Collaborative Poetic Inquiry as Micro-Resistance: Reconciling Art Educators' Identity Dissonance in Professional Spaces

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Biography

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Abstract

Two teachers explore conflicts at the intersection of their personal and professional identities in public university spaces, examining reconciliation of identities in dissonance using collaborative poetic inquiry. Normative expectations permeate the academy, defined in the United States through White, male, middle class, non-disabled, able-minded, heterosexual, and Christian values, requiring teachers operating outside of these frameworks to perform in ways which place them in contradiction. This article proposes a collaborative, experimental poetic process to reflect on marginalized aspects of identity, intellectualize power dynamics involved in workplace conflicts, explore dynamics of privilege-oppression, and assess which parts of identity to sustain and which to reconcile to enable coexistence. Suggestions for art teacher outliers include finding tertiary relationships, creating collaborative poetic assemblages to bring clarification to workplace conflicts, and creating opportunities to reposition oneself within new narratives. This research provides a space for all teachers to build resilience in education spaces.

Keywords

Art education, higher education, reconciliation, arts-based research, teacher identity, critical disability studies, identity dissonance

Current literature supports academic identity as a confluence of multiple, intersectional identities which continually evolve through tensions between personal and cultural values and professional contexts (Clegg, 2008; Edwards & Edwards, 2017; Fitzmaurice, 2013; Henkel, 2000; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Mockler, 2011; Reynolds, 1996; Sheridan, 2013; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005). Internal conflicts exist in this liminal space between what faculty choose to reveal and conceal, based on shifting ideals, socio-cultural values, and other identity markers which may conflict with workplace culture (Clegg, 2008; Edwards & Edwards, 2017; Pfeiler-Wunder, 2017). In the United States, many universities continue to privilege values defined as White, male, middle class, non-disabled, able-minded, heterosexual, and Christian (Harwood, Mendenhall, Lee, & Riopelle, 2018; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; O'Connor, Carvalho, Vabø & Cardoso, 2015; Pfeiler-Wunder & Tomel, 2014; Price & Siebers, 2011; Steinberg & Kinchelow, 2009; Witt Smith & Calasanti, 2005). Individual perceptions of one's academic self vary according to these values placed in relationship to professional context (Clegg, 2008; Edwards & Edwards, 2017; Mockler, 2011; Reynolds, 1996; Varghese et al., 2005), therefore the choice to curate one's academic self reflects the desire to adhere to faculty norms and commonly accepted social practices (Billot, 2010; Rao & Pfeiler-Wunder, 2018). Teachers can experience privilege, marginalization, and discrimination in these spaces based on their social locations (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). Such dissonances push individuals to hide aspects of identity from their work narratives (Sheridan, 2013) to avoid rejection or ostracism (Pfeiler-Wunder & Tomel, 2014), the efforts of which can feel taxing and adversely impact performance and engagement.

Pressures of performativity came to a head when we found our personal selves in living contradiction (Whitehead, 2000) between personal and academic identities. While the authors acknowledge such internal conflicts are experienced every day and with more critical implica-

tions by People of Color and other minoritized groups (who cannot choose to hide), living with conflicting identities proved disabling, with larger implications for public universities seeking to create environments supportive of diverse faculty. Both authors embody positions of privilege (white and middle class) and marginalization (neurodiverse, non-religious, and female) within their institutional landscapes.

Prompted by painful incidents at work which necessitated reflection (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), the authors investigate their 'hidden' identities, concealed to avoid targeting and discrimination (Bowman & Smedley, 2012). Both authors refer to this phenomenon of internal conflict between personal values and workplace culture as *identity dissonance*. Author 1, identifying as neurodiverse, was triggered by a conflict with a student which forced her to acknowledge how self-imposed ableist expectations of academic performance (Price & Siebers, 2011) led her to project similar expectations onto a student. The results of this painful encounter lingered for weeks, leaving her feeling displaced. Author 2 experienced workplace isolation as a non-religious woman in a predominantly Latter-day Saints (LDS) community and a male-dominated department. Both authors work in large public institutions of higher education in the United States.

For both authors identifying as social outliers in their departments, reconciling the rift between professional and personal identities became a necessary step to cope with and navigate work environments, which although cordial, contain systemic messaging and unspoken assumptions which conflicted with personal values. Self-reflection was needed to sort through emotional responses to situations which confronted values, belief systems, lived experiences, and social positionings. Internal headspace became a fluid site of negotiation and reflection.

