The Research Poet/The Poet Researcher: Choices and Obligations for Poetic Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, researchers have debated the extent to which practitioners of poetic inquiry should feel obligated to generate text that excels both as research and as poetry. This article enters the debate by tracing changes made to a 'found' research poem. I generated the poem from excerpts taken from participants' writings and then employed a series of revision techniques: from Saunders' informal method to a more orthodox checklist constructed from the recommendations of a range of poets, and, finally, in response to critiques from members of a writing group. The focus of this process was to find the point at which the product became appreciably better than the original draft but also stayed true to the participants' meaning and language. I argue here that extensive revision may enhance the quality of a research poem, but remaining close to participants' intent and wording should be the first and foremost methodological goal. Although a number of previous articles have referenced the 'quality' debate, none, to my knowledge, have systematically tracked the process of analysis and draft improvement. The work will be of interest to readers because the article explores the choices and obligations faced by researchers employing this method.

KEYWORDS: Writing, poetic inquiry, qualitative research

Qualitative research allows us to make sense of the social world, especially from the emic (insider) perspective, but it does more than that. At its best, it also "captures one's soul" (Morse & Field, 1996, p. 1). Ruth Behar (1996) concurs, suggesting that a qualitative approach demands a stance of vulnerability in which the researcher not only studies and analyzes but feels—and conveys that feeling to others.

Poetry "helps us to be more awake, more aware, more alive," asserts Nadia Colburn (2022), but it does more than that. As Emily Dickinson (1945) declares, the poet is responsible to "tell all the truth but tell it slant" (p. 233). Colburn notes that viewing reality from the side allows for a truth that cannot always be attained by looking at a situation straight on. This process allows us to attend to a variety of available meanings (Jones, 2023) and assume a position of empathy (Osborn, 2016).

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In comparing the purpose of these two endeavors, Glenn (2013) notes that researchers and poets engage in similar activities such as "close observation, attention to words and immersion in and understanding of cultural and symbolic resonances" (p. 134). In addition, both Behar and Jones highlight the role of emotion although, as Behar (1996) frets, there is discomfort about that in the academy: do "we want to give [emotion] a seminar room, a lecture hall, or just a closet we can air out now and then"? (p. 16).

Nevertheless, within the field of poetic inquiry—that is, the type of research in which findings are presented as poems based on data—a controversy currently exists about the quality of these poems. This article examines repeated revisions of a data-based poem and the extent to which the series of drafts improve over time but also remain deeply reflective of the original data. The research questions I posed were: (1) At what point during that series of revisions was the poem appreciably "better" than the original draft? (2) Over the course of revision, at what point did the poem lose the essence of the participants' ideas (as I see it, feelings of both hope and doubt) and the richness and uniqueness of their language? I argue that extensive revision may enhance the quality of a research poem, but remaining close to participants' intent and language should be the first priority of poetic inquiry, as it is the priority of all qualitative research. It is the intent of this article to add to the methodological knowledge about poetic inquiry by describing a process that leads to a rich research and poetic partnership. I frame this work using a qualitative research theory that takes the role of affect as seriously as poets do. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) refer to this theory as *emotionalism*.

Theoretical Framework

Emotionalism is an approach to qualitative research that focuses primarily on participants' feelings—and the thoughts fused with these feelings—rather than on what they do or how they do it. Operating from this stance involves a "commitment to convey, even embody, the very personal depths and passions of lived experience" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 58). The goals of research framed by emotionalism are to fully capture participants' affective experiences and to allow readers to participate deeply and meaningfully in those experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Researchers themselves should engage fully with the lives of their participants and represent that engagement without "tortur[ing] the truth out of it" (Douglas, 1977, p. 5).

I employ this approach to interpret the collected data and take seriously Douglas's admonition. Like some other emotionalist practitioners, I have chosen to express affective experiences by crafting a poem from the writings composed by members of a writing group established for adults with major mental illnesses. This approach more readily evokes emotion than would a conventional academic text. As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) note, "poetic modes of representation *do* feelings in a culturally recognized way; they do not merely convey what feelings are like" (p. 198).

Literature Review

As we can infer from the sub-title of Piirto's 2002 article, Writing Inferior Poems as Qualitative Research, there is a lack of consensus about whether poetic inquiry can meet the standards of either research or poetry, much less both. Even the author of a recent poetic inquiry text (Faulkner, 2020) laments, "I am tired of reading and listening to lousy poetry that masquerades

as research and vice versa" (p. 220). Before continuing with an analysis of this problem, it is important to attend to Prendergast's (2009) distinction among three types of data-based poetry:

- *Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia* (researcher-voiced) poetry is derived from field notes and other sources in which the original language is generated by the researcher. Poetic inquirers operating from this perspective are obliged primarily to themselves and to academic readers.
- *Vox Theoria* (literature-voiced) poetry is composed in response to works of literature or theory or about the poetry-writing or research-inquiry processes. Obligations are similar to researcher-voiced poetry.
- *Vox Participare* (participant-voiced) poetry is derived from interviews and other sources in which the original language is generated by research participants prior to being adapted by the researcher. In this case, the author assumes a fundamental obligation to represent the voices of others.

