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## “BLACKBOXING IT”: A POETIC MIND/ING THE GAP OF AN IMPOSTER EXPERIENCE IN ACADEMIA

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**Abstract:** Entering academia is a journey often fraught with many intense emotions, including shame, self-doubt, and fear. As such, this exploratory paper aims to expose and “dwell poetically” (James, 2009) on such feelings of novice academics, particularly the “imposter syndrome” experience, through an act of creative vulnerability and meaning making. Employing critical poetic inquiry, this paper offers and examines found poetry mined from a first year language and literacy education PhD student’s early academic writing. This poetry writing was done while simultaneously “minding the gap” existing in the “black box” of the PhD experience (Stanley, 2015), and framed through the lenses of the “personal” as “political” (Hanisch, 2000) and shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006), resulting in a poetry “cluster” (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009) that “speaks shame” (Brown, 2006), composed with the aim to invite comfort, connection, and community, particularly with emerging scholars.

**Keywords:** academia; novice scholar; imposter syndrome; poetic inquiry

## Pending Pedagogy

White difficulties demonized learning  
before school even started;  
we couldn't stop it, dog-ear the pages, or highlight  
the salient points. The drones decided and  
monitored accordingly,  
in measured, airy strides with a sensible  
p a c e.

Next, word flutters got caught between two  
pa(i)nes, waited to dry up and feel their  
thin dark legs stiffen. There can't be a  
butterfly effect if the wind is  
stale and still, in the morning  
of the burned house.

Finally, the search parties scanned,  
fanned further, into the wet reeds searching  
to shun meaningful uncertainty, the creative pauses, and  
the deep belly breaths puffed from  
well-fed pits lined with real sugar-  
the good stuff- bleached like  
the incoming curriculum.

Stanley (2015) is onto something: "Doing a PhD... [is]... an identity metamorphosis" (p. 144). Certainly, embarking on a PhD journey is fraught with tensions; while it is an exciting, prestigious, and incredibly privileged endeavor, some scholarship points to the emotional whiplash experienced by novice academics (Baptista, 2013; Brown, 2013; Brus, 2006; Polson, 2003; Stanley, 2015). As Archer (2008) argues: "younger academics are interestingly located at the nexus of competing discourses around what it means (or might mean) to be an academic" (p. 387), and therefore, new placement in academia can be difficult to navigate. For instance, Casanave, much like myself:

entered her doctoral program as a teacher (not a researcher)... she loved it... however, she faced mountains of readings, not about teaching and practice, but about theory and research. It was an odd experience for her, not to understand readings in her native language, to be confronted with terminology that she had never heard of and sometimes could not pronounce let alone

understand and to become acquainted intimately with the infamous nominalized, jargon-filled, impersonal writing style of the social sciences. (Casanave & Li, 2015, p. 105)

Indeed, many graduate students oscillate in such a way, between excitement as well as a sense of shameful “imposter” syndrome: the marked sense of feeling that they do not belong and that they have “tricked” someone. Graduate students might feel powerless and small in the prestigious spaces of the university, a sentiment that inspired the poem “Pending pedagogy” which opens this essay. Indeed, I felt like I was being scrutinized – that the “drones” were “monitor[ing],” the “search parties scan[ning]/... the wet reeds searching” – and I felt “caught.” In short, imposter syndrome consists of “strong feelings of intellectual and professional phoniness in high achieving individuals” (McGregor, Gee, & Posey, 2008, p. 44). Learmonth and Humphreys (2011) theorize these competing emotions, arguing “throughout our adult lives we have been haunted by a certain sense of ‘doubleness’ – a feeling of dislocation... of playing a role” (p. 99) in their characterization of the contemporary academic identity as a sort of Jekyll and Hyde presentation of self. This metaphor especially resonates with me, as a first year PhD student in language and literacy education.

