

# From ‘I-Poems’ to ‘Pronoun Poems’: Listening for the Collective Voice Through a Voice-Centred Relational Methodology

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Luke Macaulay<sup>1</sup>  and Mervi Kaukko<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

In this article we present our development and use of *pronoun poems* when using a voice-centred relational methodology (VCRM). The use of *I-poems* has been demonstrated as valuable when ‘listening’ for the voices of research participants through a VCRM approach. Through focussing on the ‘I’ pronoun, previous VCRM scholarship has argued that the use of *I-poems* can facilitate listening for the authentic inner first-person voice of research participants. However, in our research with refugee youth, we found this approach to be limiting – especially when listening for the collective voices of participants. While previous researchers have also drawn on the use of a variety of pronouns when using VCRM poetry, drawing on examples from our previous research with refugee youth it is our intention to build on this scholarship and show how we have listened for the collective voice. Particularly, we demonstrate how our use of these *pronoun poems* has the specific intention of tuning the listener’s ear to the ontological collective voices of participants, and the harmony and/or consonance of these voices within a socio-cultural context. In doing so, we argue the importance of researchers acknowledging the cultural underpinnings of their assumptions when engaging with participants’ voices through VCRM poetry. As a method with the goal of championing and centring the diversity of voices, providing an approach that acknowledges the use of the collective voice furthers the development of this method to achieve such a goal.

## Keywords

voice-centred relational methodology (VCRM), I-poems, pronoun poems, refugee youth, poetic inquiry

## Introduction

The use of poetry, and in particular *I-poems*, has been demonstrated as a valuable approach when ‘listening’ for the voices of research participants through a voice-centred relational methodology (VCRM) (McKenzie, 2021). Yet, in our research with refugee youth we found this approach to be limiting – especially when listening for the collective voices of participants. In this article we present our development and use of *pronoun poems* and demonstrate the significance of this approach when listening for the collective voice. Such an approach builds on current VCRM poetry scholarship (e.g., Chadwick, 2017; Chandler, 2023; Helme, 2021; Villanueva & Loots, 2014; Woodcock, 2010, 2016) by allowing for a greater plurality of voices to be represented in VCRM analysis. Additionally, through our presented *pronoun poem* approach we highlight to researchers the importance of considering their

own cultural onto-epistemologies and how these may influence researchers’ interpretations of findings. Prior to presenting our research and *pronoun poem* approach, in the following sections we offer some background information about VCRM, including how poetry has previously been used in VCRM scholarship.

As a research methodology, VCRM is rooted in the seminal work of Carol Gilligan. Most notably in Gilligan’s 1982 text *In a Different Voice*. Reflecting on this work, Gilligan (1993) describes ‘voice’ as a form of “psychic breathing” and states,

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

### Corresponding Author:

Luke Macaulay, Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Åkerlundinkatu 5, Tampere 33100, Finland.  
Email: [luke.macaulay@tuni.fi](mailto:luke.macaulay@tuni.fi)



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“by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural” (p. xvi). In the early stages of the development of VCRM approaches, Gilligan (1993 [1982]), Brown and Gilligan (1992), and Taylor et al. (1995) used this method to garner meaning from the relational “voices of women in a male-voiced world” (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 20). A key contention underpinning the why of this approach is that women’s voices are rarely heard in societies where relational ontological and epistemological meaning making is conducted in relation to the omnipresent male voice (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). While this methodological approach was developed to ‘amplify’/‘listen to’ the relational voices of women within and across certain social arenas, it has evolved and been demonstrated as applicable when working with multiple social groups vulnerable to social disadvantage and marginalisation (i.e., a silencing of ‘voice’) (Gilligan et al., 2003). This has included our work with refugee youth (see for example Kaukko et al., 2024; Macaulay, 2023a).