Researchers who compose poetry in either of the first two categories are free to revise the wording in whatever way they wish in their efforts to obtain the highest-quality result. But those whose poems are participant-voiced have no such liberty because their "work belongs as much to the community whose culture it is documenting as it does to the researcher" (Glenn, 2013, p. 138). There must be a necessary balance between participant voices and what 'works' as poetry (Faulkner, et al., 2022). A writer unwilling to strive for that balance should employ another form of research representation or select non-data-based poetry as their genre of choice. More precisely, those engaged in poetic inquiry of the *vox participare* type need to remain as close as possible to the core of what participants expressed AND the way they expressed it (Ely, 2007). As is true of all qualitative practitioners, this process involves examining whose voices are privileged (Davis, 2021).

Some emotionalist researchers suggest that employing a rigorous revision process for *vox participare* poems may, in fact, undermine imagination (Bochner, 2000). As Breitenbach (2006) argues, "Revision needs time and freedom from excessive constraint and regimentation. It needs to remain open and loose and walk on the edge of possibilities, trying them on and checking them out" (p. 200). What is more, experienced writers tend to revise intuitively and are often at a loss to explain the rationale behind the changes they make (Breitenbach, 2006). Nevertheless, a poetic inquirer's efforts to augment their craft and to adopt a flexible process of revision are likely to result in a product that exemplifies stronger research and richer poetry than would otherwise be the case.

Previously published articles described the process of poetic inquiry, but most emphasize the analysis that led to the poem draft rather than the procedure used to revise the poem. Davis (2021), for example, recounted the cyclical process of thematic coding she used "to uncover the poem in the existing data set" (p. 116) and her commitment to ask herself "whose voice was dominant? Whose voice was missing? [and] Why?" (p. 118). However, Davis included only two research poems and a single draft of each. Gorlich (2023) explained that her analysis involved "1) deleting and moving text, 2) condensing text and 3) theoretical interaction with the text" (p. 131). She claimed that "I have carefully noted how I worked with the text" (Gorlich, 2023, p. 137). But, in the end, we see only the final poem, followed by a description of what was altered, not the poem in its various iterations. Faulkner et al. (2022) and Glenn (2013) offered several research poems but, again, only one version of each. To my knowledge, no previously published work has described the systematic revision of a research poem, including the various drafts and the rationale for revisions, in an effort to evaluate the point at which the poem has improved markedly while

remaining true to participants' ideas and language. Such an article is needed because it supports new—and even experienced—poetic inquirers in their efforts to take a methodical approach to their work, much as traditional qualitative researchers employ a constant-comparative method or discourse analysis. This systematic approach might best occur after the more spontaneous approaches advised by Bochner and Breitenbach—thereby obtaining the best of both worlds. I describe in detail the range of revision processes I employed with collected data in the following section.

Method of Inquiry

The qualitative case study described here is both intrinsic and instrumental in nature: descriptive, exploratory, and curiosity-driven. This research examines the work and thinking of adult writers who were members of a facilitated therapeutic writing group (Nyssen et al., 2016). The site for this study was A Place for Us (APFU)[2], a nonclinical psych-service center located in a southwestern U.S. city. I selected this site because I was interested in the writing experiences of authors dealing with major mental illness who wrote for personal fulfillment and the texts they crafted.

Sharon, a local writer and editor, organized the weekly writing group several years before my arrival. Prior to collecting data, I attended the group informally so that members could get to know me. During this time—ten months in all—I obtained research approval from my university's IRB and the APFU director and members' council.

Participants

Study participants joined this group for a variety of reasons. A few focused primarily on improving their writing. But most said they attended for affective purposes: to receive encouragement, to interact playfully, to give and receive comfort, and to express both positive and negative emotions through their writing and in conversation.

Before data collection began, I discussed the study with members; we also reviewed an informed consent document. I viewed the process of consent as ongoing (Usher & Holmes, 1997), regularly asking if they were still comfortable with me using the data I collected for research purposes. Eleven members participated in the study. Of these participants, ten were white, and one was African American; five were male and six female.

Group Protocol

I collected data from late August 2017 through April 2018, attending 30 sessions. A total of 17 members participated in the writing group over the course of those eight months, and attendance varied from two to six members at any given session. Initially, Sharon provided all prompts, but she soon left for a prior commitment. At that point, my role expanded from observing group interactions and writing along with members, to also facilitating the group. Two members suggested that they might offer their own topics. From that point on, prompts were occasionally provided by me, other staff members, or Sharon when she visited, but those proposed by members were privileged. After the prompt was read, members wrote for about ten minutes or so and then, if they wished—which most did—read their work aloud to the group (Chavis, 2011). Clapping

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[2] The names of the institution and of the participants, including the group organizer, are pseudonyms.

followed, as did compliments about what listeners appreciated in the writing. This routine was repeated one to three times more.

Data Collection and Sources

Data collected for this study included field notes, audio recordings of both group sessions and interviews, and photocopies of member writings. I focus here on the latter because that is the data analyzed for this paper. In line with emotionalist practice, I chose to exclude interview data because, as Gubrium and Holstein (1997) argue, this method often results in the participant disclosing only surface-level emotions. Also, audio from group sessions and interviews had been the focus of an earlier article (Jaeger, 2023). Because all members wrote to the same prompts and shared their work with each other, I viewed theirs as a communal enterprise best expressed via the *vox participare* approach. I collected member writings at the end of each session, photocopied them, and returned the originals the following week.