In this exploratory paper, I attempt to capture my “personal” as “political” (Hanisch, 2000) work of mining my early meticulously crafted academic writing for new meaning through an act of critical poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2015). Poetry “facilitates [both] creative and political agency” (Weibe et al, 2016, p. 24). By revisiting, recycling, and “remixing” my coursework written with many “mixed” emotions, I searched for found poetry in forum discussion responses, presentations, and term papers with the aim to (1) “engage as [an] active witness” of my experience and (2) to “recognize” and capture the underlying shame that represents my imposter syndrome experience in order to move towards “healing, a better life” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683). Further, to continue to work within this theme of “mixing,” I have structured this paper so that my creative found poetry cluster (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009) is “mixed” in with my more academic discussion of my inquiry, which was composed while “minding the gap” – that is, written with the lived experiences of a new PhD, laden with trepidation, seen through downcast eyes, and typed with trembling fingers – at the center, so that it might be transformed into poetry that explicitly exposes my emotional state during composition. To do so, I draw from shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006), a theory “for understanding shame and its impact on women” (p. 43), as a “psycho-social-cultural construct” made up of feelings of being “trapped, powerless, and isolated” (pp. 45-6), to aid in framing this work. Further, I employ Stanley’s (2015) metaphor of the PhD “black box” which attends to the intersecting/competing identities of the PhD student before and during academic life. This poetic inquiry of shameful imposter syndrome, regret, and self-doubt felt during my first year of PhD life aims to honor, heal, and offer a gesture, extend an invitation, for understanding and community. For instance, I do so through playing with

Vygotsky's highly contested (Smagorinsky, 2007) concept of a "zone of proximal development," an important idea in my field of language and literacy education.

### **Zone of Proximal Development**

After injuries comes connection:  
bandage to skin, leaky pen to purse lining,  
a scream into sharp winds headed  
east, along a more self-effacing coast line(d) with bottles that will  
never be rubbed soft, to  
sea glass. Healing takes more space  
than time.

The terms that float around, the  
'safer' words, evade referencing loss or  
shame, staying housed in the article and  
severed  
from the appendices so cloaked in  
everything we couldn't say, all the lost  
little darlings whose hands we hold as we cross  
streets in the places  
we have no business being in.

Our inner speeches echo between our hot  
ears, bouncing off the rafters, the parts that  
hold our memories and warnings. Everything is red and  
breathing at different rhythms here - it's hard  
to get better in this ruckus. The aches are a dull roar and we  
are so far from the ocean now,  
though there is still a swelling and  
foam- pink like us- and  
frothing.

Overall, it is my hope that through this personal as political (Hansich, 2000) act of creative vulnerability of "speaking my shame" (Brown, 2006, p. 43), other novice academics and researchers might feel comforted; you are with a friend here, not, as Emily Dickinson wrote: "in the loneliness one dare not sound" (Dickinson, 2007, p. 881). Rather, I hope to mobilize my knowledge gained from a painful beginning to my PhD work and demonstrate, as I write in the above poem, "Zone of proximal development," that certainly, "after injuries comes connection" and that unlike Dickinson's speaker, we should "dare to sound" our loneliness.

## Extending the “Black Box” Metaphor: The Shame, the Plane, and the Drag of it All

First, I aim to extend the “black box” metaphor by addressing my theoretical frames of the personal as political (Hanisch, 2000) and shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006) in “The shame,” then I expand on my conceptual frame of the PhD experience as a “black box” (Stanley, 2015) in “The plane,” before finally completing my extension of the black box metaphor in “The drag of it all” by delving into a personal framework for this inquiry.

### The Shame: Theoretical Framework

#### Build Your Resume

I picture the editor with long arms, able  
to stretch the length of the mahogany desk if they choose to  
bend over it, extended- Christ-like.

They are tall, too, but  
with rounded shoulders- the kind that shrug off  
backpacks and thickly knit sweaters draped on them by  
someone else who cares more for their  
warmth, cholesterol, and happiness.

Everything falls to pool  
at their pale feet, unnoticed and unworn,  
on a maroon carpet that needs cleaning.

