

Review of “Doing Poetic Inquiry” by Helen Owton (2017)

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Article abstract

Directed toward the novice, Helen Owton’s (2017) book, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, introduces the reader to poetry as an approach to research that allows one to enter into a phenomenological space of relational experience and understanding. Striving toward accessibility, she captures the tensions that exists within qualitative research by offering a guide that is both personal and methodologically orientated. Across the space of this review, I blend found poetry with prose as a means of entering into dialogue with this work. This dialogue lives in a messy space of intention and understanding where knowing lives within the body—the heart, the personal and political. Owton’s work is a compassionate gesture that offers concrete examples and suggestions inviting the reader to reconsider their own research practices and the discursive spaces in which those practices live.

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REVIEW OF “DOING POETIC INQUIRY” BY HELEN OWTON (2017)

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Abstract: Directed toward the novice, Helen Owton’s (2017) book, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, introduces the reader to poetry as an approach to research that allows one to enter into a phenomenological space of relational experience and understanding. Striving toward accessibility, she captures the tensions that exist within qualitative research by offering a guide that is both personal and methodologically orientated. Across the space of this review, I blend found poetry with prose as a means of entering into dialogue with this work. This dialogue lives in a messy space of intention and understanding where knowing lives within the body—the heart, the personal, and political. Owton’s work is a compassionate gesture that offers concrete examples and suggestions inviting readers to reconsider their own research practices and the discursive spaces in which those practices live.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; phenomenology; interdisciplinary; reflective writing; arts-based research

Burdened arrival
 caught
 with/in
 a neoliberal, ontological chasm
 swift method
 open heart

Helen Owton's (2017) book, *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, invites us into a conversation, a phenomenological exploration of the work of making sense, of entering into relationship through the practice of Poetic Inquiry. Her text is an invitation to (re)consider research outside the positivist paradigms that still hold so much power within the academy, so that we might step into a "shared experience" (p. xi), to engage aesthetically—sensually with another. While highlighted as a "*how to* guide to doing Poetic Inquiry" (p. xi), Owton goes beyond simply offering a prescription for a research approach. Instead, she introduces herself and her process, and establishes both a theoretical and personal context, helping the reader come to understand her, the way she approaches the work of doing Poetic Inquiry, and what/who informs this work.

It is my intention, across the space of this review, to enter into loving relationship with Owton's work as I reflect on her process and intention—considering how she speaks to me and beyond me, opening new spaces for relationship and understanding with/in the work of doing Poetic Inquiry. I use found poetry—drawing from the text of the book as well as my notes in the margins—as a means to synthesize and engage with a reflexive orientation, inviting Owton to become present beyond the space of the book, entering into dialogue in this new space of making meaning and review.

Poetry breezes in
 and out of life
 emotion
 speaks toward change
 entering
 a different
 understanding
 reaching
 the heart

As I engaged with this book, I found myself keenly aware of the tension that exists between those established discourses of research and knowing, and the work of being with, being in relationship. It is clear that Owton is called to the poetic, to the work of doing Poetic Inquiry. Yet, at the same time, she finds herself navigating within a structure that immediately calls this work into question. She responds to this tension by

establishing a strong theoretical foundation, inviting multiple voices to enter the dialogue. At the same time, she structures her work in a manner that is accessible to those who might otherwise feel disoriented by the messy and evocative, or by the personal and layered spaces of knowing. Owton does this by introducing the reader to poetry, to the poetic experience that calls to her, and, by connecting the reader to experience that is historical and personal, an experience that speaks to the heart.

My poems are a/part
 messy texts
 entangled
 with/in the layers
 between
 falling
 into line, status quo
 a busy (re)turning
 to breath
 body, heart
 evocative openness
 reveals connection
 entering into the essence
 of knowing
 of being
 in relationship
 whole
 self
 sensing and engaged

Owton has learned that this heartfelt experience may not provide sufficient rationale as some might require for this work. She, therefore, responds attentively, situating her lens, acknowledging where her scholarship dwells in relationship to other paradigms and “methodological assumptions” (p. 27). Conscious of the novice reader, of what they may (not) know about paradigms and epistemologies, she seeks to theoretically ground her intention, while making a case for the value—the importance of Poetic Inquiry. As I read the second chapter of this text, I appreciated the warm and conversational tone that provides simple definitions before elaborating the feminist phenomenological positioning of her research.

