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## CREATING A WARMTH AGAINST THE CHILL: POETRY FOR THE DOCTORAL BODY

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**Abstract:** Using a series of poetry conversations, the authors give voice to their experiences of the doctoral process to illuminate the emotional and affective-political experience, and engage with the neo-liberal powers of the doctoral journey. They write poems to remember the body, and bring justice to the many bodies that have experienced the chill inside the “ivory tower.”

**Keywords:** poetry conversation; neo-liberal; doctoral student; body; affective-political

...

I searched for a home  
 a self to call my own  
 like a castle far away  
 the ivory tower beckoned  
 but after my imagined happily ever after  
 I got a chill I couldn't shake  
 for ivory is cold  
 so I carved myself  
 a poetic path  
 (Leavy, 2010a, p. 243)

It was a few years back when I first heard Patricia Leavy's (2010a) words "ivory is cold so I carved a poetic path." Living as an academic in the "ivory tower" I too feel the chill as we are regularly asked to give "an account for ourselves" in the neo-liberal university. The coldness of the ivory reminds me of the Cartesian split, where the body is not "figured" in counting our worth to the university. Leavy's words speak to the action we can employ when writing poetry to create an embodied approach to our research, to awaken the "heart beat" and create a warmth against the chill. The writing of poetry throughout my doctoral journey became an important method for remembering the body. In this collaborative work on the Doctoral experience in the neo-liberal university, I invited my colleague Mohamed to engage with me to write poems to remember the body and bring justice to the many bodies that have experienced the chill.

***"The writing of  
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 body."***

As authors we have developed a strong friendship over the years as we have completed our Doctoral studies. Although coming from very different backgrounds (Bahrain and New Zealand), one of us old enough to be the other's mother, one focused on innovative qualitative methods and the other an expert in quants, we have a shared passion for the work we do in academia to make a difference. This current poetic work involved several meetings (usually over coffee) to discuss our experiences through the doctoral journey and recount different experiences we have had in our roles in the university: Mohamed as Postgraduate Student representative for the University of Auckland, and Esther as a Lecturer listening to stories of other colleagues like herself from traditional teaching backgrounds, who had been "encouraged" to complete their Doctorates. We separately wrote our poems and emailed/texted them to each other, drawing on a

method of juxtaposed conversations (developed by Joe Norris, Rick Sawyer, and Darren Lund, 2012). Each of these poems worked as a provocation for further talk and writing of poems. These poems are understood then as research poems (Faulkner, 2009), that in the writing have a purpose, to *do* something, or in response to Leavy (2010b) who asked “what is this poem good for?” (p.183), the objective was to employ poetry to interrogate the doctoral experience and to illuminate the “body” in the process. As such the aesthetics of a poem are at times sacrificed in adherence of “research language” (Faulkner, 2009, p. 74).

In our poetry writing we employed the method of “surrender and catch” to immerse ourselves in the data generated through our conversations (both emails and verbal). “Surrender,” asks the researcher to encounter the data with total involvement, to let it “wash over you”; it is synonymous with the “experience of being” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 5). Wolff (1972) earlier described surrender as

synonymous with “being” or “experience of being,” its seminal meaning is cognitive love: whatever other meanings it may have flow from it. Among them are total involvement, suspension of received notion, pertinence of everything, identification, and risk of being hurt. [And] ... to meet it as much as possible in its originality, its itself-ness. (p. 453)

When working with embodied arts-based practice, I understand the notion of surrender as giving myself over fully (as much as this is possible) to make sense of the data with *all* of my “senses.” In doing so one must not anticipate, hypothesise the outcome, but rather suspend any received notion. Inside this experience, of surrender, Prendergast (2015) offers a set of guiding characteristics or qualities to scaffold the researcher:

- Aesthetic power
- Imagery, metaphor
- Capturing a moment
- Truthtelling, bravery, vulnerability
- Critical insight, often through empathy
- Surprise and the unexpected (p. 683)

I understand “Catch” where, as the research process unfolds, you comprehend, conceive, and conceptualise things anew. It is an intellectual, existential awakening to a new being-in-the-world (Prendergast, 2015, p. 6). Importantly for this work “... its result may not be a concept in the everyday or scientific sense of the word but, for instance, a decision, a poem, a painting, the clarification or origin of an existential questions, a change in a person” (Wolff, 1972, p. 454). However, like Wolff, we admit the process of “surrender and catch” was not unconditional. Mohamed and I entered into these research conversations

with a desire to illuminate the experiences of the doctoral body in the process of the increasingly neo-liberal PhD machine.

