

Your Roundabout in My Ear Lobe: Poetic Inquiry as Creative and Embodied Knowledge Production¹

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Abstract

A starting point of this article is that all writing is multiplex and collaborative, creative and critical, and a form of knowledge production and representation. The article discusses poetic inquiry as a creative method and an instrument of knowledge production. Throughout the methodological discussion, poems from the author's research project on connections between public and private urban spaces, dis/identifications, and embodiment are included as illustrations and starting points for the discussion. The author shows how poetic inquiry is part of poststructuralist theory and methodology, how poetic inquiry can access embodied experience, and such inquiry's possibilities for multiplicity and multilayered writing.

Keywords: poetic inquiry, knowledge production, writing, embodied experience, creativity

Entry Points

*you embrace me
with your yellow brick wall,
with your familiar pavement
leading me to school
a/temporalities as our mortar
im/movement of bus wheels as our plaster
I move through you
I am moved
by you*

The entry points of this article, as well as of my research as a whole, are manifold. I could start by writing about my relationship with the city of my childhood and youth, which I left for studies, or by describing how I wrote poems about this relationship for a poetry competition twenty years later. I could begin by depicting how the poems I wrote for the competition became part of my conference paper in a workshop on imaginative and creative methods, ethnographic inquiries, and ethnographic writing a year after the competition. The story could begin at a poetry course a couple of months after the conference. In this writing course, which was part of the winning prize of the earlier competition, I received feedback on my poems: where are the people of the city in my poetry? Where are all the bodies?

I could start with how, for the first time in years, I allowed myself to think about

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my body instead of only feeling the pain in it. I allowed myself to really think about how after twenty-five years of increasing pain, I was now in a surgery queue for, among other things, a hysterectomy because of adenomyosis and endometriosis.² These are all the beginnings that started the poems included and discussed in this article. Some poems are from before the surgery, some were written during my hospital stay, and some are from after the surgery. They contain pieces of much earlier writing, from before the diagnosis and from the time I had just moved away from the city of my childhood. For me, the various entry points of the article demonstrate instances of serendipity in the creative process of my research project,³ in which I explore connections between public and private urban spaces, dis/identifications, and embodiment. Following Lie (2014), serendipity is my combination of unexpected information, meetings with others, comments by others, and inspirational texts I happened to come across, which I will return to later in the text.

The aim of this article is to discuss poetic inquiry as a method of research within the humanities. I ask what role creativity plays in poetic inquiry and how the form of writing and poetic inquiry affects knowledge production. In addition, I discuss the relationship between embodied experiences, a theoretical framework, and text form with my poetry suite as a concrete example throughout the article. In the first section, I provide an introduction to poetic inquiry. Next, I discuss creativity's relationship to poetic inquiry. I then focus on this method as knowledge production and as a way to access embodied experiences. This is discussed, in the subsequent section, through (poststructuralist) theory, form, and audience as parts of epistemology in poetic inquiry. The penultimate section develops this by discussing the poststructural possibilities for multiplicity and multilayered writing in poetic inquiry.

Writing and Poetic Inquiry

A starting point for this article is that writing is multiplex and collaborative, creative and critical, and a form of knowledge production and representation. Sociologist Laurel Richardson (2000a) states that writing is a method of inquiry, of coming to know through and in connection to creativity. Author and art theorist Mara Lee (2014) argues that writing is an act and place where the binary between thinking and doing is no longer maintained. In addition, writing is always political, as how we are situated affects how we write (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This corresponds to Richardson (1990), who explains how we are expected to write as scholars affects what we can write about. In addition, text formats and the existing view of writing as inquiry within a given discipline also influences academic texts.