Data Analysis

My overall approach to data analysis reflects Josselson's (2004) *hermeneutics of faith* stance: characterized by an openness to understanding meanings as expressed by participants. As such, findings are primarily descriptive with the goal of understanding "the other as they understand themselves" (p. 6).

In Jaeger (2022), I analyzed all data using a more traditional approach which I have termed *theory-responsive analysis*; that is, I came to the study with a theoretical frame in mind, but, as I applied a more inductive approach to the data, decided the original frame was less helpful than I had originally imagined. At that point, I considered a range of other theories, ultimately settled on Winnicott's *holding environment* as the most effective frame, and then employed deductive analysis using constructs from that theory.

I was drawn, however, to poetic inquiry—specifically the *found poetry* approach, which Butler-Kisber (2019) defines as a "rearrangement of words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages that are taken from other sources and reframed as poetry by changes in spacing and/or lines (and consequently meaning), or by altering the text by additions or deletions" (p. 4). As Glenn (2013) argued, the data that serves as the basis for poetic inquiry in the 'found' genre belongs as much to those who wrote the original text as it does to the researcher. It was important to me to honor their words and meaning.

I used a combination of methods recommended by Butler-Kisber (2019), Kowit (1995), Lehmann and Brinkman (2021), Poindexter (2002), and Prendergast (2015) to craft poems from texts written by group members[3], using text from multiple participants within each poem (Lahman & Richard, 2014). The drafting process proceeded as follows:

- Reading all member writings, looking for several prompts that produced the most powerful work, and settling, finally, on six topics: what is the bravest thing you have done?; describe a childhood memory; when was the last time you cried?; if you believe in heaven, what will it be like?; how important is honesty?; and something that scared you.

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[3] Including my own; as Gubrium and Holstein (1997) claim 'researchers' own experience can, and should, serve as rich sources of "data"' (58)

- Reading the texts generated in response to each prompt, pulling bits of writing that particularly struck me—"unambiguous phrases, strong statements, eloquent expressions, wording that appealed to me" (Poindexter, 2002, p. 708)—and moving these bits to another document
- Reading and re-reading these words and phrases to gain a sense of overarching meaning
- Cutting up the document with a single phrase per piece, laying them on a table, and re-arranging—and sometimes eliminating—them
- Typing up each poem (one per prompt)

After allowing the drafts to sit for a few days, I began informal revision as described by George Saunders, the award-winning short story writer. Saunders (2021) is not a poet, but the approach to revision he describes in his recent book *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life* appealed to me as both methodical and intuitive. In response to the debate among poetic inquiry scholars as to the importance of standards for research poetry, I wanted to see what the approach to revision recommended by Saunders had to offer before applying more formal poetry standards.

Saunders (2021) suggested that a writer knows how effective their writing is by watching "the way the deep, honest part of our mind reacts to it" (p. 61). He describes the specifics of his approach in this way:

> I imagine a meter mounted on my forehead, with a *P* on this side ('Positive') and an *N* on that side ('Negative'). I try to read what I've written the way a first-time reader might . . . Where's the needle? If it drops in the *N* zone, admit it. And then, instantaneously, a fix might present itself—a cut, a rearrangement, an addition. There's not an intellectual or analytical component to this; it's more of an impulse, one that results in a feeling of 'Ah, yes, that's better.' (Saunders, 2021, p. 111)

Saunders repeats this procedure several times until a block of writing reaches what he refers to as a state of "undeniability": a feeling "like something that has actually happened and cannot be undone" (p. 112). Over time, Saunders argued, this process becomes "the whole game: (1) becoming convinced that there is a voice inside you that really, really knows what it likes, and (2) getting better at hearing that voice and acting on its behalf" (p. 345). I used this method to revise the poems crafted from my research data, waiting at least a day between revision sessions and continuing—for at least three iterations—until they reached the point where, in my mind, what I saw and heard in front of me was "undeniable."

At this point, I read several manuals about poetry writing (Kooser, 2005; Kowit, 1995; Mayes, 2001; Oliver, 1994) and a range of poetic inquiry articles dealing with expectations for poems crafted from research data. From this experience, I noted actions recommended for poets and for writers in the poetic inquiry genre and assessed the extent to which my personal commitments and the poems I had drafted met those expectations:

- Aim for progressive improvement in the genre: work with authors in that genre (LaFreniere, 2012), read contemporary poetry and/or attend readings (Maynard et al., 2010), apply rigorous revision (Maynard et al., 2010), exert as much effort in crafting poems as in the conducting of other aspects of the research (Percer, 2002), work through writing handbooks (Richardson, 2000), and obtain formal training in the genre (Piirto, 2002—especially for high-stakes products)
- Increase awareness of debates in the genre (LaFreniere, 2012)

- Take care to ensure participants would recognize themselves in the work (Faulkner et al, 2022)
- Have a specific audience in mind (Kooser, 2005)

I have no formal training as a poet, but I am committed to progressive improvement. I read contemporary poetry daily, have read several poetry handbooks, occasionally attend classes, undertake as rigorous a process of revision with my poems as I do with my more traditional academic writing, and participate in a weekly writing group that includes authors of both poetry and prose who provide feedback on each other's work. In this sense, I am committed to improving my writing in this genre.

