

“I FEEL LIKE I’M MORE LIKELY TO GET TRIGGERED, I GUESS?”: A POETRY CLUSTER ABOUT SAFETY IN RAPE CULTURE RESEARCH

Amber Moore

Abstract

This paper offers and explores a poetry cluster of found list poems written from data collected in a feminist literacy education research study. The larger project examined secondary English teacher candidates’ responses to teaching and learning about sexual assault narratives from a trauma text set, as well as pedagogy for addressing sexual violence, rape culture, and Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement, in the literature classroom. The selected poems are raw, much like the subject matter they collectively speak to, and function together as micro collection that carry a particular politics: exploring what it means to resist rape culture as a witness of, and, potentially, as a teacher of, trauma stories.

Author Bio

Amber Moore is a Banting Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests include adolescent literacies, feminist pedagogies, teacher education, arts-based research, rape culture, and trauma literature, particularly YA sexual assault narratives. Her work can be found in journals such as *Cultural Studies in Critical Methodologies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*, among others. Contact: amberjanellemoore@gmail.com

Acknowledgement

This scholarship research in this article was generously supported by The University of British Columbia’s Department of Language and Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education (4YF Scholarship), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship), the Killam Trusts (Killam Doctoral Scholarship), as well as several UBC Endowed Awards.



A poetry preface: The survivor on 17th Avenue

She walks with her hands stuffed
in dark pockets of a coat that
dwarfs her.
It stains her clothes,
leaving red smudges on cream blouses
like burn marks
on wayward skin.

People seem to move out of her way,
like they inherently
know to keep
their distance;
she has long arms and
can strike quickly.

She's not swaying like she
used to- that
sash-*ay*-ing.
She stalks now,

p
u

in a straight line, shoulders
Her hair even tries to
escape her, flapping around,
as if fleeing, or
calling for help.
It almost sounds shrill.

I could call out,
warn her about what's to come but
I've been made quiet.
She sticks to this street like a bruise.
Wait and watch
her fade. I have faith she will soon
lighten, blend back.

Before beginning my journey into academia as a feminist literacy education scholar, I was a secondary English teacher who consistently prioritizes (and still does) teaching trauma literature – especially sexual assault narratives, in my pedagogy. As we are currently still in the midst of Tarana Burke's significant #MeToo reckoning, attending to issues of sexual violence and rape culture in schools is thankfully becoming increasingly commonplace (e.g. see Boehm et al., 2021; Colantonio-Yurko et al., 2018; Hewitt & Hol-

land, 2021); however, this was not so much the case while I was a teacher in a small city in Alberta, Canada where the subject matter still seemed somewhat taboo. Working with my high school students to unpack, for example, how rape culture presents in classic works like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or the young adult novel *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), I found their responses were always critical, compelling, and yes, sometimes concerning (e.g. see Moore, 2019; Moore & Begoray, 2017), which inspired me to continue focusing on how this issue can be meaningfully addressed in literacy learning. The poem that opens this article is one I wrote years ago during that time, in my classroom, alongside my grade 10 students who were poetically responding to a text about this particular kind of violence. I offer it here as a kind of artefact of where this project ultimately emerges from – that is, a dedication to resisting rape culture, especially through education, as well as an entrypoint into the research discussed in this paper.

With this in mind, the “poetry cluster” (Butler-Kisber and Stewart, 2009) featured in this article emerges from a feminist poetic inquiry carried out as part of larger study conducted at a university in Western Canada that examined the complex and critical ways in which secondary English pre-service teachers responded to teaching and learning about rape culture, sexual assault, and Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement (e.g. see Moore 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). Participants were recruited from two sections of a Bachelor of Education course focused on foundational literacy learning; the author was a guest and guest lecturer in the course, granted permission to recruit and run this study by both the courses' regular instructors and the institution's ethics board (H18-02072). These emerging educators were a diverse group who engaged in this study because of their criticality and dedication to embedding social justice work into English literature education. This research explored how 23 participants responded to a trauma text set of diverse sexual assault narratives, as well as pedagogy for teaching such stories with their future adolescent literacy learners during a two-day workshop that I ran focused on teaching trauma literature to adolescent literacy learners. Part of the “double strategy” (Lykke, 2010) approach – that is, the use of two methodologies for this research which first included a feminist critical discourse analysis with the following methods: individual interviews with all participants, two focus group sessions, analysis of workshop materials from participating pre-service teachers, and a research diary; second, what followed is focused on in this paper, feminist poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2018a; 2018b; 2020a; 2020b; Ohito & Nyachae, 2018; Prendergast, 2015), employed to take a deeper, second look at data.

