"Am I Telling the Story Right?" Poetry, Community, and Trauma

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Abstract

The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA) is a once vibrant community that experienced socioeconomic decline through urban renewal polices and related factors. This article presents poems constructed from interviews with women who considered the Hill District to be their home. Interviews were completed as part of an undergraduate-level community-engaged learning course in collaboration with a local agency. One component of the course was a public reading, during which the poems were shared with members of the community and the University. The poems were created through use of the Listening Guide, a feminist relational method. These emotionally resonant poems, known as I poems, attend to the subjective experience of each participant by focusing on her use of "I" throughout the interview transcripts. While individual in nature, these poems are inseparable from the historical trauma the Hill District has experienced. Seen through the lens of root shock, interpersonal and intergenerational traumas are also the trauma of the Hill District. Poetic inquiry provides an avenue for connecting individual experience with the larger community story.

Keywords

Poetic Inquiry, The Listening Guide, Community Based Research, Root Shock, the Listening Guide, community based research, root shock

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The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA) is a once vibrant community that experienced socioeconomic decline through urban renewal polices and related factors. This article presents poems constructed from interviews with women who considered the Hill District to be their home. Interviews were completed as part of an undergraduate-level community-engaged learning course in collaboration with a local agency. One component of the course was a public reading, during which the poems were shared with members of the community and the University. The poems were created through use of the Listening Guide, a feminist relational method. These emotionally resonant poems, known as I poems, attend to the subjective experience of each participant by focusing on her use of "I" throughout the interview transcripts. While individual in nature, these poems are inseparable from the historical trauma the Hill District has experienced. Seen through the lens of root shock, interpersonal and intergenerational traumas are also the trauma of the Hill District. Poetic inquiry provides an avenue for connecting individual experience with the larger community story. Keywords: Poetic Inquiry, The Listening Guide, Community Based Research, Root Shock

Qualitative researchers have engaged in poetic inquiry for decades (e.g., Prendergast, 2009). Researchers have been drawn to poetry for a variety of reasons, and a common cited reason has been to foster an open emotional connection with others (Richardson, 2001; Todres & Galvin, 2008). Poetic inquiry can be integrated in the research process in many ways, including as part of an overarching research method. One such method, the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003), has been employed by generations of feminist researchers, particularly to study voices that have been otherwise neglected, such as Brown and Gilligan's (2013) work with women and girls. A powerful feature of the Listening Guide is the creation of I poems, which are developed throughout data analysis. While fundamentally rooted to the entirety of the Listening Guide process, the I poems themselves fit within the traditions of poetic inquiry and arts-based research (Koelsch, 2015). These poems, crafted from a history of careful listening to participants' multivocality, are beautiful, sparse, and evocative. At their best, they draw the listener's attention to the neglected subjectivities of individuals whose stories are not valued by dominant discourses.

One such group of neglected voices is that of women of color residing in low-income urban neighborhoods (e.g., see Carby, 2007; Reid, 1993, for a discussion of poverty and race in psychological research and feminist thought). While there has been important research on

this population, much of it focuses on crime and other stereotyped negative outcomes (e.g., Arnold, 1990; Morris, 2016; Sudbury, 2002). When research does attempt to explore African American women's lives from a more positive or nuanced perspective, it often veers into a different kind of stereotype; the "Superwoman schema," or Strong Black Woman role, describes a core way in which African American women have been one-dimensionally lauded for their resilience and strength, a move that overlooks the complexity of their subjective experiences and the impact of external stressors (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, 2009; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Poetry and other arts-based approaches are one way to move beyond stereotypes. Sometimes poetry is part of an intervention or focus of research. For example, Chung and colleagues (2006) included poetry as part of a community intervention to address depression. Bacon (2018) studied a poetry group consisting of female African American high school students. Nunn (2016) included poetry as part of her work with African American girls. Sjollema recognized the importance of community-based poems and analyzed found poems that were written by members of an urban, marginalized community (Sjollema & Bilotta, 2016).