With/out poetry
 knowledge becomes
 measured, technological
 truth

subordinates
messy reality

Acknowledging how the positivist paradigm still holds within her discipline (Sport and Exercise Sciences), Owton seeks to consider the limitations of such an “objective measured reality” (p.16). She invites the reader to see the personal within the space of inquiry, to consider how experience shapes our knowing. It is clear that her experience also lives within the text, and that possibility is shadowed by the historicity of language. She cannot fully escape the grip of positivism, where research exists as technical, objective, rational and methodological. She wants the reader to know that “Poetic Inquiry is not a method, it is an attitude and a way of being and becoming in research and in the world” (p. 21). As such, one might see contradiction in Owton’s choice to identify “friendship as [her] method” (p. 19) rather than characterizing it as an approach or process. Instead, this choice of words echoes the tension of being with/in multiple paradigms where positivism resonates loudly in the learning and expectations of various disciplines within the academy.

Working with/in
a metaphorical tapestry
of brambles
where meaning is lived,
shared between
being
in the world
with others
stories of the humane
friendship inspired,
embedded
in corporeal interaction
mediated sites
of meaning
inscribed
senses
act in concert
(re)turning to self,
understanding
always in
relationship
an interaction of consciousness
embodied performativity
calls us into

the lifeworld

where meaning is perception first
reason second

For Owton, doing Poetic Inquiry opens space for humane disruption, for entering into the work of interpersonal engagement between researcher and participant(s). It is a means of giving voice and challenging those dynamics of power that leave us silently isolated. Poetry, Owton reminds us, lives within the performative space, a space of experimentation and possibility, where one might begin to inhabit experience with presence. Within such a space there are multiple ways of seeing and knowing. Owton acknowledges the value of a variety of experimental, arts-based forms of research; however, it is the poetic that calls to her heart—that calls her into knowing, into relationship. She offers Poetic Inquiry as possibility, identifying the text as a guide. The guide she seeks to offer is a reflection of her own journey and experience with Poetic Inquiry. It is not her intention to offer an exhaustive representation of this work. Rather, it is her desire to bring us into dialogue with her understanding and process—so that we, as readers, might begin to consider our own relationship with Poetic Inquiry. For the reader who may be well versed in more traditional-positivist approaches to research, Owton's work facilitates familiarity, increasing readers' access to Poetic Inquiry approaches.

The chapters that follow Owton's introduction to poetry and her discussion of paradigms and epistemology, suggest through their titles— "Poetry as Data," "Turning Data into Poetry," "Poetry as Literature Review," "Judging Poetic Inquiry," "Future Possibilities of Poetic Inquiry"—a directional parlance focused on research design. While consistent with her overview of the book, where she articulates that she will provide "a detailed 'how to' guide for *doing* Poetic Inquiry" (pp. xi), there was a part of me that initially found the structure and orientation of these chapters somewhat off-putting, especially when put in the context of the personal nature of the first chapter. Those unfamiliar with Poetic Inquiry, however, may find themselves disoriented if completely immersed within the messy, personal, theoretical space of sense making. While I see value in this disorientation, it also has the potential to alienate those who understand research within more traditional paradigms. I can therefore understand why Owton chose to advance these chapters in the manner she did. She seeks to respond to the reader, anticipating the challenges some readers might face, and imagining their questions. Her word choice offers a means for connecting the dots, for bringing one into explicit relationship with her process, so that they might discover how Poetic Inquiry can live within the context of our own work.

Where

do participants speak,
 live
 with/in artful absence
 art and data juxtaposed
 who
 is the poet,
 participant, subject
 who
 captures the contextual
 juncture of experience(s)
 evocative and vulnerable
 collaboration,
 in process
 where
 poems cannot be
 unheard

Owton seeks to consider both established methods and disciplines as well as new possibilities for doing Poetic Inquiry. She challenges the reader to invite research participants to engage in the work of writing poetry and suggests that using poetry as data allows both researcher and participant to become engaged in collaborative meaning making. As Owton notes, however, Poetic Inquiry is entrenched within multiple competing discourses and paradigms, including “ongoing debates about inferiority, superiority, poetry as data or art and what qualifies one to write or publish poetry (Piiro 2002; Prendergast 2009; Shapiro 2004)” (p. 32). These arguments of the nature and quality of Poetic Inquiry as art-form or art-like have influenced the kinds of examples that are available, especially when one considers the possibility of poetry as data. While she is able to provide a few examples from Henderson (2002), and Shapiro and Stein’s (2005) work with medical students, Owton (2017) notes that “poetry as data appears to be an approach missing in arts-based methods” (p. 31). However, it is important to acknowledge that the absence she sees is not a reflection of the broader context of arts-based approaches to research, but rather a reflection of these approaches within Owton’s own discipline, (Sports and Exercise Sciences). She responds to this disciplinary absence by talking through her own work and process related to using poetry as data.