Why poetic inquiry?

Poetic inquiry served this project well because this arts-based methodology can be experimental and as such, can creatively and critically challenge researchers and readers alike (Miller, 2019). Poetry can offer different ways of knowing and so poetic inquiry complements a project focused on resistance against rape culture because to do antirape work, as Buchwald et al. (2005) argue, “imagination must be summoned” (p. xi). Further, it is also an excellent methodological choice for handling complexity in research and embracing divergent thought (Gorlich, 2016) which is useful for examining the intense topic of sexual trauma; further, as Leggo (2018) asserts, “Poetry can transform our hearts, imaginations, intellects, and conversations” (p. 73). Poetic inquiry has been meaningful to me as an emerging scholar (e.g. see Moore 2022c; 2020; 2020; 2019; 2018a; 2018b) and it is a methodology I find myself returning to. As a feminist scholar who understands poetry as a part of living a feminist life (Ahmed, 2017), this methodology is deeply significant; like other poet-scholars (e.g. Leggo, 2005; Patrick, 2016; Richardson, 1992), writing research poetry “integrates my research self with my poet self (Richardson, 1992). I am a poet and a researcher: my poetry informs my research, and my research informs my poetry (Leggo, 2005)” (Patrick, 2016, p. 385). And so, poetry is used to

create, ruminate on and present data in a powerful form that more traditional approaches might not allow for.

Three poetry clusters were written after line-by-line coding of the data – transcription produced from the interviews with pre-service teacher participants as well as two focus group sessions, based around the project's focal themes of safety, silence, and social action. Poetry clusters can be especially helpful with teasing out nuances and providing greater depth in examining particular topics (Butler-Kisber, 2010) and as such, the poems were created from multiple transcripts to construct a collective voice and to see the data differently. This paper explores one of these three clusters in depth: the safety poems, which are all found poems written in the form of list poetry.

Why found poetry?

Found poetry is produced out of poignant words and phrases from existing texts which are then extracted and arranged into poetry using line breaks and space (Faulkner, 2020a). Found poetry was especially selected for this project as a way to directly incorporate and center participants' voices into the work. Said another way, found poetry particularly fits the contours of a project goal to first begin with an artful attentiveness (Leggo, 2008) to the data. Writing this poetry was discursive as the poetry writing demanded much re-reading, revising, and sometimes a kind of perseverating during editing. As such, this project contains a form of found poetry that Butler-Kisber (2010) notes is 'treated,' meaning it is "changed in a profound or systemic manner" (p. 3). And yet, at the same time, it is also critical not to try to seek control (Leggo, 2008) – a tenet of poetic inquiry that again resonates in antirape work because sexual violence and rape culture hinges on taking control, choice, and consent. Overall, this inquiry helped to ensure that the findings were grounded solidly in the data; like Patrick (2016), I also felt as though during several moments of data analysis, "In the end/ writing a found poem/ was my epiphany" (p. 392).

Why found list poetry?

This article hones in on one of the three poetry clusters (to read about the other poems, see Moore, 2020c; Moore, 2022) produced during analysis in particular: the safety poems. The safety poetry cluster consisted of 10 found list poems from interview and focus group data coded under the major theme of 'safety,' which included a number of secondary codes such as *Classroom safety*, *Precarious moments*, and *Women's safety pedagogies*, for example. More particularly, the list poetry, which is one form of found poetry dating back to the Bible and Homeric epic but was especially favoured by Modern poets such as W.H. Auden and Walt Whitman (Lehman, 2002), was particularly selected for a few reasons. First, list poetry is a staple of school poetry pedagogy; indeed, schools abound in lists (Soong, 2020) and it offers a somewhat familiar, friendly, inviting model (Pullinger, 2015; Soong, 2020). For example, as Bowkett (2009) writes in his poetry writing pedagogical text, "One value of list poems is that they make you look around and notice things" (p. 102). And so, it seemed appropriate to employ in a project focused on reimagining how rape culture can be resisted in schools with and alongside pre-service teachers because engaging in trauma literature pedagogy can be difficult and risky.

