

Exploring Identity and Assimilation: Research and Interpretive Poems

Carol L. Langer & Rich Furman

Key words: poetry, expressive arts research, qualitative methods, poetry as data, Native American

Abstract: Through the presentation of traditional qualitative and poetic data, this article explores the experience of a Native American woman coming to terms with her bi-racial identity and issues related to assimilation. Data is presented in three different ways, each with varied implications for qualitative and expressive arts researchers. First, data is presented as an in-depth qualitative interview with interpretive comments. Next, the authors present a research poem that utilizes the subject's exact words in compressed form. This is followed by two interpretative, creative poems that reflect the authors' attempts at capturing the essence of the subject's experience. The strengths and limitations of each of these methods are assessed. The article further discusses the implications of using poems and other expressive arts as data.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. The Poem as a Tool for Data Presentation in Research](#)
- [3. Methodology](#)
- [4. Poetic Presentations of Qualitative Data](#)
 - [4.1 Traditional qualitative data](#)
 - [4.2 The research poem](#)
 - [4.3 Interpretive poems](#)
- [5. Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

[Authors](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction

No matter how much we wish to deny it, language is an abstraction. At best, oral or written language is an imperfect representation of human experience. Language is, however, our primary means of communicating about reality. Human communities have therefore strived to make language as representative of the human drama as possible. So too, researchers have struggled with the desire to explore and communicate human truths via this imperfect tool and have grappled with alternative and creative means of representation of experience (RICHARDSON, 1994). Qualitative researchers have recognized the problematic nature of reducing human experience into overly simplified symbols such as numerical values or overly simple categories (FINLEY & KNOWLES, 1995). [PERCER \(2002\)](#) addresses one potential solution to this dilemma:

"I am beginning to think that the practice of writing poetry engenders a means by which to understand and make sense of the world that cannot be articulated through traditional research practice or venues." [1]

This article seeks to continue this struggle towards the meaningful presentation of human complexity by exploring the use of poetry for the presentation of data. In this article, the authors present the experience of Donna, a Native American woman exploring her identity and experience of assimilation. These experiences are presented in several different ways. First, we present excerpts from an in-depth qualitative interview and interpretive comments about the text. The authors then present a research poem that utilizes Donna's exact words in a compressed form. This is followed by two interpretative or creative poems that reflect that authors' attempt to capture the essence of her experience. Before these varying data are presented, a brief discussion of the use of poetry as a tool for understanding will be explored. [2]

2. The Poem as a Tool for Data Presentation in Research

In addition to aesthetic considerations, poetry can be understood as data about the human experience in compressed form. James SMITH (personal communication, June 23, 2003) refers to poetry as "the distillation of the essence of life." Similarly, HIRSHFIELD (1997) refers to poetry as "the clarification and magnification of being" (p.5). Unlike other forms, poetry is data that combines a narrative or story along with various poetic devices that express the depth of human emotion. [3]

The use of the arts as a tool in research has been growing steadily over the last several decades. Researchers that utilize the arts challenge the notion of an objective, omniscient observer and value the richness and complexity of artistically generated data (BREARLEY, 2002). In an early important article, EISNER (1981) explored the use of various artistic approaches to qualitative research. He asserts that the attention to observation that is key to artistic training is equally essential to the researcher. Indeed, he credits his training as an artist as greatly influencing his skill in inquiry (EISNER, 1991). [4]

Poetry has been utilized as a tool of knowledge acquisition and dissemination by researchers from various disciplines. RICHARDSON (1993), a sociologist, has utilized poetry as a tool for the presentation of data describing the life histories of unwed mothers. She compresses the essence of life narrative interviews into poems derived from key words and phrases of her subjects. She asserts that presenting data as lyric poems, that is, as poems that transcend the direct chronology of narrative, are extremely effective in communicating "lived experience." The poetic devices of lyric poems, such as rhythms and images, are effective since

"[they] concretize emotions, feelings and moods-the more private kind of feelings- so as to recreate the experience itself to another person. A lyric poem "shows" another person how it is to feel something. Even if the mind resists, the body responds to poetry. It is felt. To paraphrase Frost, poetry is the shortest emotional path between two people." (RICHARDSON, 1995, p.9) [5]

Similarly, social work scholar Cynthia POINDEXTER (2002) utilizes the form of the poem for presenting narratives of HIV patients and caregivers. Utilizing GEE's (1991) linguistic system of dividing spoken phrases into lines and stanzas, she compresses narratives into research poems that present data that is perhaps easier for practitioners to consume and utilize. She notes that the narratives people tell naturally fit into poetic structures. [6]

