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## Intimate Uncertainties: A Mother Returns to Poetic Inquiry

*Sarah K. MacKenzie-Dawson*

**Key words:** poetic inquiry;  
uncertainty;  
identity;  
motherhood;  
education;  
poststructuralism

**Abstract:** Poetic inquiry offers the opportunity to become intimate with those multiple facets of self that shape our understanding. However, as scholars, even when we engage in creative forms of inquiry, we often find ourselves driven to ignore certain aspects of our identities. To acknowledge the personal within our research is uncomfortable and some have even argued, irrelevant. I believe our stories of the personal are extremely relevant, reflecting a landscape of multiple, fluid, intersecting and often contradictory subjectivities. As scholars, each of us has or will struggle at some point along our journey in relationship to our place within our work of doing research. The struggles may be different, but the discomfort is shared. Across the space of this article I use poetic inquiry to enter into discomfort and uncertainty as I try to make sense of what it means to engage in scholarship as a new mother. Through poetic inquiry my story does not exist in isolation, but instead becomes one of many in the larger dialogue of discomfort, uncertainty, self and possibility across the landscape of doing research and being human.

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### 1. Awkward (Re)Beginnings

"So this is how it tends to go in our lives. The words—and our living of them—fall out in bits and pieces, often as poems that refuse to become prose" (RASBERRY, 2012, p.247)

Cut wildflowers sit on the table  
a token  
of memories and dreams  
swiftly shifting  
across a chasm of who  
I thought  
I was  
would be  
a little girl

imagining loneliness  
with an independent stake in hope  
this place,  
this home,  
this space  
Body blended with the consciousness of escape  
it was here  
in these rooms with broken plaster  
floors scratched with echoes of running  
where I found myself  
enough  
Olfactory hallucinations  
of the stank of alcohol and shame  
the ringing of a phone  
admissions  
hope  
love and loss  
and finally a child,  
my child,  
our child  
I watch the moment  
Faint lines of the impossible  
absoluteness of love  
like shadows acquiescing  
I am  
no longer  
the little girl  
caught in the transparency of fullness and dreams  
alone and  
connected  
it all intertwines like the wildflowers  
the vividly beautiful  
casualties of a life (un)imagined  
Pulling the light-switch with intangible longing  
my breath is careful  
tight  
reaching toward the subtleties of memory  
and the messy recollection of  
a realization of dreams  
those I carry with me as I step through the door  
one last time  
and those  
I can no longer  
touch  
their scent,  
like the wildflowers that sit upon the table  
lingers [1]

The day I returned to the academy, we sold our house. Perhaps for some individuals this might seem relatively insignificant, but for me it represented an enormous transition. Owning my own home had been one of my biggest goals and I, alone, a single woman, had accomplished it. I acknowledge even as I write this, that I am writing from a place of privilege. As a tenured professor at a prestigious university, I have choices and an agency that is not available to many. However, this is (my) story, (my) experience and I share it as a means to connect, to consider and reconsider the nature and possibilities of experience. The house was inconsequential; it was the symbol of the house, the home; to me. It symbolized independence and love, memory and experience. There had been so much hope and possibility in that house, joy and loss, shame and discovery. The day I sold that house, it wasn't just my name on the documents of sale. Instead there were two names, myself and my husband. When I walked out the door of the house, I did not cross the threshold alone, but I walked with a daughter in my arms and one in tow, with my partner beside me. I left behind a piece of my identity, a dream realized, something that had for a moment, been all my own. I cried as we drove away, watching my first home fade in the distance, watching a part of (my)self-fade in the distance, knowing that while exciting this also reflected a significant moment of change.

Spatters across the sold sign bodies gathered mind alone I hold my daughters knowing they will not remember this home this place of us this place of me [2]
---

My pregnancies although joyful, were unexpected. I never anticipated that I would be a mother, let alone a mother to two daughters, only sixteen months apart. However, this is the situation I found myself in. While I felt truly blessed, I also struggled to negotiate the possibility of ever returning to work in manner that was reflective of what I had accomplished in the past or met the expectations of what myself or others thought I should be/do. I wanted to write, to make my art, be an inspired and inspiring teacher/scholar who was fully available to her students. Yet I wanted desperately to be a truly loving and connected mother to my daughters. I had ideas of what this might or might not look like and I also had my doubts about myself and my goals. Through poetic inquiry, the complex and profoundly human methodology of sharing and letting go, I seek to become present across the landscape of this uncertainty and ambivalence, rendering experience through the fragmented and temporal lens of human understanding. I write from the perspective of an educator who seeks to consider, Leah FOWLER's (2012, p.25) question, how do we "restore education to a process where individuals conduct deep explorations of what matters to them, what sustains them what call's their hearts." I share my negotiations upon the page, not simply as a way to engage with the fragments of my own life story, but also to create space for a dialogic landscape of exploration and consideration.

"I have not slept in days, my body-mind feels ragged, my emotions flow unexpectedly—anger and love entwine with the desperate emotions of one being, watching, working, across a landscape of survival. I have not written in months. Instead my identities as an artist, teacher, scholar and writer seem to have been replaced with a new role that requires so much attention, so much energy—the role of mother. As I watch my two small babes, I am overwhelmed in awe. They are beginning to find words, discover their bodies and through these new movements of energetic being, I am caught within a space of love and frustration. I feel a tremendous responsibility to love, nourish and support them, creating space for them to grow as they are meant to grow. However, what does that all mean for me, for my art, my scholarship, my teaching?" (Personal journal, September 18, 2015)

We speak  
breathing in energetic  
stillness  
Bodies, minds, words  
longing  
breathing  
the echoes of history  
and expectation  
with/in  
our work,  
our loving [3]

