The Quality of the Light: Evidence, Truths, and the Odd Practice of the Poet-Sociologist

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horror movie pitch

okay you guys are gonna love it. get this

all the black women turn invisible,
all of them

just overnight. America goes to sleep and they’re there
and they wake up and they’re not

the scary part?    stick with me
they’re not gone. YOU JUST CAN’T SEE EM
    think about it
they can see each other
but you can’t see them
and they could be anywhere

the girl you passed up for the promotion
she could be in your car
ready to yank your head back by your hair
right when you’re at a busy intersection
the woman you grabbed on the subway escalator
she could be in your living room
looking through your tax returns

the group of friends you whistled at
might take turns whistling back at you from hidden places
shrill, and off-key, until you go mad

the one you prodded and whispered about
she might be lurking in the men’s room
with a sharp letter opener and a roll of duct tape

the girl you lied on again and again
might be on the back porch where you smoke
and she’s dousing your cigarettes in lighter fluid

all the ones whose hair you touched
all the ones whose names you mocked
all the ones whose pay you cut
the ones whose houses
the ones whose jobs
the ones whose babies
the ones who
the ones who
the ones

they could be anywhere with knives
or guns or poison or machetes or
things they have to say to you about you
and you have to listen

i mean let’s be real maybe they would just leave
go somewhere warm and secret, string up Christmas lights,
raise goats and chickens, grow zucchini and fire up the grill,
make every night for cards and barbecue, let their hair grow
or cut it all off, let themselves get fat
or skinny, talk about things
that are not you

but then again
maybe they would do everything you did to them
do it more
and faster
and harder
with all the mean they learned from you.
the witless cruelty
the smirking dismissals
the rope across your wrist
all the twisted words and lucky punches

and you wouldn’t even see them coming

(Ewing, E.L., 2017)

As a poet, I often explore themes that echo those I focus on in my research—race, identity, and power. A poem like this one, “horror movie pitch,” allows me to venture into a discussion about intersectionality and [in]visibility through a somewhat more irreverent, open-ended, and accessible lens than, say, an essay might. To me, this moving between forms to best serve the ideas one wishes to convey makes sense, much in the same way we as researchers move across theoretical frameworks and methodological tools in order to best address a line of inquiry. But the question that repeatedly arises in interviews, in personal conversations, in emails from writers and graduate students looking for advice generally goes something like this: “You’re a poet, and a sociologist. How do you do both at the same time?” I invariably struggle with a response as my mind is ringing—not with answers, but with several countervailing questions. I never fully understand what is meant. Are they asking how, logistically, I manage the time demands of my work? Or is it an epistemological question—are they asking how I negotiate competing systems of knowledge in my head, the poet’s knowledge and the sociologist’s knowledge? Is it an ontological question? That is, are they asking how one can be simultaneously a poet and a social scientist? And if so, is this a variant of a question they pose of all people who occupy two positions at once (“So, you’re a dental hygienist and the president of the parent-teacher association at your child’s school … how do you do that?”) or is there something in particular about the coupling of poetry and social science that is so counterintuitive or distasteful that it begs for special comment? It seems impolite to ask any of this out loud, so I just do my best to answer the question. I often think, though, about a boyfriend of many years ago who reacted to my interest in my graduate statistics courses by saying, with dramatic disdain, “I fell in love with a poet, not a researcher” (needless to say, he is no longer present to witness my progress in either of these career paths). And on the other end of the spectrum are those sociologists who, as James D. Miley put it, “regard [an] interest in poetry as an illness from which they hope I will soon recover” (1988).
As a qualitative sociologist, one of the methods I use in my work is critical discourse analysis—the process of carefully examining language practices to understand what people are doing in social spaces when they use certain words, phrases, or verbal cues. So I wonder what these folks really mean when they say poet, anyway. What is a poet, and what is poetry that it should be presumed so antithetical to the work of the social scientist? I am reminded of a passage from the seminal Audre Lorde essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury”:

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. (2012, p. 37)

If we understand “poetry,” as Lorde puts forth here, as (1) a tacit recognition of the fact that worthwhile knowledge can be derived from one’s own experiences, including affective experiences, as opposed to only from “objective” problem-based analysis, (2) a manifestation of women’s (especially Black women’s) pragmatic strategies for navigating a patriarchal world while simultaneously valuing our own inner lives, and (3) not a luxury reserved for a privileged few, but rather “a vital necessity of our existence,” through which we imagine ulterior lives of liberation, then perhaps the juxtaposition of poetry and social science—in a course, in a piece of writing, or embodied in an individual—might seem much more natural. After all, the task of the social scientist is to ask critical questions about the reality that surrounds us—our strange behaviors, our attach-
ments, the institutions we construct, and the inequalities and injustices that lie therein, the trappings of what we call “culture,” and all the idiosyncrasies that make up human life in society.