Wrestling with uncertainty, self-doubt and, at times, feelings of marginalization, the authors engaged in an arts-based research (ABR) self-study to discover what remains unknown about identity reconciliation. ABR uses different expressive forms which lend themselves to

the study of phenomena. Although debated heavily as a methodology, ABR expands the scope of qualitative inquiry through disrupting traditional positivist research practices and privileging historically marginalized voices (Eisner, 2006, 2008; Leavy, 2015; Rolling, 2011). Self-study is a "practitioner-owned" (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015) research practice which uses critical self-examination to advance knowledge of practice. Although self-study has been criticized for lack of methodological rigor (Feldman, 2003; Loughran, 2010; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), arguments in favor of self-study point to its potential impact on organizations through analysis of macro-level institutional context and practice (Craig, 2010; Kornfeld, Grady, Marker, & Rapp Ruddell, 2007).

In this article, we first describe and problematize the social process of reconciliation using a mechanism-based argument to analyze power structures on the macro level which influence social outcomes within the reconciliation process itself (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Little, 1991). Understanding structures of privilege and power dynamics operating within groups shapes individual experiences within those groups (Little, 1991). The authors each share their personal narrative, describing micro contexts in which they experienced *identity dissonance*, mapping the internal reconciliation process through collaborative poetic inquiry. The authors then present an ABR process of collaborative poetic inquiry through which faculty experiencing *identity dissonance* can reconcile academic and personal identities to regroup in spaces where they experience marginalization. Conclusively, research findings are analyzed and recommendations made for future practitioners to build coping strategies.

Problematizing Power Dynamics in the Workplace

Individuals' social and cultural orientations, communication styles, and values differ drastically creating opportunities for conflict. Complex power dynamics exist in the social structures in which conflict emerges and in the processes through which conflict is resolved. In the work-

place, power-relations can reduce reconciliation to a performative act (Dyson, Farina, Gurrola, & Cross-Denny, 2020; Keane, Heinz, & Lynch, 2007; Reynolds, 1996; Rouhana, 2004), or an automatic behavioral response of forgiveness (Palanski, 2011) where the victim is willing "to abandon their right to resentment" (Aquino, Bies, & Tripp, 2006, p. 654). This places the responsibility of repairing the relationship firmly on the victim. Lower-status individuals often agree to this required social performance, closeting past grievances and acting with deference, reifying existing power structures and normative values.

The choice to acquiesce may be driven by the high stakes of speaking out. Victims in the workplace will not seek justice for fear of counterretaliation from bosses and judgement from peers, which can result in loss of career advancement or even job loss. Higher-status employees prevail in conflict, as they have more political and social resources. Therefore, low status individuals typically work toward tolerance in an attempt to overcome feelings of resentment and anger (Palanski, 2011). Conflict resolution shifts to conflict settlement, as agreements are made which are often not mutual, and diminish the long-term interests of the weaker party (Rouhana, 2004). This comes at a tremendous personal cost (Aquino et al., 2006).

Therefore, it is important to examine work environments as extensions of institutional structures which may be touting rhetorics of inclusion but continue to be embedded with systemic messaging supporting existing power structures. Those who must continue to function in these workspaces, where embodied values, traditions, logics, orientations, and priorities contrast harshly with social performance expectations absorb this additional labor.

Methodology: Post-structural Dialogue through Collaborative Poetic Inquiry

This project used a post-qualitative methodology of collaborative poetic inquiry which resists the structure of traditional research practices (Lather, 1993; St. Pierre, 2018), and fo-

cuses instead on an understanding of poetry beyond expressive and representational form (Boyd, 2013). Privileging the "too strange and the too much" that St. Pierre (2018) describes as the most significant part of qualitative research, poetic experiments were more interested in what poetry does (p. 607). Our back-and-forth poetic exhanges (Rhoades & Daiello, 2019) mining, and sharing each other's texts in an ongoing dialogue produced collective data—a process of inquiry where "theoretical and philosophical practices [are] developed through lived experience and the body" (Richardson & Keifer-Boyd, 2020, p. vi). Lived experiences proved complex and emotional. Memory of the events that threatened identity felt foggy, as we struggled to rationalize and understand what went wrong. Gillis (1994), as cited in Norval (1998), conceptualizes identity as a product of memory, intertwined with "complex class, gender, and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end" (p. 254). Poetic inquiry pushed memory to the surface capturing heightened moments, shifting perceptions and revealing unexpected understanding of the complexities of experiences (Reeves, 2019). This approach was necessary to permeate internalized cultural performance expectations in our work cultures of productivity (Mitchell & Snyder, 2020; Price & Siebers, 2011), dominant religious values (Clark, Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002; Nash, 2003), and gender expectations (Doerer, 2019; Flaherty, 2017; Kelly, 2019; Scheiber, 2020).