The specific writing and research method I discuss in this article is poetic inquiry (cf. Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima 2009; Galvin and Prendergast 2016; Owton 2017; Faulkner and Cloud 2019). In short, poetic inquiry turns research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experiences, and reflections into poems or poetic forms (Faulkner 2019). As a methodological approach, poetic inquiry reveals and communicates multiple truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression. Methodology scholar Valerie Janesick (2016, 61) argues that poetry as inquiry sparks,

among other things, creativity, as it forces the writer to actively push their imagination to where it has never gone before. Throughout the article, I combine poems, which form a poetry suite, with my methodological discussion. I argue that poetic inquiry is connected to writing as inquiry and creative analytic practices. By understanding writing as inquiry, someone's thought process is present through writing. The structure of a text or argument does not need to be ready before the researcher starts to write. The same applies to creative analytic practices, in which the writing process and the writing product are viewed as being deeply intertwined (Richardson and St. Pierre 2008, 478). Therefore, writing is a method of analysis, not solely the writing of a research article.

According to the classification of poetic inquiry proposed by theater scholar Monica Prendergast (2009, 545), my poems can be described as researcher-voiced poems with reflective autoethnographic⁴ writing as their data source. This category of poems differs from the other two classifications: participant-voiced poems and literature-voiced poems. In participant-voiced poems, poems are written based on interview transcripts or solicited directly from participants (Prendergast 2009). In contrast, literature-voiced poems are created from or in response to works of literature or theory (Prendergast 2009). In addition, I argue that the description of this kind of poem and writing should include a theoretical framework and theory as analytical tools, as well as combining research and literary ambitions. This argument follows Brady (2004), who states that poetry can turn researchers back to their bodies and highlight how theory comes from our embodied experiences. The following short poem is an example of this type of poem:

*I lean my head,
let the asphalt flow
into my ear*

In the poem, I combine urban spaces with my body. I merge them by letting the asphalt enter my body and stabilizing my body through a material that will stiffen as it cools. By doing poetic inquiry, of which the poem is an outcome, I investigate my embodied experiences of urban space. I inquire which revelation can be illuminated or uncovered through, for example, metaphors, rhythms, and silences.

Creativity and Poetic Inquiry

Richardson (2000a) states that writing, regardless of its form, is connected to creativity. Likewise, gender scholar Nina Lykke (2014, 142) considers the process of writing "a choreographed dance where academically structured and planned moves work together with creatively improvised and intuitive moments in an embodied synergy." For philosopher and literary critic Hélène Cixous, writing creativity has a utopian character, and the form of writing is full of desire, as the style is often passionate, poetic, and full of contradictions (Lee 2014). In this section, the focus is on defining and describing poetic inquiry as creative. I first focus briefly on poetic inquiry and then on

creativity in previous research and theoretical work emphasizing creativity in connection to poetic inquiry and writing.

First, creative analytic practices acknowledge that the writer cannot separate form and content (Richardson 2000a). Aligning with Richardson, I understand writing as a theoretical and practical processes

...through which we can reveal epistemological assumptions, discover grounds for questioning received scripts and hegemonic ideals—both those within the academy and those incorporated within ourselves, find ways to change those scripts, connect to others and form community, and nurture our emergent selves (2000b, 153).

In this article, I focus more on the writing process of the—at this stage—final version of the poems. However, displaying the writing and rewriting at much earlier stages of the research process would be interesting. It is, unfortunately, not possible to show the full process in this article, as the research process began much earlier—something I will get back to in the next section. I want to emphasize, however, that creativity and writing are very present for me as an ethnographer during fieldwork, for example, when writing field notes, preparing, conducting, and analyzing interviews, and looking for literature or writing memos.

For me, poetic inquiry and creative analytic practices overlap, as they advocate for evocative, empathetic, and creative writing, which means staying open. While the form of writing can vary in creative analytic practices, in poetic inquiry, it is poetry. The approach to poetry in poetic inquiry can differ, from one interview transcript formed into poems to data collection that encourages informants to write poetry, which is then analyzed by the researcher, to fieldwork poems, which can also be called autoethnographical poetry. The examples in this article consist of the latter form.

Until now, I have used the word “creative” concerning poetic inquiry a few times in this article, but I have not defined it. I argue that it is common to describe poetic inquiry and writing as creative without addressing “creativity” or what it entails. Creativity theory is often interlinked with a psychological, business, educational, or organizational perspective. In the following, however, I will attempt to discuss creativity within the humanities.