Surrender and catch resonate with the work on serendipity. I argue that serendipity is a useful concept for arts-based researchers to employ (Fitzpatrick, in press). There is resonance when understanding the researcher as a serendipiter, with the method of surrender and catch. Horace Walpole coined the term “serendipity” after his reading of the ancient tale of the *Three Princes of Serendip* in 1754 (Merton & Barber, 2004). Although the term has become common usage, the original story and Walpole’s understanding of serendipity are useful to better understand the role of the arts-based researcher. Like the *Three Princes of Serendip* (Merton & Barber, 2004), the arts-based researcher also sets out on a journey of discovery. They are skilled and knowledgeable, and prepared to make sense of their discoveries along the way. Essential to making sense of the “fragments” discovered the researchers require sagacity, wits, skills and intellectual training (Merton & Barber, 2004). As an “astute wanderer” the arts-based researcher must “connect seemingly isolated fragments with other apparently unrelated fragments” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991, p. 160).

Kennedy (2016) expands on the notion of serendipity to include the role of the researcher as a “Serendipiter” in “How to cultivate the Art of Serendipity.” This notion was originally coined by the New York photographer Gay Talese, as well as the term “Super Encounterers,” which Sanda Erdelez relates to those researchers who have special powers of perception that lead them to clues. Hence, the Serendipiter is a skilled researcher who always has a problem or question that occupies their mind, who immerses themselves playfully and passionately into their world, and who is open to notice and discover connections and patterns throughout their daily encounters. For me the Serendipiter resonates with Wolff’s surrender and catch where the researcher must surrender, immerse themselves in the process, and have the skills to notice, to catch, to make meaning. It is with “sensitive reflection upon each of life’s fragments, [we] can arrive at an understanding of some aspect of society” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991, p. 160).

We argue poetry *for justice* demands an approach that applies criticality. Wolff (1972) describes the surrender and catch method as remembering the “relationship between biography and cognition” (p. 439) and “critical thinking” as “thinking,” “remembering” and “consulting” others (p. 447). We suggest, through juxtaposing our own stories, the stories of other doctoral students, and literature through the writing of poetry, we become engaged in the process of critical thinking. We now invite you (the reader) to juxtapose your own experiences alongside our poetic murmurings.

## Remembering the Body as a Doctoral Student

### *Esther's Murmuring*

*My bum is stuck to my chair, the autumn sun calls just outside my window, I keep typing. Perhaps it will last another 500 words? If I could just finish this paragraph here. There is laughter out in the hallway, someone is going to lunch. Laughter. I remember how to spell it. I glance at the clock, tick tock. I glance at the list of requirements, check tick. If I finish quickly, perhaps I can keep my job? If I finish this Doctorate the world is my oyster. Isn't it?*

Jamie Burford (2017) provides a thoughtful synthesis of current literature on Doctoral experiences of writing in the neo-liberal university. He posits the practice of affective-political doctoral writing, in remembering the body in the process. The poem below uses the method of found poetry to provide a summary of Burford's article, and in doing so remembers the body. In the writing of the poem I have attended to Laurel Richardson's (1994) "writing as a method of inquiry" and have played with the words/phrases with font, italics, bolding, tabbing to create space, to create a visually evocative poem.

### **Burford Asks, "How Does Capitalism Feel?"**

Acceptance into Doctoral studies

*The clock starts to tick*

**You**

Plug into the heaving

Monstrous academicwritingmachine

*Psst: Be wary of emotions*

Manage, contain, absent yourself from

Emotional and embodied 'feelings'

**Welcome** to the 'enterprise university'!

Massification, managerialism, internationalisation

Attend to timeliness and completion.

