
Dark Roots and Murmurings of the Moon: Voicing the Poetic in living (in) inquiry

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Some murmurings on entry...

This rendering is inspired and excerpted from my doctoral research in schooling communities in post-apartheid South Africa (Swanson, 2004)[i], offering a textual performance that begins to attend with poetic voice to the critical, the human, the storied, the ecological, and the political, in search of a soulful disposition towards the world. Embodied and spirited in ideals of democracy, reconciliation and justice, this disposition is not an attitude to the world that projects onto it such ideals and values, but seeks to consciously and purposefully live out their possibilities with a contentedness of the discomfort of their improbability, while residing in a world with a hopefulness of a world that could be. It is the advocacy of a poetic disposition that offers a humanity of presence
and conscious commitment to conscience as a guiding principle of a living (in) inquiry. And in this sense, I embrace poetic inquiry as a way to offer a voice of resistance to the Form, the Structures, the Knowing that render the shadows ‘real’. A poetic disposition of inquiry offers a way of attending to the world that lifts the heart back into its abiding place.

Silence.

Like echoes of phantom murmurings… faint and yet deafening, lie its many articulations.
Silence.
Gurgling and spluttering through the medium of voice, it is the message we seek, or avoid, as we search to create our representations of interpretive realities, and the beyondness of thought…
It is the sacrifice given for the unheard, the unthinkable, the unjust, it is our unconquerable nightmare of virtual possibilities, never to be grasped or realized, and it is, simultaneously, our only reach of Hope…

Voices…

Voices of research. Voices of (the) people. Voices of a pedagogic journey. Collisions, ruptures, intersections, subjugations, disjunctions, mergers. Voices of hegemony. Voices of silence. And I am the connection between them. The symbolic mediation lying within a single text, which I construct, sculpture, shape, paint with vivid words, like an artist on a canvas. And like an artist, I try to bring out the texture of the materials with which I work, so that their ‘natural’ constituents will show up: the voices of the people, heard from the ground, heard with sincerity and carrying the context of their lived experiences. This is the challenge of the narrator, the poet: to draw the characters, the people, “up into life, up out of the ground.” Yet, I know that these voices are modulated, muffled through the funneling space of research – even elliptical research, which tries to weave rhizomatic paths, back… back to the ground….

The utterances, taken away from the contexts of production, are now fragmented performances of language, recontextualised in a new textual place, so that the effects of mimesis are compounded. The intertextual, intratextual, and interdiscursive merge, as abutments are constructed between utterances borne from divergent contexts, where threads and wisps of fabric of the place, its ambiance and taste, of the different sources are carried with the phonate. Bakhtin (1981) reminds me that words carry the competing historical and social meanings of the places from which they have been borrowed and in which they have lived before. And I am the arch that anchors the abutted utterances as if they naturally lie contiguously, in a new temporal and spatial continuum, rooted to a new ‘real’…. But, this is not so. I have, instead, in my research and through poetic engagement, abutted them not to show continuity and confound meanings, but, in Derridean (2002) terms to “sign post” their disjunctions, make visible the ruptures, make conscious the paradoxes and ambiguities produced, and highlight the ideologically irreconcilable in inherent contradictions between incommensurate contexts.

And so, brought together into uncomfortable space, in poetic space, in the spaces of research, the voices speak …..

Poetic murmurings of rootedness…

Dark roots,
Like fleshy limbs,
Pushing into yielding soil,
Like a snake into its hole.

Roots,
Seeking solace beneath the earth,
Away from light,
Turning from “the gaze.”

“Weeds! These do not belong here!
They’re a problem. They must go.”
I pull and yank the thick tenacious twines,
They resist!

I apply more force,
With two hands now… pulling upwards,
Towards the light...
They yield!
As they slip from their life source,
Their belonging place,
I see that…
They are not alone!

Delicately intertwined,
Are the roots of others,
Others I thought worthy of life,
Threaded together in mutual co-existence.
I had not seen them,
Hidden beneath the earth,
Their role and relevance…
So deeply embedded.

I judged on what I could not see,
I severed the coherence. I broke the web,
Flaying disembodied limbs of roots, unearthed…
Lost!

On poetic inquiry...

Poetic inquiry[1] is the performative expression of those experiences in the act of creating identity and defining, or attempting to define, what it means to be human, and what it means to know. Further, it gives dignity and value to poetic experiences through their expression, making them sacred, while transcending the material and transforming it onto the imaginative realm without separation from its material and (inter)textual rootedness.

