ART | RESEARCH international
A Transdisciplinary Journal

SKETCHING POSSIBILITIES: POETRY AND POLITICALLY-ENGAGED ACADEMIC PRACTICE

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Abstract: In this article I draw together and reflect upon my own experiences of writing poetry as a part of a politically-engaged academic life. My aim is to trace the political possibilities I have found in poetic practices, with the hope that describing and reflecting on my own experiences may illuminate pathways for others to integrate poetry into their academic practice. As I will detail, I have published research poetry and have been a leader of workshops that encourage academics to incorporate poetic and other forms evocative writing into their researcher toolkits. Often participants in these workshops have remarked how unusual it seems to think of poetry as a resource for academic work. I hope that this article might demonstrate some previously unimagined possibilities for new poetic enquirers, and provide stimulus for further thought for experienced practitioners to connect poetry and academic practice.

Keywords: academic practice; higher education research; poetry; politics; writing

In some ways this current piece discerns an inchoate series of poetic practices that I had not initially understood to be formal "project" that I was pursuing. This, it seems to me, is one of the joys of academic life. Suddenly, we find ourselves arriving *somewhere* when it seemed like we were only meandering, noticing, picking up threads and seeing where they led us. Indeed, the fact that researchers can arrive somewhere unexpected in the age of the neoliberal university (Giroux, 2002; Shore, 2010), with its emphasis on economic rationality and the careful metricization of research practice, gives me hope. Universities, sometimes at least, remain places where curiosity and encounters with the unexpected are possible. So, it should be known that rather than emerging from any master plan, this piece—on the political possibilities of academic poetry—has been generated by an "academic flâneur, purposively wandering the streets of the academy to explore, imagine and hope" (Kenway, Boden, & Fahey, 2014, p. 268). Indeed, it was only the occasion of writing this article that enabled me to discern research poetry as a slender red thread that has run throughout my academic career to date. I have now come to see my own academic practice as using poetry both to evoke the subjective experience of political transformations to universities, as well as to identify the attentiveness poetry calls for as a possible practice for surviving inhospitable political conditions. This article will attempt to answer the following question: What does it mean to discern poetry as a political practice for academics? Reflecting on my own experience, I will identify at least three possible ways of configuring this relationship.

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Poetry as a Tool for the Analysis and Presentation of "Political" Research

Perhaps the most obvious way in which I can recognize my use of poetry for social justice ends is in two empirical research projects I have conducted (Burford, 2012; 2014). In both of these projects I used poetry in order to produce evocative forms of academic writing that link subjective "felt experience" (Cvetkovich, 2012) to wider political contexts. In order to orient those new to research poetry to broader debates in the field, perhaps it is useful for me to begin by glossing some key ideas that I have found enabling before sharing my own experience.

My own work builds on an extensive body of scholarship on research poetry (Faulkner, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Jones, 2010; Lahman et al., 2010; Lahman et al., 2011; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Quinlan, 2013; Richardson, 1992, 1994; Richardson, 1998). According to McCulliss (2013), research poetry can be separated into three broad categories: "literature-voiced" poems that are written in response to academic texts; "researcher-voiced poems" that draw on field notes, and/or autoethnographic writing; or "participant-voiced poems" generated from transcriptions of interview data (see also: Davies & Petersen, 2005; Elizabeth & Grant, 2013; Glesne, 1997; Madison, 1993; Poindexter, 2002) or solicited from participants directly. Across each of these categories, "research poetry" tends to be characterized by:

> an economy or concentration on language, the consideration of the emotional and aesthetic qualities of the words chosen and a focus on providing new insight or revelation that can be visceral as well as intellectual. (Jones, 2010, p. 594)

Poetry's introduction to research has been facilitated by postmodern critiques of academic writing, "where scholars and researchers question the traditional, scientific, authoritarian stance of research representation" (Glesne, 1997, p. 214). Proponents of poetry argue that its compressed form and generic conventions produce a different mode of expression. As Cahnmann (2003) argues, "just as the microscope and camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible, so too poetry and prose are different mediums that give rise to ways of saying what might not otherwise be expressed" (p. 31). Poetry's open form is often viewed as a strength, as is the way that it "leaves frayed edges and loose wires" (McBride, 2009, p. 43) for readers to make sense of themselves.

