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Articulating Everyday Catastrophes: Reflections on the Research Literacies of Lorri Neilsen

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Abstract

Lorri Neilsen, whose feature article appears in this edition of *M/C Journal*, is Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Neilsen has been teaching and researching in literacy studies for more than four decades. She is internationally recognised as a poet and as an arts-based research methodologist specialising in lyric inquiry. In the latter half of this last decade she was appointed for a five year term to be the Poet Laureate for Nova Scotia. As an academic, she has published widely under the name of Lorri Neilsen; as a poet, she uses Lorri Neilsen Glenn. In this article I refer to her as Neilsen.

This article reflects specifically on the poetics and the politics of the work of poet-scholar Lorri Neilsen. In doing so, it explores the theme of catastrophe in several senses. Firstly, it introduces the reader to the poetic articulations of the everyday catastrophes of grief and loss found in Neilsen's recent work. Secondly, it uses Neilsen's work on grief and loss to draw attention to a rarely recognised scholarly catastrophe: the catastrophe of the methodological divide between the humanities and the social sciences that runs the risk of creating, for the social sciences, a limiting and limited approach to research project design, knowledge production, and relationships between researchers and subjects, to which Lorri Neilsen's ground-breaking use of lyric inquiry is a response. And thirdly, it alerts us to the need to fight to retain the arts and humanities within universities, in order to avoid a scholarly catastrophe of a different order.

In undertaking this exploration, the article uses several terms with which some readers of *M/C Journal* might not be familiar. *Research literacies* is a term used to signal capacity and fluency in the understanding and use of research methodologies. *Arts-based inquiry* is the umbrella term used by researchers using their creative practice in the arts—in writing, theatre performance, visual arts, music, dance, movement—to lead them into new insights into the topic under investigation. This work is frequently embodied and sensuous. So, for example, the understanding of anorexia might be deepened by a dance performance or a series of paintings or a musical score devised in response to work with research participants; or, as I argue here, understandings of the everyday catastrophes of grief and loss might be deepened by the writing of poetry or expressive prose that uncovers nuance and sheds light in ways not possible using the more traditional research methodologies available to social scientists. *Lyric inquiry*, a sub-set of arts-based inquiry, is Neilsen's own term for a research methodology that uses writing itself as the research tool, and whose hallmark is embodied language expressed as poem, song, or poetic prose, to “create the possibility of a resonant, ethical, engaged relationship between the knower and the known” (*Handbook* 94).

This article, then, reflects on the research work of Lorri Neilsen. In this article I use Neilsen's responses to grief and loss as the starting point to follow her journey from the early days of her involvement in literacy research to her present enchantment with arts-based inquiry in literacy and social science research. I outline her writing on research literacies, explore her notion of lyric inquiry as a crucial facet of arts-based research, and conclude with examples of her poetry born of creative reflection on what we might call everyday catastrophes. Ultimately I argue the need to avoid a scholarly catastrophe of a different order from those Neilsen explores, through the continued recognition of the crucial place of the arts in academic institutions.

I open with excerpts from a piece in Lorri Neilsen's collection, *Threading Light*, published in 2011. This piece, *The Sea*, written out of the grief of losing her aged mother, is one I find most moving. It begins:

Days later—a week, a month, hard to tell—sun comes out of drizzle and ice and fog and snow showers, ripping open a bright day. Snow-mounded. If you were a kid, you'd look for your sled. He is sure the box of wrenches is in the cabin, and you know a drive to the country is better than another day in bed with Kleenex and a hacking cough, hiding a flayed heart, and pouring CBC into your ears around the clock. (104)

The two figures in the piece, he and she, head south to their seaside cabin. They take a walk beside an ice-covered seashore.

Today, you step carefully because of ice, and what you find catches your breath. For a brief moment you have escaped the grizzly claws of grief ripping at your chest. You are kneeling on the ice, touching the frosted edges of kelp and weeds, slimy umber and sienna, and putrid green growths that slurp in and out most of the year, but here, now, are stunned, immobile, impaled on the rocks by the cold. Desire is a feral animal; let it loose, it will seek beauty. You point out to each other tableaux: rimming white, translucent blues and greens, coppered plants flash-frozen, fringed by crystalline tatters. A Burtynsky, you think, but not man-made. This is life's ebb, as Tu Fu wrote. The ocean's winter verge. Death's magnificent intaglio.