In addition to research focusing on poems created by members of marginalized communities, research poems can also be created throughout the research process by using the participants' own words (e.g., Glesne, 1997; Langer & Furman, 2004; Richardson, 2001). While participants can be involved at multiple stages in the process, one type of research poems, categorized as participant-voiced poems (Prendergast, 2009) or found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2010) are generally crafted by the researchers using interview transcripts. These types of poems have also been incorporated in research with African American women. Borum (2005), who crafted poetic prose out of interviews conducted with the parents of deaf children in the African American community, noted that "poetic prose is designed to capture the complexity and multi-dimensional aspects of African American parents' lives within a social and cultural context" (p. 709). In another example, Kooken, Haase, and Russell (2007) crafted poems out of interviews with African American women who survived cancer. Corley (2019) created poems out of her research with African American high school seniors and their single mothers. Slightly modifying this process, Petersen (2012) incorporated her field notes into the poetic process in her research with African American women with disabilities.

Our work contributes to this tradition by including poems crafted out of interviews conducted with primarily African American women who reside in the Hill District ("the Hill") of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA). The complex, politicized history of the Hill District and the effects of intergenerational trauma on its residents has been documented more fully by others (e.g., Fullilove, 2009; Simms, 2008); to better contextualize the poetry presented in this article, however, we provide a brief summary of this region. The Hill District was once a vibrant African American community, which was torn apart both literally and figuratively by urban renewal of the mid-20th century and later by riots and neglect. At the time of this research, elders in the Hill community remembered a past version of the neighborhood that was vibrant and cultivated. When our older research participants were children, the Hill was a warm, energetic place where adults would commune on their porches as children played in the street; at the time of our interviews with Hill residents, a small fraction of those original families remain in an area now dominated by shuttered row homes, abandoned businesses, and empty lots. Individuals raised during and after urban renewal have experienced the neighborhood as divided by trauma, violence, and crime. Fullilove (2009) has described the trauma experienced by residents of the Hill as "root shock," a collective trauma in which the community itself has been disrupted; the effects of this trauma are generational and embodied. As of this time, one of the two nonprofit agencies that served the Hill has closed, along with several other business including the sole grocery store and coffee shop.

The poems presented here were created out of interviews conducted with individuals who considered the Hill District to be their home. The interviews were completed as part of a community-engaged learning course at Duquesne University designed and conducted by Susan Goldberg, who was an assistant professor at Duquesne at the time and is now a faculty member at Fielding Graduate University. The course was a senior-level required capstone course for psychology majors, most of whom were from the Pittsburgh area but unfamiliar with, and often warned to stay away from, the Hill. Students participated in conducting interviews as part of a larger engagement with the Hill District. By listening deeply to the residents, students and researchers heard stories of trauma (Goldberg & O'Connor, 2017) and a complex relationship with the Hill itself (Koelsch, Bennett, & Goldberg, 2017). A highlight of the course was a public reading of the stories of the participants, which will be discussed more fully below.

At the conclusion of this course and data collection, Susan invited Lori to participate in this project based on Lori's prior research on women and trauma and interest in poetic inquiry. As part of our work together, Lori participated in a public reading and attended meetings with community stakeholders. Lori then invited Elizabeth, who was a graduate student in Duquesne's Clinical Psychology Ph.D. program at that time and had assisted with Susan's course in the past, to join the project. All three authors approached this work with a deep respect for community-engaged teaching and learning, a recognition of the historical and current impact of racism in Pittsburgh, a sensitivity to the multi-generational impact of community trauma, and knowledge that we needed to continually reflect on our power and privilege as White university researchers. We also believe in the power of narrative and poetry. Crafted out of the words of the participants and shared with the larger community, the poems contain an interesting paradox: they are deeply personal and individual, while also sparse in detail and specificity. These poems, developed by listening carefully to one individual's subjectivity, are nonetheless communal. Their power lies in their ability to connect people with each other, the larger cultural context, and the listener.

Method

The poems presented in this article were drawn from interviews conducted as part of a larger project spearheaded by Susan's community-based teaching and research. The project was conducted under the purview of the University's Institutional Review Board.

General data analysis for this project was completed by Lori and Elizabeth, and the poems were constructed by Lori.