Richardson was an early proponent of the genre, arguing that poetry is particularly useful for ethnographic writers who wish to evoke the textures of a research field. Rather than asking whether the poetic and ethnographic might align, she reversed the question, asking instead: "When is poetry not ethnographic?" (Richardson, 1994). According to Richardson, it is the poem's task to represent "episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, pleasures – to capture those experiences in such a way that others can experience and feel them..." (Richardson, 1994, p. 12). This is a point echoed by Elizabeth and Grant (2013), who argue that poetry might, "produce a different kind of interaction between the writer and the reader" (p. 130), an interaction modulated by the reverberating quality of poetic texts, the ways they may move the emotions and bodies of academic readers.

My primary field of scholarship is higher education, and this remains a space where research poetry is marginal. Indeed, much education-related poetry is published outside of its own disciplinary journals in venues such as *Qualitative Inquiry* (e.g. Connor, Newton, Pennisi, & Quarshie, 2004; Davis, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Newton, 2005;

Prendergast, 2009; Teman, 2017), or *Cultural Studies <> Critical Methodologies* (e.g. de Vries, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2012, Perselli, 2004; Pelias, 2005). However, when such education research poetry is collated together, it quickly becomes clear that there is a rich body of work to survey. If we look closely at this work we can see a diverse array of thematic concerns addressed through poetic methods. Many researchers have drawn on poetry to explore political themes of social marginalisation and academic identity, such as Hill's (2005) poetic portraits of Black women academics in the US or Clark/Keefe's (2006) poetry on working class and first-generation academics. Other higher education researchers have taken up poetry to foreground the political nature of academic practices, such as Elizabeth and Grants' (2013) poems on the changing practice of academic research under managerialism.

My own research poetry has been animated by an interest in exploring and representing the ways in which the political contexts of universities are "lived" by academics and graduate students. In the first case (Burford, 2012, 2013), I used poetry and other forms of performative writing in order to explore the ways sexual orientation opens up questions about researcher voice and embodiment in university research, teaching, and learning. In particular, I published one collection of poems that focused on my own experience of being a queer Masters student who was producing knowledge in a faculty (Science) and discipline (Development Studies) structured by heteronormativity.[1] In this (2012) piece, titled "A *queeresearch* journey in nine poems," I also reflect on the potential that research processes like poetry might offer researchers. In a poem called "Re-membering the re-searchers body" (p. 52) I recognize the anger that drove my research interest:

> Got fire in my belly,
> Plenty,
> Enough to light the fireworks,
> That go boom boom bust
> Fizzle and sizzle all over the park,
> And shake the night sky into light.

As well as practices of researcher attentiveness (such as poetic practices) that also seemed to be essential resources:

> The cool palm of my back,
> That strong, flat center
> That slows my departure,
> Bends to listen
> And attend to pain.
> Cool, calm, collector of information,
> Quiet carrier of responsibility,
> It holds its weight,

Balances and re-balances

I also published two poems in an anthology called "This Assignment is so Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching" (Volpert, 2013). One of these poems called "dangerous thoughts of a queer/trans awareness educator" (Burford, 2013, p. 179) evokes my curiosity about the queer possibilities of discomfort in the diversity classroom, as this part of the poem reveals:

Sometimes when I educate
I am called to trawl through the gutters
Of my mind
I want to
Dredge up muck and gunk,
Present rude words
In bad taste (bet they'd taste good though)

Another poem called "ms. aretha brown" (p. 81) was an attempt to uncover genderqueer pedagogical role models who continue to shape my own approach to teaching, for example:

Ms. Aretha Brown,
for many, the gifts you gave remain un-opened
but I carry mine in/on me.
You can hear it in my own voice when I teach
and read it between the lines around my eyes.

