

CHAPTER 17.

**BECOMING RESEARCHER-POETS:  
POETIC INQUIRY AS METHOD/  
OLOGY FOR WRITING (THROUGH  
THE LIFESPAN) RESEARCH**

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To what extent does anxiety  
about research tools, uneasy  
awareness of potential misfit  
and misuse, indicate arrival  
at overwhelming, intimidating  
even frightening kinds of work?

What are ethical obligations  
at these junctures, and how  
and why might [I] responsibly  
stay with such [a] project[t]  
even as [I] contend with [my] own  
uncertain movements?

(Found poem created by author drawing from Restaino, 2019,  
p. 153)

This chapter is about the promise of poetic inquiry—a method of creating poetry with, from, or around qualitative data—for writing through the lifespan research. It is rooted in my experience with poetic inquiry as a form of what Jessica Restaino (2019) calls a “misfit tool,” a way of engaging in research that calls for approaches other than those we’ve always taken. When I discovered poetic inquiry, I had been wrestling with mountains of data from an ongoing longitudinal research project studying the lived experiences of faculty writers. I’d spent my tenure sabbatical (re)reading methodology guides and pouring over prominent examples of grounded theory, narrative inquiry, portraiture and more. Nothing

felt right. According to Restaino “the failure of our traditional tools to perform as we might expect” is “clear sign that we are working in dark, uncertain spaces, that we are doing work that stands to overwhelm us” in meaningful ways (2019, p. 151). In such instances, she urges:

We must work  
in this space of ‘misfit’.  
Indeed we must ourselves  
become misfits. Our humaneness  
problematizes not only our work  
but who we are  
in the work.

(Found poem created by author drawing from Restaino, 2019, p. 85)

Poetic inquiry reoriented me to my work, compelled me to be more present, to embrace the space of “misfit,” to *become* a misfit in order to make meaning differently as a researcher, writer, and human. My journey with poetic inquiry is ongoing, but what I’ve experienced so far has convinced me of the potential value of a poetic approach to researching writing through the lifespan. As I continue to feel my way forward, I hope to entice others to think along with me about what poetic inquiry might bring to our collaborative endeavor. In that spirit, this chapter offers an overview of poetic inquiry as I understand it, along with initial thoughts about how, why, and when it might inform the work of lifespan writing researchers.

“Poetic inquiry’ is the use of poetry crafted from research endeavors, either before a project analysis, as a project analysis, and/or poetry that is part of or that constitutes an entire research project” (Faulkner, 2017b, p. 210; qtd in Faulkner, 2020b, p. 14). “Merg[ing] the tenets of qualitative research with the craft and rules of traditional poetry” (Leavy, 2020, p. 85), poetic inquiry researchers might write poetry as a form of fieldnotes or memoing, or as a way to analyze data, represent findings, or as a vehicle for reflecting on embodied experiences as researchers and writers. For example, I wrote the following haiku on the chilly Monday morning after Halloween in 2021 as I struggled to make the most of the time I’d allotted to my project that day:

Heavy, hooded blur  
fat coffee-drenched tongue, sluggish  
sloshy swallow: hope

Placing this poem alongside traditional academic writing in a journal article manuscript or pairing it with a poem like the following, crafted from lines

of interviews with faculty about their writing lives for an article on resilience (Tarabochia, 2021), embeds me, my embodied experience, in my research in ways that fundamentally change “findings” about the “essence” of faculty writing lives:

Wake up hot, sweaty.  
Awful, like being smashed down,  
but with no way out.

