

## 8. Being, becoming and knowing through poetry<sup>1</sup>

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SIGNPOST: BE POETIC

### 1. PRELUDE

We write as colleagues and friends, embracing similarities and differences in our past, understandings and everyday life. Here we draw both from the growing academic literature on researching and writing differently and from our own experience to explore the value and potential of poetry in academic writing. In this chapter, we centre poetry<sup>2</sup> – literally and metaphorically – interwoven with our personal and academic words.

Poetry – whispers and screaming  
Gut-wrenching and soul soothing  
Silenced yet loud  
Individual and universal. +

We both work in the UK and have lived here for over 15 years, but come from different countries of origin – India for Aanka and Italy for Ilaria. We met towards the start of our formal academic research journeys while doing our PhDs in management studies. We have different positionalities that are complex and changing, and cannot be easily recited or all-encompassing (Butler 1990):

unlike a string of pearls  
like a prayer in a rosary bead  
I am more than the sum of the traits I hold. +

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<sup>2</sup> All poetry included in this chapter is our original unpublished work. Poems marked with + are written by Ilaria; those marked with ++ are written by Aanka.

Ilaria identifies as a ‘White other’ woman academic (ie, she is White, but not part of the majority English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish ethnic groupings in the UK), even though she has dual nationality. She used to write poetry (in Italian and Chinese) in her teens and twenties. Interestingly, she stopped writing poetry once she started researching and working in academia: wanting to ‘fit in’ in a world that was not made for her and operating in what at the time was her third language, her style of communication became assimilated into the traditional notions of academic writing. However, once she became more confident in her academic identity, she began her journey into researching and writing differently (Boncori 2022a) via evocative autoethnography (Boncori and Smith 2019). This marked a fissure and an ‘undoing’ in her awareness and practice of researching and writing in academia, and a stepping stone towards poetic writing in her work. She only recently rediscovered poetry – the *need* for poetry – during the Covid-19 pandemic and used it in her academic writing (Boncori 2022b).

Poetic knowing and sensemaking  
When nothing else makes sense  
When no other words seem enough. +

Aanka identifies as a South Asian immigrant and has studied, lived and worked in the UK since 2008, having completed her higher education at UK academic institutions and worked in them as an early career researcher and lecturer. Aanka changed her career path more recently: she is now a performance poet and educator, performing at festivals, demonstrations, symposia and poetry events; lecturing on decoloniality; and delivering training in British academic institutions, community groups and public authorities on matters of racial justice. Contending with this intersection of British academia and the arts, she intentionally chooses to remain at the intersection, as complete immersion in one or the other serves as a reminder of the abyss she experienced as a young immigrant wanting to ‘make it’ in academia. Aanka experienced this abyss as a loss of self: a loss of her various identities in the service of an institution (academia) which prefaces rationality and individualism over emotional integration. Very much a mirroring of another of her intersectional nodes – that of race and privilege. Having a doctorate, being physically located in the UK, speaking English efficiently (albeit with a slight accent), and yet being and experiencing life in the UK through a Brown woman’s body and all it signifies feels akin to Castro’s intersectional reflexivity, exploring the researcher’s positionalities as a woman of colour in UK academia (Castro 2021). Aanka’s love of poetry, like Ilaria’s, re-emerged during the pandemic and upon her shedding the identity of a full-time academic. It also came during a deep dive into her emotions while she recovered from burnout and mental health chal-

lenges. Through poetry, Aanka personifies these intersections of race, gender, arts and the academy, making them an emotional exploration of self. She recalibrates these intersections in every poem – giving weight to one over the other, questioning both – as she ties in both literary poetry and street poetry. This further feels like an extension of what scholars such as Castro do through writing critical autoethnography (Castro 2021).

Gather me;  
 Pick up my pieces, collate my thoughts, I seem to be everywhere but here  
 I cannot let go of the past because what if pieces of me go with it  
 Sometimes I revisit the past to pick up the pieces I accidentally left within it  
 I am somewhere between the past, present and what will be  
 I am just as eager to scatter myself, as I am to gather me  
 Gather me. ++

## 2. EXPLORATIONS OF POETRY

In the academic field of management and organisation studies, writing has traditionally been codified to become understood as ‘scientific’ or properly academic only in its disembodied, unaffected forms. These masculine restrictions are a way to ‘colonize the experiences of marginalized people through the value placed on authority, linearity, and productivity’ (van Eck et al 2021). Further, as argued by Armitage (2014), in the case of poetry in the workplace, the lack of embodiment and affect in traditional academic writing contributes to the silencing of experiences, which can instead be overcome by poetry. The political and transformational potential of poetry has long been claimed by Black feminists (see Lorde 1984) in amplifying voices, experiences and (in) justice.