The second project where I employed research poetry was in an empirical study on the affective-politics of doctoral education. This project examined how political transformations to the university (such as creeping managerialism, increased intensification, audit, and regulation) are *felt* by today's doctoral students.[2] I presented a series of poems that were written in the (southern hemisphere) summer break of 2012-2013. In fact my initial motivation to explore poetry in 2012 was rather practical. Given poetry is known as the most "economical" of the arts (Lorde, 1984, p. 116), I had hoped that producing less text might allow my neck and shoulders time to recover from the intensive desk work I had been doing over the preceding months (which was itself perhaps a symptom of the intensification of the doctorate). This practical concern was coupled with an intellectual curiosity about the sociological possibilities of poetry (Curtis & Meager, 2013).

Another concern that led me toward experimenting with poetry was my interest in the quotidian practices of doctoral writing (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). I hoped that using poetry as a research practice (Cahnmann, 2003) might enable me to contemplate the mundane, everyday practices of my doctoral writing and to view even quiet and ordinary events as

data. This was kind of being-withness inspired by ethnographers such as Kathleen Stewart (2007). By "poking around poetically" (Lahman et al., 2010, p. 39), I thought I might be able to differently attend to and represent ordinary features of my doctoral life, and attempt to evoke for readers why those feelings matter politically.

Given that I was myself a student writing a doctorate about the contemporary doctoral experience, I decided to draw on my own autoethnographic reflections, and create "researcher-voiced" poems. By autoethnographic, I mean that my project was intended to generate meaning from my own experience, to put the "autobiographical personal" into conversation with the "cultural and social" (Ellis, 2004, p. 375). Each day I made time to sit down and journal some reflections about my doctoral life. I would often begin with simple things: its smells, its sounds, the feelings I noticed, and things I did with my body. This would often be enough to get me thinking. I was also open to inspiration. If reflections, strings of words, or rhythms came to me while walking on the beach, reading, or cooking lunch, I would make time to note these down. Often the poems took shape quite quickly, and were edited very slowly, often over many months and sometimes years. In total I drafted 15 poems during the summer of 2012-2013. Eventually, I selected two poems to publish in a higher education journal, based on their relevance to developing accounts about the affective-politics of doctoral education (Burford, 2015).

Both of these poems sought to explore the pleasures of academic writing in a time where academic publication has become an increasingly high-stakes and auditable practice. The first poem called "Workaday Writing" (Burford, 2015, p. 1234) explored the various (and sometimes mysterious) ways academics warm up to their writing:

Over canapés
He asks them
How they write
The first, a woman
Past middle age
With a crisp countenance
Requires silence
Nothing less than a vacated house
Spouse, pets dispatched
Clock batteries removed.
The second, a woman
With dark hair
Tied efficiently in a bun
Likes salsa music softly playing
White paper
And a row of sharpened pencils.

The third, a man
Jokes about the sacrifices he makes
To an altar for his Inner Critic:
Fresh mandarins and cheap incense,
But really he just writes anywhere, everyday,
Which is sort of the same thing.
The fourth, a man
Writes in cafes
Requires the proximity of others
To feel conversational.

The second poem was called “Fat Writing” (pp. 1234-1235) and explored how notions of excess might subvert narrow neoliberal notions of efficiency:

He asks me to trim the fat off my writing
And advises on style
As if he were Gok Wan
Concealing a flabby tum
Within ‘flattering’ garments
Of course, low cut for those of us with cleavage
But always covering those unsightly upper arms
For me
A chunky paragraph or three, is one of life’s pleasures
It takes up space, without apology
So indulgent and ooooooozy
I want to lick my fingers afterwards
And take a nap.
I want corpulent, curvy words
Words with weight
That stand solidly against
The Lean Mean Machine.
Even sickly sweet, or cheesy words have their place at the table.
I’m certainly a fan of no-no’s
Like over-embellishment (too many rings, pattern-on-pattern)
It’s as if he got dressed in the dark!
Maybe it’s a queer thing
That I like the writers who won’t make it onto the cover of Academic Vogue
The beauty school drop-outs
Whose words creep down my forearm like a sleeve tattoo.