Thoughts and struggles in two totally different worlds intertwined to the point that we could not distinguish who was wrestling with what, and our combined poetry became an assemblage (Charteris, Crinall, Etheredge, Honan, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2020). This assemblage of data was further disrupted through a text mixer, an online coding program which randomly shuffles and disorganizes text to play with sentence structure to present words and phrases in unexpected patterns and configurations. Citation was also used to randomly insert voice, which became an event and a material arrangement that assumed its own life and meaning as voices intermingled to form yet another dimension of experience. Data was created, revisited, and recreated through

re-engaging with each other's poetry experiments. Breaking away from prescriptive notions of data and validity (Lather, 1993), the original voice of each author was less important than the semiotic product of the co-constructed poems, exposing symbols and thoughts which built unexpected understandings. Chronological order, lived experience, and distinctions between individual contexts dissolved as subjective experiences shifted from passive to active. This disruptive, collaborative approach would be helpful for others whose identity feels compromised in professional spaces.

Author 1 used text mixers to disrupt the text, reworking poems to include excerpts from her own response to Author 2's story. This reductionist approach reframed ideas to create nuance and symbolic focal points within the text that provided trajectories of understanding. Author 2 used reductionist artmaking techniques such as burning and cutting. Both authors continued to revisit, revise, and disrupt, exchanging poetic pieces to support unpredictable aesthetic choices made with each other's work. Through mutual identification of our positionalities as outsiders, we addressed what we could not resolve in our workspaces through this interactive and collaborative process.

We chose to present our results visually as internal conflicts felt heavy—like a material thing with which we grappled, struggling to find clarity in situations which were murky. The following sections include Author 1's story of *identity dissonance*, Author 1's departure poem, and a collaborative poetic assemblage. Author 1's departure poem represents a starting point on a continuum, informed by conversations, but crafted through Author 1's voice. Author 1's story became a catalyst for Author 2 to disrupt the text. A similar pattern of exchange took place with Author 2's story of *identity dissonance*, departure poem, and collaborative poetic assemblage. This methodology revealed new information about both authors' workplace situations, which will be discussed in the analysis and interpretation section of this paper.

Author 1 Story of *Identity Dissonance*

I self-define as neurodiverse, as AD(H)D is a neurological difference permeating all aspects of my lived experience, shaping my identity, social encounters, and social performances. The embodied experience of AD(H)D makes it difficult to distinguish between artistic impulse and neurologic tendency, both of which drive my professional research and creative practice. M. Remi Yergeau (2018) positions neurodivergence as an identity of "neuroqueerness," fracturing the medical assumptions attached to neurological differences. In this model, neuroqueer identity is entwined with neuroqueer tendencies, expressions and experimentation—in my case, my AD(H)D "rhetorics" through artmaking.

I privilege AD(H)D and other neurological differences through claiming neuroqueer, and choosing to embrace differences as strengths, rejecting medical model narratives which classify those with AD(H)D as socially deviant, overactive, impulsive, unfocused, and non-detail oriented (Timimi & Leo, 2009; Wexler, 2009). This perspective aligns with critical disability studies (CDS) which considers how environments, institutions, and cultures work to systematically disable bodies, embedding impairment (Dolmage, 2014; Garland-Thompson, 1997; Goffman, 2017; Hamraie, 2017; Kafer, 2013; Yergeau, 2018). As Kallio-Tavin (2020) states, "individuals and groups of people are socially, rather than biologically constructed. Social attitudes, the material conditions of society and institutional determination builds dominant ideas and perceptions of the body" (p. 5). Narratives constructing disability in terms of its deficits are systemic in higher education.

I have worked as an administrator and lecturer for thirteen years at a Big Ten university, which has supported my scholarship focusing on neurodiversity. The privilege I experience in this space is accompanied by an awareness of the ways in which neurodiverse identity is subjugated at the academy (Price & Siebers, 2011). Performing what Siebers (2004) describes as the masquerade, I conceal this part of my identity in the desire to maintain a performance of

professionalism and to be socially accepted. Avoidance of the stigma associated with being neurodiverse is accomplished through doing more, which compromises my physical and emotional health. This fissure between my work identity and inner landscape creates a rift where exposed tensions arise out of social performances which leave me feeling exhausted and stretched to the limits in my struggle to reconcile these two selves.