In looking at the arts for expressions that not only offer narratives which can challenge this status quo but are also challenging in their very form and presentation, poetry offers an avenue – we believe – that allows the ignition of challenge and change. Like photography, poetry has been through a long journey to reclaim the colonial masculine gaze and enable inclusion, contamination and disruption. ‘Photography has sometimes been linked to the history of colonial modernity’s extractive forms of knowledge production, purporting to offer neutral documentation while consolidating colonial hierarchies through its colonial ethnographic gaze’ (Caspari 2023, p 24). Likewise, poetry hinges on the delicate lines of explorations within and transgression of defined boundaries. In this chapter, we delve into the ability of poetry to allow the contamination of the colonial and patriarchal means of knowledge production. We do this by exploring the nuances of street or live poetry, making reference to its history, stylistic development and the criticism it faces.

Here, we reject the traditional notion of what counts as ‘proper’ academic writing to embrace poetry as a powerful tool of resistance and inclusion. This means that poetry is considered not just as an embodied method of inquiry (Thanem and Knights 2019), but also as a powerful epistemological project. In doing so, we also diverge from the notion of poetry as something that is somewhat elevated and rarefied; that takes us away from the ‘malaise of the ordinary’ (Armitage 2014, p 26). We reclaim the power of poetry instead as a democratising tool to *embrace the ordinary* and the dirty messiness of everyday life. We consider this use of poetry – and especially street poetry – in academic writing as a form of researching and writing differently that is profoundly engaged beyond simple reflexivity to centre emotions (Gilmore and Kenny 2015), and that is embedded in affective ethnographic approaches (Gherardi 2019). This allows academic contributions that avoid being ‘sanitised’ for academic purposes (van Eck et al 2021); and an openness to alterity in learning, interpretation and feeling that is premised on epistemic positions of inclusion, vulnerability and difference rather than authority (Rhodes and Carlsen 2018).

While poetry has been used to simplify and unpack the complexity of organisations (Armitage 2014; Morgan 2010), we want to resist this reductionist approach, as it can be deployed as a way to neutralise the ‘dirty writing’ (Pullen and Rhodes 2008) potential of poetry in favour of the neat masculine compartmentalisation of organisation studies. Instead, for us, poetry emerges from the unruliness of emotion, the body and experience when prose is not enough (Faulkner 2005), when experiences are unknowns and voices are silenced, as ‘poets align themselves with the wretched and the voiceless of the planet’ (Okri 1997, p 13). In doing so, poetry becomes a tool of resistance against White masculine ‘neutralised’ positionalities to destabilise the colonising stain of academia and its normative writing (Collins 2002, 2016), rejecting positions of universal and undiscussed authority to privilege marginalised and situated ways of opening up to difference and vulnerability (Anthym 2018).

In this chapter, we recognise the value and potential of embodied and affective methodologies (Chadwick 2017; van Amsterdam et al 2023), and build on previous work on poetry as a locus of knowing by considering the contributions and opportunities offered by street poetry in academic writing. In doing so, we go against the notion that social knowledge production in academia needs to maintain an illusion of neutrality premised on the homogenisation of diversity and the diminishing focus on its biases. The linguistic sanitisation of academic texts often hides dynamics of exclusion and privilege; an oversimplification of gender; the exclusion of activism; the presence of the body. This encourages collusion in meaning-making, archival absences and a masking of the increasing dependence that academic writing has on marketisation – such knowledge production sustains itself via structures that alienate and confuse its

subjects (Westhoff 2009; Jhonson 2001). These subjects often cannot identify with the very form of such knowledge generation but become partners to its production and maintenance.

At five minutes past nine,  
 You departed as you had arrived  
 And I was left with myself  
 Untouched, but completely scratched. ++

### 3. THE VALUE AND POTENTIAL OF SLAM POETRY

The cultural capital of poetry in Western academia and the Global North is often premised on taken-for-granted criteria: ‘the dominant, “academic” approach to poetry is typically associated with university lecturers, school teachers, critics, published poets and the editors and writers working at literary magazines. This “academic” world dominates perspectives on poetry in UK and US societies’ (Gregory 2008, p 67). This is exemplified by formal poetry readings, publications and the study of classical and, more often than not, Western poets (Dwane 2003).