I also developed a *vox participare* revision checklist based on the recommendations from these readings (Faulkner, 2020; LaFreniere, 2012; Prendergast, 2009). I employed this protocol as I undertook a formal revision of the research poems:

- Artistic standards; the poem should:
  - Alter the reader's perspective in some way (Faulkner, 2020; LaFreniere, 2012)
  - Be unified thematically (LaFreniere, 2012)
  - Elicit empathy (Prendergast, 2015)
  - Evoke the 'aha' of recognition (universality) (Faulkner, 2007; Faulkner, 2020; Furman et al., 2007; Mayes, 2001; Prendergast, 2015)
  - Incorporate elements of surprise (Faulkner, 2020; Prendergast, 2015)
  - Include concrete detail (Faulkner, 2020; Kooser, 2005; Sullivan, 2009)
  - Convey detailed emotions in ways that draw the reader in, but without stating these emotions explicitly (Bochner, 2000; Faulkner, 2020; Glesne, 1997; Kooser, 2005; LaFreniere, 2012; Mayes, 2001; Sullivan, 2009)
- Poetic standards; the poet should:
  - Overall: compress data to obtain the essence of the experience (Faulkner, 2020; Glenn, 2013; Miller, 2000; Oliver, 1994; Ward, 2011); allow for multiple interpretations (Sullivan, 2009; Ward, 2011); convey a sense of immediacy (Mayes, 2001); avoid diversions (Mayes, 2001); express energetic flow/movement (Oliver, 1994); offer a sense of both lightness and darkness (Faulkner, 2020)
  - Poetic devices: consider rhythm, repetition, figurative language (simile = tentative; metaphor = forceful), sense-based imagery, alliteration, structure (Faulkner, 2020; Kooser, 2005; LaFreniere, 2012; Mayes, 2001; Prendergast, 2015)
  - Lines: attend to length, with short lines conveying energy and longer lines offering breadth of vision (Kowit, 1995); attend to line breaks: natural phrase or enjambment or word of emphasis at the end (Faulkner, 2020; Kowit, 1995); do not waste 'early' lines, jump right in (Kooser, 2005); aim for significant but not didactic last lines (Kooser, 2005)
  - Language: use conversational speech (Kooser, 2005); ensure that every word has an exact purpose (Faulkner, 2020; Mayes, 2001); use adjectives to limit noun associations, but sparingly (Kooser, 2005; Miller, 2000); use strong and accurate verbs (minimize the use of be/have)—generally active—to avoid adverbs (Kooser, 2005; Mayes, 2001; Miller, 2000); establish a clear tone (Mayes, 2001)
  - Title: include necessary explanation in the title rather than within the poem (Kooser, 2005)

In addition, I followed the standards of qualitative research broadly written. That is, this type of research demands trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability; systematic data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and accurate representation of participant discourse (Ahmed, 2024; Bochner, 2000; Davis, 2021; Ely, 2007; Faulkner, 2020; LaFreniere, 2012).[4]

In requesting feedback from members of my writing group, I advised them that I was fundamentally committed to staying true to the *overarching sense* of the data excerpts—to the messages the participants were attempting to convey—and, so far as possible, staying true to the *language* of these excerpts.

Findings

From the six poems I crafted from excerpts of participants' writings, I ultimately selected the one based on the prompt *if you believe in heaven, what will it be like*? It seemed to me to be the truest to the data, both in terms of overarching essence—that is, the poem captured the collective wisdom from the original pieces, including a balance between doubt and hope—and use of language: rich, detailed, even humorous.[5] I conducted a series of revisions with support from George Saunders' informal protocol, then the more formal recommendations from various well-known poets, and finally, the suggestions from my writing group. In light of expressed concerns about 'quality' in poems composed via poetic inquiry, I wondered how to balance excellence with a firm connection to the original data. Returning to the question of balance in a few pages, I will first compare pairs of drafts—one to two, two to three, and so on—and explain the work that went into the changes I made along the way. Draft and line numbers are represented as, for example, D2 L3.

Original Participants' Texts to Raw Data

I read and re-read the pieces written by participants and jotted down phrases that struck me as particularly evocative. Although I did not employ a *vox participare* checklist until the shift from Draft 2 to Draft 3, my initial selection process reflected several aspects of that checklist spontaneously:

- Research criterion: accurate representation of participant discourse (i.e., content was directly quoted from the texts written by individual group members)
- Artistic criteria: incorporate elements of surprise (e.g., *zapped into oblivion*), include concrete detail (e.g., *luminous puff of smoke*), and convey detailed emotions without stating them (e.g., *freedom from want or need*)
- Poetic elements: compress to the essence of the experience (by deleting most of the texts), offer a sense of both light (e.g., *smiles down*) and darkness (e.g., *nothing, just sleep*), include sense-based imagery (e.g., smells like lavender and vanilla) and naturally phrased line breaks (e.g., *in the chorus*).

Raw Data to Draft 1

Here is the raw data, compared with the initial draft of the poem in which I cut and reorganized excerpts, changing only verb tense, articles, prepositions, and punctuation.

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[4] For more detailed evidence of these criteria, see the Method of Inquiry section in Author, 2023.

[5] The original responses to this prompt by participants in this study can be found in the Appendix.