Lorde’s formulation enables us to think about the task of the poet as thinking through, alongside, and ultimately above and beyond the happenstance of life as we know it; poetry unites, as she describes it, the tripartite entities of language, idea, and action. As the social scientist asks \textit{what is}, the poet asks \textit{what may be}; as the social scientist tells what people \textit{do}, the poet tells what people \textit{are}. Indeed, Lorde’s characterization of poetry as a tool to “give name to the nameless so it can be thought” suggests a useful third party to the dialectical paradigm of empirics and theory: imagination. Where the social scientist uses empirics to gather a descriptive understanding of the social world, and uses theory to render these observations into more broadly applicable, abstract connecting threads among social phenomena, the poet uses imagination to extend the social world from the realm of the observable into the realm of the possible. Consider, for instance, this excerpt from the poem “Field Trip to the Museum of Human History,” by Franny Choi (Segal, 2015):

Dry-mouthed, we came upon a contraption
of chain and bolt, an ancient torture instrument
the guide called “handcuffs.” We stared
at the diagrams and almost felt the cold metal
licking our wrists, almost tasted dirt,
almost heard the siren and slammed door,
the cold-blooded click of the cocked-back pistol,
and our palms were slick with some old recognition,
as if in some forgotten dream we did live this way,
in submission, in fear, assuming positions
of power were earned, or at least carved in steel,
that they couldn’t be torn down like musty curtains,
an old house cleared of its dust and obsolete artifacts.

In the world of Choi’s poem, police abolition is not a thorny theoretical issue or an impossible dream; it is historical fact. Choi’s poem allows us the space to sit alongside a speaker for whom a world of violent policing is as
difficult to envision as a world without it is for our contemporaries. Within
the universe of the poem, what once felt merely possible is rendered con-
crete, to be touched and tasted.

I have spent the majority of my life in performance poetry spaces and
have dedicated the last several years to curating spaces where young people
can share poetry in community, and through these experiences I have
come to understand poetry as one of the most powerful tools human
beings have for cultivating empathy and a sense of the subjectivity of oth-
ers. I believe that such empathy can build the foundation for a full and
loving care, and such care is, in turn, the difference between teachers who
are nurturing and teachers who are harmful, between researchers who are
community partners and researchers who are well-meaning but exploi-
tative and parasitic, between policy-makers who center the lives of those
they presume to serve and policy-makers who conveniently forget the
humanity of those who dwell on the other side of a spreadsheet. Further,
inherent in a poem is a comfort with paradox and subtlety, with nuance
and even the moments of apparent self-contradiction or uncertainty that
characterize all human life. Reading history, statistics, and theories could
help my students accumulate knowledge; reading poetry helps them bolster
this knowledge with understanding.

As Lorde suggests, our foremothers have established a long tradition of
intuiting the role of poetry in the relational work of our everyday lives. When I was a child, my mother used call-and-response verse of her own
invention to move my brother and me through the daily rhythms of child-
hood. Calling us out of bed, she would chant: Good morning! Good morn-
ing? How are you this morning? (To which one was to reply, “I’m fine, I’m
fine, I’m very fine this morning!” whether or not one was actually fine.)
African American culture is full of aphorisms, in effect short orally trans-
mitted verses that share critical truisms for survival and success using
poetic features such as alliteration (“hit dogs holler”), parallel structure
(“don’t start none, won’t be none”), and rhyme (“all my skinfolk ain’t my
kinfolk”). Akiwowo (1986) has suggested that the Yoruba oral poetry
Ayajo Asuwada illustrates the principles of a foundational sociological
worldview (e.g. the necessity of community and the dangers of social
alienation, the nature of a good society) through several verses. Akiwowo
describes these principles and this poetic practice as comprising “a vision
of the future” (p. 345).

Proceeding from this idea of poetry as the realm of the possible, in the
remainder of this chapter I will illustrate the reciprocal links between my
dual roles as poet and social scientist and how this duality works reciprocally and cohesively in my scholarship, my classroom teaching, and my own practice as a poet. Specifically, in the following pages I briefly discuss three ways in which poetry is nestled within my scholarly work: using poetry in the classroom, using poetry as a form of argumentative evidence, and my own practice as a working poet.