Next, found list poetry was selected because safety in general is often communicated via lists and this project aimed to challenge and counter this often-simplistic tendency, especially as it unfolds in response to rape culture(s) within rape prevention discourses (e.g. Bedora & Nordmeyer, 2015). For example, especially in the case of women's safety pedagogy, many higher education institutions have amassed lists of

precautionary measures for avoiding rape. As Bedora and Nordmeyer (2015) found in their examination of 40 college websites, it is commonplace for post-secondary schools to post rape prevention and risk reduction “tips” like “keep a telephone near your bed” (p. 538), largely directed towards female students. And so, list poetry was deliberately selected to poetically push back against this problematic paradox wherein especially women are always at risk of being attacked, and yet they alone are always in charge of protecting themselves against this violence; like the subject in the poem that opens this paper: “She’s not swaying like she/ used to- that/sash-ay-ing./ She stalks now.” Such lists of tips demonstrate that girls’ bodies, are usually understood as potential rape spaces (Hall, 2004). Although the lists acknowledge (to some degree) the prevalence of rape culture everywhere generally and on school campuses specifically, such tip lists suggest that violence typically happens due to youthful inexperience, intoxication, miscommunication, and so forth, rather than because of pervasive misogynistic cultures, rapists, and the norms and systems under patriarchy that protect both (Manne, 2017). In contrast then, the found list poems in this cluster represent data from participants doing critical and considerate wrangling with the difficult subject matter of rape culture and sexual violence, as well as with texts that represent unique experiences with it. Finally, like Ohito and Nyachae (2019), list found poetry aided with distilling findings into poetry and this process is detailed in the following section.

Writing the safety poems: The process

And so, with this backdrop of intentionality in mind, the selected three poems shared below represent a kind of microcluster of a larger cluster of list found poetry for an inquiry into the data coded as ‘safety.’ I too “consider it prudent to make my artistic choices transparent” (Patrick, 2016, p. 388) and so although “there is no template or prescribed approach for creating found poetry” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 5), like Ohito and Nyachae (2019), who pair feminist critical discourse analysis with Black feminist poetry to deepen research rigor, I paired feminist critical discourse analysis and poetic inquiry, writing found poems to explore the data anew.

To prepare to write the first poems I used line-by-line coding to identify all declarative I-statements that emerged from the interview and focus group transcripts that spoke to various safety discourses. To write these poems, I grouped the I-statements by theme and rearranged them, often using space on the page to visually extend the analysis; for example, with “On fear,” I listed the I-statements according to length, staggering longest to shortest in an attempt to convey an image of a kind of collective spiral of fear so that it almost looks like a tornado touching down; my intention with this was to represent the sense of magnitude and fear that is felt by so many when addressing the topic of sexual violence, including several of the participants. Next, while writing “On frustration,” I arranged I-statements in a confused manner, forcing the eye to dart across the page to read in a disrupted fashion in an effort to represent moments from the study where participants described and/or worked through feeling annoyance, confusion, disappointment, exasperation, etc. Finally, for “On feeling conflicted,” I wrote a kind of dual column poem by isolating bolder declarative I-statements on the left and more uncertain I-statements on the right as I tried to communicate a sense of conflict and division as well as to represent moments where participants expressed feeling conflicted about the subject matter, stories, and themselves as potential teachers of these issues and texts.

The safety poems

On fear

I've never read it so, you know, I knew that it was a book about sexual assault um... but I still was like,
nervous.

I've done it before, but with literature, I feel like I'm more likely to get triggered, I guess?
I've never done that – I don't think.

