

**Research Poetry and Meaning Making:
Stanzas from an Autoethnography**

Shelley Tracey, School of Education

Creativity:

*Silent reflections
on liminalities;
meaning is wordless*

This haiku poem, written in the process of researching the literature on creativity for my PhD, evokes the challenges involved in defining and researching creativity and designing suitable methods for its exploration. The notion of liminality encompasses the uncertainty which is characteristic of the creative process, the difficulty of defining and explaining creativity, and the fact that creative processes occur in a range of spaces and contexts, from the individual to the cultural and political. The complex nature of creativity and its diverse manifestations suggests that multiple research methods might be appropriate. The study under discussion incorporates an arts-based approach to enhance the enquiry, concurring with Prendergast and Leggo (2007: 1446) that

*We need spaces for many kinds of research,
including research
that focuses on poetic knowing,
the kinds of knowing that can be
gained in the experience of
stories and myths, art and music,
dance and performance.*

While a full exploration of poetic knowing is beyond the scope of this paper, I will consider the notion of meaning-making through the creation of and response to poetry. My PhD study focuses on the design and delivery of a course for educators on the Masters in Education programme at Queen's, in which participants explore their creative practices and identities. One of the methods of exploration is the development of a creative autobiography which identifies the educational, psychological, biographical, social and cultural factors which

impact on personal creativity. This form of self-study serves as an introduction to autoethnographic research methods. The study itself incorporates an autoethnography, a reflexive exploration of the author's experiences as researcher, practitioner and poet (Ellis and Bochner, 2003), as well as an enquiry into the synergies between these identities.

The following poem was written at the start of the research process:

Research spaces and academic writing

*Poetry takes long stretching strides over chasms,
the reverence of waterfalls seen from far above.
Academic writing has gifted me no wings or courage;
I take small steps in unsuitable shoes, following the path specifically,
leaving crumbs for the return.*

This poem reflects my self-identification as poet rather than as researcher, and the beginnings of an exploration of the connections between the two identities. The poem is one of many created in response to the research process; others will be interwoven through the text below with reflections on the poems, rather than detailed analyses. This is in keeping with the acknowledgement that some aspects of creative acts and outcomes are not necessarily explicable in words. I hope that my poems speak for themselves.

The roles of poetry in research

Richardson, writing in 1992, describes how she takes words from field texts and restructures them as poetry to represent the research findings; subsequently, other uses of poetry in the research process have emerged. Butler-Kisber (2005: 108) argues that poetic representation in research supports "new ways of seeing and understanding phenomena." Cahnmann (2003, 34) suggests that "Using elements of poetry in our data collection, analysis and write-up has the potential to make our thinking clearer, fresher, and more accessible and to render the richness and complexity of the observed world."

In my study, poetry acts as a means of responding to ideas generated by the enquiry, creating a deliberative space for meaning-making. I have used the Japanese form of Haiku, which consists of three lines (line 1: 5 syllables, line 2: 7 syllables, line 3: 5 syllables) to structure these responses. This paper began with a haiku, which emerged from reflections on the nature and processes of my research.

I also use haiku to embody the essence of some of the texts which constitute my literature review:

Ryan

Teachers reflecting

In the centre, images;

Deepening their work

The following haiku emerged in the process of reflecting on a transcript of one of the creativity sessions from course developed for the study.

Transcript

Laughter and silence

Reflective spontaneity

Collaborative delight.

The structured yet resonant format of haiku offers possibilities for containing the fluid and oceanic matter of creativity, which, however diverse its possibilities, must be channelled by the end of my study into book-form, bound between hard covers. I wonder if haiku as a resonant container might be a metaphor for the (ideal?) relationship between creativity and research.

I have also experienced poetry in the research process as a space for playing with ideas:

A study in R major

Research and all the words that start with r:

Recognise

Reframe

Reflexivity and repositioning

Record, reveal and respond

And r for remember:

Refer to the experts!

Refrain from repeating yourself!

Repeat is an Irish bog reinvented.

The playfulness in this poem reflects the tone of the following one, written about a year before the research began:

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.

