Introduction

Brinkwomanship

When they come for you no bigger than a piece of fruit, weighing no more and no less than a water biscuit, this will be my excuse: that I hoped you were just testing yourself as I might subtly and irresistibly poke at a sensitive tooth. That, not morbidly, but out of a curiosity, to locate the exact, minute, sensory transition – between merely knowing the definition of pain, and knowing the meaning.

- Leontia Flynn

Ethnographers aim to understand life as lived, as poetry aims to evoke it. Yet these two modes of seeing, being, and writing have sometimes been positioned apart, even oppositionally. As social (and specifically medical) anthropologists navigating cross-currents of disciplinary expectations, we approach this article as appreciators and practitioners of both – a category not as uncommon as we first thought. To begin we each share, from a personal standpoint, a little about our experiences of writing poetry as practicing anthropologists, including four of our own poems, with commentary, as examples. In the second half we hold ethnography and poetry side-by-side – asking what they share, in terms of both ways of seeing and ways of communicating, and where they diverge. Problems of validity and ‘truth’, translation and incommunicability, haunt both, and yet are answered differently between. Both have a curious, invested interest in life as lived – in time, in space, in bodies, and sometimes in (and beyond) physical, psychological, and social experiences of pain, as our second section explores. A handful of examples show us that anthropological aims in approaching illness and wellbeing can at times be beautifully met by poetry. We thus challenge ourselves, and others, to continue considering the potential for active cross-pollinations of ethnographic and poetic practice as a route to understanding both the heights and depths of embodied human experience.

Reflections on Writing Poetry and Ethnography

Susan

My experiences of writing poetry, concurrent with my ‘real’ ethnographic research and publication as an early-career anthropologist, have primarily been characterised by guilt. But also by compulsion. I have written poetry my whole life, and during my academic career as an essential way of processing parts of the work I found distressing, confusing, or tantalisingly just beyond the reach of my
understanding. Catharsis, yes, but also an active process of both perception and analysis. Yet it remained (until recently) an entirely backstage process. Writing during research, I kept all my poetry documents separate to my official ‘fieldnotes’. I considered pursuing my creative writing under a different name, and worried about how these two ‘selves’ would ever marry in an academic career. But the separation was no more than a self-protective myth.

Though I necessarily incorporate ‘others’ at times, most often poetry has given me access to facets of my own experience, as an ethnographer and a human, to a degree I would not have otherwise reached via the hoop-jumping of a junior academic. At a similar, early point in her career Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor also describes experiencing poetry as an appealing alternative to having felt ‘stuck in an imitative mode when writing in scholarly prose’ (2011: 393). Poetry offers ‘a paradoxical freedom to be honest, more explicit, about one’s observations and feelings’ (Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010: 8). In particular, it gave me leeway to acknowledge, without having to justify, the affective dynamics of fieldwork: its effects on me both during and after.

**Sugar**

When I walked white  
in Africa.  
Pink nosed and shorn,  
pressing silver into the guilt palm  
of want - that eyeless, legless  
want. I wished myself anywhere, anywhere  
covered in snow, in sugar,  
in sand. Anywhere  
I could un-weave my coat. Let my skin down.  
I preached Joseph

and science, but they told me  
that white light is made up  
of every colour and sometimes  
they looked at me like a rainbow  
while I sat back in a lawn chair,  
matte as the moon. In turn

I ogled the barbers  
selling Hollywood, the taxis  
transporting Christ, the pastors  
modelling business-chic, and the mothers  
weaving futures with one eye  
on the telenovelas, waiting with me  
and with everyone in skin  
for the rain on tin, the mud-days

when everything stopped,  
extcept the sweet hot tea, when I learned  
to tend small conversations
under the mango tree, with my back
to the bricks, baked to black. I don’t know.
I don’t know if I can ever
go back.