Milestones, reporting, performativity measure

Intensified diversified demands

Squeeze more outputs – shortened time frame

Pressure, pressure, pressure ...

***Push to publish***

***impact***

**Writing** = an output with revenue-raising potential and as a reputation-building value.

**Writing problem** = Doctoral **bodies**.

**Doctoral students have *bodies!***

Bodies experience 'deep, affective somatic crises' and

***Feel...***

Threatened

Overwhelmed

***Feel...***

'Seemed to be killing me'

Agonizing burden of insecurity, uncertainty, unsettled

Failure a '**WASTE**'

Of funding

Of time

**Remembering the body**

***Affect*** = 'embodied meaning-making'

***Affective-political*** = encouraging greater curiosity

Understand writing as transformative

## ***Rhythms – patterns of feelings***

### **Emotional dimension *necessary***

Competing stories

non-seamless

messy

not always rational

This work aims to capture our experience, having both recently completed our doctorates, of our “bodies” reflecting back on our doctoral writing experiences. Using a series of poetry conversations we give voice to these experiences of the doctoral process to illuminate the emotional, affective-political experience, and engage with the neo-liberal powers of the doctoral experience.

Poetry conversations is a method initially developed by myself with one of my supervisors Katie Fitzpatrick and published in 2014, to disrupt the traditional supervisor-student relationship. The poems in this previous work created a way to communicate aspects of the doctoral journey that valued emotionality, creativity, and poetic voice, where they suggested that...

introducing an explicitly artistic form of communication such as poetry into this process pushes the boundaries of research supervision and other kinds of research relationships. It opens up greater possibilities for exploring the emotional edges of the work we do. (Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 50)

Working in a similar way, Mohamed and I intend in the poems that follow, to disrupt the focus on cognitive outputs and timeframes that dominant the doctoral process, to remember the body. Earlier, in our individual pursuits of PhDs, we disrupted notions of the “independent” PhD through engaging in collaborative relationships, through establishing and leading research networks and groups, that supported and encouraged the process with other doctoral students and colleagues.

More recently we published a poetic piece with two other authors, Frank Worrell and Alex Li (Fitzpatrick, Worrell, Alansari, & Li, 2017), as a response to the Orlando shootings in 2016. In this work each of the authors articulates their response to the shootings, and to each other’s responses, through a series of poems. Hence, similarly to the aforementioned articles, in the act of fulfilling our obligation to publish we are at the same time engaged in the writing of poetry as a critique of the neo-liberal university. With reference to Judith Butler

(2001) in the act of “giving account for ourselves,” we simultaneously shape our activities to meet the performance expectations, whilst also seeking moments for tactical renegotiation (Cupples & Pawson, 2012). Perhaps our writing of poetry is a subversive act.

### ***Esther Thinking Back to the First Poem***

*Mohamed met me in the café, it was raining again, I had ordered him a coffee to take off some of the chill of the day. He had just submitted his thesis. We chatted for a bit and I made notes. Mohamed had no pen or paper with him. I needed to race off to a meeting in town about creative writing, him to a meeting with a student about quantitative analysis. While sitting on the bus he sent me a text.*

### **Mohamed to Esther**

#### **The doing of a PhD**

At times I wonder How far we can go

Sailing against the tides

Cutting through the seas

Dreaming through the night

For a sight of land

Navigating our journeys

From a place we called home

Managing our futures

For a destination unknown

A, why do we do this

Sail against the tides?

### ***Esther Murmuring***

*Back in my office later in the day I typed up his text message. On this day serendipity had once again shown her face, I was still a little in awe of it. One of the subjects of our conversation had met me at the intersection, in the rain, as I was racing for the bus. I*



*surrendered to the moment, to the sounds, the rain, the conversation. Later on the bus I let the conversation wash over me, the words and the emotion. And so once back in my office I told her story, catching the unexpected moment, the imagery, the sensory feeling of a shared experience. As I also responded to Mohamed's "sail against the tides." And emailed it to Mohamed.*