An atmosphere of shame has surrounded me in the past several months, which is why discovering Brown’s (2006) shame resilience theory while reading about adolescent literature felt like an oxygen mask had dropped, helping to steady my breath during the turbulence. In many ways, conducting this poetic inquiry on imposter syndrome in graduate school with a shame resilience lens is a kind of personal as political exercise because “it is... a political action to tell it like it is, to say what [you] really believe about [your] life” (Hanisch, 2000, p. 113). For instance, I was imagining all my professors, every journal manuscript reviewer, and even my fellow colleagues as these kind of “long arm[-ed]” and “Christ-like” figures, capable of so much more than I am and filled with grit and stone-cold determination; like the subject in the above poem, “Build your resume,” they did not need company or the warmth of “thickly knit sweaters” – nothing, much less emotional distress, distracted them from their work. Thus, it seemed serendipitous to discover shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006). Murrenus Pilmaier (2016) drew from this framework in her critical analysis of the significance of female vulnerability in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), my favorite book, and

one I had reread during my commute to school this fall in a search for comfort. Murrenus Pilmaier (2016) argues that the story “seems to bear out this theory: it crackles with life because of the vulnerability of the heroine. Indeed, by unabashedly showing her true self and admitting her faults, Anne gains everything she ever dreamed of” (p. 161). This filled me with hope, compelling me to investigate further.

Brown’s (2006) foundational paper on shame resilience theory resonates deeply with my PhD experience thus far, beginning with the very first line of the abstract: “Although shame is one of the most primitive and universal of human emotions, it is often still considered a taboo topic among researchers” (p. 43). As such, her aim was to generate a theory using grounded theory methodology to investigate women’s relationship to shame. Defining shame as “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance or belonging” (p. 45), she presents many fascinating findings. For instance, through interviews, she discovered that her 215 female participants’ primary concerns were feeling trapped, powerless, and isolated, often experienced in a “web” of conflicting layers (p. 46). She goes on to argue that shame resilience is “best understood on a continuum” with negative feelings at one end, and resilience elements at the other, including “empathy, connection, power, and freedom” (p. 47). For my purposes, her theorizing of the “speaking shame continuum,” which is about “developing fluency in the language of shame... allow[ing] women to engage in thought and dialogue about shame and shame resilience” (p. 49) has particular significance. Because speaking shame allows us to develop strategies to develop shame resilience, I posit that this poetic inquiry into my shame-filled imposter syndrome experience is one such personal as political exercise in harnessing voice “to accurately express [my] shame experiences [which] increas[es] [my] ability to recognize and name shame [as well as] understand the importance of externalizing and sharing shame experiences” (p. 49).

## **The Plane: Conceptual Framework**

### **Three 3D E-moments**

1.

Just a quick note: thanks for the breakdown,  
both for our understandings and for the other one  
you told me about  
in your bathtub with cold, lavender water with the  
lights out.

2.

I hope this message finds you well.  
I've been thinking about what you said, that  
"dialogue exists in a state of time/space  
s u s p e n s i o n." You constantly relinquish  
the floor, though you c/sh/ould take  
it all.

3.

Someone mentioned a metaphor about growing 'sea legs'  
and unlearning; that's something we really  
must do more of-  
don't you think? We must work towards changing  
our basic understanding of written discourse,  
of course.  
We are many-voiced.

Stanley (2015) importantly explores the PhD "journey," asking critical identity questions for the emerging scholar including "How does it intersect with "real life" (and what actually remains of real life when we undertake a PhD)?" and "How are we to find our way, perhaps even find *ourselves*?" (p. 145) – a kind of inquiry into the experience of "growing sea legs," as the poem "Three 3D e-moments," which introduces this section, tackles. Through autoethnography, Stanley admirably seeks to "soothe" and "understand the transition process" of becoming an academic, using the metaphor of wanting to "open the black box flight recorder to make sense of the 'journey'" (p. 145). Her use of the "black box" metaphor draws from Haggis' (2002) use wherein he applies the idea to the mysteries of adult learning processes, what is "unseen yet still powerfully experienced" (p. 211). This metaphor is fitting; as Stocking (2010) similarly employs it in his self-reflective essay that explores the "'black box' out of which [his] historiography has been generated" (p. 7), he wonders, "would my black box be more aptly named Pandora's?" (p. 206).