**Poetry in the Classroom**

At the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I designed and taught a course called “Racism and Educational Inequality in the Lives of African-American Youth” (I am not one for brevity). As laid out in the catalog description, the course was designed to “draw on sociological lenses to provide a theoretical, historical, and empirical overview of issues affecting the education of Black youth in America.” Students explored sociological frameworks for understanding race, racism, and anti-blackness, discussed contemporary educational policy and instructional practices, and read a great deal about the manifestations of educational inequality. Much of the reading was fairly standard for a course on this topic: Frederick Douglass, Gloria Ladson-Billings, the Moynihan Report, and lots of empirical reading on implicit bias, discrimination, and the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black youth. Like many other professors of my generation, I also reached into other media forms to convey key content. We watched documentaries, listened to a podcast, had a remote guest speaker through video-conferencing and a panel of visitors, and I made all the students watch the music video for the song “Never Catch Me” by Flying Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar in tandem with a bell hooks reading as part of a conversation about Black death and resilience.

And, we read poems. We read poems because in a course focusing on the lives of young people who have been silenced, marginalized, erased, and discriminated against, people who have been the targets of some of the most heinous violence the American educational system can concoct, I did not want students to walk away framing Black children only as two-dimensional objects of suffering and despair. We read two poems: “when the officer caught me” by Nate Marshall, and “This, Here” by Kush Thompson. Thompson’s poem came as part of a conversation on intersectionality and the ways in which the lives and experiences of Black girls are so handily made invisible in much of the national discourse around education crises. Thompson (2015), who herself identifies as a womanist, offers
a delicate, evocative telling of her own narrative of Black girlhood on Chicago’s West Side:

This, where your heart is not yet
a restless telephone wire shackled to the ankle
of every one you have ever loved after sunset.

This, where the news stations tell you everything you know about
what lives across your street, outside of your living room window,
at the end of your driveway.

This, deliberate. This, abrupt.
This, sloppy stitching.

In that week’s reading response assignment, a white male student—a former computer science teacher, working toward his master’s degree—wrote of the connections he saw between the poem and another assigned reading, *Despite the Best Intentions* by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond. The student begins by quoting Lewis and Diamond’s argument that the “social order works to reproduce racist schema and racial inequality through the mundane activities of everyday life” (2015, p. 5). He goes on to discuss the poem:

When connecting those two lines from her poem to [the reading from *Despite the Best Intentions*] there is a picture being painted about the clear boundaries that are in place between blacks and whites in essentially all aspects of society, and that did not just happen by chance …. The “sloppy stitching” that makes it so easy to see, the clear disparities at the “integrated” Riverview High School where inside the classrooms it was segregated, and when comparing the income levels of black and white students the black students came from families that made half as much money.

While the student arguably took away an important conceptual point from his reading of the Lewis and Diamond text—the fact that racism is structural in nature and reproduces itself through the *habitus* of ordinary people—the juxtaposition of the sociology text and the poem enabled him to employ a powerful metaphor for better understanding and discussing structural racism. As he points out, “sloppy stitching” is an apt way to describe the machinations of segregation in housing and schools: there are threads that bind the whole system together, but once you see them, they are hard to unsee. Metaphors like this have tremendous utility not only in
helping students understand social science concepts, but also in communicating them; perhaps the student will find “sloppy stitching” to be a useful tool in sharing his learning about segregation with others when he returns to his work as an educator.

**POETRY AS EVIDENCE**

In *When the Bell Stops Ringing* (Ewing, 2018), my book about structural racism and public school closures in Chicago, I bolster my sociological arguments with evidence from a variety of disciplines, including history, psychology, and philosophy. I also include poems in every chapter. I find that the poems serve multiple evidentiary purposes: they offer a different sort of first-person account of the social forces discussed in the book, and they provide useful metaphors for reader understanding much in the same way as Thompson’s poem provided a metaphor for student understanding.

For instance, in a chapter on institutional mourning, the social and emotional processes undergone by individuals and communities facing the loss of a shared institution, I include an excerpt from a poem performed by four Black youth during the Louder Than A Bomb youth poetry slam festival. In the poem, they talk about their frustration and anger toward Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel for overseeing the destruction of public schools and public housing.

Mister Wreck-It Rahm/look at what Chicago’s becoming
Bending the rules to fit a lie of building a new Chicago
Building new streets when your own plan got some potholes
Tearing down dreams/it’s getting real windy in these streets
Where Xs mark the spot where his wrecking ball is next to drop
We are not included in the blueprint of the new Chicago

While the other sources of evidence in the book—interviews, observations, discourse analysis, historical analysis, tables, and figures—all work in cohesion to support the rhetorical thrust behind the idea of institutional mourning, the poem provides something singular even within this milieu. It represents the conceptual framing of the authors themselves, their own way of uniting the threads of experience and evidence to make a point, and do so in a form that is succinct and memorable. In a chapter outlining the history of residential segregation in Chicago’s Bronzeville community, the
argument is preceded by a quotation from the Gwendolyn Brooks poem “kitchenette building”: *We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, Grayed in, and gray* (Brooks, 1992).