Creativity means creating something. Nevertheless, I argue that creativity is not creating something through a routine. Rather, creativity is the production of ideas or things that are in some sense novel and useful or meaningful (Klausen 2010). This line of reasoning does not necessarily mean that others view it as useful or meaningful. As education scholar Robert Fisher writes, creativity “requires the courage to take risks—the risk to be different” (2004, 8). In addition, “serendipity, the effect by which one accidentally discovers something fortunate while looking for something else entirely, [is] a form of chance in relation to the creative process” (Lie 2014, 111). I understand the risk-taking mentioned by Fisher (2004) as being open to serendipity and pursuing accidental discoveries, as mentioned by gender scholar Sissel Lie (2014). Furthermore, literature scholar Rob Pope (2005, 52) discusses creativity as “extra/ordinary, original and fitting, full filling, in(ter)ventive, co-operative, un/conscious, fe< >male, [and] re

... creation." Some of these definitions align with how I characterize creativity in this article, while others do not. Subsequently, I briefly focus on the aspects "extra/ordinary," "original," "co-operative," and "re/creation," while leaving others out of the discussion.

I do not see creativity as extraordinary and, therefore, as the prerogative of a few individuals, but as ordinary, in the sense that creativity is commonly available and a latent capacity in everyone (Pope 2005). Furthermore, creativity may be original in that it is drawing on earlier origins and/or originating (Pope 2005) or original in relation to one's previous thoughts, words, or deeds (Fisher, 2004). A characteristic of creativity that I stress is cooperation. This cooperation can be intended or unintended. Furthermore, cooperation can also refer to creativity as a shared, ongoing process of change through an exchange (Pope 2005). According to psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1996), creativity happens in the interaction between a person and the sociocultural context. In addition, creativity is connected to recreation. In this article, I do not define recreation as a repetitive creation, thought, or replicating something. Instead, it refers to the ongoing process of making something afresh (Pope 2005). For the discussion in this article, I view re/creation and cooperation as closely interlinked. Hence, creativity is an "activity that produces something new through the recombination and transformation of existing cultural practices or forms" (Liep 2001, 2). Furthermore, I perceive creativity as universal because the desire to create something different and new is universal. This reasoning does not mean that imagining something is connected to a universal cultural meaning.

This article's point of departure is that creativity and writing are interlinked through the characteristics presented in this section. The arguments on what creativity apply to writing as well. Writing is ordinary, original, cooperative, and re/creative. Writing and creativity are processes, in dialogue with the world and other writing or phenomena, and reflexive within themselves (cf. Gibbs 2015). Creativity is not only part of writing, as it is present throughout any research process within the humanities. Furthermore, writing and creativity are not only present at the phase of writing up the research results; they are also essential in all stages of the research process. The following section describes this by introducing my path to the research project, poems, and this article.

Embodied Experiences, Imaginations, and Knowledge Production through Poetic Inquiry

As ethnologist Jenny Ingridsson (2017) states, writing oneself out of an empirical field by trying out different genre-specific forms, and creative writing can be a way of seeing empirical data with new eyes. The following poem marked the start of this shifted perspective of letting myself get closer to an embodied experience, which I had for a long time disassociated from:

*your constructions of steel
in my uterus,
your weldings,*

*your rebars
 as knots around my fallopian tube,
 your shafts,
 your sluices, together,
 separates,
 claps,
 shuts
 in a way, you, the city – a masse
 in a way, my body, me – already in late autumn
 my concrete foundations,
 my block complexes,
 my bus lines around your roundabout,
 past your street crossings
 in a way, you, the city – a circle
 in a way, my body, me – a cavity
 your colossus structures
 in my cysts,
 your chaos, channels, chambers, corridors,
 your clods as my myoma
 in a way, you, the city – peace and order
 in a way, I, my body – bigger than a terraced house*