When I returned to my desk to write, to reengage with my work as a scholar, I found myself overwhelmed. I had made the commitment to write, I had been excited to return to the work I loved. As an introvert, I had yearned for the undisturbed clicking of keys, for those intimate moments shared with ideas and text, pen and paper, body and mind connected in a space of quiet. I set deadlines and made plans, but rather than grand insights or tranquility I found my consciousness crowded with a cacophony of seemingly disconnected thoughts. The university where I taught was highly selective and unlike my own history, many of the students I taught came from *significant* economic privilege, this placed a different kind of burden of expectation for me as a teacher, and left me feeling anxious. After more than a year and a half spent with my daughters, spent away from the classroom, I was observing a group of student teachers with whom I felt little connection, in an elementary school learning environment that was the antithesis of everything I believed. I was trying to find a way to navigate my time between nursing my youngest daughter, student teaching observations, grading and my scholarship. I needed sleep. I wanted quiet. I was besieged with feelings of expectation, frustration, desire, obligation and ambivalence. I wanted to be fully present to my daughters. I wanted to be the loving and inspirational educator I thought I had once been. Even though I had tenure, I still felt the need to perform at high levels, to keep up—prove myself worthy of being there. I felt lost with no idea where to go, with little energy to inspire me to move forward. Instead, I was caught in the space of overthinking, anxiety and disappointment in myself. At times it felt as if I was holding so tightly to some unknown entity or expectation

that I would forget to breathe. However, every so often I was able to catch my breath, to pause, to be(come) mindful and aware.

Outside my kitchen window  
through  
the shadows of almost empty limbs  
I see  
a cardinal  
his red breast, moves softly  
in rhythmic motion with the  
whispering leaves of autumn trees,  
my thoughts begin to breath  
in rhythm with the cardinal  
who sits still  
quietly, waiting, watching,  
being  
a moment  
that breathes  
brief  
epiphany  
beckoning  
toward graceful  
possibility  
mind, body  
be(com)ing  
moved  
toward stillness  
connection  
and the work  
of living [4]

It was within such a moment that I recognized the need to pause, to become present, and to take the time to acknowledge and be with/in discomfort. I had spent so much time reflecting on who I was or wasn't, on who I should or shouldn't be that I was slowly disconnecting, from myself, my students and my loved ones. I was reminded of the words of Brene BROWN (2010, p.46) who asserts, "if we want to live fully without the fear of not being enough, we have to own our story." It was in that moment that I began to recognize that I had something to offer. That by entering into the space of my own discomfort and experience as a scholar, a teacher and a mother to two very young daughters, I could indeed engage upon, engage within/in the dialogic landscape of poetic inquiry, not simply as a scholar, but as an imperfect human being living in the world. [5]

I will begin with a description of poetic inquiry, as a space for openings and reflection which helps to situate my work both methodologically and theoretically (Section 2). After that I will begin to more deeply delve into the relational aspects

of poetic inquiry, examining these both theoretically and personally (Section 3). This will be followed by further account of personal negotiation and consideration of both the challenges and possibilities that exist within a space of uncertainty. I will engage with the idea of uncertainty both as a practice that might move one beyond the historical and cultural, expectation and definition, toward an embodied way of knowing within a space of presence and connection (Section 4), leading to further engagement and discussion relating to experience, uncertainty, knowing and unknowing (Sections 5 and 6) and conclusion (Section 7). [6]

## 2. Poetic Inquiry

Across the landscape of this text, I seek to consider research as a/r/tographical (IRWIN & De COSSIN, 2004; SPRINGGAY, IRWIN, LEGGO & GOUZOUASIS, 2008). From this perspective research is a practice of negotiation where one inhabits those ambiguous spaces between knowing and not knowing, between being and doing as a way to make sense of, comprehend and reconsider experience. Rita IRWIN (2004, p.29) describes the practice of a/r/tography as one that "embraces a metissage existence that integrates knowing, doing, and making, an existence that desires an aesthetic experience found in an elegance of flow between intellect, feeling and practice." Work such as this is spiritual in nature as it situates one within the ordinary spaces of *be-ing* human. Ernest KURTZ and Katherine KETCHAM (2015, p.25) suggest, "spirituality is experienced in [...] our stories—not so much in what we 'do' but in what and how we *be* ... by *how we experience* the realities we meet." Thus by engaging in poetic inquiry using a/r/tographical process, I seek to enter into experience as (im)perfect and (un)knowing, recognizing myself as one Bronwyn DAVIES (2000, pp.26-27) describes as "an embodied being whose existence is intricately connected to, part of, inextricable from the landscapes they construct and in which they make their lives." These landscapes are profoundly human, reflecting a way of knowing, being and doing that does not separate the corporeal from the spiritual, the mind from the soul. But rather as Luce IRIGARAY (2002, p.75) understands, "that the soul corresponds to the life of the body cultivated to the point of acquiring autonomy and spiritual becoming of the breath." In other words, human experience is spiritual experience. Within the space of inquiry, that spiritual experience exists within the dialogic (FERRER, 2003), where our breath and our knowing is connected to all that lives and has lived, that is grounded in knowing that is embodied, emotional, temporal, fluid, and relational. [7]

Poetic inquiry (CAHNMANN-TAYLOR & SIEGISMUND, 2008; LEAVY, 2009; LEGGO, 2008a, 2008b; O'CONNOR, 2001; PRENDERGAST, LEGGO & SAMESHIMA, 2009) situated within a poststructuralist framework (IRIGARAY, 2002, 2004; MacKENZIE, 2010; PETERS & BURBULES 2004), is a research methodology that creates space for that relationality, as multiple voices enter into negotiation in a manner that is both dialogic and fluid. Tom BARONE and Elliot EISNER (2012, p.47) define research as "a process of *researching*—that is, of coming back again and again to perceived phenomena, scrutinizing the world, and thereby re-experiencing it." However, they build upon this definition when considering arts based research, acknowledging this scrutinizing may not

necessarily fit within the systematic structures that define many approaches to methodology, but rather "may occur within a more fluid process and even occur serendipitously through unplanned or informal encounters of phenomena throughout an artist's life" (ibid.). As one engaged in inquiry I am both constructed and constructing, telling and listening through an aesthetic landscape of imagination (GREENE, 1995) and reality. "The poet always understands that s/he/they is located in a complex space and time" (LEGGO, 2009, p.167). Through poetic inquiry, I engage an autobiographical voice, while acknowledging Renee NORMAN's (2001, p.38) suggestion, "autobiographical writing is never a singular gesture. There are always others in the mirror." From a poststructuralist perspective, we are both situated and situating; our knowing, understandings and ways of being and seeing are always in flux and always relational (BUTLER, 2001, 2006; DAVIES, 1992; IRIGARAY, 2002, 2004; MacKENZIE, 2008, 2010, 2012). Laurel RICHARDSON (2000, p.929) affirms this idea in relationship to methodology noting:

"... poststructuralism suggests two important things to qualitative writers: First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which we say everything at once to everyone." [8]

Unlike more empirical research methods that might point to generalizations and truth, solutions and answers, poetic inquiry offers a dialogic space for meaning-making that is both personal and shared, multi-faceted and fluid. The writer is exposed, rendering the personal not as a narcissistic performance of self, but rather as a way to create spaces for "identification and empathetic connection" (PELIAS, 2004, p.1) where through language both reader and writer, self and other may become part of the greater dialogue about what it means to be human. Norman DENZIN (2003, p.xii) maintains, "(w)riting creates the worlds we inhabit," poetry allows us to move creatively within these worlds—to impose, rearrange and pause as we engage with the meaning(s) of the text—the experience. By choosing poetry as my method, I move beyond the telling into an aesthetic space of interaction and spiritual engagement (FERRER, 2003; MacKENZIE, 2008, 2010, 2012; MacKENZIE-DAWSON, 2017a, 2017b). [9]

Poetry is a human endeavor of representation, relationship and (re)arrangement where the reader and writer live within the work. As Mary Ann O'CONNOR (2001, p.84) notes, "(a)ll poetry is a form of inquiry and a way of knowing." Parker PALMER (1993, p.2) comments, that as educated people we "have been schooled in a way of knowing that treats the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated, a way of knowing that gives us power over the world." Poetic inquiry creates the space to move beyond the objectified or objectifiable landscape of knowing toward a space of community, a space of breath and possibility. To engage in, to engage with a work of poetic inquiry is often both uncomfortable and risky as it moves us beyond the normative spaces of research that suggest a practice of tangible presentation, truth, solution or explanation, toward a space of being, a space of connection and unknowing. It is in such a space that "the shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living; the



relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world" (p 21). It is through these relationships that research becomes something messy, fluid, complicated and living; a story of and practice in experience. It is through these relationships that we disrupt the stories remarks Luce IRIGARAY (2002, p.120), that we have been told by

"our culture, our school education, our cultural formation stories that suggest that to learn, to know, is to make one's own through instruments of knowledge, capable, we believe of seizing, of taking, of dominating all of reality, all that exists, all that we perceive and beyond." [10]

However, she also implies that by, "remaining linked to experience, it engenders a sort of milieu that is at once natural, sensible and spiritual where knowledge of the past circulates and where that of present and future is elaborated" (p.59). As one who engages in the work of poetry inquiry, I find myself called to do this work, not as a means to an end, but rather as an act of engagement, exploration and relationship. Monica PRENDERERGAST (2009, p.xxxv) offers:

"Clearly, to engage in poetic inquiry is as much a calling as it is a method; a calling between the 'I' and the 'Other', a call-and-response, a song that is sung, a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public, whispered (or shouted) into multiple ears." [11]

Poetic inquiry is a relational endeavor that allows one the opportunity to move into, engage with and share experience. As humans our stories are layered, excruciatingly personal and overwhelmingly ordinary. Through poetry, one is allowed the space to move into experience, the traumatic and the mundane and those stories that exist in-between, as a means to explore the nature of being human. Across the landscape of this inquiry, while I may hint at other aspects that shape my sense of self, world and experience, my primary focus is on the feelings of difference, discomfort and uncertainty I experience as I negotiate the spaces of and in-between being a teacher, scholar and mother. Poetry allows me as the writer to share experience aesthetically; however, the aesthetic nature of the experience moves one further in relationship with the reader, real or imagined, toward a poststructuralist landscape where even within shared meaning, the stories become layered, new truths unfolding and evolving. There is no Truth within such a space of knowing, no claims of experience as fixed; instead what one finds are openings, spaces for reverberation (IRWIN & SPRINGGAY, 2008) etchings of a story layered across the reflections of an image of what it might mean to be with and in experience. This work is mysterious, evocative and as such its purpose, as Max VAN MANEN (1990, p.50) indicates is "much less to attempt to unravel a problem than to try to recapture something: to re-achieve direct contact with the world of living ... ." Across the landscape of this text I seek to use poetry as a way to enter into the layers, embracing the ambiguous nature of memory and experience as I move toward a dialogic space of engagement. I identify with John GUINEY YALLOP (2010, p.5) who offers the following:

"I believe that knowledge is constructed, that knowing is temporal and that coming to know is a sensual experience. Writing engages my senses. Writing is a sensual act. Writing engages me in the moment of knowing while at the same time writing engages me in the construction of knowledge in this moment. I know no other writing than poetry that brings me so sensually and so fully into the moment of knowing, and I know no other writing than poetry that allows me to construct that moment for the reader or listener—or for myself." [12]

It is my intention to inhabit this space thoughtfully, purposefully and presently, as I seek to explore and make some sense of the subtle nuances that shape my understanding of myself as a mother, teacher and scholar. Through poetic inquiry, I seek to open this space so that others might disrupt, weave, re-image the story I share, infusing their own meanings and understandings upon the text as a way to create a dialogic space of praxis, possibility and engagement. [13]

### 3. Relational Tangles

When we enter into the work of doing (re)search we arrive with the echoes of our lives—our stories, rippling across the consciousness of our understanding. I engage in this work from a place of position. I am a woman, survivor, a mother, partner, recovering addict. I am also a tenured professor who does not have to worry where her next meal will come from, who can afford to purchase a home, a researcher who has the choice to transgress and disrupt traditional epistemological lenses, the choice to do her work not out of necessity but out of love. The work I do, the life I lead, my teaching, my research it is all a part of who I am. However, I recognize and embrace the idea that as soon as my words hit the page they may become something else, mean something else and be something else for all who choose to engage with the text. Our knowing, my knowing is caught in a powerful place of relational tangles, body and mind, feeling and sense, experience and possibility.