Table 1

Raw Data to Draft 1

Raw Data Before Drafting	Draft 1
1 Lay in the grass on a clump of clover	1 I read about this life after death stuff,
2 Light breaking through the clouds	2 but I really have to say I don't know.
3 In the chorus	3 Are we zapped into oblivion
4 Walking around on top of the clouds	4 after a luminous puff of smoke?
5 All are welcome!	5 Is there nothing, just sleep?
6 Blue hooded sweatshirts	
7 Everyone who I ever knew was there	6 I hope and want to believe
8 Freedom from want or need	7 streets are pearly,
9 Everyone wears bathrobes	8 mighty, mighty gates are gold,
10 Smiles down at everybody still on earth	9 javalinas fly across the horizon,
11 Freedom from suffering	10 light breaks through the clouds,
12 Freedom from desire	11 Elvis croons in the chorus.
13 Zapped into oblivion	12 It smells like lavender and vanilla,
14 I read about this life after death stuff	13 everyone wears bathrobes
15 Luminous puff of smoke	14 walking around on top of the clouds,
16 I really have to say I don't know	15 smiling down at everybody still on earth.
17 Getting closer to the goal line myself	16 Everyone I ever knew is there,
18 I hope and want to believe	17 with new minds and new bodies,
19 There is nothing, just sleep	18 arms around my shoulders.
20 A new dimension	
21 Halfway crossed over	19 Freedom from desire.
22 Hover over the room	20 Freedom from suffering.
23 Who would get dibs over the sky	21 There will be no more tears.
24 Elvis croons	
25 Streets are pearly	
26 Mighty, mighty gates are gold	
27 There will be no more tears	
28 New minds and new bodies	
29 Be with past loved ones	
30 Smell like lavender and vanilla	
31 Silent for 22 hours each day	
32 Arms around my shoulders	
33 Javalinas will fly across the horizon	

One primary focus of the revision was to eliminate the weakest lines; for example:

- *Blue hooded sweatshirts*—far less evocative than bathrobes
- *Freedom from want or need*—freedom from desire and freedom from suffering seem more important
- *Getting closer to the goal line myself*—this is particular to the writer rather than inclusive of all readers
- Be with past loved ones—this is a cliché about heaven

Another focus was to separate the doubtful beliefs about heaven from the hopeful parts (lines 1 through 5 and lines 6 through 18, respectively) so the thematic contrast is clearer, and then finish with a sort of coda (lines 19 through 21). This structure served to evoke an 'aha' of recognition by allowing for multiple interpretations ('Yes there ARE reasons to both doubt and

hope for heaven!') and possibly alter the reader's perspective if they had only thought about one or the other. The coherence of this structure conveyed a pensive tone throughout. In service of quality research, this draft held tightly both to the essence of the participants' writing and to their language.

Draft 1 to Draft 2: Informal Revision

For Draft 2, I went through several rounds of Saunders' revision protocol—reading aloud until something bothered me, 'fixing' it, and then reading on—over and over again until I felt comfortable with the outcome, until it was pleasing to my ear. Other than allowing for one synonym, I held to the same constraints about change in language that I used in Draft 1.

Table 2

Draft 1 to Draft 2

Draft 1	Draft 2: In Heaven
1 I read about this life after death stuff,	1 This life after death stuff,
2 but I really have to say I don't know.	2 I really have to say I don't know.
3 Are we zapped into oblivion	3 Are we zapped into oblivion
4 after a luminous puff of smoke?	4 in a luminous puff of smoke?
5 Is there nothing, just sleep?	5 Is there nothing, just sleep?
	6 And who would get dibs over the sky?
6 I hope and want to believe	
7 streets are pearly,	7 I hope and want to believe
8 mighty, mighty gates are gold,	8 pearly streets,
9 javalinas fly across the horizon,	9 mighty, mighty gates of gold.
10 light breaks through the clouds,	10 Javalinas fly across the horizon.
11 Elvis croons in the chorus.	11 Light breaks through the clouds.
12 It smells like lavender and vanilla,	12 Elvis croons in the chorus.
13 everyone wears bathrobes	13 It smells like lavender and vanilla.
14 walking around on top of the clouds,	14 Folks wear bathrobes
15 smiling down at everybody still on earth.	15 and smile down at the living still on earth.
16 Everyone I ever knew is there,	16 Everyone I ever knew is there,
17 with new minds and new bodies,	17 with new bodies and new minds,
18 arms around my shoulders.	18 their arms around my shoulders.
19 Freedom from desire.	19 Freedom from desire.
20 Freedom from suffering.	20 Freedom from suffering.
21 There will be no more tears.	21 No more tears.

Changes in Draft 2 include:
- Adding a title
- Cutting back on the use of the weak verb *to be*: *streets are pearly* (D1L7) becomes *pearly streets* (D2L8). *Mighty, mighty gates are gold* (D1L8) becomes *mighty, mighty gates of gold* (D2L9). *There will be no more tears* (D1L21) becomes *No more tears* (D2L21).
- Compressing the poem by paring back unnecessary wording, eliminating: *I read about* (D1 L1), *but* (D1 L2)*, walking around on top of the clouds* (D1 L14*).*

- Adding the line *And who would get dibs over the sky?* (D2 L6) because that, too, spoke to a doubt and added another element of surprise.
- Breaking up comma series into separate sentences for clarity and rhythm (D2 L10-15).
- Substituting *folks* (D2L14) for *everyone* (D1L13) to avoid unnecessary repetition.
- Emphasizing aspects of greater importance by reversing *new minds and new bodies* (D1L17) to *new bodies and new minds* (D2L17).