The entry points for the poem were a fascination with cities, my experiences with endometriosis and adenomyosis, and a visit to the library. During the library visit, the poetry book *det* (2012 [1969]) by Danish poet Inger Christensen caught my eye. While thumbing through the book, I caught the words *constructions of steel* and *welding*. In the poem above, I not only describe my intestines, uterus, and fallopian tubes as having grown together into a lump, but I also merge them with the materiality of the city and buildings. The materiality of buildings ambivalently creates comfort through their sturdiness and familiarity while simultaneously creating a feeling of being stuck in past spaces. The interpretations become metaphors to help me understand and attempt to express my embodied experiences and refuse the mind-body dialectic. Through embodied experiences, I aim to obtain embodied knowledge. Experiences, thoughts, and acts transpire through the body – forming a connection to and knowledge of the world (Uotinen 2010). This connection, however, does not move in one direction only, as the world also impacts experiences, and bodies impact the world. In the poem, this is one of the experiences I want to convey. Embodied knowledge is situated knowledge. Both offer “a critical methodology that emphasizes knowledge in the body, offering the researcher an en fleshed epistemology and ontology” (Spry 2001, 716). It becomes a counterpart to the epistemic habit of emphasizing reason or mind before embodiment.

When I aim to feel, understand, express, and convey embodied experiences, both in and to myself and others, I lean toward the poetic form. The poems become representations of metaphors that are always lacking, as it is hard or impossible to express embodied experiences. At the same time, poetic inquiry is one way of staying with the

complex and hence not immediately condensing it into the well-defined (cf. Kusserow 2017; Rosaldo 2014). In this way, it extends the possibility of conveying something to the reader that cannot be conveyed by writing another form of text. Apart from attention to moments of serendipity, a temporal resistance to habits of writing or habits of form is central as well. As I am not new to writing poetry, I have acquired some poetic habits, one of which is repetition. While writing and rewriting the poetry suite, I paused to concentrate on repetitions and let go and play with avoiding repetition. As one never knows what may lead to the following poem, one must be open and attentive. Knowledge production through embodied imaginary is a process, as organization scholars Carl Rhodes and Arne Carlsen (2018) write, that puts the researcher at risk while letting go.

Consequently, this opens up avenues to ongoing and open research and deliberately fails to reach conclusions, instead always wanting to know more and accepting that any knowledge is imperfect and incomplete. Hence, as geographer Leila Alexandra Dawney (2011, 75) writes, “embodied imagination is a way of considering the interrelationship between bodies, affect and materiality which refuses any subjectivist or objectivist reading.” In fieldwork, everyday life with my body, feeling and expressing experiences and imaginations of the intertwined city and body, and finding the words for this in poetic inquiry, knowledge production takes place. Thus, imaginaries are material, affective, and embodied (cf. Dawney 2011) and spring from collective and individual narratives, memories, experiences, and theoretical readings and inspirations. The fieldwork is both embodied and linguistic, as creative analytic practices acknowledge that form and content are interconnected. Therefore, the fieldwork continues in the writing process and is consequently linguistic. I will discuss this further in the following sections.

Theory/Form/Epistemology/Audience

For researchers, writing is the primary means of communicating our knowledge production and research work. When illustrating or representing complexity and openness, it is imperative to think about and experiment with writing and text as form. Poetic analytic writing pushes the limits of scholarly production (cf. Ingridsdotter and Silow Kallenberg 2018). A starting point in this article is that any text, a report, poem, or essay, aims for dialogue between writer and reader or listener. Hence, a text has a social dimension, and it is relational. In this article, I do not discuss dialogues between reader and writer, or readers’ interpretations of poems, in-depth. I do, however, believe that the process of knowledge production is as much a result of the act of writing as it is of the act of reading, although this falls beyond the scope of this paper. This section focuses on the relationship between text form, theory, epistemology, and audience. These relations influence writing and research in academic disciplines, which I will touch upon. In this section, I pay particular attention to poetic inquiry concerning poststructuralist theory and writing, and how theory has been a creative part of writing and researching.

Most of my earlier published writing as a scholar took the form of academic prose.