Meaning merges
 tradition and narrative
 a retelling of stories
 where the heart leads

intuitive searching
 captures feeling,
 emotions
 an unambiguous
 construction
 where meaning
 breathes
 eloquent expression
 language unclogged
 voices move slowly
 between the silence
 and gaps
 that speak
 creatively

Owton is sensitive to the needs of graduate students who may find “limited support” (p. 45) for their Poetic Inquiry work. Her book is a gesture, where she reaches out to share her process and practice, with specificity, as a way to offer support and guidance. While I have concerns that the creative spirit of Poetic Inquiry might be lost for the reader in a sort of methodological/epistemological misunderstanding through phrases like “I offer a more substantial breakdown of the *process*” (p. 45), I am also cognizant that she is offering a beginning point for researcher understanding in relation to approaching this work, to developing a relationship with Poetic Inquiry. This invitation is encouraged using examples from Owton’s research, and examples from across the literature that she integrates into her discussion.

Finding self
 engulfed
 in the endless
 pages of experience
 and meaning
 poetry unravels
 breathe
 in/to, toward
 the conceptual,
 complex intricacies
 where life may speak
 creatively
 feeling imposter,
 imposters positioned
 across wide-space,

writing of, writing with
 personal phenomena,
 (re)organized therapeutics

Owton writes from a place of vulnerability, acknowledging the challenges she felt as a graduate student navigating research papers, trying to make sense of it all —while also feeling, at times, out of place in this process. It was Poetic Inquiry that brought her into relationship with the theory that overwhelmed her. Through Poetic Inquiry she found the space to “unravel concepts that might not be readily understood without writing creatively about [them].” (p. 76). She seeks to capture her own journey as a reflection of possibility and an opportunity to invite the reader into dialogue.

Dynamic reflexivity
 shifts the shapes of meaning
 World and self
 layered and living
 in the midst
 of uncertainty and unease
 (be)coming into understanding
 across the visceral periphery
 A revelation of self
 healing,
 of a self faced with oneself
 between the layered facets
 of being amidst
 complexity,
 a part of the human condition
 the severed bits of ourselves
 feeling and thinking
 We write
 from our whole self—mind—spirit—body
 coming into the messy space
 of rhythmic flow

Owton invites the reader to come into the poetic, reminding them “poetry is just another form of writing which allows you to think deeply or carefully about something” (p. 96). Aware that emotion is often dismissed within the culture of academia, she wants readers to become attuned to their emotions, to understand that emotion is an important part of reflexivity, and that poetry can engage them with emotion. Writing from a place of compassion, she understands that beginning to work with/in the poetic can be difficult. As such, she offers prompts and gentle advice to encourage readers, truly inviting them

into the process. She reminds readers that this type of work, while necessary for phenomenological understanding, takes practice. It is through this practice that we might come into better relationship with ourselves, with one another, and the world.

(Be)coming into the poetic
 the heart speaks
 to/ward sensuous knowing
 Validity cannot live
 here
 in this space
 of perspective,
 rhythm and breath,
 this space of letting go
 where feeling and fact
 become expressions of being
 selves in essence

Owton imagines the novice researcher asking the question: how will I know if my work is good? She encourages the letting go of traditional criteria: validity, reliability and generalisability, the letting go of thinking that we have to prove ourselves. She suggests to begin to engage in work that speaks to the heart, to “slow down, live in the moment and breathe” (p. 132)—fully urging for a uniting of the heart, mind, imagination, body, and spirit. She also offers alternative criteria for consideration (Faulkner, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), highlighting the importance of reflexivity and intention, reminding readers that Poetic Inquiry is an “artful science” (Owton, 2017, p. 105).

Meaning lives
 with/in an embodied space
 where method speaks
 to/ward aesthetic,
 relational
 knowing
 This is the work of living,
 of slow scholarship
 that calls
 us in/to
 imagination,
 body, spirit, heart
 and mind
 Where we might learn to breathe
 presently,

healthfully,
 compassionately
as humans
re inventing our world
and ourselves
in relational possibility

Across the landscape of *Doing Poetic Inquiry*, Owton navigates thoughtfully through a landscape of contradiction and expectation that has too often dismissed arts-based approaches to research as overly emotional, or lacking the rigor of more established methodologies grounded within positivist paradigms. While presented as a how-to, what Owton actually accomplishes within the text is far more important. She lives as a mentor within the text, inviting the reader to come into relationship with poetry, while sharing her relationship with the poetic—with process and understanding as well as those aspects that continue to challenge her. Owton’s work is grounded in compassion; she understands that Poetic Inquiry speaks to and from the soul, that poetry “moves through our veins...flows through [our] body...that poetry is relational” (pp. 127-128). Her work, which blends the personal with the poetic, the theoretical with the practical, and the messy with order and direction, reflects the struggle for legitimacy so oft encountered by researchers who use arts-based forms of research. Yet, it is also a call toward what might be possible, a discursive bridge that helps readers (re)consider themselves as researchers, immersed within a discursive space of epistemological contradiction; engaged in the work of *doing* Poetic Inquiry.

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