

# THE MORE YOU KNOW

## ARTS CREATION AS NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH

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### ***On Learning***

I have rebelled against making rotis:  
Round, soft, with ghee melting on top.  
I have fought the joy of cooking sometimes.  
For I have a brother and a desire  
to be a fighting feminist forever.  
But when my fingers feel the dough—  
soft, sticky, and satisfying—  
I wonder why I gave up  
before I knew the joy of learning.

### ***On Learning Anew***

My finger, a tool,  
runs through the crevices,  
the cracks, and the corners  
to mold clay like roti dough.  
I am remembering and recalling  
this motion, this movement,  
this memory  
of childhood  
of learning this technique before  
of knowing ceramics before  
I took a university course.

### ***On Learning Again***

A character is round or flat,  
A plot can be linear or not:  
I hear my students echo familiar words,  
as I teach children's literature tonight.  
I remember how I once met these words,  
these phrases, these concepts, these ideas  
when we read Chaucer's Tales  
and of Macbeth's death.



of ginger garlic paste that lingered after we ate, in silent reading of our own poison, and the noiseless acknowledgement of each other's' presence.

Home, as I miss it, was whole. Not shattered through the trembling windows of anger. That wound us all up. But found us later at the same table, pretending like nothing ever happened. It was quiet, though. Enough to listen to my own head pound endlessly with things I could never share. Making memories from other times my companions and writing my only escape. It was always six of us fighting our own battles, in our own times, and letting each other be in our insecurities and inabilities.

Home, as I miss it, was growing. Despite seething with rage—a family tradition. It found us bound to each other by blood. No escape. Quite fatalist. But it was passionate, though. At least, as passionate as we wanted it to be. It made space for loud voices, cacophonous noises. To drown the rest of the world out. And to drown ourselves with it. It was always the six of us fixing our own problems, giving too much advice, and holding someone through the night.

Home, as I miss it, was full of art. Books. Poetry. Music. Games. Dance. Movies. Quizzes. TV. Sports. Festivals. Rituals. Food. With all its imperfections and damage, it shined through with hope and hospitality. For everyone who walked through the door. It made space for kids and adults, all the same. I think it made space for the six of us too. In its own way, home will always be the six of us with at least one thing that makes us grin, cheek-to-cheek.

Home, as I miss it, will always be the six of us. So, when you tell me Thatha passed away, why can't I picture home without him now? Why do I know that when you video call me, it is Thatha who sits in the pooja room reading mantra after mantra, in deep meditation? Why do I still think he's there ... somewhere back home?

### ***On Being Through Play/A Game For Two***

There are twenty-five cards in this deck,  
thirteen in the other,  
and there are four coins—  
from which we choose two.  
You are doubled up  
over the instruction manual,  
and I, softly resting my neck,  
think of Amma carrying boxes and bowls  
nursing a family of four  
with rasam sadam and games galore.

We just cleared the table  
of Mucinex and multivitamins,  
of cups empty but chai stained,  
of three lip balms and a medicine pouch—  
to make way for our fantastic escape.

You begin reading the manual for today,  
and our eyes sparkle in a childish haze.  
You—the Red Guard, and me—the Voidwarden,

You—a hypochondriac, and I—an anxious butterfly,  
waddle our way through the game of life.

***On Knowing***

I know what silences sounds like:

ticking and tocking.

I know now what my mother means when she says  
“oru chottu oil” for dishes we everyday eat.

I know how

to mix paint on a palette to make purple and cream.

I know how to run red lights safely.  
my body creak after long walks, and

I have heard

I know  
these walks

make me write poetry.

I listen to the joy that Ross Gay seeks.

I cannot stand  
the smell of guava, for the life of me.

I know the homely softness of hosiery, and I try everyday  
to love more joyously. I briefly lend my ears to a sitarist’s melody.

I know I cry tears of joy.

And that I learnt to share a remote with my brother.  
I’ve grieved for the loss of another.  
I know how to fold my clothes right out of the dryer.

I know what it feels like to have fresh food  
three times a day. I know my family misses me.

I know home as a memory.

*The First of Knowing*

At 9, I live

in

an already identified body—

a policed body,  
a recognized body,  
a body with one name  
and one number,  
a body that is gendered,  
and thus,  
a body that is sexualized.

A body decided,  
                  decoded,  
                          deciphered.

A body laid bare:  
                          I live in a time

  and a space

In a body that is and will be                   known to the state.

At 9, I live in a body that is trained. A body that is strained.

And this is the first I know of how to behave.