Here, I attempt to extend this black box metaphor, to "change/ [my] basic understanding," as I write in the poem above. Of course, outside of the black box, is the rest of the plane, or, my life outside of my academic identity, and particularly, the drag- the force behind the plane. To begin with, the plane itself as representative of my journey is far too easy; as a former high school English teacher, I'd urge anyone to push their reading further. Rather, Ronnberg and Martin's (2010) musings about the symbolic possibilities of airplanes, how they represent "our longing to escape the tedium and tensions of terrestrial life, even if we admire the "well-grounded" person who scoffs at our "airhead" flights of imagination" (p. 448) very much connects with my desire to enter PhD life. They go on to make the case that the symbol of the airplane captures our "innate urge to reclaim... inner heights" and our

“longing to fly” (p. 448) to which I respond, *guilty*. Still fresh off of the high of finishing up my master’s thesis, a project I thoroughly enjoyed, I wanted more. I had a taste of being a teacher-researcher and a resounding reminder of the excitement of being a student, and so, I began to dream. Fast forward to my first semester as a PhD student and reflecting on a piece I wrote for a creative writing course I took with heavyweight poet and scholar Carl Leggo, where he invited us to “know [our]selves in poetry, to know [our]selves as poets” (Leggo, 2005, p. 92), it is interesting to revisit this poem that speaks to flight, research, and hesitance:

### Sky Letters

I heard of an experiment where all these

lost letters

were

d

r

o

p

p

e

d

a c r o s s America;

plain envelopes with clear type that

named no one who lived in the neighbourhoods

they

fell

to.

The researcher wanted to know who

would send them back,

but,

what if they were caught in

| fences | or \_ ditches \_ or branches ~?

I don’t think they accounted for

the trees.

When I wrote this, I had not yet come across the black box metaphor as applied to the PhD experience. However, this piece not only symbolically connects to my current poetic inquiry, but it also offers a true glimpse at the emotional work I was doing at the beginning of my program. Rather than being caught up in the “flights of imagination” (Ronnberg & Martin,

2010, p. 448) that I was experiencing before beginning my studies, here, it seems quite evident that I was more preoccupied with crashing, loss, and error. Additionally, I remember that at the time I wrote this, I had just returned home for the Thanksgiving holiday. As such, friends and family probed a little about my research aspirations, but I was met with many furrowed or raised eyebrows; as one student discusses in Brown (2013), I felt that I had “this weird status that your family and friends don’t really fully understand, no matter how many times you try to explain what the heck you do” (p. 406). Further, this increased my sense of shameful isolation, as I felt “increasingly disconnected” as a result of “the possibility of change” (Brown, 2006, p. 46) in my relationships due to how those close to me either did not understand, or questioned my choice to enter the PhD and/or my research focus. Much like those plain envelopes addressed to no one and falling in the poem, I started to feel like my explanations of my graduate work was falling on deaf or skeptical ears.

Similarly, another piece I wrote for Carl Leggo’s class also speaks to this sense of impending doom, a “crash,” and an expensive one at that; I ended the following abruptly, to reinforce the crash it details.

### **Royce Road Kill**

He stole a Rolls Royce and  
hit a deer.

She lay on the hot, bruised asphalt,  
covered in paint called  
“Cornish White,”  
worth \$600 per can.

Upon reflection, the choice to write about a Rolls Royce seems less arbitrary and more telling of the beginning of my black box PhD experience. For example, Davidson (2012) discusses the car and the plane as objects that are “both... symbol[s] of freedom and [are] steel and oil cage[s] that imprison its owner in debt and everyday drudgery” (p. 469). This very much resonates with me in terms of my emerging life in academia; I am so privileged to have the freedom to embark on this journey, yet the daily experience is emotionally taxing, ripe for possibilities of crashing. Relatedly, Pearce (2016) examines how both planes and cars are connected to war, citing the Rolls Royce Silver Ghost as a vehicle that was augmented for battle (p. 58) before analyzing its presence in *The Great Gatsby*. He argues that it represents the “epitome of luxury” (p. 60) yet is potentially dangerous as it is “a challenge to drive,” and “monstrous” (p. 64). Perhaps then, though this might seem too easy, I am the deer and the PhD is the Rolls Royce, providing a glimpse into my “raw, emotional, embodied experience” (Stanely, 2015, p. 145). Further, this perhaps marks a step in “the process of identity shift and the ways in which previous experiences and identities may

interact with PhD candidature” (p. 146), which can painfully feel like a battle. However, I am hopeful that unlike Gatsby, the Rolls Royce will not finish me.

