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The “Text as Thou” in Qualitative Research: Carving the Artist-Self within the Researcher-Self: A Review Essay

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Abstract

This review essay is a personal reflection on *Method Meets Art* written by Patricia Leavy. It describes how the book helps the author come to terms with an artist/researcher identity and how it leads to the understanding of a text as Thou, expanding on Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship.

Introduction

I am in Las Vegas visiting my family and friends. I would not have chosen Las Vegas for my vacation if it were not for them, as I would rather spend my vacation on the beach somewhere. I have been in Vegas several times before and perceived it to be no more than the epitome of entertainment. This time, however, Las Vegas appeals to me differently after having just finished reading the book by Leavy, *Method Meets Art* (2009), which filled my mind with a myriad of thoughts on the arts. I see art everywhere here. Without the arts that “grab people’s attention in powerful ways” (Leavy, p. 12), Vegas would be just another noisy and hollow city, crowded with temporary buoyancy of tourists from all over the world. So, this morning, I get up early around 6 o’clock before others get up, hoping that I can find a place to enjoy my morning coffee with some sort of serenity. I find a coffee shop nearby my hotel that is open to save my soul. I order a large coffee and find a comfortable spot near the window. My coffee is too hot like a burned marshmallow, so I decide to wait for a minute. In the mean time, I start flipping the newspaper, *USA TODAY*, back and forth, which I picked up on the way, without much anticipation to read anything interesting.

Then, the newspaper’s headline title and a picture catch my eye. The title is *Where are today’s Leonardos?* (Zucker, June 3 2009) accompanied by a picture of da Vinci. The subtitle reads, “During the Renaissance, students of creative thought—like da Vinci—forever changed the world with foresight and intellect”. Interesting, I thought. As art-minded as I am at the moment, I start reading the article with curiosity. The author of the article, Howard Zucker, a physician and attorney, explains that the foundation behind the Renaissance scholars was the belief in the power of human ingenuity and creative thought. He argues that today’s plague, our global economic melt-down, can be improved by “21st century Leonardos who dare to make the impossible happen” (p. 11 A) utilizing their artistic, imaginative foresight and intellect that question traditional wisdom.

The power of human ingenuity and creative thought... 21st century Leonardos... Worriedly, I think about our current education where there is not much space for creativity and imagination, especially under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Accountability, standards, standardization, and standardized tests have become catch phrases for determining the quality of education, which is definitely not an environment that is conducive to learning to become Leonardos. What is worse, however, is that the field of education research is strongly influenced by this legislation, promoting evidence-based, positivistic scientific research rather than redirecting the course of education toward polyphonic, postmodern multiple meanings of education. For example, the National Research Council published a report, *Scientific Research in Education* (2002), calling for evidence-based education research that uses “rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 3). Such adherence to the positivistic thinking demonstrates that we are

back to the “good, ole’ boy” thinking, or “Déjà vu all over again,” as Lather (2008, p. 362) calls it, in spite of the paradigm shift we experienced, staying away from the positivism that underpins the use of objectivism and measurement. In this current political context, qualitative education research that goes against the “mighty push” (Viadero, 2008, cited in Lather, 2008, p. 362) toward the objective scientism is punished as “embarrassing” (Lather, 2008, p. 362), and there is no doubt that the arts have no place within the positivistic sciences (Baldacchino, 2009). As the hegemonic metanarrative of positivism sways the sword of power and authority, qualitative researchers and arts-based researchers in particular, are increasingly marginalized.

About the Book

In this current political context, the concept of having research method meet art sounds rebellious therefore provocative. Reading Leavy’s *Method Meets Art*, was indeed a breath of fresh air. As the author notes, it is not a ground-breaking book on arts-based research (ABR) since several great books on ABR including handbooks have already been published. However, the contribution of this book to the field of research method is invaluable not only because it is an oppositional effort to resist such a tendency of “Déjà vu all over again”, but because there have not been any introductory books on ABR that we could recommend to graduate students who are interested in ABR. In rather conservative institutions like mine, quite a few professors have an aporetic or even antagonistic attitude toward ABR discouraging their graduate students from being involved with it. Although it is not the goal of the book, Leavy successfully establishes the legitimacy of ABR in social science research and succinctly explains how pivotal ABR is to the future of academic research. Leavy invites the reader to imagine the world of arts-based research alongside her, keeping the tone of a novel narrator rather than that of an epic narrator (Bakhtin, 1975/1981), encouraging the reader to an open dialogue rather than being conclusive and closed.