*On Knowing to Be a Girl*

Do not   spread your legs on the sofa

Do not   sprawl or take up space

Do not  
dress in your pajamas  
or let your hair loose

Do not  
almost say *fuck*

Do not  
*raise* your voice

Do not  
ask too many questions  
or ask too few

Do not  
scrape the food off your plate  
with your bare fingers  
and devour the raita

Do not  
leave your sentences incomplete  
or end on a critique  
or botch up your grammar  
and become a disgrace

Do not  
forget to do your homework  
or forget to nod politely  
or forget your colonizer's lesson  
or forget to *be* a woman

Do not forget what you've learnt

On days you almost forget to live.

### ***On Unknowing***

I am still scrubbing my arms

still soaking in a bath

still rinsing my mouth

still rubbing my wounds hard  
still dusting off old thoughts  
still wiping my words off  
still soaping my movement  
still cleansing my soul  
still peeling off my dead skin  
since I was ten.



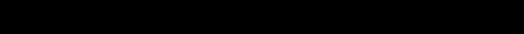
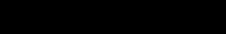
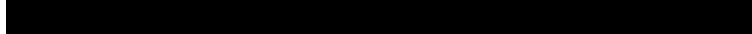

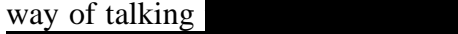
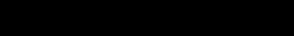
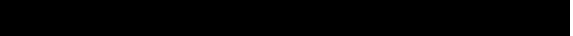

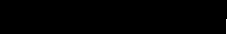
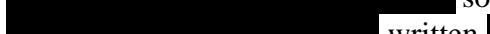
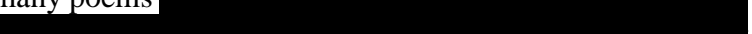
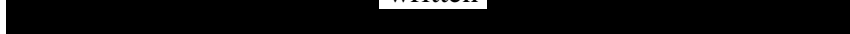
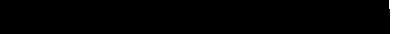
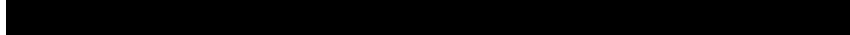
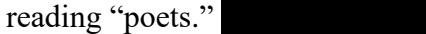
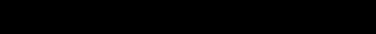
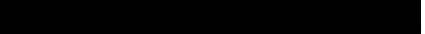
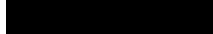

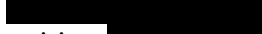
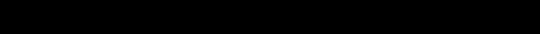

*Of Amma, I Know*

My mother, she would sleep,  
at twenty past ten.  
Groggy from the numbers job  
on long Excel sheets,  
after the intimate cooking  
of two fresh meals,  
begging my family  
to shut up and eat.  
My mother, she would groan,  
of muscle pains unknown.  
Walking miles to her job  
on sultry mornings in Hyderabad.  
My mother, we would laugh,  
had no energy for us.  
And when you said,  
“I never thought of mother as a person,”  
I was shocked.  
All my life, I think I’ve learnt  
of a woman’s hard work,  
and how it gets worse  
with dreams of her own.  
All my life, I think I’ve known  
to pursue my interests alone,  
in the minutes between  
serving food and cleaning chores.  
All my life, I think I’ve seen  
my mother praying  
for just one more night  
of quiet and peace.

And now, my mother,  
retired, and still tired,  
making three fresh meals,  
with ageing pains that won't heal,  
paints in my bedroom  
sings in a classroom,  
learns a new language,  
and cares for many ...  
And yet, for us in our luxury,  
we still don't see  
how exhausting  
a woman's work can ever be.

### *On Knowing Through Writing*

How did I come to poetry? A better question for me would be how did poetry come to me?

I remember  a gift  my  diary  my  
way of talking  imagining and *enacting*   
 so many poems  
 written   
 even before I was  
reading "poets."   
 the pen was my way out   
writing   
these musings on learning and knowing  it needed imagery, metaphors,  
wordplay   
 So, I glided into poetry.  What about  "research"? you  
ask. And  I ask  What poetry is not research?  
 someone's way of knowing and their knowledge of the world  
 "the world is made of stories."  
 it is not a majority way of knowing, but that doesn't make it any less  
relevant.



## ARTS CREATION AS NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH

Throughout my life, I have been drawn to artistic ways of being. Writing diary entries as a preteen provided me an escape from societal expectations. Painting classes gave me time to immerse myself in a sensory experience, away from all the chaos. Dancing with my schoolmates in front of an audience helped me claim space in the world.