The chapter is replete with historical and quantitative evidence detailing the way public institutions doubled down on segregation over the course of the twentieth century. But foregrounding the chapter with the poem offers a guiding metaphor—the kitchenette building—that reinforces the evidence that follows. Perhaps more importantly, it signals to the reader that this too is a means of understanding; this Black woman poet’s imagistic rendering of her life narrative is a worthy and necessary intervention to anyone hoping to understand the social meaning of segregation. This implicit assertion is in concert with the tenets of critical race theory (CRT), one of which is the centrality of experiential knowledge. As Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) describe, CRT “explicitly listens to the lived experiences of People of Color through counter-storytelling methods such as family histories, parables, testimonios, dichos (proverbs), and chronicles.” In the context of the field of education, which has seen a distressing push toward positivistic and neoliberal logics of evidence (see, for instance, Lipman, 2013), there is a continued imperative for scholars and theorists from historically marginalized groups to maintain an insistence that our ways of knowing are as legitimate, if not more so, as forms of knowledge emerging from the historically Cartesian logic of the academy, with its fidelity to a supposed objectivity which has never actually been objective so much as bound to a myopically constrained view of the universe. We must continue to embody the centrality of witnessing, of storytelling. We must uphold griot truths, always.

**POETRY AS PRAXIS**

I decided to be a poet, inasmuch as one can “decide” such a thing, many years before I decided to be any kind of scholar. At the time I completed graduate school, I had already published several poems and received a contract to publish my first book of poetry, garnered a place in the social world of poetry and established connections with countless peers in the field, performed publicly in many venues, taught poetry in a variety of settings, participated in workshops and residencies, and spent a great deal of time co-organizing the Louder Than A Bomb Massachusetts Youth Poetry Slam and the Chicago Poetry Block Party. This might all be well and good for someone in a literature department, but as a social scientist, I wondered as I entered the job market what my potential new colleagues
might think if they happened upon this information. I also wondered what students would think if they encountered my poet voice (both literal and literary), which is in many ways different from my professor voice. Beginning my career as a junior scholar with an existing robust persona as a poet left me with a few possibilities. If I felt that being a poet meant people would somehow take my sociological work less seriously, I could stop writing poems, or at least stop sending them out into the world for others to see. Not only did this seem impossible, it seemed selfish. My own life was irreversibly transformed by the poets who came before me, and I regularly receive correspondence from young people who write to tell me of the impact my work has had on them.

When considering matters like this—matters of representation, perception, and what is seen as respectable—I tend to begin from a simple first principle: *this space wasn’t made for you anyway.* The institution of the American university emerged with the presumption of white maleness at the core of what it considers valuable, acceptable, and worthy. In our era, as people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, and others whose very existence was unaccounted for at the dawn of the American professoriate, we continue to be seen as interlopers, to be generally ignored, tolerated, tokenized, or “the lucky ones” held up as exceptional and remarkable figures while the institutions who make us newsletter features and keynote speakers continue to systemically marginalize and exclude those who look like us and come from the communities that raised us. This persistent situation strains the boundaries of what “inclusion” actually means. I am reminded of the life of Georgiana Simpson, who in 1920 enrolled at the University of Chicago in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree and moved into a women’s dormitory (University of Chicago Library, 2009). Several of her white classmates protested her presence, and five of them moved out after the head of the residence hall stated definitively that Simpson ought to be able to stay. When the president of the university returned from his summer vacation and learned of the decision, he unilaterally reversed it, forcing Simpson to find housing off campus. She went on to earn master’s and doctoral degrees in German philology. Simpson, like many Black woman scholars who would follow her, was—to borrow a phrasing from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot—*at* the university, but not *of* the university (personal communication). So it is, and so, I assume until shown otherwise, shall it ever be. This first principle, dispiriting as it can be, is also perversely liberatory. If you already view yourself to be something of an oddity in the eyes of the institution, there is not much to lose by adding a proclivity for creative writing to the list of your “abnormalities.”
Still, I was startled the first time I stepped up to the microphone for a reading at an art gallery in Boston and saw several students from my Education and Social Policy course looking back at me. And I was relieved that this apparent disruption of predictable social boundaries did not result in any major disaster. The students laughed at the funny parts, looked distressed at the sad parts, clapped, and left at the end, and in class had nothing to say about my love poems or my stated interest in time travel, and at that point I don’t think it would have bothered me if they had. It’s just as well. As much as I understand the functioning of such boundaries in the world, the fact remains that in my head all of these ideas and forms and functions tend to blur together, seeking whatever expressive space seems most useful and available in any given moment.