Using poems as autobiographical data, the second author of this article has explored the phenomenon of step-fatherhood (FURMAN, 2003) and friendship (FURMAN, in press). In this sense, poems are not used as "objective" or "generalizable" data, but as in-depth data that can aid in the exploration of complex relationships. [7]

3. Methodology

In this section, the authors will explicate the three methodologies that are utilized in the creation of three separate types of data. The first data presented is traditional qualitative data in the form of an interview narrative. Portions of interviews are presented with the comments of the first author about the context and meaning of interviews. The data is taken from a series of interviews conducted by the first author with mixed race people about their identities as Native Americans. [8]

The second presentation of data is a research poem utilizing the exact language of the client taken directly from the narrative. The authors decided that in the creation of the research poem they would not use formal tools borrowed from linguistics, but would rely upon their sense of the data for the creation of line and stanza breaks. No words were altered, yet those deemed unimportant to the meaning of the text were deleted to give the research poem a greater sense of compression (the economy of words). Compression is an essential tool in poetry which helps them become increasingly powerful by allowing the reader to focus on the essence of the work. In the creation of the piece presented below, the first author highlighted the words she believed were most essential to the document. The second author then reviewed this reduced data, checking to see if he agreed with the first author's coding. Very small discrepancies were noted, and were discussed and explored until consensus was achieved. Since the original text represented a small section taken from a larger interview, there were not natural and definite starting and ending points. The authors therefore decided upon a beginning that seemed to be a logical entry point into the text. The ending was chosen for being an emotionally evocative passage that seemed to be a summation of Donna's experience. [9]

4. Poetic Presentations of Qualitative Data

4.1 Traditional qualitative data

This excerpt comes from an in-depth, semi-structured interview conducted during the late 1990s as part of the first author's dissertation. Some theoretical discussion of the data is included. Donna is Cree/Saulteaux from Canada. She currently resides in the United States, and has for some time. She is unable to enroll as a Native because her tribe long ago lost its land base. She knows her history and her tribe's history. She is phenotypically Native. She says that she does not need any kind of formal confirmation of her identity. It isn't a matter of whether or not she would pursue her ethnic identity if she could. It is a matter that she does not have the option to do so. She thinks being Indian is a "matter of the heart." She draws the line at Native spirituality, however. She says that to be a participant in Native spirituality, you "must be invited." Donna is a Canadian indigenous person. The Catholic Church and the Canadian government usurped her rights to tribal membership and benefits. These events have not stripped her of her identity, however, only of the formal benefits that might have accrued. She indicates that she endures discrimination on a regular basis because she is phenotypically Indian. The benefits that she derives are personal. [10]

Donna can't change who she is. She knows some of her language and remains active in Native issues. The fact that she will never have an enrollment card of any kind does not diminish her self-identity as Native. She does not have an option to pass as white. Her phenotype causes the social construction of her identity (i.e., if you look Native, you must be Native). In short, she is not allowed to be Native or white. Donna rejects the European colonialism that resulted in the annihilation of her tribe and embraces her identity as an indigenous person. She seldom uses the term Native, preferring to refer to herself as a Canadian indigenous person. The use of this term in identification does not require a proof of membership in any tribe and is consistent with her phenotype. Furthermore, Donna has lived within an environment that included significant others who were similar to herself. They acted as guides for her identity crystallization and maintenance. It is when she leaves that environment that she begins to experience difficulty from others. Donna is in her early 50s, and is a youth worker. The first author and Donna talked over lunch in a Thai restaurant in a small Great Plains city. Donna begins:

"I have a lot of resentment toward Catholicism because of things that happened to my family. I think it was a great influence on assimilation. Priests taught sexism, sexually molested my uncles, forbade the culture to practice its spirituality. My grandmother could have been a great medicine woman but kept it hush-hush because of fear of retribution. Eventually, she converted. I would have been the next in line to take this on, and that's lost to me. The assimilation—internalized racism—became ... made it so difficult because my grandfather knew Cree, Saulteaux, and French language, so what happened was internalized racism which even had an impact on the next generation. Our land base had been taken; we were an impoverished people, forced to make meager wages. We knew how to work, to make

