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Breathing Room: Poetic Form as Resistance to Convention in the Ethnography of Suffering

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By Casey Golomski

Here I ruminate on recent writing experiments at the convergence of poetry and ethnography as a means to convey experiences of suffering. Recent ethnographies of suffering highlight innovative ways medical anthropologists embed themselves in their accounts of others' suffering, as well as their misapprehensions about what occurs in this process of witnessing. Dwelling in these misapprehensions shows the obvious potency of medical anthropological research to existential questions of care. As a standardized genre, however, ethnography transports readers and listeners in certain directions of knowing through conventions of analytic voice and staging of researcher positionality. I consider how poetic form can enable ethnographers to resist these conventions and re-sound ones' own and others' experiences of suffering beyond a biomedical register. I draw on recent examples from my own work and as part of a lineage that calls for integration between medical anthropology and the medical humanities.

A kind of house

Ethnographers are storytellers engaged in the project of conveying other peoples' experiences, re-presenting content of others' and our own lives in ways that we hope changes consciousness for those who bear witness to it. This is at least how I've come to see my own work and make it personally doable. As storytelling is one of our main professional outputs in anthropology, it is also a part of our livelihood. Thus, storytelling should feel viable.

Like anthropologists of ethnopoetics showed us through studying indigenous peoples' oral traditions, ethnography is itself a key mode of communication for particular cultural communities. It has certain non-static but conventional or semiotically regimented principles of aesthetics and form. Some of these are textually powerful and help make our contributions unique among other storytellers, such as journalists and the literati. Other conventions, however, might actually reroute readers' attention away from our storied information in unproductive ways.

Permit this line of symbolic thought: If ethnography is a kind of storytelling, storytelling is a kind of house. A house has a kind of architecture and is also a place of dwelling. As a way to interpret peoples' lives, dwelling refers to our everyday existential being in the world and material building of relational humanity in particular places.

Reading, writing, and listening are all dwelling-like, I think. Through them, we maneuver encounters with stories' inhabitants (both human and other-than-human). We follow particular narrative arcs as if they were passages, settling in zones we feel comfortable with or transfixed by. We return to sites that give us warmth, follow characters who befuddle us or with whom we move because they host us. Windows and openings between rooms call us to look into scenes from advantageous, perhaps hidden viewpoints. We pass by lines of text we find repetitive, like bad wallpaper that recopies itself too far along a corridor. We paint ourselves into scenes, recalling our own colored joys and misfortunes. We feel existentially lost in reading dark situations, grasping toward the key-hole's light from a cellar door.

Anthropologist Jarrett Zigon (2018) writes how people dwelling in difficult situations like debility, poverty, or racism re-orient their consciousness, practice, and adaptability so their "being is not reduced to... something like being trapped." As ethnographers in the house of storytelling, I think we can re-do our craft to free human beings we write about from difficult textual, spatial and existential captivities. Doing so can give us what I call breathing room.

Writing and using poetic form has been a way I've recently experimented with possibilities and limits for conveying stories, and more specifically, for conveying experiences of suffering we encounter as ethnographers who are also vulnerable. In this essay I explore the convergence of ethnography and poetry, examining how the latter can amplify the former by suspending analytic verbiage, and how, for ethnography, poetic form can give breathing room on the page to the lives we want to write about.

Anti-structure

Kent Maynard (2002) wrote that American anthropology and poetry have parallel trajectories. Both went through transformative moments in the later part of the 20thc as authors became reflexively suspicious of structure as both textual and theoretical framing, seeing their own impositions of order on human experience as more imaginative than objective. Much poetry abandoned stricter forms like iambic pentameter to focus on lyricism, experiential surprise, and or to "defy all obvious sense of form" (230). "What animates poets [now] is less the agonized attempt to express the particular through the structural demands of, say, a villanelle [haiku, or the

like], than the supposedly more existential agony of facing the blank, white page” (231). Maynard compares this shift to anthropology’s turn away from essentialized notions of totalizing culture(s) and structure(s)—re-construed as hegemonic or fictional by feminist anthropologists, critical interpretivists, post-modernists, and others—toward body and embodiment, personal experience, and practice in the 1980-1990s.

