by day  
for I am weary of the night.  
By day, the bed is cool,  
the sheets fine under  
the turning of the fan,  
the sun translucent.  
I will be a mole  
burrow under the covers,  
go underground where  
in my day blindness  
I can dream the night dreams  
the eclipse of the moon, the buildings  
of the city lit with neon  
my own name flashing somewhere  
calling, come out into the night.

(Pasquin, 2008)<sup>1</sup>

I am breathing in experience, breathing out poetry.

Georgia Heard gives us another excellent starting exercise in her book *Writing Towards Home*. She suggests the use of Nye’s *Valentine for Earnest Mann* as a writing prompt (1995, p. 10). The poem may be waiting to be written. Maybe, as in this poem, it hides in the eyes of skunks. Certainly it comes from what we have experienced, what we have breathed in of life. We write together, the students and I. Where do our poems hide? On one such class day, my poem had been hiding under the verandah, as earlier in the week I had discovered the fox. In class I wrote this draft. The students wrote their own drafts and were amazed by what memories and experiences this question had conjured. Slowly, in small groups, they shared their fledgling poems, coming to the realization that by pushing a boundary of what mattered to

them, they could write a poem. They come to know the meaning of, “breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry.”

### Fox

A fox lay dead under the porch all winter,  
 unnoticed except for the dog's unavailed  
 keening and rooting one December morning.  
 The body was perfect come spring.  
 I have taken old cats to be put down,  
 helped them breathe their last, but  
 I was not prepared for this; the sweet  
 scent of decay, that some wild being  
 had come to die. We cut the floorboards  
 stepping across the curled body  
 as though it were a revered ancestor  
 carefully lifted from the dust.  
 There was no saving him, no final rites or  
 coins on the eyes, open and unseeing,  
 a death not expected that day.

(Pasquin, 2008)<sup>2</sup>

“What prompts us to write?” I ask them. We write about what matters. We create around what matters. We write the stories that need to be told. We read the stories that need to be heard.

Everywhere we are all made to “desensitize” twenty-first-century-style. If children aren't playing with toads or talking with each other or sitting in a park observing, can you interest them in poetry? Can we interest adults? “Are we to teach this?” asks Rukeyser. “All we can show to people is themselves, show them what passion they possess and we will have come to poetry (p. 40).

And so we come full circle; reading, responding, writing; a better understanding of the process, of the imperative to have a classroom filled with poems and the freedom to love the words in an unrestrained manner, to write the words in an unrestrained manner. “Poetry matters because it serves up the substance of our lives,”

says Jay Parini in his book of the same title. "Its adequacy to experience is profound and lasting." (2008, p. 181).

What is the story we are each called to tell and in the telling may serve up the substance of our lives? Encouraging student teachers to tell their stories through poetry, to share in moments when they will understand that it matters to know, "how very dark the woods are" (Metzger, 1992, p. 136), will make them far better teachers of the genre that needs to be taught, no, *lived* with passion.

### Succour

Imagine your heart is so  
petrified, it simply drops  
from your chest onto the sidewalk  
for someone else to find.  
Do you wander heartless?  
And the woman who claims it?  
Will she search for you,  
easy to find with your gaping wound,  
or will she keep the heart,  
wondering about the story  
that needs to be told, how  
someone, somewhere is fading,  
blood no longer carrying breath,  
bog bones brittle.

The story that needs to be told  
is that even a butterscotch lollipop  
can give you comfort;  
that duck decoys are to be avoided,  
but not small green frogs or  
the bracken at the edge of the rock;  
that walking barefoot after a storm  
to pick armfuls of downed peonies  
is an act of reverence;  
that naming things makes them so  
and a life can be built from  
small scraps of paper on which

you have written the meaning  
of everything.

Two rocks on the shore barely touch  
but if one were moved, the entire  
scene would change. Water knows  
this. Wind knows this.

Stand with your palm upturned  
to catch the rain.  
Learn to rely on the kindness of bears.

(Pasquin, 2004)<sup>3</sup>

In poetry readings I have done, I wait, as the poet, for the in breath of the audience at the end of the final line. It is then I know that they have “breathed-in” my poem with their own meaning and that they may take a new perspective or ideology from a cold winter night in a small café to help make sense of their world.

## Notes

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**Lesley Pasquin** is a Montreal writer, poet and educator. She has been a classroom teacher, a resource teacher, an Educational Consultant and an Elementary School Principal. She currently teaches in the Department of Integrated Studies in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. She has a strong belief in the power of the arts in the classroom. Her work has been published in *Arc Magazine*, *Room Magazine*, *carte-blanche* and *Montreal Serai*.

She is a member of the Quebec Writers' Federation, the League of Canadian Poets, the English Language Arts Network and she gives poetry readings in and around the city.








## *Boom. Tick. Bing!* Writing Bodies In.

Susanne Gannon & Diem Chi Nguyen, University of Western Sydney, Australia

### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a poetic response to the school-based practicum for beginning secondary teachers. Following their first practicum experience, in their English Method class back at the university, students pooled sensory details and memories of the week they had just spent in schools to write their own poems. The paper includes one of the poems and some thoughts about the complexity, ambivalence and embodied knowing that poetry opens up space for in reflecting on initial school experiences for beginning teachers.

For the learner and the teacher, what counts as success and failure is subject to wild vacillations and so, to revision... Mistakes, misrepresentations, confusion, conflicts, and little gifts of error are all crucial to the stuff of understanding and constructing knowledge, as are the small and large adjustments and insights we make from these events. (Britzman, 2003, p. 2)

 In teacher education, “learner” and “teacher” are ambiguous and ambivalent positions. Before they begin their first practicum placement in a school, students have diligently practiced writing lesson plans and unit outlines. They’ve navigated complex Syllabus documents and sifted through and selected from long lists of learning outcomes. They’ve drafted assessment tasks and marking rubrics. They’ve interrogated departmental policies on diversity and inclusion. They’ve begun to map their developing skills against the Professional Teaching Standards for Beginning Teachers (NSW IT, 2009), practicing the language and performance of

competence that they will need to display when they exit our course and front up for their interview with their prospective employers. Through all this preparatory work, the bodies of teachers and students are more or less elided, except as subjects of “behaviour management strategies” that teachers must have ready to deploy when teenagers misbehave. However all learning, at all stages of education, and in all sites, entails deeply embodied and unpredictable “pedagogical encounters” (Davis & Gannon, 2009). The intellectual and professional preparation that students undergo tends to avoid the intensities, “lines of flight,” and new modes of becoming that happen when people bump against each other in the flesh in the highly charged social and pedagogical spaces of schools.

Early professional education for teachers can be understood as a process of “invention” that involves an “emotional chronology” as much as an intellectual or professional one (Stronach, 2010, p. 101). It is an ongoing process, a multidimensional iterative process that never ends, and the becoming-teacher who is simultaneously a student is a subject who doesn’t quite settle. Part of this process involves the “wild vacillations,” “confusions” and even “little gifts of error” that are characteristic of powerful learning (Britzman, 2003, p. 2). These are most potent for students in our graduate entry Master of Teaching (Secondary)<sup>1</sup> course during Focus Week in Week 5 of their first semester. This is a week of classroom observations in the schools to which they will return later for supervised block practicum. Students come back from Focus Week surprised by the intensity of their experiences, full of excitement and full of stories. This is when their invention as teachers really begins. Some students leave at this stage, while others become impassioned, falling in love with the profession, with the students, and with the glimpses they have of the teachers they might become. Most of their university classes in Week 6 (post Focus Week) entail reflection and theoretically informed analysis of their Focus Week experiences as their lecturers aim to bridge the perennial theory-practice gap in teacher education.

I took a different approach, interested as I am in the more ineffable, elusive aspects of teaching and learning. I’m interested too in embodied experience and how that might be represented and contested in language. In my English Method 1Y<sup>2</sup> class, I aim to turn the students into confident creative writers and engaging teachers of writing able to inspire kids in their classes to use language to make sense of their worlds. In Week 6 this year we were playing with poetry and its interest in specificity. In one of the workshop activities, students free wrote about Focus Week in their notebooks, then filled the whiteboard with fragments of language, detailing their experiences. Their choice of red, blue, green and black markers, and their twenty-five different styles of handwriting semiotically signalled the twenty-five different experiences

they had had. Each day and each lesson of their week on practicum refracted further into a multitude of other sensations and experiences. They filled the board with images, sensory details of sound, smell and taste, vignettes, memories, shocks of proximity to other bodies, dialogue, transitory thoughts. One student described the awkwardness of occupying a desk next to “my old Ancient History teacher (I gave her hell)” and noted “I felt weird calling her by her first name.” Most dramatic, and different for them, was their inclusion in the category of “teacher” and their tentative entry into the spaces occupied by teachers—the lunches and special morning teas, the gossip and conversation, the staffroom, even Friday afternoon down at the pub. When the whiteboard with this “data” was full and when everyone had said as much as they wanted to about what was there, students took those fragments of language and each wrote a ten-line poem there and then in the class, while the material and their experiences were fresh. They incorporated aspects of poetry that we had examined elsewhere including rhythm and beat, figurative language, visual and aural patterns, experiments with line breaks, rhyme. Otherwise the instructions were simple: write a ten-line poem using any of the details on the whiteboard, keep it concrete, material, and sensory. The poems were just as likely to include details from others’ experiences as from their own. In that sense, and because the students constructed these texts at least partially from the details we had pooled on the whiteboard, this exercise might be understood as an adaptation of found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002). It was also an attempt to demystify poetry, which for teachers as much as for their students, and more than any other genre—as poet and teacher Louise Wakeling notes—is a matter of “facing down the fear” (Wakeling, 2009).