Across both poems I reveal myself as a neophyte who is learning about academic work and life, both as an object of his study, and also a passionate practice. Through their emphasis on the diversity, mystery and magic of writing, both poems seek to destabilize the narrow meanings that often circulate about writing in the neoliberal university.

Academic Poetry as a Political Process with Others

Academic poetry should not only be understood as potentially political once it is published. It is my firm view that the process of creating poetry itself also contains political potential. Over recent years I have been exploring the possibilities of connecting politics and poetry in various workshops at universities. My interest in using poetry in this way began in 2010 when I led a workshop for queer and transgender students during the "Diversity Week" celebrations at Otago University in New Zealand. During this time I was employed as a coordinator for support services for LGBTIQ students and staff, and I viewed hosting this workshop as a part of my normal duties aimed at building a resilient and caring university community. This workshop began, as most workshops do, with introductions and a broad orientation to our goals and objectives. Following this I introduced students to some previously published LGBTIQ poems in order to demonstrate the wide possibilities of form and content that could be played with. I then introduced our main activity for the workshop "Found Poetry." In this activity I placed a number of pre-selected words on the floor and asked students to begin "poking around poetically" (Lahman et al., 2010, p. 39). Students were invited to find words that resonated with them, and then to find a quiet space to begin to craft a piece of poetry that they could perform (or not) to others at the workshop. Some of these poems were observations about university life, many of them were overtly political—re-claiming a space for non-normative love or gender expression, evoking the toxicity of discrimination and exclusion, or exploring the violence of living in a society that never really imagined a space for you in it. Most of the university students decided to perform their poems, creating a collective space where queer voices expressed their undeniable presence on campus. For the most part I understand the political potential of this workshop as residing in the process of drawing together a collective, and focusing attention on issues that matter to queer and transgender students. What students did with their poems after the workshop was up to them, but creating moments where queer and transgender voices come together has significant political and community-building potential.

A second example where I have sought to link together poetry and social justice was at a conference workshop I led with Kim DeBacco (DeBacco & Burford, 2016). In this workshop called "Poetry and the measured university," DeBacco and I led a group of academics interested in academic identity in a process of poetic exploration. Our interest was in the idea of the "measured university"—the idea that the university has increasingly become enmeshed in a "state of caution, a sense of too much restraint, blandness, and

even automation," at the same time that it "establishes a new rationality, a certainty that academic life and decision-making proceeds on the basis of evidence" (Peseta, 2015). It was our goal to enable the academics at the workshop to have space to play with the pleasures and politics of measurement. We provided participants with several options for writing poetry. In the first case, they were invited to begin with the call for papers of the conference itself, to explore how this text could itself be used as raw material for beginning a poem. We advised participants that they could work in groups or individually, and that they were free to follow their own gut in determining a composition process. However, we also introduced some more structured processes, which invited participants to apply some mechanical techniques to produce "by chance and not inspiration, automated poetic reflections on the 'measured' university" (DeBacco & Burford, 2016, para. 2). This process involved reconstructing texts associated with the conference (or other texts the academics brought with them to the workshop) that we hoped would "prod, pierce or poke fun at the performative gaze of measurement that regulates academic identities in the contemporary university" (para. 2). We introduced the practice of writing "chance poetry" adapted from Bernadette Mayer's list of *Writing Experiments*. For example, participants could cut words out of a text, eliminate material systematically (e.g. every fifth word), or read texts backwards. They were invited to eliminate certain kinds of words or phrases, or to pick a work at random and see what ideas circulated around it, such as the word "however." The academic participants in the workshop embraced playing with poetry, and a number of them performed their work at the end of the workshop. While the construction of the poems (and the lives these poems may have after the conference workshop) may be one political outcome of the workshop, perhaps the most significant outcome was our demonstration of the value poetry has as a creative-intellectual practice of inquiry that can be applied to political questions in our working context of the university.