## The Drag of it All: Personal Framework

### A Growl

We need to talk about desire, the red cap, and all this fur.  
 Enough avoidance - meet my  
 tired eyes. One  
 tw<it>ch<es  
 Though I'm told it will settle down soon,  
 and rest, like all of you. All this throbbing is related  
 somehow; nothing keeps a beating alive like  
 connective tissue,  
 inside and  
 out.

There has been recent interest in  
 threading discussions with talk of possible new sites for finding  
 passion,  
 lingering whiffs of fragrance filled with  
 charm, whimsy, play, and teasing -  
 but this is a scent-free zone here,  
 in these hallways,  
 that hold the cultural texts of  
 the young hearts. We stand here in a tiled library inscribed with questions about  
 stillness when their worlds are filled with  
 movement.  
 Sharp elbows are flung high and thick, batting lashes make  
 waves; they are drowning.

So come up for air.  
 Replace *gasping* with a single, low  
 growl and let it be heard. Bear your pearls  
 and  
 rumble.

Next, this drag, this force, functions to power the black box metaphor in two respects. Firstly, the scientific understanding of drag, the mechanical force generated from the plane

(Hall, 2015), works to represent the power of my past behind me. Drag is an aerodynamic resistance to the motion of the plane, and this link to resistance works for my purposes, as remembering my past life before my PhD journey, a time when I felt I was something of a “force” as a passionate teacher driven to pursue doctoral work, helps me to resist – to “growl” back at and “rumble” with, as the poem above suggests – moments where I succumb to imposter syndrome and doubt my decision to leave my tenured position and English department headship to head back to student life. Returning to Leggo (2005), he also taps into the science of energy as poetic, with “There is a law of thermodynamics which claims energy is never/ lost, only transformed. While my high school/ physics is decades old, I am thinking a lot/ these days about energy and ecology/ and interconnectedness in the heart’s course” (p. 95). I admire how he always insists upon the significance of the heart, the energy of love and writing coupled together; as such, my drag behind me, my force, is truly a passion and love for education and literature that fuels me.

Secondly, Butler’s (1993) theorizing that “drag is performance” (p. 23) connects with my present experience in the black box of academic life and identity in the sense that I often feel as though I am engaged in an elaborate performance of confidence, knowledge, and comfort. Because Butler’s theorizing espouses that discourses such as gender produce subject positions for individuals to take up, her thinking makes sense when I (re)consider how within the discourse of academia, I have been struggling to take up the subject position(s) of expert and researcher while at the same time working as a learner and novice. While unlike Butler, I am not focused here so much on my performance of gender but rather my performance in higher education (though of course gender certainly influences this), I still find the notion that identity performance is “not merely limited to our gestures and mannerisms but also is created through speech and language” (White, 2015, p. 319) as helpful for understanding my own experience. I’ve engaged in a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 2002, p. 179) while grinning through classes, acting happy and comfortable while surrounded by brilliant colleagues that I have no doubt belong in this program. I’ve controlled my voice while speaking in seminar leads, pretending that the years of public speaking as a teacher every day is the same thing as piloting a discussion on complex literacy theory in front of professors who are essentially my version of superheroes. I offer the following poem I’ve written to try to capture this sense of feeling displaced in my own body- the disconnect between my performance and my identity.

### **I Want to Be at the Vertebrae**

I want to be at the vertebrae of my life,  
no longer lingering in the cold,  
surviving on the outside,  
on my  
painted skin.

My world is all goose bumps,  
 blonde arm hairs on end,  
 throbbing temples, and an ache tip-toeing behind my eye,  
 looking for a new image. Cracked fingernails trap yesterday's Clinique  
 underneath.