One of the poems created during that class can be found below.<sup>3</sup> Each of the poems produced was very different in form and content, and several weeks after that class, when I heard about this special issue of the journal, after the semester was completed, I issued an open invitation to submit a poem as part of this paper. The “Boom! Tick! Bing!” of the title was a theme developed in one of the student poems not offered for final publication, reflecting the unexpected physical and metaphorical collisions of everyday life in schools, the rhythms of timetables, and the light bulb moments that convince beginning teachers to persist. Another student wrote about the ambivalence she felt as she was posted on guard for the Principal by her cigarette-smoking supervising teacher. Another student rhapsodised around the details and the warmth of the communal Easter lunch in her staff room, surprising to her as a student of Muslim heritage. Another student negotiated the complexities of being a student teacher in the school where he had been a student just four years earlier, and the continuous slippages between “teacher” and “student” that he experienced in his interactions with colleagues. Other poems took up a range of diverse issues

they had confronted in their week in school, each profoundly different from the other despite the common discourse we had established in our discussion and in the details we had gathered on the whiteboard. Although several students expressed interest initially in submitting their poems, finally, as the frenzies of their extended practicum took over their lives, just one student chose to follow through the entire reviewing process, reworking her poem in response to editorial advice, and her poem is included below.

In the context of the class, it's important to note again that the poems were not related to any assessment task, nor were they intended for publication. Rather than an advanced exercise in poetic writing, this was an experiment in writing to capture the ambivalence of the practicum experience in a mode that offered more fluidity than the other modes of writing they had available to them. The poems provide some insight into the potential of poetry for capturing moments in the process of invention of themselves as teachers. As responses to their first practicum experiences, the poems hint at some of the moment-to-moment vacillations between success and failure, the micropolitics of schooling, the confusions and conflicts that Britzman (2003) makes reference to. As poems, the texts that follow demonstrate how poetry is "[un]afraid of sensual immersion, subjectivities, mutual constructions of meaningful relationships" and "instead of writing or talking through abstract concepts," as poets, as Brady suggests of poet-social scholars in the social sciences, they "write *in* and *with* ...what they see in themselves *in relation to* Others, in particular landscapes, emotional and social situations" (Brady, 2009, p. xiv).

### Hormone Central

Hormones raging everywhere I walked  
 On my first day there, I heard teachers argue  
 "How about *you* organise morning tea?"  
 I smiled politely and shuffled past,  
 Until I reached the door of Building E.  
 The temp head teacher was a tad selfish  
 She did not notice me when I was there.  
 During lunch she spoke 'bout other teachers  
 She tried very hard not to mention names  
 She whispered and said "You know that teacher ..."  
 I felt so awkward that I stepped outside.  
 "Oh my god.. What have I gotten into..."

I wondered if this was the right career  
The bitchiness shocked me to my core.

Hormones raging everywhere I walked  
In the classroom the students weren't contained  
One student got up and walked out the door  
The teacher yelled "Get back in and sit down"  
The student came back but sat on the floor  
"But you told me to sit down Miss Kumar"  
The students continued to misbehave  
The teacher was stuck but she could not yell  
All she could do now was watch, sit and wait  
She turned and gave me a look of defeat  
It said "There was no controlling this class"  
I thought "... I don't wanna do this anymore"

Hormones raging everywhere I walked  
Lust was in the air near the toilet blocks  
I was very surprised by what I saw  
Students shamelessly snoggin' and caressing  
Now that I am a teacher, it was uncanny  
Seeing things from the other side made me sympathise  
This must have been what it was like for my teachers  
The playground was where they got all the goss  
Listen carefully and you will know too  
"Tina is hooking up with Jonathon"  
I was watching my own daytime soapie,  
It was live, with all the drama and so much more...

By Diem Chi Nguyen

## Notes

1. Students enter this course after completing a three-year undergraduate degree, which provides them with disciplinary knowledge. On completion of the 18-month Master of Teaching (Secondary), they become certified to teach in particular curriculum areas from years 7-12 in secondary schools in New South Wales.
2. English is equivalent to English Language Arts in Canada. Students taking English 1Y are those who have chosen to concentrate on English as their sole teaching specialization and therefore take “double methods” classes. There were 25 students in this class, whereas the foundation English Method 1X class had approximately 120 students, including this group.
3. Aiming for a real audience beyond teacher and the classroom is one of the principles of good practice in the teaching of writing that we have explored throughout the semester. However, publication entails revision and reworking of texts beyond what students trained (e.g., by school examination systems) to produce good first drafts are used to. See comments by teacher-writers on the effects that publication for wider audiences can have on “raising the bar” for student writing in schools in Gannon (2008).

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**Susanne Gannon** (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in English education in the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney. She researches in diverse areas including gender and ethnicity in education and cultural studies, place pedagogies and post-structural theories. Her work on English teaching and writing pedagogies has been published in the journals *English in Australia* and *Changing English*. She has recently co-edited the books “Charged with Meaning: Reviewing English” (2009, with Mark Howie and Wayne Sawyer) and “Pedagogical Encounters” (2009, with Bronwyn Davies).

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**Diem Chi Nguyen** is an Australian born Vietnamese. Diem Chi attended Macquarie Fields High School where she met a number of wonderful teachers. Thus, she decided she too wanted to become a teacher. After recently finishing her Bachelor of Arts she then moved on to do a Masters of Secondary Teaching. Diem Chi is currently finishing her post-graduate degree at the University of Western Sydney and is very eager to start teaching. She hopes to be as inspiring as her former teachers and make a difference in the lives of all the students she will come to teach. Diem Chi hopes to make English fun and enjoyable.







# Poetic Imag(ination): Finding Praxis Through Haiku

Sarah K. MacKenzie, Bucknell University

## ABSTRACT

I draw on poetic inquiry to explore my experience using and interpreting haiku within the context of a literacy methods course. From this project I learned that poetry, as a pedagogical tool as well as one of inquiry, opens up spaces for (un)imaginable possibilities to be exposed, moving both teacher and students toward a place of praxis and reflexive agency.

## Introduction

### To be of use

The people I love the best  
Jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shadows  
and swim off with such sure strokes  
almost out of sight ...  
I love people who harness themselves,  
    An ox to a heavy cart,  
    Who pull like the water buffalo,  
    With massive patience,  
    Who strain in the mud and much to move  
    Things forward,  
    Who do what had to be done,  
    Again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.  
The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

— Marge Piercy (1982)



Fig. 1: Circling with(out)

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illuminated by the lighting-life of the mind; then teaching is the finest work I know. (Palmer, p. 1, 1998)

This article shares the story of an illuminated circle, the story of a teacher educator discovering hope through the recognition of her own limitations of experience and the inspiration of her students (re)searching through self and text to examine the political nature of the practice of teaching. It is a poetic inquiry into the inner and outer workings of teacher, it begins with the “I” but slowly emerges into a “we,” be(com)ing a shared story of connection (Leggo, 2008) and newfound awareness of possibility. Prendergast (2009) identifies that,

... to engage in poetic inquiry is as much a calling as it is a method: a calling between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other,’ a call-and-response, a song that is sung, a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public, whispered (or shouted) into multiple ears. (p. xxxv)

As one who often engages in poetic inquiry, I had not necessarily realized how much can truly occur when I pause to examine the initial response of self, finally stopping the claims of knowing, to listen and see through the words and spaces, what exists out/side my consciousness. I have finally arrived at this place, but this is certainly not where I began.

## Where I Begin

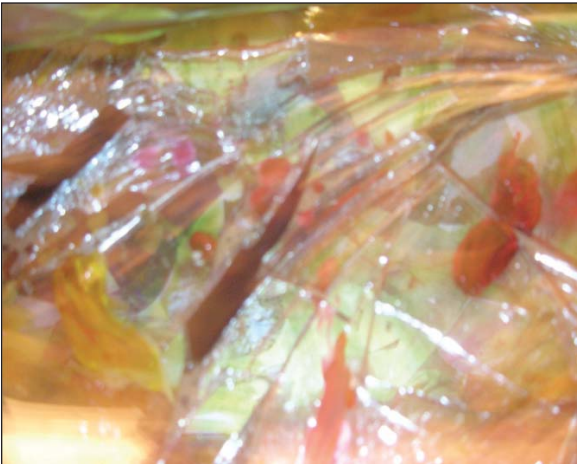


Fig. 2: Broken mirror

### Through the window:

A young woman sits at her desk, writing. She pauses for a moment looking at her words. Observing her bent figure, focused, one might assume she is committed to her work. Yet if we were to stop and listen to the loud silence, to gaze into her mind, we would find confusion, hesitancy, and a desire to be accepted, recognizable as a knower.