My love for the arts, though “different” than others because it was not a *hobby*, has always been my way to represent things. Whether it was learning the melody of a song or reproducing an oil painting from an old newspaper cutout or writing a speech from the perspective of personal experience to move a crowd, I was on a journey to use the arts as a method to represent a life lived. While this is one way of sharing knowledge that already exists in the world, I have also used artistic methods to conduct research: a story *about* my learnings as a teacher, a poem *describing* hierarchies of subjects in schools in India, and a story *revealing* the language policies in India. And while the representational arts still put me in a different box than someone who is writing a paper, the learnings I was sharing felt stale. The research was not experimental or bordering the strange—these methods were tame ways of *including* the arts in my research and, in turn, resisting *arts as research*.

While my research for doctoral classes and academic conferences alluded to the arts, and made a case for artmaking in the classroom, I had never considered practicing artmaking as a form of researching. During my third year in the doctoral program, I took a pottery class because I was attracted to creating something substantial and real with my hands. My interest in that course changed everything. While I was in the pottery class, I wanted clay to be a part of my research. But how can a piece of ceramic art say something about educational systems? It could say *something* if I beat meaning out of the clay (Collins, 1988), but I did not want to *use* pottery, I wanted to create/make pottery. I had an itch, a desire to have clay mold my dissertation.

The more I thought about representational ceramics, i.e., ceramics that would re-present my research instead of offering something different to think about, the more I feared creating something. What if what I made was *too obvious*? What if my ideas were not relevant to the art world? What if I was not considered an artist but rather a researcher who adapts the arts to her own findings? I was mortified at the thought of being found out as a fraud ceramicist and, by extension, a fraud poet, a fraud painter, and a fraud writer. I needed to figure out how to be an artist who doesn’t just reproduce, but creates, imagines, and conceptualizes.

Harman (2018) says that the problem with humans is that we only pursue “knowledge” (what a thing is) and practical know-how (what a thing can do), while ignoring other cognitive activities like arts creation—“since the *primary* role of art is not to communicate knowledge about its subject matter” (p. 44). I understood clay as just a medium to show a concept, instead of ceramics molding my conceptions itself. While these might sound similar, the difference is this: If a bowl that I make cracks, it can be interpreted as the brokenness that I observe in educational systems. Clay here is a medium to show a concept. On the other hand, experimenting with the material to observe the ways in which the clay body cracks and heals can become a conceptualization of crises and healing within educational systems. The “research”/conclusion does not come as an afterthought to the artmaking. Instead, the artmaking practice is the research. I realize that the reason I am attracted to learning and knowing in all spaces that I have been a part of, like presented in the poetry, is because of my artistic pursuits.

As I struggled with the questions of representational ceramics, I decided to spend the rest of my academic year away from clay—creating something that delved into my understanding of

education. I turned to poetry to find answers. Since poetry and creative writing had always been my way out of crises since I was a child, I wanted to immerse myself into understanding how I think about education.

I began the semester drawing from short journal entries that I wrote during the pandemic, which were making sense of the times that we were living in—amidst the Black Lives Matter movement protests, the inaccessibility to education for many students in the global south, and the rapidly increasing cases of domestic violence. The lockdown that we thought would last for a few weeks lasted for longer than a year, sending our lives into disarray. While I noticed my writing as social commentary that would inform my work as an educational researcher, I was still left wondering: What about this writing is “education”? How can this writing be considered “educational research”?

I realized that I needed to change the way I was thinking about, categorizing, and understanding education. My writing began to grapple with my position in the world as a woman, a scholar, a teacher, and a student. Having spent time within educational institutions my whole life, these reflections on the world portrayed *why* I wanted to research “education.” I did not want to study teacher practices or classroom policies in my educational research. Rather, I wanted to pick apart and delve into the foundations of education: how we learn (and unlearn), how we know (and question), and how we live (and survive) in an unjust world. The poems in this paper present education, i.e., learning, knowing, and being that happens everywhere—within and beyond traditional educational spaces.

While I wrote some of these poems in a poetic inquiry class, in this rendition, I reimagine my work as research creation (Loveless, 2019) and/or arts as research. I added old poems to the manuscript from various folders on my computer, often titled terribly, ensuring that I ignored them. In combining the poems that I wrote *for* a poetic inquiry methods class in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education department and ones I had just written, I began to understand that poems written *for/as* research have similar research qualities to poems written *as poems*.

What are these research qualities?