In her recent work, Gilligan (2023) moves away from a binary conceptualisation of gender and voice. Expanding on her seminal ideas, Gilligan (2023) now labels the feminine voice as a ‘human voice’ interpreted as a voice in resistance to patriarchal structures. In this work, Gilligan (2023) calls for a ‘radical listening’ of voice and states, “the word radical means ‘root’ and radical listening is a way of listening that gets to the root what of is being said... It specifies a way of tuning in to the under-voice” (p. 32). Central to this claim is not simply an acknowledgement of a ‘root voice’, but how such a voice can be heard (i.e., through a ‘radical listening’). As the name would imply, VCRM is a methodology that centres the relationality of this voice, where voice exists in connection with the self, with others, and with broader socio-cultural systems and structures (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Gilligan et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 1995). Importantly, in research contexts, this includes the relationality of the researcher/participant. As we discuss and show later in this article, through our use of *pronoun poems* in listening for the ‘root voices’ of refugee youth participants, our own relationality to participants needed to be addressed in offering a ‘radical listening’ of these voices – particularly how we interpreted these voices as being collectively situated. Therefore, VCRM approaches have been argued to ‘tune’ the researcher’s ear to the nuance of the relational voice (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017).

Central to VCRM theorisation is that voice is not singular. In order to articulate the operation of these relational multiple voices, seminal VCRM scholars have cleverly drawn on music theory (see a notable example from Gilligan et al., 2003). Specifically, VCRM scholars have used the concept of counterpoint as a metaphor to highlight how reality is constructed and interpreted polyphonically. While acknowledged as relating to the relationship between melodies in music, we have found a lack of explanation in VCRM scholarship

expanding on the type of relationship these melodies have. Given the importance of this metaphor in VCRM scholarship to explain ‘contrapuntal voices’, in the following section we highlight how and why the contrapuntal relationships of melodies acts as a useful metaphor to explain the contrapuntal relationships of voices.

In the simplest terms, counterpoint is the concept of two or more melodies played together – or existing in complement of each other in a piece of music. In most contemporary Western music, homophony is the dominant mode of harmonic tapestry where there is usually a single dominant melody complemented by the harmony and rhythm of other musical parts. Think of a vocalist being accompanied by a pianist – the vocalist would usually be performing the dominant melody, whereas the pianist is offering complementary harmony and rhythm. Counterpoint, however, is composed of multiple independent melodies where no single melody takes the dominant role. These melodies intermingle, bounce off one another, build, and peel back – all the while creating consonance, dissonance, suspense, and resolve.<sup>1</sup> In VCRM theorisation, it is argued that the multiplicities of relational voices operate in the same way. The adjective for counterpoint is contrapuntal, and as such, in VCRM theorisation these voices have become known as ‘contrapuntal voices’ (Gilligan et al., 2003). Listening for these contrapuntal voices is a hallmark of VCRM. In the following section we highlight how VCRM can be used as a method of data analysis when listening for contrapuntal voices.

## VCRM Analysis

VCRM analysis is a form of analysis in qualitative research that almost exclusively uses textual forms of data, and while not exclusively, the most common form of data when using this method has been transcripts of research interviews. A key strength of VCRM approaches to data analysis is that the method is intended to be adaptable to the needs of the researcher/s and their overall research aims and questions (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008; Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). Importantly, Sorsoli and Tolman (2008) highlight that there is no definitive way of using this method, but rather there is a flexibility of pragmatism in the researcher’s use of the method. Taking this into consideration, we will present the VCRM analysis perspectives initially proposed by Brown and Gilligan (1991), as these perspectives set the foundations for future VCRM analysis innovations.<sup>2</sup> Common across all approaches of VCRM analysis is listening for multiple voices in participant narratives, and as such, data is approached from multiple perspectives – referred to as ‘listenings’. Given that each piece of data is analysed multiple times, it is important to note that this is a labour intensive and time-consuming mode of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Nicolaou & Eloff, 2024).

Brown and Gilligan (1991) propose the following four perspectives when analysing textual data:

'The story of who is speaking?' – Throughout this first perspective of analysis each transcript is read for the overall narrative of the story being told and to identify any initial themes and concepts. While this perspective of analysis is common in many qualitative research designs, the distinction of this approach is that the researcher explicitly reacts to this perspective by writing their initial responses to the story as researcher notes/interpretive summaries to enhance researcher reflexivity (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). Through this approach, the researcher reflects on the presence and influence of their own voice in their interpretations of the narrative.

'In what body?' – The purpose of this perspective of analysis is to engage with how the individual telling the story situates themselves within the story and their relationship with the story (Gilligan et al., 2003; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). This is achieved by highlighting, underscoring, or bolding instances of when participants refer to themselves and analysing how these references are framed. As with the previous perspective, researcher notes/interpretive summaries are made throughout. If the previous perspective of analysis is thought of as drawing out the narrative landscape, this second perspective is thought of as drawing out the psychic landscape (i.e., how does the participant position themselves in their narrative?) (Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). This step facilitates in-depth analysis of the first-person perspectives of participants and how these are framed.