When I was a teacher  
I wrote on the board  
spoke softly  
inviting my students  
to dance in bare feet  
to write  
with me  
beyond defined expectations  
becoming community  
joyful celebrants of individuality  
articulated in the nakedness of risk-taking  
but it was not  
(im)perfection masked as the intangible  
wildness rejecting order  
we were simply be(com)ing

I begin here with the story of my (own) teaching journey, one of praxis, desire, and finally escape. I always begin with this story because it is here where the origins of (my)self as teacher educator arise, it is here where I see failure and possibility. Each day, I return to new landscapes of what once was and what might now be, not for me perhaps, but for my students who have chosen to enter this messy profession called teaching.

Thoughts puddle  
tears upon the floor.  
The principal shouts  
to the little boy  
hands caked in dirt  
burned by the horror of parents'  
actions.  
You are not

good enough,  
 you cannot go  
 see, experience  
 your teacher says so.  
 And I do not speak,  
 instead caught  
 up in anger  
 silenced  
 and silencing  
 I am lost.

I remember myself, an eager beginning elementary school teacher wanting desperately to make a difference, to develop lessons that were engaging while valuing the uniqueness of each student in my classroom. However, as my dreams merged with reality, I was quickly left breathless; isolated in my desire and the reality that perhaps I could not do all that I had imagined. The above poem illustrates this sense of longing and feeling silenced in a holistic sense, but also in a specific sense, when one of my students was not permitted to go on a class field trip because the principal did not trust him, and the principal blamed me. I was overwhelmed by anger, and even as I write this I still find myself somewhat livid at the lost opportunity and in a sense the loss of a young teacher's hope; but I also felt like I had failed my student. This experience is not unique; in fact, I have known many pre-service teachers to feel like they are practicing within a conundrum, where they believe themselves called to make a difference in a space that sputters the status quo, spitting its insipidness upon one's sense of possibility. Often these teachers, like myself, leave the classroom or like so many others I have known, begin to sink into the quicksand of standardization, assessment, and a singularly defined best practice. Teacher attrition is a real problem, and as Darling-Hammond (2003) notes, it is influenced by salaries, poor working conditions, a lack of sufficient teacher preparation and a feeling of having no support or mentors to turn to. As a teacher educator, I feel it is my responsibility to provide my students with multiple opportunities to not only engage with methodology, but also to consider the larger, more systematic, ideological challenges that may play a role in their experiences as teachers. It is my hope that through these types of experiences in the pre-service classroom, that they might develop a sense of praxis and agency within the classroom, thus staying on and truly making a difference.

## With Intention

When my students step into my literacy methods course, I always ask them to identify their goals for the course. Inevitably I find myself bombarded with expectations of facts, formulae, and procedures that will create an exciting and fun classroom, empowering students. While these things are not impossible, there is a lot more that goes into pedagogy. It was this *more* that got me in trouble as a teacher, leaving me feeling ineffective and voiceless; it was this that made me want to run away. As Palmer (1998) suggests, "... good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). As a pre-service teacher I had the opportunity to practice technique, what I had not experienced was developing a sense of inwardness that sought thoughtful relationship with the outer other resonating in both student need and the ideologies that shape pedagogical practice. I believe it was the absence of this opportunity that left me ill-prepared to respond to the challenges that were thrust upon me as a beginning teacher, leaving me to trust my first instinct—to flee. Thus, I believe it is my responsibility as a teacher educator to provide my students with the opportunity to engage both theory and methodology, other story and self story, so that they might become reflexive agents (Shannon, 2001) within a system that can quickly (dis)empower both teachers and students. Giroux (1994) remarks,

To insist that teachers recognize the political nature of their own work can be understood as part of a broader critical effort to make them self-reflective of the interests and assumptions that shape their classroom practices. (p. 37)

In danger  
risky thoughts provoked  
respect us (who)

Yes, teaching is indeed political; however until I entered the door of my own classroom I was not aware of the danger or the possibilities that might exist within this space. I did not realize I was not the only one in the classroom—that along with me stood ideology and expectation all ready to yank me in the "right" direction. With all the desire in the world to be an agent of change, I was unprepared to face what that really meant. I was in danger, frozen, without the tools to step outside expectation and reflect upon my position as pedagogue. "I was taught to master a body of knowledge defined ... but I never learned to question ..." (Giroux, p. 39). Thus, as a

teacher educator, I find myself committed to challenging my students to question, to reflect upon what they read and observe; entering into thoughtful dialogue with text and one another so that they might eventually find the courage to move thoughtfully, responsively, within what can be a tremendously confining space, school. As part of this commitment, I often assign readings that identify the political nature of teaching, that share the underside of the profession, along with the opportunities for praxis, so that students can engage with the “realities” of the classroom, rehearsing their responses so that when they become teachers, they might find themselves able to speak up, to be informed. As Freire (2005) remarks, “If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried away by the wake of change” (p. 6). Throughout their careers, my students will be influenced by the expectations of others, expectations that shift across time and space, but without the ability to critically engage with these ideas, they are likely to find themselves bound, at a loss or even unaware.

Giroux’s (1994) article *Teachers, Public Life, and Curriculum Reform* is a reading that challenges teachers to become public intellectuals, inviting them to “re-imagine teaching as a part of a project of critique and possibility” (p. 39). Within this article, he shares his own struggles as a teacher, the ill-preparation that focused on mastery of knowledge rather than critical consciousness, and the “realities” of negotiating within the status quo that often defines the educational system. It is often a piece that students find themselves drawn to because it does not simply direct them to become agents, it shares a story, one of challenge that might become their own. It is on this piece, and in particular, the response of my students to the ideas presented and my own emerging insights, that I will focus on throughout the rest of this paper. By identifying my pedagogical approach to engaged reflection and exploring the response of my students, I hope to (re)consider the possibilities of poetry, in this case haiku, as a means to create interrogational spaces—for both pre-service teachers and teacher educators— that move toward praxis.

### Choosing Haiku

Sight chosen  
interrogated  
without us

We become  
we watch each other  
truth escapes

As I have mentioned before, the class that I am writing about was a literacy methods course; we had spent a great deal of time focusing on the value of the writing process in the classroom and talked a tad about the role of poetry in that context, but I was feeling like we needed to delve further into the possibilities of poetry. In honor of National Poetry Month, I decided to invite my students to create haikus as a means to reflect upon Giroux's (1994) article and to consider how poems might in fact be used as an inquiry tool within their own classrooms. We began the class as we usually do, reviewing the agenda and moving into reflecting upon the readings. Students were presented with a set of directions, as well as two model haikus that they could refer to if they found themselves stuck.

**In table groups ...**

- Identify the big ideas from the reading
- Discuss what strikes you
- Develop 3-5 Haikus that articulate these ideas/response

Silence--a strangled  
Telephone has forgotten  
That it should ring  
-Michael Collings

Freeway overpass--  
Blossoms in graffiti on  
fog-wrapped June mornings  
- Michael Collings

Fig. 3: PowerPoint slide

Traditionally, students are first exposed to haiku as a 5-7-5 form where one integrates a season word. As this Japanese form has emerged in the West, it has been adapted, both as a strictly 5-7-5 form to a form that simply consists of a short/long/short pattern. When I introduced the form to my students, for the purpose of this project, I broke with convention and gave them space to play with the patterns, recommending: 3-5-3, 5-7-5, short/long/short or long/short/long—they did not



have to follow any specific form, they just had to maintain some consistent form of pattern and respond to the reading.

Dobyns (2003) remarks:

A work of art gives testimony as to what it is to be a human being. It bears witness, it extracts meaning. A work of art is the clearest nonphysical way that emotion is communicated from one human to another. The emotion isn't referred to, it is re-created. The emotion shows us that our most private feelings are in fact shared feelings. And this offers us some relief from existential isolation. (p. 10)

I wanted students to have the opportunity to be engaged in communal art-making as a means to engage both the emotional and the intellectual, transcending the powerful "shoulds" that so often inhabit their thoughts. As Brady (2009) intimates, "... poetics is every bit a sensuous-intellectual activity—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering, and discoursing ourselves in ways that show us something of what we are, literally as embodied participants and observers" (xiv). However, recognizing the (un)comfortable nature of creating poetry, engaging in the sensual and the intellectual simultaneously, and the resistance that might arise when asked to engage in something that did not initially seem relevant, I responded to my students' desire to see instructional methods modeled for them; thus using this as an opportunity to model this as a form of transmediation, whereby one moves communicatively across sign systems, translating meaning (Bergoff et al., 2000).

