Examining Scholarly Identity Through Auto-Fiction: A Court Jester's Tale

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Abstract

This auto-fictitious narrative is an existential and political exploration of scholarly identity transformation of a teacher educator in academia. Set within a parallel, metaphorical kingdom, identity is examined through the author's actions, interactions and experiences with others in a fictional setting. Narratives, in storytelling formats, establish agency of self and provide "voice" to be freely expressed, most notably for those who experience marginalization where their thoughts and ideas have been mitigated within traditional institutional environments and dialogues. Expressed in a humorous, somewhat deliberately mischievous manner, the polyphonic self in this story reflects on relational power and academic identity within the university environment. This descriptive piece adds discussion to existing organizational research through presentation of a fictional piece for examining how one may self-construct identity within a hegemonic work setting.

Introduction

Throughout my academic career as a teacher educator, my scholarly identity has been impacted by myriad challenging experiences. For me, entry to academia has been an enculturation process; a "rite of passage" set by academic elite, where quick and proficient acquisition of institutionally-set standards was expected and required. Encounters with often obscure but paradoxically "in your face" norms generated feelings of uncertainty, dissonance, and questions of "fit" as an academic. This state of being spurred reactive adoption of adaptive or novel strategies when faced with institutional confusion or ideological dilemmas (Craig, 2010). Within this academic culture, professional successes and collegiate affirmations have occurred as well, but as a scholar I continue to feel as an outsider, interloper or imposter, never quite accepted within conventional research standards, some of which counter my own educational ideology (Richardson, 1997), values of practical teacher knowledge (Clandinin, 1985), and unique professional signature of work (Barone, 2007). In this narrative, scholarly identity is framed as a psychosocial construct (Erickson, 1994; Marcia, 2002; McAdams, 2001), one internalized by social interactions (Thorne, 2004) and strengthened through situated agency. Through auto-fiction, my perception of professional identity as "otherness" in an academic milieu is existentially and

politically explored and expressed (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pals, 2006; Potgieter & Smit, 2009; Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

This narrative is existential because of the intimacy of personal meaning-making through an auto-ethnographic, albeit, fictitious method. Written as a performative and evocative piece, the *self* of the narrative is situated within a complex institutional network of a socially-constructed hierarchy (Langellier, 1999; Richardson, 1997; Spry, 2001). Performative narrative is an agential and dynamic process where dramatization is more communicative than presentation of referential content alone (Josephs, 2008). Through performance, questions rather than answers emerge with deliberate provocation of critical, multi-vocal thinking, views and dialogue about both content and method. Here is where the political surfaces as academia is posed as the cultural landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) in which I examine "otherness" as an educator/researcher on the margins of insider/outsider membership status (Hayano, 1979; Huber & Whelan, 1999). Politics as a focus of inquiry stir an inner drama within a researcher. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2007) share "Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does" (p. 13). What I *do* through the performative auto-fictitious narrative is playful, non-traditional, and an emphatically transgressive act. Fringing on the borders of scholarship, this type of subtly-unruly writing demonstrates my current self-image in academia, as a congenial heretic.

Literature Perspectives

Aesthetics of Storytelling

Over the years, qualitative researchers have acknowledged the value of aesthetics in research and exhorted use of experimental writing formats (such as narrative, storytelling and fiction) (Barone; 2007; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Boje, 2001; Ceglowski, 1997; Coulter, 2009; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Denzin, 2000; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1993; Eisner & Powell, 2002; Leggo, 2005; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2003). Additionally, Clandinin and Huber (2002) note that "experience, understood narratively, has both artistic and aesthetic dimensions" (p. 162); therefore, use of a narrative, metaphorical story line helps with my expression and examination of professional life episodes. But, to be engaged in an artistic process requires "a certain quality of attentiveness and emotion" (Eisner & Powell, 2002, p. 133). And, if a story is aesthetically powerful, it would be "riddled with uncertainties, marked by surprise, motivated by the satisfactions of discovery, supportive of innovation, and prized for the experience it makes possible" (Eisner & Powell, 2002, p. 134). For me, use of a make-believe story line provides a safe *other world* in which to explore the unknown or foreboding challenges as well as new identity borders to be discovered. Narrative, specifically, subjective auto-fictitious storytelling, grants leverage (and distance) to critically reflect, examine, and re-imagine (i.e., self-create) my scholarly identity through an active, agential, navigational process where power forces are resisted, contested and potentially collapsed (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Gabriel, 2000).