A poetry of resistance ignites the word in search of a lived seeing, a spiritedness of being that dares the dark recidivism of oppression. Filigrees of fine hope are woven with words towards a poetic justice[2], giving presence to the absences within the absent. Dangerously seeking to overcome the intransigent, the immutable, the unconquerable, it exudes a boastful defiance, posturing as playful to provoke political possibility.

Poetic inquiry in contemporary academia represents the symbolic and political act of resistance to the decontextualized, abstract, dispassionate modes of discourse embraced and reified by scientific rationalism and the movement which produced positivist methodologies.
of academic research. Nevertheless, within some postmodern writings, contention still exists around the ‘validity’ of academic representation outside of prescribed norms. Poetic inquiry offers the possibility of flagrantly resisting formulation, and concerns itself with the human condition as lived and (re)imagined as its primary focus. It embraces creative textural forms that produce pluralized meanings and it breathes life and feeling into storied and poetic human experiences. Potentially, it desists from serving the interests of both positivist/ modernist and some post-modern orientations that would concern themselves with empiricist tenets of justification, ‘truth’ and form, above evocation, empathy, illumination, self-understanding, resonance, and the revisioning of ways of being and living in the world.

More specifically, poetic perspectives within arts-based research are productive ways of engaging in and representing qualitative research using creative expression. Poetic practice helps one reimagine ways of understanding the familiar so that new ways of expressing themes commonplace to poets - themes about love, death, social justice, home, offer new ways of seeing, feeling and understanding. For Cahnmann (2003), this way of seeing requires the practice of noticing. By drawing on the unanticipated, the unfamiliar, the nuanced, the uncommon, and “assuming and exploiting a common frame of reference” (Gioia, 1999, p. 31), “poets achieve a concise ability to give language to the unsayable” (Cahnman, 2003, p. 32).

Thus saying, an important aspect of arts-based research, and one that is readily compatible with narrative, is poetry as a form of inquiry. I have used poetry in my own research representation to bridge other styles of literary engagement, to provide another gaze on research issues that purposefully complicate meanings rather reduce or simplify them through mainstream language use, and to express meanings in different, sensitive and creative ways that are both provocative and evocative. Poetic form has permitted me to provide a vivid, lyrical, perspectival, and engaging expression of research concerns that appeal to the emotional, sensual, intuitive, visceral and philosophical, and that enhance meanings of critical issues, maintain their complexity, and raise them to a more insightful, spiritual, heart-felt and embodied dimension of human engagement.

In this sense, poetic inquiry, offering its own voice of resistance to the Form, the Structures, the Knowing, that renders the shadows ‘real’, lifts the heart back into its abiding place.

Poetic inquiry is the lived expression of tacit ways of knowing, perceiving and understanding. For Dewey (1934), the poetic, aesthetic and expressive, as distinct from the prosaic, scientific or stated, achieves more than just that which leads to an experience. It constitutes it. In the same way poetic inquiry does not lead to understandings and experiences. It lives them.

Murmurings in the silence...

Silence haunts us…
Shrouded in secrets and false promises,
it immortalizes our mortality, so that we are but a wraith of our own potential.

Like ignis fatuus[3], it ignites the dark with spectral light, illusory and illusive;
hovering and flitting over the marshy ground of our consciousness,
playing tricks with our consciences,
misleading those who travel by the moon.
Murmurings of the moon...

There is a moon within a half circle of light.
Many choose not to see it.
They look upon the soft smooth arc,
the perfect curve,
and see its boldness.

But there are shadows between us,
and a moon behind the arc we fear to see,
for we have not yet learned the paths beyond the spaces we create,
the contours of the unimagined.

We look upon a mercuric sea,
and lose the essence of the sky mapped on it,
one for the other,
one and the same,
the watery image in whose face the sky is painted.

And the moon, with its dappled light,
splashed in gyroscopic patterns
in rhythm to the motion of the sea,
alluring, deep-spirited,
it calls us to the dance.

And what is our dance -
this dance of our identity?
A calling from without and within;
our many other spirits play the music of our ancestry,
and we follow searchingly for roots along our route.
Let’s listen to the music of our history,
and let it flow to the rhythm of the dance!