Haiku is a playful poetic form, the word itself meaning "playful phrase" and as such I believed it would create a safe space to enter into the discursive exploration of theory and practice. Students seemed eager to begin, to engage in this playful form of reflection and at the same time there was a sort of reluctance in the air, a reluctance that I interpreted to represent a fear of vulnerability which is so often present within art-making. However, I believed it was important to be present to this discomfort, to negotiate within this space, a space not dissimilar to the one that they would be entering within the profession. Harr (1975) notes that:

Haiku writing is a precise and demanding art, although it looks deceptively easy. It is an expression of a view of nature or of natural events. It invites the reader to share in the event—to co-create it along with the poet. Therefore, haiku makes no effort to teach or philosophize. It is not unduly emotional, but is capable of subtly eliciting emotional response. This is done by understatement, by showing rather than telling. (p. 113)

While one may initially find discomfort in the act of art-making, there is a structure to haiku that creates a sense of safety on the part of many pre-service teachers, who often find themselves searching for something rational to hold onto within a practice that they are slowly coming to recognize as ambiguous. By using the haiku, I was seeking to find a balance between creating a safe space where students might be faced, through interaction and creative practice, with self and other (Bolton, 1999). It was this active and collective engagement with self, other, and practice that I wanted to elicit, yet I also saw the importance of providing my students with the opportunity to find their own way, discover their own words. Integrating the haiku response into my classroom provided just such an opportunity.

## Moving Through Haiku

After being introduced to the task, students were broken into table groups of 4 or 5 and one group of 6. Each group chose to approach the task differently: some involved group members brainstorming together the words that they thought were relevant, others involved group members each writing their own haiku and then coming together to share and respond upon the completion of each poem. Either way throughout the process there was lively dialogue and debate, as well as sense of deep engagement with the ideas that Giroux was trying to convey within his article. The following are the haiku poems that they created:

### Group One

Oppression  
The teacher struggles  
For a voice

Finding balance within structure  
Creativity  
Let students explore learning

Working together  
A bond that promotes learning  
Teacher and students

### Group Two

Teach useful knowledge  
Not only the textbook facts  
He never learned how

Civic competence  
Teachers are agents of change  
What do students learn?

Purposeful teaching  
Empowerment of students  
Promoting changes

**Group Three**

Traditional ways  
Dull, dry writing on the wall  
No one really learns

Politics

We're agents of change  
Be active

Rethink, restructure  
Create a class vision  
The role of teachers

**Group Four**

Pushed aside  
Marginalized by a lack  
Of a voice

Empowered for change  
Stepping out into the world  
Forging a new path

Sit in silence  
That is how people learn  
"hands off, minds off"

Knowledge to expand  
But stopped by those who don't know  
We must band together

Confined by rules,  
Made without the knowledge  
Of how they'd work

Upon the completion of the groups' work, they were eager to share their poems with the rest of the class, proud of their own and their peers' ability to create something tangible and thoughtful. As the poems were shared, themes such as relationship, creativity, rules, reflection, and empowerment were identified and a great deal of discussion ensued in relationship to their role as public intellectuals and what that might mean for their practice. This discussion continued on when they moved into planning their units; it was exciting for them to begin examining how they might empower students, but also what challenges they might come up against. It was a good class, where students had clearly engaged with our essential question (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) for the day: *Why is it important for teachers to be intellectuals and agents of change?*

## Poetic Ponderings



Fig. 4: Stitching sel(f)ves

A life in teaching is a stitched-together affair, a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition. To make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes give out, and to make mistakes and then rework large pieces. (Ayers, 1993)

Despite the positive tone of the class, when I began to engage with the poems of my students, I found myself drawn to specific words:

Marginalized confinement  
Rules made in silence  
Oppressed the teacher struggles

Made without  
Knowledge to see change  
Stopped by a lack of change

I was nervous, was this kind of agency I hoped for my students, an agency that dwelt within the negative (im)possible, where light was overpowered by dark



But do not stop  
 look back  
 for fear

our story  
 experience  
 (im)possibility acknowledged

and then  
 we pause stopping in the moment  
 drawing on our senses  
 willing protectors exposed  
 ready to move in response

ours and theirs  
 the (be)longing  
 no longer matters  
 we have become  
 a body  
 moving presently  
 with/in the blowing wind

The poems created by my students demonstrate a willingness to become vulnerable, a willingness I thought I shared until I stopped to recognize the reflection of my own painful experiences upon my interpretation of their words. I had been clinging for so long to the emotions arising from my own experience that I had forgotten to pause, to see that this was not the only way of experiencing the work of being a teacher. By pausing to take another look, opening up the space of experience and understanding to something that is complicated and collective, I was able to soften the voice of my own intention; to shift the pedagogical lens of my teaching and (re)search so that it might become something collective, where self and other, student and teacher are (dis)connected. It is through this (dis)connection, where stories and understandings are (un)wound that possibility can arise. Through poetic practice the interpretation of text/experience needs not be a mere revalidation of what I already believe I know. Instead, this new acknowledgement of the voice of another, in this case the students in my literacy class, creates space for varied perspectives and possibilities. As I move aware that I am not alone, I gain insight, "... that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side learning to let them speak to one another" (Bateson, 1994, p. 14). Todd (2003) reminds me change is not possible without this communal relationship that calls for question and change within acceptance of self in relation to another.

The Other signifies a limitless possibility for the self, and it is by coming face to face with such limitlessness that the self can exceed its own containment, its own self-identity, breaking the solitude of being for the self. In this view teaching is only possible if the self is open to the Other, to the face of the Other. Through such openness to what is exterior, the "I" can become something different than or beyond, what it was; in short it can learn. (p. 30)

The anger has subsided  
washed by the winds of  
our (re)collection of life

The teacher  
becomes the learner  
enchanted

My students were proud of their creations, eager to share their words with one another—it is my hope that this sense of pride might translate later when even with/in the ideologically violent space of school, they hold on to that sense of hope—acknowledging the fullness and complexity of their position as teachers, a fullness that I had not been ready to see.

## Full Circle



Fig. 5: Resurrection of voice(s)





anticipate was my own growth in the process, or that my students might in fact teach me something about myself and my own pedagogy through their poetry.

We walk within sounds,  
darkness echoing upon  
the landscape--today  
that becomes  
tomorrow,  
when we breathe.  
hope, upon the sorrow  
washes engrained perspective  
distinct becoming,  
tame and wild  
moving possibility  
between each other's  
hands, clasped in pleasure for the  
light that rises out  
when I begin to see we,  
together  
the navigation finds us  
opportunity for use.  
springtime rises youth

Through this poetic inquiry, I have come to realize how even within the context of the college classroom, my pedagogy and my interpretation of truth remained haunted by the trauma of my own experiences and loss as an elementary school teacher. In addition, I have come to recognize that this did not have to be the truth for me, nor did it have to be so for my students. Instead, pedagogy must rest in a place of resiliency and awareness, where we are willing to see hopefully within practice, not simply with angry recognition of unjust ideology.

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**Sarah MacKenzie** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where she mentors student teachers and teaches courses in literacy and educational foundations. Her current research explores arts-informed epistemologies and the ways and spaces in which pre-service teachers (co)write their identities as teachers.



# “To Avoid Embarrassment, Poetry Should Keep Itself to Itself”: An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Place of Poetry in Adult Literacy Teacher Education

Shelley Tracey, Queen’s University Belfast

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the reasons for the author’s reluctance to bring examples of her own poetry into her practice as teacher educator on a program for adult literacy tutors. The paper begins with the author’s poem, “The Place of Poetry,” which is used as a tool for reflection on the author’s assumptions about her identities as poet and as educator. The paper ends with poems written by the author’s students, which demonstrate that the use of poetry in education has the potential to facilitate transformative learning.

## The Place of Poetry


*To avoid embarrassment, poetry should keep itself to itself.  
It should be private, not shout out loud  
or pretend that it can sing. There’s virtue in the repetitive detail  
of a daisy, or the simplicity of a tulip; you must agree that  
orchids are utterly tasteless and profane.*

*Poetry should sit quietly in a corner, knees to its chest, fiddling with its  
hair. It should make no jerky movements, or appear too suddenly. It should be  
obedient, perform decorously when requested, and be silent and calm. It should  
never ever strut about proudly, or dare to overwhelm you; it’s just a lesser trickle  
and never a wave.*

*Poetry should know it's finite, limit itself to the specific, the particular:  
the edges of a shell, one single white rose-petal,  
a smearing of silver across a fish's back,  
the winking blue eye at the core of a snail.*

*I knew a tree once that leaned itself back against a riverbank, growing  
wide and flat and shameless where some grasses used to grow. But there's no  
poetry in that: we all must adapt ourselves, never making statements about  
miracles or art.*

*Don't let poetry confuse you.  
You know it's not momentous.  
Be on your guard; deny it access, and keep it in its place.*

his poem emerged from my practice as teacher educator on a program for adult literacy practitioners. It was provoked by the negative responses of more than two thirds of my students in three successive cohorts to my suggestion that they incorporate poetry reading and writing into their literacy classes. In a survey, these students indicated that they felt excluded by poetic language, were not particularly fond of poetry, and thought that the learners whom they were teaching would not enjoy it. Two of the main reasons cited for this aversion to poetry were: not knowing where to start when commanded to write a poem in class, and the sense conveyed by their English teachers that they alone held the key to the one and only correct interpretation of a specific poem.