However, even in today’s post-structuralist field, the way ethnographies are composed show how conventions of editors, writers, and presumed audience construct very specific kinds of texts. Some work in medical anthropology and the anthropology of religion I’ve read in the past few years in research, teaching, or review capacities that lead me to claim this, as well as my own writing journey.^[i] I don’t think all these ethnographies fit this bill, but you can spot some formulas when you read enough.

Much of our writing starts with vignettes. We then tell readers what we are saying, how we are saying it, and who we are as anthropologists. An important, but rigid kind of insertion into contemporary ethnography is the positional confession: I embody, detect, and (mis) represent from a particular stance. Accept my words with a grain of experiential spice from the field through which I’ve flavored this readable morsel. This is followed by a chapter on theory or the background to the area, place, or culture group under study: how did this geo-historical and -ethnological site come to be a reality through histories of political, environmental and epidemiological change, or anthropology’s re-constructions of knowledge about and in it?

For example, in Africanist medical anthropology books, Nolwazi Mkhwanazi (2016) offers some striking review notes. Many begin with a post-colonial history of how structural adjustment decimated public healthcare, thus laying grounds for epidemics. They then chart dynamics of suspicion and distrust among states, local agents, and Africans, and local “creative crafting of knowledge, meaning, and action” to overcome these circumstances. These constellate into what Mkhwanazi identifies, borrowing from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as a “single story,” or perhaps more specifically, a singular textual formula for storytelling about care and suffering.

Ethnographically, peoples’ sweet moments and bitter losses then populate these textual structures. Some individuals are biographical stars or features of whole chapters. Fewer are co-authors. Most are present in stories given as evidence for a topical theme, their rich lines of quotation sandwiched between quasi-omniscient statements that range from the declarative to the speculative. Indeed, anthropologists’ moves through speculation, becoming, indeterminacy, and incommensurability^[ii] are the

newest iterations in breaking from structure, and signaling interest in undoing molds that define how we theorize and maybe write altogether. In practice, however, as critical heterodoxy, these movements get regimented along lines of institutional-academic-publishing power as a new disciplinary orthodoxy that carries sociocultural and economic capital. Where one is in their professional career matters, obviously, and gives license to write as one wishes.

Poetic form

Anthropologists' personal experiences of death, suffering, and illness are ethnographically catalyzing in this regard, compelling some to write beyond these noted conventions. Moving works include Janelle Taylor's autoethnographic work on her own mother's dementia (2010) and About Farman's filmic production of his wife's cancer diagnosis, Amazonian ayahuasca-healing journey, visions of impending death, and their collaborative documentary efforts of this journey before her actual passing (Caraballo and Norzi 2016). Renato Rosaldo's wife's death-in-the-field has been recently recast in a stunning collection of poetry (2014).

Poetry is the form I've thought about recently and tried wielding to make sense of suffering, to give its articulation breathing room on the ethnographic page. In general, there has been plenty of synergy between anthropology and poetry, including Ruth Benedict (writing with a pseudonym), Hilda Kuper (the first Western anthropologist of my main fieldwork locale), Stanley Diamond (in the first issue of *Cultural Anthropology*), Michael D. Jackson, Adrie Kusserow, Nomi Stone, Ather Zia, and those (including myself, Golomski 2016, 2019) in *Anthropology and Humanism*, the only AAA journal to publish poetry.

