

Chapter 3. Juxtaposing Poetic Inquiry Practices for Deep Listening

This chapter offers three related approaches to poetic inquiry that enact a praxis of deep listening in qualitative research. In the other chapters of this book I implicitly suggest the value of poetic inquiry for listening to qualitative data—listening for the relationship between the one voice and the many through composite poetry, listening to cultivate mutual vulnerability and collaborative meaning making through tandem found poetry, and listening for the constellated insights that emerge in poetry clusters. Here, I consider three new types of inquiry—profile poetry, reverse interview poetry, and I-poems—each of which enacts a different kind of listening, a unique “angle of understanding” from which to interpret and make meaning (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 216). Social science researchers Rosalind Edwards and Susie Weller (2012) explain that any approach to data analysis constructs an “analytic mode of being” for the researcher in relationship to research subjects and data (p. 214). Considering different analytical approaches alongside one another throws into relief the distinct modes or angles of sense-making they engender. Taken together, different angles of understanding create opportunities for deep listening, for listening across relational orientations and ways of knowing. Inspired by Edwards and Weller (2012), I juxtapose three types of poetic inquiry to draw attention to varying “analytic ontologies” (p. 216), ways of knowing, being, and doing in the midst of qualitative research, so as to provocatively trouble tendencies to value and seek certainty and stability in who we are, who we know, and what we find through our research. I highlight the effect of juxtaposing ways of deep listening to signal the intentionality of the practice and its relationship to feminist research commitments.

The praxis of listening—the rigorous, recursive, reflexive effort to understand with “greater precision and compassion” (Rosenberg & Howes, 2018, p. 76) the positions, perspectives, stories and experiences of research participants—has a long tradition in feminist-relational research (see also Boehr, 2021). Feminist researchers embrace listening as a critical praxis that resists dominant logics, hierarchies and power dynamics that have traditionally defined research relationships and methodologies. For example, in Lauren Rosenberg’s (2015) ethnographic work, listening manifests as “mutual contemplation” (p. 57) as she seeks input based on the knowledge and experience of participants while working through data (see also Rosenberg & Howes, 2018, p. 81). Relatedly, archival researcher Emma Howes describes her listening process as “more a matter of reflection and reevaluation” while immersed in archival material (Rosenberg & Howes, 2018, p. 81). Both Rosenberg and Howes (2018) link listening to a feminist ethos informed by relationships with participants, by what they see and hear in their research, and by “what may remain more opaque” (p. 77). No matter

the approach, a critical listening praxis is rooted in feminist-relational commitments to acknowledge how subjectivities, biases, and ideological lenses inform research practices—how researchers conduct interviews, interpret and analyze transcripts, represent findings, and make meaning with and from participants’ words and stories (Boehr, 2021; Rosenberg & Howes, 2018).

Feminist researchers, and I count myself among them, listen to remain alert to our own positionality, how our own experiences, needs, and perspectives orient us to participants and their stories, as well as to changes and continuities in participants’ sense of self over time. We listen to trouble static notions of narrative, knowledge, self, truth, and meaning making. In this chapter, I show how juxtaposing particular types of poetic inquiry can enact feminist listening praxis in ways that have not been fully explored in writing studies research. Writing researchers grappling with the following questions might find valuable the poetic methods in this chapter and the deep listening their juxtaposition makes possible:

- How do I stay accountable to those experiences traditional research tools are most likely to miss or flatten?
- How do I acknowledge my entanglement with dominant ideologies and (re)orient to my work in the spirit of knowing, being, and doing differently?
- How might I orient to my work not as an objective analyst, but as a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 1996) immersed in the process?
- How can I center relationships (with scholars/scholarship, research participants, self and readers) as both the foundation and goal for my research and writing?

In what follows, I demonstrate the potential of profile poems, reverse interview poems, and I-poems to engage these questions through deep listening.

Scaffolding Deep Listening Through Poetic Inquiry: The Listening Guide

To emphasize their relationship and the value of their juxtaposition, I explain below the three approaches to poetic inquiry as they relate to Carol Gilligan’s (2015) Listening Guide (LG). The LG was originally designed in the 1980s during Gilligan’s research on women’s identity and moral development as “a method of psychological analysis that draws on voice, resonance, and relationship as ports of entry into the human psyche” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 253). The guide has since been used to study a range of phenomena in psychology and in other contexts as well. Lori E. Koelsch (2015) used the LG to analyze interviews with college-aged women regarding unlabeled sexual experiences, for example, and Chinyere Elsie Ajayi and Sunday Ajayi (2023) used it in their research on women’s experiences living with female genital mutilation. In writing studies, Christiane Boehr (2021) used the LG as part of her case study on women writing in community. She explains how the guide scaffolded “rigorous, associative

listening practices” through which she was able to “create a holistic portrayal of participants and sustain a respectful, power-sharing ethos” that involved re-thinking positionality, questioning preconceived notions, and checking associations in an effort to “remain open and connected...to different truths as a manifestation of respect.”