I know the center will save me if  
 I can find my way in; I need an entry point.  
 Listen carefully for the blood pumping through,  
 concentrate on the low whistling noises in my ears,  
 pay attention to breathing,  
 to the words that come out of me and  
 how loud they are.

What I hope this piece points to is the distinctly embodied experience of imposter syndrome in academia, how I have felt physical effects of the pressure I'm putting on myself to perform and be successful in this program and beyond. Stanley (2015) too, describes an "embodied journey; as some people smoke to cope, I fell back into disordered stress-eating, a demon which I battled for many years and against which I thought I had won" (pp. 146-7). For myself, anxiety is the "demon" I similarly, thought I had won the battle against. Throughout my student life, anxiety has been a pervasive monster. I vomited while writing papers and fainted at exams. Before my grade twelve English final, I woke up in the washroom kneeled beside the toilet, brow bleeding from the fall, my frightened teacher knocking on the stall door. In another fainting episode I slithered out of my seat in a sea of 300 people and faced an accusatory lecture thereafter in response to an assumed eating disorder. While I thought I had successfully designed coping mechanisms, uncontrollable anxiety reared its ugly head again in the week before the PhD program began. Like Brus (2006), I thought to myself, "Was I nuts to go back to school?" (p. 31) as I found myself waking up each morning, in this new, grey place, feeling as though I had been sucker-punched in my sleep. Further, I had always loved school- why was this PhD causing me so much pain? Wasn't a PhD supposed to be about passion? Such questions were making me feel bitter and resentful in the midst of

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this battle with anxiety as well, and I revisit this particular manifestation of my imposter syndrome black box experience in the following poem.

### **Aca-speech**

Let anxiety rewind, speak your  
huckleberry English, and serve to alleviate  
unpleasant dialogue. All this talk of offering, attending,  
troubling, unpacking, and teasing apart  
just taunts and haunts,  
coming alive as we move carefully between what we actually  
mean to say.

I am tired of this literary event.

Take me home, where pretension is embarrassed  
to meet our eyes.

Returning to Stanley, “embodiment... is easily sidelined when we discuss academic experiences: we are whole human beings and part of the PhD experience, is, surely, a physical one” (p. 147).

## **Why (Critical) Poetic Inquiry?**

### **Discussion Questions**

What is our understanding of  
temporal restraints; are we aware of the  
scarcity of time, ideas? Where are the  
opportunities to better understand our  
cold spots, icy with pure lack of  
knowing but holding steady in a  
hardened place?

We are cautionary in our outlooks, display.

How can we locate a suitable venue to  
warm up to ideas well read and printed in  
reputable places; should we peek on the next block-

through the windows of the houses around the corner with cheap siding and lower numbers? Will we engage in a review of the comparables? What price to set on this space of generation?

Wait for the validation, the reflexive reflex, the knee-jerk rejection- a review to set our kindling *ablaze*.

Indeed, “poetry is a risky business” (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2009, p. 16), and perhaps, at this juncture, the following comes as no surprise: poetic inquiry terrifies me, and as I’ve written in the poem that introduces this section, I am cautionary in my outlook, display. Of course, I battle cry this methodology’s affordances in grant applications and in classes in feigned tones of confidence and at varying volumes, depending on the day. Certainly, it is a place to “open [our]selves to what matters in lived experience” (Weibe, 2015, p. 153), “a way of drawing us... so we feel the emotional reverberations of a shared moment” (Luce-Kapler, 2009, p. 75), and “it is an invitation to explore ambiguity, nuance and contradiction [as it] is polyvocal, dialogic and democratic (Gorlich, 2016, p. 523). Critical poetic inquiry specifically has been engaged with for this project because it “invites us to engage as active witnesses within our research... in [a] search for justice, recognition, healing, a better life” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683). As Downey (2016) argues, it “allows... [us] to communicate what often lies hidden; the messiness, and evocation of the moment that do not necessarily originate from a position of normalcy... Vulnerable or critical moments are no less important” (p. 358). *This* is my chosen methodology for my dissertation, my magnum opus, or as my mother-in-law wryly jokes, my baby, as I delay any actual uterine creation. My relationship with poetic inquiry feels like a new acquaintance, fresh and full of promise but still a little awkward, especially if left alone together – we’re just not that close. Yet, I’m expected to be its champion, demonstrate expertise in my knowledge of it, and perform my use of it not only naturally, but masterfully; it is an *arts-based* research approach, after all. So, here we are, paired together in this date I initiated, and the onus is on me to get the conversation going while we swirl the ice in our boozy old-fashioned.

