



Research Poetry and the Non-Representational

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Abstract

A call for cultural geographers to experiment with different ways of re-presenting their work has gained momentum in recent years (see DeLyser & Hawkins, 2014; Lorimer & Parr, 2014; Vannini, 2015). This climate of experimentation has seen a number of cultural geographers openly promote their interests in, and engagements with, the creative arts: some have explicitly developed practices in response to longer-standing geographical interests (e.g., Cresswell, 2013/2014; Gallagher, 2014; Gorman-Murray, 2014; Wylie, with Webster, 2014), while others have more established art practices that inform, and are informed by, their geographical work (e.g., Crouch, 2010; de Leeuw, 2012; Zebracki, n.d.). In this article, I explore the potential of poetry to animate accounts of geographical fieldwork via an intellectual engagement with the ideas and tenets of non-representational theory. I begin by outlining the history of ‘poetry as method’ in the social sciences and then acknowledge poetry’s status within phenomenology. From there, I consider what a post-structuralist account of geographical fieldwork might entail, drawing from Deleuzian philosophy. Then, using three conjoined poems of my own as a vehicle, I critically analyse the work that poems do as research as well as the ways in which they operate in literary terms.

Keywords

Non-representational theory, research poetry, therapeutic art making, creative methods

Representation does matter, but it's not all that matters. And getting some grip on the world, to know how to go on, to write to others, perhaps as pleas for help in trying to work out how to go on. But if there are so many words, then in writing, even if not directly in life, innovating with our expressive mediums to create new worlds is a healthy part of it, so experiment.

J-D Dewsbury, 2014, p151

Introduction

Prendegast (2009) estimates that the use of poetry in qualitative inquiry stretches back to the early 1980s. Examples can be found in psychology, sociology, anthropology, nursing, social work, education, women's studies and geography. Originally conceptualised as autobiographical or autoethnographic, poetry as research now takes several forms. It may assume the voice of the researcher, but it may also assume the voice of the participant (as in poetic transcription or found poetry). In other cases, such as mine, the researcher adopts a more spatial or diffuse voice, which may incorporate object-oriented perspectives (Harman, 2012). Either way, the goal of poetry as method is to '... synthesise experience in a direct and affective way' (Prendegast, 2009, pxxii). Research poetry '... creates or makes the world in words' (Leggo, 2008, p166). As Shidmehr (2009) explains,

Poetic inquiry is the activity of ethically responding to an act or utterance which is still anticipating a response. Inquiring poetically, thus, the researcher/poet responds to that act/utterance in order to consummate or finalise it. It is important to note that she is responding to a past act/utterance as if it was happening now, as if she was actively participating in the act and in its consummation in the present moment (p101).

DeLyser (2010) asserts that writing is a way of thinking—a way of not only re-presenting but also creating geographical experiences (see also Dewsbury, Harrison, Rose, & Wylie, 2002). In 'writing up' human geographical research, we are not *finding out* so much as we are *making sense* (Cragg, 2010). This can come into conflict with more dominant forms of writing in academia that tend toward clear and straightforward prose (Lorimer, 2015; Mitchell, 2006; Sullivan, 2012). Poetic inquiry, in contrast, embraces subjectivity. It is 'involved knowing' rather than objective knowledge. Participating in 'involved knowing' is to experience it personally, from within, and in relation to others (Franke, 2011). To re-present that knowing in poetic form is to give it affective charge. In poetic inquiry, the researcher is engaged in a critical act of resistance to dominant forms of academic discourse whilst still working in effective, interdisciplinary ways between the social sciences and the creative arts.