Poetic inquiry offers writing through the lifespan researchers wholistic, humanistic ways of understanding writers and writing development (our own and others’), dimensions that are not always surfaced through quantitative or even traditional qualitative approaches. Because writing is such a complex, multidimensional activity (Bazerman et al. 2017, 2018) “caught up in all facets of our lives” (Dippre & Phillips, 2020, p. 3), tracing and representing the “rambling pathways” of writer development (qtd. in Dippre & Phillips, 2020, p. 3) can be a complicated, daunting endeavor. Providing a unique “porthole to . . . experience,” poetic inquiry offers an artistic, embodied, relational way “to attend to all this complexity” (Leavy, 2020, p. 98; Dippre & Phillips, 2020, p. 4) and (re)center human elements in the study of writers and writer development. Poems have the potential to capture the rich nuances of writing lives, to reveal what researchers might never access otherwise. In the words of Laurel Richardson, foremother of poetic inquiry in sociology: “a part of humanity that may elude the social scientist reveals itself in poetry” (qtd. in Leavy, 2020, p. 98). Lifespan researchers grappling with the following questions might find poetic inquiry to be a promising approach:

- How do I make visible the “human” in human subjects research?
- How can I more fully honor the nuance of participants’ lived experience?
- How do I stay accountable to those experiences traditional research tools are most likely to miss or flatten?
- How might I orient to my work not as an objective analyst, but as a “vulnerable observer” immersed in the process (Behar, 1997)?
- How do I acknowledge my entanglement with dominant ideologies and (re)orient to my work in the spirit of knowing, being, and doing differently?
- How can my research directly challenge and begin to transform structures and systems that privilege certain bodyminds over others?
- How can I venerate and draw forth my work from the rich historical roots of theories of the flesh, forged by women of color to theorize from physical realities and embodied experience?

- How can I center relationships (with scholars/ship, research participants, self and readers) as both the foundation and goal for my research and writing?

## HISTORICAL ROOTS OF A “MISFIT TOOL”

An embodied literary form that conjures abstract, multivalent meaning, attends to silence, and evokes emotion, poetry uniquely articulates human experience that doesn't “fit” dominant ways of knowing, being, or doing. It surfaces partial, situated knowledge, honoring subjugated voices, decentering authority, and disrupting binaries such as mind/body, rational/emotional, and public/personal (Leavy, 2020). Methods of poetic transcription have roots in theories of the flesh, the move by feminists and women of color to theorize from physical realities “flesh and blood experiences” in ways that bridge seeming contradictions in experience and meaningfully complicate conditions of living (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19; Faulkner 2020b, p. 64).

D. Soyini Madison (1993, 1994), for example, uses poetic transcription to honor, analyze, and represent storytelling performances emerging from/within Black oral traditions because in poetic form words are less “isolate[ed] from the movement, sound, and sensory body that give them substance” (1994, p. 46). In this spirit, Ohito and Nyachae (2018) use Black feminist poetry as form of feminist critical discourse analysis to surface new insights about “the complex lives, lived experiences, and knowledges of Black girls and women” (p. 839). Noting the importance of the theoretical and epistemological constructs in which poetry is created, they generate “list” poems from research artifacts in the stylistic lineage of Black feminist poets.

These roots foreground the value of poetic inquiry as a (misfit) tool for resisting structures and systems that constrain conditions of living for certain bodies more than others. “Poetry is political,” proclaims Faulkner (2020b, p. 30); “re-presenting research participants in ways that honor their stories and voice, call for social change, and offer new insight provides researchers with a means for advocating” (p. 156). To illustrate, I share a poetic representation of transcript from my first interview with Sadie, a Black woman who was pre-tenure at the time of our conversation in 2016:

When I became a faculty member, I experienced the real academy.  
Oh! You think I am an idiot, all of you people—rest of the world  
thinks I am a stupid idiot. Oh! Constant onslaughts undermining who  
I am anxious about my writing, fearful about whether I will make tenure  
elusive, traumatizing, so much at stake—Fight! Gear up! Exhausting.

Grew up poor, working class, rural south Louisiana.  
Black women told me I was a smart little Black girl.  
When the schools weren't serving me, I had Black women  
in my life, everyday brilliance celebrated.

Born in [a Midwest metro], single mother worked all the time,  
overcrowded schools; I just wasn't learning.

