A W(RITE) OF PASSAGE: QUEERING LABOUR, LOGIC, AND TEACHER IDENTITY THROUGH POETIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

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Abstract

With concerns of mental health and queer identity becoming important topics in teacher education/welfare as well as social justice conversations, this research seeks to confront a gap in scholarship that tackles the psychopolitical issues queer teachers face through an artistic response. Heterosexism and saneism are structures that uphold the professional pillars of logic and rationality, and thus “madness”, emotion, and its subsequent creativity are repressed by mentally ill queer teachers working in schools. By asking what happens when queer educators use poetry to create meaning of their madness and emotions, I seek to understand psychological and political affects of writing for educational labourers living with mental illness. By developing a creative-theoretical model that writes from the past of the queer child to the present of queer teacher I use Pinar’s methodology of “currere” as a base point to queer my curricular map and create openings in how we might know professionalism, madness, and queerness differently through creative writing.

Keyword(s): Critical mad studies; heteroprofessionalism; saneism; queer phenomenology; teacher welfare; research-creation; poetic inquiry; currere
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Chapter 1: Introduction: Revolution, not Resolution

When I was fired from my dream teaching position at an elite private school in Vaughan, Ontario - which enrolled primarily religious students/families - only a day after coming out as queer to my students, I knew what I needed to write about for my thesis. I didn’t look for another teaching position, instead I went back to my artistic roots to process the traumatizing effects of termination due to my identity. The topic for my thesis was not *Queer educators getting fired* it was instead *Why did poetry and life writing become so essential in my life?*. As a spoken-word artist in my early 20s, I picked up my craft again, picked up a pen and went through anger, depression, and then finally, resilience about my story, a process I am still in, and now with scholarship allying me in a process of *currere*. Instead of going forth with the emotional labour of a lawsuit, I chose to take to the page, speaking my poems and my truth in performances from Vancouver, British Columbia all the way to Beirut, Lebanon. I did meditate and slow down, as well as needing to manifest my story, perform resistance, and carve out a space for my identity in a world and a profession I wasn’t fitting into anymore. It was time to change structures of sanity, to disrupt the professional world and queer the classroom. I chewed up the liberalism’s *Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2007) and wore drag to my job interview. It was there that I chose activism over helplessness, revolution over resolution, and resistance over professional compliance.

“For example, at a 2007 AERA Queer SIG symposium for which MacGillivray served as discussant, a member of the audience claimed, “If teachers come out they get fired.”
MacGillivray challenged the audience member’s claim as a certainty. The audience member’s eyes then welled up with tears as she recounted how she lost her job as a schoolteacher in North Carolina when she came out of the closet.”

-Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007

Curriculum studies houses this work appropriately because in this disciplinary home, I am holding the theoretical ropes of queer pedagogy with a methodological footing in arts-based curricular autoethnography. Currere, the infinite form of curriculum, is the house built around these ropes I am holding and the footing I have. Currere is holding the framework of writing-as-creating-making that I will utilize into discovery of my primary research question: What happens when queer educators use poetic autoethnography to make meaning of their emotional lives? In understanding emotion herein, I use the term “madness” borrowed from the field of critical mad studies in order to psycho-politically situate the mental health of a marginalized group (LeFrancois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013). In critical mad studies, madness and mental illness are not seen as deficits the way that productive and ableist professionalism paints them out to be. But rather, madness and mental illness are openings toward creativity and seeing the world through a unique positionality and orientation. Further to this aim, I will contextualize the school/learning environment as a project of the enlightenment, and thereby an institution of rationalism and normativity shaped by capitalism that reproduces social efficiencies through beaucratic structures of mental ableism and heterosexism. The dialectical production of queer mad creativity disrupts this system by inserting itself and culturally “jamming” discourses of professionalism, and notions of “academic study” by using poetry and feeling as foci of inquiry in this thesis.
Outline of Project

It’s my intention that my poetry and the citations within this work can help catalyze further research for each section, helping me work with unraveling my research question while exploring the nexus of artistry, pedagogy and queerness. I will begin by surveying scholarship of the current climate for queer educators in Canada, as well as the psycho-political climate of professionalism, complimented by scholarship in queer theory. I will then move toward how the writing and poetic processes of self-reflection aid in one’s educative journey. Since reviewing my data of poetry, themes of mental illness/health and humour became apparent, and thus, my literature review will also include a short section on teacher’s living with mental illness / the mental health of early career queer teachers, and on the effects of humour in writing. However, I will not just focus on my educator identity in isolation from the my emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental landscapes. In keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing, I will incorporate all faucets of body/mind/spirit knowledge (curriculum) and ask how poetry and performance have contributed to my understanding of those faucets as a queer spirit and educator, holistically speaking (Kovach, 2010). Using my own poetry and creative life writing as data, my methodology section will use Pinar’s theory of currere as a methodological footing, but I will develop currere with poetic autoethnography to bring about an arts-based perspectives to currere, in a sense, creating a queering of currere. I also attempt to queer currere through a (psycho)logical and epistemic queering, that I explore further on. I will conclude the thesis by naming the limitations of poetic autoethnography, as well as implications for future study and practice in understanding the wellbeing of queer educators through artistic means.
Situating the Research(er) in Social and Psychological Contexts

In an effort to contextualize the knowledge in this thesis and in the autoethnographic data, I believe it to be imperative to state and reflect upon my identities at work that influence my writing and the impetus for this work. As a queer and gender non-conforming person myself, this work is personal and the heteroprofessional arena has been one of re-entering the closet, an intense psychological backtracking that proved to be a difficult mental health process. Further, as someone living with mental illness, professional life has been difficult to navigate as schools are saneist and ableist institutions that work off pillars of productivity, ableism, and logic in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. As a mentally-ill queer artist, this school context proved to be a discongruent environment for my sexual, activist, mad and creative self. I tried to choose authors sensitive to power relations shaping not only the politics of schooling and culture, but as a thesis that attempts to disrupt normative scholarship, I also tried to cite authors that were doing work underrepresented in research. My own facets of privilege and oppression shape the knowledge in this work and have drawn me towards certain thinkers and educationalists that help me critically engage as a scholar. These, I believe, are limitations and strengths.

Literature Review: Queer Teachers & and their Mental Health in Neoliberalism

The research in this chapter, and the example citations below, will help frame the context of queer artists and educators and the cultural climate for teaching and living queerly as an attempt to answer the central research question: what happens when queer educators use poetic autoethnography to make meaning of their madness and emotions? In the last
decade, there has been substantial research done on queer youth, on cisgender gay male (and
lesbian teachers), but rarely on ‘queer’ teachers, or queer teacher’s mental health. For
simplicity, I will use the term “queer” to refer to gender and sexual minorities such as those
who identify as LGBTQ2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and Two Spirit). Although
there has been substantial scholarship in the last decade on gay teachers, the research has
focused more on working conditions from policy and educational sociology perspectives,
while less attention has been paid to what it means to live queer curricula. In this sense, I
am moving away from the study on the queer subject, and moving toward a study of curricula
as queer lived experience. Further, the methodological approaches in queer studies in
education have often followed traditional models of social science research, whereas this
study fills a gap in scholarship by adding an arts-based perspective. My primary research
question being “What happens when queer educators use artistic response to create meaning
of their emotional experience”, my secondary research questions ask: Where does artistic
identity and response fit into the queer emotional meaning-making narrative? Why do we
need artistic responses for queer educators working in heterosexist and cisgender contexts? I
attempt to carve out both a queer and artistic space in educational research. Overarchingly,
my debates in this thesis will discuss the public and private arenas of professionalism and
identity, and ask how teacher professionalism diminishes artistic and emotional faucets that
poetry and life writing allow to flourish. Further, I will explore what it means to put the queer
subject to work, and the role of emotions in pedagogical and artistic praxis as they relate to
queer teacher’s mental health.