Community-Based Teaching and Research

This project is deeply rooted in the tradition of community-engaged teaching and research. Community-based participatory research "provides a framework to equitably involve community members, researchers and other stakeholders in the research process.… Its aim is to create positive, transformative and sustainable change together with, for and in communities" (Collins et al., 2018, p. 885). The development of the project involved a close working relationship between the researchers and a social service nonprofit agency (referred to as "the agency" throughout the rest of this article), which was founded by an Eastern Orthodox spiritual leader who considers himself part of the community. The agency had the goal both of meeting the needs of Hill residents and broadly addressing generational community trauma. The agency's aim has been to serve the struggling residents of the Hill. Those served by the agency are primarily African American, most of whom have experiences of poverty, and many of whom have a personal history of sexual or other trauma, incarceration, homelessness, unemployment, mental illness, and/or drug dealing or drug use. These

challenges are understood by the agency as community struggles, rather than individual or moral failings. The entire study took place between 2012 and 2019. Susan worked closely with the director/founder of the agency and the Hill residents who served as volunteers throughout the research process. This article discusses a set of interviews that took place during the 2013-2014 academic year.

The teaching aspects of the project were a central part of the senior-level semester-long course required for psychology majors before graduation, discussed above. The course was certified by the university as an advanced community-engaged learning course and students were considered co-researchers. Before even approaching the community, students were immersed in readings about such topics as White privilege (e.g., Yancy, 2016) the African American Great Migration (Wilkerson, 2011), and therapeutic presence (e.g., Craig, 1986). In order to help prepare them for the experience, they also read about interviewing Holocaust survivors (Greenspan, 1999) and practiced how to be a "vulnerable observer" during the interview and research process (Behar, 2014; Josselson, 2013).

Reflexivity is an important component of community-based teaching and research and was emphasized throughout the process. Finlay (2017) described reflexivity as "the use of a critical, self-aware lens to interrogate both the research process and our interpretation or representation of participants' lives in our social world" (p. 120). Most of the students and faculty researchers involved in this project identify as White. Susan identifies as Jewish and has always experienced this as a marginalized identity; however, in this work she continually had to confront her identity in this context as being White and privileged (see Koelsch et al., 2017 for an additional discussion). Throughout the project, we worked with the student researchers to address issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other privileges held by the students and ourselves.

While reflexivity is always an important component of the research process, it was especially important to attend to in this case, given the differences in social-cultural location between the participants and the students/researchers. In particular, there is a history of presumably well-meaning White academics attempting to intervene in the Hill District in ways that were neither consistent with the community's values nor sustainable. For our work in the Hill District, we recognized that while we hold expertise in research and teaching, we needed to follow the lead of our participants and community stakeholders. One reason why we chose the Listening Guide as a method is that it required a careful listening to our participants' stories, which forefronted their voices while also recognizing that we listen with our own academic ears.

Narrative framework

The study was conducted based on a narrative research approach, with an underlying existential epistemology (Jezierski, 2009). According to Chase (2005), "contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse interdisciplinary approaches …all revolving around an interest in biographic particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (p. 651). The particular method used in data analysis, the Listening Guide, directs researchers to listen to the voices people use while telling their stories (e.g., Gilligan et al., 2003). The overarching goal of the research is to hear the in-depth stories, experiences, and meaning-making of people in the Hill. By using participants' actual words, rather than an interpretation of their words, the researchers were seeking to share their worlds in a "hermeneutics of faith" (Josselson, 2013; Orange, 2011). In other words, we chose to listen for the knowledge and wisdom of the participants' voices, rather than apply a critical lens. As White university-affiliated researchers, we recognized the importance of using our power and privilege to amplify the voices of our primarily African American participants.

Participants

This project was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board, which oversees the protection of human subjects. Participants for this study were community members who spent time at the agency, either receiving services offered or volunteering to help others seeking services. For example, participants might be people seeking canned food, prepared food, clothing, medical care, or vouchers. Duquesne University has a long-standing relationship with the Hill, the agency, and its director, and other researchers have focused on addressing trauma within the community (e.g., Walsh, 2015). Participants for the study were recruited via convenience sampling; the agency and the researchers invited people who visited the agency to participate in interviews, without remuneration. Interviews took place during the 2013-14 academic year, and a total of 22 residents participated in the interviews. This study focused on female residents who had lived in the Hill District for at least part of their childhood. Eight participants met these criteria and were therefore included in analysis. They ranged in age from 37-56; all but one identified as African American; the last participant identified as Latina but considered herself part of the African American community.