Ableist expectations of rationality, productivity, sociality, presence, and collegiality permeate the academy (Price & Siebers, 2011) supporting capitalist notions of productivity (Cosenza, 2014; Freeman, 2010; Mitchell & Snyder, 2020). These performance expectations perpetuate ableism through the promotion and reward of individuals who uphold these values. Neurodiverse individuals are vulnerable, as rhetoric sorts out those who cannot conform or perform to these standards. I felt bound by these ableist rhetorics at work, unable to step away from imposing these expectations on myself and others. After all, my identity emerges out of a history of performing well professionally, for which I have been rewarded. I found myself complicit in perpetuating narratives of hyper productivity and supporting the absence of counternarratives which for me are just as real—when my bodymind gives out, and I am unable to keep up with the demands of work in conjunction with managing other aspects of my life as a working mother and doctoral student.

I experienced a conflict with a student and peer which turned emotional, the backfire of which ignited this article. It was the end of the semester, and my competing roles of full-time staff member, mother of two boys, and graduate student had left me feeling exhausted. Tired and unguarded, I can have an intense emotional response to situations where other's behaviors are disappointing and where expectations are misaligned. Emotional intensity is characteristic of my AD(H)D orientation to the world. In this instance, I was not in control of my response. This student had agreed to contribute to our department newsletter but was unwilling to edit or rewrite her piece, which created additional work for me at a time when I was already overwhelmed. I

was suddenly flooded with emotion and expressed my disappointment with an honesty I would share with a peer whose success I am invested in, but which I should not have shared with a student—also a product of my neuroqueer orientation as I easily miss social performance cues. The student and I left this argument not understanding each other's viewpoint, which resulted in political unease as my position felt threatened and work relationships compromised.

Power dynamics within academic spaces position staff beneath students and faculty. If a student feels wronged, there is pressure to support students as customers (Searcy, 2017). My honesty was not the correct social choice, and I had no one to turn to for support. My position straddles professional staff, lecturer, and student roles so I have no colleagues in the traditional sense. My identity as neurodiverse left me feeling exposed and misunderstood, which felt overwhelming and colored my self-perception in relationship to my work and colleagues. Emotional fallout lingered for weeks as I struggled between feelings of disbelief and failure. I did not know how to reconcile this loss of my professional self, or the experiences which led me to impose unhealthy ableist expectations on myself and others. This experience led me to question how identity dissonance is addressed in workspaces, and to what degree those with less institutional power are forced to concede to those with more authority. I was curious about the ways we are all forced to conform to the overarching values of the institution.

Author 1 Departure Poem

I journaled about my struggle with this event. Using scraps of conversation with Author 2 I created a poem. After running this poem through a text mixer, I incorporated excerpts from Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai's (1996) poem "In the Place Where We Are Right." The resulting departure poem can be seen in Figure 1. One of the major themes which emerged is self-doubt. Self-doubt becomes the fertile ground where I felt the possibility of reconciliation. But self-doubt is also the space in which ableism forced me to yet again compromise with

dominant cultural expectations. Other themes were exhaustion, disbelief, confusion, guilt/grief, and feelings of failure surrounding the conflict. Social performances, biting my tongue, and feelings of isolation left me feeling angry and trampled over.

My life as a neurodiverse person has been filled with such awkward meandering between the space of apology and reconciliation, toward myself as well as to the outer world. Garland-Thompson (1997) presents the concept of the normate body, an ideal subject characterized by the absence of disability. The normate is the imagined ideal in a society which privileges physical and emotional perfection and rational thinking. The normate is an ideal; a standard with which to measure and compare the disabled body. I feel conflicted in reconciling with my normate identity and further perpetuating normate social performances, as remaining closeted further problematizes perceptions of my ADHD as impairment. But performing as myself and removing myself from these normate expectations further distances me from friends and colleagues. This is not a win-win. Something is always lost for me in this equation.