Your fingers follow the lines of kelp: these things once lived, and moved. Take the long view, maybe they still do. You pause to sit on a cold rock and look at the sky; for a moment you are back beside her body, that last morning, your fingers on cooling flesh. Then, water, the sound of waves. Presence. You look up. He has found one periwinkle fused to a rock, then another. Several more. He places them in your hand, one by one, each dark brown ball with its own scurf of ice that gives off the smallest breath of mist as it touches the heat of your palm. Each a small jolt. This is what the sea creates while you are busy with your own tides: precise cups of glossy perfection with curves like a blues howl that open your heart, craning for light. (*Threading Light* 104–5)

One of the things I appreciate most about Lorri Neilsen's lyric work is her capacity to hold the minuscule simultaneously with the universal; a flash of insight under the arc of a timeless sky. “Smaller than small; larger than large,” write the Hindu prophets (*Upanishads*). “This is what the sea creates while you are busy with your own tides,” she writes, and in that moment of reading I am jolted into an awareness of the contours of grief that no amount of social scientific observation could provide: an awareness of the nature of self-absorption and inward focus so intense that even the most inevitable of natural rhythms—the ocean's tides—are forgotten: forgotten, that is, until the protagonist is shaken awake again, by exquisite beauty, into a new kind of response-ability to the world.

Lorri Neilsen's feature article in this edition of *M/C* creates layer upon layer of insights exploring the notion that loss, an everyday catastrophe, involves a turning inside-out, a jolting into a new sense of self, or a propulsion out of an old, restrictive one; and that inevitably it propels us headlong into a state of living in the moment, of being present to what is, rather than distantly taking stock of what we have. As I ponder this experience, as a reader of her work, I re-experience that moment of stasis: physiologically we all know that experience of time suspended after shock, time inexplicably, irrationally, standing still. But what Neilsen has done so successfully as a poet-scholar, in my view, is not simply find words to express this turning inside out as poetry. Additionally, she has claimed the moment of poetic insight as a crucial form of knowledge-making that has a central and necessary place in illuminating our social worlds. This claim has far-reaching political significance for social science researchers, introducing, as it does, a re-invigorated understanding of the very concept of research:

Research [she tells us] is not only the creation of products to market at the academic fair; research is the process of learning through the words, actions and revisionings of our daily life. [...] Research is the attuned mind/body working purposefully to explore, to listen, to support, to transgress, to gather with care, to create, to disrupt, to

offer back, to contribute, sometimes all at once [...] Inquiry is praxis that cannot be boxed up and delivered: it is a story with no ending. (*Knowing* 264)

Neilsen's particular fascination is with *lyric inquiry* which she claims as political, poetic, and sustaining of the individual and the larger world:

It has the capacity to develop voice and agency in both researcher and participant; it foregrounds conceptual and philosophical processes marked by metaphor, resonance and liminality; and it reunites us with the vivifying effects of imagination and beauty – those long-forgotten qualities that add grace and wisdom to public discourse. (*Knowing* 101)

So what has led her here, to that place where lyric inquiry forms the basis of her engagement with the knowledge-making endeavour in the academy and beyond? As a feminist scholar fascinated by biography, by life writing and story, I find myself drawn as much towards the story of Neilsen's evolution as a poet-scholar as to the work itself. How has she come to an awareness of the need to create new ways of doing research? What has she uncovered here about the ethics and the politics of doing research in the social world? As I read her work I become aware that her current desire to dance at the edge of the conventional research world has been driven as much by a series of professional catastrophes as by an underpinning desire for methodological innovation. Neilsen herself explores these issues in her 1998 collection of academic essays, called *Knowing Her Place: Research Literacies and Feminist Occasions*.

There are several threads weaving their way through this account of a young academic researcher and scholar finding her way into a larger, wiser, more resonant space: there's the story of the young graduate student learning the language of and experiencing the perpetual isolation of disembodied fact-finding statistically resonant research into literacy; there's the story of the young mother juggling academic life and research and parenting, wanting to make sense to the teaching research participants she is working with, wanting to close the gap between the public and the private worlds, wanting to spend time with her partner and her two sons, especially her second son whose birth could have been a catastrophe but whose gentle ways of being in the world gifted them all with the desire to slow down, to see afresh; and, later, there's the story of the mature woman whose impulse is to community *and* to solitude, to living with a generosity of spirit that takes seriously the intertwining of her poetic life and her academic and everyday worlds. Interwoven with these stories is the story of writing itself: here we find the formal disembodied writing of Western scientific research practices; here now is collectivist writing generated at kitchen tables, in community centres, in schools; here now is every mode of writing that evokes nuance and explores the senses; and here now too is the research writing that privileges response-ability, scholaristry, bodily sensation, reciprocity, engagement with the world.

