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FOREWORD

Social science methods get fuzzy on close inspection. Statistical studies are the type case for quantitative methods, of course, relying as they do on the premise that mathematical models have a “goodness of fit” with social reality. That is a challengeable assumption but nonetheless the clearest line drawn for the types of methods associated with it. Other studies show a broad mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, more or less dependent on logical-positivism and representing conventional science to that degree. Still others more qualitative in nature, but not far off the clone of conventional science platforms, leave the numbers behind and operate on the premise that their data will somehow “speak for themselves” if the research results can be laid out in a detailed descriptive account that hides the author, that is, as if things “just happen” the way they are said to happen and analytic snapshots of that appear on their own momentum in print. Those efforts always fail on one count: Nothing speaks for itself. Interpretation is as necessary to human life as breathing. Authors can be hidden but nothing in actuality can be done without them. Distancing oneself through reporting that avoids first-person constructions and other overtly personal appearances in the text usually comes with the posture of being “objective.” It has a long-established place in social science research, despite its fictional nature—a useful one, to be sure, but a fiction nonetheless because all research necessarily starts with an observer moving through the world as a personally-situated sensuous and intellectual being. Distanced accounts can only be created by passing *through* that universe of everyday realities, editing out anything that appears to be extraneous to the methods and problems selected, including the author. Moreover, another pot-stirring has it that successful representation often boils down simply to picking the right vocabulary for describing the problem at hand.

There is a muddle in this picture. Every method for mapping out realistic scope and depth of information about being human has a fuzzy thin spot or a hole in it. Some of the difficulty can be alleviated with broader coverage of both what is studied and how it gets done. The need for a plurality of methods that can be applied to individual research projects on the human condition has never had a stronger calling than it does now. What follows in this remarkable book is dedicated precisely to expanding that possibility through social science poetics.

Poetic methods are qualitative and call for self-conscious participation. Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for magnified encounters with life as lived, up close and personal, and sets it in a mode where everything reported is proprietary, overtly as the authors write about their presence in the research or implicitly on the strength of always claiming

the representations as a personal product (interpretation) of sorts. Whether it is used or not, first-person language always (and frequently an I-Thou philosophy) fits the mode. Comparisons of such work are in fact more often tied to the creativity and skills of the authors than to the substance of their works, a lopsidedness that generally appears the other way around in quantitative studies. But this can also be carried too far. The differences are relative. They have overlapping middle ground. So the appropriate metaphor might better be shifted from telescope to teeter-totter, one of those terrific playground devices that locks the action into a zero-sum game while one person lifts the end of the board on a fulcrum as the other end sinks. Riders push up and down this way, ideally amusing each other with the exercise of being earthbound at one moment and free of it in the next. They can also try to balance it. With clever maneuvering, both ride suspended on the scale. Research methods are like that, up and down on the degree to which they rely on qualitative or quantitative principles and often ending up somewhere in a shaky middle, a continuum that prevents either extreme from being completely removed from the other. And while life itself is never absolutely a zero sum game, the teeter-totter analogy points nicely to the reality of our situatedness as actors who are always moving in Bakhtinian space, that is, always viewing, choosing, and communicating in contexts cluttered by communications, choices, and related behaviors from others. These patterns help to structure our understandings of the nature of the world and our place in it and thereby our language and associated behaviors, including picking methods and theories we think will improve our ability to represent experience.

Language is the key connector of the variable perspectives, styles, smoothings, and uncoverings of arguments in science and poetics. All language is poetic in the sense of depending on metaphors and related tropes at one level or another for communication. Poets use existing language in creative ways that differ from the special usages of chemists, historians, sociologists, and others. But even knowing the central tendencies of usage for special or heightened purposes in any language—assuming they can in fact be indexed sensibly—still doesn't solve the problem of mapping precise boundaries for the cross-traffic of transition zones in the middle. Just as science has no monopoly on rigor or a high valuation of systematic thinking, so does poetry lack a monopoly on poetic processes. We find grains of poetics in everyday speech, wherever new or in other ways conspicuous metaphors are used (e.g., “tacking into terrible winds” as one speaker said recently about John McCain's losing campaign for the U.S. presidency). Poetry makes an art form out of ordinary language use possibilities. Our lives and thoughts are shot through with poetic character. And so is science in thought and deed.