Comprehensive national reports (Taylor, et. al, 2015) and narratives from queer
teachers’ experiences (Callaghan & Mizzi, 2015), reveal a complex picture about queer
teachers emotional wellbeing as marginalized workers. On one hand, they have experienced
great progress in public schools in policy areas and spousal benefits. These institutional
rights are earned and this thesis doesn’t attempt to take away the work gone into getting those
rights. However, my thesis gives representation to an uncharted domain: the mental health
and mad creativity of these queer teachers. I use those terms intentionally: mental health is a
term often used institutionally as something to upkeep in order to be well enough to work and
function. Mad creativity is proposed here not in contrast to mental health, but as a form of
mental health that has often been medicated, diagnosed, and repressed in the pursuit of
logical mental ableism. Mental health is the umbrella of experiences that mad creativity falls
under and is over-shadowed by. A much more hidden phenomena, by looking at the mental
health of our teachers we are looking after the wellbeing of our schools and our students.
When we foster mad creativity as a valid form of knowledge, we make space for all forms of
mental health in the education system. Teachers, as symbols of logic and moral
perfectionism, are often not seen to be queer, yet alone mentally ill, are often left out of
research that looks at the intersection of labour, madness, and sexual subjectivity, especially
through an arts-based methodology. By analyzing the ways that professional life hinders
queerness (and queer subjective emotion) for queer teachers, and how affective artistic
response (artistic autoethnography) works in helping queer people express their oppressed
emotional and queer identities, I am creating a space in educational scholarship that centres
marginalized voices and approaches. Taking a critical affective lens, I will then theorize my
understanding of teaching queerly as teaching personally, affectively and artistically. A small
portion of this study will review will focus on the ways in which bibliotherapy and poetic
writing (Mazza, 2003) carve out a space for emotionality, teaching, and responding to neoliberal professionalism as a form of homo/transphobia and saneism.

Professional Teaching as Homophobia & Saneism

From pre-service teacher education to school leadership, queer teachers face a myriad of obstacles within the cisheterosexist workplace. It is first imperative to my study to detail the cultural conditions of work and professionalism in order to understand why emotions and queerness are under suppression in the workplace, to ultimately illustrate why artistic response to such conditions is deemed necessary.

Queerness and emotionality are intrinsically linked in this analysis, particularly in the section “Writing the Queer Child”. I argue the workplace does not allow for emotions because of the capitalist focus on productivity, logic, and the masculinization of thought (and thereby pedagogy). Specifically, it does not allow for people who have been traumatized by the school for their identity to find healing. For many of us, schools were emotional, traumatizing spaces — and many of us still have gone on to teach. Possibly to heal our past selves, or to make the world better for the next generation, but since there was no space to do this healing work in schools I turned to poetic writing to create meaning. Arguing that teaching, and being queer, is inherently an emotional (as well as spiritual, intellectual, and physical) experience, researchers know very little about the emotional and personal life of teachers, especially in Canada. As Sutton and Wheatley state, “Researchers know surprisingly little about the role of emotions in learning to teach, how teachers’ emotional experiences relate to their teaching practices, and how the sociocultural context of teaching interacts with teachers’ emotions” (p. 328, 2003, emphasis added). Further, the mental health
of teachers, let alone queer teachers, is a largely under-researched area within teacher development studies in Canada. However, some work on teachers’ mental health and emotionality has been done in the UK (Travers & Cooper, 1997) as well as in China (Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz, 2001) but to my knowledge, there is no scholarly literature explicitly examining the mental health of queer teachers working in Canadian schools. Although this study is not explicitly about developing a mental health support framework for queer Canadian teachers, the data in this thesis instead reveals that mental health is a neglected factor in understanding the experience of queer teacherhood. Instead, this study looks at how poetry and creation act as an expressive space for queer teachers to make meaning of mental illness and emotion through humour and artistic practice.

Capitalist education values ‘rationality’ and ‘reason’, which are organized through relations of white heteropatriarchy. That is, white masculinity is a marker of ‘saneism’, and non-normative bodies are constructed as non-rational (i.e., given to emotions) and not-sane (mad). Thus, queer (anti-normative) affective lives are seen in stark contrast with the sociocultural principles of teaching and workplaces. It can thus be argued that teaching and professionalism mis homophbic and saneist. This is the important gap of scholarship and inquiry that this study seeks to address. Further, this homophobia and saneism of the school system hinders specifically queer and mad educators, not giving space to their marginal identities to gain professional footing or healing. In the obsession with accumulation and its logics of efficiency and rationality, emotions have little place in pedagogical practice. It is less that my study argues for a queer emotional supremacy of pedagogical spaces, but rather, I use an epistemic equity lens to have affective/artistic as well as rationalist perspectives of
curriculum interwoven in teachers’ and student’s lives equally. This not only better creates space for queer and mad educators, but creates a more diverse learning environment for many students who are sexual minorities and who have experienced trauma and madness.

In this thesis, I will theorize queer as anti-normative, not just sexually speaking, but as an epistemological orientation that refuses and resists against the gradient of normative thinking around social norms in teaching and learning contexts, ultimately what Apple states as the “hidden curriculum” (1971).

Sarah Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*, argues that queerness is an orientation away and toward normative objects, spaces, and ideas (2006). Queerness is way to live, think and feel in the world in ways that are against the norm, and thus, this study will conceptualize queerness as an epistemic orientation to creatively and queerly think teaching, delineate logical thought, and bring about a resurgence of emotional life in the professionalism project that ignores teachers emotional pasts — all through the queer practice of poetry. Illich (1977/2005) in Robert Mizzi’s recent book chapter, *Heteroprofessionalism* defines professionalism as a form of control over work. Mizzi goes on to state that in teacher’s lives, “Power and knowledge are interconnected with the profession; there is a particular body of knowledge associated with and determined by social institutions” (p. 138, 2016). I extend Mizzi’s definition by suggesting that such a body of knowledge is in fact the hidden curriculum of professionalism. In keeping with the conceptualization of ‘queer’ as not only a sexual identity, but a form of epistemic queerness instead, heteroprofessionalism is more than just hiding your partner at a Christmas party or performing masculinity at work, but rather, is a psychological system that keeps teachers as workers who do not feel, as moral agents that
do not engage in complicated relationships, and as logical symbols of the state that are ‘rationale’, committed to the scientific method, logic, and civic obedience. Importantly, heteroprofessionalism suggests that teachers are not cultural disruptors or artists, but are technicians of state curricula and therefore ideology.

Pedagogy mostly exists within workplaces, and thereby we must further acknowledge that pedagogy is influenced by scarcity, economic survival, and money, which allows me to incorporate secondary critical lens to this thesis. Such an understanding of the precarity of pedagogical work is important in understanding how difficult it is for queers and artists to do pedagogical work within learning environments. In response to this acknowledgement, an activist professionalism may be required for educators to truly act as agents of social change for themselves, while not ignoring their important emotional and personal terrains. Mizzi cites Sachs (2005) in proposing an “activist professionalism, which requires teachers to be active and responsive to their own lives and to the lives of their students”, as a way to queer professionalism while still working within it (p.139, 2017). However, I challenge Sachs’ argument by asking how such a responsive nature is achievable when money is held over our heads on contract jobs, when administrators and course leads hold surveillance capital over curricular objectives, and when radical ideas are only welcome in theory, but not when they make classrooms engage in difficult and uncomfortable dialogue. Such an “activist professionalism” against neoliberalist logic may be only but a dream for many queers and artists working pedagogically. Instead, I argue that artistic praxis creates a “third space” within this intersection of identity and pedagogy for queers to make-meaning of these tensions (Rodricks, 2018).
Be a good teacher

Write. Repeat.