In order to serve as an introductory book, Leavy offers reader-friendly, step-by-step descriptions of six different significant genres of arts-based research (ABR): narrative inquiry, poetry, music, performance, dance, and visual art. Each chapter consists of an overview of the method, the methodological variations of the method, kinds of research questions the method can address, and a sample article of the method. It also has pedagogical features such as checklists for further considerations, annotated lists of journals, websites, and recommended readings, which could be very useful for students and instructors who want to teach a course on ABR. Leavy thoughtfully interconnects each method using a metaphor of an arch, *from word to image*, starting with narrative inquiry that heavily relies on “the word”; poetry that merges the word with “lyrical invocation”; music that picks up on the lyrical nature of poetry; drama performance that encompasses many aspects of the previously discussed methods; dance, another form of performance; and finally visual arts that portray still images.

Making Sense of the Book: Aesthetics and Qualitative Research

What is most refreshing about this book is that it made me reconsider my identity as an a/r/tographer. I have never considered myself one before. Knowing that a/r/t is a “metaphor for artist-researcher-teacher” (Leavy, p. 3), I considered myself “*r/tographer*” (researcher and teacher), only daydreaming of becoming an “*a/r/tographer*”. I didn’t think I belonged to this “third space” (Pinar, 2004, p. 9) of being an artist-researcher even though I am an art-lover and I used to walk around the fringe of the circle of a/r/tographers, sometimes self-inviting to cross the border of the a/r/t community. Further, I was clearly aware of a tension within the area of arts-based research and the use of alternative forms of representation (Piiro, 2002). Piiro questions the quality and qualification of arts-based research:

To observe heartfelt efforts by researchers with little or no background in the art being demonstrated was sometimes painful, especially to those who worked in, were trained in, knew, and loved the art being demonstrated. Is not the concept of quality and qualification to be taken seriously in arts-based research? (p. 443)

Piiro’s argument made sense, therefore I was reluctant to identify myself as an artist-researcher-teacher, or a/r/tographer. Being a Sunday pianist without professional training and having an undergraduate English degree that is more than two-decades-old wouldn’t suffice.

However, what Leavy tells us throughout the book is that it is natural for qualitative researchers to find the artist-self within the researcher-self. Rather than focusing on artists becoming interested in qualitative research, she focuses on qualitative researchers engaging in the arts as the meaning making process where inquiry and art merge, sharing the ability to think “conceptually, symbolically, and metaphorically” (p. 11). Leavy cites Saarnivaara (2003) to explain how qualitative researchers are artists in a “loose” sense:

I am using the word artist, following Juha Varto (2001), in a loose sense—metaphorically—to describe a person who confronts her experiential world by means of a craft and without exerting any conscious conceptual influence and who draws on it to create something new. (Saarnivaara, 2003, p. 582, cited in Leavy, p. 11)

Janesick (2001) also refers to qualitative researchers as “artist-scientists” (Leavy, p. 10) explaining how qualitative research practice and artistic practice are similar in that both practices are “holistic and dynamic, involving reflection, description, problem formulation and solving, and the ability to identify and explain intuition and creativity in the research process” (Leavy, p. 10). Moreover, Eisner & Powell (2002) conducted a study about the intimate relationship between the art and science, interviewing 20 social scientists about their

research process as well as their research products. They explored the artistic and aesthetic qualities of the work of researchers. Contrary to the popular belief that scientists have little to do with emotions and aesthetics, they found out that social scientists highly engage in artistic modes of thought and aesthetic forms of experience, involving emotional quality in the research process. They summarize, “the work of science provides an arena for aesthetic forms of experience. Aesthetic experience can be secured in the use of the tools of the trade, in shaping one’s thoughts, and exploring one’s ideas” (p. 150).

As I am getting more convinced that I am an artist-scientist, therefore, an a/r/tographer, I am also vigilant about how arts-based research could be, so called, a “troubling model of qualitative inquiry” (Sava & Nuutinen, 2003, p. 517) that comes as a risky business that might put a/r/tographers in “danger of marginalization” (Barone, 2007, p. 454) in the current political context. Hence, I am grateful that Leavy addresses the reasons why we should engage in artistic practices and the issue of academic research standards including validity, assessment, and trustworthiness smoothing the sharp dichotomy of a qualitative-quantitative debated. Leavy writes, “the story of arts-based research practices is one about fusion, affinity, resonance, and above all *holistic approaches to research* from the point of view of the knowledge-building process and the researcher who is able to merge an artist-scientist identity”(p. 253). More specifically, she notes, arts based research practices are about “composing, weaving, and orchestrating—creating tapestries of meanings” (p. 254), so is qualitative research.