In addition to mining my academic writing for poetic resonances, this piece is also my attempt at making an impression on the very illusive, and completely mesmerizing methodology of poetic inquiry, while simultaneously combating my “imposter” feelings. I began to fall for this methodology during my MA thesis, where I used narrative inquiry (see Moore & Begoray, 2017 for a snapshot of this work). During data analysis, I could not help but wonder if perhaps poetic inquiry might have been a better approach when I realized how inspired I was by my participants and began writing poetry on the side, filling pages in my notebook as quickly as I was completing chapter drafts. Like Dancer (2009), I found that

“while writing academically... I [had] to write poetry at the same time” (p. 39). One such piece follows.

### **Elder/flower**

The rose petals feel soft like  
 new skin. They are damp and flushed in a  
 blush not catalogued by Pantone,  
 open to August sky. Quaking fingertips  
 are tickled and catch a drop, lifting it to join  
 salty cheeks dipped in another  
 more humiliated shade of  
 red.

I am not cultivated, cultured, designed. I rise  
 like a milkweed, perfectly out of place and sour  
 with white wisps waiting to abandon ship-  
 all parts of me ready for transplantation. Just turn  
 over the new soil, already- change the fields. It's time  
 now for new potatoes to thrive in their  
 burial grounds, grow knots, and errant  
 hairs.

I sit among the stems and remember  
 a humbler garden.

I wrote this in response to one of my participant's use of floral imagery in her writing. One of my favorite moments of the study, which focused on grade ten students' digitally written responses to a trauma narrative, was when one girl described herself as having “beautifully bruised petals.” Such moments captivated me, compelling me to respond on the sidelines, in the margins, but I did not allow it to permeate my thesis; I had already laid it out – the decision for narrative had been made. However, I was beginning to feel that poetic inquiry “is as much a calling as it is a method... a voice that wills itself to be heard” (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxxv) and I worried, ignoring the whispering; perhaps poetry would have better captured the nuance in my study, such as the beauty my grade ten students demonstrated, especially in their compassion for one another. I found myself moved while coding the data, much of which was poetic prose. Thus, I decided that for my doctoral research, poetry, with its ability to “touch us where we live, in our bodies” (Sparkes, Nilges, Swan, & Downing, 2003, p. 154), had to play a role. Accordingly, this paper also functions as a first attempt foray into this kind of poetic questioning and discovery, and my

inner dialogue about this work, captured in the following poem I wrote alongside this essay, echoes much the same sentiment.

### **Pawnshop**

Jesus. You're just going to  
leave me here?  
Is it safe?

*This is a pawnshop, not  
an injection clinic.*

But, I'd feel safer there...

*Nope.*

Yes, yes I would. People there  
are trying to be better, not  
lose themselves in lives  
they didn't  
live.

Pawnshops hold particular significance for me, and my history with them connects to my black box PhD experience. As a kid, we were quite house-poor. I never suffered for anything, but I have many memories of going to Goodwill and The Salvation Army, which I both loved and hated. I loved them due to my allowance for an uncapped bounty of ten-cent books that I could cart home. Dozens of Stephen King and *Sweet Valley High* books, a box set of Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood's poetry, and Maya Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings* crowded me in the backseat of the car. However, I hated them because these shops were also the source of much of my clothing, making me feel quite literally like I did not fit, pretending to be someone I was not, much like now. Returning to Brown (2006), I felt shame due to an "unwanted identity" (p. 46) that I felt I had to literally dress myself in. Though apparently "thrift is in" (Mooney Nickel, 2016, p. 175), back in the late nineties when I was a girl, thrift shops did not have the same cultural capital they do now, as fashion destinations for vintage handbags or hipster hotspots for ironic re-renderings of Tommy wear. Rather, I'd anxiously mix and match clothing, trying to disguise it all as new; this novice practice of repurposing, recycling, and remixing is arguably again at work in this paper, as I attempt to look back in my old "drawers" of writing and shake it off, cut it up, and present it as new, and perhaps most importantly, as polished.