Effective research poems are rooted in the sensual, have emotional poignancy, show a range of nuanced meanings, evoke empathic responses, and display an open spirit of imagination (Faulkner, 2009). What makes ‘good poetry’, however, is a qualified judgment and one that has historically shifted over time (O’Neill, 2010). According to Faulkner, however, a ‘good poet’ is one who actively writes poetry, has studied poetry, has participated in poetry readings, and has published their poems (Faulkner, 2009; Piirto, 2009). Piirto (2009) laments that those who engage in poetic inquiry rarely meet these criteria. Others take a more liberal view. Faulkner (2009) interviewed 11 established poets to gain their views on what constitutes a good poem. First and foremost, these poets agreed that poetry must have a psychological and emotional effect: as one poet described ‘... a good poem starts at your stomach and moves to your head’ (p46). Other qualities of a good poem are authenticity, narrative connectedness, and engagement. As another poet suggested ‘... “in a really good poem by a really good poet”, we will go along with whatever the poet does in the poem’ (p56). Flux, imagination, mystery and the ineffable were other elements of a good poem for these poets—an audience should sense layers of meaning and want to return to the poem again and again. A good poem gets close to the imaginary reality of its subject, allowing the reader to make their own connections.

Unlike poets, poet-researchers must attend to quality in multiple domains—poetry as craft and poetry as research. As Faulkner (2009) argues being ‘true’ to fieldwork accounts may mean sacrificing exposition or poetic imagination. In turn, poetic truth cannot be just an extraction from fieldwork experiences or interview transcripts. There must be a fidelity to poetic craft. In putting forward poetic criteria for evaluating research poetry, Faulkner (2009) draws on the principles of *Ars Poetica* (the ‘art of poetry’), arguing that there is an ethical responsibility for poet-researchers to articulate what their poetry means to them. In the first of these criteria, Faulkner (2009) argues for an artistic concentration of effort to be apparent in poetic inquiry—the idea of vigour rather than rigour. Second, she argues that research poetry should embody experience. The reader should *feel with*, rather than read about the research. The third criterion is discovery/surprise. By this she means that research poetry should teach something surprising about the human condition. Fourth, the point of view should be ‘conditional’ whilst presenting ‘narrative truth’—it should feel like the poem is presenting a true account. Finally, the poem should transform by providing new insights, perspectives, or provocations. As Gosetti-Ferencei (2012) states: ‘[p]oetry can, in unique ways, express more than can be said in words; it can go beyond the capacity of its own medium, it can signal the transcendence as well as the limits of language itself’ (p208). This capacity for responding to performative acts in affectively intense ways is what makes poetry a ‘realized ideal’ in terms of non-representational methodology (Lorimer, 2015).

For poetry to be research it must also be philosophy, although one may argue that all poetry is philosophy. As Nuzzo (2015) states: ‘there is some peculiar

form or indeed figure—*Gestalt*—of thinking occurring in the creative act of poetry in a fundamental and constitutive way’ (p44). Heidegger (1971) placed significance on poetry as a unique mode of revealing truth and the meaning of Being. In this way, he saw poetry as ‘a becoming and happening of truth’—it calls what it names into presence (or nearness), ‘makes a space for ... spaciousness’ and ‘lets the earth be an earth’ (emphasis in the original; Heidegger, 1971, pp44-45). By truth, however, Heidegger does not mean propositions but rather what is revealed of Being in the poem. For Heidegger, the earth is naturally self-concealing, and it is art that self-discloses it. Therefore, poetry and philosophical thinking are essentially the same act. Both work in the realm of ‘authentic’ language, transforming the invisible into the visible in a kind of ‘mirror play’. The poet does not devise the character of the poem; it is allotted to her (Heidegger, 2000). Poetry generates and opens up a sense of being in the world, specific to that poem and its reader (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2012).

