

New Vox in Poetic Inquiry Rhizomatic Runners in a Fruiting Field

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Article abstract

As a doctoral candidate ever-deepening my understandings of arts-based research methods, in general, and performative and poetic methods of inquiry in particular, this paper advances several new theories of Vox in poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009, 2015, 2020), playing with the generative possibilities found with/in such poeticizing as writing method, performative gesture, and reflexive praxis, while addressing intersections between the personal/public and poetry as political currency. Woven as a métissage of poetic offerings within theoretical exposition, this essay links theory, research methods, and personal explorations with/in poetic inquiry. Found poems and original compositions punctuate the proposal of several new Vox to help elucidate our myriad voices within a growing chorus of poetic inquirers singing to a variety of purposes. A journey through methodological praxis unfolds, poses further questions, and encourages ongoing exploration and practice of poetic research methodologies in diverse, rhizomatically fruiting tendrils and directions.

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NEW VOX IN POETIC INQUIRY: RHIZOMATIC RUNNERS IN A FRUITING FIELD

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Abstract: As a doctoral candidate ever-deepening my understandings of arts-based research methods, in general, and performative and poetic methods of inquiry in particular, this paper advances several new theories of *Vox* in poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009, 2015, 2020), playing with the generative possibilities found with/in such poeticizing as writing method, performative gesture, and reflexive praxis, while addressing intersections between the personal/public and poetry as political currency. Woven as a *métissage* of poetic offerings within theoretical exposition, this essay links theory, research methods, and personal explorations with/in poetic inquiry. Found poems and original compositions punctuate the proposal of several new *Vox* to help elucidate our myriad voices within a growing chorus of poetic inquirers singing to a variety of purposes. A journey through methodological praxis unfolds, poses further questions, and encourages ongoing exploration and practice of poetic research methodologies in diverse, rhizomatically fruiting tendrils and directions.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; poetry; vox; rhizomatic; *métissage*

Introduction: Performative Poetic Inquiry

Indigenous research methods speak to how our personal story is interwoven with/in our broader research stories (Wilson, 2008). Honoring that circularity within my own life, I position myself and my artistic, research, and teaching practices before addressing poetic/performative approaches to inquiry. Thus, I acknowledge with gratitude and respect my presence living, working, and writing on the traditional territories of the Lekungwen, WSÁNEĆ, Songhees, and Esquimalt people, whose traditional relationships with the land continue to this day. HÍ SW KE! (Thank you.)

I come from immigrant/settler ancestry in the United States: my father emigrated from Iran in the mid-1950s, while my mother's family of Irish and Swiss-German farmers immigrated in the mid-1800s. I feel an ancestral connection to poetry, particularly through these Persian, Irish, and German lineages, cultures where poetry has been revered for thousands of years.

A lifelong writer, I have only more recently embraced my role as “researcher” (Borhani, 2013) within this *metiér*. As such, I prefer the term *inquirer* to researcher, denoting more open-ended, less rigid processes, something to be drawn forth, as in *educaré*: something emergent, birthing; a more phenomenological, lived experience of things. I am, at heart, a storyteller, with a gift for gab and a love of script. In my writing, I seek to weave disparate (yet interconnected) life stories into a nuanced nurturing whole, offering sustenance; food for thought, learning, and growth. I am also a poet in the academy, embracing poetic and performative methodologies, including a/r/tography (DeCosson & Irwin, 2004), where onto-epistemological overlaps acknowledge and make room for the sometimes messy, blurred, mutually informing processes inherent in the roles of artist, researcher, and teacher. Similarly, through poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009, 2015), and auto/biographical life writing and *métissage* (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008; Hasebe-Ludt, Chamber, & Leggo, 2009), I engage lived experiences through artistic, critical, and performative inquiry.

Poetry is “performative in nature in that poetry is originally an oral art form that is deeply rooted in the sense of voice” (Prendergast, 2006, p. 370-371). Poetic inquiry is similarly performative, given its aesthetic roots in poetry, but also in that “[c]reating research poetry is a performative act, revealing both researcher and participant(s) as masked and unmasked . . . actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the process of research” (Prendergast, 2006, p. 371). The art/act of choosing which words to include, which stories to highlight, arranged just-so on the page, what surfaces, and what stays behind, speaking with absence and silence, are performative research methods. This

performativity also implies embodiment: the researcher engages all the senses (through fingertips, ears, eyes, nose, taste buds) to sift through data in crafting a poem: scruffy fur, eagle's strident cry, ancient comet streaking past Big Dipper, lilacs greeting you on a spring night before you round the corner to see them, bite of salt on lips. Through voice welling up within the body to speak or sing a poem, through the rhythm of breath, poem-making is embodied craft; likewise, through the corporeal act of writing – hand and fingertips to pen, page, and keyboard – *embodied* we create. Furthermore, poetic inquiry “connect[s] writing as embodiment to ethnographic practice” (Faulkner, 2018a, p. 18), wherein creating poetry in/as research occurs in relation to some facet of community. We write the stories of others as well as our own, extending poetry's ancient role as communal memory and mouthpiece, oral archive and transmission; the poet as human radio, minstrel, and storyteller.

Methodology

. . . my face . . . a poem
I have just learned how to apply
–*Ars Poetica*

Poetic inquiry, as qualitative research methodology, flourishes in a multitude of creative locations, ranging from education to health care, kinesiology, psychology, and sociology (Owton, 2017; Prendergast, 2009, 2015; Vincent, 2018), and through diverse methods such as poetic transcription (Carroll, Dew, & Howden-Chapman, 2011; Glesne, 1997), found poems (Prendergast, 2006, 2015), cluster poems (Butler-Kisbe, 2002), autobiographical research poetry (Leggo, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2018; MacKenzie-Dawson, 2018; Rajabali, 2017), and poetic-performative styles of expression (Deegan & O'Connell, 2018; Saldaña, 2006; Schoone, 2015). The title of this article draws inspiration from this rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) array of poetically inquiring runners and side-shoots populating the world of qualitative inquiry (Vincent, 2018); may we long be nourished by their delicious roots and berries.