a living, but because we were indigenous, employers didn't pay well. My mother saw advantages to speaking English. They didn't teach the kids native languages. I was growing up in my family, we'd get too rambunctious in the house, and we were told that we were 'acting like Indians'; or if we got too quiet, that we were 'acting like a squaw'. Grandfather would tell us if we'd marry Indian men we'd inevitably be poor. I'd go play, and others would say, 'Don't play with her because she's Indian'. So I got it both places. Being Indian has always been a part of me that I have always claimed. Anyway, my grandparents more or less passed as French. Our land base was lost in the early 1900s. Catholicism took the land over and claimed it for the Catholic Church. I was the most native-looking of my brothers and sisters, so Grandfather didn't like me as much. I felt like my family didn't get to enjoy beautiful things from their culture. My grandfather identifies more with Saulteaux Ojibwa tribe. When my parents were married, when they were asked for their nationality, my father put his hand over my grandfather's mouth and said, 'Irish'. Assimilation brought a lot of bad things. One thing I've heard is 'cannibalism of the soul'. The Euros tried to break the spirit of the people. There is a psychosis among the Cree called 'cannibalism of the soul'. It explains Euro oppression on this continent—power relations as we now have is not a mentality that we were raised with. Native people have more 'heart'." [11]

One of the immediately striking things in Donna's story is that she not only knows stories from her immediate family; she knows her people's history. The story includes not only recognition of and reaction to the macro forces of assimilation and their impact on the generations preceding hers, she reveals two other phenomena: the impact on her generation and subsequent generations, and Donna's identification with her people. It is clear that she does not consider herself to be an outsider. [12]

4.2 The research poem

Next, the first author then created line breaks in the narrative and broke it into the form of a poem. In creating line breaks, she paid attention to keeping discrete units of meaning together and to the sound of the newly forming poem. As stated earlier, the authors worked together to verify the accuracy and emotional integrity of the presentation. [13]

The second author checked to make certain that the creation of line breaks did not alter the most central messages of the narrative. The authors then reflected together on the degree to which the depth and accuracy of affected content was maintained. This three step process helped assure the trustworthiness of the data. The authors decided to move a section of the respondent's quotation that appeared at the end of her conversation to the beginning of the research poem because the intensity of the rest of the respondent's words seemed to flow from that single observation. It provided stark and powerful entrée into the rest of the poem. Other than that lone relocation of content, the authors worked to ensure that the respondent's words and thoughts remained intact as they were re-worked into a poetry format.

The Euros tried to break
the spirit of the people.

One thing I've heard is
a psychosis among the Cree,
Cannibalism of the Soul.

It explains
Euro oppression on this continent,
power relations as we now have
is not a mentality that we were raised with.
Native people have more heart.

Cannibalism of the Soul.
Resentment
toward Catholicism.
Things happened to my family
a great influence ... assimilation,
Priests taught sexism
molested uncles
forbade spirituality,

grandmother could have been a great medicine woman
but kept it hush-hush,
fear of retribution
eventually converted.
I would have been next in line
that's lost to me.

Assimilation ... internalized racism
so difficult,
what happened was,
internalized racism impact
the next generation.

Land base was taken,
an impoverished people,
forced to make meager wages
knew how to work make a living.

because we were indigenous
employers didn't pay well.

They didn't teach the kids native languages.

Growing up in my family
we'd get too rambunctious,
told we were acting like Indians.

Got too quiet
acting like squaws.

Grandfather would tell us
we'd marry Indian men,
inevitably be poor.

Others would say
don't play with her she's Indian,
I got it both places.

I was the most native-looking
grandfather didn't like me as much.

My family
didn't get to enjoy
beautiful things from their culture.

When my parents were married
they were asked for their nationality,
father put his hand
over Grandfather's mouth
and said:
Irish. [14]

There are several benefits of transforming respondents' words into a poem. First, the condensed form of a research poem leads to a more powerful presentation of data. For the first author, having done the original research and being very familiar with the data, the impact of the poem was a surprise. The emotional intensity and the poignancy of the respondent's comments were intensified for the researcher, compared to the narrative. In this sense, the poem may more accurately express the intensity of emotions conveyed that may be lost in a longer narrative. The clarity and conciseness of the poem was rather like blowing away the husks on wheat and leaving just the kernel. It was a truly powerful experience for the researcher to hear the respondent's words in this form. Second, this additional step forced the researcher to focus on the actual content and meaning, leaving little room for interpretation. This is a critical awareness for a qualitative researcher. GEERTZ (1973) discusses the need for thick description; the use of poetry as a presentation of data is an example of thick description in that it causes a movement toward truly understanding the respondent instead of just re-stating the conversation. Third, the presentation of data in this form helps in the process of data reduction. In this manner, the research poem may be appealing to researchers and audiences more comfortable with highly compressed data (i.e. quantitative data). Also, data that is compressed in this manner may be used for advocacy purposes, as its compactness lends itself to various media. [15]