Scholarly Identity

Individuals "are motivated to learn and to change by their continual need to belong, matter, control, master, renew, and take stock" (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988, p. 58). These motivations impact scholarly identity and influence professional choices, decisions, actions, and interactions with others (Tennant, 2005). Identity formation, most notably a transformative one, requires reflection and observation within one's own environment, where an "individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves" (Erikson, 1994, p. 22). Identity development is cultivated by social interactions with others, continually evolving within a complex and mutable milieu (Archer, 2008; Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Churchman & King, 2009; Marcia, 2002; Pals, 2006; Potgieter & Smit, 2009; Smith & Sparkes, 2008); therefore, identity is an ongoing negotiation process within one's environment (Humle, 2014). My identity-forming journey as an academic has been saddled with challenges that are expressed and scrutinized through auto-fictitious narrative.

Problematized Constructs

Through this fictionalized story, I attempt to problematize the following two over-arching constructs that impact my scholarly identity; specifically regarding perceptions of marginalization: "otherness" (organizational acceptance and status) and gender. My perceptions of "otherness" are historical challenges that I have faced throughout my life journey; in hindsight, these experiences have proven to serve as transformational catalysts. Ironically, fictionalizing the story has aided me in de-mythicizing my experiences as I have had to reflect critically and creatively. Problematizing my experiences in a fictional setting generated a significant contrasting background to my everyday experiences and

stimulated new, unique viewpoints and insights to emerge; which enhances my consciousness and provides different angles from which to reflect and take action.

Baggage Carried on my Journey

I have a history of marginalized identity regarding education and "otherness" as I come for a lower socio-economic and under-educated background. I am a first-generation high school graduate. English was a second language for my French Canadian mother who acquired a 7th grade education. Her father was illiterate, having no formal education. Her mother received sporadic formal education up to second grade but managed to teach herself how to read and write. My father, of East European immigrant roots, acquired an eighth grade education before being recruited as a teenager into the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and later the military. To him, these were better options than a life in the coal mines of Pittsburgh. After 20 years of military service, he took a janitorial position in the school district of which I attended. My mother joined him and they operated as a custodial team. I was known in school as the "janitors' daughter." Although I always believed I was smart enough to go to college (peers and teachers recognized this as well), I never felt good enough. Non-standard, broken English used at home was corrected and not accepted in school. I had to acquire language code-shifting skills to survive, but through this process internalized a belief that college was for children of higher economic families like those of doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Plus, upon graduation from high school, I was financially on my own.

So, my hope for acquiring a college education was through the G. I. Bill; thus, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. This was a practical, means-to-an-end opportunity; albeit, deal with the devil. To say the least, navigating through this male-dominated militant society helped me acquire additional survival skills as evidenced through multiple meritorious promotions. By my second year of enlistment I was the youngest, shortest Sergeant in the Marine Corps (20 years old) and the following year selected for an Enlisted Commissioning Program. But, challenges regarding gender were extensive and I was told over and over again, as a 5'2" female, I did not "look like a Marine." During my military service, I took college classes part-time, but did not complete my Bachelor's degree until several years after serving a four-year military stint. Not a traditional college student by any means, I always felt *behind the pack*. It is not clear if the baggage of a lower social stigma carried throughout my life developed skills that made me stronger, more able to bridge social, economic, and gender borders and margins (Bauer & McAdams, 2004), but it definitely impacted my identity in adulthood, world views and sense of agency (Lubrano, 2003; Richardson, 2005). These embodied experiences required that cognitive, reflective muscles be flexed in development of social agency within potentially hostile, non-supportive contexts and environments (McAdams, 1993). And although other academic degrees and challenges were pursued, mastered, and provided some level of scholarly efficacy; remnant thoughts remained of my lack of pedigree required for entry as an academic into the insider's circle of higher education.