In my own explorations with poetic and performative approaches to inquiry, I have enriched my repertoire of research methods and deepened theoretical understanding by considering the role of *Vox* in poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009, 2015, 2020), writing *Ars Poetica* (Faulkner, 2017a), experimenting with Slow writing (Hurren, 2014; Ulmer, 2017), and exploring performance (auto)ethnography (Ault, 2014; Denzin, 2003), and applied theatre research with/in education (Bryon, 2018; Foster, Mäkelä, & Martuseqicz, 2019; Schoone, 2015).

In this article, I weave a *métissage* (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Donald, Hurren, Leggo & Oberg, 2008) of texts, interspersing poems amongst theoretical and methodological considerations of poetic/performative inquiry. *Métissage* is “a research approach and a literary praxis that invites writers to braid strands of their own writing with that of others (Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010, p. 2). Working with *métissage* commits me “to interdisciplinarity and the blurring of genres, text, and identities” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 142), allowing me to blend and play with theory and praxis. This methodological attunement reflects my positionality as a person of mixed-race who whose lived experiences embody a similar blurring of identities, cultures, and locales. “*Métissage* . . . in a Canadian context, is a mixing and a *rapprochement* of differences: race, culture, class, gender, geography, and language” (Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010, p. 2) that helps give voice to these blurred and overlapping identities. The French term “*rapprochement*” refers to “an establishment or resumption of harmonious relations” (Lexico, 2021b), especially in an international context; this emphasis on relationality appeals to my poetic sensibility, while its ethos of cross-cultural harmony—affirming, rather than polarizing, difference—provides a scholarly and aesthetic home for my Iranian-American, Canadian-American border-crossing and counter-culture experiences of borders within borders, within multiple fields of identity, culture, and community. Thus, *métissage performs* as a political, personal, contingent, coexistent method(ology) where we “create plural selves and communities that thrive on ambiguity and multiplicity” (Chamber et al., 2008, p. 142); certainty is not sought so much as space is afforded to an endless array of possibilities (and selves). That is, there are multiple ways to engage poetic inquiry, carve an idea, string a haiku, weave a curriculum, enact a poem, or reckon with agency and care in our interactions with each other and our local, more-than/other-than-human neighbors and kin. Practicing *métissage* helps me remember these inclusive ways-of-being in research.

In what follows, I offer several new *Vox* for consideration within the field of poetic inquiry, to aid our understanding of the myriad ways in which we might approach poetry as research, and to enhance our personal artistic praxes. I hope the addition of new *Vox* to our theoretical musings and vocabularies will provide both a winnowing of greater specificity within already existing *Vox*, and suggest branches not yet named within a lotus-like pool of blooming possibilities, encouraging us to continue wondering about (other) new ways of playing with *Vox* in research and writing.

In suggesting subtle permutations, variations, and overlaps among existing *Vox*, my aim is not to indicate a hierarchical structure among such groupings. Rather, in the way of poetry itself, and the image of a lotus suggested earlier, we might imagine *Vox* within poetic inquiry as sharing overlapping petals with neighboring voices, all tethered

by a rhizomatic stem structure that spreads (in this case, underwater) to create new stems and resultant blossoms. Thus, varying *Vox* appear as branching stems of rhizomatic growth, rather than as “categories,” or within a hierarchical arrangement. As such, the rhizomatic branches of *Vox* represent a diversity of voices, something akin to Bakhtin’s heteroglossia (1934/1981): a speckled chorale voice made up of many voices, rather than a linear catalog of fixed notes or points of view. More nuance than category, representing shades of difference and similarity, degrees of gradation and coloration loop back on one another in an ever-circling, spiraling chorus of voices that do not delimit one another or future descriptive namings of *Vox* within poetic inquiry.

Building on Laurel Richardson’s methodological concept of crystallization, this chorus, like the crystal,

combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. . . Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (Richardson, 2000, p. 934)

These crystalline facets of *Vox* may perform like nested topics at times – a set of Matryoshka dolls of poetic inquiry; “deepened, complex, thoroughly partial,” with the order of the nesting depending on the topic and inquirer, place and time. Working within many voices also allows us to address (and push back against) power relations that might limit one voice, but not another. In these ways, variously named *Vox* overlap and interjoin in expressing poetic inquiry’s reveries and insights, a polyphonic chorus of ongoing, ever-changing voices.

In addition to discussion of *Vox*, this article includes original and found poems, the latter gleaned from multiple sources and contexts. Found poems help to “reflect on, play against, and perform with the central topic” (Prendergast, 2006, p. 369), whether that of the literature itself, or themes of inquiry within those sources. I find crafting found poetry helps me “think”; occasionally, something unexpected and wondrous results. Thus, even though not all found poetry surfaces as part of a final poetic or research “product,” as a tool of inquiry alone, this method remains invaluable.

New Vox in Poetic Inquiry

The magic of a talking burning bush.

–Krista Franklin (2015/2021), *Manifesto, or Ars Poetica 2*

Poetry expresses the voice of its maker, and the persona put forth in the poem (be that a person, fictitious or real, or another being or thing). The interplay between what the poem has to say, and how it says it, becomes the poem's voice. Sometimes, the author's voice is almost indistinguishable within the voice of the poem, while at other times, the poet's voice sings prominently.