Draft 2 to Draft 3: Formal Revision

In anticipation of Draft 3, I employed the *vox participare* checklist explained earlier. I used this checklist to revise Draft 2 based on formal criteria, continuing to make only minor changes to language.

Table 3
Draft 2 to Draft 3

Draft 2: In Heaven	Draft 3: On, If You Believe in Heaven
1 This life after death stuff,	1 Are we zapped into oblivion
2 I really have to say I don't know.	2 in a luminous puff of smoke?
3 Are we zapped into oblivion	3 Is there nothing, just sleep?
4 in a luminous puff of smoke?	4 And who gets dibs over the sky?
5 Is there nothing, just sleep?	
6 And who would get dibs over the sky?	5 I hope and want to believe
	6 pearly streets,
7 I hope and want to believe	7 mighty, mighty gates of gold.
8 pearly streets,	8 Javalinas fly across the horizon.
9 mighty, mighty gates of gold.	9 Light breaks through the clouds.
10 Javalinas fly across the horizon.	10 Elvis croons in the chorus.
11 Light breaks through the clouds.	
12 Elvis croons in the chorus.	11 Smelling like lavender and vanilla,
13 It smells like lavender and vanilla.	12 folks wear bathrobes and
14 Folks wear bathrobes	13 smile down at the living.
15 and smile down at the living still on earth.	14 Everyone I ever knew is there,
16 Everyone I ever knew is there,	15 with new bodies and new minds,
17 with new bodies and new minds,	16 their arms around my shoulders.
18 their arms around my shoulders.	
	17 Freedom from desire.
19 Freedom from desire.	18 Freedom from suffering.
20 Freedom from suffering.	19 No more tears.
21 No more tears.	

Revisions for this draft attended to several recommendations from the checklist:
- Include necessary explanation in the title rather than within the poem: The new title is, essentially, the writing prompt employed in the group.
- Do not 'waste' early lines; jump right in: I deleted the first two lines of the poem which seemed unnecessary.
- Use strong, accurate, and generally active verbs and avoid, especially, *be/have* variations: I did some of this in the move from Draft 1 to 2, and in Draft 3, *would get* was changed to *gets* (D3 L4)

- Attend to line breaks: I experimented with enjambment by moving *and* (from the beginning of D2 L15 to the end of D3 L12); this raises the question of what else the folks in heaven might do.
- Compress as much as possible: I shortened the poem further by deleting *still on earth* (D3 L15) because it was redundant.

Draft 3 to Draft 4: Peers Weigh in with Intact Language

To prepare for additional drafts, I distributed Draft 3 to my writing group. I explained that I was working on an academic piece about poetic inquiry and requested that they revise the draft three times: first, adhering to the language as written (Draft 4); second, using synonyms as liberally as they wished (Draft 5); and third, maintaining the essence of the collective authors' ideas but straying as far from their specific language as desired (Drafts 6 and 7). I used their suggestions to produce four additional drafts.

Table 4
Draft 3 to Draft 4

Draft 3: On, If You Believe in Heaven	Draft 4: On, If You Believe in Heaven
1 Are we zapped into oblivion	1 Are we zapped into oblivion
2 in a luminous puff of smoke?	2 in a luminous puff of smoke?
3 Is there nothing, just sleep?	3 Is there nothing, just sleep?
4 And who gets dibs over the sky?	4 And who gets dibs over the sky?
5 I hope and want to believe	5 I hope and want to believe
6 pearly streets,	6 pearly streets and
7 mighty, mighty gates of gold.	7 gates of gold.
8 Javalinas fly across the horizon.	
9 Light breaks through the clouds.	8 Javalinas fly across the horizon.
10 Elvis croons in the chorus.	9 Light breaks through the clouds.
	10 Elvis croons in the chorus.
11 Smelling like lavender and vanilla,	
12 folks wear bathrobes and	11 Smelling like lavender and vanilla,
13 smile down at the living.	12 folks wear bathrobes and
14 Everyone I ever knew is there,	13 smile down at the living.
15 with new bodies and new minds,	14 Everyone I ever knew is there,
16 their arms around my shoulders.	15 with new bodies and new minds.
17 Freedom from desire.	
18 Freedom from suffering.	
19 No more tears.	

When required to stick with the language as written (Draft 4), peers recommended deleting lines and words: *mighty, mighty* (D3 L7); *their arms around my shoulders* (D3 L16*)*; and the last stanza. I agreed that removing *mighty, mighty* allowed for more balance between the modifiers of gates and streets and energized the flow of the poem. I also agreed that the image of arms around my shoulders seemed out of place with the rest of the poem and that the last stanza was somewhat didactic.