A body  
self, without motion  
I am caught  
without words  
just trembling pronunciation  
of grief  
I lost today  
those Sunday afternoons  
your hand reaching out  
join us  
The last time I saw you  
you told me  
that you heard  
I stopped drinking  
you told me  
it has got to be hard

it was hard  
when you gave up cigars  
but it was something you had to do  
that I had to do  
we had to do  
A moment of connection  
with a father  
I could not call my own  
a model of unconditional love  
who welcomed me into his family  
a father  
whose voice did not echo  
through the words  
on the other side of the phone  
I found him  
dead  
in the surrealness of an intonation  
I forget  
to breathe  
instead  
I did  
I do  
I am  
alone  
My partner grieves  
and I take care,  
lost  
A body, myself  
in the classroom  
without strength  
I gasp, no words, just  
tears  
An inconsolable seeking  
lays path for  
connection  
myself/ourselves  
teacher and students  
Two months later  
we gather to celebrate the end of the session  
teachers and students  
in the cheerful chatter I hear a voice  
an echoing of meaning  
he stands to speak  
You taught me  
to care  
about myself  
about other people

The young man who laughed about how much he loved bananas  
on the first day of class  
and told us his life's goal was to get stickin' rich  
sobbed  
my life's  
forever changed  
because of you  
And in that moment purpose rang  
I saw the truth of my calling  
a father lost  
a teacher grieving  
all pretense dissolves  
to reveal  
what it just might mean  
to be  
human [14]

When my father in law died suddenly, I felt lost. In him, I had found the father that I had needed. While I grieved with his family I also felt extremely isolated, like I had no right to grieve this man—that this was not my family, not my father, not my place. My partner was out running the morning the phone rang and I had to drive through neighborhoods searching for him, two hours before the second day of the summer class I was teaching. The family was gathering at the house and I told him to go, I would take care of things at home. I was the outsider I thought, I did not want to intrude upon their grieving. Instead, I went to teach my students. Later, he told me they all asked where I was, that they had expected for me to be there. But I was not there, instead I stood—like I had so often stood, alone and disconnected, not knowing where I should be or what I should do. All I could really depend on was that I was expected to teach that morning and so there I was, standing in a classroom trying desperately to breathe through a kind of pain I had never known. I looked at my students, people I barely knew, and allowing myself tears, I told them I could not teach that day, that I had lost someone I loved. It was a special summer, I became the kind of teacher I wanted to be—someone who was authentic and caring, someone who challenged students to see beyond what they had assumed about the world and themselves. At the end of the semester we had a celebration for the students and one tough, young, black man stood up, his voice shaking, "you changed my life," he said, and in that moment I realized I had been blessed with something so few people find in their lives, I had found my purpose. I had not changed his life, but I had created a space that allowed him to reconsider what it meant to be a person in the world. In that place, that moment, I felt like I did belong, that I was exactly where I needed to be, I felt a sense of reciprocity between my needs as a person and my work as a teacher. In that moment, I recognized my work as a professor/scholar, not simply as a career, but an act of love and connection. Despite the power of that moment, the imposter syndrome (SALKULKI & ALEXANDER, 2011) remained, I continued to feel disconnected, like I never quite belonged. What I did not realize at that point, something that even today I admit I struggle with is that

while I loved my students, while I embraced a pedagogy of teaching and research that was grounded in what bell HOOKS (2000, p.10), quoting Scott PECK (1978), notes as the desire and "will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth," somewhere I had forgotten the part about the self. Instead of nurturing, I allowed my own inner monologue of anxiety and self-abasement to carry my thoughts. While there was a feeling of relief when I earned tenure, I still struggled always fearing that somehow one day I might be found out, that someday everyone would recognize the fraud I knew myself to be. "Shamed by feeling they can never let anyone know who they are, they may choose isolation and aloneness for fear of being unmasked" (HOOKS, 2000, p.60). [15]

I watched, within my isolation, as colleagues, mothers themselves seemed so able to manage everything. As I reviewed colleague's dossiers for different performance reviews or for hiring purposes, I saw the course evaluations, the list of publications, the number of committees that were served upon. I listened as they talked about what they were doing with their children. I saw their energy. And, in that space of isolation, I told myself what I was doing, who I was, was not enough.

Subtle serrations  
of the shifty  
characterization of my/self  
wandering with/in attention  
to pause  
to recognize the brilliance in the breeze  
as crocuses gently raise their petals  
toward a sun  
that glistens  
softly across the landscape  
that does not see the self  
a body  
my/self, my body  
stalled  
in preparation  
for the inevitable  
slashes of the violent storm  
across moment  
mind  
and memory  
"Perspective is a function of experience" (BROWN, 2017, p.14). [16]

When I was a child, I spent a great deal of time waiting—waiting and observing, attempting to see a reflection of worth in my caregiver's eyes. There were moments when I knew, that I had worked hard enough, that I have managed to predict and act in the manner necessary to receive commendation, love. Yet there were other moments when my failure as a child, as a person were violently

tangible, as I watched the throbbing disappointment in my mother's eyes or saw my father once again choose fantasy over the needs of his children. I, like Brene BROWN (2017, p.15), "learned how to say the right thing or show up in the right way. I became an expert fitter-in, a chameleon. And a very lonely stranger to myself." I offer this brief glimpse into my childhood, not as a way to dwell or as a means to blame someone else for the anxiety that seems to grip so heavily at times across my sense of self, but rather as a means to offer for myself or another an acknowledgment of origin.