Lynn Sorsoli and Deborah L. Tolman (2008) emphasize the value of the LG for recognizing multiplicity and movement in interview data. In their studies of the sexual experiences of adolescent girls and the struggles female survivors narrate around decisions to disclose experiences of sexual abuse, the LG allows them to listen for multiple, overlapping, sometimes contradictory voices of participants in order to nuance and even productively agitate understandings of how participants make sense of their lived experience. Lisa A. Mazzei might call this way of paying attention “troubled listening” (Mazzei, 2007, p. 110), a way of “listen[ing] at the limit of voice” (Mazzei, 2009, p. 52), of attending to silence as an “absent presence” (Mazzei, 2007, p. 27) that may reveal “those narratives that have previously gone unnamed, unnoticed, and unthought” (Mazzei, 2009, p. 52). Mazzei’s (2007) poetic understanding of silence as space ripe for listening, as inhabited—with life, with breath, with meaning—reinforces the value of poetic inquiry for deep listening. Citing poets such as Rumi, Gerald Stern and Briget Peegan Kelly, Mazzei (2007) explains how the heartbeat of poems can often be found “in the breath, the pauses, or the unwritten cadences” (p. 36). Likewise, the meaningful silences of research participants may contain multitudes if we learn to listen for them. Listening for silence—participants’ loaded silences and our own—prompts researchers to “investigate how we perpetuate sameness, hegemony, or privilege” in what/how we (fail) to voice and listen (Mazzei, 2007, p. 51). The LG is a perfect scaffold for “troubled listening” (Mazzei, 2007, p. 110), for multiplicity and absence, movement and “inhabited silence” (Mazzei, 2007). As part of a feminist research praxis, the LG offers a systematic way of attending to narrative as a form of meaning making in qualitative research and remaining critically aware of how power dynamics in research relationships influence whose truths are voiced.

The LG method involves four rounds of listening to data, as described by Gilligan et al. (2006), “each designed to bring the researcher into relationship with a person’s distinct and multilayered voice by tuning in or listening to distinct aspects of a person’s expression of her or his [sic] experience within a particular relational context” (p. 255). The first round involves listening for the “plot” of the interview, the lay of the land, the main stories that emerge in conversation with a participant, as well as for the listener’s response to the interview (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 257). The second round focuses on the speaker’s first-person voice in order to discover how the person speaks about themselves; the goal of this round is for the researcher to come into relationship with the participant, to tune into what they know of themselves before attempting to write about or interpret their experiences (Gilligan et al., 2006).

The third and fourth rounds, as described by Gilligan et al. (2006) bring the focus back to the research question, first by listening for “multiple facets” or layers of a participant’s expressed experiences and highlighting counterpoints between voices and finally pulling together all that has been learned about the research participant as it bears on the research question (p. 262). The LG scaffolds a relational method for “discovery research” for “intentionally bring[ing] the researcher into relationship with the participant through making our responses, experiences, and interpretive lenses explicit in the process, and by listening to [the] participant’s first-person voice before moving in to listen for answers to our own research questions” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 267). The method is flexible and associative and worth experimenting with for researchers seeking relational approaches to qualitative research that feature deep listening and recursive, reflexive meaning making.

For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the first two rounds—orienting to main stories told and tuning into the I voice—because they offer me, as a researcher, “a way of opening [myself] to the experience of another that enhances the prospect for discovery” in ways that highlight the potential of poetic inquiry to facilitate deep listening (Gilligan, 2015, p. 75). Adding layers of recursiveness and homing in on the original research question, rounds three and four offer additional scaffolds for deepening analysis. I can imagine using them to experiment further with affordances of poetic inquiry for coalescing insights about faculty writing lives, and I encourage writing researchers to try incorporating them into a deep listening praxis. However, in order to fully probe the potential of three types of poetic inquiry in the space of this chapter, I stick to the first two rounds of the LG, as represented in Table 3.1.

Loosely following the framework for each round of the LG, I consider two types of poetic inquiry in the context of round one and a third type of poetic inquiry as it relates to round two. First I show how profile poems, poems created from the words of a single participant, can be used to crystalize main stories and capture the landscape of an interview. I then pair a profile poem with a poem composed through the process of reverse interviewing (Restaino, n.d.), a procedure that involves re-listening to an interview recording and creating what Restaino (n.d.) calls a “reactive text” or set of notes that chart my emotive reactions, hesitations, and/or moments of uncertainty while listening. My approach is modeled after Restaino’s (2019) effort to enact feminist practices of reflexivity, reciprocity, and humility in the collaborative ethnographic project she completed with her friend Susan Lundy Maute as Maute was living and dying with terminal cancer. Creating poetry from the reflexive process of reverse interviewing enacts a second aspect of round one of the listening guide, acknowledging my “social location in relation to the participant, the nature of our relationship... and [my] emotional responses” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 257) to the stories she shared during and after our interview.