This poem was painful to write. It wrestles with positionality, power, and privilege, in a more direct way than I have been able to in my academic writing (it having taken me five years after my last trip to Uganda, four years after finishing my PhD, and a year after completing my book, to even begin to write this poem). It explores ‘tensions that emerge between the outside researcher and the community’ (Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010: 7) – an important possibility for ethnographic poetry, as I was thrilled to find Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor advocating. As such I believe it goes beyond being reflective, and takes up the role of the reflexive: in the sense of doing the hard work of placing my experiences and emotions within the echoes of colonial anthropology, and post-colonial nationhood, in which I was dwelling. With which I am contending still.

However it is true also that the reflexive work of poetry for me has not been confined to periods of formal fieldwork. Over and over again, I have written poems about moments in my own personal life of which my experience and interpretation is shaped by my academic interests.

Grain of Her Voice

They say,
when meaning is gone, all that is left
is the grain
of the voice.

Well, hers sweeps the room like salt-flecked taffeta.
She says
it rained the night of the St Clair dance,
and though time has carved
sudden cliffs in the story,
she remakes the dress each day
with words that fall like wheat threshed in shadow,
till fear pulls at its pin-tucked form,
places a seamless and immodest silence
in its place.

They often find her undressed
In just the skin of her sound,
petticoats wet with the rivulets
that run down her sentences
like sand,
slip underground.

The grumbling hymn of the road unknown,
the tussock-whispers of slippers
seeking terra firma,
the rough boot-print of home,
The hiss of the sea hot against
the vinyl grind before the first strain of symphony –
Dust in its veins –
And the low moon-stretched croon, love-hush,
of nervous fingers rubbing at oiled silk.

Yes it poured down, pours down,
sound leaks through,
as she keens, a gull call,
a thrush in the field – or was she elsewhere,
with him, not you?

The sea roars, laughs itself horse-racing-back-to-shore,
only not so sure,
for when she wandered
they used to offer her warm milk,
but they don't any more: too pale.

When she grinds her teeth in her sleep,
and lips crack like
speakers crackle, creak, and speak,
smooth back the sheets,
the hair, loose on her forehead
and let the sound pour out.

The sound
pours out.

When I let my mind's grip
on the semantics of noise
slip
I can still sense the shape of her
through the rain, I can hear it
in her voice –
in its grain.

(Originally published in Landfall, 2018)

This poem is largely based on witnessing my husband’s grandmother affected by dementia towards the end of her life – cared for by family, and later in a residential hospital. But when I wrote it (on my phone, in bed, late at night) my mind was also busy turning over the contents of an academic conference on ‘Performing the Real’ that I had been attending during the day. One presenter had spoken about sound. The connection between sound, voice, identity, and personhood formed against memories of Grandma Joan singing old English songs in a shaky, cheerful voice – but is in a sense also a theoretical exploration of where personhood resides, exploring the possibility of its visceral and physical embeddedness (in the body, in unique vibrations of air) in contrast to common ‘western’
philosophical notions associating personhood with memory, which is threatened by dementia. The poem also alludes to the response to this threat, by family – reaching for the personhood of the loved one, as I observed in my husband’s family’s emphasis on Grandma’s singing, during their speeches and recollections at her funeral and other family events. To tell a story that felt true about this experience, within the aesthetic form of the free-verse contemporary poem, there are both invented details and observed ones in the same poem.

In this poem and many others poetry has enabled me to hold human experience up to the light to see it differently for a moment. It gave me permission to let go of my death-grip on the processes of reading and citing theory, and yet in itself seems to carry particular threads of conceptual connection. Cahnman-Taylor describes it as ‘permission to be surprised by emergent understanding’ (2011: 393).

Most of what I consider the more original insights in my work to date have flowed out of this process of letting go, and then returning; feeding back into the work with the fresh perspective from the playfulness or imagination of the poem. In this way poetry has shaped my academic writing indirectly, and I can’t help but see it as an intrinsic, active, and productive part of my ethnographic process, even though it has been behind-the-scenes. Till recently.