Poetry has a very different place in my own life from that of most of my students: I have been writing it since I was a child, and the practices of reading and making poetry are woven into the fabric of my everyday life. My poetry has been published in conventional print formats, such as anthologies and journals, and in less conventional ones such as on a CD of recorded poems and on a glass sculpture of short pieces which toured Ireland in 2003. In October 2005, my sense of identity as a poet and my ideas about the appropriate "places" for poetry were tested when I was invited to participate in the annual week-long Canadian event of Random Acts of Poetry (online) as the Belfast contributor. These random acts involved asking individuals or groups of people in venues not normally associated with poetry if I could read one of my poems to them. The venues I chose included the greenhouses in a botanical garden, a bus stop, an art gallery and a railway station. Most of the responses to

my random acts were positive, although I will never forget the look of disgust on the face of the woman behind the till at the garage when I offered to read a poem to her; it was as if I had made a particularly lewd suggestion. That entire week, I was filled with anxiety about putting my precious poetry out there, and concerned as to whether presenting poetry as a surprise has the effect of marginalizing it as eccentric and shocking, as conveyed in Sandra Faulkner's lines below:

*Poetry is  
when I lift my brown hemp skirt  
in the packed metro car, show  
some stripped tights in orange,  
rusty red and plum purple.  
But my fun flushed face and toes  
are only a dream of a dream  
I told you about just now,  
like writing some poem.*

*(Faulkner, 2007, p. 229)*

The Random Acts of Poetry experience and the process of writing my poem about the place of poetry helped me to identify a major contradiction: my poetry is out there in the world to a certain extent, but I find it challenging to be "out there" as a poet. Until I wrote "The Place of Poetry," I had never identified myself as a poet in my practice as a teacher educator, nor had I brought any of my own poetry into the classroom, even when I engaged my students in creative writing. This paper explores the reasons for my "hiddenness" about poetry, how and why I eventually "came out" to my students as a poet and a poetry lover, and how poetry enhances reflection on the processes of learning and the nature of language.

## Languaging

*The art of knotting words together,  
loose but still connected,  
leaving spaces for absences  
and pathways of butterflies,  
wings almost touching.*

In its focus on some of the subjective aspects of writing poetry and teaching, this is an exploratory and not an expository paper. It is a reflexive autoethnographic unravelling, in prose and in poetry, of the web of assumptions which I had created about my roles and responsibilities as educator, and about learning and poetry, and shares the processes of developing insights and understanding. At the same time, I acknowledge that these insights might be partial, agreeing with de Freitas (2008, p. 471) that although reflexivity acknowledges and builds on the writer's subjectivity, the self-awareness and truths that emerge from the process are not absolute, nor is language sufficiently transparent to convey these processes accurately. As a poet, I am particularly aware of the limited capacity of language to reveal and describe the subjective explicitly and definitively; poetic language is dense and complex and the use of metaphor and other poetic devices provoke and resonate with a variety of realities, experiences and texts. These resonances limit my own certainty about the meaning of my own words.

### Creativity Conference, Cambridge 23rd November 2009

*Outside the room where meaning's being created,  
the sky's deciding how it might like to be:  
the underbelly of a riverbed  
transforming through the flowing;  
or perhaps a winged seed prying loose  
from deep inside the flesh of day.  
The light is sliding through the clouds,  
or possibly the clouds are endsmoke  
of a light that overheated.  
The winter trees, inclining,  
have turned their backs,  
shaking their heads,  
pretending they were never present.*

While I have memories of and notes about drafting and writing the poems in this paper, these memories add little to my knowledge, for memory is mutable and accumulates and discards meaning over time. I will refer to the poems included in this paper to supplement its themes, but will not analyze them in detail or explain them to the reader. I lack the confidence to boast that I own the unique interpretation of my work, unlike the English teachers of some of my own students!

## Coherence

*What is tenuous lets meaning through.  
The moon burns through the porous urban night.  
I like the stillness of the sleeping houses;  
they all make sense.  
In the morning, I feel resistant.  
This intense new sky imagines me somewhere else, or in a painting,  
always stopping to look, not having to move on.  
Leaves edged with frost so perfectly specific: one statement at a time.  
The outsides and insides of things  
might not recognise each other,  
but it seems as if we might be less uncertain.*

These lines reflect my belief that poetry offers opportunities to engage with the complexities of meaning making and to access imaginal worlds of possibility and learning. As a teacher educator, I support my students in entering these imaginal worlds through the use of a range of arts-based methods for reflection, besides the traditional one of writing reflective journals (Tracey, 2009a). This paper explores poetry as a tool for reflection on my identities as poet and teacher educator. This exploration draws on different notions about reflection in its application in two models of reflective practice. In the first instance, I agree with Hiley's suggestion (2006) that reflective practice is intrinsically poetic by nature, with reflection occurring through the mode of poetic expression. The poem "Coherence" is the result of my reflections on my practice.

In contrast, Brookfield's model of critical reflection (1988, 1995) focuses on critical rather than on creative thinking, and involves educators in examining critically their assumptions, beliefs, values and practices. The poem with which this paper began acted as a stimulus for the examination of my own assumptions about my practice. Although my reflection on these assumptions was written a few years ago, it appears here in the present tense to capture my thinking processes:

*At a distance of three or four years since the poem was written, I identify less with it as its creator, and more with the ideas about the place of poetry which it conveys. The image of poetry sitting in a corner fiddling with its hair provokes thoughts not only about the concreteness of this image, but also the way in which I have kept my poetry out of my practice, as if I need to maintain a separate identity as a poet from that of*

educator. My reflections on my poem lead me to observe and question my notion, based on my study of the work of Carl Rogers, that my main role as teacher educator is that of a facilitator of learning and self-actualization. My understanding of the nature of facilitation appears to be intertwined with an assumption that this necessitates the withdrawal of my individual and creative self from my position as educator. This accords with my personal reticence and unwillingness to appear to be “showing off” to my students and imposing my interests on them; this reticence is reflected in the images of privacy and intimacy in the poem and the tone of secrecy, however ironic they are.

In contrast, as teacher educator on a programme for adult literacy tutors, I am more than willing to declare myself in my role as the monitor of the correct uses of language. I remind students that I am the Guardian of Grammar, a member of the Apostrophe Protection Society, and the Sentence Structure Supporting Act. While there is humor and playfulness in this list of ironic titles, they reinforce my power as maintainer of academic standards and as assessor of student coursework and of their teaching practice. I begin to wonder whether I have not shared my own poetry with my students because it might threaten the personal power with which my role endows me. I give a variety of reasons for not presenting my own poetry to my students, including my reluctance to “force” it upon an unwilling audience, some of whom might feel they have to admire it to please me. I am also aware of my fear about negative responses to my poetry. My identity as poet is so important to me that it seems threatening to bring it into the classroom and risk it being undermined. At the same time, my concern about the risks of exploring poetry with my students, both mine and that of established poets, could prevent me from stretching the students and provoking their engagement with aspects of language and literature which are outside their comfort zone, but nonetheless worthwhile and inspiring. Poets whom I admire such as Ben Okri suggest that it is precisely the responsibility of the poet to extend the possibilities of language and the boundaries of the known: “Poets are set against the world because they cannot accept that what there seems to be is all there is. .... The poet is the widener of consciousness” (Okri, 1997, pp. 3–4).

The experience of reflecting on my Place of Poetry poem supported me in developing my understanding about the importance of poetry in my practice. The poet/educator/researcher Carl Leggo argues for the inclusion of poetry in all aspects of learning, claiming that, “Poetry engages us with language, nurtures the inner life, acknowledges the particular and local, encourages us to listen to our hearts, fosters flexibility and trust, and invites creativity and creative living” (Leggo, 2005, p. 439). In my own practice, I use acrostic and shape poetry to engage students in playing with language and exploring ways of giving the beginner writers in their classes a voice. These forms of poetry appear to generate a playful attitude to language; they also



seem to be vehicles for deep learning, providing adult literacy learners with opportunities to synthesize their learning experiences and to convey the emotional as well as the cognitive impact of their learning (Tracey, 2009b).

Exploring my assumptions through the lens of my poem has stimulated me to bring my own poetry into my practice. The poem below, which is as intensely personal and as charged with emotion as some of those written by adult literacy learners in my students' classes, was one of the first which I shared with my students:

### Like Trees: for V.K.

*Some people are easy to see:  
Like trees, they declare themselves, exposing  
their yearnings without any shame. They are wonder  
made conscious, a canvas for light. Risking the storms,  
they articulate slow transition. Visible, substantial,  
they acknowledge their wounds.  
Some people, like trees,  
are easy to see. Some people are easy to love.*

There is a direct contrast between this poem with its references to visibility and transparency and the “hiddenness” of the Place of Poetry poem at the start of this paper. Sharing “Like Trees” with my students was risky; while some of them expressed their approval, others worried away at the initials in the title, wanting to know the history behind the poem and ignoring the content and language of the poem itself. Some students were dismissive, saying that because the poem didn't rhyme, was very brief and didn't “sound like a poem”; it was not a “real” poem. However, the risk of presenting the poem for scrutiny appeared to be worth taking, because students' questions about it provoked a discussion about creative processes, rhythm, repetition and metaphor, and generated suggestions about using poetry in literacy classes. Each time that I have shared one of my own poems in class, at least two students have subsequently given or emailed me a poem which they wrote after that class. As Leggo suggests, the use of poetry in education supports the development of trust and creativity.