"To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice. We must face the confusion and disappointment that much of what we were taught about the nature of love makes no sense when applied to daily life" (HOOKS, 2000, pp.xxix).

I am Daughter yearning Mother loving, mind churning Teacher listening, loving Writer, artist, scholar seeking, loving [17]
--

My private life and public life are intertwined. My exhaustion, love, anxieties continue to weave themselves across my knowing whether I am engaging in research, teaching or mothering. Carl LEGGO (2008b, p.91) supports this assertion noting that "... the personal and the professional always work together, in tandem, in union, in the way of complementary angles." Within the academy we have been trained to claim, to name, to silence those facets of self that may bring into question the quality of our knowing. As Parker PALMER (1993, p.63) reminds, "... we detach ourselves from the personal," finding safety within the generalities of experience, silencing the possibilities within our stories, our truths. I have spent many years seeking to disrupt that rule, to write using a pedagogy of compassion (DENTON, 2005), becoming vulnerable as a means to establish connection and relationship across the landscape of doing and being with/in teaching and (re)search. Yet often, I forget, instead finding myself caught in the dangerous space of expectation. When I returned to work, after having my daughters, I found myself, once again, caught up in expectation's trap and the image of who, of how I thought I should be. It was in a moment of uncertainty, when I paused for breath, that I once again was able to become present, to acknowledge the shadows dancing across my reflection, when I became aware of the power and implications of my ego (IYENGAR, 2005; MOORE, 2005), an ego both shaped by and shaping a landscape of contradictions and expectation (BUTLER, 2001; DAVIES 1992). Instead of entering into a dialogic space of inquiry and possibility, I found myself seeking affirmation, trapped within the mimetic ruminations of another's perceptions (MARTUSEWICZ, 1997). As I

began to become present within my work—within process I realized it was time to reintroduce the personal and the professional, to acknowledge their tangles of perspective as well as their role along my (re)searching journey. I am a mother, a scholar, a teacher, an artist, a survivor, a partner, a person in recovery, a tenured professor and woman who once was a little girl who never quite fit in and all of these aspects of my identity contribute to my knowing. [18]

#### 4. Ambiguous Uncertainty

As I consider my own scholarly journey, I have come to see that research, in particular a/r/tographical (re)presentations like poetic inquiry, might not be all that different from the experience of being a mother. Gary William RASBERRY (2012, p.245) continues to build upon this notion of inter-relationality between the two, noting:

"Our living and our writing of that living—as well as our writing and our living of that writing—serve to inform and deepen one another. To grasp for yet another connection in this lovely and complex nest of interrelations, I would like to suggest that parenting, embedded as it is in our living, is a form of writing. Parenting and Writing. Writing and Parenting." [19]

Each is a practice of intimacy as we enter into the uncertainty of being in relationship with another. As a researcher, I seek to offer a glimpse of my authentic self while knowing that as Susan DORMER and Bronwyn DAVIES (2001, p.6) suggest, it is that "true self" that is "elusive multiple, and changing, being both the producer and the product of multiple contradictory processes." Within both poetic inquiry and motherhood, I find myself negotiating within definitions while at the same time trying to (re)consider alternate possibilities and ways of being and knowing in and through relationship. Intimacy requires courage, knowing that when we become vulnerable—exposed, truly available to the other, we will not come out unchanged (MAY, 1994). Brene BROWN (2010, p.25) suggests "relationship and connection happen in an indefinable space between people, a space that will never be fully known or understood by us." Motherhood and poetic inquiry, through a/r/tographical process and a poststructuralist lens, might suggest that we embrace this uncertainty, becoming open to the possibilities of what might or might not be. "Being open in the moment means listening intently, simultaneously seeking rationality, acknowledging connections and appreciating the fullness of presence in the present" (SAMESHIMA, 2007, p.35). As I began to write this piece, I found myself silenced by fear, afraid to return to my (re)searching practice, afraid to dwell poetically (IRIGARAY, 2004, p.29) within the uncertainties of being human. Perhaps I was afraid of discovering some truth that confirmed my anxieties, a truth that would confirm that I was a failure, that I was indeed not enough, that I did not belong. Yet as my youngest daughter would call to me, seeking the comfort of my breast, as I held her in my arms, I felt peace and a sense of knowing and connection not only with my daughter, but with something greater than us. In those moments I was able to simply be present.

Breathing  
the nurturing body  
releases  
oxytocin  
endorphins  
of possibility and connection  
mother and child,  
bodies and being  
this moment,  
this breath  
un/fold a glimpse  
of humanity,  
beautiful imperfection  
I pause  
for breath  
to be with/in and upon  
this landscape of  
the un/told  
un/certain  
territory of living  
presently  
no longer a disembodied  
body

"A disembodied mind permits the certainty needed by technical rationalism. To put the body back into the mind is to wreak havoc with certainty. Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one's past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty" (CLANDIDIN & CONNELLY, 2000, p.37). [20]

(Un)certainly can be frightening because it requires us to acknowledge ourselves as (ir)rational—not fully in control, not even perhaps able to define what in fact control might be. However, Sylvia WILSON (2004, p.48) considering the work of David JARDINE (1992), suggests that "It is precisely this uncertainty and ambiguity that holds open a place for new life, for renewal, and for possibility." There are times, as a scholar, teacher and mother that I find myself bound by the irrationality of exactness, seeking image and erasure as I enter into a place of ambiguity and uncertainty. The echoes of history, those stories I tell myself (LEGGO, 2008a), stories of my childhood, my person—my being, stories that may reflect a collective landscape of capitalism and gendering that place me "... as a central agent of pastoral power" (BOLER, 1999, p.70), all of these singe across my consciousness and at times I find myself caught in a state of psychic paralysis. I am unable to step forward, to be present. Instead I remain caught within a web of expectation and prediction, fueled by anxiety. I struggle with the fear of failing my daughters, of not being fully present, not meeting their needs or doing what I am expected to do as a mother. I am afraid that by not doing all that might be right, I may leave my daughters scarred, following in the footsteps of my own mother. Yet I am bound by the tides of the "ideal worker norms, that expect woman to work as though they do not have children" (WARD & WOLF-WENDEL,