Table 3.1 Listening Guide as a Scaffold for Deep Listening Through Poetic Inquiry

Round 1: Landscape			Round 2: I Voice	
Part 1	Main Stories	Profile Poem	Participant's Sense of Self	I-Poems
Part 2	Researcher Response	Found Poem from Reactive Text		

The pairing of the two poems—the profile poem and the reverse interview poem—enacts the reflexive practice at the heart of the first round in the LG, the goal of which is to lay bare the researcher’s social location in relation to the participant. The pairing poetically reveals points of dis/connection, shows how the researcher is touched or not by the narrative, and identifies thoughts and feelings surfaced during and after the interview. It invites researchers like me to listen to ourselves listening, to ponder and lay bare our reactions and to interrogate how our reactions shape our understanding of participants and their stories, how we orient to the research itself (Gilligan et al., 2006).

Next, following round two of the LG, I create what Elizabeth Debold calls “I-poems” (Debold, 1990, as cited in Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 259) from a single participant’s interview transcripts collected over six years. Pivoting from the first round focusing on my reflexive engagement with interview material, I appreciate how the creation of I-poems “tunes the ear of the researcher to the voice of the other and specifically the ‘I,’ the first-person voice as it speaks of acting and being in the world” (Gilligan, 2015, p. 71). I-poems are created by identifying every “I” statement in a given passage of transcript and listing them down the page in the order of appearance. “I” statements typically involve the pronoun and verb with or without the object; researchers usually decide “the run of words” to include based on what seems important to understanding the interviewee’s sense of self (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 205). Each “I” statement is placed “on a separate line, like lines of a poem,” creating a poetic “free-fall of association” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 260). The I-poem presents a “stream of consciousness carried by a firstperson [sic] voice, cutting across or running through a narrative rather than being contained by the structure of full sentences” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 260), attending to how a person speaks of themselves as opposed to the stories they tell. The process of creating I-poems creates space between the participant’s and the analyst’s perceptions, a pause for listening before interpretation (Edwards & Weller, 2012).

Edwards and Weller (2012) reiterate the value of creating I-poems for tracking continuity and change in subjectivities over time. They used the I-poem method of analysis with qualitative case study material from their research on how sibling and friendship relationships of children and young people relate to their senses of self over time. They interviewed over 50 participants three times each in designated age ranges over seven years in order to understand how their identities flowed from proscribed and chosen “relationships across the lifecourse”

(Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 204). They used I-poems to trace the changing subjectivities of a participant, Anne, as her sense of self in relation to her older sister shifted over the years, as represented by the evolution of voices from “little sister” to “nostalgic” to “naughty” (Edwards & Weller, 2012, pp. 211-214). As they point out, I-poems don’t necessarily provide objective access to participants’ authentic selves apart from researcher subjectivity, but the listening process they inspire propels researchers into a position that “stand[s] alongside” (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 212) rather than gazes upon the participant. The difference is between interpreting a participant’s sense of self and interpreting how the participant perceives their sense of self and standing alongside them as those senses persist or evolve over time.

In this chapter, I share I-poems created from passages near the end of six of Mandy’s interviews in which she reflects on herself as a writer. Often the passages capture Mandy’s response to a question I asked all participants in almost every interview: *How would you describe yourself as writer in this moment? Finish the statement: I am a writer who....* Creating I-poems from each interview allows me to consider shifts and consistencies in Mandy’s perception of her sense of self as a writer and person. All three types of poems in this chapter are based on transcripts from Mandy’s interviews to emphasize how they work differently and in tandem to help me engage with and represent data from multiple dimensions.

I chose to focus on Mandy because the body/mind/spirit relationship was so prominent in our interviews, a relationship I saw as an occasion (Sullivan, 2009) for poetic engagement. Mental health struggles emerged early as a significant component in her lived experience as a writer, and I was drawn to the profile poem as a way to map the landscape of this experiential dimension. Moreover, Mandy’s talk about her mental health struggles featured visceral imagery and provocative metaphors; it was rife with “contradictions and absences” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 257). The mind/body/spirit dynamic loomed large in my interactions with Mandy; her body was palpably present in the stories she shared, especially in her breath, snot, saliva, and tears. In other words, her data was ripe for poetic representation. Composing a found poem from the “reactive text” (Restaino, n.d.) I created during the reverse interview process gave me a way to reckon with the roles our bodies played in our interviews and how I engaged as a researcher, friend, and faculty writer myself with Mandy’s visible, visceral expressions of emotion and experiences with mental health.

The juxtaposition of the three poetic approaches to engaging with data from the same participant highlights how each approach offers a different type of listening, a different “angle of understanding” (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 216), that when compared foster a deep listening praxis. Edwards & Weller (2012) make a similar move when they compare a thematic analysis and an I-poem analysis of data from their participant Anne. As in their case, the contrast I make drives home how each poetic approach orients me, as a researcher, differently to Mandy and to the questions at the heart of my research study. Moreover it underscores

for qualitative researchers the value in using these forms of poetic inquiry to enact a listening praxis that centers bodies, emotions, relationships, and subjectivities all in motion and in flux for the purpose of resisting certainty and stability in favor of transforming what is knowable, thinkable, possible.

