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 nearsightedness" (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
cohones, 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.