Draft 4 to Draft 5: Peer Advice with Synonyms Allowed

Table 5
Draft 4 to Draft 5

Draft 4: On, If You Believe in Heaven	Draft 5: When I Think of Heaven
1 Are we zapped into oblivion	1 Are we obliterated
2 in a luminous puff of smoke?	2 in a luminous puff of smoke?
3 Is there nothing, just sleep?	3 Is there nothing?
4 And who gets dibs over the sky?	4 Who is really in charge?
5 I hope and want to believe	5 Pearly streets and
6 pearly streets and	6 gates of gold.
7 gates of gold.	
	7 Javalinas fly across the horizon.
8 Javalinas fly across the horizon.	8 Light breaks through clouds.
9 Light breaks through the clouds.	9 Elvis croons in the chorus.
10 Elvis croons in the chorus.	
	10 Smelling like lavender and vanilla,
11 Smelling like lavender and vanilla,	11 folks wear bathrobes and
12 folks wear bathrobes and	12 smile down at the living.
13 smile down at the living.	13 Everyone I knew is there,
14 Everyone I ever knew is there,	14 with renewed bodies & renovated minds.
15 with new bodies and new minds.	

Given the opportunity to alter language more liberally (Draft 5), writing group members offered suggestions that resulted in the following changes:

- Substituting *When I Think of Heaven* for *On, If You Believe in Heaven* as the title; *obliterated* for *zapped into oblivion* (D5 L1*)*; *who is really in charge* for *who gets dibs over the sky* (D5 L4*)*; *renewed* and *renovated* for *new* (D5 L14)
- Deleting *just sleep* (D4 L3); *I hope and want to believe* (D4 L5*)*; *ever* (D4 L14)

The change of title removes 'belief' from the poem, contrary to its clear presence within each of the original participant writings; they had talked about what they *believed in*, not just what they thought. In my mind, changes to the first stanza counteract the attempt for every word to have an exact purpose and dilute the delightful play of language of Draft 4. Likewise, the substitution of *renewed* and *renovated* for the repeated *new* in the last line sounds like a home remodeling project rather than a resurrection. *Ever* emphasizes that no one from the earthly life is missing from the heavenly one; dropping it weakens this emphasis. In my mind, it is at this point that the personality of the poem, if not the essence of its ideas, loses ground.

Draft 5 to 6 and 7: Peer Input with Complete Language Freedom

Table 6
Draft 5 to Drafts 6 and 7

Draft 5: When I Think of Heaven	Draft 6: Heaven, I Think	Draft 7: Heaven, I Think
1 Are we obliterated	1 Are we obliterated	1 Is it just a puff of smoke,
2 in a luminous puff of smoke?	2 in a puff of smoke?	2 Nothing after nothing, or
3 Is there nothing?	3 Is there nothing except	3 everyone I've known
4 Who is really in charge?	4 sleep and sky?	4 new bodies and new minds.
5 Pearly streets and	5 I hope for	
6 gates of gold.	6 pearly streets,	
	7 gates of gold,	
7 Javalinas fly across the sky.	8 javalinas zipping across the horizon,	
8 Light breaks through clouds.	9 between breaks in clouds.	
9 Elvis croons in the chorus.		
	10 Everyone I've known is there,	
10 Smelling like lavender and vanilla	11 arms around me,	
11 folks wear bathrobes and	12 smiling.	
12 smile down at the living,		
13 Everyone I knew is there		
14 With renewed bodies & renovated minds.		

With the instruction to focus on conveying the essence of the authors' ideas while altering language in whatever ways they saw fit (Drafts 6 and 7), writing group members deleted many sensory details. Missing now are visual modifiers (luminous—D5 L2), sounds (Elvis in the chorus—D5 L9), and smells (lavender and vanilla—D5 L10).

The rhythm of *Javalinas fly across the sky* (D5L7) is cleaner than *javalinas zipping across the horizon* (D6L8). The use of *smiling* as the last line in Draft 6 disrupts the balance between the hopeful and doubtful aspects of the poem—and its thematic unity—and diminishes the significance of the ending.

Additional detail is lost in Draft 7. It captures the foundation of what I believe the group members were trying to convey, the repetition of *nothing after nothing* retains the pensive quality of earlier drafts, and the ending is clear and potent. What is missing is the rich language of earlier drafts and of the participants' original writings.

Discussion

Of these drafts, which is the "best" poem? In its tight simplicity, Draft 7 may be a strong candidate, capturing both doubt and hope in just a few words. And, of interest, other than a lack of strong verbs, it meets all *the vox participare* criteria. What it fails to do, I would argue, is convey the rich variety of the collected data; it ends up being, as a result, a sort of "cherry-picking.'" It is the obligation of the qualitative researcher to present the depth and breadth of the collected data or, at least, to make a strong claim for their decision to work with only a subset of it. This obligation remains for poetic inquirers as well.

To return to the initial research question, at what point during the series of revisions was the product appreciably "better" than the original draft? In my mind, this shift occurs in Draft 4. By that point, the poem had undergone both informal and formal revision, and I had also received constrained input from the writing group. Revisions included eliminating weak words and lines, clarifying the theme, and energizing the flow.

In response to the second research question, over the course of revision, at what point did the poem lose the essence of the participants' ideas (as I see it, feelings of both hope and doubt) and the richness and uniqueness of their language? I would argue that this change occurs in Draft 5. In some ways, the spirit of the poem—the juxtaposition of doubt and hope—is maintained through all the drafts. But suddenly *zapped into oblivion*, a magical image becomes o*bliterated*, resembling the depressing end of a dystopian novel. The comparison of *nothingness* to *sleepiness* is eliminated. *Getting dibs* shifts to the seriousness of *taking charge*. The simplicity and brightness of *new* is now architectural *renewal* and *renovation.* I would suggest that Draft 4 best serves both masters: improved by informal and formal revision and yet clearly maintaining the intent and unique language of the research participants.