AERA (2009) has recommended a framework to follow while conducting humanities-oriented research in education, which includes a similar research reporting structure to the social scientific standards: the requirements of conceptualization, substantiation, coherence, etc. In a broad sense, research in education can be considered *as research* once it follows a pattern of “reporting,” i.e., “describing, understanding, and explaining an empirical reality” (Vannini, 2015, p. 1). However, in various presentations of art forms, we often notice that empirical reality can be elusive, indescribable, and unattainable. In that case, then, the creation of arts sits on murky grounds in terms of research. However, if we redefine research qualities to include discovering something new, to allow and welcome change, to changing the way we look at the world, then the creation of arts *is* research.

Loveless (2019) argues that research creation as “crucial to the development of new academic literacies that challenge traditional modes of knowing” (p. 53). To create a new academic literacy within the field of education, I want to think about this question: What makes research research? While documents like the AERA standards on reporting on humanities-oriented research offer legitimization and visibility in the broader field of education, making our lives easier as experimental researchers, I want to dig into the earth to find the roots of my insistence that arts creation *is* research. We need to begin to look beyond educational research to redefine educational research.

In college, I was struggling to find my footing in the philosophy department. After changing my major to English, I was first introduced to Gloria Anzaldua in the second year. I remember the joy while reading the paper, highlighting as I went along, memorizing “I carry home on my back” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 21). I had only moved from the south to the north of India, but it was such a different life up there.

After I moved to an entirely new continent, my ties with Anzaldua as a postcolonial scholar grew stronger. Her essays are made of remembrances of experiences, understandings, and theories of the times and spaces that are/were her own. It is written in a way that made it approachable—a writing style I would later find out resembled creative nonfiction, a kind of poetic inquiry, literary theory, and many others. Her artistic endeavor was the best academic work that I had encountered. Creative writing by Anzaldua is research. Paintings by my mother learning a new folk style each week is research. Photographic art by Teju Cole (2017) in *Blind Spot* is research. Creative nonfiction like Orhan Pamuk’s (2003) *Istanbul* is research.

All this art is rich in theory, in an artistic philosophy, that is not apparent to the eye. It is not written out, nor explained in harrowing detail. The process of knowing is not condensed to present to the world. In other words, such artistic presentations of the world are unlike traditional methodologies like action research, case studies, field surveys, among others, that is “obsessed with control, prediction, and the will to explain and understand everything” (Vannini, 2015, p. 5). Instead, these artists focus on bringing back “a sense of wonder” (Vannini, 2015, p. 5) to discovering and researching the world. Such non-representational research “aims to rupture, unsettle, animate, and reverberate rather than report and represent” (Vannini, 2015, p. 5). Since my learning and understanding of the world comes from these artists, writers, poets, and theorists, I am often drawn towards the side of awe and wonder in the research world, rather than work that tries to pin down meaning.

Often pit against scientific research, methodologies like research creation are often expected to justify their necessity. Harman (2018) succinctly notes, “though the rapid advance of modern physics had been one of the most reassuring chapters of human history, I see it as a field that excludes far too much” (p. 23). The scientific methodology used in physics is good for *something*, i.e., knowing more about physics, and so, we can discover more about the universe that we live in. However, physics, and by extension the sciences, does not necessarily account for a lot beyond the physical world. There is much that is left out when one uses the scientific method.

Harman (2018) alludes/draws upon/invokes Spanish philosopher José Ortega’s essay on metaphor to think through what gets left out by the scientific method. He highlights the Kantian division of phenomenological knowing (experiential) and *noumena*, which are things-in-themselves that we do not get to experience directly and unmediated by human presence (p. 68). The noumena that cannot be captured directly are often alluded to indirectly, and thus, Harman argues that “these things-in-themselves are of crucial importance to the arts” (p. 69). The noumena being “non-real,” but also real in its existence as an essence, makes it a complicated subject to highlight and/or talk about. Since “reality is always radically different from our formulation of it” (p. 7), we need to turn to a means that does not only capture that which is apparent and visible but also attempts to play with things that cannot be represented. In other words, the arts provide a place of presentation for concepts, ideas, and things that cannot be directly approached.

I believe that the arts and Harman’s concept of Object-Oriented Ontology, or OOO, helps us contact and play with things that cannot be represented because of one of the basic principles of this philosophy is that “all objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional” (p. 9). The objects are not necessarily physical, tangible

objects, but also things that are in the realm beyond the “real” like feelings, emotions, essences, etc. Similarly, the arts make space for all kinds of objects, and different kinds of art often deal with different objects and their properties. In OOO, the different objects are also not identical to their properties or components. In other words, the sum is *different* than its parts. Similarly, in the space of the arts, objects and their properties are often treated separately, but with similar importance. A painting, in and of itself, is one presentation. However, the technique used to create the painting is a different presentation. While they are related, the painting is not *only* the technique, and the technique is not *just* a part of the painting. Like non-representational research, where “material objects are to be given the same conceptual and empirical weight that is warranted to their human companions” (Vannini, 2015, p. 5), placing objects, sensations, natural, real, fictional, human, etc. on the same plane of eminence allows us to think of them in-tandem, and thus, non-hierarchically.