In her initial survey across social science disciplines, Prendergast (2009) found three main categories that defined poetic inquiry according to voice, or *Vox* in Latin: *Vox Theoria*, for “[l]iterature-voiced poems . . . written from or in response to literature/theory” (p. xxii); *Vox Autobiographia / Autoethnographia*, for “[r]esearch-voiced poems . . . written in a reflective/creative/autobiographical/autoethnographical” (p. xxii) voice; and *Vox Participare*, for “[p]articipant-voiced poems” (p. xxii) comprised of either participants' and/or researcher's voices. In subsequent work, Prendergast (2015) identified five additional *Vox* that reflect expanded understandings and applications of poetic inquiry in (post)qualitative research: *Vox Theoria/Vox Poetica* encompasses “[p]oems about self, and writing and poetry as method” (p. 683); *Vox Justitia* covers “[p]oems on equity, equality, social justice, class, freedom (p. 683); *Vox Identitatis* for “[p]oetry exploring self/participants' gender, race,” (p. 683)sexuality); *Vox Custodia* for “[p]oetry of caring, nursing, caregivers'/patients' experience” (p. 683); and *Vox Procreator*, addressing “[p]oems of parenting, family, and/or religion” (p. 683). Most recently, Prendergast (2020) identified two more *Vox*, emerging from Carl Leggo's work: “*Vox Veritas* and *Vox Cupio* . . . are the voices of truth telling (*veritas*) and of wishing/dreaming (*cupio*)” (p. 31).

I have often wondered about further expanding *Vox*' named distinctions for two reasons: to accommodate subtle variations among already existing *Vox*, and to embrace additional *Vox* yet forming on imagination's horizons. Part of my wonderment stems from a sense, shared by Adam Vincent (2018), that “the poetry created through Poetic Inquiry may be of the same textual genre, but the context - that is what feeds the poetry - differs and is as important as the products themselves” (p. 52). It is precisely for this reason that I believe we may never have too many *Vox*, depending on how poet-scholars keep re-defining poetic inquiry in their own unique signatures, and remembering that these various definitions of *Vox* are fluid, permeable and overlapping. Rather than viewing these distinctions among *Vox* as hierarchical sub-categorizations, I

prefer to see them as organic rhizomatic growth within the field: horizontal, circuitous, subterranean and aquatic, interchanging discursive meanings with one another in critical conversation and poetic dialogue.

Vox Politica

In her original exploration of *Vox*, Prendergast identified certain *Vox Theoria* poems as “overtly political and critical in their content” (2009, xxii), citing those written about 9/11 as examples. In some ways, *Vox Justitia* (coined later, in 2015) also speaks to poems of this nature, addressing social justice, equality, and equity—all “political” concerns. Although Prendergast does not directly identify this overlap between politically-oriented *Vox Theoria* and the politics of *Vox Justitia*, she nonetheless emphasizes the importance of “critical poetic inquiry” and the need for “social poetry” that works “in support of equity, human rights, and justice worldwide” (2015, p. 683). Indeed, this need seems to grow ever more urgent. Given an evolution of thought around politically-minded poetic inquiries, and the clearly overlapping nature of several already-existing *Vox*, I propose a further distillation which speaks specifically to poems of that “overtly political” nature: *Vox Politica*.

Social poetry, political, and protest poetry dwell in an interstitial (fluid) realm between *Vox Justitia* and *Vox Politica*; there *will* be overlaps and cross-fertilizations between these manifestations of *Vox*. My intention in offering *Vox Politica* to describe “overtly political” poetic inquiries is two-fold: When writing about such poet-inquirers, how do we invoke their work within the current array of *Vox*? Secondly, how do we name our own writing and research when it embodies this activist-artist-researcher stance, when we become political microphone and mouthpiece? This is *Vox Politica*.

Literary poets have long led the way in articulating poetry’s political voice in this manner: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Carolyn Forché, Etheridge Knight, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Bly, Mahmoud Darwish, and so many others; poets writing on the front lines of political, social, racial, and eco-systemic oppression. Poetry lends itself well to protest, too: intensified political speech combined with physical action, where the personal, in the (communal) political, garners push back with/in solidarity, often embodied through the unifying power of rhythm and song. Recall protest and anti-war songs of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and the ongoing prevalence of politically responsive music today, in genres spanning folk, rock, rap, and punk (from Guthrie to Baez, Dylan to Marley, Tupac, John Trudell, Ani DiFranco, Pussy Riot—to name but a few). Spoken Word, likewise, engages the power of oral poetics—rhyme and performativity—to challenge

oppression, state-sanctioned violence, racial erasure, pipelines; this, too, is *Vox Politica*, perhaps with an additional moniker underscoring its rallying cry: *Vox Protestatia*.

Muriel Rukeyser's ethnographically-sourced social poetry about the Hawks Nest Tunnel mining disaster in West Virginia, *The Book of the Dead* (2018), illuminates class and racial injustice through its stark, honest portraiture of a preventable tragedy. The poem also calls out the complicit political priorities (or lack thereof) of capitalism and governmental authority, and the lack of a social safety net that helped create such a tragedy. This is *Vox Politica*. Following the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Sandra Faulkner (2018b) reckoned with gun culture in her own family, and targeted violence against LGBTQ+ communities, by using "poetry to speak back to the ubiquitous talk, use, and idolization of guns in the United States" (p. 340). This, too, is *Vox Politica*.

A volume of refereed work gleaned from the 6th International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry (ISPI) and the 17th annual Winter Wheat: The *Mid-American Review* Festival of Writing, held at Bowling Green State University in 2017, is devoted to "poetic inquiry as a way to reflect on power inequities, to make . . . personal experience part of the critique, and to realize the potential power in poetry as political discourse" (Faulkner, 2019a, xiii). More than mere theory, the writers in this volume utilize poetry to contribute to the creation of social and political justices. Sandra Filipelli's (2019) study of Buddhist peace principles amidst social violence embody *Vox Politica*. My own work in this volume (Borhani, 2019) advances singing poetry as a form of personal and collective resistance, an embodied pushback against forces of tyranny and oppression.