Read. Respond.

Write. Repeat.

Read. Respond.

The 3 R's!

Think. Critically.

Analytically,

Ok now this is getting silly.

I don’t want to read this idiosyncratic

Curricularly diplomatic

It’s making me manic,

I’m starting to panic.

Help I’m drowning and I thought I knew

How to swim. Be a good teacher.

Help me, I’m drowning.

I can see myself in the distance in the future

Still drowning slowly

Help me I’m drowning he said

But nobody responded.

“You have to learn to swim ”

As my fingers loose grip of oil glossed rim
“It’s a rite of passage”

BANG! My identity clashes

So be a good teacher

What does that mean?

I just want to stop learning

I’m done being keen.

This is unnecessary, trivial, cringing- I’m whining

Sometimes I find myself wishing it would stop -- I’m done trying.

HELP ME

I’m drowning; said the student, to the teacher.

Shhh!! there’s no talking!!!

And now I sink deeper.

Carving out Unprofessional Space: Life-Writing & Poetry as not Reflection, but Third Space

The arts allow for emotions and queerness to thrive past the constraints of professional reality because they are often seen as outside of actual reality; they are just stories constructed and performed that provide a brief escape from reality, rather than a reality in and of themselves. The performative nature of the arts allows them to be non-threatening to workplaces and social institutions (including schools) to which they are often speaking back to.
Beyond the social impact of the arts, this autoethnography will focus on the arts, and in particular creating writing, as a process of catharsis and critical reflection, and as a place not alone or in the school, but rather, as a third space of in-betweenness where critical and creative inquiry flourish (Rodricks, 2018). My poetry is living within me as part of becoming and unbecoming teacher. The act of creating the poetic work was not simply reflective or projective, but was a present act where my I stopped time, was both child and adult, both in the closet and out and proud, both before my mental illness and during, and was creating from multiple spaces within me, also known as third spaces.

In my earlier years of teaching, I retreated to my desk at home to write poetry and performed spoken word on weekends as my craft outside the classroom, not incorporating my artistic work into my academic or pedagogical life. However separate, my poetic and life-writing practice became a way for my to make meaning about my practice, my affective terrain, and my activist tensions in professional life. Wordsworth's definition of poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of feeling" but Lacour goes on to argue that Wordsworth did not substitute feelings for knowledge, but rather bound them together (Lacour in Mazza, p. 4, 1993). It was this binding together of queer discourse (poetry) and knowledge creation through poetry, where I come to understand my own currere as a new epistemic and methodological braid. I could not separate my living inquiry in classrooms from my therapy sessions, from my personal life, from my childhood - I was braiding this “overflow of feeling” in a poetic way that created meaning out of my multiple contrasting identities and experiences.
**Shitting in Robarts**

*Here I am, shitting in Robarts Library.*

*Just when my wifi didn’t connect*

*Into the academic industrial wasteland of this perfect privileged prison.*

*They say Robarts looks like a turkey.*

*I say it looks like a white man with too much time so he wrote 50,000 books and now we call it the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Collection. I wrote his name down in Comic Sans just to fuck him up.*

*Here I am, shitting in Robarts library.*

*Just when I thought I didn’t have any more shits to give to this place,*

*I’ve clearly got one more.*

*The librarian downstairs at the “Help desk” looks like she’s chained to her keyboard and the help desk should really be called the “Help Me someone, please?” Desk. Her name is Tonya and she wishes the fast food trucks outside sold Demaurier Lights.*

*Here I am, shitting in Robarts.*
The bathroom smells like the bullshit I’m feeding my therapist in our 400$ sessions.

And the Starbucks barista downstairs is an eighth year doctoral student in Victorian literature. Her name is Alex and she can speak Old English but her Methodology chapter won’t make it past first base with her supervisor.

Here I am, shitting in Robarts.

Wondering why there are so many filled seats in this house of mentality but so many empty bodies yearning for purpose. So many international students given the promise of the West’s tomorrow, driving their depression scars deeper by staying silent about their mental health. So many Pakistani boys lying to themselves that they want to be doctors. So many gay boys capitalizing on their identity for scholarships. So many white administrators acknowledging land — but little do they know the people here before them would of never put up with this shit.

As the toilet bowl stirs I smell the shit of the academy shifting from promise

To prison

-- and I think I’ve been here too long. I think the university made me need it like an abusive boyfriend who tells me I won’t love again if I leave.

I take a sharpie I stole from the help me somebody help me.. Please somebody!! desk and write “I’m queer and I’m angry” on the stall. Maybe a commerce student will see it and go on Grindr for the first time. Maybe it’ll be the Instagram story of a second year who just
realized that her woman studies course taught her more about her past then she could remember from that night.

Here I am, shitting at Robarts.

And Robarts is shitting on me back.

And I look at the empty toilet paper roll and I think,

nobody is going to want to clean this mess up.

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**Writing the Queer Child**

Curriculum theorist Lisa Farley cites Winnicott (1971/2005) in stating that creativity pushes us to walk in our deepest caves of hurt and betrayal, and I too believe this poetic process has brought up my queer child and pressed it against my identity now as a queer teacher (2016). Coupling my humour in my poems was my anger as a queer child, an anger I still hadn’t released as an adult. Anger still at myself for not being healed, able, normal. Strong-Wilson & Yoder argue that as strong writers and poets, a teacher’s invisible subject resides in his or her “furore” as teacher, their inner anger. My inner queer anger in this work was released, as was my inner queer child. And in that child-like anger also came play, humour, and colourful queer creativity.

In Gilbert’s (2014) description of her anxiousness on her first day of school, now as an education professor, they recall the worry of gendered attire in grade school that still
lingers in their mind now. Gilbert goes on to describe that sexuality animates education to the point of disruption. This disruption happens and lives within the child for years to come. The curriculum then lives within the body of the queer child, however reflective they may become of their world. The heteronormative aims of the curriculum-as-planned continue to survive in the inner world of the child’s queer curriculum-as-lived. Here I am, newly minted B.Ed. Teacher polished in Ministry of Education professionalism— the curriculum-as-planned, when the curriculum-as-lived takes over. The anxiety, the guilt, the not-enough-ness, the perfectionism, all of the emotions of my queer childhood in homophobic schools becomes an animated archive that I drown in. Writing poetry in this space, this “third space” was what Cummings calls “an act of desire” … “between here not ‘not here’” (2019), sexual — maybe, but a desire for imagining a different time and place where my identity and illogical feelings could be at peace with my purpose (2019). Carl Leggo states that “poetry can transform our pedagogic imaginations” (2016), and it’s in this act of poetic inquiry I try to create meaning, to transformatively learn // pedagogically // and be in the imaginative space of queer acceptance free from my anxiety.