Then, qualitative researchers are artists, in the loose sense, who use the arts as “a broader palette” (p. 11) in order to make sense of what is being investigated thus to expand the promise of qualitative research. This is not to say the arts are used as instruments of research as in Baldacchino’s (2009) claim that “the arts cannot become other than what they are; which means that they could never serve as instruments—of research or otherwise—for something else (p. 5). Rather, the arts are perceived as a way of knowing, understanding and examining experience, creating aesthetic experiences for the researcher and the audience. Gadamer (1988) writes:

Aesthetic experience also is a mode of self-understanding. But all self-understanding takes place in relation to something else that is understood and includes the unity and sameness of this other. Inasmuch as we encounter the work of art in the world and a world in the individual work of art, this does not remain a strange universe into which we are magically transported for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in it, and that means that we preserve the discontinuity of the experience in the continuity of our existence (p. 86).

Qualitative research that uses artistic representations creates such aesthetic experiences and play a pivotal role in our conceptualizations and re-conceptualizations of meaning and knowledge in human lives and in the broader currents of our society (Dunlop, 2001).

Therefore, ABR pushes the boundaries of the qualitative research landscape by honoring art and multiple aesthetic perspectives (Mello, 2007), which in turn becomes an aesthetic inquiry that enables us “to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routine have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” (Greene, 2000, p. 123). Dewey also explains that every experience, even in its rudimentary forms, is “art in germ” (Dewey, 1934, p. 19) that contains the promise of aesthetic experience. Therefore, art as experience or experience as art unites “the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 48). Hence, any qualitative researcher who finds the artist-self within the researcher-self sets out to engage in qualitative research as aesthetic experience. As such, it is inherently connected with the experience of making sense with his/her “unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things” (Dewey, 1934, p. 49) that directs the researcher’s doings, undergoings, and makings. Thus aesthetics is placed at the heart of qualitative research (Bresler, 2006), leading to aesthetic inquiry in which the aesthetic is integral to the research in helping others with their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative understanding of the world (Greene, 2001).

Toward the “Text as Thou” in Qualitative Research

As I reflect upon the book, *Method Meets Art*, I am recognizing myself being in the process of “merging an artist-scientist identity” (Leavy, p. 253). I carefully carve the artist-self in me so that I can aesthetically experience and provide aesthetic experience for the audience through my research. My researcher-self meets the artist-self at the “intersection of social and political progress, the emergence of alternative theoretical and epistemological groundings, overarching social justice-oriented research initiatives and the academic shift toward interdisciplinarity and now transdisciplinarity” (Leavy, p. 253). At this intersection, I reexamine the relationship between the arts-based research and qualitative research inextricably interwoven in my work (narrative inquiry in particular) and in my newly confirmed identity as an a/r/tographer. Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, & Grauer (2006) write:

A/r/tographical work is rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess which are enacted and presented or performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher (p. 1224, cited in Leavy, p. 3).

The concept of a “relational aesthetic inquiry” comes as an epiphany to me. The relation or interchange between the text (including the arts) and me as an artist-researcher who creates it and the relation between the text and the reader who interprets it remind me of Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship. A text can be a Thou, that is, any particular text and any genre has the possibility of appearing as a Thou to the audience (Kepnes, 1992). And a text, when interpreted, can open us to “other worlds, to ourselves, even to a glimpse of the eternal Thou” (Kepnes, 1992, p. 81). Thus, Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship helps us develop a new view of the human relation to all creative works (Kepnes, 1992), which is well reflected in Buber’s words: “The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-Thou establishes the world of relation” (Buber, 1970, p. 56). Buber identifies two different relations that one may take to the world of things and beings; the first being the instrumental or objectifying “I-It” relationship, and the second the reciprocal or relating “I-Thou” relationship (Berry, 1985). According to Buber (1970), although we need the objectifying “I-It” relationship, we need to count on the “I-Thou” relationship in order to humanize the organic being of the It. He writes, “Without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human” (Buber, 1970, p. 85). Therefore, when our research work, arts-based research in particular, is understood within the I-Thou relationship, our work can be brought to life, creating new avenues for social science research.

In conclusion, Leavy’s book helped me renew my commitment as an a/r/tographer who places aesthetics at the heart of qualitative research. I will continue working on developing an “I-Thou” relationship with my research, where my research process and product are viewed not as an object, but as an organic relation to the world. This, in turn, will help the audience inevitably engage in the I-Thou relationship with the text they encounter, continuously broadening their horizons. In this sense, then, my research endeavor becomes a metaphorical act that William Blake (1757-1827) so lucidly captures in his poem:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an Hour

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About the Author

Jeong-Hee Kim is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Kansas State University. She teaches graduate courses on curriculum theory, teacher action research, and issues in teaching and learning. Her scholarship centers on narrative theorizing and curriculum theory, particularly exploring student resistance and teacher agency and praxis. She has received two awards for her published articles from AERA, Outstanding Narrative Research Article Award (2007) and Outstanding Narrative Theory Article Award (2009). She is currently serving as a co-guest editor for the *Journal of Educational Research* for the special issue on narrative inquiry.

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