Mode of Inquiry

Narrative

"Let the stories be told, they can say what they want" (Ocasek, 1978).

Narrative writing is a fundamental means for individuals to make sense of experiences; most notably, ones that challenge existing or shifting perceptions of *self* (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Bruner, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative situated stories of *self*, support identity development (Boje, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kligyte, 2011; McAdams, 1996; McLean et al., 2007; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2008), which as an agentive process could counter stifling subjugation of *self* within discursive and performativity regimes (Craig, 2010; Lyons, 2007; Potgieter & Smit, 2009).

Auto-ethnography, as a narrative story-telling writing practice, privileges *self* within a larger social, cultural or political context (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2007). This narrative writing process provides voice to individuals who perceive or experience marginalization in other discourses or hegemonic pressures that control individuals to conform, defer or concede to institutional powers and norms (Brown & Humphreys, 2006). Utilized as a tool to critically examine and question one's life experiences, narrative writing has historically served as a valid method for unearthing unexamined assumptions and identifying transformative aspects of professional identity (Coia & Taylor, 2005; Coulter & Smith, 2009; McLean et al., 2007; Richardson, 1997). Authors are therefore provided liberty to examine socio-cultural refractions within one's own sense of identity. Additionally, auto-ethnographic writing easily lends itself to aesthetic

expression through incorporation of other literary forms, elements, styles, and genres, including fiction (Barone, 2007; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hamilton et al., 2007). Through auto-ethnographic narrative, writers freely *say what they want* without restrictions, a process not often experienced within other academic forms of writing.

Auto-Fiction

"If the illusion is real, let them give you a ride. If they got thunder appeal, let them be on your side" (Ocasek, 1978).

Auto-fiction functions as a heuristic frame in this paper, where my auto-ethnographic narrative is fictionalized as traditional folklore within a metaphorical kingdom. Folklore as a writing genre carries with it universally understood structure, traditions of culture, and common literary elements that help globalize the story, potentially broadening connections with the audience. It also allows for use of metaphors deeply rooted in our daily experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As narrative writing, auto-fiction is oxymoronic where authors meld perceptions of experience as subjective truth and reality with fictitious story-telling (Gabriel, 1991). Bias is unabashedly claimed in this auto-fictitious story, perhaps adding a more authentic or profound element of truthfulness absent from other forms of scientific research that strive to highlight objectivity as proof of truth in findings. Admittedly, multiple methodological issues and epistemological skepticisms arise, most significantly validity (Polkinghorne, 2007), but more importantly, an effective story should "ring true and enable connection" with the reader (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 16). Some scholars claim the contradiction of truthfulness within the story is less important than power issues explored (Barone, 2007; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Denzin, 2000; Doyle, 1997), that multiple truths exist (Eisner & Powell, 2002), "that narrative truth is pragmatic truth" (Bochner, 2001, p. 154), that it should incite imaginings, problematize for meaningfulness, and heighten reality (Barone, 2001), and that truth "is true to experience in the sense that experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality saturated with the possibilities of meaning" (p. 154).

Perhaps then a fictitious narrative can be presented as "artfully ambiguous and socially conscientious" "for purposes of political enlightenment" (Barone, 2007, p. 458). Perhaps there is justification in exploring the political and performative aspects of narrative as research with less emphasis on epistemological soundness. Perhaps truth is no stranger to fiction. Perhaps it depends on the story. Perhaps. But alternatively, perhaps fictitious writing as a form of knowledge insults some scholars' views of research integrity; that it is tainted, taboo, and rejected as academic porn to be shunned by all serious research purists within a scholarly society. I understand these views, but yet again, here is where I find myself outside the margins of traditional research and scholarship. Auto-fiction has helped me describe and make sense of the complexity of my experiences and development as a scholar in a manner that could not be accomplished through traditional reporting. More importantly, the writing has been redemptive, liberating, an emancipatory and cathartic process. I thoroughly enjoy and embrace fiction writing as my salvation; whereby, it allows for a broader exploration of the affective dimension of my experiences within academia. Unfortunately, I am equally plagued with concern that my confessional of pleasure and reward in fictitious writing potentially brands me a scholarly strumpet of disrepute. Conversely, perhaps readers (and "others") can gain insight to experiences of marginalization through the tale, as all folktales have embedded lessons to be learned.