Natalie Honein's essay and poems, "Spectators in a Tragedy" (2019), speaks to social injustice in war by examining "the role that we play as detached observers, spectators, waiting as an audience does, for the horror show to end" (p. 202). Citing the example of Pablo Neruda's "resistance poetry," Honein explores poetry's power to prompt political change, her poems confronting the difficulty in facing what we don't want to see, what is too painful to bear. Through *Vox Politica*, she helps us to not turn our faces away, to bear witness to another's loss and pain.

Again, here are overlaps with *Vox Justitia*. But I posit that anti-war poems, in particular, engage *Vox Politica* in their call for a different social order (overtly, or by implication), an end to violence (and the need for peaceable solutions to conflict), and through their insistence on (individual, corporate, governmental) accountability in the face of socio-environmental-political transgressions. As Rukeyser (2018) once noted, "What three things can never be done? / Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone" (n. p.). Perhaps some of the overlaps between *Vox Justitia* and *Vox Politica* dwell in the former

voicing and drawing attention to a problem, while the latter names solutions? Or do they entangle and exchange even more than this? Many poetic inquiries incorporate both *Vox Justitia* and *Politica*, calling out injustice, and crying out for socio-political change.

Identifying an evolution in personal awareness sparked by a political event, Faulkner and Squillante (2019) engage *Vox Politica* (spiced, again, with *Vox Protestatia*) to reflect on critiques of national Women's Marches™ that were “too centered on White women's experiences, ignoring trans women and women of color with a singular focus on reproductive justice” (p. 178), at the expense of a more inclusive, intersectional feminism. Joining a different march, organized by “black women and femmes,” Faulkner and Squillante strove to “listen to their history and help them move toward *real* equality. They asked us to think about the commodification of feminism and social justice. To prioritize intersectionality. To question our motives and our complicity” (2019, p. 180). Examining our own complicity can be deeply challenging work. But what choice do we have? Poetry helps bridge gaps between historic and emergent understandings, framing other(ed) perspectives and new (old) ways of being that might help lead us out of our current morass.

If *Vox Politica* pulls back the veil, calls out the problem, *Vox Protestatia* turns up the volume, takes to the streets, marches, sings, and shouts about it. Lighting the spark of peaceful protest, intertwined, *Vox Protestatia* is always political, and *Vox Politica* invariably implies an urgent protest. This unity roots and flowers in verse, song, and action, seeding hope, and planting peace.

Grab your child by the hand and keep going.
 Throw your fist in the air knowing it's just another
 word for *watch what happens when I open my palm*.
 (Faulkner & Squillante, 2019, p. 186)

I love this image—can it be *the* image for this moment in history? A fist thrown up in the air with force, with gusto—then slowly, deliberately, *opening*: a mic-drop to the sky, releasing a bevy of doves . . . they fly free . . . *Watch what happens*.

Social poetry demands we show up as witnesses. *Vox Politica* may be to *Vox Justitia* as street demonstrations, die-ins, blocking railways and pipeline routes are to legislative processes, or an elected official's eloquent speech. *We need both*. *Vox Politica* is action based, performative, moving in tandem with non-violent civil disobedience. Embodying this poetry of witness, from Rukeyser to Forché, Faulkner and others, we write new (old) worlds into existence through our resistance poetics.

This found poem draws attention to unconscious bias at work. Found poetry draws words and phrases from other existing texts (newspaper articles, academic treatises, letters, even other poems) to devise or reveal new or refined meanings through re-arrangement of the words on the page. This poem was constructed from the verbatim transcript of a 9-1-1 call in Georgia, U.S.A. (exact location omitted to protect the innocent); the caller's words provide an unintentionally ironic frame highlighting racial bias and profiling in America today.

9-1-1, What's Your Emergency?

Hi there

I'm in the Walmart parking lot
and I just got my nails done
and I see this black gentleman
with these two little
white kids,
and I . . .

And, so I just had a funny feeling
and so I rode around and I just came back

And I saw the girl get in
and the little boy
and I said, Do these kids . . .
Are these kids okay?
Do you know these kids?

And he goes,
Why wouldn't I?
So I said,
Let me see the little girl,
and he said No,
and I said,
Well, let me just see the little girl
and see if she knows you . . .

And it could be nothing,
but I'm not sure

and I figured, well,
let me call up.

And if I didn't do this
I would be up all night

Did you want to meet with a police officer?

Well, I'd like someone to come
and look at this guy
to make sure that he knows these kids

He just got gas and now he's pulling away.
Should I follow him?

No, I'd recommend not following him.

I think he knows I'm watching him.
I'm right behind him.

And if I'm wrong, that's great,
I'm thrilled
But if I'm not,
you know,
then these kids are okay.

And maybe he knows their mom
I don't know

But I don't know
that he knows them . . .

These are but a few examples of *Vox Politica* flourishing within intersectional, politically minded poetic inquiries, substantiating this call for further nuanced, rhizomatic tendrils and nomadic floes of *Vox* within poetic inquiry. As we continue to take up political and protest-oriented concerns in our work (Borhani, 2013; Faulkner, 2017b; Faulkner & Squillante, 2019; Hall, 2013), our work as agents of social change comes alive: theory and action unite as we hone critically reflexive and artistic-research sensibilities, modeling these life practices for our children, our students, our colleagues,

and each other. Work, home, personal, and political all combine, as we are needed to tell these stories and write the poems that document, question, and contest this changing world, that speak back to power. *Vox Politica* helps flesh out, expand, and embody that “core mandate for critical poetic inquirers whose work is in support of equity, human rights, and justice worldwide . . . [one that] never flinches from catching and voicing hard and shining truths about the way things are, and surrendering to songs about the way they might become” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683).