When we came together to present our paper about the intersections of poetry and ethnography, at a symposium for medical anthropologists in Aotearoa in late 2018, I was uncertain as to how many people would be interested. I foresaw the room emptying prior to our panel. I imagined the remaining few hunkering, sniffing. When Catherine contacted me the day prior to suggest we email around conference attendees to let them know we’d be finishing the talk with an open invitation to others to share their own poems, I confess I anticipated a long and awkward silence. I was wrong. When we finished speaking to a full room, we had immediate volunteers to read. People tugged creased sheets of papers eagerly out of notebooks, and flicked open tabs on their phone. Around eight people, with less than a day’s notice, eagerly shared their own poetry with a room full of colleagues – discussing illness, pain, fieldwork, language, culture, as they explained the context for each piece. Before this I’d often joked about poetry being my ‘secret life’. It was thus delightful and (unfoundedly) astonishing to me that other anthropologists also wrote poetry, both locally and around the world; and that it is claimed, by some at least, as an increasingly ‘visible and viable form of trying to achieve and convey cultural understanding’ (Cahnmann-Taylor 2011: 5). Imagine, too, my warm relief that others have struggled with feeling it to be somehow risky to their professional reputation, to write and publish poetry; that even famous anthropologists have published under pseudonyms. But I’m challenging myself, in the writing of this article, to pull both together under one name, one self: to ask what the possible fit is.

Catherine
I have always written poetry, but until recently understood this to exist outside of my public and professional self. Like Susan, writing poetry felt like a guilty use of my time, and thus was sequestered to evenings once my son was asleep (my other ‘real’ job), and often written on my phone, once the necessary quiet settled. Recently, having reached that amorphous stage of mid-career, I have done what many scholars do: taken my foot off the pedal of the increasingly breakneck academic pace to consider how I spend my time, what projects I make commitments to, and how this all serves my own, my family’s, and others’ wellbeing. In the process poetry has become a necessary mode of reflecting on and engaging with the world as it runs through the interiors of my own life. It is precisely the way in which poetry blurs the private and the public, the intimate and the distant, that appeals to me as an anthropologist and an ethnographer. For mothers and other primary caregivers working in academia,
the split between the professional and private roles that we juggle can feel at times difficult and toxic to our health. That one role is not allowed to breathe fully in the presence of the other can lead to a giddying amount of tacking back and forth without any sense that either is well attended. Poetry offers a different voice, genre, and method for achieving what ethnography does when at its creative, reflexive best – bridging the gap between worlds and selves.

As a medical anthropologist, moments of ‘accidental ethnography’ pervade daily life. For Christopher Poulos, accidental ethnography was ‘a way of writing my way into and within and through the challenges and conundrums and incidences and coincidences and conversations and hints and conflicts and clues that animate daily life’ (2016 [2009]: v). This process was recently made real to me when I found myself spending months on and off in hospital as a caregiver after my late-husband was diagnosed with leukaemia. Writing poetry while wedged in a chair between a drip line and the bedside was one way of make sense of something that exceeded intellectual reasoning, despite being a rich, even excessive, source of thought and response. As Arthur Frank argues, becoming ‘wounded storytellers’ is part of living with and through illness, but the flux and uncertainty of illness can make stories untellable. ‘Those living in chaos are least able to tell a story, because they lack any sense of a viable future. Life is reduced to a series of present tense assaults. If a narrative involves temporal progression, chaos is anti-narrative’ (Frank 2013 [1994]: xv). Poetry, in its non-linear, oblique, and off-centre ways of telling, allows access to moments of pain that refuse to yield coherent narratives. This poem, *Ward Five*, allowed me to do just this.

**Ward Five**

By morning
his blood is bathed, laid out
opened like a peach. We

take the tool and separate
the membrane, the scissored thatch
from where the sediment holds
us all close. Coaxed
between throat and thorax,
between a curdled chromosome
and the stem cells we eat
like honey