'Telling what story about relationships?' – The purpose of this perspective is to further draw out the relational experiences of participants and how they position these relationships within their narratives (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). This is done by analysing transcripts for references to others – particularly how participants have situated these others within their narratives – and compiling researcher notes/interpretive summaries. This can demonstrate dynamics of oppression as played out via power relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008); for example, how participants situate themselves in relation to teachers, parents, friends, and more abstract notions such as community and institutions. Conversely, this can also demonstrate a sense of collective belonging within one's community and their familial ties therein.

'In which societal and cultural framework?' – This fourth perspective draws out the social, political, and cultural contexts that participants view as being the arenas in which their narratives occur (Brown & Gilligan, 1991; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). This is done by reading transcripts to identify participants' explicit references to social, political, and cultural contextualisation within their narratives (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). This perspective establishes the context for the previous three perspectives, allowing the entire story to come together as a whole (Paliadelis & Cruickshank, 2008). This raises questions such as *through what cultural lens is this story being told* (Brown & Gilligan, 1991)? Through exploring such questions and addressing them in researcher notes/interpretive summaries, the relationship between the

voice of participants and how they perceive the dominant culture can be investigated.

### VCRM Poetry

A key innovation in the use of VCRM analysis is the use of poetry, primarily, what Elizabeth Debold (1990) has referred to as *I-poems*. Such an approach is designed to make clearer the authentic inner self of the participant as presented in their narratives (Edwards & Weller, 2012). These poems can be constructed as part of the second perspective of VCRM analysis (*In what voice?*), in addition to the four VCRM perspectives detailed in the previous section, or as their own standalone VCRM analysis (Macaulay, 2023a; McKenzie, 2021; Woodcock, 2016). *I-poems* are constructed by highlighting, underscoring, or bolding all instances of the 'I' pronoun in a piece of text. These are then placed on their own lines with any surrounding verbs and/or important words and phrases to create stanzas. It is important to maintain the order in which these phrases appear in the text. Drawing on Tronick and Weinberg's (1997) research with mothers who have a history of depression, Gilligan et al. (2003, p. 163) demonstrate how to construct an *I-poem* in the following example:

**Participant:** And then **I think** you know everything kind of went underground for me and **I stopped talking** to people... Hmmm. **I think** when there is a mental illness in the house and it's and there... can be... and some of it can be out of control that hmmm a lot of families tend to isolate and that **I think** is what my family did and hmmm besides **I didn't have anything to talk about**.

#### *I-Poem:*

I think

I stopped talking

I think

I think

I didn't have anything to talk about

These poems can be useful and catalytic in facilitating nuanced analysis when using this method. As Gilligan et al. (2003) state, "the *I-poem* picks up on an associative stream of consciousness carried by a first-person voice, cutting across or running through a narrative rather than being contained by the structure of full sentences" (p. 163). As such, this approach allows for a focussed and streamlining of the 'I' voice and how this voice is positioned within the participant's narrative – such as the participant's inner isolation in the above example (Gilligan et al., 2003).

As mentioned in our opening comments of this article, we have used VCRM analysis with a focus on poems in our research with refugee youth. Yet, in this work we have found the use of *I-poems* alone to be limiting, especially when listening for the collective voice. It is important to make clear

that it is not our intention to discourage the use of *I-poems* all together – where appropriate, *I-poems* have been an important part of our *pronoun poem* approach. However, when used exclusively as a VCRM poetry method, we found *I-poems* to be limiting. In the following section we discuss these limitations, as well as our use of *pronoun poems*. Others have also used multiple forms of speech/pronouns in their construction of poems when using VCRM approaches – these include ‘*me*’, ‘*my*’, ‘*us*’, ‘*we*’, ‘*they*’, and ‘*you*’. Notable examples include Chadwick (2017), Chandler (2023), Helme (2021), Villanueva & Loots (2014), and Woodcock (2010, 2016). Building on this work, our use of multiple pronouns in VCRM poetry has the specific analytical objective of tuning the listener’s ear to the ontological collective voices of participants, and the harmony and/or consonance of these voices within a socio-cultural context. The examples we draw on in the following sections come from two research projects. The first is the first author’s PhD research (2016–2020) working with Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese youth from refugee backgrounds. The focus of this study was on these young people’s experiences of becoming adults in Melbourne, Australia. The second research project includes both authors and is a longitudinal study working with young asylum-seekers with a focus on their experiences as undergraduate students in Australian universities.