Contribution to Organizational Research on Identity

Since organizational research on "identity studies are moving away from seeing identity as unitary and monolithic" and increasingly moving towards "conceptualizing it as a complex and dynamic phenomenon" (Belova, 2010, p. 68), a self-exploratory, auto-fictitious narrative can provide a dynamic, texturized view of perceived marginalization and its bearing on identity formation. Storytelling is emotive and exhibits more than content alone, which would offer a direct contrast to realistic stories and could potentially shed greater insight on experiences of oppression and social marginalization through the presentational style (Baruch, 2009); thereby, adding to current research on organizational identity. Additionally, inclusion of discursive approaches such as narrative and story-telling as a unit of analysis presents the polyphonic, pluralistic and fragmented nature of individual identity (Bakhtin, 1981; Belova, 2010; Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000) and demonstrates the evolving, overlapping and competing views that are constructed through one's contestation and experiences navigating through an organization as a meaning-making process in forming identity (Belova, 2010; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Lastly, a fictional, self-exploratory narrative can allow for novel examination

of the "relationship between the different facets of identity, and ways in which these facets/sources refract within an individual narrative" (Belova, 2010, p. 69).

Why did the Researcher Cross the Road?

Stories may be told by an individual, but are always compilations of multiple voices or co-authorship of others who are a part of that individual, since we all see ourselves through others' eyes (Erickson, 1994; Humle, 2014; Marcia, 2002; McAdams, 2001; Thorne, 2004). The nature of stories seeks to resonate connections with others. My story primarily counters how others may view my "otherness" as a qualitative researcher as ill-informed through the very genre writing and scholarship they marginalize. Through the story, I attempt to excise the defining borders and limits of my academic identity as I perceive others perceive me. On some level this story was an act of satirical deconstruction of existing power (Alvesson & Willmont, 2002; Dwyer, 1991), on another level it was a coping device to deal with incongruity (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Kahn, 1989; Linstead, 1983; McClane & Singer, 1991) and provide a way to self- or re-construct my identity and image within, as well as beyond, the organizational structure and norms. More than a story, this is my professional statement imbued with obvious polemic tension as I *seriously* attempt to refract prevailing views through humor. This story invites readers to *cross the road* with me and interpret their own punchlines.

Background

Origin of the Story

I began writing *The Never-Ending Journey of Transformation* soon after completing my dissertation, adding to it over the years as I traversed the academic landscape. It has been cathartic for exploring my professional "otherness" in higher education and purging anxieties experienced within an academic culture; most notably regarding perceptions of my transitioning and transformational self in academia (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Previously, I did not recognize the writing as auto-ethnography; rather, it was more of an emancipatory, personal meaning-*making* process that freed up emotions which muddled my thinking and focus (McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi, 2003). In retrospect, emersion of a medieval folklore genre lush with motifs of powerful Kings and the aristocracy of a monarchy served as a perfect pastiche for my perceived self-concept as the *not so fairest* of them all in a parallel hierarchical context imparted through the social, cultural, and political dimensions of academia (McAdams, 1993). This was and still is my "generative metaphor" for exploring the hurdles and challenges of professional identity and practice (Schön, 1983). In writing the story, it was aesthetically rewarding to play with words and create tropes (e.g., *Boracle* as a combination of "boring" and "oracle" to represent "Scientific Knowledge"), generate metaphors (e.g., *Gypsy Spirit* as "Progressive Thinker"), impose double meanings and double entendre (e.g., simultaneous connotation of *Rank* as "stench" and "position"), liberally apply cleverly deliberate malapropisms (e.g., *NewSense* for "nuisance"), borrow from historical stories (e.g., *Tower of Babble* and *A Sop's Foibles* for "Aesop's Fables") and morph existing terms into parallel humorous symbols (e.g., "Quantitative Researchers" as *Counts of Statistics*) (See Appendix A – Translation of Motifs). Folklore as parody sanctioned the transparently distinct ethnographic tone for critique in the story and eased entry for an oppositional counterstory (See Linde, 2009). The folklore genre also allowed use of bungling protagonists as comedic heroes, who could succeed through less conventional ways that involved happenstance, sacrifice or sometimes serendipitous mistakes (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Personas

"Let the good times roll, let them knock you around. Let the good times roll, let them make
you a clown" (Ocasek, 1978).