However, I also engaged in poetic inquiry and drama, where embodiment and relations between the researcher and researched are central. An article (Palmgren 2018) focusing on urban spaces, rhythms, and power relations took the form of a poem over seven pages long. In the poem-article, interview data is represented so that the poem's layout reflects spatial experiences. This article is not just a peer-reviewed article read by other scholars, and as its form is poetry, I was invited to non-academic events to perform it. The knowledge created in the research project thus met other recipients through the form it was written and performed in. While research written as poetry – both the current poetry suite and earlier projects – was performed at non-academic and academic events, most of my more traditional write-ups were presented at and invited to academic events only. The broader audience also applies to my previous research project on constructions of girlhood and eating disorders online, where part of the text was written as drama (Palmgren 2014). For me, the form of the text made it possible to broaden the audience and, through performance, allow for the exchange of knowledge across bodies. Apart from the poems representing embodied experiences, poems themselves can be embodied experiences (cf. Faulkner 2018) for the reader or audience. The embodied experiences happens if the reader experiences feelings of being in situ. The use of, for example, rhythm in a poem may have this impact. The poem is not only text that can be read; it also takes the shape of my embodied voice in the same space as the listener, even going inside the listener.

I argue that poetic inquiry is not only connected to or in dialogue with the audience or readers, but that this dialogue is also present as the text is written into a network of other texts (cf. Lie 2014). This line of argumentation moves us to a discussion on theory, epistemology, and poetic inquiry. I argue that creative analytic practices such as poetic inquiry connect well with social constructionist epistemology and post-structuralist theory (cf. Berbari 2019).⁵ As St. Pierre and Pillow write, poststructuralist and feminist theory⁶ are both viewed as troubling “foundational ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies” (2000, 2). In poststructuralist theory, there is “doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge” (Richardson 2001, 878). To this claim, I would add that no text form should be viewed as privileged or universal in research. Research entails academic prose just as much as poetry. This does not, however, mean that form does not matter, which I will return to below. The reasons for not placing one form above others are that the empirical data or the research questions and aim should influence the form and possibly more experimental writing.

Another way theory has played a part in my poetic inquiry is by being a catalyst—drawing on gender scholar and poet Hanna Hallgren (2013), my poems and my writing move and travel both within and through other texts. For me, theory seeps in and out of poetic inquiry. After writing the poems in this article for a while, before consciously relating the poems to a theoretical framework, I began to see and later use and consciously incorporate non/human intra-action as a theoretical framework for the poems (see Barad 2003). For example, the intra-action between my uterus and hormone treatment and opioid-based drugs or between my body and the street's surface, which triggered contractions, resulted in the following poem:

*my library
of street names and pills
in chronological order
as coordinates on the skin
as stitches in the phone book
injecting spinal anesthesia
in the holes
of the asphalt*

These intra-acted, instead of interacted, body, city, and treatments presume a prior existence of independent entities (see Barad 2003). In literary theorist Roland Barthes's (1986, 169) sense, theory became reflexivity instead of an abstraction or a generalization. In other words, the notion of non/human intra-action became a way to write reflexively and creatively and encouraged me to stretch my imagination. At the same time, theory and empiricism are amalgamated in the poem (cf. Hallgren 2015).

Possibilities for Multiplicity and Multilayered Writing in Poetic Inquiry

As mentioned earlier, a similarity between poststructuralist theory and poetic inquiry is understanding knowledge as contextual and truth as multiple and subjective. I argue that writing in poetic inquiry encourages, borrowing St. Pierre and Pillow's (2000, 1) words, "a lusty, rigorous, enabling confusion," which is central in poststructuralism. As in previous poems, I used poetic and multilayered writing in the following poem. Layered writing is an attempt to recognize eclipsing or clashing discourses, partly through new images, analogies, or metaphors, which I will discuss in this poem:

*the bark of the maple tree,
as the surface of my intestine
the sports ground's round
after round
after round,
like all the organs
which my intestine has choked
the roundabout's towering tufts of grass,
like everything which should not grow anymore
but grow,
and bow
inwards and outwards*

In the poem, the sports ground is not a symbol of exercise or movement but a symbol of the pain that exercising would cause because of my inner organs' immobility. The uncared-for lawn by the roundabout is a reminder of the norms of neatly cut lawns in urban spaces and the abnormal growth of tissue inside the body. I argue that possible subjectivities and discourses are present through escapes, small slides, plays, crossings, and flights (cf. Davies and Gannon 2005). These are connected to the body and

symptoms of the illnesses associated with urban material structures. New images and analogies create new possibilities for our understanding (cf. Lie 2016). Through these subjectivities, images, metaphors, knowledge of the symptoms, and effects connected to the symptoms and body image become visible in the layered poem. In addition, the poems are not only, as anthropologist Adrie Kusserow states, “about accurately describing an experience, but [also about] using the insight of its acute nuances language and artistic aesthetic to bring a wider array of meaning(s)” (2020, 430).