Neilsen's account of this journey begins when, as a young postgraduate student doing research into literacy, she learned the language of statistical significance to measure syntactic complexity, noting, as she wrote up her MA, the distance between the language she had learned and the everyday language of the classroom teachers the research was meant to inform. The emphasis of this early research was on removing language from its context, isolating components of language for scrutiny, making findings that were replicable. In time she came to see this kind of knowledge-making as dry, limited, rule-bound, androcentric. From this disengaged, disembodied place she moved, over decades, into a space where compassion, wisdom, humility, and wonder combine to locate her as researcher who understands, alongside researcher David Smith, that "writing is a holy act, an articulation of limited understanding" (qtd. in Neilsen, *Knowing* 119).

In an echo of Luce Irigaray's insistence that the research and writing we do as fully alive feminist scholars will link the celestial and the terrestrial, the horizontal, and the vertical, and in a further echo of Helene Cixous' claim that when writing from the body, "an opera inhabits me" (Cixous 53), Neilsen writes unabashedly of the metaphysical nature of her research world:

Artful living, artful writing, connecting with a purpose to help each other transcend and grow through inquiry. Connection, embodiment, transformation, transcendence. All these expressions tap spiritual chords [...] But if inquiry is to transcend the destructive circumstances of our lifeworlds, if its purpose is to make a difference, not a career, we cannot avoid using words such as vision, spirit, humanity, soul. Interest in metaphysical perspectives is not new in feminist circles, but is IS new in conventional research communities where the intangible, the deeply disturbing and consciousness-awakening dimensions of life are compartmentalized, reserved [...] for a walk by the ocean, for the rare meditative times of our lives, if we find them at all [...] But (she concludes) the awareness that we know when we live in the eternal present [...] is an awareness full of tremendous power, and, ultimately, hope. (*Knowing* 280)

In the final chapter of this 1998 text outlining her journey into research literacies, called *Notes on Painting Ghosts and Writing the Poetry Report: Some Things I know But Not For Certain*, Lorri Neilsen writes confidently against the grain of what she sees as the limits of androcentric research practices:

Everything we know is at once out there and in here [...] My place is to apprentice myself to the world, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, not in subservience and compliance, as the androcentric practices we have followed would keep me, but in reciprocity, curiosity and response-ability. What we must seek are the transgressive experiences and the fresh words which reveal us, in Annie Dillard's words, 'startlingly to ourselves as creatures set down bewildered'. (qtd. in Neilsen, *Knowing* 261)

And in a gesture that I find heartwarming, she writes of the impact of being scooped up into a collective research-making endeavour, of belonging to a community of scholars (including poet-sociologists Laurel Richardson and Trinh T. Minh-ha) whose research agenda is to expand the ways we might know, to reflect the fullness and richness and complexity of the research endeavour itself, and, in so doing, of human experience:

Time and enculturation have combined to make inquiry a terrain where I live, rather than a place I visit on occasion. Inquiry is less a stance and more an intentional gesture, a re-bodied approach to working with people, particularly women, on projects which matter to them locally and globally. Inquiry is a conspiracy, a breathing together, for which we need the conditions of being together and sharing a climate, or air, for breathing. Inquiry values difference, rather than fearing it, sees contiguity or complementarity as necessary for working together without suppressing our diversity. (*Knowing* 262)

Hers is no airy-fairy disengaged mood-making endeavour. It is decidedly political:

the inclination is to openness and growth, to take risks, to create critical spaces[...] When we make the assumptions of the norms of

research problematic, we make the assumptions and the norms of life together on this planet problematic as well. We begin to dismantle the Western knowledge project, and we begin to learn a fundamental humility. Expanding our research literacies keeps us full of wonder, in spite of the shakey ground and the shadows. We can learn more when our pen is a tool of discovery, not domination.

