

## Poetic Meditation

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## **Poetic Meditation: (Re)Presenting the Mystery of the Field**

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This companion to the Poetic Meditation explains the meditation exercise as a mysterious mode of discovery that fulfils three key potentials for marketing researchers. First, the poetic meditation offers a means to train the body for data collection, by improving capacities to sense during qualitative research. Second, the meditation is intended to enrich our capacities for thick description as well as the possibility for researchers to incorporate new features and forces into research. Third, the meditation is intended to inspire further poetic meditations, hence we explain the process of producing the meditative piece that includes poems written by the first author, as well as quotations from this companion essay. Together, these three potentials encourage researchers to embrace mystery as a pathway to knowledge-making.

### **Investigating the Mysterious**

“have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer...” (Rilke 2014, p. 18)

For many readers of this special issue, it is scientific wonder that prompts us to ask questions about the purpose of consumption, the way markets are created and extended, and how life and human experience are attached to both. Given our roles within universities, and the attendant requirements to publish, our particular mode of wonder requires that we generate explanatory theses to resolve questions, explain events, often by theorizing meaningful relationships and causal processes. Yet, it is worth asking ourselves, can everything be explained with a reason?

Heidegger (1970) questions this possibility, believing that the obsession with explicative and “calculative thinking” distracts us from wondering about the mysteries and contingencies of life. Such mysteries and contingencies cannot be immediately explained or resolved. Rather, they are to be acknowledged and explored within their mystery. We argue that such a pathway is an important, yet often-ignored feature of interpretive research. This is to say that as much as some qualitative research presupposes explanations, or applies ‘ready to wear’ theoretical schemes, it is more likely that researchers go into the field as a means to

discover unexplained phenomena, experience mysterious occurrences, and describe strange forms of life as a means to build or refine theory (Geertz 1983; Burrawoy 2009).

Anthropological advice to ‘make the familiar strange’ highlights how mysterious experiences can often be the key event that link fieldwork and the theoretical representations that we publish. Moreover, mystery is not isolated to fieldwork. Reading can be equally mysterious. How many of us have turned the pages of canonical texts to be tormented by words and phrases that whirl before our eyes, making us doubt our intellectual abilities, if not our sanity! Entry into a new theoretical galaxy is often an arduous and ambiguous process. Strange concepts may only become familiar when we experiment with them, incorporating them into our thinking and writing. And indeed, writing too can be a mysterious process of unexpected breakthroughs between days and weeks of frustration.

Despite mystery being a feature of fieldwork, texts, and the process of building our own representations, there is little guidance on how to capture and handle experiences of mystery in the process of making knowledge. Given the significance of the mysterious, this is an important gap in our understanding of research procedures. For this reason, our commentary is a companion piece to the poetic meditation, an epistemological praxis intended to handle such mysteries. Such capacities fit well with the concerns of non-representational knowledge making which searches for features and forces that have been previously overlooked in social science research.

This commentary begins by outlining why researchers should develop embodied sensitivity to mysterious stimuli, relationships, and events that defy easy categorization. Next, we consider how researchers can enhance their embodied sensitivity to the unexplained by developing mindful practice during fieldwork. Finally, our commentary invites you to compensate for causal obsession, rational reasoning, and nomothetic norm-making, by creating and listening to poetic (re)presentations that clear space for the sensing of life, the novel figuring of phenomena, and the creation of representations that affect readers.

### **Researcher as Embodied Sensorium**

“I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.”

(Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 50)

In the practice of qualitative research, it is accepted that researchers must be sensitive to utterances, practices, objects, and sensory impressions of various kinds. Scholars have long acknowledged how researchers develop skills in gathering and interpreting discursive and visual data. Methodological guidance around these skills encourages us to attend to particular incidents and events (e.g. Arnould 1998; Pink 2015; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Nevertheless, a common omission from our field's methodological meditations is the manner in which research is an embodied practice. Given the attention to the techniques of data collection and representation, it is surprising that the body of the researcher is rarely figured in accounts of epistemology and method. How does one use the body in qualitative research?

Answers to such questions are rarely figured in methods classes, or in the method sections of journal articles. It is with this gap in mind that we offer *poetic meditation*, a mindfulness practice intended to train researchers to relax and focus on the body so as to become more sentient. Developing our sensitivity to environmental stimuli is important in qualitative research, because a sensitive body is able to detect events and forces that otherwise fly undetected by our knowledge-making radars (Hill et al 2014). The possibility to figure our surroundings in a deeply engaged manner offers potential to thicken descriptions, and importantly, to reveal unexpected or previously unnoticed features of market and consumption environments.