To support students in using poetry as a form of deep learning, they are given a group task to write a metaphor poem about their learning. Working in a group encourages collaborative reflection and reduces what might appear to some

the insuperable challenge of being required to produce a poem as an individual. The following example from the class of 2008 to 2009 suggests that this is an effective activity:

### My certificate course is.....

*Reflective as a lamp in a window  
when the outside is dark,  
or cat's eyes  
caught in the headlights.*

*Eye opening as matchsticks at the end of the night.*

*Confusing as a one legged man  
in a prosthetics shop  
looking for an arm.*

*Inspiring as a one legged man  
finding a new arm in a prosthetics shop.*

*Stefanie, Jacqui, Moyra and Paula*

Risking the foregrounding of poetry and my identity as a poet in my practice appears to have encouraged students to have taken a similar risk in engaging with poetry. The poem below is by a student who recently completed the first year of the program. This poem, which is the first she has ever written, conveys her deep involvement in the learning process, as well as its profound impact. The poem synthesizes her understanding of reflection with the format of acrostic poetry and an exploration of the possibilities of language.

### Reflections

*Reflecting on this road I've travelled  
Regard the distance I have come  
Recall the places where I've stumbled  
Face all the fears I've now undone*

*Each footfall on this winding pathway  
Stretching far behind my back  
Has brought me to a new position  
From which there is no changing tack*

*Fearsome foes, inclement weather  
Many things to overcome  
Not least of all the inner demons  
Each tried to break me, one by one*

*Learning always from each other  
Sharing spools of common thread  
Has made the journey go more quickly  
Inspiring confidence, not dread*

*Engaging with my adult learners  
Has taught me more than books could do  
Walking sometimes in their footsteps  
Has helped me know just what to do*

*Clear, before me, lies the ocean  
Foaming waves break on the shore  
I watch in silent contemplation  
Reflecting now, that I know more*

*Trials and tribulations over  
I rest amongst the shady dunes  
I bathe my feet in healing water  
At once revived, refreshed, renewed*

*I gaze into this tranquil mirror  
Reflect on all I've seen and done  
I've learned so much along this journey  
I can't believe that now it's done*

*On this quiet shore the gentle lapping  
Soothes me into slumber sweet  
I'll rest a while 'til it is morning  
The onward will I further seek*

*Not at an end, my quest continues  
A new path must I seek and tread  
For learning is an onward journey  
That will not end till I am dead.*

*Nicola Toner*

## Conclusion: Reflections and the Place of Poetry

This paper began with my poem about the place of poetry as a stimulus for reflections on the challenges of incorporating poetry into my practice. It seems fitting that the paper should end not with another example of my work, but with a poem written by one of my students on a teacher education program for adult literacy practitioners. Nicola's evocative words provoke me into further reflections: about the differences between our poems, about transformative learning, and on the place of poetry in teacher education.

Unlike Nicola's "Reflections," my poem is tentative in terms of theme, imagery and language; the use of irony allows me to distance myself from the "embarrassments" of poetry. Nicola is far more present in her poem than I am in mine. She reveals the painful aspects of her learning journey directly and courageously. The alliteration, rhymes and half-rhymes in "Reflections" reinforce its tone of conviction and determination. The metaphors of movement and struggle in her poem convey the impression that Nicola has fully engaged with and been changed by the learning process; this contrasts directly with my image of poetry sitting in a corner fiddling with its hair.

"Reflections" is about the changes which learning brings; the nature and processes of these changes are conveyed in the reflective content of the poem, the movement from past to future and in the poet's assertion that her experiences have "*brought me to a new position/ From which there is no changing tack.*" In its emphasis on change and the sense that her "new position" represents a fundamental alteration in the poet's perspectives, this poem embodies transformative learning. In its classical sense, transformative learning entails a permanent shift in frames of reference, often beginning with a "disorienting dilemma" or series of dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991). The "Reflections" poem subsumes several of the stages which occur in the process of

transformative learning, according to Kitchenham's list of these phases below (2008, p. 105). Illustrative excerpts from "Reflections" have been added to the relevant phases (in italics).

**Table 1:**  
*Kitchenham's List of Phases*

<p><b>Phase 1 A disorienting dilemma</b> <i>"the places where I've stumbled"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 2 A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame</b> <i>"...the inner demon/Each tried to break me, one by one"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 3 A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions</b> <i>"Engaging with my adult learners/Has taught me more than books could do /Walking sometimes in their footsteps/Has helped me know just what to do"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 4 Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change</b> <i>"Learning always from each other/Sharing spools of common thread"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 5 Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions</b></p>
<p><b>Phase 6 Planning of a course of action</b> <i>"Clear, before me, lies the ocean/Foaming waves break on the shore/I watch in silent contemplation Reflecting now, that I know more"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 7 Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans</b> <i>"I gaze into this tranquil mirror/Reflect on all I've seen and done/I've learned so much along this journey"</i></p>
<p><b>Phase 8 Provisional trying of new roles</b></p>
<p><b>Phase 9 Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships</b></p>
<p><b>Phase 10 A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective</b> <i>"a new position, From which there is no changing tack"</i></p>

While Mezirow's classical model of transformative learning foregrounds the rational and cognitive aspects of learning (Mezirow, 1985, 1994), Dirkx's conceptualization addresses the affective, imaginal and transpersonal aspects (Dirkx, 1997, 2001; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006). The process of transformation in Dirkx's sense occurs through "inner work" (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003, p. 115), incorporating profound self-searching. In its self-searching and its reflective enquiry, emotionality and expressive use of language, "Reflections" seems to encompass both the rational and imaginal aspects of transformative learning.

The poem "Reflections" is suggested as a useful stimulus for discussion in teacher education programs about the nature of the learning journey and about the reflective processes which foster this learning. The structured format of the acrostic poem provides a supportive framework within which student teachers might reflect on their practice. Poetry has the potential to support them, as it did the author of this paper and her students, in examining their assumptions about learning and about their identities as educators.

At the end of this paper, I replace my initial concerns about poetry in my work as teacher educator with an acknowledgment of its right to be there, and a continuing commitment, in the words of my poem "Like Trees: for V.K", to making it "Visible, substantial." The place of poetry is in my practice.

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**Shelley Tracey** is a poet and teacher educator, South African by origin, who lives and works in Belfast, Northern Ireland. She coordinates a professional qualifications program for adult literacy and numeracy practitioners in the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast. In all aspects of her practice, she seeks and develops opportunities for educators to explore and enhance their creativity. Her publications and research interests include creativity, practitioner research, using visual methods of reflection in teacher education, and including literacy learners in writing communities. She is currently composing text poems and writing about this new poetic form and its potential as an inclusive literacy practice.

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## The Everything and the Nothing of Educational Experience: The Poetic Vicissitudes of Tom Wayman's *Did I Miss Anything?*

David Lewkowich, McGill University

### ABSTRACT

In Tom Wayman's poem *Did I Miss Anything?*, the poet-teacher offers a series of responses to the above question, posed by a student unaware of the always contextual nature of learning. The poet replies: "Nothing" and "Everything." In the course of this paper, I use this poem as a prompt, approaching the tensions held in these words not as a chuckle at the student's expense, but instead, as a humorous challenge that revises the question of what is at stake in the educational act, and as an absurd gesturing into the boundaries of what the possibilities of teaching might be.

### Did I Miss Anything? (Tom Wayman)

*Question frequently asked by  
students after missing a class*

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here  
we sat with our hands folded on our desks  
in silence, for the full two hours

Everything. I gave an exam worth  
40 per cent of the grade for this term  
and assigned some reading due today  
on which I'm about to hand out a quiz  
worth 50 per cent

Nothing. None of the content of this course  
has value or meaning  
Take as many days off as you like:  
any activities we undertake as a class  
I assure you will not matter either to you or me  
and are without purpose

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time  
a shaft of light descended and an angel  
or other heavenly being appeared  
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do  
to attain divine wisdom in this life and  
the hereafter  
This is the last time the class will meet  
before we disperse to bring this good news to all people  
on earth


Nothing. When you are not present  
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom  
is a microcosm of human existence  
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder  
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been  
gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

## The Extremes of Nothing and Everything

 In responding poetically to the frequent query of his students, “*Did I miss anything?*,” Tom Wayman sets up a pedagogic situation of extremes, which admits of the possibility that contradiction and vacillation are both primary and necessary to the educational act itself. He tells his students “Nothing.” He tells his students “Everything.” An impossible demand is placed on the teacher when asked to provide

an exact account of what happens in her classroom, of what the movements of learning really and finally add up to, of what transpires irregardless of ambiguity. Such impossible demands decree impossible solutions, and in fact, Tom Wayman answers the only way he can: both impossibly and nonsensically. In the course of this paper, I use Tom Wayman's poem as a prompt and as a space of inquiry into theoretical thought, approaching the tension and juxtaposition held in his words not just as a simple reproach, nor as a slight demeaning chuckle at the student's expense, but instead, as a humorous challenge that revisions the question of what is at stake in the interminable movements of learning, and also, as an absurd gesturing into the boundaries of what the possibilities of teaching might be.