By night his body aches agrarian
Primed to flesh
the machines that feed him

phalanx to fat, wet phalanx

He is milk and mouth and fur
cultured into zero
his body curled, the sweet size
of a nut.
In this poem I oscillated between speaking of the body as an objectified whole, strange and seen from a distance, and using language to compartmentalise it and pull it up close (mouth, blood, throat, membrane). The poem seeks to capture the ways in which cancer treatment both feeds the body and seems to devour it at the same time. Words like ‘thorax’, ‘fur’, and ‘agrarian’ render his body in animal form, hinting at both the raw fleshy nature of illness and the experimental drive of medical science that pushes bare life to its limits in the quest for survival. There is a sense of intervention that borders between violence and love (opened, separated, laid out), and a viewpoint that is receding from his body, his person, the relationship (in the ‘sweet size of a nut’, ‘cultured in to zero’). In this poem I’ve sought to capture the ways in which pain, suffering, and fear can create both a sense of pulsating immediacy and foggy detachment. Emotions can feel overwrought to the point of numbness. The terrifying reality of what might happen is ground down into small tasks that are tackled minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. Nothing quite makes sense, but one labours on nonetheless as if it did, within the mundane routines of medicine, family, and care.

Poetry speaks to the limits of language by limiting language. Biomedicine can operate in a similar way, by relying on practices that constrain communication and the certainty that it might convey. As caregiver and patient spending our days stuck in a corner of a large metropolitan public hospital, we noticed the limits placed on what can be said, and by whom, in contrast with our desire for fuller narration. Doctors parsed possibilities and probabilities and unknowability into words that addressed our regular need for a response, but did little to answer our questions. What we most needed to know were the things that remained unanswerable: will he live, will this treatment be worth it, how much will this require of us?

The next poem I share speaks to pain, suffering and wellbeing in a far less immediate and obvious way.

**Big Rain**

After land descends, becomes
a soft larval skin, borne down beneath
this new sea all things with

sap and blood break inward
and thunder rides the cattle fields

as you,
stopped on the step, mothly grin, float
pistachio shell canoes across the lawn
predicting how soon
a scudding light will return. To the
outside

As stones go swimming and grow alfalfa tips,
we’ll learn to live here
a second time
Words sink in a flood, I said. Words
find their teeth when they worm
through mud, promising things

Kith

used to mean knowledge, and later
one’s native lands. Now, our likeness
roams as silt through aquifers,
breaths back from culvert cracks
across the fern gully

Our children are busy
sowing brassicas along the coal seams.
Unseated, in abeyance, this land
is a limber coin
Still prone

Still pleasant for
the pigeon who visits us at noon
Her arcs are careless but she coos
Over time, this sound will soften up
the hunting grounds
and birth flax

(Originally published in Plumwood Mountain 2019)

This poem weaves together memories with fiction and speculation. It builds from the punching, rushing recollections I have from childhood of floods in my farming home town: silty torrents that tore out roads, sheds and trees, and rerouted river bends. I have refracted these memories through the present, one of increasingly severe storms in New Zealand, as climate change produces volatile weather systems and floods low-lying coastlines. Climate change shifts the temporality of our present actions into a calamitous future, producing a new material means through which we live on in a carbon ecosystem. This poem thus fuses past, present, and future through the figures of those who have survived a ruinous deluge.

This is the narrative I have produced retrospectively to make sense of my poetic process, but the truth is that in writing it I occupied these zones of imagination simultaneously and subconsciously, largely unsure of what I was writing until it was drafted. And once I do glimpse the thread of a poem I must be careful not to unravel its oddity and over render its message. In other words, for me, good poetry needs to retain its position at the slippery edges of reason, thought, and the known world. This is a key difference for me between writing ethnographically and poetically. With ethnography, I may approach my narrative creatively, but I begin with a partially visible subject (although aspects of that subject still always surprise me as I write them into story), and I work on drawing out the details and my understanding. In writing poetry, I work best when I have come at my subject backwards, uncertain of the ground, moving first into concrete images, scraps of dialogue, and small acts that gradually texture together into something bigger.
Big Rain shifts between hope and recovery, and despair and cynicism, between a chance for something new and the likelihood of a return to well-trodden ways. In this poem I point to pain in subtle ways, through the language of decomposition, betrayal, and the hunt. But pain is rarely singular. I have tried to evoke the ways in which, in many contexts, pain and the threat of suffering exist alongside the pull of other realities, such as the prospect of recovery and the chance of something better, as well as the possibility that things may never mend. As Arthur Kleinman notes, ‘Ordinary experience frequently thrusts people into troubling circumstances and confounding conditions that threaten to undo our thin mastery over those deeper things that matter most’ (2006: 4). It is here, in our often ill-fated attempts at mastery, that we discover the best and worst versions of ourselves, where we respond to, generate, rationalize, and sometime overcome suffering. Ethnography gets us close to this struggle (or dance), but in a different way to poetry. Poetry finds the wet throat of the process and give it sound, while ethnography builds a variegated world in which actors, objects, desires, and relations tangle into stories. This distinction is not wholly different, and the processes are certainly not incompatible. Indeed, for me they work together to produce different hues in the same cloth.