Second grade, white<sup>2</sup> teacher: I can't teach her, she can't read.  
Aunt: It's your damn job to teach her to read.  
Young Black woman's classroom: Within weeks I was reading.

The day my aunt realized, I sat in her chair, started reading.  
She heard me, poked her head out the bathroom—  
butt naked just remember—walked out—stark naked—  
Whole family there, danced around the house “Hallelujah!  
Thank you Jesus!” She did all this. Crazy! Wonderful.  
Second grade, seven years old, my aunt danced  
stark naked for me because . . . I'm about to cry . . .  
I was reading.

Celebrations of everyday brilliance  
left an indelible mark, affirmed  
I was a smart little Black girl.

Community of Black women supported my type of intelligence,  
recognize[d] the capacity to think well through everyday life.  
[When] I internalize not-good-enoughness, this loud voice in my head:  
White supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal institutions have been  
trying to kill you. Examples across your life, historical pattern.  
And that voice becomes louder, in my head.  
The women in my past have given that voice  
a megaphone.

Poetry can connect and agitate; respond to current events and conditions; challenge and exert power; and critique dominant structures toward “re-visioning of social, cultural and political worlds” (Faulkner & Cloud, 2019, p. viii; Hartnett, 2003; Reale, 2015a, 2015b; Burford, 2018). Lifespan researchers might use poetry

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2 Following Sadie's preference, rooted in Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) practice, I do not capitalize “white” because it does not refer to a specific cultural group.

to advocate for writers and to pursue transformation in policies, procedures, programs, pedagogies, institutions and ideologies to enhance mutual becoming.

## A CASE FOR POETIC INQUIRY IN WRITING (THROUGH THE LIFESPAN) RESEARCH

Researchers from across disciplines employ many forms of poetic inquiry to engage with qualitative data and various terms have been coined to describe nuanced approaches (Leavy, 2020; Prendergast, 2009). However, the intention to use poetry to “synthesize experience in a direct and affective way” (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii), to “present human phenomena in a manner that preserves its *livedness*” (emphasis original, Furman et al., 2007, p. 302), and enact feminist commitments to bodies and bodily knowledge (Faulkner, 2018; Howard, Nash, & Thompson, 2020) remains constant. Because writing through the lifespan researchers are writers ourselves, poetic inquiry can make visible our embodied presence in our research, how we impact and are impacted by it, and how we develop as writers and humans in response to dynamic forces, including our research with and for writers.

Despite the promise of poetic inquiry, few writing studies scholars publicly claim it as a research methodology. A noteworthy exception, writing through the lifespan researcher Collie Fulford (monograph in progress) composes poetry as a practice of close listening, a way to enact reciprocity, and an analytical process-product. She uses poetic inquiry as one approach among others for analyzing qualitative data from her study of the writing lives of adult students at an Historically Black University. Creating found poems from interview transcripts, Fulford says, “allows a level of intimacy with another person’s way of expressing ideas,” attending to “meaning, rhythm and syntax” in an attempt “to distill what is already there” (personal communication, Nov. 17, 2021). More than member checking, sharing poems with participants becomes an act of reciprocity and mutual vulnerability. “It’s evidence I was listening,” Fulford explains, “and I found their words both meaningful and *beautiful*. We don’t talk about aesthetics or pleasure much in composition research,” she continues, “yet there they are.” Participants react with surprise and pleasure when they read their words in Fulford’s poems, which is how she often feels when composing them. Fulford hasn’t decided if she will publish research poems as a product for readers to see. As Faulkner (2020b) notes, not all research poetry needs to be featured in analysis or even published. “Harnessing the power of poetry” behind the scenes, so to speak, can be a valuable way “to center creativity in the research process” (p. 155), and a good place to start for writing researchers looking to integrate poetic inquiry into their research and writing.