And her focus is ever on the artistry of research practices:

The ontological and epistemological waters in which these [research] literacies continue to develop are social, political, ecological [...] Re-imagining inquiry is re-imagining ways to work with people and ideas which keep us, like the painter, the dancer, and the performance artist, watchfully poised, momentarily still, and yet fluidly in motion. (*Knowing* 263)

In summary, then, the kind of writing that accompanies the research methodology that Lorri Neilsen has created cuts across the notion of knowledge as product, commodity, trump card.

Knowing [*for Neilsen*] is an experience of immersion and expression rather than one of gathering data only to advance an argument [...] A reader does not take away three key points or five examples. A reader comes away with the resonance of another's world...our senses stimulated, our spirit and emotions affected. (*Knowing* 96)

This kind of writing emerges from her desires to create a resonant, embodied, ethical, activist, feminist-honouring, and collaborative way to grapple with the nuance of human experience. This she calls lyric inquiry. Lyric inquiry sits on the margins, inhabits the liminal spaces, "places where we perceive patterns in new ways, find sensuous openings into new understandings, fresh concepts, wild possibilities" (*Knowing* 98). In her chapter on lyric inquiry in the 2008 Sage *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, Neilsen argues that lyric inquiry leans on no other mode of enquiry: it stands on its own, resonant and expressive, inviting fresh ways to see, read, consider experience. Unlike the narrative enquiry that currently popularly accompanies much social science research in order to bolster an argument, or illustrate a point being made in policy formulation or discussion (Hopkins), lyric inquiry adopts its own mode, its own performative spaces. It's a heady concept and, I would argue, a brave contribution to the repertoire of qualitative arts-based research methodologies.

For me Lorri Neilsen's stance as poet, writer, researcher, woman, is beautifully captured in her piece from *Threading Light* which she has titled *Writing has always felt like praying*. Here we glimpse the lives of four figures: the Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus Christ, and the poet herself, each responding to catastrophe of sorts:

Gotama saw the face of his infant son and sleeping wife,
shaved his head and beard, put on his yellow robe, and
left without saying good-bye. Duties, possessions,
ties of the heart: all dust
weighing down his soul. He walked and walked,
seeking a life wide open, complete and pure as polished shell.

In a cave away from the fray of Mecca, vendettas,
and a world soured by commerce, Muhammad
shook as the words of a new scripture
came to him. Surrendered himself
to its beauty, singing and weeping verse by verse, year by year
for twenty-one years.

Of course you remember the man from Galilee
who carried on his back the very wood on which
his blood was spilled. How he pushed back the rock
from the front of the cave and – this is gospel –
ascended, emptied of self and full of god, returning
now in offerings of bread and wine.

I pace back and forth on a cliff above the unknowable, lured
by slippery and maverick tales that call forth terror, crack
the earth, shatter my bones with light. I have no need
to verify old brown marks of stigmata, translate Coptic fragments.
A burlap robe on display in the cold stone air of the Church of Santa Croce
is inscrutable: it tells me only that my body is a ragged garment
and will be discarded too.

But here, now, I am ready as a tuned string
to witness what is ravenous, mythic. Here I am holy, misbegotten,
gossip on the lips of the gods, forgotten by the time the cups
are washed and put away. So I start as I start every day,
cobbling a makeshift pulpit, casting for truths as they are given me:
Man, woman, child, sun, moon, breath, tears,
Stone, sand, sea.

(*Threading Light* 102–3)

It is ironic that the kind of research that Neilsen advocates, research that draws specifically on the arts to create new methodologies for the uncovering of topics traditionally explored by the social sciences, is being developed at precisely that moment when university arts departments around the world are being dismantled, and their value questioned (See Cohen, *NY Times*; Donoghue, *Chronicle of Higher Education*; Kitcher, *Republic*). As I indicated at the beginning of the article, I use this homage to Lorri Neilsen and her work to make the broader point that we lose the arts and the humanities in our universities at our peril. It's not just that the arts are a pleasant addition, a ruffle on the edge of the serious straight-tailored cut of the research garment: rather, as Neilsen has argued throughout her research and writing career, the arts are central to our survival as a response-able, interactive, creative, thoughtful species. To turn our back on the arts in contemporary research practices is already a dangerous erosion, a research and knowledge-making catastrophe which Neilsen's lyric inquiry seeks to address: to lose the arts from universities altogether would be a catastrophe of a much higher order.

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