Methodological Approaches: Queering Currere through Autoethnographic Poetry

Currere is the methodological guide I use in understanding my journey as an educator -- but not just as an educator in professional isolation, but as an artist and queer researcher working through feeling and knowledge construction through the arts. In this section, and subsequently in my poetry, I will attempt to ‘queer’ currere, by not only my sexual identity, but also by a queering of empirical research, by incorporating a marginalized methodology
within the social sciences, arts-based research (my poetic autoethnography). As stated, currere started as a great methodological bedrock to look at my experience of queerness, mental health, and teaching. But this sequential chronology soon became queered - through the poetic process I began to dance between currere’s stages of regressive, to analytical, to synthetic, to progressive. The next poem discusses my dilemma’s with using currere. However, I have analyzed my poetry in more traditional textual analysis methodologies (looking for key themes), and have spoken to themes that speak to my identity as a queer labourer in work and learning environments in small sections after some of the poems, sometimes with citations to add to my analysis. In creating and putting my poetry in conversation with scholarship, I am seeking answers to my question: How does creative writing help queer educators understand their emotional experience?. My poetic autobiography is not only a fragment at the beginning of my research, or an appendices at the back of the thesis, something disassociated from the ‘real research’, but rather, is an important method interwoven and centralized throughout my autoethnographic project. It is not something I reflect on after-the-fact with currere as the reflective guide, but an act of inquiry in and of itself. In this process of inquiry, I found currere did not fit with my poetry as a queer mad teacher. Currere felt like the perfected teacher-gone-scholar was looking back at trauma and queerness as a developed and graduated scholarly self removed from the work, reducing the act of self-study as simply a reflective, looking back process. I could not look at my experience of sexuality and saneism through the past and the future - my trauma of queer childhood affects my teaching of young students, my orientations to bodies in the school growing up affect my relationality as a teacher in school spaces now, and my thoughts and desires dance between time/space as dreams, memories, and projections. In reflecting on my
poetry, and importantly, in the poetry itself, I will seek to answer my question: How does creative writing help queer educators understand their emotional experience that disrupts notions of present, past, and future?

My poetry has not be analyzed by anyone except myself, making both limits and possibilities in this autoethnography. Mendez (2013) describes her definition of self study, “autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture.” However, there are limits to a master’s thesis project and to self study as a methodological approach. In preparing myself for this self-study I read the text, *Just who do we think we are: Methodologies for self study in education*, and in particular, Biddulph’s autoethnographic study of gay identity and teacherhood that acknowledges the limits in this type of inquiry by stating “I started to wonder how my unconscious process was influencing the texts that I write and what the implications might be for questions of rigor and validity” (p. 50, 2013). Although the methodological approach is autobiographical, it is more than just traditional currere. Pinar defines currere as a method focused on self-study through academic study, a concept I will trouble by interrogating what is considered ‘academic’ study and knowledge. Like Wordsworth, I suggest that feeling and form in poetry is a valid knowledge system and when braided with academic study, queers currere’s roots in a Western epistemology of academic knowledge. Currere attempts to synthesize the educational journey of one’s self through the chronological lines of regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetic (respectively). Poetry delineates this linear format of educational ‘becoming’ by looking forward, then back again, then inward, then back again -- in a sense, it queers the chronology of reflection and projection of currere and instead *disorients* it. Like currere, poetry utilizes and synthesizes the past, present, and future, but in
it's own unique potentialities holds the capacity for more rich autobiographical experimentation of reflection. "[Poetry] has the kind of variety and indeterminacy, richness, and flexibility that could make it privileged ground for experimenting with human potentialities and responses, redeeming the past, assimilating the present, and projecting the future" (p. 3-4, Mazza, 2016).

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**kneeling to currere**

Kneeling to currere I see a successful white man has created a beautiful box

A box I am containing myself in

I convinced myself into this box, I wanted it to be a perfect fit

Four squares surround me, each named

Regressive

Progressive

Analytical

Synthetic

Tied with the bow of logic, packaged tightly

Stamped on top with the approval of curriculum theorists across the colony

Like so many men, I kneel to currere, worshipping him

Until the feeling inside me erupts, I overflow with feeling

Flooding the box I am contained within, the water inside rises to the top

I drown underneath until a wave tidals through

I am thrown inside the box, the square named “progressive” falls to the ground
I chew up the “analytical” side of the box, and choke on a memory of myself
I am naked in this box, spores of my body and mind
overflow with feeling
Pinar looks at me from his desk in disgust
As I lay on the floor with the wet box destroyed,
my body drenched,
And salt poured in the wounds he made me open for the sake of research,
I look at him and say,
“I am ready now”

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Mad Poetry as Queering Currere

My autoethnography is poetic, and arguably epistemically queer, but does not ignore
the richness of depth and critical analysis that academic study offers. Thus, the following
citations add to currere to better reflect the framework I approach my data with. A firm
understanding of Pinar’s currere will guides methodology, in his book *What is curriculum
theory?* (2012). Here, I look at a curriculum project of “becoming and un-becoming” with
and through poetry. It is through poetry’s semiotic dancing that my queerness and mental
illness find humour in the darkness and in the chronology currere offers that I reject. It is in
this playground of words that anti-normative sexual and psychological practices emerge and
collide. I couple this foundational, reconceptualist text with his *Autobiography, politics, and
sexuality: essays in curriculum theory 1972-1992* (1994), an earlier text by Pinar, but one
that allows room for queer autobiographical writing and social action. Through this text, I found my poetry was not only a reflective practice, but a reflexive praxis, one guiding my reflection toward social change in schools and educational settings. Issues of mental health and queerness in relation to this text are not isolated, reflective themes -- but are building blocks toward creating change through praxis. In a review of this work, Dunlop argues that “the essays in Pinar's book uphold and develop perspectives on autobiography as critical praxis, while using the advocacy of "working from within" to incorporate considerations of lived human experience into notions of curriculum" (1997, emphasis added). This translation from working from within my poetic, affective terrain to social action is an important piece to consider when researching the lived experience of oppression on queer educators.

Poetic Inquiry in Currere

I utilize poetic inquiry as conceptualized by major curricular theorists Monica Prendergast, Pauline Sameshima, and Carl Leggo, in their edited book Poetic Inquiry. Further on, one of my poems “the scholar dances” is a poetic response to Prendergast’s work in poetic inquiry. This book acts as a committed player in this work as it reviews the most contemporary North American scholarship in poetic educational research. A piece by Mackenzie (2009) resonated with me as she shares from her own poetic autoethnography in her chapter within, arguing “it is through poetry that I become willing to step into the messiness of the always shared, personal experience, becoming vulnerable to those emotions that may arise as I begin to live, write, breathe, and move, within the poetic spaces of [my own] be(com)ing Teacher” (p. 240, emphasis added). Like Mackenzie, I too through this work grapple with my poetry in ways that face me with myself as a teacher, queer, and
Particular to Mackenzie’s quote that is congruent to the affective theme of the data is her emphasis on the “vulnerable emotions”. Although in this conceptual research I reveal thematic affects that reoccur in my poetry, the vulnerability that mental illness and homophobia place me in allow poetry to reaffirm my identity and in fact help “be(come) teacher.”

Poetic Autoethnographic Writing: From Somatic to Semantic

"Writing the personal demands a self available for a reflexive turn" (Pelias, 2014). Unprepared for what my poems showed me, my thesis took a shift. It was now clear to me I was using humour, metaphor, and poetry to perform the realities of my darkness I was too scared to speak in classrooms and at academic conferences. Was I using poetry as a cop-out? It's becoming increasingly clear that poetry was not an escape, but the only way in for anything to be eventually let out and understand my educator identity from. I offer a poetic reading and response of a quote from Pelias describing the role poetry plays in autoethnographic study by adding my own poetic responses in italic to her citation:

"The poetic gives to the autoethnographic: A way in, an entry into a lush labyrinth filled with thorns and bushes,

turning and twisting on a line, queering the line, no boundaries or borders

curving into the center, into the heart, beating, beating its way, a heart beating faster and faster more fearful and faster
in anticipation, into its seductive surprises, *where drag meets poetry, my dance somatically and semiotically is seductively queer -- take a look in*

into its delightful and disturbing displays, *are you afraid to look?*

*insisting that more be carried on the way out from all the way in."