## Listening for the Collective Voice

When using a VCRM analysis in his PhD research, including *I-poems*, the first author (Luke) discovered a notable lack of the ‘*I*’ pronoun in the data. Rather, participants drew on a variety of other pronouns in place of the ‘*I*’. It became clear that multiple pronouns other than just ‘*I*’ would need to be explored in the data when constructing poems. A prime example of this is the use of the pronoun ‘*you*’ and how/why this may be used to refer to the other, or how this may be used to discuss personal experiences in a second-person voice. Other VCRM scholars have also explored the use of the pronoun ‘*you*’ in poetry. For example, Chandler (2022) draws on participants’ use of ‘*you*’ as a means of generalising an experience, as well as participants using phrases such as ‘*you know*’ in attempts to connect with the researcher. Others have attributed the use of ‘*you*’ when speaking of personal experiences to being a distancing of difficult experiences (see for example Roth-Raider, 2014; Woodcock, 2010, 2016). For example, Roth-Raider (2014) has referred to this as a “more removed ‘*you*’ voice” (p. 3). Similarly, Woodcock (2010) has previously stated when discussing the use of the ‘*you*’ pronoun in the construction of VCRM poems: “Informants may have simply been speaking in reference to ‘*you*’ or an ‘*other*.’ Yet other times, informants may have been knowingly or unknowingly separating themselves from a particular statement by using the pronoun ‘*you*’” (p. 5). It is this distancing use of ‘*you*’ that Luke initially interpreted participants’ use of this pronoun.

At the time of Luke’s PhD research, youth participants were receiving considerable negative attention through racialized public and political discourse as a response to criminal events allegedly involving African Australian youth. This discourse was primarily played out in the media and was dubbed as being a so called ‘African gang crisis’ in Melbourne, Australia. As such, participants’ use of the ‘*you*’ pronoun was initially interpreted as a form of self-preservation (i.e., to not take full ownership of the difficulty of what was being discussed, and as such, to use a more distant ‘*you*’ pronoun instead of an ‘*I*’ pronoun). However, through critical conversations with participants, their communities, and encountering the work of Baak (2016), Krog (2018), and Krog et al. (2009), Luke discovered he was wrong in his initial early interpretations of the ‘*you*’ voice. Without this realisation, ultimately, Luke would have misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misrepresented the findings of the study, as well as reinforcing ‘Western’ individualistic norms within his research. Luke’s reorientation of thinking needed to better understand how the ‘*you*’ is used from a collectivistic ontological position.

While not specifically approaching their work using VCRM, drawing on the collectivist philosophy of Ubuntu (*a person is a person through other people*) Baak (2016), Krog (2018), and Krog et al. (2009) have highlighted that the use of the second person ‘*you*’ voice as a first-person voice is extremely common in collectivist communities. A core argument of this work is that this way of speaking is not a distancing of experience but rather is a way of speaking that acknowledges that all human experience is connected. In their work analysing a specific testimony from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings<sup>3</sup>, Krog et al. (2009) highlight the importance of understanding the difference between the use of the ‘*I*’ and the ‘*you*’ voice for certain communities. Krog et al.’s (2009) analysis focuses on the testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile (a Xhosa woman) whose son was murdered by the police during the apartheid years. Of note, in this testimony was the frequency of the ‘*I*’ pronoun – not its absence. In this sense, the frequency of the ‘*I*’ pronoun highlights an absence of collectivity – giving a specific meaning to the interpretation of their analysis of the text. Krog et al. (2009) summarise: “Mrs Konile was using ‘*I*’ as a form of complaint. She was saying, ‘I don’t want to be “*I*”. I want to be “*us*”, but the killing of my son, made me into an “*I*”. This deed has removed me and I can’t get back to where I belong”” (pp. 61–62).