4.3 Interpretive poems

In this section, two poems are presented that have been written by the authors of this article. Unlike the research poem, the purpose was not to create a poem based upon Donna's words, but to utilize poetic device to create an evocative and moving document which allows for the subjective responses of the researchers. The first author was greatly impacted by the time she spent with Donna. Her interpretive poem provides an interpretation of her presence, of the metacommunication embedded in their experience, as well as an interpretation of Donna's statements. The author uses third person to imply that the work is written in retrospect of the interview and is the researcher's experience of Donna and her related experience. This method was used to capture not only the core elements of the quotation but to also tap into the researcher's experience which is an often-missed element of traditional qualitative work. The first author reflected on her experience of Donna, her words and her physical presence. Although the first author kept a research journal as a personal awareness device during the dissertation process, she had no opportunity to use that journal in any way during the development of the dissertation due to the predetermined structure of her methodology, as determined by her dissertation committee. This interpretive poem allowed the first author to speak about the impressions of Donna and the personal impact she (the first author) felt during the interview process.

Interpretive poem #1

Still Water Runs Deep

An air of "I dare you" hung around her
Like fog over a lake.
She didn't look imposing, particularly
But you sure knew she was when you
Looked into her eyes.

Those deep, languid eyes
Loss comes to mind ... great loss;
A medicine woman that will never be;
A tribal identity forever gone.
The history of priests indelibly etched
Into her heart and mind
Priests who sexually invaded lives of
First Nations children, male and female.
Even the very young made to kneel and pray
For hours at a time
On rice kernels scattered on the floor.
Lessons in humility?
Taught distrust and anger instead.

The eyes told it all, but the words she spoke

Gave the ghastly details.
Because her tribe's land was lost,
So was her tribal identity ... not hers, though.
"Nobody can tell me who I am."
Euro invasion, decency masked genocide,
Internal racism, self-hatred, public
And private ostracism.

She may not speak her Native language
But she has a command of English.
Cannibalism of the Soul, a profound insight of
What human can do to human when
Land or natural resources or religion
Are at stake.

Where is the child who couldn't play?
Where is the woman-healer?
Where is the First Nations homeland?
Where is what was and now can't be?

Gone the way of Manifest Destiny.
Gone, but not forgotten.
Donna's eyes tell the pain
Her words ... don't say "Irish." [16]

Writing this interpretive poem was also a powerful experience for the first author. The opportunity to put onto paper the sorrow, anger, and pain that was visible during the interview process was diminished only slightly by the realization that Donna is representative of hundreds of thousands of individuals whose people have had similar loss. The movement from focus on an individual to focus on a group and the connection to the overwhelming force of imperialism was accomplished in a few short stanzas. The intensity of this experience for the first author cannot be minimized. [17]

To write this poem, the second author read the narrative several times. After, he closed his eyes and meditated for several moments, allowing images inspired by the narrative to enter his mind. He first began to write words and thoughts randomly on a blank page of paper. After several minutes of reading his notes, he began to write a poem that adopts a loose narrative structure. He decided that the structure of the poem should reflect the essence of Donna's experience. The narrative is incomplete, fractured. In this sense, the fracture of the narrative is metaphorical for the experience of Donna, whose personal identity as a native woman has been fractured by the impact of racism. He assessed that the narrative leaves many questions unresolved in regard to her identity; lines end in question marks to imply a sense of the unresolved.

Interpretive Poem #2

Cannibalism Of The Soul

is the name of our psychosis.
The day my parents married

petitioned about nationality
father blanketed grandfather's mouth

to silence proclaimed
Irish.

Why does this resentment
lie upon my chest

as did the weight of priests
who molested my uncles?

When young
the children would play, rambunctious,

you know children,
grandfather would holler

stop acting like Indians
or if too quiet
stop acting like squaws.
He liked me less than those

who appeared less Indian.
And my grandmother?