Author 2 then responded, interjecting her own experiences into the poem. Author 2 lit the resulting poem on fire, creating Figures 2-4 which combined to form the first collaborative poetic assemblage. Lighting the poem on fire felt cathartic, as anger and resentment became a tangible action, where Author 2 physically felt empowered to burn what she did not like. Analysis of this poem revealed themes of combustion, destruction, letting go, and rebirth. These post qualitative methods of inquiry, felt "risky, creative, surprising, and remarkable. . . [not able to] be measured, predicted, controlled, systematized, formalized, described in a textbook, or called forth by preexisting, approved methodological processes, methods, and practices" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604). Engaging in this process brought something new, unthought, shocking, and exciting into existence, losing control and creating a different world for living (St. Pierre, 2018), which created space for newness, discovery and imagining possible futures in which we didn't experience an internal crisis of identity.

Figure 1. Author 1, *Departure Poem*, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

Collaborative Poetic Assemblage

Next, we shift to Author 2's story of identity dissonance, Author 2's departure poem, and another collaborative poetic assemblage.

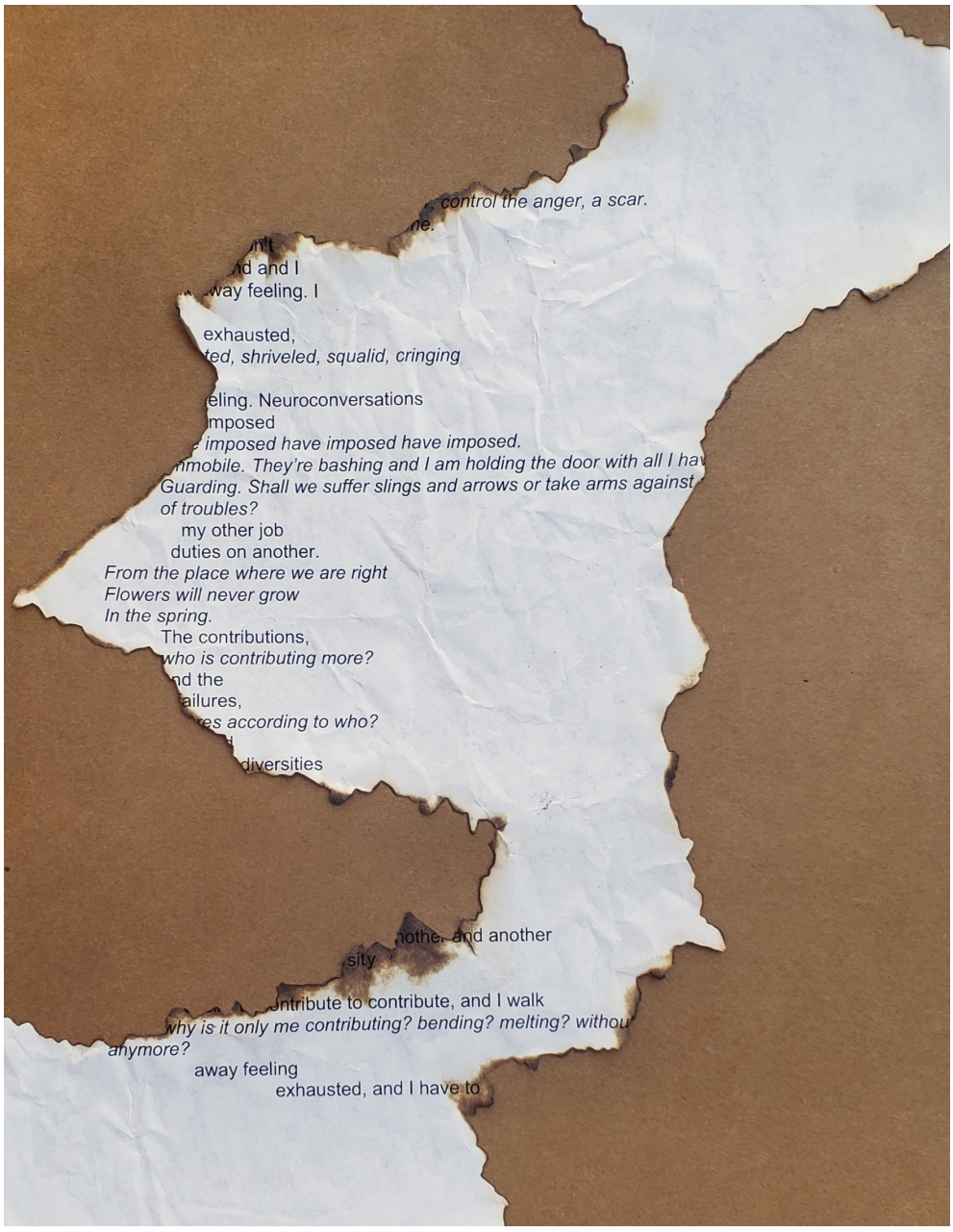

Figure 2. Author 1 & Author 2, *Collaborative Poetic Assemblage* Page 1, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