Listening for the Landscape: Profile Poems (Round One, Part One)

Profile poems are a form of poetic inquiry that involves crafting found poems from the transcript(s) of a single participant to describe an aspect of their lived experience. Like a portrait of a face sketched from a particular angle, profile poems are not meant to be comprehensive but to outline the contours of a theme or pattern emerging in the data. Aligned with the first round in the LG, creating a profile poem is about tracing a plotline, listening for the landscape of an interview or set of interviews. Both involve attending to “repeated words, salient themes, striking metaphors or symbols, emotional hot-spots, gaps, or ruptures” (Gilligan, 2015, p. 71) in the data. With profile poems, words, phrases, or lines from transcripts are arranged poetically to artistically depict the landscape of a given theme as it plays out in the experience of one participant. For example, in an effort to understand experiences of trans* individuals, C. Sean Robinson (2018) created a single found research poem from an interview with a biracial, non-binary, genderqueer faculty member because it allowed him “to focus on the meaning making, emotional tensions, and vulnerability of one participant” (p. 114). In a similar vein, I created the following profile poem with transcripts from my interviews with Mandy, who was early on the tenure track at a research-focused university when she joined my study in 2016. First, I conducted a close reading of one interview extracting phrases and words that resonated with me and seemed indicative of Mandy’s story as I understood it, paying particular attention to text that exploded public/private, mind/body, intellect/emotion binaries (Faulkner, 2020). I combined phrases and arranged and deleted words to create flow and rhythm.

Learning to Do Life Better

To live my life and work
 but not have work erode life.
 Some people, work is life;
 that’s not me. Or maybe ...
 I’m just complaining
 and I shouldn’t be
 and everybody has to fucking work
 to get tenure
 maybe I haven’t been working
 hard enough.

In a rush
got to get it out.
Look, statistics!
Put that in.
Write about a theory,
babble on.
Talk like a researcher
to a practitioner,
they ignore you.
Talk like a practitioner
to a researcher,
they look down on you.
Translate identities,
research and practice
and practice and research.
Make it persuasive
but also academic
and empirical ...
Well, shit.

The research I'm doing:
meticulous
time sucking
energy sucking
emotio[n] sucking
dreary and dragging.
Not ready.
Hyping myself up.
Describe it to readers,
make an impact,
the right message
to the right people
in the right way.

I need help,
sage advice
pull me out of my head.
I need to hear:

“hello,”
“stop being a fucking idiot”
“this is how you’re going to get there” and
“it’s okay.”

Now I ruminate,
don’t know what to do,
how to fill that gap.

I judge myself less for those days
that devastate me for weeks,
moved to days,
moved to hours.

It’s gotten better over 12 years
also worse.

Complete breakdown.

Sobbing,
Xanax,
therapy.

The nature of mental health
stigma will never go away,
feels like defeat.

You’re a fucking professor,
you teach therapists
to be fucking therapists,
and yet you’re a fucking mess.

Surrendering
to the fact that I’m not okay.

It comes down
to learning how
to do life better,
be better
to myself
as a person.

I know this person
I want to become, and
I’m not her.
Yet.

Rendering Mandy's words poetically compels me and hopefully invites readers to listen differently, to, in the words of poet Jane Hirshfield, "enter the changed consciousness that poetry asks" (1997, p. 12). It invites us to consider assumptions and expectations about how to find meaning here, "to listen for concentration's transforming arc" (p. 12). The poem is both evocative of Mandy's lived experience and shaped by my own subjectivities; it is a type of "poetic transcription" (Leavy, 2020, p. 91) in which "the perspectives of both I and the participant are fused" (Robinson, 2018, p. 115). Experimenting with poetic transcriptions based on an interview with Dona Juana, an elderly Puerto Rican researcher and educator, Corrine Glesne (1997) discovered a "third voice" (p. 215) that was a combination of researcher and participant. I believe a third voice emerges in my profile poem, one that is not mine nor Mandy's but exists between us. According to Glesne (1997), the third voice offers a unique "interpretive space" in which the separation between observer and observed "disintegrates" and new meanings emerge that nevertheless ring true (p. 215). When I shared the poem with Mandy, she responded with surprise, delight, and gratitude. "I love this poem so much," she told me. "It is a gift. To be given back my words to me, and constructed in such a meaningful way. That means so much. Thank you." Responses like these, according to Robinson (2018), are "a testament to the truths of experiences as told by [participants], as heard by [researchers], and to the manner in which those experiences are [poetically] conveyed" (p. 115). Mandy's response drives home how readers, too, are invited to join in the recursive truth finding and meaning making.

Poetic techniques capture the frenzy of Mandy's words as she described her efforts to be all things to all people. Short lines pull the eye quickly down the page, while repetition ("the right message/to the right people/in the right way," stanza 3, lines 11-13) and listing ("sobbing/Xanax/therapy," stanza 5, lines 8-10) create a choppy accumulation of demands, mounting toward a breakdown. The repetition of the word "sucking" (stanza 3, lines 3-5) emphasizes how passion can be depleting as it intensifies the urgency of the work and compounds the pressure to make an impact beyond institutional measures, to reach the communities Mandy cares so deeply about. The poem ends with Mandy's desire to "do life better" (stanza 7, line 3), underscoring the reality that Mandy's writing life is inseparable from her human life, from her journeys of becoming the scholar *and* the person she wants to be. As Robinson (2018) points out, profile poems are particularly valuable for "mirror[ing] the shifting nature of identity and the difficulty of capturing who we are and who we want to be" (p. 114). The profile poem offers a scaffold for engaging in the first part of round one of Gilligan's LG (Gilligan et al., 2006); it considers Mandy's identity development in relation to a significant aspect of her experiential landscape—living with mental health challenges as an academic.