Where for Heidegger poetry reveals the essence of being, for Deleuze and Guattari (1994) poetry is sensation. Accordingly, we should not ask what a poem means but ‘what does it do’? How does the poem function in connection with other things, what intensities does it transmit, what multiplicities or ‘lines of flight’ does it generate? As Clay (2010) argues, while all poetry is composed of sensation, contemporary innovative poetry does this most clearly by challenging the reader to approach the poem in an experimental way—withholding expectations that the poem will represent something. Instead the reader’s understanding of the poem is a becoming that is ‘viscerally real’. Beyond representation, ‘poetry is itself a real part of the world (‘true’ because ‘real’) with its own forces and effects’ (Clay, 2010, p13). From a Deleuzian viewpoint, therefore, a poem does not ultimately mean or represent something, it is ‘a *material* thing that demands to be encountered on its own terms’ (emphasis in the original; Clay, 2010, p34).

A Deleuzian conceptualisation of poetry emphasizes its non-representational nature, reconfiguring it as praxis. With the poem as praxis, each individual reading of a poem is also praxis. The poem remains autonomous while it is the reader who actively senses, actualizing the poem through the performance of reading or listening. In this way, a poem is ‘... an unfolding movement of a block of sensations in conjunction with a reader who is also, for the time of the performance, the actualisation of the poem (Clay, 2010, pp62-63). Thus, the ‘poetic subject’ is, in effect, a *superject* (after Whitehead) emerging from the landscape of the poem which subsumes poet and reader. The subjectivity of a poem is not invested in a person but in the poem itself. The reader ‘passes through’ the landscape of the poem. In ‘passing through’, the reader embodies the poem for the duration of the performance. As Clay (2010) explains, ‘... a body both takes its place in a landscape that is produced by the poem and yet has that landscape sensorially inscribed within it’ (p132). To be focussed on meaning as a reader is to distance oneself from the priority of sensation and the way in which the poem

becomes active because of its sensations. Furthermore, sensations create interstices or ‘spacings’ between lines and words so that the reader also ‘becomes’.

As Rancière (2009) argues, emancipation as a spectator comes when we challenge the dichotomy of viewing and acting, to understand that viewing itself is also an action. In effect, the spectator refashions an artistic performance as an active interpreter. As he suggests,

[Performance] ... is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge of inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect (Rancière, 2009, p15).

Therefore, the notion that reasoning requires distance is anathema to research poetry. The emphasis is on *encounter*, not recognition, as the ‘basic premise of aesthetic experience’ (Latter, 2012, p2).

Method

My own research poetry was informed by a critical engagement with process-oriented ontologies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Guattari, 1995; Malabou, 2008; Whitehead, 1978), post-phenomenology and non-representational theory within geography (Ash and Simpson, 2014; Dewsbury, 2003; McCormack, 2003; Thrift, 2008) as well as speculative pragmatism and new materialisms in the creative arts (Bennett, 2010; Bolt, 2013; Grosz, 2009; Manning, 2009). However, in asking the question ‘what makes art making therapeutic?’ I was not interested in art therapy as a medicalised practice but in everyday acts of art making—expressive dance, gardening, painting, drawing, sewing, knitting—and their geographies (see Boyd, 2017).

To briefly summarise these engagements, I sought out other practitioners over the course of five years for whom art practice was a source of personal therapy—by this; I mean that each perceived his or her art practice as therapeutic. The first was established artist Amanda Robins whose painting and drawing is deeply meditative and deliberately soft and gentle in contrast to my own, which is ‘fevered’ and ‘frenetic’. Amanda refers to her practice as slow art (Robins, 2009). The second was Swagata Bapat, a manager where I worked, for whom 5rhythms™ dance (Roth, 1998) is a solitary practice. My work with Swagata led me to take part in 5rhythms™ dance classes with Meredith Davies and David Juriansz as a member of a large group of between 70 and 100 people, each week for a year (see Davies & Juriansz, n.d). Although taking part in a similar practice to McCormack (2002) and informed by similar theories, I was particularly interested in the relationship of the dancer to the ground.

