Dwelling in the Human/Posthuman Entanglement of Poetic Inquiry: Poetic Missives to and from Carl Leggo

Monica Prendergast
University of Victoria

Abstract:
This inaugural Dr. Carl Leggo Memorial Lecture on Poetic Inquiry was delivered at the 7th International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry on October 3rd, 2019. I share a poetic conversation I have crafted out of Carl’s work that allows me, and all of us, to enter into a continuing dialogue with Carl’s words, which survive and will live on without his earthly presence. I discuss the process I undertook to create these poetic missives, in my voice and Carl’s, following the dialogue. All of the work beginning with “Dear Monica” are found poems created from Carl’s writing—his prose, not his poetry. My own poetic messages to Carl are mostly original, although they include a bit of found poetry from the literature on posthumanism. And the abecedarian poem is definitely inspired by Carl’s love of this type of poem, and his playful joy, always, in exploring the possibilities of language and poetry.

Keywords: Carl Leggo; curriculum studies; poetic inquiry
Penser à l’implication humaine/post-humaine de l’investigation poétique : Messages poétiques à destination et en provenance de Carl Leggo

Résumé :
Cette conférence commémorative du Dr. Carl Leggo sur l’investigation poétique a été prononcée pour la première fois au 7ème Symposium International, tenu le 3 octobre 2019. Je partage un entretien poétique que j’ai mené à partir des œuvres de Carl qui permet à moi et à nous tous de nous lancer dans un dialogue continu aux œuvres de Carl, qui survivent sa vie par terre. Je discute les étapes empruntées pour accoucher ce discours poétique, avec ma voix et celle de Carl, suite à l’entretien. « Chère Monica » est l’expression qui commence les poésies découlant des œuvres de Carl – de sa prose, mais non pas de sa poésie. Bien que mes messages poétiques tirent leur inspiration de la littérature post humaniste, ils sont majoritairement originaux. Et la base du poème-abecedaire est définitivement inspirée par l’amour de Carl pour ce type de poème, et sa joie amusante à explorer continuellement les possibilités du langage et de la poésie.

Mots clés : études en curriculum; recherche poétique; Carl Leggo
I am very honoured to have been invited to deliver this memorial lecture in the name of our dear departed colleague and friend, Dr. Carl Leggo. Many in this room know how much we have lost—an incalculable amount—with Carl’s passing in March of this year. Many of you here were Carl’s supervisees as graduate students, and many others knew him for many years and certainly throughout the dozen years this symposium has been held. However, some of you here may never have met nor encountered Carl or his work. This lecture today is designed with you in mind, in that I hope it will succeed in encouraging you to seek out Carl’s scholarship and the many, many major contributions he made to the field of poetic inquiry.

It is no exaggeration to say that we would not be here today without Carl. He and I co-hosted the first ISPI at UBC in 2007. We invited a number of people we had never even met; those whose poetic inquiry work had appeared on our radar in the gathering of an annotated bibliography on poetic approaches to social science research. This was the subject of my 2006-2008 SSHRC-funded postdoctoral research study, carried out under Carl’s supervision. And we invited a number of graduate students and others, many who Carl requested, based on his knowledge of their work, to that first gathering in the fall of 2007.

When it was decided to keep the symposium going on a biennial basis, which has happened to this day, we never imagined the flourishing of work that this group would produce: an edited book collection and journal special issue out of each ISPI since then. To date, that means that six books and six journal issues are out in the world as a direct result of Carl’s generosity of spirit, his ability to say “Yes” that never seemed to falter. He said yes to me when I approached him at a conference in the fall of 2005, very nervously, my heart hammering away, to see if he would consider supporting my postdoctoral application. I asked him if he could give me five minutes of his time. His response was to tell me I could have more than five minutes. And, indeed, we sat together for over an hour talking about what I wanted to work on with him. Two minutes into that meeting he stopped me and said there was no need for me to “sell him” on what I proposed—he was in, one hundred percent. The rest of that first meeting, with great joy, we had our first of dozens of conversations about poetry and the work it could do as an arts-based form of qualitative research. And whenever an ISPI was held, we would greet each other as proud parents who had birthed this small but vibrant scholarly community into being out of our shared passion for poetry, for spinning words into worlds.