Like Fulford, I discovered the challenges and affordances of poetic inquiry slowly through fits and starts, in surprising moments of immersion and delight, and I continue to grope my way forward. Based on my experience, I urge lifespan writing researchers to take a playful approach; read widely—poetry as well as poetic inquiry scholarship—follow your intuition and try out the techniques and approaches that beckon you. In this section, I share ways I’ve experimented with poetic inquiry and describe the analytic, reflexive and relational affordances. Through an extended example, I model how lifespan writing researchers might imagine ways to incorporate poetic methods into longitudinal studies. My hope is that doing so generates more ideas about how those new to poetic inquiry might begin.

In my ongoing longitudinal study with 25 faculty writers from several universities, various institutional positions, and across disciplines, I’ve experimented with various forms of poetic inquiry to analyze and represent data, converse with published literature, consider feedback from journal reviewers and reflect on my own subjectivities in this work. I’ve used erasure poems, also called critical or counter poems (Lahman, Richard, & Teman, 2019), to embrace “the imaginative power of redaction” (Runyan, 2021, p. 134; Kleon, 2010), to discover meaning in scholarship, fieldnotes, artifacts, or interview transcripts and to resist dominant structures and discourses (Lahman, Teman, & Richard, 2019; Faulkner 2020a). A page from Jessica Restaino’s (2019) book *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness* became a source text with which to grapple with poetic inquiry as a form of methodological surrender in my research with faculty writers. The resulting poem and visual art has been a touchstone for me as I follow where this project leads.



Figure 17.1. Erasure

### “Rooting Surrender”

Contradictions held  
 root-linking, music-bent  
 reinscribed unity, imagine  
 undoing, “unbecoming” rhythmic  
 mysteries unknown loss  
 grounded embrace: surrendering  
 forced to unlearn  
 to grieve

A related approach, concrete poetry, takes physical shape on the page to reinforce content (Leavy, 2020; Meyer, 2017). I crafted a concrete poem from my first interview with Julie, a participant in my study, to represent what she was telling me about the shifting role of writing in her life as she transitioned from a graduate student to a faculty member.

“Letting Life Be”

r . . . u . . . n the risk of writing  
in an b t a t world  
a s r c  
p u  
a n  
W r i t i n g is part of it.  
a v  
l e  
l r  
e s  
l e

When I was younger I could ~~do everything~~ somehow  
find the energy and make it happen.  
Not anymore.

At the heart of my article, “From Resilience to Resistance: Repurposing Faculty Writers’ Survival Strategies,” is a composite poem made of lines of transcript from interviews with 21 research participants conducted in Spring 2018 to explore the role of resilience in the lives of faculty writers (Tarabochia, 2021). The versatility of composite found poems for surfacing similarities and differences among individuals and groups within a set of research participants make it ideal for studying a phenomena like lifespan writing. For more examples see Comeyras and Montsi (2000) and Teman (2010).

In addition to using found poetry to represent data, I generate poems as a form of reflexive practice. My *Peitho* article (2021) includes an “I am from” poem (Janesick, 2016), in which I reflect on my researcher subjectivity and my orientation to this work as a faculty writer researching faculty writers.

I am from straight, cisgender, slim, able-bodied, whiteness,  
from educated, English speaking, property owning, middle class citizenship  
from married mother, neuro typical, (mostly) mentally stable womanhood.

I am from “follow the rules,” “confess your sins” and “hard work pays off.”  
 Good girl, good student, good choices.  
 I am from check the details, put in the time,  
 butt in seat, and “do you get up?”  
 I am from crying  
 at my desk, late, bone deep frustration  
 on the stairs, baby asleep, what if I can’t finish  
 in the kitchen, across the island, no more to give.  
 Awake, drenched, heaving, pounding  
 heart burning.

In the same article, I use a series of poems, one self-generated, one found poem from scholarly literature, and one found poem, inspired by Adam Rosenblatt (2020), crafted from anonymous peer-review reports I received during the journal submission process, to examine my experience as a poet-researcher arguing for vulnerability as a strategy of resilience for faculty writers. I put a found poem composed from personal correspondence in conversation with another found poem from reviewer feedback to address concerns about the ethical dimensions of poetic inquiry raised during the review process. I used the haiku form to reflect on poetic inquiry as a methodological approach and on my stake in the project.