Let’s not map it in unitary space,
close its meaning in the language of our time!

Listen to the calling!

Feel the motion of the dance!

Find its essence in the web of life,

moving between,

moving beyond,

in the shadowy fullness of a new moon.

Listen to the calling…

Listen to the dance.

Dark roots of research...

I remember standing uncomfortably at the back of a grade 10 classroom in a school in the Cape Province of post-apartheid South Africa - a school that had been classified ‘dysfunctional’ by the education department because of its high failure rate, school drop out rate, and ‘socio-economic problems.’ The school is in a historic fishing village of mixed-race people bordering on a shanty-town or township. Having no place to sit, I remember standing uncomfortably in the heat at the back of this classroom, while the teacher teaches a congested class full of students.

As before, at this school, the students are expected to fail mathematics. The lesson is procedural and unengaging. The students sit and listen in quiet. The teacher turns to look for a large green checkered chalkboard that could be attached to the main chalkboard, to assist in teaching graphs. Yes, he has forgotten that it has disappeared. He’s already mentioned its disappearance in another class. He laughs jokingly and turns to the class, addressing them in Afrikaans: “So, those of you who see my chalkboard somewhere in the township one day, maybe it is a nice door by now, maybe it is someone’s roof, but you can ask them please it would be nice to have it back. Mr. Steenburg needs it to teach graphs. I know they might need it very much, but teaching graphs is not the same without it.” The class responds with laughter, and it lightens the air from the heavy stench of rotten fish emanating from the harbour and the smell of too many bodies in the room…… The classroom is stark and there are no posters or colourful charts on any of the pitted and marked walls. There isn’t even any graffiti. There is one sole poster pinned up on a metal cabinet by the teacher’s desk. On it is printed the words of Mandela’s final statement from.
his Rivonia trial of 1963. Despite the twenty seven years of imprisonment that succeeded these words, the hope rings out in them as it reads:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Roots of hope...

The moon is waning, but we can light a torch to see in the dark. If we look within ourselves, we may find some transcendent light within our hearts and souls to guide us. We encounter obstacles along the way, we stumble, we may even fall…. But we can and must raise ourselves …. and continue, poetically, with dignity, humility, and a soulful luminosity!

For in the poetic and political words of Nelson R Mandela (1994):

I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

On returning poetically...

And so I return to a conversation about poetic justice, giving voice to living (in) inquiry. I assert that this poetic being in the world offers a disposition towards it that attends to the soulful and hopeful. Embodied and spirited in ideals of democracy, reconciliation and justice, this disposition is not an attitude to the world that projects onto it such ideals and values, but seeks to consciously and purposefully live out their possibilities with a contentedness in discomfort. This is the discomfort of the rupture between what is possible and not possible, of the real and the imagined, the past and future, of what is already set and what can be different. It is an assertion/insertion of hope that stands against the leaching of possibility by the mundane realism of improbability. It is a way of residing in a world with a hopefulness of a world that might be (other)wise. In this way, it is the advocacy of a poetic disposition that offers a humanity of presence and conscious commitment to conscience as a guiding principle of a living (in) inquiry. Poetic inquiry is a way to offer a voice of resistance to the Form, the Structures, the Knowing that render the shadows ‘real’. In this sense, a poetic disposition of inquiry offers a way of attending to the world that lifts the heart back into its abiding place.

[1] This term has been used by Monica Prendergast to encompass the range of qualitative research in the social sciences that have a distinctly poetic-basis to a research orientation, methodology and approach to inquiry. Prendergast discovered that more than forty different terms were being used in the literature and she provides a critique of these approaches as well as a structure for categorizing them based on themes, forms and emphases. She elaborates on this in: “Poem is what?” Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research, to be published in an upcoming issue of the International Review of Qualitative Research.

Also known as will-o’-the-wisp, friar’s lantern, or jack-o’-lantern, from Medieval Latin meaning ‘foolish fire.’ It is a pale flame or phosphorescence sometimes seen over swampy ground at night. It is believed to be due to the spontaneous combustion of methane or other hydrocarbons originating from organic matter. Often perceived as a mysterious or religious sign, it was reported in earlier times to have misled night travelers at their peril. It also means a person or thing that is elusive or allures and misleads.