A third example where I have linked together poetry and questions of social justice was at a learning opportunity on arts-based research that I offered at the University of Surabaya in 2017. This was a two-day workshop that introduced both standard qualitative methods used in the social sciences, as well as more experimental arts-based methods including sculpture, drawing, collage, ethnographic fiction and poetry. While the first day of the workshop was mainly focused around explaining how arts-based practices like poetry might be animated for use in social research, the second day of the workshop moved into the creation and analysis of arts-based data. All participants were asked to work in groups to create some kind of artifact about their own lives as academics in Indonesia today. One of the groups at the workshop selected to explore poetry as their mode of data creation, and produced a fantastic poem in Bahasa (the national language of Indonesia) that highlighted the consequences of increasing intensification of academic work (Barcan, 2013), and the growing metricization of the academy (Burrows, 2012). This poem included reference to the "Scopus Ghost" that haunts academics across the global south, many of whom are increasingly required to publish in academic journals that are listed in databases like Scopus

as a part of expanded audit regimes. While the text itself prompted wry laughter when it was performed at the workshop, I see that much of the value of the poem here was in the process that surrounded it. This process included an hour-long discussion that led up to the creation of the poem, where a group of academics shared their experiences of contemporary academic life. It also included another hour where academics began to analyse the poem that they had created, as well as the process that ensued after the performance of the poem, which led to a rich workshop discussion about the affective stances Indonesian academics tend to take toward the political transformations of their institutions.

In summary then, I am suggesting that poetry can be a valuable practice that enables inhabitants of the university to reflect on a diverse array of political phenomena—from the structuring frame of heteronormativity to the wide scale marketization of universities across the globe. I have attempted here to foreground poetry as a practice that can draw people together, and provide new insights.

Academic Poetry and the Utopia of Ordinary Habit

A third way in which I am linking poetry and politics together is to view writing as a personal practice that might offer ordinary spaces of creativity and attentiveness within an academic life. Much of my own research to date has been about affective-political dynamics of higher education (Burford, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). In my attempt to understand what it feels like to forge a career within the university, I have paid particular attention to writing as a window into academic life and work (Burford, 2017c). As Elizabeth and Grant (2013) note, within the current managerial context that exists across many universities of the global north, "audit practices privilege the writing and publishing (in contrast to the teaching, serving, or even researching) version of the academic self" (2013, p. 124). As a result the productivity of researchers, particularly with regard to their written "outputs," has become increasingly important. Writing increasingly *counts* for individual academics with regard to promotion and job retention (Sparkes, 2007), as well as for institutions in pursuit of public funding. The uneasy role of writing in the current higher education environment has prompted a number of studies that seek to trace the feelings that effloresce around it (Burrows 2012; Gill 2010). Recently, broad agreement has begun to emerge about the affective consequences of these transformations to writing, and academic life more broadly. Writing from the UK, Burrows (2012) describes the current state of academia as one of "deep, affective, somatic crisis" that "threatens to overwhelm us" (p. 355). He references what Gill (2010) describes as the current ordinary affects of the contemporary university: "exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure" (p. 229). According to Gill (2010), this combination of emotions can be traced back to the broad neoliberalisation of universities and the growing "precariousness" of academic life (p. 230).

My own habit of thinking about writing has tended to fall in line with these scholars. I have tended to cast it in a rather dark light as a practice that may be associated with the internalisation of disciplinary norms and compliance to institutional demands. Taking up this position has allowed me to depart from some of the most basic assumptions made by those who are working to improve writing pedagogy and practice. For example, it has enabled me to ask political questions, like whether higher education researchers can take as given that writing is a *good* or *unproblematic* practice, that all academics should do more of, more quickly, and with higher measurable quality? It has also meant asking what the burdens of writing in the current context may be regarding the wellbeing of academics.

While I hope my previous thinking about writing alongside increasing reports of emotional ill-being among academics has been valuable, I am interested in whether I can configure the political relationship between affect and writing in other ways, perhaps ways that are more reparative and less paranoid. Thinking about the practice of poetry has been transformative for me in this regard. While my previous work has been focussed on describing the dynamics surrounding feeling bad and academic writing, what I am trying to sketch in this article is the way forms of writing–such as poetry–might be seen as possible routes to survival. The key text that I am working with to think about writing in this way is Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) book called *Depression: A public feeling*. Cvetkovich is interested in thinking about depression as a cultural and social phenomenon, rather than solely as a medical disease. She is particularly curious about the ways in which we might place depression within the affective dimensions of ordinary life.