Vox Poetica

They say poetry is political:

pedagogical

epistemological

ontological.

Mythological.

Axiological.

Which of these -ologies

curls up with poetry at night

sleek bodies intertwined

red fur, warmed earth,

tails twitching in a shared dream?

How is the dream of a fox

poetical?

Vox Feminista

Vox Feminista is the voice that specifically queries feminist praxis within poetic inquiry, critiquing patriarchal and hierarchical hegemonies by exposing and seeking to lessen or eradicate gender inequalities. *Vox Feminista* also addresses intersectional feminisms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and/or sexual orientation, uniting critical and feminist theory to “focus on social and economic inequalities . . . [with] an agenda of promoting system change” (Martin, 2003, p. 65).

Not all poems that address feminist concerns will be overtly political. For example, poems that celebrate mothering may sing in *Vox Procreator*, while those that catalog identity issues may better embody *Vox Identitatis* and/or *Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia*. And it is true that poems directed toward expressly feminist concerns—equity in the workplace, body politics, walking safely at night—could also be addressed by *Vox Politica* or *Vox Justitia*. But given these overtly feminist aspects, I

suggest *Vox Feminista* is another line of flight within our rhizomatic lotus pond of connected, yet independently flowering, stalks; interstitial, overlapping; a differently colored voice in a chorus of harmonizing *Vox*.

Like the art of poetically inquiring, practicing feminism transcends the bounds of our formal “research,” expanding into and influencing our whole lives, the lives of others, and our planet. As Sara Ahmed (2017) notes,

To bring feminist theory home is to make feminism work in the places we live, the places we work. When we think of feminist theory as homework, the [workplace or home] becomes something we work on as well at. We use our particular to challenge the universal. (p. 10)

Vox Feminista inspires that work, giving voice to the materiality of feminist “theory”: the body, our life experiences, home *and* work, addressing matters of import to *all* beings, in kitchens and bedrooms, classrooms and boardrooms, out in the streets, the commons, and on the land.

Communications and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar Sandra Faulkner considers poetic inquiry a feminist research methodology, citing its “focus on embodied experiences and attention to breath, line, form, and emotion—all things that speak to the body” (2018a, p. 5) as feminist concerns. Faulkner (2019b) has written extensively on the varied forms and functions of poetic inquiry within qualitative research; exploring theory, methods, and diverse applications in data gathering, analysis, and interpretation of findings with poetry. She sees poetic inquiry as embodied, relational, reflexive—methodological approaches that lend themselves well to feminist concerns such as the body, family, social and environmental justice, and the personal as poetic and political.

Poetic praxis as research methodology furthers feminism’s goals of refuting a mind-body, emotion-intellect split and other patriarchal dichotomies, such as nature-culture and public-private. Many of Faulkner’s autobiographical research poems speak *Vox Feminista*, addressing family life, sexual harassment in the academy (Faulkner, Calafell & Grimes, 2009), and a “feminist political response” to media headlines, demonstrating “how feminist poetry uses personal, embodied experience to critique existing systems and structures of oppression” (2021, p. 325). Similarly, Esther Ohito and Tiffany Nyachae engage *Vox Feminista* in Black feminist poetry that probes connections between language and power, wondering how poetry might reveal

possibilities for (de- and re-) constructing understandings (Leggo, 2004) “of the complex lives, lived experiences, and knowledges of Black girls and women” (2019, p. 839).

Laurel Richardson’s *Vox Feminista* models a “feminist-postmodernist” (1993) social science that blurs genres, stokes a female imaginary, validates emotional labor and response, and honors tensions implicit in self-reflexivity. Her 2018 essay, “So, Why Poetry?” untangles interrelated threads of *Vox Feminista*, *Vox Politica* and *Vox Justitia*, through an auto/ethnographic lens onto the insidious effects of unconscious bias. Richardson’s brief essay examines the implications of living with a poem she wrote entitled *Deplorables*: a seemingly quiet catalog of women’s work that emits a strangled scream about the stereotyping of working-class women during the 2016 American presidential election (the poem is included within the essay). Richardson explains that the poem is “about any and all women in powerless positions by virtue of race, ethnicity, or social class. It is about all . . . women who have been treated deplorably” (2018, p. 663), beginning with those stereotyped in Hillary Clinton’s offensive campaign rhetoric. Witnessing and speaking (back) to her own bias, and the bias of others (including friends and colleagues)—speaking *for* those marginalized, left behind, forgotten or mistreated Richardson exposes class-centric privilege amidst unconscious bias, even as she acknowledges her own complicity in such patterns. She is not just speaking about overt political events during an election cycle, though this is important. She goes further, naming what needs to change—the continued perpetration of such bias—and calls out for that change through the medium of poetry. The effects of unconscious bias continue to reverberate today in ongoing tensions between supporters of former President Trump and the Biden administration. Advancing Richardson’s suggestion to engage poetry as a means of cultivating understanding among those with differing points of view, might *Vox Feminista*—alongside *Vox Politica* and *Vox Justitia*—help us to hear and talk with one another along the way?

How do we distinguish *Vox Feminista* from *Vox Politica* or *Vox Justitia*? As noted previously, these are neighboring voices in chorus, inter-weaving and mutually informing: they may speak of similar things, but in differently faceted nuances. It is the differences within the similarities that intrigue me, those “intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges [which] permits—even invites or incites—us to reflect on our method and to explore new ways of knowing” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 821). These related *Vox* dance in tandem, manifesting striations and permutations that illuminate details of social challenges we push back against. For some, a lived, embodied feminism is often deeply spiritual. Thus, we must also understand how feminism can be simply a way of life, an ontological orientation. Poets working in *Vox Feminista* need their own stem on the poetic inquiry lotus-body, to (re)imagine love poems alongside

political poems, hymns to the body amidst social-justice odes. Swimming in a feminist imaginary, we explore our varied embodied experiences and understandings of multiple feminisms, speaking up, singing out in *Vox Feminista*.