Read their words, struggle.  
 Visceral connection  
 seeing myself there.

Find the story  
 each word amplifying the next  
 reverberating.

Heart drops. Stomach pounds.  
 Cut pieces<sup>3</sup> strike a chord nerve.  
 Here we are, exposed.  
 Objective research,  
 evidence: “the data shows.”  
 But the poet? Naked.

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3 My gratitude to Jessica Restaino for her work on “cut pieces” in her book *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness* and her virtual public talk “Surrender as Method, Subject, and Experience: Doing the Work that Undoes Us” on November 10, 2020 as part of Syracuse Symposium’s year-long series on “Futures.”

Is it them or me?  
We (e)merge to discover  
a shared thread—the light.

(Revised from version published in *Peitho*, 2021)

Currently, I am experimenting with “tandem found poetry” (Burdick, 2011) crafted from interviews conducted over six years with one faculty writer, to consider how interpersonal relationships impact academic writing lives and writer development over time. The faculty writer, Julie, and I each write found poems using her annual interviews as source texts. Our poems capture physical, mental, psychological, emotional, and embodied dimensions of the experience of writing through life events including professional and personal milestones, aging, health, social justice work, and abuse. We meet regularly to share our poems and reflect on how they speak to each other, shed new light on original transcripts, and generate insights about our ongoing development as writers, and in my case, a writing researcher. Engaging in the tandem found poetry process with Julie constitutes an artistic way of “continuing writing partnerships,” a methodology Lauren Rosenberg (2020) argues has potential for lifespan studies. A creative way to engage with research participants, tandem found poetry offers lifespan researchers another tool for “undercutting a one-way knowledge-making tradition that privileges the researcher’s findings . . . as final” and “challeng[ing] the conventions of research [by] foreground[ing] the insights of participants as they continue to reflect on and analyze their experiences” (p. 99). Writing and sharing poems with Julie has “reopened the research,” fruitfully challenging our assumptions about writer development and “the researcher-researched” relationship (Rosenberg, 2020, p. 98).

I also create poetry clusters, series of poems around a particular theme, as “a powerful way of expressing a range of subtle nuances about a topic while simultaneously producing a more general overview” (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 4). For example, I am creating a poetry cluster called “Writing Like a Mother” in which faculty writers reflect on academic writing and motherhood (see p. 315).

Poetic inquiry may also offer longitudinal lifespan researchers ways to attend to the nonlinearity of (writer) development. I will play out one extended example involving I-poems, a type of poem generated from qualitative data, usually individual interviews, in which the words of study participants are poetically rendered to “highlight the complex position of the narrated subject” over time (Koelsch, 2015, p. 98).

Originally introduced by Elizabeth Debold and elaborated by Lorie E. Koelsch (2015), I-poems are associated with research conducted using Carol Gilligan’s Listening Guide (2015; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2006).

“How to Make a Tenure Case” Excerpt from “Every Time My Writing”

Stand there answering  
bullshit questions feel  
the breast milk drip  
down get back  
to the baby run  
home and wait—  
lactating still  
bleeding—  
for the results.

(Victoria, Spring 2019)

I should have written today; I didn't.  
I feel guilty but I was running  
errands, folding laundry, all these things . . .  
Last night, not a pair of underwear in sight.  
go to the laundry room, the basket, search.  
In the very bottom, I found one pair. So . . .  
I feel bad. I did not write today.  
There were other things  
to keep our family running.