Conclusion and Implications

Poetic inquiry is unique among forms of data analysis. At least within the *vox participare* approach, the researcher assumes a dual responsibility: to follow standards of research quality—including honoring the meanings and language of participants—and to craft poetry that attends to standards of poetic excellence. This article adds to methodological knowledge by offering a process that upholds research and poetic standards.

Piirto (2002) tells a story of an arts-based research session in which presenters with no academic background in weaving employed a braiding metaphor to exemplify collaboration. An attendee who had an MFA in weaving was distressed by what he viewed as the inappropriate use of this metaphor by researchers who had no formal background in that art form. Piirto herself allows her students to conduct high-stakes, arts-based projects, such as dissertations, only if they have at least an undergraduate minor in the field or have had peer-reviewed exhibits. She raises the question of the application of these criteria in the case of peer-reviewed but lower-stakes publications. For whatever reason, she chooses not to offer an answer. Given the explosion of published peer-reviewed articles addressing poetic inquiry, it is important to address this issue directly.

Researchers practicing poetic inquiry are responsible for both research and artistic quality, but these responsibilities are not equally balanced. Like their colleagues who employ other forms of data analysis, they should feel compelled to continue to grow as researchers and as writers, whatever genre they might employ. Practitioners of poetic inquiry specifically should regularly read poetry, attend classes, revise using informal and formal approaches, and ask for feedback from other writers, including poets.

When evaluating that feedback, however, it is finally up to practitioners to balance research and poetic quality because, in the end, they are likely to be the only person in the room who exhibits skill in both domains. It is up to them to notice when the poem's quality has improved markedly and when it has in some way lost touch with the participants' view of the world. With any luck, the former will be one draft earlier than the latter, clarifying the choice of which version to publish.

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Notes on Contributor

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Appendix: Original Heaven Writings

Prompt: If you believe in heaven, what do you think it will be like?

Rita: When I was a kid we used to lay in the grass on a clump of clover and look at light breaking through the clouds—in chorus we had to sing Judy Collins—'I looked at clouds that way'—but people were walking around on top of the clouds; it made perfect sense. Later I read about people going through a long tunnel into a bright light—'Go into the light! All are welcome!'—but what sticks with me the most as proof of heaven is sorting clothes in the thrift store and finding a blue hooded sweatshirt that said 'Lakenheath' on it (I was born in Lakenheath) that I thought came straight from my father. Now I picture kind of another plane where everyone you know was there (including Petra the cat)—that can intercede when it's necessary but mainly just peace and freedom from want or need—everyone wears bathrobes—and smiles down at everybody on the earth—freedom from suffering and freedom from desire.

Lara: Have you seen the 'Death of a Mouse' bit on Youtube? The original 'Death' bit was a short film, filmed in a man's basement, with a motion-sensitive camera, posed right near a mousetrap, fully baited. The mouse arrives, trips the camera, AND the trap, and is zapped into oblivion. Instantly, a small puff of smoke emanates from its body and disappears into thin air. The man says something to the effect that, 'I read about this life after death stuff . . . so take a look at this . . .' and the sequence with the mouse replays. What *was* that luminous puff of smoke? We've read accounts of NDE's, or Near Death Experiences, and many of us have had experiences with or about relatives that've passed on. I really have to say I don't know. And I'm getting closer to the goal line myself, so I hope, and want to believe, there is a heaven. My 'prove it to me' self says there is nothing, just sleep. But somewhere inside, I really hope to encounter a new dimension, a better place. Let's all hope we go there!

Bruce: I used to think heaven was a place in the clouds with a gate at front, sort of like the one in 'All Dogs Go to Heaven' the kids' movie. I read part of a book about people that had near death experiences where they were half way crossed over and a lot of the people felt a sense of peace, and they could hover over the room and actually see themselves. I am not tying these two events together. I don't know if I believe in heaven. Some people believe after you die there's nothing; but on a different note those same people might think some kind of an afterlife exists if they are in a better mood. I'm sorry I'm not being more conclusive, but who would get dibs over the sky if there are so many forms of Christians? How can there be a sky heaven if we can't see it? Maybe it's in a fourth dimension. Or maybe death brings us closer to the things out there that we can't sense. But if I am sinful and I eat sweets I am breaking the rules of religion.

Julie: Elvis croons in his gospel CD (he got his start singing in the church with his mother). The streets, the streets are pearly, and the mighty, mighty gates are gold. I believe it is Revelations 20 and 21 that describes heaven, the stones that the walls will be made with, etc. But I think (especially since I'm a crier) that the part of the Bible that impresses me most about heaven is that 'there will be no more tears.' Only tears of joy. Sounds good to me. We will also have new minds and new bodies without arthritis.

Estevan: I believe heaven will be a place where everyone will not be sick anymore and people will be with past loved ones and God and Jesus.

Author: If heaven is real, it will smell like lavender and vanilla—breezes of it wafting through the air. If heaven is real, it will taste like a melody of fruits—peaches, pineapple, and passion fruit—tossed together with olive oil, vinegar, and a bit of maple syrup. If heaven is real, it will be silent for 22 hours each day. My two charming boys will talk to me in sweet voices with

their arms around my shoulders. If heaven is real, javalinas will fly across the horizon and small birds will look at me quizzically.