Ethnography and Poetry: Intersections and Disconnections

Both poetry and ethnography foster a particular way of seeing and being. Both cultivate an attentiveness, a mindfulness: to the writer in their own body, to the shape of the world, to the performances and practices of others’ lives. Both are interested in the details of human life, as viewed from the inside. Christopher Houston calls it a “‘hyper-alertness’ to the minutia of apparent ordinariness’ (1999: 284) and ‘practical absorption in the lived-in world’ (ibid.: 290). Most notable is the way this mindful attention is particular, and situated in some sense of the local, as Moran points out (1999). Even when playing with seemingly-universal themes, these are almost always tethered to specific places, experiences, and stories, to objects, images, and the senses. In other words, poetry resists easy generalization, just as ethnography – as a methodology and communication mode – does. In neither case does this descriptive specificity merely illustrate an already-formulated idea or theory. As Renato Rosaldo argues, both poetry and ethnography stem from a similar commitment to exploration and uncertainty, to an inductive method. They are both

processes of discovery rather than restatements of the already known. If the poet already knows exactly where her work is going, there is no reason to write further. Similarly, if the ethnographer has decided which theory to apply before examining the data, there is no point in further inquiry (2016: 183).

Poetry and ethnography both push back against an increasingly swift temporality within academic research, modern media, capitalist cultures of labour and work, and neoliberal institutions (Mountz et al. 2015). They often demand of both the writer and the reader a slowing, a narrowing in, a recursive dwelling. At their most powerful they cultivate moments of phenomenological attentiveness. They do this not through the assertion of universal ethical truths but through shuttling the reader deep inside a human moment that is at once resistant to full disclosure yet peeled back enough to allow a glimpse at some substrate of familiar experience.

While writing poetry has reinforced and supported our development as ethnographers, poetry also offers us some novel interventions in writing and thinking, both anthropologically and beyond the ethnographic imagination. As Adrie Kusserow points out, many of our discipline’s most prestigious
modes of academic writing blunt the symphonic feel of our personal and research experiences. What Kusserow describes as ‘the weight of a locked-in “topic”’ (2017: 78), our disciplinary styles of prose commonly cloud the chaotic richness, the sensorial rhythms of the experiences we describe. Moreover, reflecting on her own fieldwork, Kusserow writes, ‘the required language and length of a traditional academic article diluted and dulled the truly jarring impact and tension of this ethnographic encounter’ (ibid.: 76). Poetry by contrast, is less constrained by a linear conception of time and any seamless view of space. Poetry can help us, as Kusserow describes, ‘resist the temptation of painting reality in a kind of perfect and familiar symmetry’ (ibid.: 78). Yet like anthropology, poetry often aims to disturb the shape, colour, and weave of things that may intuitively feel settled or immovable, to displace them from their comfortable settings and to make, as Richardson describes it, ‘ordinary life strange’ (1994: 82).

Each on their own and taken together, ethnography and poetry invite critical and philosophical reflections about what constitutes truth, facts, the real, and fiction. As Patricia Vecchione argues, ‘facts are only the hard edges of things; poems twist and turn the facts in order to get at what is inside them’ (2001: xv, quoted in Maynard 2009: 116). Such a position vis-à-vis ethnography is perhaps less controversial since the post-structural turn of the 1980s. While the poet might lean into their imagination more deeply, the poet like the ethnographer uses their body and positionality as an interpretive tool in order to sketch the real. As Renato Rosaldo points out, ‘the material of poetry is not so much the raw event as the traces it leaves’ (2013: 102). Yet for us, both ethnography and poetry allow us to focus on a retrospective process of sense making about the world, of grasping what remains, what haunts, what flows unevenly forward in time, what makes meaningful the particulars of life.