(Elizabeth S., Spring 2021)

The Listening Guide method involves four rounds of “listening” to data to tease out various voices; I-poems are crafted during the second round of listening for the “I voice,” which “locates the participants’ sense of agency and self throughout the text” (p. 98). The researcher identifies each instance of “I” and extracts it from the interview text along with associated verb and additional words needed to create a meaningful phrase (Koelsch, 2015, p. 98). Listed down the page, the “I” phrases become a poem that surfaces the participant’s (shifting, conflicting) sense of self. I-poems invite researchers and readers to “look beyond what can be externalized and quantified and listen to the many ways in which the self speaks” (Koelsch, 2015, p. 104). I can imagine constructing I-poems with interviews from faculty writers in my study as a way to, “defy singular interpretation,” “invite the reader/listener to engage and grapple with the material,” and “speak to the aspects of experience that cannot be measured through operationalization” (p. 104). I hope this extended example, along with explanations of ways I’ve incorporated poetic inquiry into my work with faculty writers so far, inspires lifespan researchers to explore possibilities through playful experimentation and innovation.

## WRITING GOOD (ENOUGH) POETRY: EVALUATING RESEARCH POEMS AND RESEARCHER-POETS

Concerns about how poetic inquiry should be employed and evaluated, and by whom, are frequently voiced by critics, researchers, and poets. Poetic inquiry has been “the subject of premature dismissal by some and intense scrutiny by others, perhaps in part due to misconceptions that it’s easy or lacks rigor” (Leavy,

2020, p. 103). My experience corroborates Leavy's (2020) contention that "use of poetry in research increases rigor in the interpretation and writing process; it does not diminish it" (p. 103). As Sullivan (2004) explains, "engagement with craft slows us down, brings us into a new kind of attention to the data before us" (p. 35). Deciding how to enact poetic techniques requires researchers to attend to "subtle relations among elements" discovering nuances "not initially perceived, precisely because they are subtle, elusive, encoded" (p. 35). Nevertheless, ongoing debates over rigor and merit fuel the reluctance of many would-be researcher-poets exacerbating feelings of doubt like the ones expressed in my poem "Bedtime Ruminations," written one fall evening after ruminating about my worthiness as a poetic inquirer while snuggling my son to sleep.

"Bedtime Ruminations"

And if I'm not  
 a poet . . .  
 And if I fail . . .  
 to materialize, concretize,  
 crystalize, constellate?  
 What then?  
 Will it have been worth it?

Questions like these are vital: What "counts" as a successful poem in the context of poetic inquiry? What credentials, experiences and expertise are required to write "good" research poems? Some arts-based researchers (Piiro, 2002, 2009; Prendergast, 2009) advocate for clear standards for arts-based research, including research poems, out of "respect for the domain" and "in defense of quality and qualifications of the artists and their arts" (Piiro, 2009, p. 97). Others, (Bochner, 2000; Clough, 2000) worry that obsession with criteria, ultimately rooted in human values, choices, and often irreconcilable differences, can have a normalizing effect and derail researchers working with "alternative methods" from realizing the full potential of their approaches. Criteria can become a means of "contain[ing] our desire for freedom and experience, a way of limiting our own possibilities and stifling our creative energy" (Bochner, 2000, p. 267). Given that experimental forms are usually linked to resistant politics and social and cultural criticism, the conventionalizing effect of criteria can easily "serve a conservative and destructive function" (Bochner, 2000, p. 269; Clough, 2000).

At the same time, careful consideration of criteria has the potential to sharpen practice, enhance craft, and strengthen the power of a poetic approach. In

that vein, I am compelled by efforts to discern quality of poetic inquiry and worthiness of poetic inquirers based on the *goals* for incorporating experimental writing into qualitative research, goals rooted at least in part in a feminist research agenda committed to “ethical and deep relationships between researchers and participants . . . engender[ing] change and mak[ing] participant lives better, and . . . social justice and equity for all” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 97; Richardson, 2000). Bochner (2000), Dark (2009), and Leavy (2020) focus on audience response as another important measure: Does the research poem offer a moving story felt in the body not just in the head, invite connection, *feel* truthful, enact ethical self-consciousness that “provides a space for the listener’s becoming,” and inspire action (Leavy, 2020, p. 103; Bochner, 2000, p. 270-1)?