While being a Zulu philosophy, Baak (2016) additionally links this concept and demonstrates its similarity in other African philosophies, such as the Jëëng (South Sudanese Dinka) concept of *cieng*.<sup>4</sup> In her research with Jëëng women in Australia and their negotiations of belonging, Baak (2016) made similar arguments and associations as Krog et al. (2009) when analysing interview transcripts and the meanings of the ‘*I*’ and ‘*you*’ voice contained therein. Baak (2016) indicates that she initially interpreted a sense of distance from participants through a lack of the individual *I-voice*. Yet, as Baak

(2016) elaborates, the lack of an individual *I-voice* was instead a centring of a collective worldview, and subsequently a collective voice. Therefore, through engaging with these philosophies, as well as through critical conversations with participants and their communities, these understandings of how the *I-voice* and collective *you-voice* is epistemologically situated for some communities provided Luke with a framework to better listen to participants' 'root voice' – including how these voices were being used. It is, however, important to note that some scholarship has been critical of binary conceptions of individualistic and collectivistic cultural worldviews as lacking nuance and not accounting for internal variation and diversity (see for example Wong et al., 2018). As such, while our development, use, and interpretation of *pronoun poems* has been informed by the previously discussed collective philosophies, we acknowledge that caution must be taken when interpreting the meanings of participants' poems to account for such internal diversity. In the context of our research, we have done this by seeking participants' insights regarding our interpretations of their poems.

### Pronoun Poems

In our construction of *pronoun poems*, we have focussed on the voices of participants from three different perspectives. These are as follows:

**First-Person Voice.** This first step focuses on the accounting of personal experiences using a first-person voice. Like *I-poems*, this includes the use of the first-person 'I' pronoun, as well as other forms of first-person voice such as 'me' and 'my.' In this step, collective first-person pronouns are also of focus, such as 'we' and 'us.' An example could be "when I am at home, I am always so happy". Or "when we are at home, we are always so happy".

**Second-Person Voice.** This second step focuses on the use of a second-person voice and how this voice can also be used to account for experiences in a collective first-person manner, such as the use of the collective 'you' in speech. For example, "when you are at home, you are always so happy". Importantly, in this example the speaker could be directly referring to the interviewer, they could be using the second person 'you' as a means of distancing themselves from a personal experience, they could be generalising an experience, or as discussed previously this could be used as a common form of a collective first-person voice. In the latter, the 'you' as used by the speaker is in reference to themselves, but importantly, that 'self' is a part of a collective community. Given the complexity of this step, we recommend analysing transcripts for all instances of second-person voice – and where appropriate, instances of the third person 'other'. Later, these will need to be carefully analysed for their intended meaning – hopefully with the assistance of the participants themselves, and/or somebody from their community with literacy in this type of speech.

When constructing poems, the inclusion and interplay of the collective voice and direct reference to others can both be included to offer any interesting juxtaposition of voices within a single passage of text.

**Quotes and Mimicry.** Finally, this last step focusses on the use of quotes and/or mimicry on behalf of the participant within the telling of their narrative. For example, within their narrative the participant may take on the persona of another person to convey a point. This could include something to the effect of, "my mum is always telling me: 'When you are at home you are always so happy'". While this step does not necessarily focus on the use of pronouns per se, the psycholinguistic embodiment of another within one's narrative can offer analytical depth regarding the positionality of voice within a given narrative. For example, who, how, and why such an embodiment occurs. Therefore, this step highlights an important aspect of listening to the relationships of contrapuntal voices, and how these voices are in relation with others, as well as how the voices of others can become internalised as part of one's own 'root voice'.

To construct a poem using this method, text is carefully read and each instance of the abovementioned pronouns, as well as quotes/mimicry, are highlighted, underscored, or bolded and placed on their own line with surrounding verbs and/or other important words/phrases to create stanzas. As mentioned earlier, in our previous work we have presented these poems back to participants to gain insights and clarify our interpretations of these poems, as well as to get permission for their words to be used in this way.

### Pronoun Poem Examples

In this small excerpt from Luke's research (Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020, p. 221) Johnny<sup>5</sup>, who is a youth originally from South Sudan, is discussing his views and feelings of overwhelm regarding how his community is presented in the media. As previously highlighted, during this time young people from African Australian backgrounds were receiving significant negative racialized attention in Australia's media.

**Johnny:** "You are emotionally damaged and psychologically you are defeated, and you become weak, and you don't feel like you have a future because you have been surrounded by the media."