The debate about the ‘real’ – as ethnographers perceive or reflect upon – is by now well-worn territory. ‘The truth is that all authors fall short of truth as truth is a constructed and subjective entity’, Phillips writes (2013: 458). The distrust of poetry’s ‘fictive invention’ (Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010), by ethnographers from many (though not all) scholarly circles, perhaps relates to the anxiety of having to acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between the lives-as-lived of our participants, and the words we use to communicate them. In this way, for us, both ethnography and poetry are not only processes of thinking about the world, but written products that must contend with the limits that each genre generates in how it renders the world into text, sound, space, and meaning.

Yet again, this anxiety is not new, and poetry is just one means through which we can actively confront this space-between, in which we work and try to express situated human knowledges. Poetry, we argue, forces an attention to the weight of words that has the potential to cultivate in the poet/ethnographer a reflexive awareness of the limits of language – its transparency or opacity. ‘Poetry itself serves as a critique of linguistic representations’, as Tedlock puts it (1999: 157). And while ethnographic monographs delight in iterative layers of ‘thick description’ to build up a rich picture, poetry punches through to its core in a few paces. Indeed, due to the sparseness of words used in much poetry (at least compared to an academic text!), and the equal importance given to the negative space around these words, poetry requires the reader/listener to consider what has not been said, the spaces that inhabit the ends of lines and stanzas and the silence that hangs in the air at the conclusion of a poem. At the same time, the very act of reading a poem (not simply writing it) constitutes the poem’s narrative anew, and the gap between author and reader is blurred. In other words, for us, through its sparseness, and sometimes its ambiguity and illusiveness, poetry demands of the reader and listener an active stance of imagining and feeling that has the potential to make us deeply complicit in the
interpretive acts of poetic knowledge.

Poetry also has the potential to shift the modes through which ethnographers communicate and share their work. Poetry is a genre that invites language to be spoken, out loud, and for others to listen. Spoken poems offer us moments of co-presence between expression and reception that link scholars and their audiences. They do this in part through the traditions of oratory that have been essential to the development of different poetic traditions, and which have not been as central to the reading culture of anthropology and ethnography. Poems also achieve this through their inherently sonic qualities, their attention to rhythm and meter, pace and stanza, that require of us ‘an ear cocked toward language’ (Maynard and Cahnmann-Taylor 2010: 4). As William Logan explains, poetry produces a visceral reside. ‘A residue is not a mystery or a withholding. It is the result of a continual ignition in the language, a combustion in the nearness of words’ (1999: 12, quoted in Maynard 2009: 120).

In both poetry and ethnography, the engagement with the world is a dialogical process – one of continual translation (Tedlock 1999). Ethnographic poetry uses narrative and description to ‘point the way’ to some kind of ethnographic knowledge, rather than laying out a specific theory. It thus makes its own statement within the debate of representation versus evocation (Tedlock 1999: 157). But herein lies a common argument used to police the boundaries of ethnography and other creative genres; ethnography must be beyond evoking or even describing, and include an analytic component, else lose its right to self-identification as an academic process/genre. Is it making or withholding its own interpretation of culture? Does it describe, or theorize? This raises a much thornier question, about what shape the analytical takes in our discipline. Anthropological analysis is often undergirded by a set of implicit conventions such as the citation of theory, regular rhetorical shifts into more abstract registers, the use of academic jargon, and engagements with safe and well-trodden disciplinary debates. We would argue that poetry can also be analytical, but in a different mode, in how it juxtaposes and adjoins images and metaphors to stretch our thinking, how it uses language, sound, and rhythm to transform our sense of place, event, and idea anew, and how such ideas come to inhabit our bodies through their telling. As Nomi Stone writes, ethnography and poetry help us to understand

*what it is like to be inside a body and to be inside time. To write field-notes as a poet is to store the sensory and the musical alongside the analytic, to think in particular about the rhythms of that which is lived. These two modes of seeing spark and extend each other (2018: 46).*

Poetry, then, brings a physical component to knowledge production, so that ‘a lifeworld, a there and a then, can be summoned into our seeing as the music of the poem enters the body’ (Stone, quoted in Hagman and Sacco 2017). This is why we, as medical anthropologists who attend to forms of suffering and pain, find poetry to be so crucial a method for moving into and through our research questions.