Many anthropologists effectively wield others' poetry in their books. The most sustained use in medical anthropology recently, I think, is Joao Biehl's (2013[2005]) setting of Catarina's "dictionaries" in *Vita*, both interspersed throughout the text and as an appendix for further reading and analysis. In *Vita*, the articulation of suffering through verse is raw; its form is replicated from her notebook to his book, from spidery hand-writing to Janson font typeset[[iiii](#)]. Biehl's is a powerful textual move to represent extraordinary articulations of suffering that constellate in space and across a person's lifetime through their own and others' poetry:

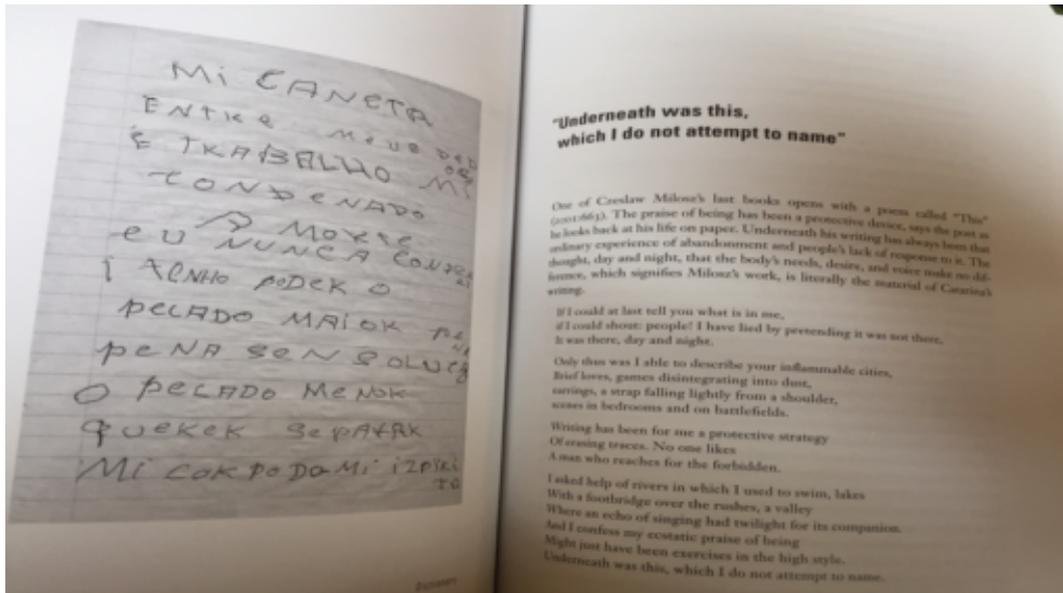


Figure 1: poetry by Catarina and Czesław Miłosz in Joao Biehl's (2013[2005]) *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, University of California Press, pp. 312-313.

What is more common is poetry's appearance as small tidbits hovering in the blank space between a chapter title and the chapter's first words. Sometimes they hover or (pre?) occupy fore- and after-words and prefaces. One recent beautiful repurposing is Kathryn Rhine's (2016) invocations of poet Kwame Dawes in her book's conclusion and introduction:



Conclusion: Evidence and Substance

There is substance in the gathering
of bodies battered by this disease.
There is evidence in the quiet promise
we make to be here again next week.
There is substance in the sweet taste
of coconut water, the scent of morning.
There is evidence in the songs a slim man
sings, healing as the balm of warmed oil.
There is substance in the expletives shattering
our peace, the tears, the lament, the fear.
There is evidence in the hum of recognition,
the comfort of hands held tightly.
There is substance in the streets walked
to tell people to hope for tomorrow.

Kwame Dawes, *Faith*

Throughout this book, I have documented the centrality of hope in HIV-positive women's narratives of their lives: for health and well-being; for love, marriage, and children; for education, work, and economic prosperity; and for security and longevity. Through an ethnographic lens, I have located these dreams in women's lived realities. Their aspirations for

Figure 2: Poetry by Kwame Dawes in Kathryn Rhine's (2016) *The Unseen Things: Women, Secrecy and HIV in Northern Nigeria*, Indiana University Press, p. 154.

Still, I wonder, what is the purpose of poetry's use in these examples? The fact that editors let it appear like this arguably justifies its use, but in terms of ethnographic theory, the convention emerges without an explanation as to why or how.