This poem represents my reflections about the nature, authority and purpose of poetry. Saunders (2006), while acknowledging and exploring the ways in which poetry is finding a role in educational research, suggests that one of poetry's greatest strengths is its non-instrumental nature. This raises the question for me as to whether it is appropriate to use poetry, which I regard with reverence and respect, for other purposes beyond that of self-expression, communication or the celebration of the possibilities of language. The aspect of research poetry which gives me the most cause for deliberation is that of "found" poetry (for example, Butler-Kisber, 2005). Cannon Poindexter (2002) describes how he generates poetry from research interviews with people living with HIV, using a "diamond cutting" process to carve away words from the research transcripts until the most evocative phrases remain. The notion of the researcher crafting poetry from participants' words raises ethical questions which I intend to explore in my study.

I experimented with found poetry in order to identify some of the decisions which need to be made in creating it; the example below was created from a radio programme on Zimbabwe in February 2008. I wrote down the words exactly as they were spoken and then divided them into lines. The final stanza contains my reflections on the process.

There are empty empty empty shops

There is nothing

I am in the queue at 5 o'clock and

I come home with nothing.

(Robert Mugabe's voice)

The welfare of my people is my concern because they are my people.

I was hit – you can see the depression here on my head

Violence has become the way of transacting

our political agenda.

Mugabe has created a legacy of fear.

Fear is the national religion in this country.

(How do you represent the soft, hesitant voice

with its quiet insistences? The irony? The shift in voice?

Whose language is this?

Am I recording, transcribing, documenting, interpreting, transforming or exploiting?)

I was interested in the way in which the spoken word turns cliché into authentic utterance, and the relationship between the interviewer and the speaker. Whenever I read these words, I will always remember the voice of the man who spoke them, but I am unsure as to how they would be received by a reader. My question, "Whose language is this?" requires further exploration.

Poetry as a resource for exploring creativity

One of the universal themes of poetry is an exploration of the creative process. This theme has been apparent in my own work from the outset. One my earliest poem is a whimsical response:

I composed a lovely poem at the age of ten

But the publisher said sorry and sent it back again

He told me I didn't know what I meant to say

While this poem prefigures the important notion of rejection which all writers must encounter, I am not sorry that the rest of this verse has disappeared!

The following poem, written about fifteen years ago, was the first of many which have explored the nature of creativity, art and meaning making.

Sometimes the Poem Comes

*Sometimes the poem comes
in a welter of images,
shooting like fireworks into the darkness,
in an explosion that must be felt,
heard, captured in the mind's eye just before it fades.
The words preserve it, fix the essence to the page.*

*Sometimes nothing emerges.
Impatient, I disrupt the silence to scrape
at the edges of my consciousness,
leaving scars and finding little that gleams.
I pick at the shiny fragments, restlessly arranging
and rearranging a pattern that was not meant to be.
From a distance, it has no shape or meaning.*

*Sometimes the past presents itself,
settling on the page. Words and phrases cluster together.
What is the nature of their resonance?
Perhaps once on the hills of the past,
the beat of drums held meaning. Not in the present, not like this,
where I am now. I stand within the cave of memory,
waiting for the echo.*

*Sometimes,
outside of time and place and meaning,*

*the waiting is a poem,
formless, wordless, timeless,
expecting nothing and receiving everything.*

Reflection on this poem makes me wonder about the processes of research and creativity: the similarities and differences in the search for meaning. The poem itself began, like most of my work, with little deliberation, when I wrote down on the page the words which had come to me while I was out walking: “Sometimes the poem comes”. As soon as I wrote these down, most of the lines above came quickly; the act of crafting and revision took place some time after the poem was written down. The subsequent return to the work and reflection on it helped to shape the language and clarify the meaning.

The following poem, written several years after “Sometimes the Poem Comes”, explores the relationship between time and memory and the emergence of meaning:

Walking in Margaret’s Shoes at Whitehead

*A poem, like a memory, takes time
to unfold, to raise its new wings, preparing
for flight. The stern green poppy head
refuses to hurry to relinquish her seed.*

*My words come slowly like late summer roses,
days after the gentle gift of your journey,
when you lent me your shoes and your view
of what’s passed. You said, houses were once
the inhabitants here. You said, landslides
have altered the shape of this hill.*

*And while the sea distantly told itself secrets,
Maire named her childhood with stories of flowers.
Together we noticed fern scribbled on rock,*