My affective experiences that ended up on the page had their roots in the body. In reading Pelias I felt a solidarity of understanding with this somatic autoethnography. It is the limits of thesis conventions that I cannot perform this entire work of poetry, but that I can instead write from a way of somatic, sensual scholarship. "Writing the personal, I speak from the body. I seek a "sensuous scholarship" (Stoller, 1997), a scholarship attuned to the visceral and somatic." (388). My anxiety that tightens my chest each morning before class, before work, before writing, before I tell a class that I am queer, is where much of my poetry is born. My body is pregnant with thought that through a "mind and body concert" poetry is born. Pelias cites Spry (2011) in suggesting that "my body functions as a site from which the story is generated by turning the internally somatic into the externally semantic" (italics in the original). It is my body full of laughter on stage when the audience and I share hysteria over the fact that I am so anxious I have to ask my therapist if she were to give me a grade in therapy, would it be an A or an A+? It's this somatic, collective humour that puts my poetry in motion and in turn, makes light of my pain. It's here that humour see's its light in my darkness.
The Data: Writing from Within

The poetry in this section is just the right amount: it is not too much, or too little. It was chosen through a rubric of what I felt spoke to teacher identity, mental health, and the relations of being oppressed in a homophobic and transphobic educational world. Borrowing the interpretive methods of Pelias, in “concert” with the poetic data is reflexive renderings afterward that offer accounts into how I interpreted the poems. I felt this process to be more authentic to each poem that analyzing them as a whole afterward.

Anxious Girls in Yoga Class

* I met Amanda when I was teaching English during my last practicum at a local high school for rich kids. She was gorgeous, funny, but thirty something and single. She was moving to Toronto at the end of the summer like me, so when she came, we met on Dundas on a mustard velvet couch in a cafe and spent 9$ on our latte’s, size fit for ants. I was dick-deep in missing home, so Amanda and I spent the afternoon trauma-bonding over how we were victims and how Toronto hated us.

* Amanda’s mom died, so she went back to Edmonton to feel her way through that (actual) trauma. She’s on a healing journey, like every other woman and queer I’ve ever met. Actually, I bet men are on a healing journey too but they suppress it with pussy and alcohol so they can’t feel it. Or, maybe, feminine and queer energy feels things when mars is in gatorade. Or retrograde, or whichever.
When I come back home to Edmonton, Amanda and I meet up for endless coffees. The caffeine circulates through our anxious veins as we attempt to heal each other through “and how are you really” ‘s and “tell me about therapy” ‘s.

“We still on for a date today girlie? Cute cafe?” Shoot me in the dick. I take a break from scrolling through my addiction to Instagram to text her. It hurts me psychologically to take a break from my Instagram feed.

“Absolutely babe! Wanna do yoga after”? She replies in a peasant green text, since she is 40 and doesn’t have an iPhone. I’m so classist for a socialist.

Me, feeling like yoga may finally be the answer to my anxiety and existential dread, reply:

“Um reading my mind. I’ve never gone but I love it.” I hate that I’m white.

Like any 2018 coffee spot, there is exposed brick and a multicolour puke couches from 1820, cherry pop tarts crumbled up on a charcoal marshmallow for 14$, and a friend you are sitting across from that you haven’t seen for six months.

Caffeine makes me gaseous like a wicked bitch and to be quite Franco, these anxiety medications make my nasty body odour hot and thick like a gust of warm garbage in August. When we get to the yoga studio above the coffee shop, my ass is full of poop and my stomach full of tight, deep knots full of breakup residue.
The space is romantically lit with candles in each corner and wooden beams on the ceiling that make me feel like I’m aligned with my inner calling as a millennial. When I enter through the wooden sliding door panel into the studio, everyone is ready to fucking heal.

Amanda has saved me a spot beside her because I have come in late, having spent too much time in the men’s change room rinsing my mouth so it wouldn’t smell like cigarette breath. I do this for both me and the other healers. A.) I like to meditate and do healing activities when I am not drunk/high/having given into an addiction because I feel the healing works less if you have shitty stuff in you during the process and B.) Because if the other trauma cases in that room smell my smoke they will think I am less far along on my “journey” than they are. And NOTHING is worse than when someone just as fucked up as you are thinks they are better than you. We are all at this bullshit yoga class for $42, do NOT give me that look just because you bought a maroon mat from Lululemon in 2012 during your divorce.

The instructor, James, is polyamorous and has tattoos that are shrinked onto his flabby skin. I feel as if his story is that he lost 100 pounds and since his mental Renaissance from Weight Watchers, he has now decided to quit working in insurance and teach yoga on Whyte Avenue. I stare at him and in my head I’m convinced that he has seen the world through the other side: he is healed. Maybe that is why I love giving mental health workshops and teaching it to students, because they look at me as though I am healed even though I am
not. It’s in the performance of teaching healing I feel I am presenting only my best, healed self to the people still becoming. I wonder if James is doing the same.

I begin the stretches James brings us through, but he is a Speedy Gonzales and is going way too fast for my tar-filled lungs to keep up with. I am trying to say “thinking” as thoughts of betrayal and weaved stories of mistrust pile into my brain, all while breathing deeply through my stuffed winter nose. Rage starts to trickle in to my upper arms as I get angry with myself for not being fully zen in this moment. I know I have to teach on Monday and don’t want a repeat of last week, or the week before, or the year before. As the yoga poses move through like a pilates YouTube video on fast forward, I start to sweat. I lie to myself and say the sweat is my anxiety leaving the pores of my body, when I know my stomach is still knotted tightly from my mind, and is the engine of my entire internal world.

James comes up to me and correct my pose like the asshole that he is. This makes me think that he believes he is better than me, and is out to get me. James’ inability to see me for the star that I am makes me even angrier than I was during his condescending downward dog demonstration. I start to brew a new blog post titled “Why Yoga Won’t Save You” until James instructs the class to lay down and meditate on our backs. James to me is a joke and my passion for hating him has developed so much in this hour it has become a new research interest.

I lay on my back in defeat, another attempt at healing that has gone array because my anxious body doesn’t hold the elementary capacity to just relax, to breathe, to let go. I start
I am lesson planning my next lesson on how I can indoctrinate the kids on how suffering is eternal and there is no way out of this shitty world. To stay in your youth forever because adulthood is a prison where you can only count the days until you are free from your mind.

I breathe, thoughts in their eternal marathon, and say that I did my best. What a lie.

It’s clear humour, here in this short story, played as the narrative’s central metaphor for growing up and taking care of my mental health. I look deeper at the role of humour and clowning later in the analysis of this data, since it is a theme found throughout. In making fun of “mental health mantras” I am poking at a system I feel has failed me: the mental health system. As a teacher, fighting for therapy from my superior’s and finding the time to actually go to yoga felt like something I should do in order to heal myself. However, in getting there, I noticed nothing will save me. This was the pain of adulthood, the sadness of adulthood coming for me -- “To stay in your youth forever because adulthood is a prison where you can only count the days until you are free from your mind”.