A year later I approached Artist as Family, a collective whose work she describes as *permapoesis* (or poetic permaculture, Jones, n.d). I travelled with

Artist as Family to Sydney to help conduct maintenance on an aesthetically- and functionally-designed food forest, fulfilled on commission from Australia's Museum of Contemporary Art. In the same year, I met three practitioners of drain art (graffiti and urban play in underground storm water drains). I spent the remainder of that year exploring drain tunnels, making graffiti and performing small acts of resistance with them. In the final year I met Lucy Sparrow, a fibre artist who 'sews her soul'. Lucy's work is deeply personal, challenges stigma, and offers child-like and comforting experiences to her patrons. Her work also provides a critical commentary on the harshness of modern life (Sparrow, 2015). After making a small contribution to one of her pieces, I joined up to the 5000 poppies effort in Australia—a nation-wide project that involved sewing, crocheting or knitting poppy-like objects in commemoration of the centenary of the ANZAC (Berry & Knight, n.d). On invitation, I took this project, along with miscellaneous felting materials, to A General Assembly of Interested Parties (see GAIP, n.d) and spent a day making things out of felt—in relation to other artists and in the company of random members of the visiting public.

By adopting an approach to geographical fieldwork that was informed by non-representational theory (see Dewsbury, 2010), the aim of the research was to immerse myself in acts of 'doing' so that I might experience therapeutic art making *as* a practice. My own artistic practice of painting became the springboard for collaborations with others; so that I might experience modes of therapeutic art making that were unfamiliar to me. This participation in a range of art forms enabled me to later think through practice in the creation of the poetry, discussed here, and the production of a series of works of ekphrastic art (see Boyd, 2017). The art work was an experiment in translating video and audio captured in the field into new artistic forms capable of providing some capture of the non-representational geographies of therapeutic art making. The aim of the poetry was the same, except in this case I wanted to experiment with the capacities of language and poetic form to convey the affective and experiential force of the intendant research encounters.

As a starting point, I consulted several texts on poetic writing. The most informative were *The Writing Experiment* by Hazel Smith and *A Poetry Handbook* by Mary Oliver. Smith's (2005) book is brimming with creative writing exercises designed to assist those who are new to the field to develop a systematic writing strategy. Oliver's (1994) book focuses on teaching 'the basics' of poetry as a craft. In doing so, she emphasises that all poetry, even free verse, necessarily comes from design. As she states:

The free-verse poem sets up, in terms of sound and line, a premise of an expectation, and then, before the poem finishes, it makes a good response to this premise. This is the poem's design. What it sets up in the beginning it sings back to, all the way attaining a *felt* integrity (emphasis in the original; Oliver, 1994, p15).

It was the explorative capacity of free verse that appealed to me in developing my own writing style. For conceptual and aesthetic reasons, I was also drawn to visual poetry for its capacity to elevate the non-representational in its presentation (Bohn, 2011). And finally, for its non-hierarchical and collagist tendencies, I was also drawn to parataxis – a poetic technique which seeks to juxtapose images or fragments for ‘psychological’ effect (Hill, 2008).

For the most part, the poetry drew upon fieldwork memories, but I was also keen for the writing to present a full account of fieldwork ‘findings’. As such, and over several months, I produced 23 poems, each making varied use of free verse, visual poetic form, and parataxis (Boyd, 2015). Bundled together and book-ended by an introduction and an exegesis, the poems went through three, separate processes of review. The first was performed by an independent, academic poet who I approached to write a formal review so that the anthology might be classified as a creative work under Australia’s version of the REF (i.e., the ERA). The second was by two PhD examiners who reviewed the poetry as part of the creative component of my thesis. The third was in the process of publishing the current article, whereby the poetry was reviewed by a member of the journal’s editorial collective (herself a poet and geographer), two anonymous reviewers, and another poet. Reviews across all three phases varied wildly from very positive to very skeptical regarding the effectiveness of the poems in both academic and literary terms. It was, however, on the basis of a rigorous peer review that the poems included in this article were judged by the editor as the better ones.