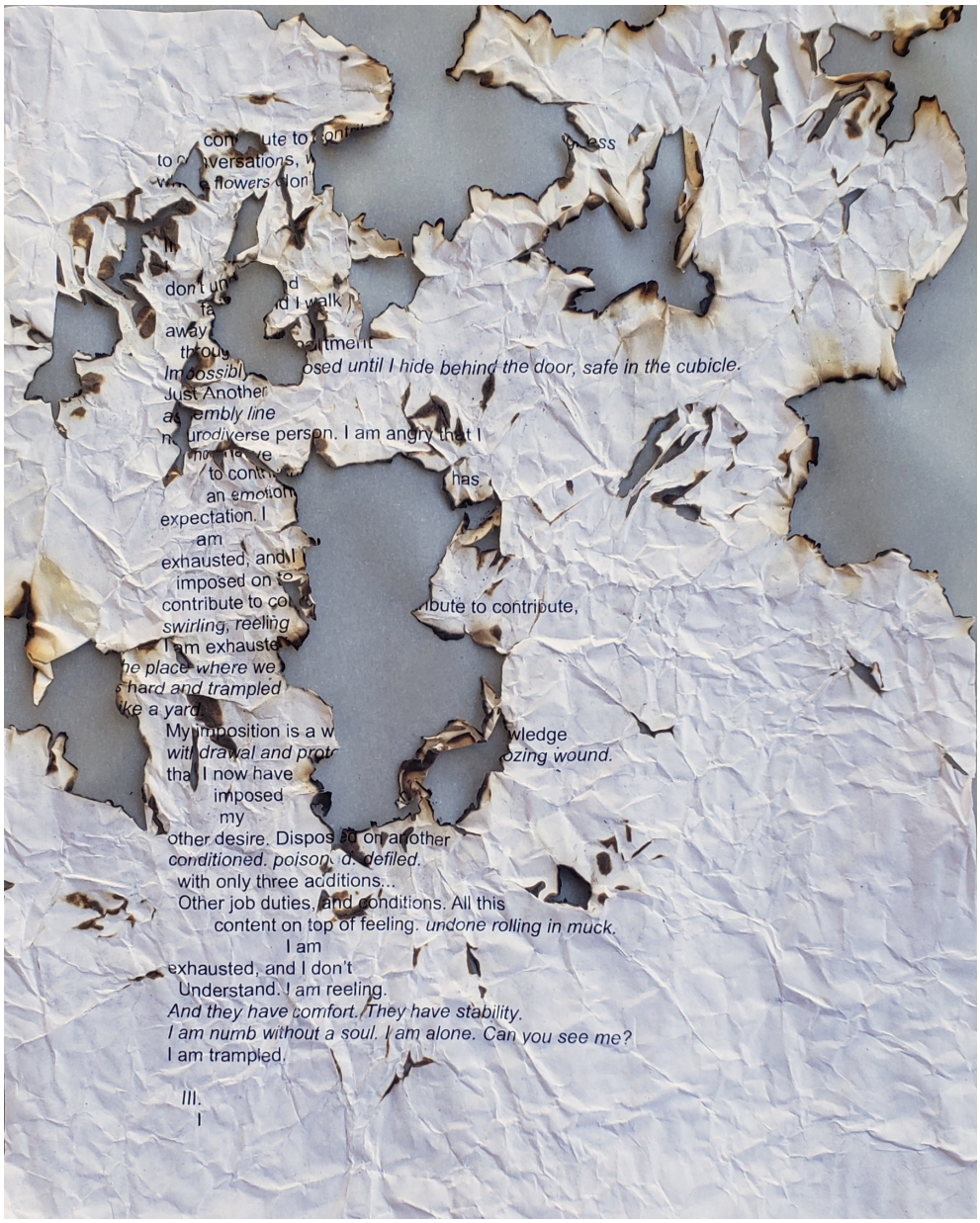

Figure 3. Author 1 & Author 2, *Collaborative Poetic Assemblage* Page 2, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

Figure 4. Author 1 & Author 2, textitCollaborative Poetic Assemblage Page 3, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

Author 2 Story of *Identity Dissonance*

My experience of otherness is distinctly different from Author 1, as I did not live with feelings of otherness all my life. I grew up with privilege in a place where the majority identified as white, middle class, able, and heterosexual. My professors and staff from my doctoral program were mostly females and I was located in a place with many different religions. Conflict with others over identity and values were rarely experienced. After graduating, I moved across the country to be an assistant professor, where I became a social outlier due to gender and differing religious beliefs within my department and university.