The Curriculum of Hell

When I read Sam Rocha, who is this really cool philosopher of education, I think I am finding myself since he talks about love so much. It is really too bad he’s straight. Anyway, he talks of love. And I love men that talk of love. I have a particular form of anxiety that makes love and intimacy very difficult, almost impossible. When I was walking in Montreal on October 14, 2018, (whenever somebody writes a specific date, I know you get scared) -- I
decided it would be best to kill myself. I thought, if I have lost the ability to love, then there is no point worth living anymore. If love was the meaning of life, mine had no more meaning left to squeeze from its black vessels pumping depression into my heart.

This was a peak of what was a three year anxiety episode on overdrive. Don't look at me or read me and tell me anything in this world teaches you more than suffering does. Suffering has no objective that you can see, or a learning goal at the end. If you knew the objective, you would do everything you could to escape suffering. But you are in the assessment, you are in the experiment, you are within the test already. The test is now. Can you read on?

The curriculum of suffering is non-linear, it is affective, it is messy, and not in a cool queer-theory kind of way. The pedagogue is both yourself and your demons. Being taught by your own darkness you come face to face with the biggest test of your life: your own will to survive. You are told there is no right way to learn these lessons, but you have a hunch that this darkness is unlike any teacher you have ever known before. You know this darkness is a new way, a way that is above cerebral knowing. You know it in your soul.

If the goal of life is happiness, suffering takes this away. The learner objective is happiness, but there is no way there. There is only darkness. You pedagogicize your body, shoved therapy and self-help down your own throat forcing yourself to heal. But teaching here does not end when the bell rings. You descend deeper into the darkness, being taught through the abuse of the underworld that you now inhabit. Your curricula, what you have
been told to learn and love, is the black eraser of joy scraping your stomach and the chains of childhood tightening your chest. There is no way out, so you dive in -- deeper.

Objective means logical, it means the end goal, you fall back into despair, down teacher's hole.

You begin to retrain your brain through bullshit gratitude journals and capitalist therapy ventures but for 300$ an hour all you come out with is a series of mantras you don't believe in. So when you have mental death, when you have anxiety, you can't believe the teachers around you.

There is no way to learn. Red flags around you, “truth” you can't discern.

Only to sit in the wound, pour salt on it, and dive into the dark nights of punishment. The syllabi of life tells you in this module, you are to come out stronger. We are scaffolding your body to be able to handle the next event of pain. This is your training. You quit. You smoke and hurt lovers and cry because there is no amount of assistance that will bring you out of the this test.

Still yet, you learn. You do not learn tools to cope, you do not learn strategies for change, you learn things that you hate. One is your body, the other is the state. You go to psychiatrists and pastors and healers abound, but depression scars and screams are all that are found.
Your life is a riddle, a game and a joke, you only know how to write poems, drink, cry and then smoke. This is suffering, live and upfront, coming to grab you, out on its hunt.

A brick on your ankle, you sink deeper into abyss, drowning in darkness, will you be missed?

You cut the rope from your ankle, and breath in the water, up on the shoreline you sit and watch the oiled waves that sank you. There is nothing to heal your gushing wounds, only salt.

Stinging.

Wrenching.

Explosive hurt.

You sit on the shoreline, your soul left burnt.

This story ends in darkness, that you can tell, but there is a glimmer of light, in the curriculum of hell.

-suffering is our only teacher
There is no dressed up or scholarly way to say that this poem is my favourite, mainly because the day after my suicidal ideation I decided to reach out (to my family) and get help. The “glimmer of light” is a line of the poem I struggled writing, since in this dark time there was truly no more light left. It was like drowning in a wave pool in the middle of an ocean, surrendering to the inevitable drowning of my illness.

The metaphors in this poem between suffering and curriculum, between pain and pedagogy, are of some most profoundly impactful metaphors in this entire work. I had never truly suffered before my own mental health collapsed and the journey that collapse catalyzed was one I like to think of as pedagogical. Suffering as teacher is an area I’d like to explore further in Buddhist curriculum studies and Buddhist pedagogy. The pedagogical nature of suffering in capitalism, in psychiatric systems, suffering in heteroprofessionalism, is all braided within this work and this poem exemplifies through storytelling the didactic and yet non-linear trajectory of suffering.

The White Lady on the Stage

“i’d like to acknowledge the ancestral lands we are working on today”

says the white lady on the stage

i wonder what she means by acknowledge

i look around and see elder elder elder
i wonder if it’s okay that we use that word

or if we are just ‘acknowledging’

i look around some more

this time my eyes drift to the gay men in the room

i wonder if they have AIDS

I correct my cognition and wonder who thinks the same of me

i state my pronouns ‘they’

the elders continue to call me ‘he’

i continue to call them ‘other’

This piece of poetry reflects the time in my emerging teaching career where writing and artistic work in theatres was a site of refuge for me from the heteroprofessionalism of K-12 public school teaching. In Ontario, very different from my home, land acknowledgements flood activist spaces with inauthenticity and settler-guilt. In Alberta, Indigenous people are everywhere and engaging with the Treaty relationship is live and everyday, rather than institutional and discursive. This poem illuminated my drive to find pedagogic space outside the classroom but in these workshop spaces was only met with more bureaucratic guilt and a hidden curriculum of its own.

Title

I went to a publisher in December and he said my poems were spicy I said do u have any salsa I’m kinda hungry and he gave me a look like I’m already too fat. So here you go
Shawn, here’s the potential titles for my forthcoming book in 2020 that I’ll never gain the momentum to write.

How to ignore your inner world and just teach!: A resource for early-career teachers

I was depressed from a breakup so I studied affect theory but now I think the discipline is nutzo: An unpublished master’s thesis

My mom stopped giving me white bread, clearly I’m fat: A children’s book that ignores subliminal messaging that I’ll unpack as an adult in a workshop reflection

Actually I think I might be asexual, can you drive me home: A romance memoir

My horoscope said I’d find love today but all I found was lint in my belly button and some unresolved issues from childhood: a feminist, psychoanalyst autoethnography

I think we might have taken queer theory too far: Four essays I never wrote that were due yesterday

I’m the funniest person I know: A love story

No benefits? No problem: A teacher toolkit on ignoring your mental health
My therapist suggested mindfulness but I can’t afford the classes: Essays on useless gratitude journals

Every minute you don’t reply I message five more guys on Grindr: a love story

When I see my paycheque I have a panic attack: A capitalist manifesto

How to write poetry like you’re straight and sane: A curriculum tool for high school English

In this piece uses humour as a vehicle to construct an identity as a writer. In making fun of myself as a mad, queer teacher, I am making distinct personal, political, and professional disruptions. As Park states, “[poetry] is truly an act of identity construction, a political act that is very much connected to the personal and the professional” (7). Humour here is a key identified theme that helps me play with suffering, identity confusion, sexuality, and professional and academic life. As Jennifer Andrews writes in describing the use of humour by Indigenous women poets, “Humour can channel anger, celebrate survival, and even unite diverse groups of readers by bringing them together through laughter” (4). It’s clear humour in this piece holds the capacity to channel the anger of oppression, celebrate mad folk’s survival of neoliberal professionalism, and as the many times I have performed this poem attests, the laughter that results can unite people in community and solidarity building.
Teaching Conjunctions to a Lover

Plus, Plus, Plus, and moreover, and nevertheless, and neverthemess, and neverthebest, and neverquite yet.

And therefore, and herefore, and hereforyou, and leftforme. And therefore,

and Furthermore, and furtherless, and furtherbless, and further undress for me.