However, other forms of poetry exist – even in the Global North – that challenge academic masculine norms of what poetry is and who can call themselves a poet. Since the Beat generation of the 1960s and poetry events in the 1980s and 1990s that encouraged the spoken word, the upsurge of less organised, more improvised poetic forms has become evident. Since the 1990s, various writer development organisations in the UK have been making room for spoken word through the encouragement of ‘slam poetry’ – competitive poetry events which time each poet’s delivery and where poets are judged by an audience instead of literary figures and a panel of judges (Gregory 2008). Slam has created room for the development of spoken word as a legitimate form of poetry, now broadly known by the umbrella term ‘live poetry’ (Novak 2011). Live poetry encompasses spoken word, performance poetry, street poetry and many emerging styles such as jazz poetry (Daniel 2017). This stylistic shift has also been described as ‘the page vs stage discourse’ (Merle et al 2016), whereby poetry is always performed, as opposed to read or even just read out, and the use of theatrical devices (e.g., exaggerated gestures, body language, props) becomes a means of creating an experience. Often:

the audience is also expected to be more vocal during a slam, often participating in the poem itself, through devices like ‘call and response’; a theatrical technique in which the audience is asked to call back a response to a key word or words which the poet utters. Similarly, techniques like singing, chanting and beatboxing are common in slams, but unheard of in more traditional poetry readings. (Gregory 2008, p 67)

These styles have borrowed directly from music forms such as hip-hop, reggae and ethnic spiritual rituals. They use rhetoric, tones, silences, repetition, eye contact and the space of the stage as their tools in delivery. Rather than being a distant, abstract, codified form of expression that excludes the majority and the marginalised through the strict impositions of norms and linguistic rules, it is a way of bringing otherness in, encouraging the sharing of experience, embodiment and affect.

These imminent forms that ‘stray’ away from the page and masculine norms of what poetry is have received the same obdurate criticism as writings within academia which challenge the streamlined linearity of masculine and Westernised narratives. They are excluded from the literary canon for lacking rigour, critical thinking and a clear methodology (Novak 2011). The argument against live poetry is that anyone could be a poet if it weren’t for clear methodologies around writing styles and evaluation of poetic discourse. We embrace this criticism as a potential. It is the masculine and colonising positioning of street poetry as the ‘subject’ in this criticism, we argue, which prepossesses the marginalisation of these forms. The situating of the spoken word as primitive, unrefined and unworthy – and conversely, of more traditional ‘page poetry’ as evolved – speaks to Western ways of locating the tactile beneath the visual; the experiential visceral beneath the distant theoretical; the body beneath the cognitive (Grabner and Casas 2011; Novak 2011).

Slam poetry is also critiqued for being unstable in its form. We argue that it is precisely this instability that brings such poetry into the here and now, giving it urgency, temporality and currency. In being unpredictable – using props, call and response, improvisations; drawing on silences, loud tones, emotional rhetoric; leveraging and including the body – these poets (and, yes, everyone is ‘allowed’ to be a poet) can put the audience ‘on the spot’ and within the narrative. The experience cannot be anything but visceral when it is unexpected; the body of the listener is taken aback, mused and constantly rendered present. Word, the body and affect are truly intertwined in a dialogical sensorial experience for both the poet and their audience. Faulker suggests that ‘as a language adequate to our experience, poetry allows us to articulate matters of concern in such a way that they become physical, tangible, and immediate’ (2005, p 94). While visceral responses are provoked through slam poetry through the challenge and exposition of external oppressions, this mode of expression also helps us to engage reflexively with our own positionalities and privileges as individuals who are part of a group holding different intersections of identity, being and meaning – whiteness, ableism, heteronormativity etc – as live poetry comes to the audience unfiltered, unplanned and uncompromising. This immediacy is the very tool of the live poet.

One known critique of the Western literary (poetry) canon is that it neglects histories – especially by downplaying and often blatantly erasing ethnic ‘other’

cultural histories. These cultural histories centre on orality and the craft of communication, generating improvised, poetic and live deliberations. Throughout various cultures, these deliberative forms of poetry have always existed, to mediate the spreading of everyday news, pass on intergenerational knowledge of marginalised groups, keep alive histories and so on. Dwane (2003) argues that what is called ‘literary tradition’ in Western terms is perhaps not just tradition or the study of seminal poets, but an intentional denial of the other:

we will, of course, never hear this orthodoxy spoken of in terms of culture and race—that would be too controversial. But we will hear about tradition and the need to maintain a tradition. Often it becomes difficult to distinguish the devotion to tradition from a devotion to cultural identity rooted in issues of race. I have heard a few of these editors attempting to justify why they are not likely to publish the work of performance poets. They say that while such work is interesting and has its place, it is not quite in the taste of their own enterprise. (2003, p 46)

It thus perhaps comes as no surprise that slam poetry is dominated by Black poets and others who have been racialised and othered in contrast to the privileged majority. Slam poets are intergenerationally and historically denied, thus anchoring themselves in the immediacy of experience – the only place they can bring some of themselves to and the only way to circumvent the long, enduring fight of erasure, of finding their full story within the literary canon or of becoming ‘of taste’.