I am persuaded by arguments for “good enough” poetry as/in qualitative research (Lahman, Richard, & Teman, 2019) with the caveat that researchers should develop the capacity to recognize “occasions” for research poetry (Sullivan, 2009), commit to revision, and hone poetic craft (Faulkner, 2020b). One way to “intensely concentrate on poetics” (p. 104) is for researchers to articulate *ars poetica*, beliefs about the art of poetry, and *ars criteria*, beliefs about what we want our poetic inquiry to do and be (p. 103). Faulkner (2020b) shares her *ars poetica* in the form of persona poems written from the perspective of beloved poets, through reflective prose, as diastic poetry (a found poetry technique similar to acrostic) and as found poems crafted from poets’ published reflections on craft. Inspired by Faulkner’s (2007; 2016; 2017a) iterative documentation of her evolving *ars poetical/criteria*, here is a recent record of my own, written eight weeks into a marathon training program when I was enthralled by the relationship between running and writing and their roles in my creative endeavors:

Dear Sandy, running is poetry. So you are a poet.  
 Poetry is breath, muscle, skin and bone-deep aliveness  
 attunement, attention to crisp sheets of bleeding ink.  
 Tensile tendons snapping out lip-smacking rhythms, punctuated by  
 iambic slap, slap, slap of feet, meter by meter on dark concrete  
 expansive lungs, root-like capillaries spider-cracking their way  
 up, out, and down. Buzzy adrenaline induced ache  
 fist pumping heart attacks the hill, the line, the syllabic beat  
 Patience. Runner, poet. You are.

Despite skepticism about whether researcher-poets can be reliable critics of their own work, I agree with Faulkner (2020b) that in specifying the goals of a particular work, a researcher’s *ars poetica* can constitute valuable criteria for judging the extent to which the project has achieved those objectives (p.142).

## TRIANGLES, CRYSTALS AND CONSTELLATIONS: SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING/ WRITERS THROUGH POETIC INQUIRY

Conversations about criteria make clear that poetry as an arts-based research practice should not be “judged according to positivist or traditional qualitative ‘interpretive’ standards” (Leavy, 2020, p. 102). Still, issues of validity are critical and must be addressed. As an alternative to triangulation, the use of multiple data sources (interviews, field notes and artifacts, for example) to validate findings, Richardson (1997, p. 92; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) offers crystallization, an approach that does not assume a fixed point or object to triangulate, but rather strives to “pain[t] a picture with words through the rigorous use of language so that the meaning is clear and can be confirmed by multiple readers” (Leavy, 2020, p. 104). Crystallization highlights the need for criteria that honors the potential of poetic inquiry. Because poems are simultaneously abstract and concrete, spiritual and embodied, particular and universal, poetry moves us “from plane geometry to light theory, where light can be both waves and particles” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). This refractive capacity draws me to poetic inquiry as a way to perceive multidimensional phenomena such as writing and writer development.

Composing poems with data from his study of tutors in an alternative learning organization in Auckland City, New Zealand, Adrian Schoone (2020) creates constellations rather than crystals. “Drawing imaginary lines connecting the shining parts” (p. 40), constellations do not seek to “pull together” meaning, but to honor the gaps, the beautiful dark spaces between fragments of found poetry, each becoming a universe unto itself. Keeping the dark space throws into relief the self-generated light of the stars. The difference is between striving for multidimensional understanding (crystallization) and “radical specificity” (constellation) that “moves beyond detail per se to engage the exigence, fluidity, and particularity of living” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 4) while simultaneously “acknowledge[ing] the uncertainties and ambiguities . . . the spirit and the inexhaustibility of knowledge” (Schoone, 2020, p. 40).

