

Reflexive Poetry: A Researcher's Poetic Personal Narrative on Social Science Research Praxis

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Abstract

The four poems presented here are excerpts from a multifaceted project entitled *Queerly Faithful: A Queer-Poet Community Autoethnography on Identity and Belonging in Christian Faith Communities* (Van Giessen, 2016). This project attempted to complexify contemporary studies on LGBTQ+ and faith identities as they manifest in the lives of queer people-of-faith by approaching the subject with a *queer sensibility* (Holman Jones & Adams, 2010). One facet of this approach involved my use of poetry as a reflexive medium used to examine the research process itself. These poems invite the reader into my experience as I wrestled with articulating methodology, theory, data presentation, and the challenges of producing a fixed document to present the findings of a queer project that resists fixedness. By blurring the lines between narrative and academic writing, I invite the readers “to become coparticipants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). These interspersed poems nuance traditional academic language and prose analysis and serve to challenge conceptions of ‘proper’ academic writing by positioning the writing itself as a method of inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).¹

Keywords

poetry, queer studies, free verse, methodology, reflexive poetry, phenomenology, poetic inquiry

¹ Building on the work of Richardson (2000), Sparkes, Nilges, Swan & Dowling (2003) argue that qualitative researchers should “harness” the “power of poetry,” noting: “Poetic representations can provide the researcher/reader/listener with a different lens through which to view the same scenery, and thereby understand data, and themselves, in different and more complex ways. It is, therefore, a powerful form of analysis” (p. 155).

I want to be compost²

There is a moment
 characterized by
 a two-hour mould of my face
 on the pillow,
 or by
 a two-kilometre
 shuffle in circles
 passed the greenery
 and tennis balls
 when clarity comes

And flees just as suddenly.

Each keystroke becomes
 a backwards production—
 a furrowed finger dance
 marked by
 a desperate remembering
 of that moment of clarity.

With each hesitant.
 tittle and dot.
 a wonder
 at how words error
 and devalue walked stories.
 And yet, unsaid
 too often means unshared:
 Can one enrich and destroy
 all at once?

I want to be compost.

To gather these sacred stories
 and allow their potency
 to decay into words
 that sow fertile grounds

² *Framing*: This reflexive poem was used to open and frame my major research paper. The poem has the effect of humanizing myself as the researcher and illuminating the sometimes-frustrating process of translating lived experience, story, and insight into meaningful text on a page. The poem also introduces some of the central themes running through my reflexive process – namely, how does one honour the sacred stories of becoming subjects in a fixed textual format? What violence might be done in the process of manufacturing static portrayals of complex, unfolding lived experiences? What value, if any, does the product of such work hold and does this value outweigh the risk of portraying the research participants as fully knowable? How might I actively betray the fragility of these representations such that I might make meaningful claims to knowledge whilst maintaining my commitment to the *becoming* of my participants?

for justice to bloom
in once barren soil.

The smell of that
earthy blackness, that
nourishing impetus
might just be enough
to mourn on the out-breath
but to feast on the in.

However...
does that make
this research
a willing act
of personal
and communal
violence?

Or...
is it not so clear,
more queer,
more fuzzy,
more sacred:
like a sacrificial burning
like the flaming
resurrection story of the phoenix
resurrection story
resurrection story
perhaps
my clarity has come!

...

and it flees.

*Creative Toil*³

This spring sun beckons a labour,
 a creative toil
 and a turning of soil that may just seed life.

In these hands I grasp the coarse wooden handles of my tools—
 edge and point;
 curve and blade—
 determined to make their way on and in the earth in
 a way to each their own.

A garden
 wed to a feast of harvest
 that may have caught dandelion root
 if not for the source of these broken calluses:
 these tools.

By these hands...
 these hands...
 By these shoulders I wield the sinewed strength of these hands—
 opposing thumbs;
 muscle and nails—
 determined to make their way on and in the earth in
 a way trained and toned...these tools.

By these shoulders...
 these shoulders...
 By this self I mind the gyrations of these shoulders—
 bound and free;
 fixed and fluid—
 determined to make their way on and in the earth in
 a way strong and stable...these tools.

By this self...
 these selves...
 By this performance I play with the world as it worlds—
 biased and blind
 achieved and denied—

³ *Methodology*. This poem invites a broadening of our understandings of what constitutes methodology in social science research. Beyond the particular tools we adopt in our pursuit of knowledge production (i.e. community autoethnography, poetry, talking circles, etc.), our embodiment, our situatedness, and the horizons of our selfhood also play an important part in the curation of our methodology. This poem joins with other post-qualitative thinkers who play with and expand on the practice of conceptualizing “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 473) by illustrating the reflexive consideration of my own embodiment and selfhood as another tool through which to engage in the research process.

determined to make their way on and in the earth in
a way subversive...knowing and showing...these tools.

Beckoned to this creative toil
this turning of soil may just seed life,
and these tools...
these tools...
have a way to each their own.

*These Lesions*⁴

These lesions compel me
inviting me graciously
to join in the carnage.

That illness
That plague
That sweeps through the study
of things and things.

These badges of puss
and scabby corners
are my VIP declaration
in this epidemiologically
raucous affair of competency.

How might my mucic traces
infect these patrons of pandered
establishment:
fixed frameworks—
disguised diseases of their own.

Made-out in the blur
four walls,
a roof,
and a threshold—
posted with femme seraphim
brothers aw(e)fully
queerly
established
each with lesions of her own.

⁴ *Theory*. This poem playfully engages with Laurel Richardson's (2000) challenge to conceptualize "theory as illness" (p. 940). In my major research paper (Van Giessen, 2016), I reflect on the ways that, "understanding disciplinary conditions to be intentionally chosen ailments that limit my creative exploration beckons me to deeply comprehend the myopia of my theoretical lesions" (p. 23). I specifically work through the question: How might playing with the metaphors that we use in our research allow us to think more critically about the role that our theoretical framing plays in establishing limits to our knowledge production in both productive and destructive ways?

*Over and Again They Fly*⁵

Over and again they fly
these truths of mine—
out over the horizon
that stretches before me
and behind me.

A great gift! To be who I am
and you who you are—
precious are your stories
your words
and your songs.

Will you play with me?
Will you strain to perceive
new horizons?
Will you dance with me,
and spin me?
Over and again we'll fly!
and truths we'll find
out over the horizon.

Within our dance there is
silk and ribbon, there is
dirt and sweat;
and we will play games
with different rules
with dissonant steps—
our toes swollen from
the other's confidence.

Over and again they fly
these truths of mine—
dancing with your horizon.
Let us embrace at our elbows
back to back
turned outwards and sing out
our invitations
to dance with us;
to play
and in our spinning
may we find a new liberation

⁵ *Methodological Rationale.* This last poem encourages and recognizes the reader's playful participation in the production of knowledge and meaning and explores some of the context surrounding my choice to utilize community autoethnography and poetic exploration as methods of inquiry.

A great gift!
Precious are your stories,
your words,
your songs.

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participatory-action research. He's currently a PhD student in Sociology at York University studying (post)qualitative methodologies and the phenomenology of queer religiosity.

Author Biography

Eric J. Van Giessen's interests include critical sexuality studies, lived religion, and queer methodologies. In 2012, he graduated from Calvin College with a BA in Philosophy followed by an MA in Social Justice & Community Engagement at Wilfrid Laurier University in 2016. He's spent over 8 years working in the non-profit sector doing community development, advocacy, and consulting and is passionate about engaged, arts-based