When I was first introduced to non-representational theory, I needed a concrete example of how to distinguish representational art from non-representational art, but the more I moved away from poetic inquiry that asked me to *use* my poetry to represent research, the more freedom I found with just presenting through my poetry. I realized that I was forcing my poetry to an uncomfortable place of representing my ideas on learning and knowing outside the classroom. My poetry was serving as a means to the same end as my academic prose. During this writing process, I noticed how I considered my poems that were not written as an academic project inferior and unacademic. Learning, knowing, and being had always been keystones in my writing. My older poetry already presented my research. Thus, I changed the way I crafted this project. I stopped forcing a message through my poems. Instead, the poems I write now flow through different emotions, objects (like clay and photographs), people (like my mother and my grandmother), and ideas and concepts (like childhood and memory and poetry) seamlessly—the subject of the poems is constantly shifting, and the different things in my poems have the same level of importance. I rejected the hierarchy and difference of poems *for* research and poems *for* myself.

The dilemma of representation has plagued the academic world. As Vannini (2015) says, we often stumble upon “the inevitable realization that our work is utterly inadequate at apprehending the intricate textures of the lifeworld subjects of our analysis and description” (p. 1). As we grapple with the expanse of reality around us that we cannot begin to capture as researchers in both the sciences and social sciences, the arts and humanities attempt to fill up the gaps in our understandings of the world. For instance, the arts give us a way to the unknown through imagination—offering up words to describe emotions through metaphors in poetry or abstract images in paintings. Harman (2018) also points us towards how the qualities of metaphor could help us get closer to *noumena*. He believes that the potential of metaphor is such that we are not given “thought-perceptions of an object” (p. 86); instead, we are given “something in its own right: the infamous thing-in-itself” (p. 86). From this, I gather that the importance of poetic renditions of the world is often metaphoric—not in a descriptive sense, but in an attempt to understand the essence of the world. Changing my own perspective of poetry helped me grapple with the “why” of arts creation as method.

Arts creation contributes something unique through its abstractions that social scientific and scientific methodology finds missing in their *representation* of the world. Arts creation as a research methodology brings forth ideas and concepts that have not been thought about or explored before. Creating art is the love of knowing and making something new, something that has not existed before.

As I continue my PhD journey in the importance of arts creation and as an untrained artist myself, I remind myself that “methodology is a lifestyle choice” (Vellanki, 2020, p. vi). This paper

would be incomplete if I did not highlight where this meditation on methodology comes from. If methodology—i.e., one’s way of knowing—is a lifestyle choice—i.e., one’s way of being—then the rigid categorization between epistemology and ontology cannot be held up. The poems above flow into one another in terms of the themes of knowing and being as I struggle to grasp knowing and being in non-dichotomist ways. To think of knowing for me is to think of being. Where do I know from? My being—a living of life. This paper is an embodiment of that belief, a playful staging of the merging of categories. Most of my learning has always been outside traditional academic spaces, where there were fewer expectations of me and more freedom of choice. These non-academic spaces, which are often depicted in my art creation, also become the ground upon which knowing, learning, and being overlap.

To understand this further, Vellanki (2020) asks us this question: “What do you want to do for nine hours a day, five or six days a week, in the limited time that we all have?” (p. 69). As I think about the nuances of the political and personal commitments that I hold in the world, I believe that I want to highlight the complexities within which we exist. This includes methodological complexities, which include both methodological pluralism and resistance of a singular methodology. I do not want to make a case for arts creation as the only methodology. In this “limited time” that we can do our work—work that reflects not just our scholarly identities, but also our home identities—I want to be able to constantly grapple with ideas and concepts through multiple lenses. I want to be able to pursue my multiple interests that include poetry, creative writing, ceramics, theoretical meditations, and so much more. I want to be able to create across boundaries and in liminal zones.

The creation of arts has the value of resonating with the world.: A way of reverberating; a way of presenting something new and undiscovered; a way of looking in new ways and at new things. These resonances with other people and their ideas and theories have taught me a lot of what I know through being in art spaces. And in creating more art, I resound the message of such innovation: there is more to learn, more to know, and more to be.

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