Orienting to the Relationship: Reverse Interview Poems (Round One, Part Two)

Poetic inquiry is also ideal for embracing the second aspect of listening fostered in

round one of the LG—reflexively orienting to the participant, pondering the nature of the research relationship, and tuning into the researcher’s emotional response as an interviewer and data interpreter. Poet David Whyte emphasizes the potential for facilitating this type of reflexive listening through poetry (Harris, 2021). Poetry, says Whyte, is “the art of overhearing yourself say things you didn’t know you knew, that you ... were actually afraid to want to know, and that you allow yourself to understand” (Harris, 2021, 30:17) The poem I share in this section, “I Could [Never] Imagine,” is my effort to overhear myself listening to Mandy.

To create the poem, I adapted the process of reverse interviewing described by Jessica Restaino (n.d.) in a website adaptation of a workshop conducted as part of the event “Performing Feminist Action” hosted by The Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition at the 2016 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Houston, Texas. Restaino outlines the reverse interview process she practiced in a two-year ethnographic project with her friend Susan Lundy Maute as Maute was living and dying with terminal breast cancer. The process, Restaino (n.d.) explains, “offers a way of responding as researchers and writers when we are overwhelmed, disempowered, unsure,” a way to “humble [ourselves] and to find affirmation, meaning, in [our] own gaps and hesitations.” The move to track and mine the researcher’s reaction to interview data—in the moment when it is collected and later when revisiting written transcripts—encapsulates the spirit of the first round of the LG. Both are about listening for and around the interview “landscape” or “plot” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 257).

Citing Lisa Mazzei (2007), Restaino (n.d.) conceives of reverse interviewing as a scaffold for “troubled listening” that “goes beyond reflexivity ... toward an ongoing process of listening to ourselves and attempting to unmask the veils through which we filter what we say, what we ask, and what we hear” (Mazzei, 2007, p. 110). My process of troubled listening through reverse interviewing involved putting the transcript of my interview with Mandy aside, listening to our recorded interview, and noting voice modulations, pauses and sighs that might hold unexplored meaning. Whereas researchers tend to “seek a voice that maps onto our ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting,” troubled listening compels us to seek “the voice that escapes our easy classification and that does not make easy sense—the voice in the crack” (Mazzei, 2009, p. 48). I listened for the voices in the cracks, my own and Mandy’s, that were not obvious, familiar, or easy to hear.

I created a “reactive text” (Restaino, n.d.) by recording phrases that intrigued me or compelled further inquiry and charting my emotive reactions, hesitations, and/or moments of uncertainty as I listened. Next, following Restaino’s (n.d.) lead, I mined the reactive text for meanings embedded in my response, inserting questions I might have been initially afraid to ask, noting “associations, tangential thoughts and confusions.” Here I troubled my listening tendencies, resisting the easy read. Intentional troubling is important, explains Mazzei (2009), for when we “settle for an easy reading ... [we] lose the possibility of tripping up on a translation that entangles us in

the layers and registers of uncertainty. If we settle,” she continues, “we fail to consider those other voices that speak beyond the limit of our knowing” (p. 49). In that spirit, I annotated my reactive text, noting sensory details and using evocative words, phrases or metaphors to reflect on and extend my initial responses.

Attending “to what is not spoken, not discussed, not answered” is essential for troubled listening if the goal is alternative ways of knowing and being, “for in those absences is where the very fat and rich information is yet to be known and understood” (Mazzei, 2003, p. 358). Poetic inquiry offered me the perfect structure for accessing the “fat” material. Toward that end, I extended Restaino’s (n.d.) reverse interview process by using the annotated reactive text as the basis for found poetry. I extracted words and phrases indicative of the nuances of my response and arranged, added, and subtracted with attention to rhythm, line breaks, pauses, and syntax (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Once again, poetry became a “misfit” (Restaino, p. 85) tool, this time for troubled listening as a way of orienting to research data and participants. The following poem rooted in the reverse interview process enacts and encourages troubled listening by producing a text “that desires, that searches for, and that demands an irrelevant translation ... that performs its mission by being messy, opaque, polyphonic, and nuanced—one that exceeds our knowing (easily) and understanding (quickly)” (Mazzei, 2009, p. 50).

I Could [Never] Imagine

Tearing up at the sadness; not having what she needs.

I can relate: Desperation ... resounding, relentless doubt.

Sitting at the top of the stairs, a new mom, crying,
wondering if I would finish ... what I put my family through!

YET my tone is light: ‘sure sure.’ Right way to react?

As a friend, a researcher? Am I a voyeur? My researcher mind,
excited when emotion bubbles up and over.

What brings her to the brink of tears, allows her to “get control”?

Sniffs, breathy. Why don’t I look for tissues?

Too focused on normalizing tears to respond to them.

I am the one in control, not crying, not showing emotion.