Today I want to share with you a poetic conversation I have crafted out of Carl’s work that allows me, and all of us, to enter into a continuing dialogue with Carl’s words, which survive and will live on without his earthly presence. I will discuss the process I undertook to create these poetic missives, in my voice and Carl’s, following my reading of the dialogue. All of the work beginning with “Dear Monica” are found poems created from Carl’s writing—his prose, not his poetry. My own poetic messages to Carl are mostly original, although they include a bit of found poetry from the literature on posthumanism. And the abecedarian poem is definitely inspired by Carl’s love of this type of poem, and his playful joy, always, in exploring the possibilities of language and poetry. Let’s begin.
Poetic Missives to/from Carl Leggo

1. Dear Carl

_a haiku chain poem_

you are posthuman now
being becoming stardust
yet your words remain

your words yet remain
poet of life (love and loss)
(he)artful scribe, scribbling

your heart-full scribbling
lines of life in flight, soaring
crow-trickster-joker

joker-trickster-crow
at play in remembering
riffling as you riff

you riff and riffle
cast your eyes over, leaf through
ruminate (always)

always ruminating on memory, its cost
lost father/brother

father/brother lost
your writing on loss
a gift for me now

for me the gift now
your teaching me (yet again)
to bear death in life

dead in life is barely bearable but for your
words, enfolding me

enfolded in words
held in the presence of Carl
I let go Leggo
to let go Leggo
i engage one last time in
poetic wonder
poetic wonder-
ings across the human/post
human wanderings
wandering human—
lost and found with words—plays in
more-than-human world
world more-than-human
yet broken by rape and greed
out of control now
now out of control
the planet rebels yelling
i am in such pain
such pain i am in
ecological despair
Anthropocene rage
Rage, Anthropocene,
with your fires and storms, hold us
to account, count us
count us to account
for mass extinction, rise seas
drown us all awake
awake as we drown
prophetic imaginings
now are all too true
all are now too true
Carl, where are you? not gone? gone?
still here, yes, heart-held
heart-held, here, help me
face our own extinction
choose love, not despair
choose love choose love
choose love choose love choose love
2. Dear Monica

_the hole in my heart_

I want to call out my grief
because grief is now my teacher

most people I know
do not want to hold
my clichéd heart
now pickled in grief

I walk the course of loss
this curriculum of loss
on my own

I know the hole in my heart
I hope I can learn
    how
to live with the hole

I believe in eternal life
that those who have died
are still present
    still caring for us
    still eager for
    communication

begin each new day
with hope
(even joy)
in the midst of loss

    the curriculum of loss
    is a curriculum of hope

(found poem from Leggo, 2017)
3. Dear Carl

the posthuman

i am fear-filled
cowed
by the posthuman

facing the endgame
of our species
on this planet

intimidated
by rhizomatic
  lines of flight
  machinic assemblages
  networks of networks
  new materialisms

agential realisms

the only thing
that does not matter
anymore
is matter (Barad, 2003, p. 801)

but if matter is all i know
how can matter not matter?

It is vitally important that we understand how matter matters. (p. 803)

how does matter matter to the artist, the poet,
the writer, the musician, the actor, the dancer?

to see myself (and all else) entangled, to know it,
to be with and of the universe: is this the way, the answer?

. . . the sticky problem of humanity’s own captivity within language (p. 812)

can only anthropocentric humanism help us now?
to be the tree, the whale, the polar bear feels injurious/unjust

i want to decentre myself but i don’t know how
the voice of the nonhuman is a voice i must not trust

enraptured/captured by language i have no other way
to be both wave and particle, a lightbeam at play
things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and
words do not have inherently determinate meanings (p. 813)
i am trying to follow this path, unbound with/out meaning, believe me
but am limited by my breath, my body, my brain that conceives me

matter comes to matter
through the iterative
intra-activity
of the world
in its becoming (p. 823)

matter coming to matter
is process
(from Heraclitus, to Bohr, to Barad)
is performative
this is known
written in voice
in the material body
in water
not stone
the stones
marked
with scrawled
letters ledgers leavings lines
on the sides
of our roads
only
techno/logical
gravestones
left behind
white noise
&
ever-running
codes
4. Dear Monica

*small philosophies on fear and love*

i.