2016 p.12); bound by the representations of teacher as mother, the nurturing one who gives all of herself to her students, while also caught up the neoliberal clutches of performance and outcomes, of proof and perfection. More than anything, I want my daughters to know love, to experience the freedom that can exist within unconditional love. Yet even within that desire, there is ambivalence; I find myself caught up in the expectation of achievement, to prove myself as a "responsible woman who care(s) for others" while at the same time recognizing that within such desire exists a certain "loss of self" (DORMER & DAVIES, 2001, p.8). It is within those moments when ambivalence weaves tightly upon my sense of purpose and worth, when the anxiety of exactness catches my breath, that I fear that I will never be able to be present enough to simply relish in the unfolding moment and the possibilities that might exist there.

Do you see  
me  
mamma  
I want  
to play  
dancing in the yard  
amongst the fireflies  
do not forget  
you are  
we are  
enough  
do you see  
mamma  
just come  
play  
be  
and it  
you  
we  
will be  
with us  
mamma  
enough [21]

I find myself resistant, yearning, caught up in a cacophony of perceived needs and desire.-Kelly WARD and Lisa WOLF-WENDEL (2016, p.12) intimate:

"Academic women can find themselves in a bind that stands at the intersection of ideal worker norms that assume a complete focus on work, intensive mothering norms that assume total dedication to family, and societal norms that grant unprecedented access to women in the workplace while limiting what they can achieve if they want to be a professional and a parent." [22]

However, they also suggest that "... as established faculty, the women ... [are] more likely to observe the norms than feel bound by them, as they had in their early careers (p.15). I listened to the emotional discord crowding my consciousness and I still felt bound. I am not early in my career, I have the privilege to not feel bound, to not have perform to someone else's definitions or directions. However, the clutches of my childhood are deep. I remember myself an adolescent, sitting alone at the lunch table listening as my classmates chattered about their expensive new cars, their fancy vacations, the clothes that they stole, about the parties they had been to the weekend before and I knew that I was different. As I watched my classmates, I heard the echoes of my mother's admonishments, "you are selfish, hateful, you will never be enough" and wondered how, amidst all of this bling and appearance of stability, would I ever be recognized as anything other than I was, an outsider. I did not feel worth, but rather saw all the images of what I was—was not or never would be.

Outside the line  
of expense and gesture,  
I wonder  
Is my love  
my teaching  
Enough [23]

In many of my students, I see my former classmates—the carefree, careless and I find myself still the adolescent girl sitting alone at the table, still the child waiting to be acknowledged as worthy by her parents.

"Self-acceptance is hard for many of us. There is a voice inside that is constantly judging, first ourselves and then others. That voice enjoys the indulgence of an endless native critique. Because we have learned to believe negativity is more realistic, it appears more real than any positive voice. Once we begin to replace negative thinking with positive thinking we not only accept and affirm ourselves, we are able to affirm and accept others" (HOOKS, 2000, p 57). [24]

It is within a space of acceptance that I am able to begin to return to the breath, to the awareness that despite the messages we may have received from our society, our families, we are all (im)perfect and it is this (im)perfection that connects us. This is not to say that we or I live within this world as a passive agent. Even in experience I am co-constructing, being written and writing into existence a way of being and being seen in the world, this is the nature of being human, being (im)perfect.

He speaks  
the eager adolescent  
who claims  
anyone can be  
successful  
if they are smart

enough  
work hard  
enough  
I listen within the layers  
as he speaks  
of unfair advantage  
of himself  
a fraud caught up  
in the rhetoric of othering  
by accident I found his name  
a newspaper article  
tells the story  
of drunken assault  
this wealthy boy  
so full  
of bravado  
and shame  
we are not so different  
he and I  
you and I  
we are not  
so  
different  
"the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (PECK, 1978 in HOOKS, 2000, p.10)  
This is the space,  
the place,  
the moment  
of pause  
I am a teacher, a writer, an artist, a daughter,  
a mother [25]

When I become willing to pause, to take the time to simply be present with my daughters and within my work, I begin to recognize that expectation limits the heart of who we are within all our relationships, whether that be motherhood, teaching or scholarly inquiry. When we begin to think in terms of needs of the whole rather than expectations of the many, there is great possibility. As an academic I often find myself caught within predetermined definitions of rightness, as a mother there are other definitions that establish frameworks of success. As a child, I learned there was an intangible formula for success that I could never quite grasp. The messages of who I should be dance heavily upon my consciousness, often leaving little room for simply being present. It can be very easy to disconnect, to find myself caught up in these definitions, judging myself. We live in a world of knowledge and excess, where, as Luce IRIGARAY (2002, p.98) comments, "we know more things but we return less to ourselves in order to examine the meaning of all these things."