**Surrounded:**

You are emotionally damaged

Psychologically you are defeated

You become weak

You don't feel like you have a future

You have been surrounded by the media

As a poem, the stanzas of ‘Surrounded’ draw the reader/listener into the repeated use of the pronoun ‘you’. This form of speech was common in Johnny’s interview, where the ‘I’ was less frequent. Also, at other times in Johnny’s interview he would directly address the interviewer (Luke) as ‘you’ – although not the same ‘you’ as Johnny uses in the above poem. This ‘you’ in the poem ‘Surrounded’ is both an ‘I’ and a ‘we’ in reference to his community. Within Johnny’s poem ‘Surrounded’, the ‘you’ pronoun functions in a very important manner to represent himself as part of his community. This ‘you’ is not a distancing of self; it is a centring of self as per his ontological worldview.

Drawn from the same study, in the following poem ‘Your Colour’ (Macaulay, 2023b, p. 159; Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020, pp. 229-230), there is a complex interplay between the first-person ‘I’ and the collective ‘you’, as well as references to the ‘other’. In this poem, Yasmin discusses her ‘visual difference’ in ‘White’ Australia and how within a racialized climate this impacts hers and her friends’ everyday lived experiences in public spaces.

**Yasmin:** “I think if **you’re** judged or perceived a lot, so **you’re** racially profiled, **people** are prejudiced because **they** see **you** in a certain way, it feels like sometimes – it’ll feel like **you’re** restricted from living every day because **you’re** going out and **everybody** just sees **you** as this **bad person**. So, it doesn’t really give **you** motivation to do things with **your** life. When **you’re** kind of – it’s uncomfortable to be in public places, especially with **your friends**. I think the – just as a **black person** in general, **you** always have to look at **your** colour before anything. **Your** colour will always be something **you’re** going to think about.”

**Your Colour:**

I think  
 You’re judged  
 You’re racially profiled  
 People are prejudiced  
 They see you in a certain way  
 You’re restricted  
 You’re going out and everybody just sees you as this bad person  
 It doesn’t really give you motivation to do things with your life  
 It’s uncomfortable to be in public places, especially with your friends  
 I think  
 As a black person  
 You always have to look at your colour before anything  
 Your colour will always be something you’re going to think about

The interplay between the individual, the collective, and the ‘other’ is noticeable in Yasmin’s poem. At times she speaks of

her collective community in a collective voice (e.g., “you’re judged”, “you’re restricted”) and at other times brings her ‘I’ voice to the centre of the poem (e.g., in the instances when Yasmin centres her individual self with the phrase “I think”). Furthermore, of interest is the positioning of the ‘other’ within this poem and the generalised ambiguity in how this is done (e.g., “people are prejudiced”, “they see you in a certain way”). With context, this generalised ambiguity of the ‘other’ could be interpreted as representing the embodiment of the dominant social, cultural, and political status quo underpinning the norms of ‘White’ Australia – which is also conceptualised as a relational voice. When compared with Johnny’s poem ‘Surrounded’, which is primarily voiced through the collective ‘you’, Yasmin’s poem ‘Your Colour’ highlights an interplay of multiple voices within the one text, demonstrating the analytical importance of the nuance of voice within these poems.

The next example is drawn from a longitudinal study where both the first author (Luke) and second author (Mervi) work with a team of other researchers from Australia, Canada, and the UK exploring the experiences of university students from asylum-seeking backgrounds navigating their higher education experiences in Australia. The following poem can be found in Kaukko et al. (2024, p. 893).

**Fatima:** “I think **my** family – **my** family **they’re** the greatest support. And **I** can guarantee that without **them** **I** would never be able to do a bachelor’s degree as a **single parent**.”

**My Family:**

I think  
 My family  
 My family  
 They’re the greatest support  
 I can guarantee  
 Without them  
 I would never be able to do a bachelor’s degree as a single parent

In her early 20s and studying full-time as a single parent at the time of the interview, in the poem ‘My Family’ Fatima highlights the importance of her family relative to her achievements. Originally from Iran, Fatima sought asylum in Australia with her family. Fatima’s poem differs in some ways from Johnny’s and Yasmin’s. Unlike Johnny’s and Yasmin’s poems presented earlier, Fatima speaks exclusively in a first-person voice in the poem ‘My Family’. However, while speaking in a first-person voice, her voice is collectively anchored. While Fatima speaks in a first-person voice, this voice, which is one of success, is collectively anchored to her family as being a contingent quality of her success. In the poem ‘My Family’, Fatima speaks of her success as a university student in a cultural context underpinned by individualistic norms and expresses her success in a first-person

voice. Yet, the theme of her poem is her collective belonging within her family.