Life is full:
unseasonable rain and sun
strong winds
blow
in the wrong direction
good news/bad news
gifts and bills
praises and insults

Some suffer:
far more than others
none of us
is immune
is inured to pain
(pain: a reminder
life is complex
&
mysterious)

never to be
taken
for granted
in the tangled midst of the events

experiences

emotions of each day’s living

be careful:
don’t perceive
the world
as fearful only

embrace fear:
lean into it
live with it
as everydayness

cycling sometimes with
&
sometimes against

the wind

(the wind: not to be feared
or despised)
an ecological understanding

everything
&
everyone

is connected

ii.

full of fears. the hollow in my heart the holes
like gaping wounds my search for wholeness
a subject-in-process encyclopaedia of stories hypertextually emerging
 evolving under construction in relationship with others
written with patience, hope, and affection
for living with love to live fearlessly [is] to live with love.

(found poems from Leggo, 2011)
5. Dear Carl

*What is posthuman poetic inquiry?*

**In Deleuzean terms**

a molecular vision of the alternative
a plurality of fissions and margins
a system of deviances

(straining for communicability
while
  protecting its
  marginality)

registering in the local
enacting the future life
  of difference

a way to dream
(and perhaps enact)
postqualitative work

**The question is**

how might we move from:
what needs to be opposed
to
what can be imagined
  out of:
what is already happening
embedded in an immanence
  of
doing
  ?

(found poems from Lather, 2016, p. 129)
how to write
a poem for
the posthuman: an abecedarian recipe

add one non-Anthropocentric agentic assemblage
blended with Braidotti and Barad
crafted chaotically complexly collectively
diffracted deflected diffused dispersed
entangled in/with everything else
folding-in the fearless and feminist
(generalizable no more)
humans becoming → machines becoming → human
injected into → iterative intra-activity ←
jolted by injustice
knower and the unknown
layer Lather latherings in lines of flight
mix in more-than-human matters
non-anthropomorphic notes
onerously/ontologically open
purée performing post the post-post
questioning yet querulous
reduce with rhizomes rooted in
subaltern secular spaces (with St. Pierre sanctified non-subjectivity)
technologies + deterritorialized territories (tremulous transformations)
upset understanding unsure of itself
vexed and vexatious
whisk with the weight of the world
extant becoming extinct
yet yearning for the not-yet
zealous zoomorphic unzippings

mix all ingredients well
to reveal onto-epistem-ologies
of emergence

meeting the universe
half ← → way

(found/inspired by Barad, 2003, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Brinkmann, 2017; Charteris, Nye, & Jones, 2019; Lather, 2016; McKnight, 2018; Somerville & Powell, 2019)
6. Dear Monica

What does it mean to dwell poetically?

(Aoki, 1979/2005, p. 375)

Carl’s questions: a four-part found poem

i. *Vox Autobiographia / Identitatis*

Can the heart . . . avoid clichés?
Can the poet who is seeking
to understand his heart
. . . avoid clichés?

How are you?
“Fine. You?”

Who am I? Who am I in relation to the world?
How should I live? What are the responsibilities
of a human being in the contemporary world?

What do we need
in order to live
with more courage
and creativity
and exploration
and experimentation?

How am I going to live this new day?
(What secrets do I have that I don’t want to share?)

How can a person
who walks daily in plural stories
ever hope to find
places for meeting
other people
who walk in their plural stories?

How do we learn
to tell all the stories,
to ring the bell,
even if no one is listening,
even if no one cares,
even if no one responds?