Rooted in “Indigenous values of individuated creation and collaborative, interdependent communality” (Martineau, 2015, p. 30) the practice of constellating does not strive to substantiate objective analysis, but honors a “multiplicity of orientations” in order to “visibilize a web of relations” (Powell et al., 2014). The goal is not to triangulate but to “encircle” (Wilson, 2008, p. 38). The meaning lives “in what cannot be communicated rather than in the reassurances of comprehensibility and transparency because it is in this way that we can begin to think differently about what we know and what we might become” (Sotirin,

2010, p. 8). Honoring resonance with the *mauri* (the Māori life source), Schoone (2020) explains that poetic constellations are re/formed and re/imagined from reader to reader and moment to moment, “yielding alternative essences and understandings,” keeping the “the research breathing and therefore ‘alive’” (p. 40).

Poetry inquiry offers lifespan researchers a way to constellate the essences of writers (including ourselves). It invites readers to connect and reconnect the “shining parts” to make new meanings and generate new understandings that shift relationally, perpetually revealing insights undiscoverable through any other means. Poetic inquiry has the potential to disrupt the understandings we’ve developed about writing, writers, and writer development based on generalities and recognizable experiences, and to animate “‘what cannot be represented’ as a different take, a different conception, a different affect” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 10). For example, poetic inquiry might offer new possibilities for studying writer identity negotiation, a key theme identified by the Writing through the Lifespan Collaboration because poetry “defies singular definitions and explanations . . . mirrors the slipperiness of identity, the difficulty of capturing the shifting nature of how we are and want to be and resonates more fully with the way identity is created, maintained, and altered through our narratives and interactions” (qtd. in Leavy, 2020, p. 100; see also Faulkner, 2006). Lifespan writing researchers might use poetic inquiry to put into conversation the “essential” experiences of writers in different moments in their life-long and life-wide trajectories (Prior & Smith, 2020; Smith, 2020).

Rooted in relationality, how might poetic inquiry “draw the writing researcher nearer to the contours of writing development by enabling intimate perspectives on writers’ lifespans” (Smith, 2020, p. 18)? How might “poem-stars” representing lived experiences of “non-writers”—the illiterate, the neuroqueer, those who compose in nontraditional ways—reshape familiar constellations or make visible new galaxies in ways that explode what we thought we knew about (writer) development? In the spirit of Naftzinger’s (2020) argument for “writer-informed” approaches to lifespan writing research, how might poetic inquiry change where we search for “shining parts” and understand the “beautiful dark spaces” perhaps looking to visual artists, musicians, dancers, novelists, chefs, gardeners, architects and others who live and move artistically in the world to shape the questions we ask about “everyday” composers and what we hope comes of those questions?

In short, poetic inquiry stands to bolster the critical dimension of lifespan writing research. By “open[ing] unfamiliar connections and relations that move both beyond and against familiar storylines, emotional verities, and the all-too-recognizable critiques of cultural-political constraints” (Sotirin, 2010, p. 12), poetic inquiry can achieve “radical specificity” (magnify the stars) and open an ambiguity of meaning (craft various constellations) in ways that are resonant and accessible without privileging shared experience and understanding over

difference. Striving for relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) in this way is crucial for lifespan writing researchers. If “writing is a process of the world’s becoming” (qtd. in Cooper, 2019, p. 5), lifespan writing researchers are enmeshed—or entangled to reference posthumanist philosophy—in an “inescapably ethical practice, what Barad calls a worldly ethics” that is “about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” (p. 6). I offer poetic inquiry as a method/ology for (lifespan) writing research that strives to fulfill such a crucial responsibility by acknowledging that writing is not just about understanding but about being (p. 4). In doing so, poetic inquiry has the potential to meaningfully disrupt generalizable understandings and attend more fully to the unique complexities of writing research; taking an artistic, wholistic, critically reflexive approach to the study of writer (and human) development across the lifespan, poetic inquiry can reorient lifespan writing researchers to our work and to the ways we shape and are shaped by our research with, for, and *as* writers.

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