I'm not afraid of the thing, it's you're afraid of the feeling of being afraid.
I'm actually really, really shy and an introverted person. Surprise!
I'm just like, 'Oh my god, this is so scary.'
I'm really day-to-day-ing it.

I don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow!
I don't know how they're going to portray this.
I don't know.
I know if I thought about my practicum, I'd get... nervous.
I knew the serious thing was coming.

I was thinking about students the whole time.
I was watching the whole thing happening.

I mean, I understand being afraid.
I just felt scared the whole time.

On frustration

I've been out of school...		I want to help you.		I read it and ... I was pretty sure that he raped her and I Googled it because it was very subtle and like, I want to say like 50% of the discourse on that says she was seduced so she agreed eventually
I'm – I'm conscious of how I come across and I	don't want to be that crazy Black girl that got hostile in class, you know?	I'm – I'm – yeah, I'm open to having constructive, meaningful dialogue, but a lot of the time, there's a lot of emotion involved...	I'm kind of being told what to teach.	
I wrote down a little note like, some things I agreed with and some things I wanted to question further...	I think of that as like, a very progressive idea.		I'm not cutting anyone off	I'm talking a lot.
How to address... you know, how do we talk		You know... these people are really talking about	social justice ... what do they know about social justice?	I mean ...
	about ... racism in the classroom, like, all of this stuff...			I really wish they were giving us concrete skills... on how to address rape culture in the classroom.
I don't have time to be like, 'racism is real.'	I want to make sense of things.	I'm just like, in that	headspace a little bit...	I really don't like the book and I really don't like the [laughs] discourse around it.
I have this other personal dilemma with like, my – my brother and his conception of class...	I feel badly for saying this again, but there's all these white people.	I'm in my class and I find myself having to restrain myself.		I want to know how obvious it is.
			I – I'm Caucasian...	that's great...
I'm like, okay, like... that's also coercion but this is also was whatever century... and so... it – yeah- it kind of drives me crazy a little bit when it's just like, 'Okay... she didn't really want to... but then they had sex.'			I don't know	
		I don't think it needs to be done.		
	I don't have time for that.			I'm trying to think

On feeling conflicted

I'm saying it should be.	I just said...
I grew up Catholic.	I have decided like... like whatever. I think those conversations can sometimes be like, the most valuable...
I'm going to enjoy the text in and of itself.	I think, for me... straightness is like a... complicated um... [pause] challenge... I remember being an atheist... oh, that's another identity thing.
I don't agree with it.	I was like... 'Okay, I think I have to separate this a little bit.'
I'm wrong.	I could tell you that I've spent a lot of time talking I was like, 'I am 100% behind you,' and at times I was like, ready to get upset... I'm always looking at these things and going, 'Okay but like, that sounds great ... um... but it's so much more complicated than that... in a courtroom.'
I was just going to say that.	I'm not... no I'm not forgiving him...
I know about this person from his writing.	I forget his name – the Stanford guy, like... I'm sure he has his reasons and I'm sure they're not necessarily like, you've like... these dickhead reasons...
I taught one of Rupi Kaur's poems.	I could tell you that I've spent a lot of time talking
I want to do it correctly and properly.	I've been thinking about this a lot, like... so diversity issues – I try to... work... uh, responsibly with the kind of... um, things like power and privilege that I feel come with just being a straight guy and a straight white guy. I just really love some of her poems so...
I also felt conflicted because of the conversation we had in class	I liken that to... the white people.
I felt weird teaching it.	I'm aware of – of how much easier I've had things in my life...
I don't know.	I'm trying to think of things that I don't agree with...
I don't know.	I was like, 'Man! They have all these like, great, progressive views and my profes- sor at the time was like, 'You know he's... Mormon, right?' I also felt... ehm...

These three poems each speak to distinct emotions that arose among teacher candidates as they touched on the issue safety in their responses to sexual assault narratives and pedagogy for teaching such trauma texts. To provide a bit of insight on these poems, because each line represents a unique moment and story from the study, in what follows, I hone in on a specific line from each poem and offer more on where these pieces emerge from.