There are two distinct personas presented in the story that help creatively provide dimension in the narrative (Archer, 2003; McLean & Fournier, 2008) and infuse a transparent polyphonic element through these dialogical characters of "self" (Bakhtin, 1981). The story-teller, a court jester, *Nimble NewSense*, represents my alter ego, the "I" and *subjective voice* of the story. In this auto-fiction narrative, *Nimble NewSense* tells the story of a maiden's journey as she traverses the land of academia. Therefore, the second persona is the maiden who undergoes multiple transformations from *Trainer of Youths* (teacher) to *Artisan of the Village* (teacher educator) to *Princess of Inquiry* (Assistant Professor) and later *Empress In-Press* (Associate Professor). The maiden, also known as *Princess of Inquiry* throughout most of the story, is the "me" and *objective voice* of the story. These dual (and sometimes "dueling") voices demonstrate psychological complexity of

identity formation, as my own "plurality of consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1981), and provides a dialectical process through their dialogic relationship. According to Shumack (2010), within narrative "The active use of the subject *self* and object *self* as actors establishes a space for internal conversation that is creative and potentially transformative" (p. 18). The characters in the story provide representation of different perspectives of a holistic *self* and allow for dialogic interplay of those differing voices as perhaps *hybrid utterances* of the author and refraction of views (Bakhtin, 1981).

Court jester. Jesters historically served as comic relief to amuse under dire circumstances. They possessed unique power in their ability to provide bad news to a King when no one else would dare to do so. Through ingenuity, they could soften a blow, deflect negative interpretation, disarm defenses through frivolity, or defuse tense circumstances during social interactions. Also, they were granted license (without penalty) to mock or criticize others within a royal household. In fact, candor was rewarded over caution of the tongue. Levity used in their antics inferred that judgment was not passed; therefore, they were perceived as non-threatening. Ironically, through their clever buffoonery, truisms emerged transparent. Noted for their wit, jesters enjoyed a privately understood privileged status, commonly viewed as being perceptive and divinely inspired; often serving as advisor to the most prominent (Ott, 2001) although without public recognition. Through whimsy, they could question power; freely speaking truths through riddles, humor, or parody. Somewhat detached from the rest of the noble court, a jester was an ideal archetype for serving as the King's confidant and counselor as they possessed common sense and honesty. As a shrewd champion of pluralism, a jester could brandish influence on others' thinking through thinly veiled satire.

So, the "I" of the story, my private agential *self* that presents emotional nuance and intuition, is *Nimble NewSense*, a humorous, bawdy, and playful jester who experiences or dodges little to no perceived societal repercussions (i.e., from academia) in telling the story and stirring up controversy (sometimes through low-brow language). It is my attempt to amuse and critique, to loosen academic shackles through a perceived palatable approach for critical dialogue, i.e., humor, and perhaps to gain entry into the royal academic circle (if only as a "fool").

Maiden. The story told is of a maiden who undergoes multiple scholarly transformations. Her journey is my journey within a metaphorical, alternate universe. She values practical knowledge. She seeks worthy challenges. She hopes to positively contribute to her world. She supports pluralistic communities. She is a creative, hard-working problem-solver, and operates within social norms, but outside conventional parameters (i.e., she may bend rules, but not break them). She is also presented with many challenges on her journey for establishing credibility within the kingdom. The maiden is the "me" of the story, my public, rational, objective *self*.

