

Poetic Inquiry Coming of Age

A Review of "Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda: Engaging with the Lives of Others" by Laura Apol

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Article abstract

Laura Apol's *Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda: Engaging with the Lives of Others* (2021) traces the author's long relationship with survivors of the 1994 Rwanda holocaust in which thousands of Tutsi were murdered by their neighbors, and examines the ways in which her personal uses of poetry for coping with painful subject matter became a longitudinal poetic inquiry. This review responds to themes of relational poetic inquiry and the development of poetic craft and suggests that the author's development reflects the development of the field of poetic inquiry and marks a stage of accomplishment.

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POETIC INQUIRY COMING OF AGE; A REVIEW OF “POETRY, POETIC INQUIRY AND RWANDA: ENGAGING WITH THE LIVES OF OTHERS” BY LAURA APOL

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Abstract: Laura Apol’s *Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda: Engaging with the Lives of Others* (2021) traces the author’s long relationship with survivors of the 1994 Rwanda holocaust in which thousands of Tutsi were murdered by their neighbors, and examines the ways in which her personal uses of poetry for coping with painful subject matter became a longitudinal poetic inquiry. This review responds to themes of relational poetic inquiry and the development of poetic craft and suggests that the author’s development reflects the development of the field of poetic inquiry and marks a stage of accomplishment.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; ethics in poetic inquiry; cross-cultural inquiry; relational research; Rwandan genocide

The Plot

A white woman goes to Rwanda to facilitate a writing workshop with survivors of the 1994 genocide in which Hutu murdered millions of their Tutsi neighbors. Hearing stories that are deeply troubling and painful, she begins to write poems in an effort to control the chaos of her emotions. She is a poet. This is what she does.

In the months after her first trip to Rwanda, she continues to work on poems and begins to realize that the poems may have value and utility beyond herself. She begins to think about poems as a means of inquiring, and, ultimately, the product of inquiry and a call to action. She is a researcher. This is what she does.

But something unexpected has happened. She has developed deep affection for those who share their stories of genocide. On return trips, over time, and through shared experience, bonds of trust and relationship have strengthened. Relationships bring with them responsibilities. She struggles to define her responsibility toward her companions in this work. She cannot call them subjects or co-researchers; they are her companions.

Should she adhere to the usual research guidelines requiring use of pseudonyms rather than calling her companions by their names? Wouldn't pseudonyms be a sort of erasure?

Does she have the craft skills to render their voices and their experiences effectively and truly? And what is truth? Whose truth?

Not for days or weeks, but for years, she stumbles through the weeds of relational ethics, not finding an easy, ready-made path to follow, having to make her own way through one sticky patch after another.

Ultimately, she publishes a book of poems with two framing essays. She titles the book *Requiem, Rwanda*.

Years later, she will write another book, telling the story of how she wrote the first one, laying her processes bare. She titles the book *Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda: Engaging with the Lives of Others*.

In Another Voice

For those who may not have time to read this review in its entirety, I want to say up front that the book is an important work, and I hope you will read it. It is important for those of us who engage in poetic inquiry, and it is important for those who want to understand poetic inquiry—what it is, why it is, how one does it. It is also important for its content which resonates beyond 1994 and the country of Rwanda. Because this is longitudinal work spanning almost thirty years, addressing deeply important social and historical issues, and because it engages with the specifics of craft, it provides an example of comprehensive poetic inquiry living out its full potential.

Over the span of nine thoughtfully focused chapters, Apol explores many of the central questions, concerns, and tensions within the field of poetic inquiry. She allows us to follow her evolving thinking and the development of her craft skills over a long period of time. Although Apol makes no reference to this, I had a sense, reading, of how this poetic inquirer's life and work parallel the development of the field itself in those same years.

She also brings us into a significant exploration of troubling historical and human forces, and the enduring impact these have on survivors; one can find in emergent understandings, notes of implied warning for us all.

Longitudinal and Relational Research

The subtitle of Apol's book is of great import: "Engaging with the Lives of Others." Due to the author's long engagement, repeated trips to Rwanda, sharing of drafts, spending time, relationships grew deeper. From deep relationships arise deep truths. Also, deep responsibilities. Throughout, Apol remains keenly and personally aware of the responsibilities and potential pitfalls of this long, deep engagement, especially when working cross-culturally and cross-racially in the fields of difficult history. "I wondered if I had the right to write about genocide; I wondered as well if I had the right *not* to write about it (p. 68)."