Where can I go  
when the baby isn't sleeping  
the light of the computer rages in the living room  
truth  
telling me  
what  
I must do  
assurance of a happy child  
who does not cry  
across the stacks of papers  
there is no time  
amidst the musts  
instead  
my soul might crumble  
beneath the weight  
of knowledge  
and failure recognized [26]

Anna LEMKOW (2005, p.17) suggests, "learning ... is a prolonged journey in consciousness and self-unfoldment." Taking the time to pause, to be with uncertainty—in its fullness and emptiness—allows me to navigate through expectation as I become more aware. As a mother, teacher and scholar, I am imperfect—always growing through experience. I will make mistakes, I may get the papers back later than I anticipated, I may not be able to return a phone call or make dinner, I may snap at my partner or children; there may be moments I find myself forgetting to breath, instead seeking definition and confirmation, and this okay. They may not be things I want to do, but they are the reflections of my own imperfection. I can allow myself to get caught up in the shame of not being enough (BROWN, 2010) or I can practice acceptance—allowing me to reflect and move forward, learning from the experience. If I permit myself that opportunity for growth, acknowledging my own fallibility, I open myself up to far deeper possibilities of meaning and connection across all my relationships, including scholarship, teaching and mothering. [27]

## 5. Poetic Pause

Throughout this piece thus far, I have infused poetry as a way to create space—openings for interpretation and further dialogue. I have struggled with the literal—considering how much of my story to tell, reflecting upon how I might leave space for others to tell their stories, infuse their own interpretations upon the work. I have come to the conclusion that there is no correct answer, poetic inquiry is multi-faceted in the ways in which one might create opportunities for interaction and knowing (PRENDERGAST, 2009). The story of a self is a living story, where, as Renee NORMAN (2001, p.200) asserts, "always there are subtexts and intertexts ... always there are parts of the story we don't know." Throughout this piece I infuse moments of teaching and mothering, intertwining the past with the present as I piece together my evolving sense of myself as one who exists as an

imperfect person, but I also leave space—space for the unsaid, the unknown, the undiscovered. Rather than a teller of the text, I am a traveler upon the text and for me, in this moment, this is exactly as it needs to be. I am an academic on the periphery who sees her research as the work of "disciplined (un)knowing," of "pedagogical possibility ... and praxis" (MacKENZIE, 2010, p.1124) as well as the work of love. I am a mother, a scholar a teacher and poetic inquiry allows me the opportunity to pause, to sit presently with the experiences of these overlapping identities as I enter into loving dialogue with others.

Mother  
Waking  
watching for movement  
a sign of breath  
Breathing  
the body holds  
a prism of perspectives  
antiquated perfectionisms  
I am  
mother who  
sees  
movement  
as I hold  
my own breath  
My daughter breathes  
and I  
might once again  
rest  
until the moment comes  
again  
when in the middle of the night  
I gasp  
Waking  
with a need  
for reassurance  
a need  
for breath  
Scholar  
words folded  
one upon the other  
caught in the violent caresses of anticipation  
expectation  
inquiry  
knowledge reacquainted  
A body/mind  
tangled upon the beckoning page  
in a search  
for answers

across the  
shifty  
shifting space  
of possibility  
incomplete, completeness  
my body sits uncomfortably  
looking at questions  
caught up in answers  
until want is paused  
within the call of time  
and the sun begins to rise  
in that hopeful space  
of acceptance  
a body/mind  
(im)perfect  
Mother/Scholar  
We are not  
so different you and I  
seeking affirmation and familiarity  
within  
outstanding lines  
ripples on the water  
Even in our  
pauses  
the world evolves  
Even in our  
pauses  
our children grow  
knowledge, loving, being  
all become  
something different  
May we walk together you and I  
within  
the ambiguity  
stepping outside appearances  
May we let the air  
move us  
our breath  
guide us  
as we hold our children's hands  
to bask  
to share  
in our (un)knowing [28]

For so long, I have shaped my sense of worth in relationship to teaching, scholarship, mothering and living by the stories I have told myself (LEGGO, 2008a; BROWN, 2017). These stories are neither real nor false, they are a result

of the ways in which I have been positioned, normative expectations of being, grounded in the historical, personal, and societal (BUTLER, 2001, 2006). These messages are often contradictory and cruel, creating a lens of less-thanness; however, they are deeply embedded across my consciousness. I am learning that it is mindfulness and engagement, presence and relationship, not expectation that must shape the work that I do, the life that I lead. Some might argue this perspective discounts the experiences of those who follow expectation out of necessity. This is not my intention, but rather I seek to question how expectation and definition might—might not define my sense of worth, of self, of being. Such a practice implies uncertainty and this, at least for me, can be quite uncomfortable. It requires that I let go of attachment and instead live within a space of temporality and unknowing. John GUINEY YALLOP (2010, p.6) proposes: "We learn to live with change, not certainty, and we learn to trust change." Whether I am considering the work of research or that of being a mother, I see that it is through the embrace of uncertainty that I may begin to be more fully present in my relationships with being and knowing, self and other. [29]

## 6. Untidy Possibilities of Love

Returning to the work of inquiry, I find myself now as a mother, different in the way I engage in the process. The words I write, thoughts I ponder are drenched in the subconscious lines of one who is deeply in love. I identify with Carl LEGGO (2009, p.164) who shares:

"In my poetry I write lovingly, full of love, longing for love, even the long love story that can break the heart, at least the empty hollow of silence that holds it tight and taut in rhythms of noisy, even hallowed, silence." [30]

Between each word I write, I find myself positioned in a place of duality where stories intertwine and the personal and public travel across my consciousness as partners in a careful dance, where everything becomes an act of improvisation and critical awareness, and an act of love.

I find myself  
amidst  
dancing  
across the ambiguous lines  
of chaos and normalcy  
bowing toward  
gratitude and madness  
reaching toward clarity  
with/in  
a kindred dance  
here  
where  
there are no clear answers  
in this space

just love  
tension  
breath  
moving through  
those emotions  
I cannot  
always  
recognize  
those that  
tingle,  
tangle upon consciousness  
distraction and presence  
becoming  
one

"Breathing, in fact, corresponds to the first autonomous gesture of a human living, and it is not possible to be divine without being autonomous with respect to the mother and the father, to the lover, to the child, to the others in general, men and women" (IRIGARAY, 2004 p.165). [31]

Through poetic inquiry, I may once again begin to breathe, entering into a space of being where heart, mind, self, soul and other begin to (re)experience the fluid and felt, tangible and transient, known and unknown aspects of what it means to be human, to be in relationship, what it means to be alive.