We now turn our attention to an example of a poem that demonstrates the use of quotes and/or mimicry on behalf of a participant within the telling of their narrative as a form of psycholinguistic embodiment. This poem is drawn from [Macaulay, 2023a](#), p. 1331), which discusses Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese youths' perspectives on their relationships with their schoolteachers. A key finding of this study was that participants reported that they felt their teachers had lower academic expectations of them as students, as articulated by high school student Mohamed.

**Mohamed:** "If there's one way of seeing us - let's say a teacher 'oh these kids, because they're Sudanese they're going to end up this way, they're not going to go to school', but there's not enough children proving to the teachers that we've got this, and we can do this."

***We've Got This:***

If there's only one way of seeing us

Let's say a teacher – "oh these kids, because they're Sudanese they're going to end up this way, they're not going to go to school"

But there's not enough children proving to the teachers

We've got this

We can do this

In the poem 'We've Got This', Mohamed pushes back against the deficit academic narrative mentioned previously and collectively exclaims: "We've got this. We can do this". In this poem Mohamed primarily speaks in a collective first-person voice (e.g., 'us', 'we') and situates 'teachers' as a category of 'other'. Elsewhere in his interview Mohamed specifically named teachers from his school, but in the use of mimicry he employs in 'We've Got This', it would seem this mimicry is one of 'teacher' as category. Specifically, how he perceives 'teacher' as a category within the education system in Melbourne, Australia. As such, his embodiment of the voice of 'teacher' within this poem could be interpreted as being as much of an embodiment of a 'system' as it is of an 'individual/s.'

In our final example we present an *I-poem*. As mentioned earlier, it is not our intention to discourage the use of *I-poems*. Yet, the use of *I-poems* alone would have been limiting in our research due to participants' limited use of the 'I' pronoun. However, there were rare examples where the prevalence of the 'I' pronoun in a piece of text necessitated the use of an *I-poem*. The following *I-poem* example is drawn from [Macaulay and Deppeler \(2020, p. 223\)](#). In the following brief extract, Daniel discusses his diminished opportunities in finding meaningful employment, which he attributed to negative media representations of his community.

**Daniel:** "Like myself, I finished my university degree, but the same too, that I can't get a job. I can't work. I am working at basic, but I am not using the knowledge that I have."

***Working Basic:***

I finished my university degree

I can't get a job

I can't work

I am working at basic

I am not using the knowledge that I have

As is stated in reference to this poem, "Daniel uses the first-person I, to repeatedly place himself in the centre of his narrative with no reference to any relational other – rendering him alone in this poem" ([Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020, p. 223](#)). The implications of this interpretation are important in the context of *I-poem* scholarship. Presenting an *I-poem* as our final example is intentional. As mentioned, when first using *I-poems* in our research this approach was limiting due to the lack of the 'I' pronoun in interview transcripts. Through discussing this with participants and referring to texts like [Krog et al. \(2009\)](#), the lack of the 'I' pronoun and prevalence of the collective second-person 'you' was shown to be part of participants' collective worldviews – not a distancing of self as was first thought to be the case. As [Krog et al. \(2009\)](#) have argued, for some communities this type of collective voice is common – it is the repeated 'I' voice that is less common. [Krog et al. \(2009\)](#) highlight that the 'I' voice and the repetition of the 'I' pronoun may represent a form of disruption to an individual's collective worldviews. Yet, as mentioned earlier, other VCRM poetry scholarship has argued that to focus on the 'I' voice is to listen to the authentic inner self – where the 'you' voice is interpreted as a more removed voice. Importantly, these distinctions may render opposing interpretations of Daniel's poem and the other examples we have presented in this article, demonstrating the importance of tuning one's ear to the nuanced plurality of collective and individual voices within their cultural contexts.