Both the court jester and the maiden personas are comedic heroes (on different levels) and they represent two facets of *self* in this auto-fiction. Also like me, they possess no prior privilege or pedigree for entry to the *Royal Court*. Additionally, both personas in this narrative empower characteristics I value and demonstrate dispositions I possess (McAdams, Anyidoho, Brown, Huang, Kaplan, & Machado, 2004). Like *NewSense*, I often deflect tough issues through humor; it is my *modus operandi* for addressing challenges or confrontations. This hardy disposition ensures that I get things done and that I can be counted on for delivery of tough assignments and/or interacting with difficult personalities. Through my comedic, playful mannerism I am also viewed as non-threatening, non-power seeking, often underestimated, detached from any power, but positioned in the *court* for use at the arbitrary discretion of the *King* or other royals of power that I serve. Similar to the Maiden, aka *Princess of Inquiry*, I am reliable and fair, although at times gullible and slow to perceive others' true intentions during interactions.

Disclaimer. It is important to note here that all other characters besides the Maiden and Court Jester do not directly represent any one individual, in any one institution. Characters are fictitious compilations of personalities and/or representation of social power constructs experienced in academia.

Story Design

There are four sequential Acts of the story. Each one presents distinctly different writing styles which loosely parallel two of Schön's modes of reflection (1983). Act I, *A Court Jester's Tale*, is written as reflection-on-action where *Nimble NewSense* tells the story in a traditional folklore storytelling style, as an external observer. This Act presents historical context of the story which dually serves as a preamble to the other Acts.

Act II, *A Sop's Foibles*, is written as reflection-on-practice and presents a conversation with *self* where the *Princess of Inquiry* (the "me" of the story) dialogues with *Nimble NewSense* (the "I" of the story) about her past choices and future actions to be taken regarding life aspirations (i.e., a metaphorical subtext for acquiring tenure). This internal monologue of the "I" and "me" of the story (conversation with s*elf*) helps the writer "expand horizons and perspectives" during a

reflective process of situating *self* for gaining a sense of agency through examination of deeds and measures taken to ensure successful outcomes of professional goals (Shumack, 2010, p. 1). Additionally, it allows a negotiated space for shared understandings between differing perspectives of objective, rational *self* points of knowledge, and subjective, intuitive *self* views of understanding.

The conversation presents opportunity for differing modes of thinking to deliberate discussion and reflection as a transformative learning process for taking strategic action. This discussion with *self* is a dialectic process in which the "I" (self-doubts) attempts to refocus the "me" (pragmatic choices) on reflexively monitoring and selecting actions that are of genuine importance (self-principles). In this second Act, *NewSense's* authentic voice as a character in the story rather than storyteller, presents a quirky panache that is manifested in rhymes, several of which are multilingual quips (sometimes crass, lower-level jabs; which intentionally attempt to dismantle language norms) but all of which question underlying assumptions of reality and challenge the princess' naiveté. Although not initially deliberate, in hindsight I believe as the subjective "I" of the story, this character's voice manifested true to my own sense of *self*, values of humor, and pluralistic, multi-vocal perspectives; thus, silly rhymes in English, Spanish, German, and French are intermingled throughout the dialogue (Gee, 1989; Heath, 1983). Or, subconsciously, this was a way to add texture to the story and present another layer of language for enhancing polyphony within the narrative (Bakhtin, 1981). An additional note, *NewSense's* character is androgynous, but readers may infer a specific gender since jesters were historically male.

In Act III, *Emperor's Old Armour: The Naked Truth,* both the "I" (*NewSense*) and the newly transformed "me" (*Empress In-Press*) conduct dialogue with "others" including *King ChaChing* who represents conventional (often unquestioned) values and perspectives of academia and *Queen Quagmire* who symbolizes oppression experienced in hierarchies of power. This third Act accesses and utilizes both reflection-on-action and reflection-on-practice thinking processes; exploring the shifting identity of *self* through recent acquisition of tenure (i.e., this is signified by appointment as a member of the *Royal Court* by *King ChaChing*).

Dialogue of characters revolves around emerging conundrums regarding new insider values and perspectives of the *Empress In-Press* which differ from existing systemic dogma touted by the *Royal Court*. Existential questions are explored regarding perceptions of a pseudo-identity as an insider, *self* as an academic agent within a climate of domination and standardization, and how future actions can be enacted that retain fidelity to one's own views of scholarship.