Consider cognitive scientist Raymond Gibbs, Jr., on the need to come to grips with the fundamental poetics of everyday thought:

Figurative language is not the novel creation of unconstrained imaginative thinking, because the evidence...clearly indicates a picture of figurative imagination as a systematic and orderly part of human cognitive processes. My plea is for a greater recognition of the poet in each one of us—to recognize that *figuration is not an escape from reality but constitutes the way*

we ordinarily understand ourselves and the world in which we live (Gibbs 1994, p. 454, emphasis added)¹

It follows as good advice to those who would judge this work exclusively in terms of how well it conforms to conventional scientific models that they need to get beyond that self-serving bias, as one might in trying to understand another culture. No one is offering poetics *per se*, especially poetry, as science. Poetry is not science, it does not aspire to be science, and it cannot be thought of rationally as a replacement for science. That would be absurd. But neither is any of this meant to obviate the overlap between poetics and science in cognitive and linguistic processes. None of it is meant to say that arts-based research lacks rigor or undervalues systematic thinking, that it cannot report accurately on the empirical world through various means, or that an important compromise in the form of artful-science is somehow impossible to achieve. Some middles are better served by their respective ends than others. Locating poets in serious conversations with scientists about plural methods for getting more than the name and address of everything in the universe is a middle worth pursuing, especially when it holds the promise of new and complementary information about shared objects of study.

This book shows plainly that poetic processes can be used both as tools of discovery and a unique mode of reporting research, that there are activities and domains of participation in life that can *only* be accounted for realistically with qualitative methods, with poetic-mindedness, thereby further opening the door to *bricolage* and a commitment by many social science and educational researchers to plural methods as the respected wave of the future. The trick is knowing how to read the information on its own terms. The trick is to remember that context is practically everything for determining meaning. The trick is to remember that sometimes it is better to have more than a hammer in your toolkit, especially if you are, say, building a house, or, more to the point, writing a poem about life as lived. There is more than one way to see things, to say things, and therefore to know things, each inviting different points of entry into the research equation.

If the common goal in the social sciences is to get to know humanity in all of its phases, foibles, tragedies, triumphs, histories, accidents, passions, enchantments, cruelties, creations, kinships, friendships, and concrete realities running from fire dancing in a jungle to deep breathing in outer space, a poetic mentality, and poetry in particular, has the advantage of covering any and every subject one can think of, literally and figuratively. Nothing is out of bounds for it. Conventional science cannot make that claim. Practices built on logical-positivism have a long list of things that cannot be studied in depth and for that reason are generally avoided. The black box behind the human face in old school psychology is to poets a huge and unending world of full-color activities—three-dimensional sights, smells, tastes, touchings, and sounds. Bathed in the phantasmagoric and eternal spring of salt water, the human brain is the launching pad for the passions and the prospects of acting out the meanings of being human—and the poets want to be there when it happens. They already have the equipment needed to share in the action. The problem is how to assess and communicate it, how to give it agency in substantive *re*-presentation and theory. No exception to that quest, one can find in this

text shades of phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, and several varieties of educational, feminist, queer, and literary theory integrated with poetic concerns.

Whether posited as reading writing or speaking thinking, sung out in shamanic rhythms, or just whispered in a mirror (performance prospects abound), poetics is every bit a sensuous-intellectual activity—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering, and discoursing ourselves in ways that show us something of what we are, literally, as embodied participants and observers. When pushed through new linguistic and imagistic experiences, that same body-centered system gives us unlimited meaning-making opportunities, weighed through our existing repertoires of information, verbal and non-verbal, as stored in our cognitive and emotional memory banks. This is the universe of, in, and through which we make meanings of all kinds, scientific or otherwise. It is the nature of the environment in which we learn, think, share, emulate, communicate, and otherwise act as culturally-saturated, sentient individuals. Making science or poetry out of it requires heightened sensitivity to its properties—more language-centered behavior that can be emphasized or deemphasized according to the demands of the moment.