And because, be short hugs, be long love, be. Be with no clause, just be, just because.

And in conclusion, and in confusion, and in fusion, all this was

was an english teacher’s musing

This poem dances with the idea of queer lovers and my subject specialist background in English and creative writing curriculum. I use my professional identity of high school English teacher to contrast my sexual relationships. This contrast between the two allows a reconciliation for this conflicting identities while positioning the English teacher as a sexual, desiring subject.

The Methodological Dilemma

As researchers, we come to the danger or blessing
of being able to fall in love with anyone,

or not being able to love anyone at all.

In our missionary of trying to understand the human condition,

we either come to empathize and love of all the world’s forms,

or to become so critical that we can’t find the good in anyone anymore --

including ourselves.

It’s hard to find a church that fits you

I don’t believe in God because scholars are rational -- but then why do I cry all the time?

and none of the grants I write are there to wipe my tears?

As if I’ve been writing grants, I’m too tired from trying to fall in love all day.

And in the meantime, when I get a break I turn off the lights but the light from the past still comes in

But where is the light in my life coming in? Because my room is bright as shit and lets a ton of light in but my spaces in between my atoms still seem to love the shadows and the dark sun. Which sucks, because nobody looks good when they aren’t in the sun.
I shouldn’t of made a reference to bodies, I forgot this was a class in anti-oppression.

I wish when I jerked off I could be attracted to cool queer people but the only thing I think of is big muscles and getting cheated on and how that made me want to be a man. But I’m kind of fat and really nervous so that doesn’t exactly fit into manhood.

So now apparently I’m this gender-fluid woman thing that has a hairy chest and likes it because it’s the only hairy chest I trust to sleep with at night, and at the same time I see drag queens and miss my womanhood and then I miss my mom, and that’s a whole new poem in itself.

But my life is more than just politics and social justice. Social justice is my favourite fucking word. I’m going to get in tattooed on each of my semi-lunar valves so that when I bleed out you can know that I died for DIVERSITY. Don’t you love DIVERSITY? Isn’t that YOUR favourite word?

I should let you go because this poem is more for me then it is for you, and it sucks that I thought about you while I was writing this. It’s my art and I don’t give a shit if you got anything from it. I’m sorry, I have anger issues. I just needed to talk, and you showed up. Deal with your stuff. I wish I could be there to help but I’m too exhausted at this point. I’m tired from trying to fall in love all day.
(Un)Inspiring Education

Inspiring education!

Please.

It’s a drowning deprivation

Of Alberta education

The system scarred their bodies and

Spat them out like shit on the street

But some of those kids,

Are kicked and get beat.

thankfully we have ethical citizens like you.

To cover up, for the damages you made,

hoped your haunted curriculum would make memories fade;

But this is a teacher the police can’t raid.

As you tie me back, and put me in the back of your car;

I’ll watch from my cage as you test them, publish them too,

Hungry for food, bitter, cold, and cruel

But at least your entrepreneurial spirit is fed.

If they stand here alone long enough,

will you stay?
I’m sure you’ll be back.

You don’t get your money without clothes off their back

And to you it’s just another kid in the ‘dumb track’

ARE YOU ENGAGED?

But you left them there,

Left them to dry

You didn’t care if they live, or if they die

And I get it.

Your to busy making sure your discreet

But we all know-

this education system only cares for the elite.

Teachers Drowning

Write. Repeat.

Read. Respond. The 3 R’s!

Think. Critically.

Analytically,

Oh fuck this --this is getting silly.

I don’t want to read this idiosyncratic

Curricularly diplomatic
It’s making me manic,

And I’m starting to panic.

Help me! I’m drowning, and I thought I knew

How to swim. “Be a good teacher”

Help I’m drowning!!!

I can see myself, in the distance, in the future

Still drowning slowly

Help me!!! I’m drowning he said

But nobody responded.

“You have to learn to swim”

As my fingers loose grip of that oil glossed rim

So be a good teacher,

What does that mean?

I just want to stop learning

I’m done with this dream.

This is unnecessary, trivial, cringing- I’m whining

Sometimes I find myself wishing it would stop

I’m done trying.

HELP ME!!!!!
“I am drowning”; said the student, to the teacher.

“Shhh!! There’s no talking!”

And now I sink deeper.

---

A slut with no job

i am a slut, with no job.

i wish I was a straight guy named Dave.

i wish I never found out about sexism.

That way, I would never have to unpack my desire for rough sex.

i wish I was lovely,

And artistic!

and sat by the water to poems about love,

and distance.

but all I wanna do, is H-I-T that bong,

and see what tonight’s unfortunate thought patterns, have got going on.

i’ll start by thinking about blowing up capitalism and my ex.

and how one day, I decided I was sick of both of them,
so I blew them up, rolled their ashes, and took a puff.

And I’ve been addicted to smoking ever since.

enough about capitalism. i just want to sit here, and write,

be lovely, and not think about wrong or right,

is his asshole too loose? or is it too tight?

And why do i love myself most in dim light?

i just want to sit here.

and write.

so i could stop the great fight –

the death of my hometown that still beast in my heart.

I have gratitude-journaled my way into and out of depression,

And yet it is still raining outside.

I can’t ever seem to leave this deep closet that kept me warm for so many years.

the closet was the closest thing to soulmate,

and my best soulmates always taught me not to tell.
i might be a slut, with no job.

in fact, as i have just demonstrated, it’s clear i am a slut, with no job.

but i will stay here, right here, right here,

with a little bit of fear – because i’m a prairie queer

and we stay through the storm.

we stay, we stay, without jobs or money or love,

we stay,

and we fight for the night

where we don’t have to convince ourselves,

that it’ll be alright.

---

The Scholar Dances

Laugh

It’s okay! You can laugh

It might seem kind of funny, what I do

I look at the event of buying a coffee and say wait- how, what, and who?

Puzzle pieces of the world make up my mind and none of them fit

Nothing ever fits, and so I go back time and time

Again and again,

Sorry before I go on -- do you have any answers?
I find myself here in front of you again,

As if I’m going backwards.

My vision though, is imperfectly precise

I have this dream, where I exist floatingly

Perfectly precise. Sometimes I near it, but not always the same way you do.

You love the numbers, the surveys, and the digits of my body

The interviews, the diagnosis, an erasure of the holy

Here I dance -- researching, rehearsing, and relearning

Here I dance where you left off -- the finites of your digitized conclusions

My database is my body, and my methods are souls, and my mind is a porous vein
pumping questions to answers

So I dance another dance,

Meanwhile you know I’m just another risky chance. Some arts-based 20 something
calling research a dance.

Start treading water, and you’ll remember it all. Remember the questions that brought
you here,

Held deep in your body, ignited by fear.

So dance with me and let’s forget to remember, and we will find answers here in the
grey, unknowingly together

Remember me, when numbers kill, and your data doesn’t quite fulfil

Because as you tilt your head back, and start to laugh
The scholar dances, and never looks back.

-in response to Monica Prendergast’s “the scholar dances”

The Theoretical Umbrella: Phenomenological Curriculum Inquiry

As I seek to answer “how does poetry and life writing help queer educators understand their emotions?” phenomenology stands out to guide my readings of the data as I aim to understand the experience of queer identity as it relates to the personal and professional. Langdridge (2007) defines phenomenology as a discipline that "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them; a focus on people's lived experience" (p.4). The limits of a phenomenological inquiry are that although it honours experience, it raises questions of rigor and validity that Biddulph (2013) also raises in his artistic self-study of gay teacher identity. These poems honour my identity, but do not speak for the entirety of the emotions and trauma that queer teachers face. Instead of creating large cultural claims, phenomenology in this autoethnography looks at my experience as a hint, sliver, and invitation of the queer teacher experience.