Ultimately, citing Dawes (2007, p. 24), Apol decides, "I do not have the right *not* to speak. I am stranded between 'the poles of entitlement and obligation.' If I resist entitlement, I shirk obligation. I cannot have one without the other" (2021, p. 69). The last line of her poem "Rift" (pp. 70-71) summarizes her position: "I cannot look; I cannot look / away."

Poetic Craft

Although the author's second chapter is titled "Turning Research into Art," it includes a story of the inverse: turning art into research. The writing of poems preceded and gave rise to the impulse to research. The entry into research processes was, therefore, organic, not something laid out in advance but something that grew out of tension, an urgent need to make sense of an unthinkable history and the imprint it has left on survivors. A difficult to resolve tension is fertile ground for poetic expression (Sullivan, 2009). But tension and the initial poetic response are only a beginning. It is by means of craft that poems achieve their fullest potential for communication, eliciting understanding, and perhaps, becoming a call to action.

It is one of the great gifts of this book that Apol lays out the processes of her poetic craft in explicit detail, allowing us to see "unpolished versions" (p. 21), revealing aesthetic decisions made at various stages of drafting, examining her own development of craft. She acknowledges that to do so is a "non-trivial risk in that they represent writing that I did not deem strong enough for inclusion in the finished collection . . . (p. 21)." As she traces her work, she seeks the poetic ideal of "allowing the reader to *live* the poem rather than merely read it" (p. 34).

Language, Power, and Maybe a Warning

The relationships between language and power arise in multiple ways but perhaps most distinctly in their connection with building a context for genocide. Language was the instrument of division. Apol explains:

Early Europeans . . . created the Hamitic myth as a means of separating Hutu and Tutsi. . . . The Hamitic myth maintained that Tutsi were actually 'outsiders' from Ethiopia, descendants of Noah's son, Ham. . . . The construction of these ethnic identities allowed Rwandans to be manipulated into invented 'ethnic' conflicts—pitted against one another to the advantage of colonial powers. (p. 57)

Tutsi were cast as foreigners, intent on taking the country from its rightful inhabitants.

The epigraph for Apol's poem "Genocide—I Begin to Understand" (p. 25) is a quote from a survivor: *It began when they called us cockroaches*. In the period that preceded the Rwandan genocide, the Hutu dominated media regularly referred to the Tutsi minority as cockroaches. William A Donohue, who has investigated this topic, points out that when people became "cockroaches," they were "just vermin that need to be eradicated" (2019, intro.).

When Apol writes of becoming “a more informed witness to the outcome of my own country’s policies” (2011, p. 9), she is referencing policies of the United States of America that turned a blind eye as the Rwandan genocide was taking place. But as a reader of her work, I can’t help but feel a sense of warning for our own time, a time when divisions are being manufactured and exploited, when opponents are sometimes called *scum*.

Conclusion

Laura Apol’s discussions of investigative poetry, issues of craft, and issues of relationship are not abstract. They are discussions grounded in her years-long effort to come to grips with hard, factual, and emotional realities, and to learn the craft that would render these effectively in poems. The issues Apol confronts are the issues we have all been grappling with in this brave new field defining itself. *Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda: Engaging with the Lives of Others* does not offer us tidy solutions to the full array of complex issues, but it provides useful examples of thoughtfully considered, culturally astute, well-crafted work, and advances the conversation. For the fullest possible experience of this work, I recommend reading *Requiem, Rwanda* (2015) either before or after.

Apol made poems of her Rwanda experience because of a felt urgency, her inherent need to approach understanding by creating forms that would somehow make order of chaos. Reading her work, I have thought often of Elliot Eisner’s statement in the first edition of his classic, *The Educational Imagination* (1979):

There is no area of human inquiry that epitomizes the qualitative more than what artists do when they work. Thus, it seems to me that if we seek to know what qualitative inquiry consists of, we can do little better than analyze the work of those for whom it is a necessary condition. (p. 190)

Reading of Apol’s articulated struggle to do that, I also thought of a small poem I had scribbled in my journal a few weeks before:

As I wrote the poem

it drew me in
then breathed me out
tumbled me on the ground
turned me into a tree

it lifted me up
to kettle with vultures
so high I disappeared

it sent me into a maze
forced me to circle
until I was dizzy

it took me to the river
made me swim
pushed me under
held me down
tried to drown me.

It rescued me.

Can poems rescue the world? Not alone, of course. But Apol's work bolsters my belief that poems and poetic inquiry have a role to play by sorting through the debris of chaos, finding patterns, and making meaning, rendering these meanings in beautiful forms that are small enough to travel, revealing what was hidden, offering visions that we can use in our efforts to create a more just and nurturing world.

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