For Mother, you are so reactionary  
But you have been standing alone, offering the world resistance  
And now I’m left questioning the difference  
Between being reactionary, and being a revolutionary. ++

#### 4. POETRY AS A WAY OF BEING AND KNOWING

When ‘proper’ academic writing – and thinking – is limited and bounded by genre, style and register, it creates different territories of knowing and experience. This involves boundaries, exceptions, marginalised spaces and divisions that assert in/out groups, who is allowed to speak, for whom and about what. Therefore, by looking critically at these boundaries and the resulting power relations, it is natural to wonder who has the right to establish what poetry is, when it can be used and in which form. But also, who has the right to establish who can call themselves a poet and why? In the words of Patricia Hill Collins:

Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship ... Investigating the subjugated knowledge of subordinate groups ... requires more ingenuity than that needed to examine the stand-points of dominant groups. (2002: 269–70)

We propose that poetry – and street/live/slam poetry in particular – is a way of allowing such ingenuity in academic writing. When we enter systems of norms, one naturally questions who the rules are for, which power dynamics are established or reinforced through these codes, and who is excluded from them. The canons of many Western-centric areas of knowledge and inquiry that dominate the world of academia are built upon the stilts of positions of White male privilege. As such, the system of poetry codification and traditional academic writing can be exploited to function as a tool of oppression, or at best as an unsympathetic and othering instrument of gatekeeping. In this way, different ways of being and knowing in academia are silenced.

Here we reclaim the power and potential of poetic writing as a form of organising knowledge. Poetry gives voice to the loud inner silences that have no formal wordcount in mainstream academia. It connects intellect, affect and embodiment to speak up about the unspeakable inequalities (Gill 2014) that go unnoticed or ignored. Street poetry – which is not straitjacketed by academic conventions – is a way of writing vertically (Helin 2023), looking deeply inwards to hold a space for the self, our emotions and the body. Poetry is a way to channel and practise unfiltered self-honesty in academic writing; slam poetry can inform academic performance, spoken knowledge that is not bound by formatting and wordcount. Poetry in academic writing is a way of knowing and being, and of accessing a deeper inner space of vulnerability that is a form of strength (Johnanson and Wickstrom 2023), which allows us to ask different questions, deeper questions, that surface alterity and experience without necessarily having to go through ‘neutrality’ as a – perhaps the only – valid position. It allows us to engage with self-awareness and to interrogate the intersections between embodiment, affect and intellect at a deeper level.

We, as intersectional scholars/beings, argue that the boundaries and premises of what counts as literary poetry do not encompass our experiences. When intersections of race, gender, privilege, culture and, by extension, what constitutes art and knowledge emerge, these have to be allowed freedom to breathe through text, the spoken word, the body and affect. We argue that the only way to bring ourselves to the academy/home is to allow ourselves to become immediate and unfiltered, thereby using expressions such as poetry to explore our embodied, dissonant, foreign, intellectual, excluded, tapered and bounded selves. Not doing so means sparing ourselves from the trials and tribulations of academic arguments; not entering the writing as whole; not inviting others and ourselves into a conversation that has been stripped of the body and affect; not challenging the colonisation of writing differently – waiting until the ‘normative White male’ of academia has learned all about writing differently, even if not yet writing differently himself.



## 5. IN OUR WORDS

We invite you to note rhythm, rhetoric and non-neutrality in these poems to contemplate our positionalities. We hope you can find resonance in the nooks of our experience.

If I have made it this far,  
 maybe I can do this.  
 I can make it in this land  
 that's not made for me  
 that looks me sideways  
 that pushes me in the shadows.  
 It's all my children know.  
 I want their hearts to know all of us  
 our histories and flavors  
 the ancient knowledge  
 and the warmth in our footsteps.  
 They are from here and from away.  
 Bringing life into a world  
 that doesn't see us,  
 that projects us away  
 into a childlike nightmare version  
 of ourselves  
 the lands we come from  
 the smells of home  
 the taste of sunshine.  
 Added, mocked, fetishized  
 but never included.  
 Forever othered.  
 Used when convenient,  
 money, expertise, status  
 but cast away in a fraction  
 when an enemy is needed to unite against.  
 I don't think in accents  
 I don't feel in flags and borders,  
 but that's what they hear and see.  
 You can make a home here  
 you can pay your dues  
 you can play by the rules  
 you can learn a tome  
 but this place will never be for you.  
 Living life on a steep gradient  
 working three times as hard  
 earning the privilege  
 of a life apart.  
 Never at home  
 constantly grateful  
 but still scared of the life ahead  
 uncertain of our future to spare. +