### **Esther to Mohamed**

The water rushes down the gutter

All in one direction

Pavement, road, dominant structures define

Push us in one direction

Standing in the rain with umbrellas

Traffic roars through the intersection

Busy shoppers hurriedly side step the duo

Yesterday's Primary school teachers

Resisting the push of the tide

Disrupting the dominant male academy

Desiring potentials possibilities and change

For the places we call home

Years of commitment to doctoral studies

Exhaustion, excitement, exaltation

Juggling work, study and family

Stretched, challenged, transformed

The school teacher now wears a floppy hat

Floppy hats only get worn on certain occasions

Floppy hats only get worn by certain people

So three months watching kitchen shows

PhD equalled unemployable

*But of course once you open yourself to thinking and writing poetry it niggles away at you. The voice of a colleague who has now passed on, haunted me, as it had done during my Doctoral studies. Her story too needed to be told. So I emailed Mohamed once more:*

### **Esther to Mohamed**

Turn back turn back turn back

It will kill you!

Shouting, blocking my path forward.

I stood still for a moment, a pause,

Out of respect.

She was dying, it killed her.

The vultures flapped their black robes.

Middle-aged white female academics,

Excellent prey for cost cutting,

'Measures'.

Why do a PhD?

I gathered together my armour.

A company of encouragers,

A whanau of interest,  
A desire for change.  
My Grandfather, long dead shouted  
No you can't go fishing,  
Fishing is not for girls.  
My Mother, long dead shouted  
No you can't go to university,  
University is not for the likes of us.  
The neo-liberal beast shouted  
No I can't measure you.

I smiled at the woman,  
Standing on the path.  
And found another path.  
A poetic path.

### ***Esther a Murmuring - A Memory of Mohamed***

*Mohamed sits at his computer with the fragments of a poem. As he works on reviewing the statistical analysis work for a colleague the voices of PhD students keep popping back into his head. So he stops and scribbles the memories onto his fragmented poem. Over a few days it begins to take shape and when it is ready he emails it to me.*

### **Mohamed to Esther**

#### **100,000 words**

100,000 words, they told me  
Tick the boxes, they told me

Meet the requirements, they told me

Meet the deadlines, they told me

Be creative, they didn't tell me

Take your time, they didn't tell me

Enjoy it, they didn't tell me

Have fun, they didn't tell me

Whose game are we playing

Whose stories are we telling

whose lives are we changing

Those in voiceless lands,

Or those in the ivory tower?

Help

I am a doctoral student

I am someone's student

Someone's property

Someone's liability

A liability.

I am an extension of someone else

Not a reflection of who I want to be

A clone

A copy

A Russian doll.

Will I ever just be?

### ***Another Coffee, Another Meeting, Another Rainy Day***

*Mohamed and I met again the next week. And it was still raining. We talked about juggling balls in the air and the nightmare of turning around and finding a forgotten ball in the gutter. We couldn't leave the poetic conversation without giving hope. After all here we were sitting drinking coffee and writing. So once again I took notes and hopped on a bus to my writing meeting. Where I started to write.*

Perhaps I need to step back in time. My journey up to this moment, of writing about my Doctorate, began with my love of literature, particularly JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis in my early teens. I came from an uneducated family, the first to finish high school, and the first to go to university. Hence, it was a totally foreign environment for me. Entering into my Doctoral studies, after years as a primary school teacher, I still had an image in my head of JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis sitting with their colleagues and students in the Inklings club, at the back of a pub in Oxford. Many students, I argue, arrive with a preconceived notion of what the university life and a doctorate involve and mean. Each of us are therefore unique in our emerging doctoral identities. There is no cardboard cut-out that can represent who we are. Both Mohamed and I had to work hard to create and recreate our doctoral identities, resisting and simultaneously creating the “rules” that define us. The following poems represent our separate struggles and offer suggestions, to enable others in academia to consider how we as doctoral students, supervisors, and academic staff, respond to the neo-liberal expectations imposed upon us.