I became acutely aware of the religious values embedded into the social systems and structures of my secular university. Clark et al. (2002) discusses the 'knapsack' of Christian privilege in the United States. These overarching Christian assumptions intensified in my new work culture, where the vast majority of faculty, staff, and students identified as Latter-day Saints (LDS), a religious group that embraces concepts of Christianity and revelations made by their founder, Joseph Smith. Clark defines Christian privilege through the assumptions made and the advantages experienced by Christian individuals, such as federal holidays coinciding with religious practices, being surrounded by members of the same religious group, authority figures (bosses, teachers, coaches, etc.) sharing the same religious identification, not having to learn about other religious customs, and feelings of confidence in talking openly about religious practices without concern for how it will be received.

I felt it was too risky to declare my non-religious beliefs in my workplace, as I feared how it would be received. Non-religious people are often stigmatized as sinful, shallow, materialists, "unfairly stereotyped, ridiculed, misunderstood, or dismissed outright as ignorant or evil" (Nash, 2003, p. 3). Instead of exposing myself and having to defend my non-religious choices, I preferred the security of keeping this aspect of my identity hidden. When conversations about religion arose, I nodded benignly, trying not to make waves, and moved on as soon as possible.

I felt limited, on edge, and scared to reveal my values in fear of judgement and disapproval, but also in fear of the potential impact being non-religious in this space was for my tenure eligibility. I fumbled through everyday encounters with students and colleagues, attempting to navigate professionalism and socially acceptable behavior in my new environment.

Gender inequalities in my work environment were further intensified by gender expectations embedded in the LDS culture of my region. This new reality heavily contrasted with my graduate school experience, where the majority of colleagues and professors were women. My observations of inequality included low numbers of female tenure-track professors (Kelly, 2019) microaggressions, male-dominated conversations, and mentoring and nurturing service commitments heaped onto female colleagues. This invisible labor (Flaherty, 2017) offered no rewards. Additional stress factors of childcare/domestic responsibilities, pandemic impact on tenure (Scheiber, 2020), and tenure emphasis on student evaluations containing significant gender biases (Doerer, 2019) exacerbated my feelings of overwhelm.

Kraft (2008) notes that many Christians perpetuate gender oppressions and devalue feminist movements, which mirrored my own experiences with LDS culture. While feminists push for more progressive social narratives, some traditional churches may argue through biblical foundations that women are subordinate to men. Though others' perspectives may vary, I encountered gender inequalities in my everyday interactions within this work environment, increasing my feelings of *identity dissonance*.

Author 2 Departure Poem

These feelings of otherness as a non-religious woman inspired my poetry. In the following poem, I explored the rift between my outward presentation of myself and my hidden identity, a performance which became exhausting. My feminist values and my religious differences, including my allyship to my LGBTQ+ students, created *identity dissonance* with my work

culture. After conversing with Author 1, I wrote about the encounters that sparked my internal conflict, such as collegial advice on navigating religiously devout colleagues, accidental and inappropriate comments, and student stories shared in the classroom containing religious and gendered judgements. The resulting departure poem can be seen in Figure 5.

Author 2 then responded to my poem, interjecting her thoughts into my original poem. She then used disruptive processes to respond to my poem, such as applying a text mixer to create the collaborative poetic assemblage seen in Figure 6.