For example, ability to detect smells, and to interpret olfactory sensations has been limited by long-term cultural trends that favour visual thinking and communication (Canniford, Riach and Hill 2018). The poetic meditation seeks to focus attention on the senses, as the first step on a path to noticing the unnoticed. This meditation can help ethnographers to prepare for data-collection practices in which the body is used as a 'sensorium', an instrument of research that is able to gather holistic data from multiple environmental sources, that include, but are not limited to the visual and textual (Merleau-Ponty, 1992; Pink 2015).

As a means to reconsider the embodied nature of research, and to offer a practical means to re-approach being in one's body, the guided meditation is intended first to offer a fully embodied phenomenological encounter with and through poems. Through the meditation, participants are offered suggestions about their physical posture, attentional focus, and breathing, making explicit how the researcher's body intervenes in the process of discovery (Patterson and Larsen 2019). Listeners to the meditation are encouraged to develop stillness in the body, and to attend to taken for granted details such as the location or rhythm of the breath, or maybe even the blood as it carries the breath to our deepest capillaries.

## Becoming Mindful of the Mysterious

“...red by its texture as followed and adhered to by our gaze, is already the amplification of our being.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 211)

Mindfulness, which we might define as an ability to attend to and be accepting of ones' immediate experience, not only enables researchers to focus on embodied sensations, it is also a means by which to escape from common thinking categories (Barry and Meisek 2010). Hurlbert et al (2009, p.246) explain that training in mindfulness can enhance abilities “to focus on sensations without regard to their meaning, symbolism, or other informational significance and thereby to increase the relative frequency of the phenomenon of sensory awareness in the individual's ongoing experience”.

Qualitative data collection can be limited by the distractions of daily life and by linguistic and institutional categories that are commonly used to interpret and explain. Such categories can further limit our ability to sense and represent. Barry and Meisiek (2010, p. 1505) suggest that mindfulness practice can “defamiliarize organizational members' habitual ways of seeing and believing, enabling them to make new distinctions and to shift contexts: to see more and see differently”.

More prosaically, by encouraging mindful practice, the poetic meditation is intended to help researchers to escape from common interpretive categories and ontological assumptions, and instead to ‘grow a new ontology’. Bajde (2013) explains that growing a new ontology involves becoming wary of simply fitting phenomena detected during fieldwork into pre-existing theoretical or practical schemes. Rather, researchers are encouraged to trace novel schemes of interpretation, analysis and linguistic representation (Hill et al. 2014).

Escaping institutionalised patterns of thinking, or discourses is difficult work (Foucault 2005). Part of the difficulty stems from language itself. Languages provides us with a palate of categories to consider phenomena, and Winawer et al. (2007) explain how these categories tend to limit how our perceptions are handled by our attention and memory. Particularly with respect to colour, they show that subjects' linguistic background alters abilities to detect differences in colour.

As a means to recover colour from such effects, the meditative piece offers a re-creation of the multi-sensorial potential of colours and their roles in daily life. Colour has multiple purposes in marketing, brands, and organizations (Beyes 2017; Beyes and DeCock 2017; Labrecque, Patrick & Milne, 2013; Stevens & Shanahan, 2017). However, in our

ethnographies, we rarely account for the material and sensuous dimensions of colour (Desroches & Marcoux, 2011). Listeners to the poetic meditation (refer to appendixes for weblinks) will encounter the following piece, written by [author 1] as an exercise in nourishing her wonderment at the agentic power of colour:

*Blood Affaire*

Excessive sweat  
obsess  
each other.  
The dress, the strawberries, the wine:  
all red.  
We should have noticed  
the sweet intoxication,  
neural and hormonal.  
Should we flight  
or fight?  
Beta-blockers,  
barricades,  
pain killers,  
all  
tentative  
backstop solutions.  
Platelets accumulate at the wound's crossroads  
preventing excess.  
In microscopic tears,  
our last chance,  
alas,  
to bleed  
Untraceable  
genetic alterations,  
remain the consolation  
of those who coincide.

Mindfulness practice is one means of training to our interpretive abilities to explore new thinking categories and organizational connections. John Keats himself recommended that frames of reason can hold back knowledge, and in this spirit, poetic meditation is intended to offer space not only to build sensitivity to perceiving, but also to figure stimuli in novel manners, establishing new schematic connections that reach beyond current theories and ontology. Here, poetry is a particularly apt partner to mindfulness, for in addition to

animating our abilities to ‘to see more and see differently,’ poetic language can present our findings to others in a manner that nourishes knowledge-making at a collective level.