In regards to his role as poet, Wayman (1993a) declares one of his main objectives to be that of "demystify[ing] the world," through the deployment of words that accurately reflect a speaker's lived experiences, and of "speaking with the utmost clarity" (p. 10), thus illuminating the contradictions of existence not so much as to further confuse the field, but to "render the text habitable" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi), to render classroom dialogue meaningful, and educational experience touchable. To tell students they missed *everything* and *nothing* is to share with them the fact that human experience consists of neither, or perhaps both, and that knowledge itself is an often-incongruous construct, for and from which they must forever interpret and glean meaning for themselves.

## "A Literature at the Edge of Work"

Tom Wayman is a Canadian poet concerned with the lives and everyday experiences of working people and how they come to be represented in art—whether their representations belong to them or not. As an advocate of the proliferation of what he titles the "new work writing," Wayman endorses an art of and for labour, which strives to realistically represent human relations in the social world of work. Unlike the efforts of the solitary artist set apart, who writes not about him or herself but on the work of others, this "new work writing" is a performance of self-representation, and is actually a language constructed by those directly involved in the illustrated conditions: the workers, the teachers, the unemployed. Not setting out to embellish and glorify working life, but to appreciate the central—and sometimes contradictory—role work plays in the construction of human subjectivities (and life

itself), and the complicated nature of the relationships we have while working, and toward our work—we often both love it and hate it, look forward to it while also despising its inevitability—Wayman argues that “because the central experience of daily life is still almost everywhere missing” in poetic representation (1983, p. 24), poetry is often revered as something untouchable, eternal, and immaterial. It is from against this lack that he deliberates on “a literature at the edge of work” (1983, p. 62), one that can take into account, and spring forth from, the actual needs and desires of working men and women, and to firmly claim these lives as both important and worthy of poetic appellation, “as creative producers rather than as passive recipients of information and skills” (Low, 2008a, p. 145).

In the context of education, Wayman also sees a lack of correspondence between the inevitable vicissitudes of the everyday—where students live multifariously confusing and complicated social realities, both inside and outside of school—and the types of literature studied in classrooms, typically taken up through abstract and intangible means. Wayman writes of the chronic squandering of poetry’s potential, in its unfortunate though familiar function as a storehouse for the mappings of literary technique, memorization, and rote skill, what he calls “an instrument of torture in mass public education” (Wayman, 1993a, p. 171). He also criticizes the proliferation of attitudes that position the poet as part of a privileged literary elite, as a dealer in “esoteric mysteries,” as opposed to the material particulars of life (p. 171). “Put another way,” Wayman (1983) notes, both in the context of school and labour, “we learn that serious literature consists of overwritten escape books” (p. 15).

Of great consequence to Wayman, then, is what Bronwen Low (2008b) refers to as “a dynamic poetics of the moment” (p. 120), one that hardly regards itself as extraordinary, immutable or resistant to change, but instead, as fundamentally malleable, and, in its very nature as a flexible form, also accurate in its representation of the human condition. The question, therefore, that must be posed in the context of the poem at hand, is: What does an accurate representation of teaching look like? Who measures, justifies, and defines such accuracy? Is it a linear narrative of heroic feats and identifiable ends, “as if the time of education could set precisely the time of learning” (Britzman, 1998, p. 4), or is it something more stumbling, more incoherent, and in its essence as something altogether indecipherable, more imperfectly human and humorous? Is its measure obvious and straightforward? Or is it inherently contradictory, at once sarcastic *and* serious, bitter and hostile *while also* compassionate and tender? For myself, and from the deep-rooted uncertainty that I take to be the true story of education, Wayman’s poem points to the tensions of teaching—as played out in the classroom—and to the actual weight that rests on its hinges: the doubts, the

disenchantments, the unmet expectations, the skewed realities, but also the utter joy, the shocking and sometimes beautiful spontaneity, and the inevitable meeting of curriculum worlds.

## A Landscape of Folded Curriculum

In the alternating indented stanzas of Wayman's poem there is a volatile sense of performative irresolution and fracture. The inconsistent and imaginary response is one of juggling alternatives, though since neither of them is genuinely valid—in that the totalizing nature of the *everything* and the *nothing* negates an explicit claim to reality and points, instead, only to fallacy and fantasy—and there are no direct demands placed on the student to choose, there is actually an alternative left unspoken, though insinuating itself interstitially in the stanza breaks. It is almost as if the explicit tone of mockery in the poem, a tone that dissipates yet is felt most forcefully on the first reading, is a means to make the reader vulnerable and exposed; to ridicule, shame, and embarrass. Yet in the solemn nature of the poem's end—"but it was one place and you weren't here"—the derisive tone is shown to have no substance, no affective staying power, and so actually empowers the reader to take a step back and consider her choices, to pillage and plunder in the shadowy echoes of textual silence. It is here that Canadian curriculum theorist Ted Aoki's notion of the folded curriculum of educational experience, a zone of tension in between the lived and the planned, can best be sounded out.

For Aoki, the pedagogical situation is never one of strict correspondence, but consists instead of a forever negotiated "living in tensionality" (2005d, p. 159), as teachers and students find themselves indwelling, sometimes precariously, in between at least two separate spheres of curriculum demands, which themselves passionately resist integration. The first is that of the preplanned, instrumental understandings of the curriculum landscape, which operate in a "fiction of sameness," and wherein "teachers are asked to be doers" (2005d, p. 160). This is the "curriculum-as-plan," the bureaucratic sphere of government documents; predetermined empirical applications that generally assume certainty and stability, and a linear trajectory from beginning to end. Apart from this exceedingly normative framework, though, there is the mode of curricular being that can only be articulated in the ambiguous potential of classroom experience and embodied relationality. Referred to as the "curriculum-as-lived," this situated curriculum consists of the unpredictable, the improvised, the "unplanned and unplannable" (2005b, p. 322). Teachers, however, cannot choose

definitively only one curriculum field over the other, and must forever reconcile themselves and their material situations anew, acknowledging the tension that comes from “living simultaneously with limitations and with openness, but also that this openness harbours within it risks and possibilities as we quest for a change from the is to the not yet” (2005d, p. 164).

When presented with the question of understanding what teaching and learning is, we are presented with what Aoki terms a “hermeneutic problem of the relationship between the general and the particular” (Aoki, 2005e, p. 155), between the mandated and the lived. To think of teaching instrumentally, and only as an abstract “application,” is to ignore the fusion of horizons, the meeting of worlds, which determines classroom experience. For “what the situation demands must not be ignored” (2005e, p. 155), and in Aoki’s view, for the situation of pedagogy to be understood properly it must be understood in its forever fluctuating relationality, and at every moment in a new and different way, in “a tension between the appearance that presents immediately to us and that which needs to be revealed” (2005e, p. 156).

Aoki’s approach to bilingualism can also help us to further appreciate this pressing questioning of relation. To venture conceptually into the sphere of a second language is not here put forward as a technical task of appropriating a linguistic code, but is viewed as a circular endeavour of “being-and-becoming-in the world”; to “belong to two worlds at once and yet not belong to either completely” (2005a, p. 243). The practice of being bilingual is thus to stand in a dialogic dialectic, of questioning between the known and the unknown, and with “an understanding of education as a leading out and a going beyond” (2005a, p. 245), a position that is often ambiguous and difficult, and necessarily branches into the sphere of unknown possibility. Aoki’s understanding of the layering and forever-folded sedimentation in “the architectonics of the curriculum landscape” (2005c, p. 201), like the inarticulable in Wayman’s poem, insinuates the possibility of a pedagogical alternative necessarily steeped in a lack of consistency and totality, and what is more, an alternative that actually characterizes the majority of human experience: doubled over and lost, in between the extremes of *nothing* and *everything*.

## A Rhetoric of Walking in Words

If one can imagine the reader of the poem as staging a travel, where the printed words point to familiar notations and routes, and the blank spaces indicate districts not normally frequented, notes not normally sounded—like sleepy, stuttering statues, and long barren wheat fields—then we can think of reading as a walking out and a shifting speculation, as a rambling “space of enunciation” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98). In Michel de Certeau’s account of the steps we take when walking in the city, there is an elocutionary rhetoric to the inscriptions we invariably stage. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, page one, page two, page three, and so on, but “everything else is of an unlimited diversity,” and cannot be simply “reduced to their graphic trail” (p. 99). While the body of the reader steps out indefinitely, it creates value by staking a pause and changing direction, then shifting with the rhythms of the wind and the moment to manage a trajectory of movement that is never foreseeable. In this way, the walker, in his or her “long poem of walking” (p. 99), takes and engages the space that is given, along with the roads, the alleys, the sentence breaks, the fields, the margins, the ocean, and manipulates such intersections to suit her fancy, linking diverse places in his/her stride. This movement skilfully secretes out of spatial organization the normally unseen and unsaid, the “shadows and ambiguities within them” (p. 99). As spaces of enunciation, they must be walked in to be written, and likewise with reading Wayman’s poem; “by an art of being in between” (p. 30), and in questioning the spaces framing the stanza, the reader can always draw unanticipated storylines over and through the ones already assumed written. As with the curriculum lived into existence in the classroom, a “travel story” in its own right—where bridges are built over frontiers, and where the student and teacher face each other every instance anew, inventing and transforming from within the demands of the situation at hand—there is also in the gathering of reading an act of privileging, a transformation, and a necessary abandonment. What is more, there is an understanding in this further folding of experience that “plurality is originary” (p. 133), and that claims to natural unity and order—in literature as well as education—are but semblances of an illusory formality that have no basis in reality, a brutal masking and a covering over of “the murmuring of everyday practices” (p. 200).