Act IV, *Turning of the Screw*, is an incomplete Act (deliberately contradictory to reflection-on-action decision-making processes) as *Empress In-Press* continues goal pursuits, but faces new covert, invisible powers (i.e., *The Maskateers*) that suppress her actions, initiatives and goals. No resolution occurs or is envisioned and although the journey continues, the destination is uncertain.

Writing the story provided a spirted, creatively meaningful, and insightful process for identifying truth claims about *self*, which anchor and ground my identity as a scholar, researcher, and academic.

The Never-Ending Journey of Transformation

Admittedly, the story itself as a stand-alone is rather trite, which potentially limits it as a performative piece in stimulating analytical discussion with an audience of research scholars. I reiterate here that the piece was originally written as reflective learning and exploration of my shifting scholarly identity through narrative (for *self* rather than an academic audience). But, through the tale and the characters' experiences, readers may interpret meaning about issues of marginalization and oppression within one's own organizational structure; thereby, extending and enhancing one's understanding of power and how hierarchy operates in institutions. It is suggested that readers refer to Appendix A – Translation of Motifs throughout the reading of the story so that metaphorical representations can be more fully understood and internalized.

So, without further ado in setting the allegorical stage, as the curtain opens *Nimble NewSense* steps out and reads from a scroll…

Act I – A Court Jester's Tale

Once upon a time, in a not so distant Kingdom, a young determined maiden pursued her quest for knowledge to shape and hone her skills as a Trainer of Youths to an Artisan of the Village. One of the final feats of the quest involved completing a task set forth by a wise man some villagers hailed a Wizard. The task – justify the Chronicles of the Learned. The maiden was distraught…the Chronicles were plagued with alien markings, cryptic messages, foreign numbers, and charts. They were difficult to decipher and appeared unrelated to any real life experiences and issues for training the

youths of the village. The maiden realized that the Chronicles of the Learned spoke to only a small sect of people – the leaders of the many provinces – Kings, Rulers, Giants, Barons, Sultans, and Emperors who resided in the collegial circle of the Ivory Tower which was steadfastly guarded by the Dragon of Research. Revered as a Boracle of the Land, The Dragon of Research spewed Prophecies to which the Kings, Rulers, Giants, Barons, Sultans, and Emperors resolutely followed and obeyed. In her eyes, the Dragon of Research appeared to be "dragon" down the learning progress for the Artisans of the Village and she believed the Prophecies to be skewed, limited, and faulty. Alas, the challenge of justifying the Chronicles of the Learned seemed an insurmountable task, but…not without hope.

The clever maiden, with a bold gypsy spirit <tambourine shakes>, devised a mission: infiltrate the forces of the Ivory Tower, assume identity as a Royal member and slay the Dragon of Research by breathing Fresh Air into its lungs (although the thought of performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the dragon caused the maiden to gag and recoil). The maiden hoped that through her efforts, fire expressed through the Dragon's breath would be transformed. The Royals of the Ivory Tower could then intuitively reinterpret the Chronicles of the Learned with foresights translated into messages understood and relevant to all the people of the Land.

Many, many, many, many, many years passed as the maiden prepared and toiled to undertake this feat. She sought out Sages of the Land and offered to serve as their apprentice in exchange for help interpreting the Chronicles and supporting her vision of translating the Chronicles' messages for the betterment of all. The maiden believed she could accomplish all of this by tricking the Kings, Rulers, Giants, Barons, Sultans, and Emperors with a temporary transformation, acquiring a façade as Princess of Inquiry so that she may join their royal ranks only long enough to slay the Dragon of Research and complete her task. You see, the maiden's identity as a Trainer of Youths and Artisan of the Village was strongly embedded in the core of her very being and even more valuable to her than the quest itself. Little did she know that a transformation, even a temporary and calculated one, would leave residual effects and stimulate new, unexpected passion for uncharted, never before imagined learning pursuits…and, a destiny yet to be determined.