### **(Re) Presenting the Mysterious**

*Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” (Keats, 1958, p. 193-4)

Following our ability to focus on particular discourses, practices, and objects of consumption, it is also the case that writing and narrative construction are also key aspects of qualitative research practice (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Writing constitutes the output of data collection and analysis, rendering expressive and evocative representations of market contexts (Brown and Kerrigan 2020; Stern 1998). Alongside the possibility for mindful practice to enhance the sensing of new features and forces, we argue that poetic writing inspired by meditation can enhance possibilities to present these senses to audiences.

Poetry and meditation disavow a cartesian separation of mind, and body, word and world (Dewsbury 2003; Rojas-Gaviria 2016, 2020; Wijland and Brown 2012); they reveal the researcher as deeply connected to the field (Canniford 2012; Sherry and Schouten 2002), and handle experiences of emotion and vulnerability (Downey 2019; Schouten 1995). We remind readers not only that researchers are connected to a context, but that this connectivity also includes those who listen to our research output as readers and listeners. Activated in this way, our audiences are acknowledged to be a part of the research process, focussing our attention on knowledge-making as a networked, flowing endeavour, in which praxis is inevitable and in which (re)presentations are not value-free.

If poetry is one way to make the familiarity of language as strange, building new connections as in the case of the poem above, then the audio format further enables such differences to emerge. Where journal publishing tends to limit the way that language is used, and printed material disavows the nuances of voice such as accent, rhythm, hesitancy, and passion, the audio format is an opportunity to enable spoken words that resonate with the audience at a more embodied level.

Accordingly, the recorded meditation gives you access to an interpretation of the English language through a non-native perspective. Listeners to the meditations will notice that this work is created and voiced by an author whose first language is not English. In this respect, an audio recording can also help us to nourish further opportunities for creativity and



paradigm shifts though ‘multilingual thinking’. Deleuze invites us to become multilingual, (even in our own languages), so as to and open ourselves to inventive mistranslations:

“we must create a minor use of our own language. Multilingualism is not merely the property of several systems each of which would be homogeneous in itself; it is primarily the line of flight or of variation which affects each system by stopping it from being homogeneous. Not speaking like an Irishman or a Romanian in a language other than one's own, but on the contrary speaking in one's own language like a foreigner. Proust says 'Great literature is written in a sort of foreign language. To each sentence we attach meaning, or at any rate a mental image, which is often a mistranslation. But in great literature all our mistranslations result in beauty.’ (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 4-5)

Related to this, the recording is intended to prompt an experience where words embody the listener. Words work their way into structures, folding upon one another, and upon the body of the meditating listener (Patterson and Larsen 2019). In this way, text becomes affective: the transcribed is inscribed onto listeners’ bodies, literally affecting them (Gregg 2006). This potential engenders a shift in the representational possibilities of qualitative inquiry such that language becomes unlimited and collectively oriented. Hence, although mindfulness practice has been criticised as yet another way to harness the performance of working subjects to organizational goals, so too can mindfulness nourish our collective creativity (see Badham, and King 2019; Karjalainen, Islam and Holm 2019).

### **Producing Poetic Meditations**

And so to the meditation: the recording enables readers to experience the possibilities considered above, and hopefully inspires you to experiment with sound recordings and data presentations both in the course of field work and in your publications. The possibility for poetry to affect the reader illustrates the potential for readers to develop their own internal vision, as well as to renew imaginative capacities even when we return from field sites.

The meditation itself is the result of a poetic inquiry into love and illness. This inquiry took the first author to unexpected reflections about colour, which resulted in a new set of poems about this topic. These poems then catalysed a process of reflection about the commonalities of both sets of poems and the centrality of colour in them. The meditation was added to create an atmosphere that could accommodate wonder and discovery around the

poems. Three different audio drafts were produced and circulated among peers for feedback. This process resulted in three iterations between the poetic meditation as a mode of dissemination of research, and the lived experience of researchers to enhance poetic resonance and appropriateness.

The main audio is created in three movements. The first movement creates a meditative prelude using guided relaxation to help the reader experience mindful embodiment, favouring grounding and the amplification of sensations. In the second movement, the poems are read aloud. These are accompanied by interpretations, a commentary on poetics, excerpts from other poets and philosophers, and an invitation to unpack the poems based on each participant's circumstances and wonderings. The third movement continues with more guided relaxation to prolong mindful embodiment and to help listeners to remain rooted.