These uses are different though than *ethnographic poetry*, what Maynard and Cahnmann (2010) describe as "verse written by researchers based on 'field' study" (5). Ethnographic poetry is akin to social realist poetry that is "attentive to, and seeks to understand, the social world" (9) and employs a range of forms. They note that "poetry as ethnographic representation is doubly challenged: to be well-crafted, artful in verse, and to attain validity in research results." Such work is based on "empirically 'true' experiences that may conflict directly with the mantra of good

poetry (at least in much of the West), that it is better to be ‘true’ to our feelings and aesthetic excellent, than ‘true’ to fact” (12). As Maynard and Cahnmann suggest, “a poet may write more to what one does not yet know; an ethnography writes more to what one already knows. The ethnographic poet ... must do both” (12). Ethnographic poetry’s aims are to “be more attentive to how affect as well as form can convey meaning” (5), “demanding swift associations and evocative language... to name and claim subjectivities and contradictions experienced in ‘the field’” (7), and “revise and remove excess, highlighting emotions and attitudes, our stance, and ideas” (8). Practically, how does one do this all as a medical anthropologist in our ethnographies of suffering?

Suffering

Over a period of ten years, doing fieldwork in the African kingdom formerly known as Swaziland, I wrote a dissertation and then a book about the contemporary cultural history of AIDS-related dying, death, and funerals (Golomski 2018). Over six of those ten years, I also experienced the prolonged loss of a partner due to chronic psychiatric-behavioral illness and substance abuse. I beheld multiple near-death experiences, FMLA invocations, fleeting suicidality, emotional and physical violence, job loss, state-mandated prison rehabilitation, and homelessness. It was a social death.

As I wrote more intensively about others’ death and dying in “the field”, I grew more silently insular, witnessing the loss of a love in close orbit “at home.” The calculative, encyclopedic method of documentation and note-taking I absorbed in graduate training in some ways gave me tools to articulate the structural and local cultural processes I saw in social dying: shifting clinical terminology; social work and hospital procedural pathways; the expressivity of salty, agitated ER nurses whose own sons were addicts, and the fresh-faced, newly-placed clinical residents whose cool authority barely masked their searching gaze; the carceral politics of mental health “treatment”; myself and another alone in a two-room loft apartment.

Despite learning much about all of this by virtue of “participant-observation” in some sick sense, the velocity of domestic closeness made writing about my own suffering *the way I knew how to ethnographically write about suffering*, prohibitive. I had few words. What could be verbalized tended to come out slowly in therapy and small associational meetings for others like me: afflicted kin. Like contemporary poetry, our culturally contingent lifeworld brims with indirection, ambiguity, lacunae, indeed with “downright silence” (Maynard and Cahnmann 2010: 6). From such zones of silence, which we all variably inhabit, a new narrative voice emerged for me. Through it, I found myself (re)

constructing experiences of suffering in poetic form (Golomski 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2019).

Mystery reaps thoughtfulness, and vice versa. For often-long-winded anthropologists, open space on a page, brightened by a small word count and fewer lines or stanzas might lead to asking what is missing in an explanation. It should also lead to thinking about what is (purposefully) unsaid or cannot be said. Minutiae has density.

We are tasked by our discipline to explain suffering, but we are not actually forced to explain it in a particular way. We are, however, strongly pushed to explain it in conventional ways, in the writing and editorial styles of key publishing forums. There is an obvious politics here. I faced this when writing my own book. I found myself striving to use poetic form that felt practically and ethically right to convey experiences of dying of AIDS. The rules of copyediting shot through the writing experiment, however. I recoiled. Then I removed it from the final version:

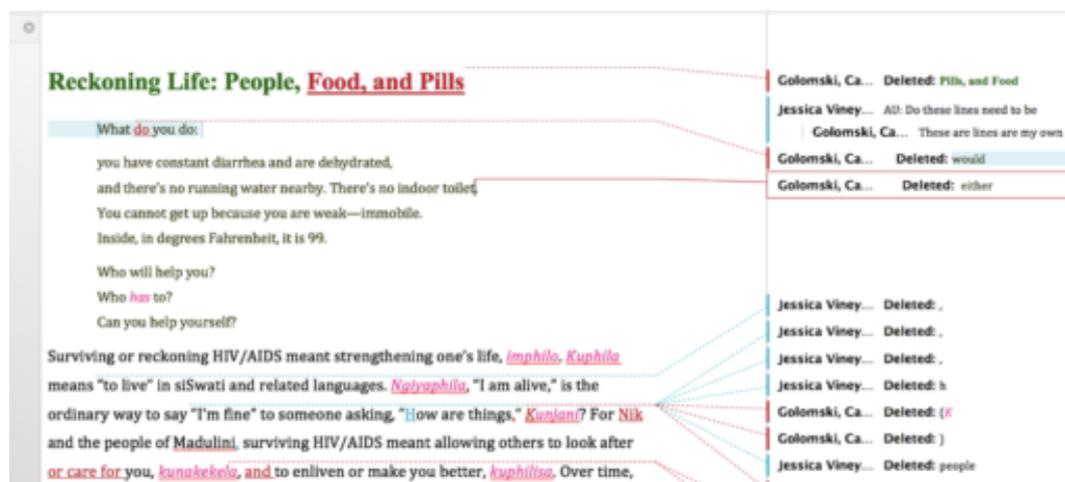


Figure 3: Screenshot of copyedited comments on chapter subsection in book manuscript (2017), now Casey Golomski (2018) *Funeral Culture: AIDS, Work and Cultural Change in an African Kingdom*, Indiana University Press, p. 43.

This is where resistance comes to the fore, or perhaps inability to resist textual structures, given pre-existing hierarchies within our field and our own situated vulnerabilities. Resistance to convention in the ethnography of suffering is something I advocate for, even if I cannot always do it myself. It can come in alternative forms of writing we choose to adopt as ethnographic storytellers, the venues we make use of (social media, poetry or literary-friendly journals and websites), and audiences we seek to address and transform. If stories are our greatest resource to change consciousness about the lifeworld we inhabit with others, we need to

multi-modally communicate, and this does not necessarily mean saying more.

Poetic form disrupts the ethnography we already know how to do. It forces pause to eye-track unconventional formatting, reading through the “existential agony” of “the blank, white page”, born from an author’s self-reflexive (in-) ability to tell and show experiences of suffering that mark the limits of language. As writers generally know, facing the silent, blank space is scary. (Don’t we need to fill it up with some thing?)

But just look.

Listen.

Here is room to dwell

And breathe.

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Notes

[i] See: Wendland 2010, Garcia 2010, Zigon 2010, Livingston 2012, Wentzel 2013, Biehl 2013, Jackson 2013, van Wyk 2014, Mojola 2014, Keshavjee 2014, Stevenson 2014, Werbner 2015, Benton 2015, Myers 2015, Yates-Doerr 2015, Olson and van Beek 2015, Burchardt 2015, Werbner 2015, Rhine 2016, Wyrod 2016, Cheney 2017, Meiu 2017, Haynes 2017, Hunleth 2017, Saethre and Stadler 2017, Biruk 2018, McKay 2018, Hackman 2018, Hardin 2018, Golomski 2018.

[ii] See: Povinelli 2001, James and Helmreich 2009, Handler 2009, Tsing 2015, Pandian and McLean 2017, Biehl and Locke 2017.

[iii] There are ethics, semiotics, materialities, and politics of transposition here, of course.

[Casey Golomski](#) is a cultural and medical anthropologist and Africanist with strong interests in the humanities, currently appointed as an assistant

professor at the University of New Hampshire and a visiting researcher at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Following on long-term research on AIDS deaths in the kingdom formerly known as Swaziland, his new work in South Africa explores matters of memory/history and end-of-life in an inter-racial nursing home.

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