Stephen Ball (2012) coined the term “Neo-liberal beast.” Signing up to do a doctorate also means you are entering into a world of measurement, accountability, competition, and other market driven processes controlled by the ideology of the “beast.” In this sense then, the construction of a doctoral identity is shaped within the structures imposed by the “enterprise university.” As doctoral students we employ poetry within the belly of the beast to disrupt and remember the body. Like Jamie Burford (2014) we hoped that writing poetry about our experiences would “enable [us] to contemplate the mundane, quotidian practices of ... doctoral ... life – its smells, sounds, textures and embodied practices, and to view these as data” (p. 1233). Further, thinking beyond the writing practice of the doctoral life that Burford describes, and yet still using his words, that “poetic writing practices have the potential to challenge researchers ... to unhinge ourselves from the normative logics which

reproduce academic-[life]-as-usual” (p. 1233). So to retain a sense of the “uniqueness” for each of us, that we each bring to our role, and to remember the body in the process we shout “Be Brave-be a Brave” and “Bring it Back.”

## **Esther’s Found Poem with Mohamed**

### **Be Brave-be a Brave**

Skill yourself with knowledge

Train with the best instructors

Girded with guidelines

Resources at the ready

Cut out your own card board shape

Others have been here before.

Rally together your troops

Encourages, enhancers, enablers

To critique, challenge, champion

Finding a place to belong

Creating a community

Go into battle ready to

Speak out

Problem solve

Be involved

Contribute

And in that moment remember to be

Human

To forgive, care, connect

And have fun

Laugh, laugh, and laugh again

Make mistakes and get up

And laugh again.

And to take off the chill

Remember the body

Feeling, sensing, awakening to the scent

Of embodied knowledge.

*I find a message in my FB page from Mohamed. He has been working late. "I've sent you another one, I think it fits somewhere near the end." I smile and open up my inbox. As I read through the poem I wonder who she is?*

### **Mohamed to Esther**

She said

We cannot change the industrial, neo-liberal, university

But we can learn how to live with it

I died.

I Looked up

Felt the breeze in the air

The sounds that echoed in the background

The colour of the sky

And everything else

I had to live with

I looked around

Noticed that empty cup of coffee

That old newspaper

Those unpaid bills

And everything else

I had to deal with

I looked back

At the neo-liberal university;

The games we played

The money we paid

The 'masters' we served

The tower we built

I thought

What do you live with,

And what do you deal with?

How do you decide,

And who do you decide with?

Who are we?

Brains on rent



Souls on hold

Bodies on break

Second hand muscles

Intellectual slaves.

Where are we?

Nomads

Never in the tower

Never in a tower

She said

We cannot change the industrial, neo-liberal, university

But we can learn how to live with it

Forgetting that a man once said

We cannot change the democratic, public, university

But we can learn how to deal with it

*Mohamed laughs. He looks tired today. He soon warms up and relaxes as we sit and chat over coffee. We are nearing the end of this piece of work. It feels good to put these words on paper, to craft them into a poem and give voice to the stories we have heard over the years. Mohamed says that one of his favourite sayings is “bringing it back to earth.” We discuss this, and again I write notes. I love that saying “bringing it back to earth.”*

## **Esther's Found Poem with Mohamed**

### **Bringing it back...**

Living breathing PhD

Piles of papers, towers of toppling books,

Desktop full of folders.

Overwhelmed, over workload, over it.

I look out the window again

Big fat rain drops fill the frame

Bringing it back to earth

Bringing it back to the body

Bringing it back to the purpose, passion, possibilities.

Not for the floppy hat

Not for the letters on my door

Not for the jargonized Ivory Tower

I stand in front of doomsday,

Like others did for me.

I train other braves to be brave.

The beast stomps down the hallway.

Ironically,

I have made an account for myself.

Students, scholars, supervisors gather.

A posse of Poets in a room.

Reading, sharing, performing,

Encouraging embodied curiosity.

Re/member/ing the body.

*The weather forecast predicted massive rainstorms and horrific winds. Outside my window the sun is glistening on the rain drenched bush. It was disobedient to the weather forecaster. Likewise, the PhD journey is forecast to be difficult, a lonely life, and can “kill you.” Mohamed and I resisted the prophet, created community, encouraged collaborations, wrote poetry, found and made time to laugh. Yes, it is difficult, but so was climbing Mount Everest for Hillary! I suppose, thinking back to Leavy (2010a), it requires courage, support and sometimes audacity, to create your own path.*

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