

# About Empirical Poetry

By **Monica Bell**

These two poems, “Dirty House” and “What It Meant to Love My Son,” are two pieces of a larger collection of empirical poetry developed from interviews with fifty Black mothers living in subsidized housing in Washington, DC about their experiences with legal authorities.

Empirical poetry combines qualitative social science with poetry. Qualitative social science aims, in part, to describe and theorize broader social phenomena by engaging in deep, detailed analysis of a relatively small number of cases. While qualitative scholars intensely debate how scientific qualitative work should be, qualitative social scientists at least share a commitment to empiricism, believing that data is an important basis for knowledge. Meanwhile, poetry aims to connect the reader to the emotional content of experience, usually the personal; in Audre Lorde’s words, poetry is the “revelatory distillation of experience,” a means of “giv[ing] name to those ideas which are . . . nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde, 2007, pp. 36–37). Both forms name ideas, yet the ideas coined in social science emerge from logos, while the ideas identified through poetry are concerned with pathos. Empirical poetry aims to unify logical and emotional knowledge.

As social scientific vignettes, these poems report situations that are common across the sample and in the context of urban Black

motherhood, more generally. “Dirty House” is about the fear of being investigated and having one’s children removed by a child welfare agency, or what critical scholars increasingly refer to as “family policing” (Roberts, 2022) or the “family regulation system” (Polikoff & Spinak, 2021; Williams, 2020). This was a common concern across the sample. More than half of the women I interviewed told me directly that they had been investigated by DC’s Child and Family Services Agency. The pervasiveness of child welfare involvement is not a quirk of the sample, as this figure is eerily in step with research estimating that slightly more than half of Black American children experienced a child welfare investigation between 2003 and 2014 (Kim et al., 2017). This finding is best interpreted by understanding the correlation between Blackness and poverty in urban America, the overlap between poverty and circumstances categorized as child neglect, and the more general use of surveillance as governance in Black and poor communities (Pac et al., 2023; see also Browne, 2015; Soss & Weaver, 2017)

“What It Meant to Love My Son” is about perceived police nonchalance after a family member’s killing and the importance of private retaliation for conveying the love people had for this family member. About one-fifth of the mothers I interviewed spoke openly about losing an immediate family member to interpersonal violence, usually gun violence. All were disappointed in the police response to those deaths. This is an unsurprising finding given persistent low homicide clearance rates which, in the context of Black poverty and segregation, contribute to a sense of estrangement from legal authorities like police (Cook & Mancik, 2023; see also Bell, 2017; Li & Lartey, 2022).

As poems, these pieces render visible the emotional content of motherhood under the disciplinary and panoptic eye of the child welfare system coupled with the perceived nonchalance and corruption of those the state has tasked with keeping these mothers and their loved ones safe and holding wrongdoers accountable. These poems report common scenarios among this population, but they equally emphasize the particularities of these women’s experiences in ways that hopefully connect the reader to the speaker at a human level, so that the reader can not only know what the speaker is saying but gain empathetic understanding of their specific experience. This last piece is a critical point of overlap between the ambitions of poetry and the commitments of sociology:

*As Max Weber explained many decades ago, one of the central goals of sociology is to produce *verstehen*, or subjective understanding of social action, that the researcher “can adequately grasp the emotional context in which an action took place” (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 5).*

Through empirical poetry, then, the “author” is largely an editor and curator, with the goal of helping the reader and the speaker deeply connect, with two purposes—(1) ensuring that the speaker is truly seen by the reader, and (2) allowing the reader to gain a richer understanding of social scientific insight. This approach to writing is distinct from traditional social science scholarship, in which authors are primarily conveying their own ideas and interpretations of data, usually with sporadic use of source material to illustrate findings. The researcher has a subtler authorial presence: the questions asked, the themes coded, and the implicit theoretical insights

that emerge from the poems are aspects of authorship but not its entirety.

In empirical poetry, the words used in the interview are the entire body of words used to create the poem. The editor/curator is “lock[ed]... into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape” (Philip, 2011, p. 191). As a poet, the selection of words, their arrangement on the page, the punctuation or lack thereof, the choice to capitalize or not, to emphasize repetition or not—all of these reveal and emphasize particular characteristics and experiences of the speaker. Although this is not the archetypical form of authorship in poetry, in which poets select their own words to convey their own forms of meaning-making, it is a new version of an increasingly recognized form, the “found poem.” The poet must arrange and transform the words available to them to convey their meaning and build an argument while maintaining fidelity to the underlying experience (Zani, 2019, 2023).

## References

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There are also questions about what “authorship” and appropriate attribution should consist of in projects like these, in which—given the subject matter—maintaining the confidentiality of vulnerable research subjects was required by the IRB and desirable for reasons beyond mere IRB requirements. Several mothers made explicit reference to the importance of confidentiality in their decision to participate in the study, and this is reflected in the broader collection of poems. Many of the poems would not exist without this commitment. However, the ideal might be for these empirical poems to be explicit co-productions, with my role as an editor and curator made clear and the primary authorship of the respondent made explicit. Hopefully, the future yields such opportunities.

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## What It Meant to Love My Son

By Monica Bell

My son was loved.  
He was *well-loved*

His whole school came to his funeral:  
He was *well-loved*

When they raided my house.  
They didn’t find nothin’:  
no evidence

but you know what he told me?  
he said:

If you meet with me and  
tell me who is selling drugs. I’ll tell you: *Who*  
killed your son.

What type of shit is that  
for a police to say

You know for sure:  
Why don’t you go and arrest him

If you’re going to tell me *Who*  
killed my son  
You’re going to arrest  
*Who* killed my son.

I told him: Get the hell out  
of my house.

Police lie. Just like I lie.  
Police lie: they twist the truth.

They said:  
they didn’t have enough evidence

They said:  
it was self-defense

I knew *Who* did it:  
I does my own investigation.

He’s walkin’ around with a shit bag  
for the rest of his life

I didn’t have nothing to do with it.

That’s how well-loved my son was