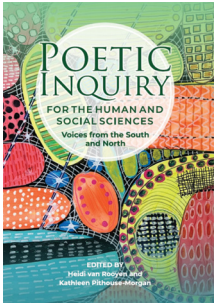


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Poetic Inquiry for the Humanities and Social Sciences: Voices from the South and the North

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Beyond prose: Review of 'Poetic Inquiry for the Humanities and Social Sciences: Voices from the South and the North'

The 54 authors of this book reflect on the use of poetic inquiry at a time when feminist, decolonial, and post-humanist researchers are raising concerns about the ways in which qualitative data collection and dissemination can silence some and reduce the experiences of others by adhering to the often-arbitrary restrictions of academic texts.

Poetic inquiry, the authors of this book argue, should be welcoming, invite new perspectives, and make possible alternative interpretations of the social world. Sadly, as Pithouse-Morgan indicates, poetry is often associated with negative rather than positive educational experiences (p.201). For many of us, poetry is about mysterious meanings that our schoolteachers berated us for being too dense to access.

While my own interest in poetic inquiry is in how we can use it to create and disseminate research, many authors in this book, such as Hough, Peté and Ndlovu, suggest that poetry can also be used "to teach complex topics from different points of view, make people more self-aware, encourage dialogue and empathy, grow social awareness, and raise ethical questions" (p.169).

Badenhorst and McLeod point out that this can be challenging when working in neoliberal universities that turn us into human capital in service of competition and efficiency over social justice and equity. They suggest that poetry can help us to shift to a world "of senses and feeling [that] can provide a way to resist the tendrils of neoliberalism" (p.126). Indeed, many of the authors argue that poetry can be a means of disturbing dominant patterns by enabling stronger relationships with others and the world around us. Van der Walt and Meskin argue that art-based methods "offer a space within which to explore the intersections between thinking, doing, and writing in ways that move beyond the linear rationality of conventional research methods" (p.229). They go on to say that "[a]rts based research arose as a productive counter narrative to the idea of an omniscient, authoritative researcher as the sole arbiter of unambiguous knowledge and the holder of power and voice in research" (p.257).

A central argument running through the text is that reflection on our own thoughts, views, and motivations nurtures an awareness that our well-being rests on the well-being of others. By placing empathy, vulnerability and care at the centre of the research endeavour, poetic inquiry can offer us a means of foregrounding social justice and equity in our research. In my view, however, this is only possible when we explicitly understand society as interconnected; an understanding that is at odds with the late-capitalist individualism underpinning some notions of self-care and self-reflection.

Certainly, the valuing of objectivity in research often rests on the idea that we can observe all that which is meaningful through our senses, especially with increasingly complex technological instruments. Poetic inquiry, on the other hand, suggests that empirical observations will always be partial and unable to fully represent the complex nature of being human.

While many scientists may feel uncomfortable with the idea of poetry as a means of data collection, analysis, or research representation, many of the chapters in this book argue that being able to understand and represent the human condition more fully and inclusively is central to answering intractable questions about society. Sliep and d'Abdon suggest that researchers have a duty to investigate that which is less obvious and to consider understandings that may be hidden in a whisper (p.12). In these ways, several of the authors argue that poetry can challenge the epistemic silencing inherent in many academic practices.

As Dark argues, some people's experiences "are rendered invisible via a kind of disrespect so normalised that there seems to be no possibility for wisdom emanating from them" (p.153). It is these kinds of challenges that we need to take seriously, regardless of the field of science with which we are engaged. Science takes place within society and the prejudices and biases of society inevitably leak into the science. Dark suggests that poetry might be "one way to restage, re-language, reframe and reclaim humanity" (p.155).

The multiple authors of Chapter Two argue for the power of poetry to challenge, subvert, and resist epistemic silencing. In this way, poetry and other non-traditional forms of knowledge-making and -sharing can open our understandings of the social world beyond the constraints imposed by more traditional forms of research. These authors argue that the use of poetry in many ways constitutes a culture of resistance to the dominant Eurocentric norms of knowledge creation and transmission.

There is frequent reference in the book to the relationship between poetic inquiry and indigenous knowledges and a suggestion that "traditional" scientific knowing is not entirely the rational activity we may wish it to be. While including poetry in our teaching, research, and community engagement may seem strange to many of us, what if, as Hough and Van Rooyen argue, "seeking the unfamiliar is the key to a brighter future personally and for society?" (p.27).

The authors of this book thus use poetry to find, create, interpret and represent data. They also reflect on how they use it to teach, and to share and connect with community in all its richness. My particular interest is in poetic representation of data, and I would have liked a deeper exploration of when it is that poetry constitutes research. I was convinced by the arguments made by many of the authors that poetry can be an enormously powerful



means of capturing the essence of participants' words in more nuanced ways than linear transcriptions. And I was convinced by the argument that poetry can be a highly participatory data creation method that can be more inclusive and socially just than traditional (often extractive) research methods. But I wanted to engage more with discussions about when poetry is research and when is it (simply, only, powerfully) poetry.

There are dangers in relativist positions whereby all representations of the social world are deemed to constitute research. To be fair, though, as the title of the book makes clear, this is a book about poetic inquiry in all its forms, and not just poetic research. And perhaps my desire to pin down definitions of 'poetry as research' reveals my own narrow thinking. But that is a reflection to be undertaken after reading this engaging book.