The combination of small philosophical reflections and poems to nourish researchers' embodied capacities is unprecedented in our field. We show the power of poetry to acknowledge life's contingency and often unresolvable mysteries. Poetic thinking is then proposed to cultivate embodied meditative thinking, contrasting with our traditional problem-solving, calculative thinking. The script does not offer a response, thus allowing the audience to follow the path that best suits their needs. In this sense, the experience is designed to avoid becoming a "bossy narrator" (Stern, 1998), merely a way to reflect on how insightful thoughts find us and reveal themselves to us during at moments in the research process. Thus, research becomes about making space for the mysterious to emerge in the form of brief revelations that push us into exciting discoveries:

*The Game of Hope and Other Enchanted Oracle Voices*

Divining from coffee grounds,  
makes a warm morning blend,  
as the clover reveals  
a twist in fate.  
Lubricating eye drops,  
as artificial tears  
electrolyze our faith  
and moisturise our hopes.  
1/3 brandy,  
2/3 purified water,  
and seven drops of rosemary oil,

to meet energising marigold.  
 This secret tender boost  
 accelerates anyone's pulse.  
 Blessed,  
 our heart opens to mysterious healing.  
 In sensuous combination  
 our words find their own revelation.  
 In the blink of an eye,  
 the pressure for facts  
 suffocates the mysterious in us,  
 and releases  
 the thousand anxious doubts  
 that compose our broken world.  
 We beg for redemption;  
 alone, naked, in grief.  
 Relentless,  
 the oracle conjures:  
 Clover's fortune is brief.

## Conclusion

How does one use one's body in qualitative research? Poetic meditation is a novel addition to qualitative research techniques offering a method to enhance ethnographic researchers' capacities to make sense of sensory and embodied practices, aesthetic forms of consumer culture and marketing communications, as well as helping to sense (and make sense of) novel features and forces within organizations. By using mindfulness practice as a means to relax and focus on sensations, ethnographers can prepare for a more truly embodied data collection where they become a 'sensorium', an instrument of research who is able to gather data from multiple environmental sources, including, but not limited to the visual and textual.

In this sense, poetry offers qualitative researchers a tool to refigure their surroundings in a deeply engaged manner, that explicitly reframes sensemaking. Although, we accept that most ethnographic projects ultimately lead to publication, we suggest that by making time and space for more poetic forms of writing that present, rather than just represent (Prendergast 2006), researchers may encounter mysterious schematic pathways and theoretical connections in the research journey. In so doing, poetic meditation prepares

researchers to thicken ethnographic descriptions, and importantly, to reveal unexpected or previously unnoticed features of market and consumption environments, rather than blandly reproducing existing categories, and modes of theorising (Bajde 2013; Barry and Meisiek 2010; Hill et al. 2014).

Poetic meditation affirms the power of alternative forms of representation in qualitative research. Consumer Culture Theory has demonstrated an ongoing interest in providing spaces for alternative modes of inquiry and representation, from various special issues to a range of conference spaces (e.g. Bettany 2019; Brown, S., & Kerrigan F. 2020; Wijland and Sherry 2012). By recording and presenting poetic meditations through audio media, we demonstrate the possibility not only to present and perform research, but to enable listeners might establish interpretations of their own. The possibility for poetry to stimulate new ideas that affect the reader illustrates how texts can affect new imaginative capacities and stimulation when we return from field sites.

We hope that the possibility to enhance embodied sensitivity, and to make new connections is a feature of this technique that inspires others to include sound recordings and data presentations in their publications. Creating a poetic meditation might be a first step in a researchers' journey that reveals not absolute revelations or responses, but instead enables us to dwell among mysterious wonder, finding joy in new sensations, interpretations, and questions, even when answers seem to be far in the future. This suggestion aims at compensating for a work in which conclusive and definitive findings are expected and celebrated much more than the novelty of our intellectual quests, and the pleasure of inquiring itself. By recognizing the embodied dimension of the researching experience, and by prolonging pleasure and joy in our understanding of questions and mysteries we can boosting our sensorial and creative confidence and reach towards unconventional and impactful responses in our research.

### **Poetic Meditation: Audio Links:**

Meditation on the Red Colour: <https://vimeo.com/460895988>

Meditation on the Green Colour: <https://vimeo.com/460955133>

(Password: JMM)

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