Interview Process

The interview teams consisted of two to three students and Susan. The interviews were one to two hours in durations. Participants consented to being interviewed and each student had a role in the interview, some asking introductory questions, and others asking more in-depth questions. The interviewers used an interview guide with open-ended questions; the goal was to learn about participants' most meaningful life experiences and to listen attentively in engaged presence. Very few questions were asked, allowing silence to leave space and place for rich stories to emerge. The interviews were conducted in a leisurely pace to allow interviewees to tell their stories of meaning and trauma in their own time and in their own way. Some life stories were chronological; others moved from the most traumatic experiences through other traumas. The researchers did not ask about trauma directly; stories of trauma became woven throughout the participants' narratives about their meaningful life experiences. For many participants, their narratives consisted almost exclusively of traumatic events.

Data Analysis

The Listening Guide is an established feminist-informed voice-centered method developed by Gilligan, Brown, and colleagues (e.g., Gilligan et al., 2003). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008, 2009) has argued that despite its history of use with primarily White women, the Listening Guide, as a voice-centered method, is particularly suited to attend to the voices of African American women; a careful listening helps to counter and avoid the myths and stereotypes often associated with this population, such as the "strong Black woman" stereotype, which can be used to justify the exploitation of Black women (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010). The Listening Guide involves four "listenings" of participant transcripts. The first listening centers on attention to plot – the "what" that happened. The second listening, which is the focus of this article, involves a listening for the I voice of each participant, which involves the use of "I" throughout the transcripts. It is during this step, further explained below, that the I poems are developed. The third and fourth listenings involve an attunement to contrapuntal voices, which serve as a counterpoint to one another. These voices vary depending on the participants and researchers' foci, and for this project we chose to focus on one voice that expressed a sense of belonging to the Hill District and another that expressed a sense of

alienation from the Hill District. We explored these voices and how they helped us understand how the participants experience the Hill District as home (see Koelsch, Bennett, & Goldberg, 2017, for more information).

The focus of this article is the I poems, which were crafted by Lori during the second listening of the interview transcripts. I poems are created by locating each instance of the use of "I" by the participant within the interview transcripts (Gilligan et al., 2003), and have been created by researchers from various disciplines (e.g., Brown, 1997; Tolman, 1994; Woodcock, 2010; Zambo & Zambo, 2013). By focusing on the participant's use of "I," we were able to attend to how each participant sees herself fitting within her own narrative (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). This "I" is inherently relational and exists only in conversation with the other voices, history, and the community at large. Once these instances of "I" were located, Lori chose which additional words following the "I" were included in order to create "I phrases" (i.e., meaningful chunks of text) and then the phrases were arranged poetically, while preserving the original order. By the time the poems were created, the data collection had been completed and the researchers were no long in direct contact with participants. Thus, while they are comprised entirely of the participants' words, Lori made all choices regarding the poetic structure. In addition to following the general guideline to produce sparse I poems, these poems were crafted with attention to the I phrases' musicality, rhythm, emotional resonance, and power.

Public reading

The I poems were included as part of a public reading performance for the community in 2018. The public reading consisted of a sharing of seven groups of stories organized by themes, such as women's memories of painful experiences, current challenges, and "home is not what it used to be." The public reading took place at an open space outside, near the agency, with a variety of people attending, including some interviewees, other Hill District community members, members of the University community, and members of the larger city community. The aim for the public reading was to make the stories real, alive, and transformative. The I poems were included as an introduction to each theme included in the public reading. Because of their emotional power, the I poems endowed the public reading with both an intensity and a respite from the stories.