**What Poetry Offers in Understanding Wellbeing and Pain**

Anthropologists have offered a range of analytical frames for understanding pain that move us beyond a purely somatic or biomedical viewpoint. The challenge to anthropologists, with our commitment to bearing witness to the experiential and phenomenological, is in understanding the embodied
immediacy of pain, ‘The particular qualities of the sting and throb of pain affecting a particular person – with a unique story, living in a certain community and historical period’ (Kleinman et al. 1994: 2). Pain is, as anthropologists show, something that links fleshy lives with social worlds, and is found at the centre of a ‘complex knot of bodily, psychological and philosophical conundrums’ (ibid.). Interpretations of pain are thus multiple, fluid, and culturally contingent (Jackson 1994). Distinct from disease, and often lacking testable, ‘objective’ biomarkers, pain can have a subjective and uncertain status in biomedicine, and understanding it anthropologically requires getting inside experience, diagnostic categories, and medical intervention, and coming to understand the gaps that exist between them. With its shifting, intimate quality, experiences of pain are often accompanied by forms of social silencing, which are themselves imbricated within the political, and within systems of inequality (see Das 1996). Yet as Susanna Trnka illustrates, pain is a communicative act, and ‘languages of pain act not only to initially alienate, but also to later re-integrate subjects into their social worlds” (Trnka 2005: 122). In this vein, Jason Throop (2010) shows how the strategies for dealing with the suffering that accompanies pain are entangled with the roots of ethical life, with culturally specific notions of virtue, endurance, persistence, strength, weakness, effort, and labour (see also Trnka 2005).

For the poet, as Jude Rosen (2018) notes, the challenge of communicating pain is often centred around its interiority, and isolating capacity. She explores the role of poetry in excavating pain, in the context of her movement from social science to poetry in parallel to her own journey with chronic pain. Rosen describes how ‘Acquiring a condition that wouldn’t go away, I acquired new words’ (2018: 41). As a medical sociologist, a poet, and a person living in a chronically ill body, she knows that while illness is constructed through words, the experience of it, through pain, is beyond them – ‘having no material referents and objects outside itself, no feeling for anything other than itself, no capacity for outward representation’ (ibid.: 49). Experiences of pain can resist language (Scarry 1988). The challenge for poetry is in reaching and representing this place.

Poetry can express pain (as physical sensation), but it can also express the consciousness of pain (i.e. suffering), and the consciousness of the consciousness of pain – forming a reflexive space in which both pain and suffering are explored and contextualised. An example of this, Tusiata Avia’s poems Ma’i Maliu I and Ma’i Maliu II are titled with the Samoan word for epilepsy, which literally translates to ‘death sickness’. The poems evoke both the cognitive and embodied experience of epilepsy’s symptoms (‘There is the blood halo on the wall’; ‘I sit on the couch, forget my father is dead, and then remember’), and the existential and practical dilemmas it involves (‘I measure myself against 23km marathons that I am not running’; ‘my daughter gets frustrated because I say “thingy” a lot’; ‘I call Selina to stand behind me on stage, just in case’). Avia’s poem worries about the worry, as much as it does the illness events. We come to see the uncertainty as part of the pain; a form of pain embedded in embarrassments, losses, and social constrictions. ‘Dead people aren’t allowed to drive’ cars, she writes, meaning that people with epilepsy can’t safely operate cars, but also communicating something of being understood as ‘dead’ via a) being framed by the Samoan term for this disorder, b) resembling the dead in her physical stillness when she is unconscious, c) experiencing a shift in consciousness during fits, when she is co-present with deceased family members, and d) being subject to a sort of social death via her limited capacity to partake in social life. As such, even as Avia’s poem captures the specificity, the non-generalizability of her illness experience, it also sets the experience within, or against, a broader web of social and relational contexts. The poem can itself be taken up as a cultural artefact, or it can be seen as a material trace of reflexive practice by the author, about what it is to live as a person with these particular forms of pain as spectres in everyday life.
As another example, a long poem called *The Wasting Game* by Philip Gross captures a father’s experience of watching his daughter hospitalized with *anorexia nervosa*. In part thirteen, he describes visceral aspects of the illness, from the appearance of her body and its biomedical interventions (‘ivory torsions in the wrist/ two spikes bandaged to drip in her veins’) to the smell of her breath (‘leaf-mould, mushroom-breathed, shit-smelled’). However its most potent evocation of pain is relational (‘She’s a question: Can/ You love this?/ Can you sit/ And watch the hours dissolving / in the drip of Parvolax and glucose’). It is a poem in which pain exists not just within the daughter’s body, but in the intersubjective space *between* father and daughter – a larger narrative on illness itself, and its interventions; a questioning risking love’s limits, its agonies, and thus highlighting the empathetic, relational pain (and resilience) that may form part of the caring relationships that surround particular forms of physical or psychological pain. Like ethnography, the poem does not therefore limit itself to evoking pain, but effectively works to place it in human contexts, with their simultaneous registers of possibility and foreclosure.