So it is that before I ever wrote an essay or a book about racism and urban public school closures, I wrote a poem about it. It is called “Requiem for Fifth Period and the Things That Went On Then” and it ends like this (Ewing, 2014):

Sing, Muse, of Mrs. Marshall, who cannot answer now.
The desk is unattended and she leans
against the other side of the oaken door,
the principal’s side, where a sign reads “Children Are My Business”
and a doll-like painted woman smiles broadly, surrounded by the faces of earnest people.
She is resting against the wood as her forearms strain
with the weight of all the papers,
colored like oatmeal or dust, each with a label at the top.
The first says STEVENS, JAVONTE, and below that, KAIZER
and below that, eight numbers.
Tell of how she collates them by classroom, then alphabetically,
though each letter is the same, though each bears the same news.

Tell, Muse, of the siren that called their joy sparse and their love vacant.
Tell of the wind that scattered them.

In relating the reality of school closure through this narrative path, one that focuses on individual characters and draws out a single moment to be examined, to be lived and re-lived from many angles, something different is revealed about the impact of school closure—about the stakeholders whose lives are at play, about their worldview and their troubles that both precede and will exceed this policy decision, about the exogenous shock of this news. In this sense, the poem teaches.
The poet, too, teaches—in the decisions she makes, is teaching; her pedagogy is enacted in the practice of being in the world in addition to the classroom context. Frequently I receive emails from teenagers, most often Black girls, who have been assigned to read my poetry and have questions about it. These messages, adding to the already-overwhelming deluge of digital correspondence we all face daily, are tempting to ignore. But then I think of the letters of famed poet Gwendolyn Brooks. I have visited two Brooks archives, and both times have been awestruck by her commitment to correspondence—especially with children. If Brooks—Pulitzer Prize winner, Library of Congress poet, poet laureate of Illinois, beloved by countless readers—was not too busy to write back, how can I be? I think of Miss Brooks when I receive an email from a girl named Tiffany: “I chose your poem because I wanted to recite something that I could relate to; something that incorporates my culture and femininity. When I read your poem, I knew that it was the right fit for me. I am one of two African American students in the senior class, so your biography inspired me as well to embrace my culture, which is easy to forget because of where I live.” And in the manner of Miss Brooks, I have come to see this kind of correspondence, as well as the teaching done and through the poem itself, as a form of praxis as well as pedagogy. Tiffany learns something about her own identity through her encounter with the poem; through her remote encounter with me she learns something about the nature of poetry and poets but also the nature of Black women—something which I, in turn, learned from Miss Brooks. Through the encounter I am also reminded of the poet and the person I want to be. Each time I receive a letter like Tiffany’s, I learn and re-learn anew the lesson Miss Brooks offered in her poem “Paul Robeson” (1992): “we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

We hear often that boundaries—of personhood, of citizenship—are intended to protect us. But I continue to believe that it is possible to be many things at once, because I don’t know any other way to be. As a poet, I love a good metaphor, and while I am grateful that Crenshaw’s vital framework of intersectionality (1991) has been broadly embraced in scholarly literature and in public consciousness, too rarely do we give it its full due as a striking visual metaphor. Here we sit, Black women, in the place where two roads meet. We did not choose to be here, but this is where we are. A friend, another Black woman professor, told me recently that she had read a book in which Black women academics are advised to keep their offices as void of any personal effects and sparse as possible. No inspirational
quotations on the bulletin board. No bowls of your favorite candy. No pictures of family. Nothing of comfort. The risk, she explained, was that students visiting for office hours might mistakenly overestimate our capacity to nurture and think it our primary function. “Nothing that will make them think that we’re mammy,” she said. For our own survival, the logic goes, it is best for Black women to obscure as much of our own personhood as possible. But, as we know empirically, no amount of subdued expression, no level of adherence to what is considered “appropriate”¹ comportment for a scholar can ever overcome that first principle. Better, I figure, to do the absolute best scholarship I possibly can, keep myself motivated with the pictures of my loved ones and images of Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Burroughs in my office, eat candy, and write poems.

Notes

1. For more on why pursuing the idea of “appropriateness” is a futile exercise for people of color, see Flores & Rosa, 2015.

References