The I Poems

A selection of I poems is presented here in order to illustrate this form of poetry and data analysis. Each poem was constructed by the Lori out of interviews conducted by Susan and her students. While the I poems can be presented without an accompanying narrative, the entire Listening Guide was used during this project, so the poems are understood as part of a larger whole. In order to highlight how these poems directly relate to the Hill and its history, Fullilove's (2009) concept of root shock provided an analytical lens. Root shock is defined as a "traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's ecosystem" (Fullilove, 2009, p. 11), which disrupts communal bonds for generations. The destruction associated with urban renewal did more than disrupt the physical space of the Hill community; it disrupted the communal bonds that had formed over time.

Amanda

I have
I have nine brothers and sisters
I can't find no support

I have cousins
I have aunts
I have uncles
I have no support

I walked
I was just in so much stress
I walked in
I could come in

I'm grateful
I came here
I'm here

I leave here
I walk the streets at night
…

I don't know what to believe
I just know
I don't wanna
            when I get older
I wanna continue

I don't have
I think
I drink
I don't think
I have
I don't know

I feel alone
I have ten brothers and sisters
I feel alone

I came back
I tried to search
I was stuck

I would be forced

I just been pushing myself
I could get
I could volunteer
I'm a get ready
I just been pushing myself

During her interview, Amanda described difficulties she experienced growing up in the Hill, including being a victim of physical violence and her struggles with substance abuse. She reported that she had moved away from the Hill District as a young adult and later returned to care for her ailing mother. Amanda described her challenges finding support from her family and friends, especially since many of her old relationships had centered on substance use and Amanda was working on maintaining sobriety. Amanda's I poem begins with an understanding of herself as alone and unsupported while also part of a large family and community. In relation to root shock, Amanda's sense of disconnection echoes the disruption to the community. She is physically close to others in her family and community, but this closeness is not experienced at a deep and nourishing level. Additionally, Amanda's poem speaks of resilience, which has been both a lauded and problematized trait attributed to African American women (e.g., Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Singh, Garnett, & Williams, 2013). By paying close attention to Amanda's use of "I," we can see how she envisions herself in the present (e.g., "I have," "I feel"), past (e.g., "I tried"), and future ("I could"). Amanda is grateful for the agency (the "here" she refers to in her poem), which perhaps helps to ground her; one possible future involves a reconnection with her community through volunteer work.

Janine

I mean we fought
I mean literally

I mean
I learned
I ended up
I would talk
I didn't play

I was
I was
I was crazy

        You know what I mean?
I'll come down
I'll put you out
I'll take

I
I

     I

I turned big time
I didn't care

I could walk
I'd walk right past you

Throughout much of the interview, Janine spoke about her move to the Hill District as a young child. She described growing up in the projects and having to learn to physically defend herself from her siblings and other children in the neighborhood. Janine's poem thus speaks to interpersonal violence within the community, particularly when considering such violence at the intersection of race and class (Few, 2005; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Hien & Ruglass, 2009; West, 2004). Her I phrases in the beginning of the poem express a desire to be understood as serious ("I mean literally," "I didn't play"), and it is a message to the listener that her words are to be understood literally. While recounting her past, Janine switches to the present and then stutters back to the past, perhaps expressing a sense of being continually affected by the traumas of her past. While she recognizes that the battles from her childhood are in the past, those traumas will always be part of her present experience. Her turn into a fighter, against her community, is a form of craziness ("I was crazy") and disconnection from her roots ("I'd walk right past you"). Janine's "crazy" makes sense given her past; she had to adapt to her surroundings, develop a tough exterior, and pull strength from within herself. Without the communal roots to protect her, Janine was/is on her own.

Patti

I was young
     I guess
         I guess I was
I don't
I don't remember

I was this age
I got the name
I was his angel

I guess
I guess
I used to recall

I was the black sheep
I don't remember
I guess

I think I was
I guess

I was treated differently
        but I had good parents

I wasn't
I used to live
I was not allowed

I dunno
I could never open up
I used to always sneak out

Where am I goin?
I dunno

Am I telling the story right?
Am I?
Am I?

During her interview, Patti described feeling like others viewed her as the black sheep of her family, with the exception of her grandfather, who lavished her with attention. She reported that as a child, she was not allowed to play outside due to crime in the area, and noted that as an adult, she spends much of her time alone in her house. Patti's poem is wrought with doubt. Throughout the poem she distrusts her own telling of the events (e.g., "I guess," "I don't remember") and turns to the researchers to wonder if she is telling her own story correctly ("am I?"). Her ambivalence about her experience is also woven throughout as she recognizes that she was "treated differently" in ways that led her to be both a "black sheep" and "angel." Patti's story perhaps speaks to the community's imperative to keep family secrets within the family, as she alludes to but does not explicitly discuss violence and abuse within the household.