I choose what to reveal. “Lightness” and energy are distancing
mechanisms. I am **never** [always?] vulnerable.

Tears again. Long pause. Voice breaking.

I just marvel—wow. A spectator to her pain.

Don’t know how to probe, to ask more, strike the tone, be a person
not feeling that pain and still “be WITH” in the moment.

A refrain: crying, ebbing-and-flowing emotion.
 Voice wet, saliva-swallowing, smacking lips
 tell me how much this matters, through tears,
 sobbing breath, shaky words.
 Am I missing things that mean this much to others
 who choose not to cry with outward emotion that
 I recognize?

So tired. [Snot-sucking]—deep breath. Long pause.
 “Trying to think about” questions I ask.
 Who am I to provoke tears, instigate suffering?
 Or is crying—the space to name and process—valuable?
 I feel the weight of responsibility to do something
 meaningful with these gifts, when I hear the voice.
 My stomach drops.

How does laughter work for us? Let me count the ways.
 She laughs [in] desperation. Why do I laugh along?
 Comfort? Don’t want to dig in? My façade:
 voice professional, not intimate, performing
 warmth, like I am smiling. I laugh to defuse
 tough questions.

Nature of mental health struggles, stigma.
 [Snuffling], crying, complete breakdown, sobbing.
 She enacts the cycle in front of me. Pure vulnerability.
 Crying and laughing through tears. “Stupid thought process
 I have to work through” will never go away.

I don’t know what that feels like, (ugh!) her frustration, exasperation.
 “Hold between us the intersubjective tension: ‘I could never imagine/
 I could imagine’”¹⁶ my own ... issues—tiptoeing around the edges
 of what I cannot [fathom] can exist. Intervention, need for control.
 To be in “contact with that which we otherwise cannot imagine”¹⁷
 Should I communicate when it is not mine?

As my poem illustrates, the reverse interview process focused my attention

16. Benjamin, 2014, p. 3, as cited in Restaino, 2019, p. 122

17. Restaino, 2019, p. 122

on those voices and silences to which I had yet to listen. “Such a listening,” Restaino (n.d.) notes quoting Mazzei, “requires courage [of researchers] and a willingness to break our own silences, and to ask the questions we dare not ask, that we prefer not to ask, that we prefer not to hear” (2007, p. 110). In the poem, I see myself wrestling with the ethics, as a researcher and as a human, of bearing witness to another person’s suffering. I am at once honored and awed by Mandy’s willingness to be vulnerable, to not only openly discuss in visceral ways her experience of mental health struggles and the impact on her writing life, but also to enact “the cycle in front me” (stanza 7, line 3), “snuffling” (stanza 7, line 2) “through tears” (stanza 4, line 3) and “snot-sucking” (stanza 5, line 1), sighing with the futility of it all, and laugh-crying toward hope. I own my inadequacy in the moment, my struggle to comfort from a distance, to placate and keep the conversation moving. I worry my behavior indicates an extractive tendency to claim Mandy’s suffering for my own benefit, to enhance my research. As she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, was I already building in my head an argument with her experience for improving mental health support for faculty writers? The reverse interview process led me to ask tough questions of myself and reckon with my intentions as a researcher, my behaviors as a fellow human. Using the troubled listening inspired by the reverse interview process to write poetry feels like an act of reciprocity, a way of treating “researcher vulnerability as yet another aspect of data” (Restaino, n.d.).

By inviting the type of reflexive listening required to compose it, my poem cultivates a kind of “rhetorical empathy,” which rhetoric scholar Lisa Blankenship (2019) explains as a relational orientation that entails “both a seeing against and a seeing with—a practice that involves both critical and connected readings,” one that is aware of how power and positionality can pollute empathetic intentions (p. 17). Pairing the profile poem with a found poem from my reactive text is one way to acknowledge the power dynamic and consider what it means for my interpretation of Mandy’s narrative landscape. Together, the poems position my voice and Mandy’s, and the silences in between, dialogically. Silence speaks. Leaning into those silences is a form of openness and receptivity facilitated by poetic inquiry. Rendering the profile and the reverse interview in poetic form emphasizes the role of feeling in receptivity, following Timothy Oleksiak’s (2020b) observation that listening is not only a cognitive experience, but an emotional one.

A self-reflexive practice of critical rhetorical empathy, my enactment of the first round of the LG honors intersubjective knowing, acknowledges the complexity, vitality, and mutuality of the self/other relationship. Importantly, as Gilligan and her colleagues (2006) point out, no single round of listening should stand alone, for each listening reveals another dimension, like “following the oboe through a piece of music and then listening again, this time following the clarinet” (p. 256). In that spirit, I next share I-poems created from Mandy’s transcripts by following round two of the LG.