In the mid-section of her book, Cvetkovich (2012) offers a short memoir of her own challenging journey to finishing her dissertation and writing her first book. Her account is set in her working context of academia, "where the pressure to succeed and the desire to find space for creative competitive job market, the shrinking power of the humanities, and the corporatization of the university" (p. 17). Cvetkovich describes her project on depression as an "episdodic narrative about how academia seemed to be killing me" (p. 17). While in her text depression is a felt experience that is located in everyday crises of low energy and limited self-confidence, her account of recovering from depression is also ordinary. She describes the importance of comfortable bed linen and creating her own built environment, as well as practices such as preparing food, swimming, yoga, spiritual practice, and meditation.

In thinking about the ordinary and available responses to feeling bad, Cvetkovich (2012) identifies craft as a survival practice. She argues that we might pay renewed attention to crafting as a form of "body politics where agency takes a different form than application of the will" (p. 168). According to Cvetkovich, crafting fosters ways of being in the world where the body-mind are enmeshed and connected by repetitive acts of knitting, stitching, or

gluing. While craft practices have often been repudiated by many progressive political analysts as soft and individualising responses to neoliberal governance, Cvetkovich takes a more reparative approach. Rather than trying to transcend the mundane and domestic in favour of something "really political"—she is interested in working within the domestic and ordinary *as* a political sphere, that is, exploring the art and politics of daily living. For Cvetkovich, crafting is connected to not only creativity and art but also to the sacred ritual. It requires modes of attention that resemble meditation. As Cvetkovich argues, having something to do with your hands can keep your attention both focussed and free. As forms of practice, rituals such as crafting, yoga, running, or knitting belong to what she calls a utopia of ordinary habit.

This way of thinking about habit—as a desirable and healthy regular practice—has been helpful for me. I am much more prone to thinking about habit through the lens of addiction, or the way building good habits can feel like the internalisation of regimes of discipline that make us docile subjects (Cvetkovich, 2012). Cvetkovich's work helps me to think about the words utopia and habit together. While I have tended to see the increasingly measured and intensified practice of writing as contributing to feeling bad, perhaps academic writing itself—particularly practices like poetry—might also contribute to making us *feel better*.

As Cvetkovich (2012) notes, popular books, such as *The Artist's Way* (Cameron, 1992), *Writing down the Bones*, (Goldberg,1986) and *Bird by Bird* (Lamott, 1995) teach us that writing can exceed neoliberal ideas of measurement and impact. It can also be a spiritual and creative practice. I am wondering whether it is possible to understand the regular writing of poetry as form of staying present that also makes creativity an ordinary part of daily life. Such a suggestion might mean that we could think about depression and writing differently, allowing for the possibility that forms like poetry might help writers weather the pressures of academic life.

I am aware that some might see writing poetry as an inadequate substitute for more properly political solutions—marches, protests, union membership drives. Yes, I agree there is always more to be done at this level too. But I have found that poetry can serve as a form of self-care and ritual that keeps me grounded in a time where feelings of impotence, burnout, and despair are all too common. Taking the time to sit down and write poetry regularly contributes to keeping me afloat for the next political challenges that need to be confronted. In addition to this, poetry can be a way of staying present, attentive and attuned to other ways of being—which is itself a profoundly political act. I have written this article with the hope that poetry may provide for some others, as it has for me, small and ordinary possibilities between giving up and going under. My invitation to politically-engaged academics is to explore further what poetry, with its "frayed edges and loose wires" (McBride, 2009, p. 43), might be able to do.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Teguh Wijaya Mulya for the warm invitation to visit Surabaya University, and Dr. Kim DeBacco for initiating the “Poetry and the measured university” workshop. I am also sincerely grateful to the anonymous reviewers who have provided constructive feedback on this manuscript.

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