*vines tonguing the lighthouse,
nasturtiums on sea sand.*

*Even now, I am walking the labyrinth of memory,
while seagulls decisively lift from the water,
head precisely toward the horizon,
and never return.*

This poem, like many of my previous pieces, makes use of the journey theme to explore the nature of meaning-making. The notion of the difficult but significant journey is central to the following poem:

Unaccompanied

*Sometimes it is necessary to withdraw.
When you first set out, you do not know
that the mountain with the clearest view
can only be ascended in solitude.
The hard cold choice of exile self-imposed
blinds you, prolongs the journey,
ossifies your wild bird heart.*

*Unaccompanied by starlight, you find the road
step by step, with tender feet and nakedness of hands.
Every encounter with rock and unevenness
acquaints you with the path, reminds you to keep moving.
The wind is always there and the rain is always there
and the cold is always there. You are the intruder.
You may have no expectations of this place.
To proceed is everything. There is nowhere to head for,
nothing to wait for, but the occasional resonance
of arrival.*

The quest for resonance in the research process can be challenging at times. Although the focus of the poem was not on research *per se*, it was exploring the idea of searching in the broadest sense. It captures for me the solitariness of this process and the need to accept uncertainty.

Another poem, *Out of the Thornbush*, explores the origins of creativity. The thornbush is native to my homeland, South Africa, and is a hardy survivor in a drought-ridden landscape. The thornbush is a symbol in my work for the simultaneously destructive and creative aspects of trauma or suffering: seeking protection inside a thornbush is challenging because both moving and keeping still are painful.

Out of the Thornbush

*A poem that emerges from a thornbush
comes out spitting blood,
hoarse from calling for help
and not being heard.*

*A poem that emerges from a thornbush
lies gasping right beside it,
still hooked into the past,
half-dying, half about to be born.*

*Please notice.
Don't look. This poem is naked
and exposed, waiting
for the pain to end, to begin, to go on.*

*Don't expect mellowness
or connected images.
Don't notice that it's tattered,*

ends unfinished.

My current reading of this poem suggests the struggles involved in the processes of creativity and meaning-making, as well as the fact that meaning evolves over time. I am intrigued by the fact that as the writer of these words, I was not always clear about what they meant. Further readings and life experiences made the poem more meaningful for me. It is perhaps because of the role played by the unconscious in the creation of my poems that successive readings of my work reveal different interpretations. This makes me think about the cumulative nature of meaning-making, and the intuitive as well as analytical thought processes involved in research.

Coherence: poetry and meaning-making

In this paper I have shared and reflected on poetry which I have created as a response to researching creativity; I have also identified the themes of creativity and meaning-making in poems written before the study began. The differences and similarities between these two kinds of poetry offer opportunities for a deeper exploration of meaning-making in my study. This paper ends with a poem written in the course of the research process. While it has many themes and contains several stories, two in particular are pertinent to this paper: the complex nature of meaning and the possibilities offered by liminality.

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

may not recognise each other,

but it seems as if at last we might be safe.

Bibliography:

Butler-Kisber, L. (2005) Inquiry through poetry: the genesis of self-study, in Mitchell, C., Weber, S., O'Reilly-Scanlon, K. (Eds.) (2005) *Just Who Do We Think We Are? Methodologies for autobiography and self-study in teaching*, London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 95-110

Cahnmann, M. The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of Poetry in Educational Research, *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 32, No. 3. (Apr., 2003), pp. 29-36. 04-511

Cannon Poindexter, C.. Research as Poetry: A Couple Experiences HIV *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2002; 8; 707

Ellis, C and Bochner, AP (2003) Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity. Researcher as Subject. in Denzin, NK and Lincoln, Y S (2003) (2nd edn.) (Eds.) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* Thousand Oaks, London: Sage, 199-258.

Prendergast and Leggo (2007) Interlude 100 Astonishing Wonder: Spirituality and Poetry in Educational Research, L. Bresler (Ed.), *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, 1459-1478. Springer

Richardson, L. (1992) The consequences of poetic representation: writing the other, rewriting the self. In Ellis and Flaherty (Eds.) *Investigating Subjectivity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage), pp 125-137.

Saunders, L. (2006) "Something made in language": the poet's gift?" *Management Decision*, 44, 4, 2006, 5