A medicine woman
talents hidden,

like a shameful disease,
or the true timber of our tongues. [18]

5. Conclusion

It is the hope of the authors that the presentation of Donna's story in three distinct ways demonstrates how creative means of data presentation can be utilized for different effects. Research and interpretative poems each present viable possibilities for presenting the lived experience of people's lives. Each approach may be appropriate for different types of study, or may be utilized in the same study as a means of providing deferring vantage points. The research poem may be useful when the researcher wishes to present subject's voice as the primary

transmitter of data, yet wishes to present this data in compressed form. Such a compression allows the reader to focus on the essence of a narrative. Interpretative poems may be useful when the researcher chooses to enter the research and present themselves in the text. In this sense, the interpretative poem fuses the perspective of the subject and the insights of the researcher. The interpretative poem as a research tool moves towards the postmodern position advocated by those who both recognize and value the subjective experience of the researcher. [19]

References

- Brearley, Laura (2000). Exploring the creative voice in an academic context. *The Qualitative Report*, 5(3/4). Retrieved January 17, 2003, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR5-3/brearley.html>.
- Gee, James Paul (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1), 15-39.
- Hirshfield, Jane (1997). *Nine gates: Entering the mind of poetry*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Eisner, Elliot (1981). On the differences between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 10(4), 5-9.
- Eisner, Elliot (1991). *The enlightened eye. Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York: Macmillan.
- Finley, Susan & Knowles, Jeremy (1995). Researcher as artist/artist as researcher. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1), 110-142.
- Furman, Rich (in press). The prose poem as a means of exploring friendship: Pathways to reflection. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 16(4).
- Furman, Rich (2003). Exploring step-fatherhood through poetry. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 16(2), 91-97.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. NY: Basic Books.
- Percer, Liz (1992). Going beyond the demonstrable range in educational scholarship: Exploring the intersections of poetry and research. *The Qualitative Report*, 7(2). Retrieved March 31, 2002, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR7-2/hayespercer.html>.
- Poindexter, Cynthia (2002). Meaning from methods: Re-presenting narratives of an HIV-affected caregiver. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(1), 59-78.
- Richardson, Laurel (1993). Poetics, dramatics, and transgressive validity: The case of the skipped line. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 695-710.
- Richardson, Laurel (1994). Nine poems: Marriage and the family. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23(1), 3-13.

Authors

Dr. *LANGER* received her Bachelor's Degree in Education in 1971 from Peru State College, Peru, NE and taught high school for several years. She received her MSW from UNO in 1985. Carol worked as a school social worker in an educational service unit serving K-12 students and their families in four counties in NE. She also worked as a medical social worker, provided EAP counseling to hospital employees, and worked as a geriatric social worker. In addition, Carol has worked in a home health organization, a state department of social services (specialized foster care), and an emergency services program. She began teaching postsecondary courses in 1986 at Midland Lutheran College, Fremont. Her postsecondary teaching experience prior to coming to UNO in 2002 includes Midland Lutheran College (6 years), Clarkson College, Peru State College, Southeast Community College, and Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, NE (6 years). Dr. *LANGER* received the Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2000.

Dr. *LANGER*'s specialties include Native American issues, race and ethnic relations, theory, women's issues, medical social work, school social work, and identity.

Contact:

Carol L. Langer, PhD
Assistant Professor

School of Social Work
University of Nebraska-Omaha
60th and Dodge Streets
Annex 40
Omaha, NE 68182, USA

E-mail: clanger@mail.unomaha.edu

Dr. *FURMAN* has worked in various roles in social work practice and education for fifteen years. His primary research interests are: friendship and its relationship to psychosocial health; poetry and its uses in teaching, research and education: and social work theory. He was the founding director of Children's Outreach Services Programs, Resources for Human Development, Philadelphia, PA. This innovative wrap-around program provides home and school-based services to children and adolescents with emotional and mental health disorders. He also founded and directed an early intervention program for the same agency. He has been a clinical social worker conducting individual, group and family therapy with adults, children and families in the various communities. He was the supervisor of group therapy for a substance abuse program in the Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia. Dr. *FURMAN* was also previously the Director of the Youth Work Certificate Program at Community College of Philadelphia, and a member of the faculty in the department of Behavioral Health and Human Services. Dr. *FURMAN* has engaged in research and development projects throughout Mexico and Central America. He is also an internationally published poet. His poetry has been published in *Hawai'i Review*, *The Evergreen Review*, *Black Bear Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Penn Review*, *Free Lunch*, *Colere*, *Pearl*, *The Journal of Poetry Therapy*, *Impetus*, *Poetry Motel* and many others. He has preformed his work throughout the United States, as well as in Nicaragua, Mexico, and Guatemala.

Dr. *FURMAN*'s specialties include qualitative research, poetry therapy and research, friendship and resiliency, international social work.

Contact:

Rich Furman, PhD
Assistant Professor

School of Social Work
University of Nebraska-Omaha
60th and Dodge Streets
Annex 40
Omaha, NE 68182, USA

E-Mail: rfurman@mail.unomaha.edu

Citation

Langer, Carol L. & Furman, Rich (2004). Exploring Identity and Assimilation: Research and Interpretive Poems [19 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2), Art. 5, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs040254>.