## Dwelling on and Recycling “Novicity” for Poetry

I employed the use of found texts for poetry inquiry, searching through text fragments from my PhD homework. As an entry point into this process, I attempted to both locate poetry within my academic prose because it “provides a place for dwelling” (Leggo, 2005, p. 93) and to further, “dwell poetically” (James, 2009, p. 62). As James (2009) discusses, “Dwelling poetically is a means of becoming illuminated, of seeing language through the lens of the poem,” and for my purposes, my poetic dwelling “informed through procedural openness” (p. 62). This open approach was important, as it is provided another avenue within which to engage with shame resilience. Brown (2016) found that feeling “trapped” largely contributes to women experiencing shame (p. 46), and so I did not want to create a situation for myself where I would restrain my poetry writing process with rigidity. As a result, I relished in such “openness,” as my process included discursively revisiting my various writing samples from six doctoral language and literacy education courses; I read through some pieces only halfway while engaging in multiple re-readings of others to dig for material. Just as I sway back and forth in this essay between writing in a more academic voice and more narratively, so too did I read with great attention to moments persuasiveness and sophistication while in other moments, I casually scanned through, often with a snarled lip and sense of dismay at my stumblings through academic writing. More specifically, when I was reading more attentively and less “snarly,” like Prendergast (2015), my process “unfolded organically in that I began highlighting lines, phrases, or stanzas that had some kind of resonance or made an impression on me as I read” (p. 683). I would copy and paste words and phrases into a Word document until I tired of that particular revisitation, and would then focus my attention on trying to “see[] language through the lens of the poem” (James, 2009, p. 62).

The result of this project rests in the following micro-collection, threaded or “mixed” throughout this paper where I have followed Butler-Kisber and Stewart’s (2009) wisdom and created “a...‘cluster’ of poems around a theme [as] a powerful way of expressing... poetry clusters give a richer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon” (p. 4). This approach seemed like a natural fit, as poetry clusters help to show “tentativeness” (p. 4), a central theme of this work. The following piece, “Lock the doors,” closes my cluster, which was overall mined from my PhD homework where I “minded the gap,” offering a glimpse into my “black box”, “personal” as “political” experience of academia thus far, and represents an enactment of shame resilience as well as an offering for connection. I conclude with the poem “Lock the doors,” with which I aim to convey, among other things, that despite the tanks rolling by, feeling sick, insulted, and afraid, with only old tea and memories to keep you company in dark moments, there are still fresh flowerbeds to look forward to, and stillness.

## Lock the Doors

Tuck in the door handles;  
we are barricading ourselves in here- two think  
tanks are rolling by leaving  
their marks in the dirt of my tulip garden. Those  
at that  
spidery multi-agency corporate gang  
attacked both of us once. We're catnip  
for those soldiers.

I had a nosebleed at a carnival once,  
waiting in line for a spinny ride that went  
backwards in circles until it made you  
sick. This moment in time is kind of  
like that, with more muscle, and no  
mirage of teal and Tiffany blue to help us dream  
of better places filled with  
steam and sand.

I recognize the driver of that steel trap-  
he was the guy who vomited on my  
shoes at the benefit concert last year for  
the woman who lost everything in the  
mudslide. He drowned himself in gin and  
tonics and didn't even apologize to my  
red pumps. His barbarity was evident  
early on.

So here we sit in this teahouse  
with only tepid water and  
old pekoe, looking at old yearbooks to  
help fill in our patchy memories of  
simpler days, when we didn't know  
anything  
nor was it our job to. Knowledge isn't power  
anymore-  
it's responsibility and  
disappointment.

If we ever get out of here, I'll start meditating in fresh flowerbeds and empty my mind.

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