Unafraid of sensual immersions, subjectivities, mutual constructions of meaningful relationships, and sometimes deliberately fictionalized realities that “ring true,” poetry is a way of constructing lines and meanings in spoken or written work for aesthetic results and more. The focus on composition and the conspicuous display of proprietary language used in poetics are the mainstays, not simply its forms of production (e.g., poetic prose, rich with metaphor and allegory; poetry as prose or verse; chanting, singing) or the kinds of messages sent (e.g., aesthetic, didactic, mythic, ritualized). Poets do not report their collected facts in a manner typical of the social sciences. Instead of writing or talking through abstract concepts *about* their research without ever immersing deeply in the culturally-constructed worlds of the people they study, as one might proceed in writing or applying scientific theory, poets write *in* and *with* the facts and frameworks of what they see in themselves *in relation to* Others, in particular landscapes, emotional and social situations.

Creating work in that earthy context obviously involves making choices among rules and prospects for form as well as theme. But only in the cobbler sense is the form the message. An obsession with poetic form is the equivalent of spending too much time nailing soles on shoes of known sizes and not enough time wearing them. Making poetry according to pre-existing forms is a wonderful activity. But it does not measure the uses to which poetry can be put as methods of representation *about* life. In that sense this is much less a book about words and forms than it is about the things that go with words and forms—*sharing* meanings about being human that in turn can lead to social action, in and out of the classroom.

Poets can be pushy about remedies. They know that life is more than a newspaper story, that poetry is more than an amusement, a parlor game to play when leisure comes calling. Sometimes the action sought is a profound celebration of life itself, a *re-valuation* of the ties that bind in what poet Gary Snyder has called so handsomely the Assembly of All Beings. Sometimes it is aimed as criticism about what ails us in the weak spots of a shared planet. Some of it is pointed directly at

the blindness of our conventions and wants to go off like a firecracker in the brain in the quest for change. That poet asks:

Now that you have found my unfaced place
in the census count
 and pulled me up as a person,
and thus have heard my heartbeat,
and had a glimpse of the interior of my soul,

How will you deal with living a life
that includes rape, murder, bigotry,
bombs, beatings,
 and the stoning to death of children,
among other things that cannot be *re*-presented
as numbers in a survey?

And if you cannot empathize with these things
slicked up wet by floods of blood and tears,
how will you ever deal honestly
 with the enthrallments
and ecstasies of life that erase the pain
reported so dutifully by your local poet?

Am I you?
Can you find yourself in me?
 What is my number now?

Ensuring interpretations grounded in self-awareness and author presence, poetics is also designed to keep premature closure on thinking in check while encouraging creativity in both research and reporting. Furthermore, because poets today are generally knowingly situated, morally and ethically accountable participants and observers who respect the integrity of their subjects, they have an opportunity to better inform the gaps of certain “Othernesses” that divide us, for example, in relations sorted by ethnicity, politics, gender, and age. By accounting for life’s exigencies in these personal terms, poetry forces the issue of making sense of numberless things that are instead personified, named, and filled with the rhythms of breathing, the music of life itself, albeit sometimes broken and off-key. That’s where the storytellers of life live, where they have always lived, as fundamental features of the human landscape. We are storytellers all, and poetry, an equally ancient part of that toolkit, is about all of us. It always has been. Many in the one, one in the many. The particular in the universal. Missing or misunderstanding those things in attempts to study the social in the social sciences, the human in the humanities, the habitual in the habitat, makes the research unnecessarily incomplete and unrealistic. A plurality of methods can cast a wider net, catch more, put us in the web of a truly productive artful-science—into a core of thinking that promotes robust discourse from ivy-covered halls to the hinterlands

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of humans *being*. Like philosophy, poetry can catch us in the act of *being*. What could be more fundamental to knowing the human condition than that?

The voices raised in this work are diverse and clear about poetics as the artful assemblage of language raised to methodological strategy. Sharing these biographical and experiential spaces through heightened language and an ongoing process of resensualizing ourselves, and by aiming for representation from one self-conscious interiority to another in a manner that flags the language used as proprietary, finds the strange in the everyday, and takes us out of ourselves for a moment to show us something about ourselves in principle if not in precisely reported fact, poetics can add to the whole of our knowledge about any experience. Arguments in this collection about life as lived and how to study and represent it through poetics are organized appropriately by established principles and objectives of qualitative inquiry. The result is a primary reference work on poetics/arts-based research that will anchor related studies for a long time to come. I am honored to have had the privilege of addressing it at the outset.

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NOTES

- ¹ Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.