DISSERTATION SUMMARY:


doctoral dissertation

VOICES IN THE SILENCE:

Narratives of disadvantage, social context and school mathematics in post-apartheid South Africa

Dr. Dalene M. Swanson

Voices in the Silence is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding the pedagogizing of difference in mathematics classrooms and its realizations as pedagogized disadvantage in and across diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, and pedagogic contexts.

Fieldwork occurred within the Cape Province of South Africa, in schooling communities with socio-economic, cultural and historical differences. Research took the form of interviews, discussions, narrative-sharing, and participant observation, in a recent post-apartheid context.

In resistance to perpetuating hierarchized, linear or scientistic approaches to research within traditional social sciences and mathematics education, I embrace an arts-based methodology. Through narrative and poetry, I engage with the socio-political, cultural and pedagogic implications of the social construction of disadvantage in school mathematics practice. The dissertation, therefore, offers interdisciplinary approaches to critical concerns of inequity and access, calling on the emotive, spiritual, embodied, and personal domains of experience in problematizing the (re)production of disadvantage.

The concept of silence is introduced to interrogate the interstitial/intertextual places of ‘lack’ and ‘deficit’, and competing ideological positions and discourses of power that inform the lived realities of “disadvantage” in mathematics classrooms within different contexts. Moments of articulation within fieldwork define utterances and somatic performances embedded within narrative contexts, and instigate an analysis of the multiple ways in which disadvantage takes root/route. These signpost where ‘voices in the silence’, in discourse, context, and the subjectivities they (re)produce, may be recognized, problematized, and rearticulated through narrative.

Consequently, I broaden the scope of interpretive possibilities to encompass interrogation of dominant discourses and universalizing ideologies within the social domain, which colonize meanings. These include globalization, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, and aspects of progressivism and pedagogic constructivism, in the way in which they compete for hegemony within mathematics classroom contexts as sites of struggle for meaning, informing discursive positions of disadvantage, delimiting practice and disempowering students constructed in terms of social difference discourses such as ethnicity, gender, class, race, poverty, and ability, amongst other positions. The incommensurability of certain social domain discourses produce disjunctions, paradoxes, contradictions and dilemmas, experienced as a lived curriculum of pedagogic disadvantage in the lives of students and teachers within contexts of constructed disadvantage.
This dissertation offers an original contribution to curriculum studies and mathematics education internationally in its methodology, theoretical engagement, and focus. It contributes to the field through a strong emphasis on local, situated and marginalized contexts, such as ones of ‘poverty’, and examines the way in which hegemonic social domain discourses are reconfigured in pedagogic practice in these locations. Narrative and arts-based approaches to mathematics education issues are rare, and the dissertation makes an important contribution in this respect and in its integration of interdisciplinary perspectives. While research took place in diverse South African schooling contexts during a period of unprecedented socio-political change, this helps to reveal certain oppressive pedagogies and practices that often are obscured by a veneer of overall greater socio-economic ‘wellbeing’ and ‘stability’ in other contexts. The implications for international contexts are made explicit, and have particular relevance for marginalized, multicultural, and aboriginal schooling contexts. Nevertheless, the dissertation emphasizes resolution over the traditional research objectives of proposing solutions.

The major contribution this dissertation makes is to open up spaces for dialogue with(in) silence through a reflexive narratizing. Ultimately, *Voices in the Silence* is an invitation to a dialogical pedagogic journey that seeks to provide roots/routes of engagement with the ideals of social justice and an egalitarian society. It attempts to find narrative moments within the difficult terrain of research work and lived experience where constructed and pedagogized disadvantage can be re-imagined and transformed into transcendent pedagogies of empowerment and hope.

**ABOUT THE DISSERTATION**

This doctoral dissertation and research, completed in 2004 at The University of British Columbia, has been honoured with four major international and Canadian awards in Curriculum Studies and Qualitative Research. These awards honour the lives and shared narratives of the research participants, community members and all those, including friends and family that made this research possible. The research was funded by a doctoral fellowship award from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, for which I thank this federal agency gratefully. I dedicate this journal contribution to the research participants, my family, and all my students across the years and across two continents.

**References**


USA: Beacon Press.


**About the Author**

Dalene M. Swanson is a SSHRC postdoctoral scholar at the University of Alberta, and a Faculty Associate of the Centre for Culture, Identity and Education, at The University of British Columbia. Her interests span curriculum studies; critical theory; cultural studies; mathematics education; arts-based research; narrative and poetic inquiry; global citizenship; and social justice.