Bohn (2011) points out that visual poetry must be read at least twice – once for its pictorial aspect and once for its verbal aspect. Readers, however, also take on the task of relating the two aspects together in their minds to form a gestalt. This makes the reading of visual poetry a much more active exercise than reading other forms of poetry. Furthermore, visual poetry is not always sequential and so the reader must devise their own reading strategy for making sense of the work, including where to start and where to end.

Findings and Discussion

The three poems presented in this article are titled ‘Fibre’, ‘Finish the Fold’, and ‘Becoming’. They were designed to convey something about the non-representational geographies of therapeutic art practices that involve making things out of fibre or felt. With this in mind, I started with the visual element, thinking how I might reflect something of the soft, repetitive, and folding movements of stitching or knitting. I did this by first ‘drawing the line’ in a computer program that would accommodate the words. Using graphic design tools, I stretched and twisted the line until it resembled a path for the words that also bore some semblance to the aesthetics of the practice.

'child,
 thread.
 Wool, needles. Cardboard.
 Fabric. // FIBRE //
 Man-made, woman's work.
 In circles it goes.
 Slowly,
 gradually by folding wearing and
 stitching. Consider
 its
 growth.
 Then cast off.
 Feel the feltness.
 Felt to the touch.
 Him, her, me, her, him, her, me - a child, a man,
 take
 // F E L T //
 // //
 select colours,
 make rough, ragged
 stitches. Leave a space. Take some fling
 and move it from pillow
 to new.
 Finish the fold..
 Click, click the needles fold together
 in a
 click
 and a
 click.
 This could go on forever but one moment after the
 other
 it grows. Imagine that.
 Two
 needles, wool,
 producing softness.
 desire
 Man-made fibre becoming woman
 by becoming something other than: more than human.

Writing on a text path within a graphic design program often starts in the middle and then stretches out in both directions as words are added. For this reason, the very act of writing assisted in generating the kind of sensuous disposition that is required to do non-representational research. As I watched the poem ‘grow’, I added words in a paratactic fashion that reflected my fieldwork experiences of felt and fibre practice. The first poem focusses on the haptics of knitting – the slow, gradual way in which the knitting comes together and the knitter experiences its growth. The second poem re-enacts an event of public art, involving the making of stuffed ‘things’ out of pieces of felt, alongside a general assembly of arts practitioners (GAIP, n.d). This second poem attempts to communicate something of the atmosphere of this event, but it also refers to an actual occasion of a father and son stitching something together for what they said was their first time using a needle and thread. The last poem returns to the practice of knitting, and its transformative potential. The knitter is transformed in the midst of a creative act. The knitting manifests ontically and in relation to the knitter. As a gendered practice, I also reflect on the multiple meanings that this practice has for me as a woman.

Whether these poems ‘work’ as poems is ultimately a decision for the reader to make. Lyrical devices – such as rhythm, repetition, and sound patterning – make an important contribution (Culler, 2015), but as Barry (2013) argues ‘poetry is not like maths ... [it is] the feeling of intimate engagement with the words and flow – it is that core reading experience, which engrosses the imagination’ (pvii-pviii). In the three poems that are presented here, there is meaning in the lines and in the pictorial elements of the poems, but there is also a literal and metaphorical space left open as an invitation for the reader to ‘read between the lines’, to insert their own experiences of making things out of felt or fibre, and to be left with the sensation of softness, gentleness, and comfort.

Whether these poems ‘work’ as research requires knowledge of non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008) and ways of doing non-representational, affect-based, and performative research (Dewsbury, 2010). Do the poems take an interest in the way that life ‘takes place’ through movement, intensities, and encounters (Lorimer, 2005)? Do they capture the joy of living and the performances that make us (Dewsbury et al., 2002)? Do they foreground the way in which the material and the social are intertwined and constantly in circulation (McCormack, 2003)? Do they place thought between the spaces of making and making sense (Dewsbury, 2003)? Do they produce an encounter with the practice that is pre-cognitive and pre-personal (Anderson, 2009)? I’m not entirely sure, but I hope they do.

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