Untidy commotion  
waking at midnight  
2, then 3 then 5  
to nourish the babe  
this is not what I expected  
a body welling  
with milk and a sense  
of absence  
selves,  
self-shifting  
mother,  
woman,  
child,  
child  
mother  
woman  
I am  
what I do not know  
This body  
mind  
a void  
ambivalence with/in exhaustion



so filled  
with love [32]

I can recognize that even in the moments of exhaustion, when I have to wake to nurse a teething baby, there is beauty. I can acknowledge the realities of my own frustration and desire for sleep, while knowing at the same time I can fully love the child who wakes me. I am not perfect, I simply am myself and in being myself I am no longer alone (BROWN, 2017). It is this awareness that I must also work to apply as I consider my own scholarship. [33]

Rebecca MARTUSEWICZ (1997, p.102) declares, that we "search for identity, for connection to the world, and for love, and at the same time, we seek transcendence from this imperfect 'humanity,' this essential emptiness of being." We hold our secrets, our imperfection cloaked within the veins of our consciousness until our bodies shudder with the vibration of those words we cannot express. Poetry creates the opportunity to engage with the shudders, to express the words, reaching out toward another who may or may not see our experience in these words.

Across the table  
I speak with (in)tension to my students  
about embracing  
uncertainty  
the possibility of the imperfect gesture  
Hands clenched  
trying to keep myself  
awake  
with the swelling notion of (in)attention  
neither they nor I  
seem quite able  
to grasp  
Instead  
I see the face of my daughter  
myself  
cheeks streaming with tears  
My thoughts awash with ambivalence and want  
I simply cannot  
be  
fully  
present in this space  
and so breathing  
I continue [34]

I used to be a teacher who sought to be completely available to her students. I challenged them to look outside the expectations of others and to find their callings, speak their truths and I believed it. I still believe this; however, the kind of relationship I have with students has changed since I have become a mother. I

do not have the time or energy to be completely available. In fact, there are moments, now, when I even find myself resenting students for their expectations as I yearn for more time to be with my daughters, more time to be with myself. In these moments I see myself as a failure, unable to be mother, teacher, self. Bronwyn DAVIES (1992, p.55) asserts, "[t]he discourses through which the subject position "woman" is constituted are multiple and contradictory. It is a contradiction of knowing, DAVIES continues, "that can debilitate women in a world in which humanistic discourses are hegemonic, dictating that contradictory knowing is flawed knowing" (ibid.). Without taking the time to pause, I find myself caught up in in the contradictions, painfully negotiating across a landscape of ambivalence and expectation. [35]

Elaine RILEY (2002, p.118) reminds us, "this is our life—it is all around us, it comes to us regardless, of times unaware. We do not create it nor do we control it, rather we are it and it is we. We are a part of it." Poetic inquiry allows us to return, to become a part of the experience, and to be mindful across the space of that experience. Each pause, each word, each breath offers a new opportunity to engage, to make sense of the moment through relationship and reinterpretation.

What happens in the waking  
when vocation splits  
across the spatial voids of who we used to be  
and who we are  
when definitions  
become awkward  
and intentions blurred  
with the work of  
being  
alive  
(im)perfect  
human  
How is it that we can  
continue to be  
to do  
when everyone else  
seems  
to have  
the answers  
that ever so softly  
touch  
our mind's palette  
tinting the purity  
of our  
knowing  
when breastmilk turns sour  
with the reflections of another's expectation [36]

Our stories are fluid and discursive, always shaped, always changing, always incomplete (BUTLER, 2001), yet, caught up in the stickiness of expectation, I forget to recognize the possibility of inhabiting—embracing the organic spaces of being; that echo the shapes of knowing and unknowing, ambiguity and ambivalence.

I am learning—  
learning,  
living  
loving,  
negotiating those subtle and sometimes  
violent shifts,  
across the layers of my subjectivity  
body, mind  
living,  
loving,  
—learning, I am, I am not, I know, I know not. [37]

I cannot control, but I can be present. Dwelling within uncertainty, accepting presently, and acknowledging the fluid and often contradictory nature of experience, recognizing that as GREENE (1995, p.26) contends:

"The way things are for our life and body only allows a partial view of things, not the kind of total view we might gain if we were godlike, looking down from the sky. But we only can know as situated beings. We see aspects of objects and people around us; we all live in the kind of incompleteness that Freire identified and there is always more for us to see." [38]

With this awareness, by letting go of my attention to certainty, I can enter a shared landscape of ambivalence praxis, possibility and imagination. [39]

## 7. Living (Re)arrangements

"We are awash in stories" (LEGGO, 2012, pp.xiii) and it is these stories that offer a glimpse into humanity, into our (im)perfect qualities of negotiation and being. Life is painful, shameful, beautiful and contradictory. Poetic inquiry allows us the opportunity to engage with these qualities, to be with/in experience without judgment, but with awareness.

Mother  
Daughter  
Scholar  
Teacher  
Artist  
wait  
You read  
write

Read to me  
for me  
Write with me  
Speak  
See  
Be with me  
So many demands  
of self unfaceted  
echoing across the lines that have begun to etch upon  
my face  
reflections of what  
I used to know  
or so I thought  
I knew  
until love replaced my knowing  
with living  
between those blurred lines  
of being  
many [40]

As humans we seek relationship, "we yearn for love—we seek it—even when we lack hope that it can really be found" (HOOKS, 2000, pp.xvii). My reflection has changed, grey hair is beginning to replace the bright strands of my youth, but still the desire for connection, for love, for acceptance remains, the desire to know and be known remains. And so I return, mother, daughter, teacher, artist, scholar—to poetry to make sense and (re)connect with experience, with self and with other, aware that the story is not my own but a part of a greater story of living and knowing, of (re)searching what it means to be human. Poetic inquiry creates the space to reach out and inward, to deepen relationships as we engage with the echoes and intersections of the discursive facets of sel(f)ves. It is these moments of engagement that create the opportunity for dialogue and the (re)arrangement of possibility and knowing. [41]

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