We Take Back the Night, Again

*Because the night belongs to lovers,
because the night belongs to us....*

—Patti Smith & Bruce Springsteen (1978) “Because the

Night”

the night is my lover
I walk past
darkened buildings
shiny streets
last gold leaf hanging
from a blackened branch
fluttering alone,
echoed in an oily mirror
— shadow reflected
in elliptical puddle —
at the empty bus stop

the night is my lover
grand solitude in darkness
salty air dotted stars
 alone
under cover
 fully exposed
impenetrable
 fully enclosed
companioned by loose, curling thoughts

the mysterious wind that carries them away

 while I remain
here. Here on earth
 enveloped, embraced
by wind

water
 a river of stars
 velvet dark
 endless sky

 your daughter, mother moon
 blossom, fruit, seed
 (re)root me
 like an ancestor tree

 the night is my lover
the night belongs to us

Vox Orphic

In my explorations with *Vox*, I have come to recognize an elemental voice that perhaps pre-originates all others: spirit of the voice within all *Vox*, root of the poetic dream, poetry's original voice and performative heart. With ancient roots twined in music and song, this is the voice of the poet-singer-storyteller, musician and lyre player, Orpheus. Singing divinely inspired poems of initiation, descent, and rebirth, of transformation and transcendence amidst mysteries of the ordinary, Orpheus' magic flows in words sung as talisman and guide. Primary poetic essence, I call this voice *Vox Orphic*.

Vox Orphic is an ineffable, intangible phenomenon, and as such, may be experienced differently by everyone. In proposing this new (ancient) *Vox*, I am inviting readers to reflect and explore with me. In what follows, I name some poets and artists who I believe embody this elemental *Vox*, whose work illuminates some aspect of the Orpheus myth, either through the poetry's musicality, musical accompaniment, and/or the liminal nature of the poems themselves. Like Orpheus, these poets sing of elemental experiences: of life and death, birth, rebirth; the earth, moon, sun and stars, and nature as reflectors of our own deepest selves, and the origins of the multiverse. *Orphic* poets can lead us safely out of various underworlds, and herein lies the possibility for transformation, the inspiration of shared communion, and a renewal of gratitude and grace for another day of life here on earth.

We find *Vox Orphic* in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1981), songs to that mythic poet who charmed animals and made trees dance; songs of spirit, the body, communion between them, and the self in relation to art (including dance and music)

and poetry. The prayerful intensity of Rilke's sonnets quivers with *Vox Orphic*. Many literary poets, from William Blake, to Jack Kerouac and Joy Harjo, embody *Vox Orphic* through their musical explorations embedded within their poetic performances. Rumi reminded his followers that his chosen path to God was through dance and music; naturally, Rumi sings in *Vox Orphic*.

The work of certain performing poet-artists is also exemplary of *Vox Orphic*, playing into something larger, more affective and engaged, than mere entertainment. These (musical) poetic/performances achieve rarified states of communion between artist and participants, a prayerfully infused mediation that unfolds in the course of a group event; a transformative experience, a journey that all undertake together, replete with reverence, reverie, reflection, and return, led by a modern-day equivalent of mythic Orpheus: musician, poet, guide to the underworld and back. These performers are not social science researchers, per se; yet, their work influences the social world, and likewise informs my own aesthetic, and development of my (social) poetic voice. Rock poet-musician Patti Smith is one such artist.

As a young female performing in the punk genre in the late 1960s New York music scene, Patti Smith broke norms by conscripting poetry and literary references into her high-powered, interactive rock-n-roll performances; a rhizomatic phenomenon. Iconoclastic poet, artist, musician, and writer, she embodies poet as priestess, creating a sympathetic resonance with her audience that kindles an ancient communal fire, around which we discuss our big concerns: climate change; the need for more love in the world; speaking truth to power; the utter necessity of using one's voice to vote. Like Orpheus, Smith is a mystic committed to the power of music and song to transform, to open gateways and illuminate darkness, and she is the guide, the spiritual interlocutor, who leads the way.

Orphic derives from Orphism, "a mystic religion of Ancient Greece, originating in the 7th or 6th century BC and based on poems . . . attributed to Orpheus, emphasizing the necessity for individuals to . . . [attend to] their nature by ritual and moral purification throughout a series of reincarnations" (Lexico, 2021b). (Orphism also refers to a brief art movement within Cubism, c. 1912.) According to Merriam-Webster (2021), the adjective "Orphic" is defined as "of or relating to Orpheus or the rites or doctrines ascribed to him;" documentation of such details appears scarce, ascribed "lost," and assigned to the realm of myth. Here, we are firmly on shifting sands, intertidal and interstitial, between sea and shore, self and world, where the details of the story vary for each of us, ours alone to experience.

Merriam-Webster (2021) further defines “Orphic” as “mystic, oracular, fascinating, and entrancing.” Each of these words is key to describing qualities of *Vox Orphic*. *Mystic* is crucial to this venture: an unknown, of a spiritual nature; relating to mysteries, awe, wonder, and “magical properties.” *Oracular* speaks to the power of an oracle, a person or shrine through whom the gods deign to speak, providing wise or authoritative guidance, and implying a “solemnity of delivery.” *Fascinating* denotes charming, but irresistibly so; captivating; magic shimmers here. Finally, *entrancing*: the definition alone is “fascinating.” Entrancing, from “entrance,” relates to the “1. power or permission to enter; admission; 2. the act of entering; 3. the means or place of entry; 4. the point at which a voice or instrument part begins in ensemble music” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). These aspects of “entering”—elements of power, permission, means, and placement—speak to a mythic, oracular experience, as well as the idea of being “entranced,” under a spell: “to put into a trance; to carry away with delight, wonder, or rapture” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Things are out of our hands, and completely in our own hands, a journey with intention, and risk; the paranormal.