What is the need,
urge,
The Human/Posthuman Entanglement of Poetic Inquiry

compulsion
to record, store,
re/store, restory
my experiences,
  my emotions,
  my memories,
when I do not even know
who "my" refers to?
What am I doing in my words?
Who is this writer who holds the pen?
Have I met him yet?
Do I want to?

ii. Vox Veritas

The process: a prose poem

The process cannot be described by circular or linear metaphors, but by a metaphor of divergence—the dissemination of opinions about opinions, knowing no end, seeking the truth that is not, apparently always drawing closer to truth but in truth never doing so, which is still untrue because in the game of chasing the traces of words, endlessly deferring and differing, there is truth even if it is the truth that there is no truth (only opinions) or the truth that it is more fun to chase non-truth than not chase at all or the truth that fun has purpose even though you cannot be sure what the purpose is or whether there is purpose—one more unconscious desire? one more ideologically constructed “value”? one more false hope to ward off the demons of despair?

naked truth

What is the pull to fabrication,
to organize and structure
line the chaos of experience
so I can reveal (at l(e)ast)
my experience
to others?
Why do I
want to reveal
my experience
to others?

What is this urge:
for self-revelation,
for exposing myself in public,
for standing naked in the middle of a shopping mall?

How much of myself
do I really reveal?

iii. Vox Poetica

Why is a poem significant?

Do we really need poems,
or is that just a poet’s hope
for endorsement and response?

What can a poem do?

What does it mean to be human?

Who will listen?

How does poetry know?

What does poetry know?

How do I know poetry?

What do I know?

What is the pull of words

(like a siren call)

that cannot be denied?

Do I listen with my ears,

my heart,

my spirit,

my blood,

my bones?

What is the vocabulary of the heart?

What is the syntax of the heart?

What is the grammar of the heart?

How many languages do we have?

what is the language

of fire earth air water?

Have you ever seen

a maple leaf after winter,

filled with the sun,

cut its shape in spring ice?
iv. *Vox Cupio*

**What are the ducks laughing about?**

What would
a curriculum of enchantments
look like?

What if we devoted
our teaching and learning,
our living curriculum,
to exploring:
"how many kinds
of enchantments
there are
in this world"?

What would research be like
if we acknowledged
the miraculous experience
of the earth,
the experience
of miracles

of seasons, day and night,
creatures and stars and snowflakes
beyond counting and naming?

What would research be like
if we devoted our energies
to exploring possibilities

where people could stand in the spaces
between commonplace and miracle,

and know in each moment
the momentousness
of "unfathomable life"?

(found poems from *Storying the World: The Contributions of Carl Leggo on Language and Poetry* [Irwin, Hasebe-Ludt, & Sinner, 2019])
Dear Carl

i like to think

i like to think
that you would
delight
in this work

as i mirror
your play-
full-ness

wording these worlds

a space for we two
to be together again
mentor & mentee
poet & poet
language lovers
& performers

that you and i
shepherded into being
an inquiry community
(“we happy few”)
with an invitation
to come and play
in the worlds of words

that you are
found
bound between
these lines
in poetic stellar-
illuminations
one last time

that you would murmur
“wonderful”
and
“beautiful”
as you listen

that you
would ask
The best and 
most essential 
question 
at the end 
that you could tell me 
being posthuman
is not that hard 
that you are 
spinning with the stars 
& 
falling free in moonbeams 
shining down in 
particulate waves 
on the snows of 
Lynch's Lane 
& 
York Harbour, 
Newfoundland
that you are 
finally 
and forever 
at home

Reflective Ruminations

To carry out this work, I began by reading through Storying the World (Irwin, Hasebe-Ludt, & Sinner, 2019) and a couple of other recent writings by Carl (Leggo, 2018, 2014). I made use of Wolff’s (1972) surrender-and-catch method that I had previously used in sifting through the 2007-2012 addition to my ever-expanding bibliography of poetic inquiry practice (Prendergast, 2015). Wolff’s phenomenological method first appeared to me in my search for poetic methods during my postdoctoral studies, and appeals greatly to me as an arts-based researcher:

To surrender means to take as fully, to meet as immediately as possible whatever the occasion may be, that is, not to select, not to believe that one can know quickly what is to be understood and acted on, hence what one’s experience means; not to suppose that one can do justice to the experience with one’s received notions, with one’s received feeling and thinking, even with the received structure of that feeling and thinking; to meet it as much as possible in its originality, its itself-ness. . . . What is caught (comprehended, conceived), what catching (“conceiving”) means cannot be anticipated (otherwise surrender would not be as unconditional as it is), for its result may not be a concept in the everyday or scientific sense of the word but, for instance, a decision, a poem, a painting, the clarification or urging of an
existential question, a change in the person: ontologically it always is a new conceiving, a new concept, a beginning, a new being-in-the-world. (Wolff, 1972, p. 453-454; Prendergast, 2015, p. 682)

One thing I knew I wanted to “catch” in Carl’s works were his questions. He was an avid questioner and questions can be found scattered across and throughout most of his writings. And I had in mind to craft a found poem, or set of poems, (as actually unfolded) using his questions as the basis. But other than gathering these questions, I tried to remain open, surrendering myself to Carl’s words, and catching passages that spoke most powerfully to me. I limited myself to focusing on his prose, not his poems that appear woven through all of his writing. In my view, Carl’s poems speak for themselves, and require no further interpretive unpacking. I considered following his engagement with Dorothy Livesay’s poetry—in crafting a poem where he moves back and forth between his favorite lines pulled from her poems and lines of his own (Leggo, 2017)—but I ended up working only with his prose for this project. Perhaps that engagement with his poetry may follow someday hence.

It does not surprise me in hindsight to note that two of the found poems in the sequence above are derived from two articles: “The Faces of Love: The Curriculum of Loss” (Leggo, 2017) and “Living Love: Confessions of a Fearful Teacher” (Leggo, 2011). In navigating through my own grief in the wake of Carl’s death, I found great solace in these two articles. Given that I knew I wanted to speak imaginatively with Carl about posthumanism and its impact on my thinking (about both the world at large, as well as on the methodology of poetic inquiry), the topics of loss and fear were significant “catches” for me. What do we potentially lose (as in pretty much everything) as we move from a human to a posthuman world? How does the humanistically rooted field of poetic inquiry, so concerned with “humanizing research” (Paris & Winn, 2014), make the shift toward the post-qualitative and posthuman discourses now so prevalent in the social sciences and humanities? Or is this shift to be resisted? And if so, why and how?

So, what have I “found” in crafting this work, these poetic missives? Certainly, I have found comfort in dwelling with Carl’s writing. For those of you here who are grieving as heavily as I have been doing, I hope this rendering of his prose into poetry will offer you some solace as well. There is much wisdom in Carl’s work, as humbly as he may have presented it. There is also the fearlessness of an autobiographical poet and scholar in addressing difficult questions about what it was he was trying to do; what he hoped to accomplish in his self-representation and in his research. This imaginary dialogue has also helped me to creatively process my own fears and misgivings about posthumanist theory, a lot of which I find intimidating in its complexity and in its eventual implications, including my own growing sense of ecological despair about the fate of humanity on this planet.

In terms of adding to my understanding of poetic inquiry methods, the addition of two new poetic voices is a significant result. In addition to the voices Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia, Vox Theoria, Vox Participare, Vox Poetica, Vox Justitatis, Vox Identitatis, Vox Custodia, and Vox Procreator that I have identified as working in the literature on poetic inquiry to date (Prendergast, 2009, 2015), I can now add two more emerging from Carl’s work: Vox Veritas and Vox Cupio. These are the voices of truth telling (veritas) and of wishing/dreaming (cupio). How wonderful it is to be
able to add these voices into the mix, as they feel so resonant with Carl’s work. He was equal parts truth teller and dreamer, never flinching from his excavation of memory, as pain-filled as it sometimes could be, and never failing in his imagining a better world filled with the love of language and poetry.

Carl, my friend, you are posthuman now, that cannot be denied. But we live with what you have left behind, with gratitude and love. Always love, love and more love. Thank you.

References


Prendergast (Eds.), *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences* (pp. xix-xl). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