Collaborative Poetic Assemblage Analysis and Interpretation

Working in response to each other's poems and experiences, we focused on process and elements of surprise in the writing which created moments where we reengaged, thinking and interacting with plasticity (Charteris et al., 2020). Our experiments never felt finished, but through this collaborative process symbols and thoughts built unexpected understandings. Repeatedly examining findings for the tension between what is already known and the potentiality of what is yet to be known, transfer and transmutation led to data crystallization, "an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionalities, and angles of approach" which led to a "deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding" (Richardson St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

Many themes emerged from these assemblages. In Figure 6, the potent symbol of religion as a blanket emerged. What can be so comforting for some can be stifling to others. This realization exposed embedded religious values that limit some and support others. Visualizing this blanket as an item which can be removed was helpful for symbolically rejecting values which felt harmful, not just for Author 2, but for some of her students. Another theme was purification, and as we set fire to Author 1's poem, we both released pent-up feelings of powerlessness

Figure 5. Author 2, *Departure Poem*, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

in connection with the narratives and assumptions applied to all bodies in professional spaces. The theme of *identity dissonance* surfaced as well, revealing an emotional cost to adherence

Figure 6. Author 1 & Author 2, *Collaborative Poetic Assemblage*, 2020. Collaged paper. 8.5 inches x 11 inches.

to organizational values. Exhaustion and self-doubt were repeated over and over in the poem from Author 1, accompanied by feelings of awkwardness, worry, uncertainty, shame, and anger, feelings shared by both authors. Despite heavy themes which could not be reconciled within

the workplace, both authors felt an internal shift in relationship to their work contexts, as deeper situational understanding reaffirmed core values.

This project became a micro-resistance, which felt empowering as we intellectualized and labeled feelings in response to power dynamics operating within our professional spaces. Our collaborative poetic practice empowered us through our arts practice. Intellectualizing pain brought a global perspective to conflict beyond individual problems, exposing internalized discomforts over underlying power-dynamics and assumptions within our work cultures for which there was no easy resolution. Collaborative poetic inquiry revealed the work we needed to do as individuals operating within these larger structures. This process simultaneously exposed both our privilege and powerlessness. If we feel this way, how do others feel? How do People of Color and other minoritized groups wrestle with *identity dissonance* as they encounter white normative structures in their everyday work environments? How do our own practices as teachers act to exclude marginalized voices? Furthermore, how do we participate in reinforcing dominant power structures through our assumptions? Through our silences?

Sitting with self-doubt we questioned if we were blowing things out of proportion. It would be simpler to adhere to social norms, but the emotional cost of these performances felt unsustainable. This project revealed crucial information in our actions, subjectivities, and power positions as educators operating within a larger system. This research informed our pedagogical habits and practices to be more inclusive of minoritized voices through questioning assumptions, disengaging with unsustainable rhetorics, and being mindful of our complicity in maintaining existing power structures in what we choose to conceal. Although there was no immediate resolution to the *identity dissonance* experienced by both authors in their respective workplaces, this project was a space to gain insights into painful workplace situations. This micro-resistance became a space to cope and respond to all that we could not control.

Implications for Art Educators

Feeling victimized by encounters in the workplace which could not be talked about felt debilitating, as we struggled to conform to workplace expectations. Avoiding conflict created complicity within power structures that confronted our core values as educators, further reinforcing social inequities and systems of marginalization. We struggled with what to do and where to turn. Obtaining a place in higher education is paradoxically a space of both privilege and exclusion—the dangling golden prize for which so much has been invested and so much is at stake. With the promise of membership (tenure), it is difficult to resist this system. Artmaking proved empowering, transformative, and agential as our voices became amplified even if only to ourselves.

This project revealed the critical importance of tertiary relationships (colleagues, mentors, and friends) to functioning and succeeding in work environments. First and foremost, it was necessary to locate social connections, even if they existed outside of work. These relationships enabled vulnerability without repercussion in a space free of judgement, which was essential for processing inner conflict surrounding difficult events. Connection and support combatted feelings of isolation and became a form of self-care. Tertiary relationships brought clarity to situations where troubled feelings could be labeled, building coping strategies that lent resilience. Collaboration through experimental poetic inquiry promoted healing, as we gained insights to our own positionalities in relation to workplace identity. This practice may help other educators address, reflect on, and cope with burdensome social dynamics and feelings of otherness in everyday encounters.

Creating inclusive spaces within the historically exclusive, rigid hierarchical systems found in higher education is vitally necessary for realizing goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But to do so it is first necessary to cope through such micro-resistances as described in this paper. These actions are the first step in creating a sense of internal sustainability until positions

become more secure, in the hope that demographic shifts in faculty will transform organizational cultures. Faculty can collaboratively engage in this experimental poetic project, allowing space to voice their narratives in a place where their perspectives can be heard, valued, and empowered, with the ultimate goal of reducing *identity dissonance* as the academy becomes increasingly more diverse.

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