Poetry is not limited to description, and often we find a critical edge to it. Ugandan poet Henry Barlow for example, in *Building the Nation*, presents the story of the poet/narrator chauffeuring a government official to a lavish luncheon at a hotel. On the way back the sleepy, overfed politician starts a conversation in which he complains about the ‘stomach ulcers and wind’ he gains as a results of skipping meals to attend to ‘highly delicate diplomatic duties’. ‘The pains we suffering in building the nation!’, the politician exclaims, as the chauffer reflects silently that his own ulcers are in fact from routine hunger; contrasting the two men that will arrive at home that night, both ‘with terrible stomach pains/ The results of building the nation – Different ways’. In this way the poem frames this particular form of pain as an embodiment of structural inequities in Uganda in the 1970s. There are parallels between what this poem achieves, and ethnographies as representational forms which aim to both evoke and socially situate different forms of pain; to reflect on both the emic aetiological sense-making for those living in and through the pain, and to offer a more etic suggestion as to the structures (of politics, capital, and class) that generate particular forms of illness and pain, and reproduce them in predictable ways within social systems.

One final example is a contemporary poem called *The Mine Wife*, by New Zealand poet Tracey Slaughter, which focuses on the Pike River Mining tragedy. In one verse it aligns the 29% rate of return of the company with the body count after the disaster: ‘Love, you’re dead on/ bankable land’ the widow/narrator laments. The pain of that particular grief, so personal in earlier verses, is illuminated here as inherently political – inextricable from the economic activity of the mine in which many bodies lay unrecovered, a controversial situation in New Zealand. In this way the poem offers a critical lens amidst a rich evocation of (gendered and placed) embodiments of grief and loss, and the social context of the West Coast of Aotearoa New Zealand, that is hard not to see as an ethnographic exercise.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The opposition between ethnography and poetry ‘invites its own collapse, only to reshape itself into new positionings’ (Richardson 1994: 77). This insight encourages us to work at the fertile and shifting interstices of these categories, to be unsettled by their blurring boundaries. Poet/anthropologist Michael Jackson talks about switching between two kinds of truth (in Houston 2015: 279). Ethnographers, as participant-observers, insider-outsiders, reader-writers, are already so familiar with flexible modalities of thinking and working. With liminality, performance, translation and multiplicity.
As such we believe that it is very possible to incorporate poetry into ‘ethnography’, as we might formally consider it. Into ethnographic practice, and ethnographic writing. Into ethnographic being, perhaps. In thinking about human experiences of the body, of health and illness, of pain and suffering, joy and uncertainty alike, we believe that an ethnographic yearning to draw close to and understand can meet fruitfully with the poetic impetus to attend and evoke. Seeing poetry and ethnography as complementary routes to understanding human life, and human pain – its definition, and its many meanings.

References


Notes

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