        Patti's story can also be understood as part the community's retreat from public to private spaces. Simms (2008), who has also conducted research in the Hill District, discussed the function of porches as one way to illustrate the move from communal to individual spaces: "porches were cozy gathering places [and later became] deserted lookout pads" (p. 74) after urban renewal disrupted the embedded nature of close neighborhood blocks. One shared overarching goal of this project for both the agency and the researchers has been to bring these family secrets back to the community. The director of the agency has noted that each story from the public reading, even as disguised, could be five people he knew in the community. He hoped that the sharing of these stories would be part of the healing process for the community (agency director, personal communication, July 15, 2014). When these families retreated from their porches to closed doors in response to the violence wrought by root shock and its repercussions, secrets and trauma became owned and carried by individuals in private. Thus, Patti's isolation within her own home can also be understood in this context.

Discussion

These poems, created out of each participant's words, belong to the Hill District community. By listening with a poetic ear, we can hear each woman position herself within her own narrative, which is also a narrative of the Hill District. By listening through the lens of root shock, we can hear how each individual poem connects each woman's story with a larger narrative of community trauma and disruption. Each individual poem contains a community deeply disrupted by root shock, and we listened for this by noting ways in which each participant's story connected with Fullilove's (2009) description of the effects of root shock.

Given the nature of community-engaged work, there were some complexities while conducting this work. Rather than conceptualizing these as limitations, we see further context for this study and directions for future research. One thing of note is that the agency was a drop-in center, and long-term relationships with participants were hard to develop at that time. While this is consistent with our view of stories and poems as belonging to no one in particular, it would have also been richly meaningful to develop long-term relationships with participants by conducting multiple interviews and member checks. Additionally, participants could have assisted with the construction of the I poems (e.g., Manning, 2018).

After the public reading, Hill residents who were present informally indicated they were moved and affected by the reading. It was not clear, however, which aspects of the public reading they found particularly moving – the introductions, the I poems, the stories themselves, or the community's participation in the reading. While it is impossible to operationalize the effects of poetry, it would have been interesting to receive formal feedback from the community members, agency staff, and University members who attended the public reading. We were not able to locate studies that specifically addressed the effects of research poetry, but we did find some studies that broadly addressed the impact of arts-based methods, some of which included poetry. Chung and colleagues (2006), for example, discussed the challenges associated with evaluating the effects of arts-based community interventions, including poetry. Using surveys, they were able to find some evidence that arts-based community interventions had their desired effect (Chung et al., 2009). In another example, Foster (2007), whose research included participant poetry, received positive community feedback regarding a dramatic performance crafted during her participatory work with working-class women. In a comprehensive review, Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, and Stasiulis (2012) considered arts-based health research and found that while some researchers did consider and address the impact of arts-based interventions, this remains an understudied area. We hope that future research can explore some of these areas, with a focus on poetic inquiry.

Conclusion

According to Faulkner (2018), "a poem becomes *embodied experience* when the audiences feels *with*, rather than *about*, a poem" (p. 226, emphasis in original). The poetry presented in this article helps transcend the distances between us: researchers and researched, individuals and communities, authors and readers. The Listening Guide provides a structure for researchers who wish to engage in poetic inquiry with their participants' stories, and these sparse poems are powerful in their ability to foster bodily and emotional resonance. In this article, we demonstrated how the personal and sparse I poem structure can be used to create poems that are deeply connected with a particular community's history and affective life. In particular, the I poems from this project express interpretations of the experiences of women of color who reside in or frequent the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and while these experiences are particular, they can also be understood poetically as part of a larger human

experience. Poetry has long been a way for members of marginalized communities to share their experiences (e.g., Sjollema & Bilotta, 2016), and we hope to have expanded upon this tradition by amplifying participant voices through poetry crafted by researchers from interview data.

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