## Future Directions

Engaging participants and their communities in our research has been an essential component in our development, use, and interpretations of *pronoun poems*. In our previous work we have been in open dialogue with participants throughout data analysis phases. Additionally, we have presented *pronoun poems* back to participants to gain insights and clarify our interpretations of these poems, as well as to get permission for their words to be used in this way. However, as with the majority of qualitative research using poetry ([Prendergast, 2009](#)), the construction of the actual poems themselves was done by us as researchers. While this work makes innovations to VCRM poetry in acknowledging and listening for the

relationality of the collective voice, we recommend that a further needed step is to consider how this relationality can be taken more seriously, and to create poems in participatory ways.

While not working explicitly with poetry, other researchers (e.g., Byrne et al., 2009) have taken participatory approaches when using VCRM and highlight that such approaches promote inclusion and a democratisation of the research process. As such, where possible, we propose that interested participants can be taught this method and included in the construction and interpretation of poems. Such an approach honours and acknowledges the relationality of their collective voices as knowledge holders in the research process. Further, in working towards the authentic inclusion of participants when using this method, considerations regarding the impact of the method would be welcomed. For example, where and how the voice ought to be heard might be a collective rather than an individual decision. This is in line with arguments from scholars from Indigenous, feminist, and postcolonial traditions (Call-Cummings et al., 2024; Fursova et al., 2023) – arguing that Western assumptions of an individual agency and the individual’s desire for their own benefit are not universally accepted goals. Rather, participation might be linked to a communal agency, with the individual as part of it. This means the interpretation of poems may not even be an isolated pursuit between the researcher and the participant – but might require the contribution of the community of the participant.

Finally, in working with participants and their communities towards their participatory inclusion in this method when listening for the relational collective voice, we encourage researchers to consider these approaches with diverse participant cohorts. This is particularly important to reduce the negative implications of researcher’s assumptions in their interpretations of participants’ voices. Our work using this method has been with refugee youth. However, the linguistic nuance of collective relational voices has applicability when focussing on numerous social locations – such as in work focussing on gender identity.

As a method that centres and champions diverse relational voices, taking these future research recommendations into consideration in the further development of VCRM *pronoun poems* can contribute to further achieving the foundational aims of VCRM – to authentically amplify/listen to diverse voices within a socio-cultural context.

## Conclusion

In this article we have presented our development and use of VCRM *pronoun poems*. The use of these poems builds on the foundation of other VCRM scholarship and the use of poetry as a means to centre the ‘authentic’ or ‘root’ voices of participants. Particularly, we have demonstrated the importance of this approach when working with communities whose cultural worldviews are collectively situated. As such, the

specific analytical objective of this approach is to tune the listener’s ear to the ontological collective voice, and its harmony and/or consonance within a socio-cultural context. In doing so, we encourage researchers to be cognisant of their own cultural worldviews and how these may influence their interpretations (or misinterpretations) of participants’ voices when using VCRM poetry. Finally, to continue the development of this approach we call on researchers (including ourselves) to consider the utility of this approach as being participatory in future research with multiple diverse participant cohorts.

## ORCID iDs

Luke Macaulay  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7351-2336>

Mervi Kaukko  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8233-1302>

## Ethical Considerations

Examples in this paper are drawn from two research projects. Both projects obtained approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, project ID numbers 8770 and 11769. All participants in these studies gave their written informed consent to participate, including informed written consent for examples from data to be published in scholarly outputs.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of data and the risks to participants if identified, data from the studies in this paper are not openly available.

## Notes

1. For the reader not familiar with music theory, we suggest some examples of counterpoint for you to listen to in order to better understand this metaphor. Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Fugue in G Minor BWV 578* is a great example of counterpoint. Also, and while not ‘pure’ examples of counterpoint in that they combine aspects of homophony within the rhythm-sections, for those with more contemporary tastes you may wish to listen to Radiohead’s song *Paranoid Android* (3:35 to 5:42). Or the cast of *Encanto* singing *We Don’t Talk about Bruno* (2:42 to the song’s conclusion).
2. For more detailed information on these perspectives of VCRM analysis and their development, as well as a starting point for a ‘how-to’ approach, we recommend Gilligan et al. (2003), Gilligan and Eddy (2017), Hutton and Lystor (2021), and Woodcock (2016).

3. Established in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission held restorative justice type hearings and invited victims of human rights violations to give testimony.
4. These examples draw on cultural philosophies. However, other examples of collectivism can be drawn more broadly from socio-cultural and political practices within certain societies and cultures.
5. The naming of participants throughout this article is done so using pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves.

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