Attending to Change/Continuity in Participant's Sense of Self: I-Poems (Round Two)

The purpose of creating I-poems to is to attend to the “I voice,’ which locates the participants’ sense of agency and self throughout the text” (Koelsch, 2015, p. 98). The focus is not on identifying a “plot” (Gilligan et al., 2006, p. 257) in a set of interview data as in the first round of listening but on changes and continuities in sense of self as expressed poetically. This type of listening, according to Koelsch (2015), acknowledges that participants’ stories are not “a pure recollection of events” but are “among other things, what was remembered, what has been shaped by multiple tellings, what has been collapsed or altered to fit within available discourses, and what seems appropriate to tell in the interview setting” (p. 103). The I-voice tells us something about the *telling* of the stories. “To learn about the self,” writes Koelsch (2015), “we must look beyond what can be externalized and quantified, and listen to the many ways in which the self speaks” (p. 104); I-poems are ideal for getting at this kind of poetic truth, a truth that is not to be taken literally but offers access to the “narrated worlds” of others (p. 104).

To create the following series of I-poems, I selected a subset of data from Mandy’s interviews, focusing on her responses to a question I asked in almost every interview: *How would you describe yourself as a writer in this moment?* In cases when I didn’t ask the question, I chose passages toward the end of the interview when she talked about her writing practice or self as a writer. Following Koelsch’s approach to creating I-poems, I identified each instance of the word “I” in the designated passages and extracted it from the interview text along with its associated verb and additional words needed to create a meaningful phrase. I listed the I-phrases down the page, creating poems that surface Mandy’s senses of self. Inspired by Edwards and Weller’s (2012) use of I-poems with longitudinal data to capture change and continuity over longer periods of time, I created an I-poem from each of Mandy’s eight interviews beginning in 2016 and ending in 2023. For the sake of space, I have not included all the poems but chose some from early in the project, some from the middle, and some from near the end of the project. The cascading I-statements that comprise each poem draw attention away from the kind of writer Mandy said she was in each interview and instead suggest the various voices she inhabited as a writer at different points in time over the years.

2016

I’m first generation
 I just always carried that
 I am smart
 I have to compare
 I’m smarter

I don't know

I stopped

I started

I think

I just had to

I guess

I'm smart

I think

I don't want to compare

I do

I think

I think

I know

I was raised

I think

I just accept

I'm tall

I'm musical

I play volleyball

I'm smart

I'm not

I can't

I always just

I work hard enough

I can

I'm just not

I appreciate

I can

I was smart

I worked hard

I am

I think

2018

I think

I don't give a fuck

I just
I won't
I have
I'll be
I have a problem
I did
I have another
I want to avoid
I accept
I related
I had
I have
I'm like well damn
I thought
I could
I can't
I can't
I think
I'm the exception
I'm not
I don't
I'll just
I just
I think
I read
I mean
I'll read
I need
I will read you
I will do what you tell me
I can be better to myself
I can be better at my job
I'll be better
I think
I know
I'm the person

I want
I can be who
I need to be
I'm doing
I don't know
I don't know
I forgot
I wrote

2020

I'm a writer who persists
 despite obstacles
 does
 meaningful work

I'm being told
I have to
I really appreciate
I guess
I can
I've been a part
I thought
I could
I only have
I had expected
I'm still
I can do that
I have enough
I'm okay
I'm okay
I don't have that pressure
I think
I think part of me
I do
I think
I set
I signed

I let fall
I think
I'm getting more
I think so
I think
I've heard
I kinda feel
I'm at
I did what
I had to do
I can do the work
I care about

2021

I am a writer who can get shit done
I am a writer who has gotten shit done
I think maybe
I couldn't think
I think now
I have
I'm not quite there
I don't care
I get
I care more
I think
I see
I'm not just worried

2022

I am writer who is effective
I am an expert
I'm a writer that writes things that matter
I think
I want to continue
I think
I'd like to say

In 2021 the hard worker voice continues to evolve. The reader can see a self fully confident in Mandy's capacity to produce, to do the work ("I am a writer who can get shit done," line 1) based not only on will power but track record ("I am a writer who has gotten shit done," line 2). The uncertain voice still comes through ("I don't care," line 8; "I care more," line 10) but a new steadfastness has emerged ("I'm not just worried," line 13). In 2022, an expert voice shows up, a "... writer who is effective" (line 1), "... writes things that matter" (line 3), "writes regularly" (line 8), who knows she's "... just gotta fucking get it done" (line 11) and "... got it done" (line 13). We see contentment ("I'm happy with where/I'm at," lines 18-19) but self-assessment is still tethered to external evaluation ("I'm an expert/I am because/I got tenure," lines 15-17). The voice in 2023, though, suggests ongoing evolution, a self-shifting focus from production to "... making a difference" (line 3). The final lines might be read as resistance to external measures ("I would like to say/I'm a productive writer/I don't/I think that's pretty good," lines 4-7). The reader can see traces of the tether to external validation alongside a commitment to acknowledge and resist that urge.