Furthermore, poetic inquiry extends the possibilities to express something to the reader that cannot be expressed in the same way or to the same extent through another form of inquiry. At the same time, I am aware that the reader of this article is possibly prevented from reading a wider array of meanings in the poems, as I have chosen to discuss the poems through a theoretical framework. In other settings, such as performing the poems at different events, the reader or listener receives only the poem and sometimes my use of voice. The possibility for multiplicity and multilayeredness can be seen in the following poem:

*your ~~mouth~~ railway bridge
 against my ~~mouth~~ spleen,
 giving a ~~saved~~ breath
 your ~~hand~~ pedestrian street
 against my ~~hand~~-liver
 your ~~collar bone~~ city arms
 against my ~~collar bone~~ skeleton
 your ~~elbow~~ recycling plant
 against my ~~elbow~~ kidney
 your ~~hip~~ skate park
 against my ~~hip~~ tongue
 you give everything ~~away~~
 I give everything away*

In the poem, we return once again to a “you” – the city of my childhood and youth – and my body or, more precisely, certain body parts. I used strikethrough to incorporate complexity, contradictions, inconsistency, ambiguity, a second imagination, deconstruction of binaries, or adding something that is not true but that I may be wishing for, remembering but never happening. The strikethroughs are applied to body parts that are visible or outside the body, while the other body parts are hidden and inside. Hence, the poem, as well as poetic inquiry, offers multiple possibilities for interpretation, multiple truths, and realities.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have discussed poetic inquiry as a method in research within the humanities. The focus has been on creativity, knowledge production, epistemology, embodied experience, poststructuralist writing and theory, and the possibilities of the poetic form. I have argued that poetic inquiry is a means to communicate and reveal

complexities and openness. As Ingridsdotter and Silow Kallenberg (2018) writes, a text not only illustrates openness, but the researcher also needs to imagine the empirical material in new ways. Poetic inquiry is an emergent field. Like Hallgren's (2013) writing on the lack of researchers in queer theories experimenting with or incorporating self-reflexive stylistics in the text form when writing about performativity, I see a similar lack concerning researchers writing in poststructuralist theory. This observation does not mean that I argue that poetic inquiry can be combined with poststructuralist theory only. I see possibilities in using poetic inquiry as a method for researchers working with ethnography, affect theory, and postcolonial theory, just to name a few.

Notes

- 1 I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions.
- 2 Endometriosis is a condition in which tissue, such as the lining of the uterus, grows in other places in the body. Adenomyosis occurs when the same tissue that lines the uterus grows within and into the muscular walls of the uterus.
- 3 My research and poems in this article are situated in autoethnography and gender studies and are influenced by poststructuralist theory. The approach in the article is, however, interdisciplinary, and I view the discussion as valid for a broader range of researchers in the humanities and social sciences.
- 4 Autoethnographic research involves "turning of the ethnographic gaze inwards on the self [...], while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (Denzin 1997, 227).
- 5 Apart from poststructuralist theory, poems within poetic inquiry have also emerged in response to other theoretical developments, such as postmodern theory, postcolonial theory, and feminist postmodernism (Leavy 2015). These are all concerned with articulating the human experience by breaking down binaries and focusing on participant voices and relational power. These theoretical perspectives all discuss, for example, how binaries such as self/other, colonizer/colonized, man/woman, or nature/culture entail violent hierarchies.
- 6 For a thorough text on the central principles of a feminist poststructuralist analysis of gendered texts, see Davies and Gannon (2005).

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