Beginning with “On fear,” the declarative I-statements offer a glimpse at how some teachers in training do the significant work of engaging with trauma stories and consider how they might bring such stories into their future classrooms even though it might be fear-inducing. Lines such as “I feel like I’m more likely to get triggered, I guess?” particularly struck a chord with me, so much so that it is in the title of this paper. This is because this participant was discussing how she absolutely planned to teach sexual assault narratives – indeed, she is a former sexual assault educator herself, but she is also a victim-survivor. As such, she was mindful of the particular risks she takes with engaging in this pedagogy as it might also be triggering for her to carry out. Such pedagogical commitments to social justice are so meaningful and like her, several of these pre-service teachers demonstrated that they were moving towards doing what literacy scholars such as Johnson and Kerkoff (2018) call for; centering English education in the paradigm shift that moves us all away from rape culture and towards a culture of consent, even if it is hard and scary.

Despite its title, I would argue that “On frustration” offers a great deal of hope, demonstrating how these pre-service teachers worked through challenging moments in their responses to critically considering antirape literacy pedagogy; for example, one participant experienced a moment of frustration with herself during the focus group, represented in the line, “I’m talking a lot.” In this moment, she passionately shared about a time during her own literacy learning when she addressed the undercurrent of rape culture in a classic novel but her classmates and teacher dismissed her analysis. In the middle of sharing this difficult moment that clarified for her how educators need to be creating space to address such issues ethically and not engage in damaging silencing practices, she paused to self-reprimand and apologize to the everyone, worried that she was dominating the focus group discussion. After much non-verbal encouragement that urged her to continue, another participant further demonstrated her appreciation of this anecdote by asking the frustrated participant to debrief in more depth later on, one-on-one, to help her hone her pedagogy. This seemed quite meaningful for the frustrated participant because she often seemed to self-chastise, worrying that she was taking up too much learning space.

Finally, while “On feeling conflicted” offers many moments that express feeling unsettled, they are filled with insight. A line that particularly struck me is “Okay, I think I need to separate this a little bit,” which was offered by a participant sharing how he was really grappling with whether or not we can separate the art from the artist – particularly if that creator is embroiled in and contributing to rape culture in some way. In this moment, he was reflecting on the back-and-forth thinking he had been doing regarding how to make decisions about whose work he can ethically teach and to what extent authors’ behaviour and politics should inform what texts he decides to teach his students. In our ensuing conversation during the one-on-one interview, he and I went on to draw from an excellent essay by Gay (2018) on this issue to inform our talk and acknowledge the powerful position English teachers have with curating their syllabi.

Concluding thought

These three safety poems are certainly raw - they represent raw data bits from a study on the very raw topic of sexual trauma. Indeed, as poetic inquiry scholars have asserted, poetic inquiry poems are not necessarily poetic per se. For example, Furman, Leitz, and Langer (2006) clearly distinguish between literary and research poetry, arguing “the term [research poem] connotes the use of poetry less for expansive and literary means, and more for the purposes of generating or presenting data” (p. 27), which I have offered here. Prendergast (2009) has importantly argued that while “poetic inquiry is, in exemplary practices, indistinguishable from literary poetry” (p. xxxvi), I acknowledge that this micro cluster is not exemplary, and is distinguishable. And yet, in the same breath, when it comes to poetically investigating rape culture, as I have written before, “I admit that I care less about turning anyone on to these pieces. This poetry has not been processed into a sharp, smooth set of upcycled pages, but rather carries more of a DIY-texture: bumpy, softly frayed around the edges, and unabashedly raw, even “off-putting” perhaps” (Moore, 2020a, p. 6). As such, once again, I offer these pieces as a representation that resisting rape culture is in need of immediate and ongoing attention; the rawness communicates the very real urgency of this issue - that “we are all part of [rape culture], it is terrible, and we need to do something – anything – to eradicate it” (Gruber, 2016, p. 1028). And so, one “something” done here is providing attention to the momentousness of each moment (Leggo, 2008) in the data through poetry. To end on a poetic note, I bookend this paper with another far-from-exemplary poem – this one written during a hard moment as I was in the thick of this research:

New World

They stop.
It is a new world.

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