But how, then, does Wayman’s poem function to bring together, in its humour, in its shrug-of-the-shoulders abandonment, an articulation of teaching that refuses to engage one extreme at the absolute expense of the other? And moreover, that manages to trust in the spaces between the words, where bodies and languages touch? For Cynthia Chambers et al. (2008), the practice of *métissage*, in modes of living as well as writing, offers a starting point. In this understanding, *métissage*—which

is both a theoretical outlook and a praxis of politics, reading, writing and research—“carries the ability to transform,” and through its encouragement of an always presumed mixing of perspectives and voice, it “opposes transparency and has the power to undo logic and the clarity of concepts” (p. 141). This idea is not unlike what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) refers to as *heteroglossia*, the integration of, “another’s speech in another’s language” (p. 324, emphasis in original). When put into service, the work of métissage functions as a sustained and collaborative collage between different and differently sounded voices, knotting together seemingly disparate fragments into a narrative braid “that highlights difference . . . without essentializing or erasing it, while simultaneously locating points of affinity” (Chambers et al., p. 142). In Awad Ibrahim’s (2009) situating of métissage as a significant cultural practice in Hip-Hop communities, this way of approaching the world, this methodology of language and identity, supports dialogue among multiple “entities that are equally valorized; hence it is an egalitarian hybridity, where ambiguity, multiplicity, fragmentation and plurality become the new landscape” (p. 233).

As I have touched on elsewhere (Lewkowich, 2010), the innovative tactics of reading that poetry encourages plays out a fracture at the moment of performance. This “moment” is likewise remade in each reading, though regardless of where it is played out, the perspectives of a dynamic and lived poetics are forever split at their core. As the reader peers into the grainy fog and poaches, making interpretive choices out of shadows, poetry can also function as an interruption that skews and disrupts; and thus the strange and solemn grammar in Wayman’s ending—“but it was one place and you weren’t here”—can be retold and retooled, as a persistent pointing to the meaning of the present re-imagined through the mention of a past absence; as *this is another place and you are here*.

## Of Humour and Leaky Bodies

In many ways, Wayman’s poem functions as one big joke. As Margrit Shildrick (1997) writes of “leaky bodies,” in the context of bioethics, and of the always unstable materiality of embodied selves, I wonder if “bodies” of humorous writing can also be said to puncture the “bodies” of readers, prompting a “leaky” relation at the very point where affect emerges and is felt. But what does this leaking imply? Wayman, in his view that “jokes remain a major way the human race gains perspective about its difficulties” (1993a, p. 148), engages the function of humour as a necessary relation in his poetry, which sets out to articulate life as it is lived on the ground.



In the representation of everyday human experience, sometimes banal and absurd yet always relationally driven, a touchstone that Wayman proposes is that of asking: "Is there any humour?" (1983, p. 47). In his critique of the emotionless anonymity of much of the art produced in the name of Social Realism, with its often inflexibly stolid and grandiose temperament, Wayman argues that because of the position that such artists effectively assume, as exterior to the work they render visually or poetically, they are "in no position to understand what is *particularly* absurd or unusual in the situation being presented. He or she literally doesn't get the joke" (1983, p. 47).

So what does it mean, then, to *get the joke*? Above all, the joke in Wayman's poem functions as a provocation that unsettles previously established curricular worlds, and is thus a jab at the taken-for-granted. Teaching and learning are here ultimately proposed as intensely contextual activities, non-instrumentalizable, and meaningless without human relation. As Judith Robertson (2006) tells us, "Recovering education as provocation invites us to view it as something dynamic and unfrozen" (p. 175). And like the wayward chips of an iceberg behemoth, floating up on the Atlantic shore, the leakage in the melting "unfrozen" always carries with it "odd hauntings [that] interfere with conscious attitudes" (Britzman, 1998, p. 8), inspiring pronouncements of sometimes mumbled motivations that lie lodged in "the fault lines of [our] inattention" (p. 10). Speaking of the rhythms of the ocean, it is important to remember the precarious nature of the shifting seashore space between the high and low tide marks, referred to in Newfoundland and Labrador as "the landwash." And though an activity easily maligned and ignored (Guy, 1975), trolling in this space of adventure, danger, and reprieve can also allow us to recover previously dormant and often marginalized aspirations (Lewkowich, 2009). The joke functions in a similar way, bouncing the body uncontrollably in stifled snickers, gleeful gasps and sometimes teary vision.

Roland Barthes (1974) describes the vociferous pluralities inherent in literature as "arts of noise," and that "what the reader consumes is [a] defect in communication, [a] deficient message" (p. 145), where deficiency means not so much a lack of meaning, but a lack of correspondence. The joke adds weight to this deficiency, as what the laugh represents—whether as a stifle or as a boom—is precisely a performative excess of meaning that cannot be contained in language. For Shoshana Felman (2007), "Humour ... is pre-eminently not a 'saying' but a 'doing': a making [someone] laugh" (p. 118). In this way, the performance of the joke "is not simply [an] act of provoking laughter, but also that of tripping," and while such stumbling may be pleasurable in the pause it provides, "it is also, and especially, a subversive act" (p. 123). When Felman writes of "the residual smile of humour" (p. 131), and of laughter as "a

sort of explosion of the speaking body” (p. 124), I am reminded of what Wayman refers to as “the ghosts of rejected possibilities [that] haunt the choices we have made or have been imposed upon us” (2007, p. 9). From this, I wonder if in reading Wayman’s poem as a joke, we can harness the explosions that leak as a non-language of laughter from our speaking bodies, a pedagogical ammunition that, in its necessary lack of a center, has the power to break down and question inadequate borders and boundaries.

## A Welcoming to the Boundary

Assuming, then, that conceptual categories necessarily bleed, what we might sometimes see as the dividing line, or the frontier—of an idea, a person, a word, an educational act—may serve more as a relational link than a testimony of simple separation, since “the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 127). On this question Deborah Britzman (1998) argues that, “Education is best considered as a frontier concept: something between the teacher and the student, something yet to become” (p. 4), and so the felt impact of “crossing over” is also forever a revealing and a surfacing; for “within the frontier, the alien is already there ... a disquieting familiarity” (de Certeau, p. 129). The frontier between the *everything* and the *nothing* in education then stands not as an absolute, but as a spinning and dizzying pivot that must forever be re-negotiated, acting both as center and as distraction. Awareness of the authority, danger, and possibility of such limits is also of interest to Wayman, as he remains “intrigued by the location in space and time where love first manifests itself, or crosses into obsession, or dissipates” (2007, p. 9).

Since I have admittedly drawn to a crisis the scope of the tension in Wayman’s poem, and purposely amplified the gap that arises between the *everything* and the *nothing*, it is important to recall the utter materiality and practicality that Wayman himself attributes to his poetic task. As he declares, “Clarity, honesty, [and] accuracy of statement have been my goals,” and moreover, “the complexities revealed by my poems should be the complications of our everyday existence, rather than newly-created difficulties” (1993b, p. 12). However, these *complications of our everyday existence* are no straightforward matter, and were we to assign to them a simplicity and undeserved tranquility, we would only be doing a disservice to the demonstrably unsure and always emergent nature of all human experience. So, though Wayman envisions his poetry as “a tender, humorous, enraged, piercing, but

always accurate depiction of where we are" (p. 12), as his readers, we must always bear in mind that *where we are* is never only one place, and since "there is [always] more to the story than the story" (Doyle, 2006, p. 96), being "accurate" does not only involve an adherence to basic material description, but is also a matter of pointing to the degrees of difference, contradiction, and relationality that inhere in our material worlds.

Held within the *everything* and the *nothing* of Wayman's poem is a joke that unsettles, but also says of education that the boundaries of teaching and learning are things to be touched and interrupted, and always to be moved through. As de Certeau (1984) reminds us, the narrative of human experience and learning is never one so ultimately delimitable; "What the map cuts up, the story cuts across" (p. 129). The question of *who* and *what* is the subject of education's learning, and the wondering of *where* and *when* such stories reside is, indirectly, the basis of the blow dealt in Wayman's response. In refusing to answer directly, he tosses the ball back to his students, and extends the possibility of a student's self-recognition made up in the educational moment of dialogue. Though this vagueness and obscurity prompts fear, anxiety, disrespect, shame, humour, fantasy, and indirection, these are scribbles inscribed then erased on a chalkboard; faint traces that form the remainder of the poetry of education's affect.

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**David Lewkowich** is a doctoral student in McGill University's Department of Integrated Studies in Education. His research interests include considerations and experiences of reading, theories of fantasy and desire in education, boredom, curriculum theorizing, the representation of teachers and pedagogical relationships in contemporary television, literature, and film, and the influence of affect and emotion in educational contexts.



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