Queer and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

A secondary text, and subsequently an affective lens to phenomenology, is Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, which helps queer my phenomenological reading of the data. Ahmed’s theoretical orientation toward affect and queer theory helps give me an attuned eye to the emotions present within the data (poetry). As stated earlier, Ahmend’s work allows for the redistribution of the vertical gaze in research from past and future that currere suggests,
and instead argues queerness that “disorients” away and toward objects, bodies, memories, and futures. This phenomenological approach to understanding my messy, affective, queer data is better attuned to the disruption of time/space than non-queer phenomenological inquiry. Important to this data, my research question of understanding emotion, and mental health, I look to Zembylas (2014) to help my theorize affect. As Zembylas states, theorizing “difficult knowledge” in curriculum studies requires the “affective turn” in the way we as curriculum theorists come to orient ourselves toward epistemic claims (2014). This “turn” helps me not move through the motions of currere in a chronological way, but helps me look at my curricular journey of “becoming teacher” as a queer, messy, and affective experience that honours my emotional experience of teaching. Finally, a complimentary branch of phenomenology -- hermeneutic phenomenology -- helped guide my textual analysis of my data in some of the poems afterward, providing a textual honouring of the writing process in understanding my lived experience. As in hermeneutic phenomenology, the analysis provided after a selection of the poems is interpretive and raises meaning and interpretation out of the language in the words. Using interpretive analysis not only help me code for themes such as anger, humour, and suffering, but also allowed me to draw inferences from the metaphors within the poetry.

I state curriculum theory within the heading of theory because braided with phenomenology is curriculum studies’ most central question “what knowledge is of most worth?”. Pinar’s currere is both a methodological footing but also an epistemological question of knowing and makes epistemic assumptions in his stages of reflection. How I have come to know my experience in/through poetry has disrupted this curricular methodology. Therefore, a curricular reading of the data is central to any currere-based methodological
approach. I see my curricular reflections here as becoming and then un-becoming teacher. The non-linear approach to currere I took -- leaving K-12 teaching, going to graduate school, leaving graduate school, returning to graduate school, teaching abroad, learning abroad, going back home again to teach and learn -- has all disrupted the reflective, synthetical, progressive, and analytical process Pinar initially offers. There is no way to write a section on each of the prescribed stages of currere as these poems state, my affective terrain and my poetry delineate time -- rushing me and slowing me down between stages of learner, teacher, and queer. Anxieties from queer childhood come into the nervousness of queer teaching in multicultural schools, and my writing shifts from performative to analytical as I shift from artist to scholar. These ‘back and forthings’ of reflection are exactly what Custer names in the “changing time” nature of self-study in education.

**Conclusion: Implications and Limitations**

*Further Limitations of Autoethnography*

There are both resource and time limitations on a master’s research project, and thus autoethnography is not an ideal methodological approach, but when done with ethical understandings of positionality can be done appropriately for a small reflexive project. Mendez names the limitation of self-harm in autoethnography, by stating “another limitation is the exposure it [autoethnography] implies of the researcher's inner feelings and thoughts, which require honesty and willingness to self-disclose” (2013). This was one of the limitations I too feel autoethnography cannot hide, and as a researcher engages in autoethnographic study they cannot avoid this authentically doing honest work. Although my need to intellectualize my experience was difficult at times through facing past queer trauma, I remained committing to learning what the poetic process told me me about my own
fragmented beliefs around knowledge, relationality, and the capacity of emotions in research. However, I got to draw the limits and boundaries of this work, and so validity and reliability, as it relates to positivism, could be highly questioned, and I invite it to be questioned. My experience of queerness and my educative journey are not absolute in their definitions, and in a larger project, by putting this story in relation to others (through interviews or collaborative research-creation) would only increase the merit of this inquiry. However, that is not to say that poetry and experience are not valid methods and should not be honoured in scholarly discourse related to autoethnography. This is not a truth-seeking project, rather, it is a project committed to understanding the process of writing and poetic creation and how such a process aids in the understanding of my educative journey (currere). I am not seeking truth, but instead seeking my how my truth works and operates so that I can one day put my process in tandem with my pedagogy and applied research with others.

**Implications for Further Study**

"Conclusions suggest an ending, a linear progression that can be resolved in some neat way. I see no conclusions here, but rather, openings. Experimental form is an opening, a clearing in the woods of research regularities."

-Corrine Glesne, “That Rare Feeling: Re-presenting Research through Poetic Transcription”

Like Glesne, I see “experimental forms” such as poetic inquiry as openings to see research through new orientations. Instead of drawing conclusions like the scientific method calls upon, I instead offer up not a “linear progression” but instead come back to my introductory title: a revolution, not a resolution. There is no solvable, perfectly tied answer for ‘curing’, ‘healing’ or ‘understanding’ my experience of queerness and mental illness in
the teaching profession. Instead, there are openings and possibilities for looking at queerness, madness, and self-study in education through new cracks and shimmers that poetry has offered.

Poetic autoethographer Janet Gunn suggests that "It is the success of autobiography, not its failure, that becomes the problem -- one of over-orientation rather than alienation, of completing not losing the self, or regressing to what Frank Kermode has called 'paradigmatic rigidity.' In other words ... The pull toward ideology is all the more difficult for autobiography to resist because the ideological impulse has so much in common with the autobiographical impulse" (Gunn, 2017). Gunn describes an "impulse" I find dangerous in scholarship, becoming accustomed to one ideological stance through the narrow eye of one experience. I raise this as both a danger in autobiographical approaches, including autoethnographic poetry, but also a strength. In understanding the experience of one individual we are to more fully realize the depth of experience of a phenomena, in this case, that of queer mental illness in the professions. My theoretical orientation here, phenomenology, allows a richness and a detailed account of experience, however albeit a small data size. This is a part of a larger conversation of empiricism versus experience and a debate I believe autoethnographic and autobiographical studies in curriculum should pay attention to. As our social justice and education worlds dive deeper into the honouring of experience, we should also be accountable to not the reliability, but the relationality that multiple narratives can bring toward research endeavours.

With multiplicity of narratives in mind, for my doctoral studies that begin in September of 2019, I plan to extend my question by asking “what happens when writing and performance are used to help queer people understand their mental health?” “What happens”
is a research question method of Critical Practitioner Inquiry that Rob Simon uses what asking questions that relate to our pedagogical life (Simon, et al., 2012). As a drama and poetry educator, I continually want to ask “what happens?” when students find and lose themselves in story and performance. Further, for a doctoral project, I would want to include stories from participants and curate them into a performance where they can perform in, using a participatory research-creation methodology (Conrad & Sinner, 2015). Moving my question from “what happens when I…” to “what happens when we…” is both a luxury of time and research resources I plan to invest in in the future.

For the time being, this master’s study contributes to emergent intersectional research in queer autoethnography, as well as contributes a necessary queer perspective to the growing field of arts-based educational research on teachers, which may inform teacher education programs to better prepare and retain queer teachers in practice within diverse Canadian schools (Benson, Smith, & Flanagan, 2014). This study’s implications can be utilized to understand the mental health of marginalized teachers and how artistic methodologies can be utilized to reveal the experience of queer teachers in order to help them thrive in diverse neoliberal schools.
References