Brimming with *Vox Orphic*, a Patti Smith performance embodies all these qualities: captivating, mystical, rapt, oracular: “And we - the faithful, the curious and the skeptical – are transfixed, hanging on her every word as if [it] was a holy writ” (O’Hagan, 2003, para 2). The audience—participants all—move as one, an undulating sea, she a ship on our waves, we a container for her performance, just as she is a touchstone for our dreams and visions; she uplifts and feeds us with her version of “divinely inspired” poetry and music. A mystical experience, yes, but not blind faith: She is an artist with all ten fingers on the pulse of the (social) world, a panoply of voices—gods, angels, children, saints—singing through her. We listen attentively.

Like Orpheus, Smith performs odes, dirges, ballads, lullabies, and love songs; however, the engine driving her poetics is rock-n-roll, with its intensity as well as rhythmic and lyrical roots in blues and folk traditions. Her songwriting foments within this dedicated ethos of loud, potent jams, the rebellious cultural roots of rock-n-roll, the dynamic cadence punctuated by delicate melodies and soulful serenades. Her voice wails softly, trance-like, imploring, then rises in a howling crescendo, hands gesturing emphatically, offering shamanic entreaties to the spirits, to the gods of poetry and rock-n-roll, to all beings. Smith croons, hums, struts around the stage; she kneels beside the patrons lining its edge, takes their hands, accepts the tokens they offer, like the red rose with a poem tied around it that I hand up to her. She pauses mid-set to recite William Blake, starts talking to the crowd in passionate exposition before returning to the music, this blend of poetry and performance, with a banshee cry of powerful intention. This is *Vox Orphic* incarnate.

There are tears in Patti Smith's eyes. She is midway through a performance . . . by turns, sombre and joyous, intense and ecstatic . . . On the brightly lit stage, she seems suddenly vulnerable, momentarily at sea in the midst of a song about the deranging power of love and loss. Then, as her spellbound audience wills her on, she regains her voice and, as the words and music build, leaps off into a place where . . . few other performers go these days. A place beyond words and their meanings, beyond mere critical definition, a place that the great jazz improvisers used to call “out there.” (O’Hagan, 2003, para. 1)

Ted Aoki (2004a) makes a similar musical comparison that resonates strongly here. He tells the story of jazz trumpeter Bobby Shew, invited to speak to a curriculum seminar at the University of Alberta. Aoki had two questions for Shew which shed light on our discussion of the transformative nature of *Vox Orphic*: “‘When does an instrument cease to be an instrument?’ and . . . ‘What is it to improvise? What is improvisation?’” (Aoki, 2004a, p. 367). Shew emphasized that improvisation requires not only a responsiveness to other musicians, but to the *situation*; instrument, musician, and music become one, a “living wholeness,” where “musicianship is more than a matter of skills and techniques, that music to be lived calls for transformation of instrument and music into that which is lived bodily” (Aoki, 2004a, p. 368).

Thus, embodied, *Vox Orphic* is relational; something new is formed in the exchange between performer and patron which is “lived bodily.” Smith forges such a connection with her audience, not just performing *to* them, but taking their hand on this journey guided by improvisational turns. Experiencing Smith’s performances, the audience (as instrument), musician, and music transform together—a journey of mythic proportion, a ritual purification (of the spirit, thus the self) through the unity of music and poetry. I am drawn to these experiences where “between representational and non-representational discourses is the site of living pedagogy” (Aoki, 2004b, p. 429): *Vox Orphic* dwells here, a liminal space like Rumi’s field “out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing” (Barks, 1995, p. 36), where conversation dissolves; holy exchange ensues; a living pedagogy. Smith leads the way, voice primed, our Orphic guide: fascinating, entrancing, mystic, and oracular. We carry a spark of this magic back with us to light the fuse that fuels our *poiesis*, our gifts back to the world.

Smith’s performances praise all life, honoring personal and artistic ancestors, speaking up for clean air and water, and encouraging power to the people. Her shows constitute a threshing floor, where love, politics, song, and the social protest inherent in

rock music's origins combine, under the right circumstances, to create what Joseph Campbell famously called an "antidote to the atom bomb" (as cited in Meriwether, para. 9): a reverential, ecstatic, communal experience, markedly different from most capitalist "entertainment."

This is more than music . . . It turns something on *in here* [the heart]. And what it turns on is life energy . . . It doesn't matter what the name of the god is, or whether it's a rock group or a clergy . . . [it's] hitting that chord of realization of the unity of God in you all. (Campbell, as cited in Meriwether, 2015, para. 3)

Van Morrison is another poet-musician who creates an Orphic space in performance, where poetry and music meld in such a way that time and space disappear; we are transported. With soulful embodiment of vocal range and affect, combined with versatility on saxophone, harmonica, keyboards, percussion, and guitar, Van entrains voice, poetics, and the accompaniment of his many "lyres" to carve portals of "entrancing." Kate Bush creates similarly lush worlds, with her lyrical poetry, theatrical vocal range, and imaginative instrumental forays. The Doors' Jim Morrison commanded *Vox Orphic* to a high, but tragic, degree, slipping too far between veils of the underworld to return.