I-poems crafted from Mandy's transcript offer another way to listen for meaning to be gleaned from her interview data, one that attends to the "multiplicity of what appears on the surface as a single voice" (Koelsch, 2015, p. 97), a smooth narrative. I-poems are ideal for this type of listening, for poetic inquiry tends to be "multifaceted, rhizomatic, and inconclusive" (Koelsch, 2015, p. 97). Although the goal is to tune into the participant's multiple, resonant, conflicting, evolving senses of self, I-poems like any research poem, "highlight the coconstructed nature of meaning" (Koelsch, 2015, p. 99). The words are the participant's, and the order of the words stays true to the transcript, but the researcher decides the length of the phrases and the subset of data from which they are drawn, and the reader reacts with emotion evoked by poetic representation. No one person controls the interpretation. As Koelsch (2015) points out, the participant is not an "omniscient narrator" of their story; neither does the researcher or the reader take on an "omniscient role"; rather we struggle together "to understand and interpret the story," co-constructing meanings as we go (p. 103). In this way, I-poems constitute "an act of resistance against the tendency to reduce complex phenomenon into single linear narratives" (Koelsch, 2015, p. 98). "Truth" and meaning are poetic, associative, ephemeral.

Poetic Inquiry for Deep Listening: Considerations for Researchers

By juxtaposing the profile poem, the reverse interview poem, and the I-poems created from longitudinal data, I've illustrated how poetic inquiry can scaffold deep listening as part of a feminist-relational qualitative research praxis. As with the LG itself, the poetic strategies featured in this chapter are best used "when

the researcher expects to hear contradictory and nuanced tales” (Koelsch, 2015, p. 98), which could arguably be any time research involves human subjects. The strategies are practically time consuming and thus more appropriate for subsets of data, which means that “pertinent voices” outside the sample can be lost (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 215). Nevertheless, as I’ve demonstrated here, they offer affordances that make them valuable additions to a qualitative researcher’s box of “misfit” (Restaino, 2019, p. 85) tools. Each approach to poetic inquiry can be used alone or in conjunction to “def[y] singular interpretation” and “invit[e] the reader/listener [and researcher!] to engage and grapple with the material” (Koelsch, 2015, p. 104). In this way, the processes I’ve illustrated in this chapter can be used to uncover traditionally untapped facets of experience.

Comparing various “angle[s] of understanding” created through different “analytic ontologies” reveals multiple dimensions of perception and experience enabling researchers to reflect on the implications of various modes of listening and being for making sense of data (Edwards & Weller, 2012, p. 216). Through their comparison of thematic and I-poem analysis, Edwards and Weller (2012), identify two distinct orientations between researcher and participant: “gazing at” and “standing alongside” (p. 215). I experienced a similar ontological shift from gazing at Mandy to interpret her experience of mental health struggles as a writer on the tenure track, to standing alongside Mandy to interpret changes and continuities in her sense of self as a writer. The difference underscores how orientations to data analysis constitute analytic modes of being, modes that can be distinguished, enhanced, and tellingly compared through poetic strategies for deep listening.

Delineating certain ontological orientations might seem to suggest that each fully encapsulates its respective angle—that gazing at leads to an accurate interpretation of a participant’s experience and that standing alongside creates a precise angle for interpreting changes and continuities in the participant’s sense of self. It is tempting to believe that rounds of listening featuring self-reflexivity and critical awareness of researcher subjectivities and social locations fully disrupt relational hierarchies by establishing a power-sharing ethos. However, as I hope the generative ambiguity of research poems demonstrates, deep listening is not meant to conjure static insights or grounds for certainty. Using poetic inquiry to listen deeply drives home for researchers that we can never engage participants or data from fully outside selves, experiences, and perceptions.

Moreover, we are never the same “self” in our research. Who we are and how we see, hear, and feel changes from moment to moment. Intentionally juxtaposing poetic strategies helps us to stay “liquid” and to “remember, to remind [ourselves] again and again, to undo stability—or at least mark it as momentary” (Waite, 2017, p. 129). Liquid interpretations, explains Stacey Waite (2017) in her book *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing*, approach the world as “fluid, mutable, difficult to pin down” (p. 133). By writing and reading research poetry across analytical ontologies, researchers can listen to ourselves

listening in ways that are intersubjective and dialogic, ways that attend to the “material, embodied, and sensorial” (Faris, 2020). In doing so, we conjure and embrace liquid interpretations as mutable, ever evolving, always in flux. We enact deep listening, “not [as] something to be achieved or arrived at but [as] a way of moving toward a kind of moving, a becoming” in and through our work (Waite, 2017, p. 166).

In this chapter I’ve demonstrated a few poetic approaches for engaging in rounds of the LG as part of a feminist praxis for challenging meaning-making norms that value static knowledge and certainty. I’ve shown how this type of poetic inquiry taps into aspects of the participant’s and researcher’s multisensory experience that traditional tools are not designed to recognize or honor. Pursuing multiple angles and conflicting voices by considering profile poems, reverse interview poems, and I-poems alongside one another resists dominant ideologies making it “difficult to objectify [participants] or apply one-dimensional stereotypes” (Koelsch, 2015, p. 97). As Koelsch (2015) points out: “By using a qualitative methodology that rejects positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions, social science researchers can work outside of traditional discourses, which emphasize rationality and reduction” (p. 97). In that spirit, the poetic approaches illustrated here seek multiplicity, associative logic, ephemeral truths. They invite mutual vulnerability by making visible not only how researchers orient to participants but the role our shifting relationships play in co-constructing (liquid) interpretations that are always moveable, transformable, open to change.