**SHAKTI:**

I often cannot tell when the world abandons me, vs, when I abandon it  
I keep having to give up the world before I ever fully find it  
I know, I know I've been on fire  
I just didn't know that I burnt everything within it

No one to call family, to call friend, to call lover  
Isolation brackets all my social endeavors  
Not because I haven't met my kind  
But because I keep meeting the world not as whole but as parts of myself  
It's myself I've been leaving behind

**Myself:** the thing that has meandered through life in reactions  
Everywhere has been a place of fear: the streets, my body, my mind  
Safety only ever came in fractions

**Fractured:** sometimes I see her lying next to me in tears  
While the world thought it saw her in all her glory, all her fury  
She now feels able to tell me she's been in fear  
We hug, we embrace  
We leave and hold each other's gaze  
Wipe the tears off each other's face  
I kiss her feet, and she begs me to stay  
I tell her I need her too  
And I'm sorry:  
That it wasn't her, but love, that went astray  
I'm meeting past versions of myself to undo the chains

**Chains:** how dare they have us in chains, how dare they judge  
The girl in short skirts and high heels  
The girl being clingy  
The drunk girl crying of heart ache  
For heels also impale inwards  
And clinging is holding on for dear life  
And crying initiates separation  
Hasn't birth always taken tears?

How dare they judge these women  
I am all these women  
And other women, I haven't yet met;  
In myself

**Met:** I ask myself if there is a woman in me I refuse to meet,  
And yes, in my womanhood, there is an 'other'  
My mother  
The woman I have eroded myself from within to erase  
And yet in my reflection I sometimes see her face  
And then I cannot look at myself for three days  
And I have not looked at her for three years

And the question is not if her and my estrangement will succumb  
The question is: will I have all of myself with me, when that day comes

**Come:** come lets meet, great, sit down and feed each other  
I need to show you all my parts, I need to see yours  
I don't have three more years to spare  
I am unsafe within and on the street  
But even Medusa had to let down her hair  
And Kali had to stop in her tracks  
Showing and seeing our parts is the only way to get our own backs

**There is no going back:** fear only tells me arrival is near  
The day is coming, the day is coming  
When us women will meet each other and no longer be passerbys  
When we will meet each other and no longer ask 'who are you?'  
But instead now ask: 'who am i?' ++

So how can we become more poetic social scientists? We suggest that there is great potential in appreciating the promise and value of poetry in shedding light on phenomena and experiences in the social sciences. First, the contemporary social scientist should appreciate that knowledge should not be boxed up in disciplinary boundaries, but should instead be enriched by methods, themes, theories and practices of other fields of inquiry. Although at times criticised for being 'less scientific', arts-based methods draw from longstanding cultural and literary traditions. Second, it is important to become aware of the different styles of poetry available – in terms of stylistic requirements, level of formality, content and register, but also of form. Here we have juxtaposed spoken word and the more live/street style of contemporary poetry with the more formal and Western-centric poetic literature that tends to be privileged in academic writing. Next, we suggest that the potential of poetry is rooted in its immediacy, and in the symbiotic connections it fosters between intellect, the body and emotion. It is immediacy, we propose, that can offer an entry into experiencing the histories, narratives and forms that have previously been neglected and suppressed. Further, we invite the reader to engage critically with positionalities in and around poetry: which voices are being heard and who is being excluded in traditional academic writing? How can we use poetry to illuminate experiences of marginalisation and discrimination? How can we push this agenda even further by including emergent or alternative forms of poetry that help us explore social issues from individual and group perspectives?

We suggest that being a poetic social scientist serves to bring contextualisation to narratives that are easily dismissed, othered or co-opted. As such, poetry is rooted in epistemological stances that are based on co-construction, inclusion and the personal. This fosters critical positionalities and rejects notions of objectivity and authority in research. For the social scientist, this

also means openness to othering and engagement with generative perspectives of ‘becoming’. Poems that come with context are poems that knock on doors demanding access – the privilege of being in the academy is a means of creating admission, however gradually. In doing so, the poetic social scientist can shed light on the silencing and/or the co-opting of human stories, collective and individual experiences. Embracing poetry also means embracing vagueness, feeling and un-knowing – the in-betweenness is what can become seen, reflected on and named through such work.

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