This Orphic tradition, said to have evolved from earlier Dionysian rites, extends back to ecstatic worship of the holy, and implies an ability to slip between worlds, like Gloria Anzaldúa's "shape-shifting approach to language and the body" (Keating, 2009, p. 121). Smith's shapeshifting dwells, poetic-performatively, in improvisation, in her kinesthetic stage presence, and the art of incantation. Poetry sparks through incantation. Incantation is breath and prayer, crooning notes, somber chants, rhythm and exaltation. Incantation, from the Latin, *incantare*, to chant or bewitch (Lexico, 2021a), underscores an important aspect of *Vox Orphic*: incantation, as enchantment, sings worlds into existence. Artists like Patti Smith move beyond mere performance, into spiritual catalyst: "I am a threshold yearning to sing . . . Come on my spirit are you ready let's go!" (Smith, 1979).

Since first hearing the call of Orpheus' lyre, *Vox Orphic* has guided my own poetic inquiring, a long-reverberating note within all other voices; a kind of *Vox Excelsis*. Perhaps *Vox Orphic* is *the* fountain from which all other *Vox* spring,

. . . the place where the lyre
lifted, sounding – the un-heard centre

leading us on. (Rilke, 2021, II, 28)

Ghazal

When morning fog kisses the night's fading shadow
from toothed leaves of the holly tree, then we will know
how long the cure takes, and where lies the remedy.

In forests of fascination we lose our way,
burdened by excess and the dark weight of gold.
Days of endless night do not bring the remedy.

The orange tabby curls in a perfect circle,
her thick fur a blazing mantle, like soft fire
I caress blindly in search of the remedy.

Rumi traveled a long way in search of his Shams.
Lorca was shot for dissent against the State.
So it's no wonder remedy lives on the run.

When Rumi got to Tabriz, he saw countless birds
fly out of Shams' mouth and into Lorca's cantos,
centuries before the remedy reached these shores.

Bathed in morning's gold light, writing poems to old Friends,
the Guest holds a polished mirror up to my face, says
See? Here is the remedy looking back at the cure.

Vox Sprouts (Concluding Thoughts)

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person
—Czeslaw Milosz (1988/2021), *Ars Poetica?*

Perhaps *Vox* are inherently “tangled to lean into knowing” (personal communication, Dr. Carl Leggo, March 16, 2013). We lean in (closer) to notice their particulars, untangling (and reweaving) harmonic lines of flight, Orphic journeys, breath of social movements, the commons. Prendergast observes that engaging in poetic inquiry is “a calling between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’, a call-and-response, a song that is

sung, a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public” (2009, p. xxxv). I hear *Vox* as an ongoing call-and-response, too—resounding, rippling, reverberating among themselves, and in our writing and songs.

Do we need more Vox? Perhaps “need” is not the operative concern, so much as dreaming of what could be, and creating openings for a diversity of voices to chime in. Experimenting with *Vox* helps me “lean into” personal and cultural phenomena that arise during research, adding to my understanding of poetic inquiry methods, while generatively nourishing a commitment to poetry as personal, pedagogical, and political praxis. This autoethnographic process sings in a chorus of *Vox*.

Reminded again of Richardson’s imaginary of the crystal, where “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 822), we recognize that one researcher’s *Vox Autoethnographia* may be another’s *Vox Feminista*; *Vox Identitatis* may be *Vox Politica* to another. Angle of repose, and context, refract the crystal’s different facets. Like refractive possibilities, *Vox* are potentially limitless.

Can my wonderments inspire curiosity and exploration in others? How might these multi-faceted *Vox* be used in future inquiries? A breeze stirs the lotus pond, sending other emergent voices rippling through fertile waters. *Vox Mentora* might honor poems written to our poetic and scholarly mentors. Mentor, as in “wise adviser, intimate friend . . . sage counselor” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021, para. 1)—from Odysseus’ so-named friend (who often was Pallas Athene, visiting him in disguise; a multifaceted mentor). This links to *Vox Paedagogia*: the voice of teaching and tutoring, and how our students experience learning; poems of pedagogy, curriculum-making, classroom practice, and teacher-training experiences. What about poetic inquiries singing “love songs to the earth” (Adrian M. Downey, Mi’kmaq, lives in Frederickton, New Brunswick, personal communication, January 9, 2020)? *Vox Gaea* speaks to (living/being in) place: to ontological and material conceptions of Land/land (Styres, 2017), the elements, the cosmos—plants, birds, trees, water, stars—and the synergistic interplay of ecological systems; the earth’s stories. (Although “earth” is *Tellus* in Latin, I prefer Greek *Gaea*, for its familiarity to many as synonymous with a name for planet Earth.) *Vox Gaea* helps us listen to place, to our planet-home, that we might better (re)inhabit, (re)enchant, and (re)connect words and worlds of being.

Vox arises in movement, a wave in motion. Like languages, *Vox* are always at play: in flux, and in translation. Rather than taxonomic classification, I seek to muse reflexively on distinct notes within a chorus of harmonizing voices. This is the nature of

voice in poetry—all voices are already there, one encompassed in many. As we begin to notice underlying, overarching voices, their echoing refrains, we listen more deeply; and then we sing along.

Isn't this simply the nature of multiplicity—complexity, even? Can we ever truly make sense of the irreducible gift of *Vox*? Hopefully, the ideas presented here will inspire further clarity or refinement of thought. Like some research poems, not all these ideas will “stick;” but if something resonates, let's meet around a crackling fire, and talk some more, the fire's glow illuminating our faces: many voices, in a rising chorus.

Starlings in Flight (Ars Poetica)

I want to write poems
 like starlings' flight
 across a reddened sky
 wing letters scripted
 free flying writing light

Is a starling like a poem
 poem like a bird
 bird winged thought escaped
 privacy of the singular
 mind upended banking low?

Starlings dart dive descend
 one arc scything the sky
 flight uplifted words flung free

Ink blot on the horizon
 starlings curved across
 a disappearing sun
 carving word wings
 one body one pen one poem

One mind in flight

evening descends soft
 around the bird's ears
 she lands curiously
what is this poem called flight?

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