The maiden arduously recorded the journey in completing her quest (hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages). Her story to be revealed is neither myth, nor fable, nor fairy tale, although a hope exists of it being legendary someday. The vision expressed in her sacred writings has been safely stored and can be shared in a crystal ball or her magic mirror.

Ah, but more years pass and the maiden, now Princess of Inquiry, finds herself thinking, "perhaps the transformation wasn't strong enough…the Dragon of Research has not been slain, only marginally subdued and the Royals of the Ivory Tower continue to bear allegiance to the castle gatekeepers, mostly Knights of Knowledge, Dukes of Degrees, Ogres of Authority, and Counts of Statistics." An identity as Princess of Inquiry in this Kingdom's Ivory Tower just does not possess nor wield the same sharp shiny sword that is heralded by the Royals' Court. The transformative quest of years ago now presents a larger, even more daunting and looming challenge to the Princess as she finds herself catapulted into the Dungeon of Tenure… [Dunt, dunt, daaaa!]…an oubliette viler and more life defining than the initial transformative travails that brought her to this venture (yet, viewed as a venerable victory if one survives). "Oh bullocks!" exclaimed the Princess, "What do I do now?"

Through happenstance, the Princess stumbles into an Enchanted Chamber, a sanctuary of sharing where genuine scholarship occurs through exchanges of knowledge amongst other imprisoned Crusaders of Inquiry as they covertly joined in counsel to discuss and generate strategies for defending their honor and principles against Shrewd Shrews and Tyrannizing Trolls, rallying support from the Merry Men & Women of the village, collectively strengthening their positions to survive the imminent judgment of their deeds, and acquiring protective Suits of Armour. Yet prophecy reveals, even in a benevolent Kingdom, no humble beseeching of mercy saves anyone. An ultimate fate awaits the Princess in her next quest as she must now navigate through… [Dunt, dunt, daaaa!]...the Bog of Perpetual Rank!!!

Act II – A Sop's Foibles

Many years of service to the Court has left the Princess weary. In confidential conversation, her past deeds are summarized as futile through an admonishment by Nimble NewSense, the Court Jester.

NewSense: Princess, allegiance to thee I profess and therefore must share this prophetic distress…

You have: Dredged the moat,

> Fed the goat.

> Sang for the King,

> Danced with the Sultan of Swing.

Brandished your bow,

Fought many a foe.

Served on countless courts,

Sailed to too many ports! <sighs *emphatically*>

You have: Rallied support from local villagers,

Deflected offenses from invading pillagers.

Trained many youths,

Polished the Duke's boots.

Coddled the Queen,

In a disastrous court scene!

Dragons you have slayed,

but rarely have you played.

You have: lead Artisans to glory,

But that became someone else's story.

Kissed the King's ring <then whispers>

'Besides other things.'

Heralded as the people's friendly leader,

Yet, so far, gained a mere meter….

In your quest towards your goal.

Please now, let the good times roll.

For, scaling the ivory tower,

will never gain you royal power.

Remember, Cyclops, your nemesis,

will always be on the premises.

And, it will take more than one blow,

to defeat that ominous foe!

As Hera to my Seuss,

You must now stop this ruse.

Soooo, since jousting is much more taxing than relaxing.

And playing is much more appealing than slaying!

Do not ration your passion!

I decree, Ándale, Ándale,

Let's go play!

Princess: <busy shuffling items, completely ignores rantings> NewSense, I must don my armour but it is bulky and awkward to handle, will you please help?

NewSense: Princess that is work you must shirk. After removing, so much time is spent to polish…wasted time is something you must abolish.

Princess: Nimble one, I must prove myself competent in serving the court by slaying more dragons or any other foe that challenges me as I traverse through the Bog of Perpetual Rank. A Suit of Armour will protect me and present an image of strength.

NewSense: But Suits of Armour make Princesses look silly, to add, your ass is surely no young filly!

Princess <looks alarmed and snaps back>: My steed is seasoned and loyal! And, what do you mean I look silly?

NewSense: <eyeing her outfit> Well, for one, how can you defeat a beast when you are defiantly missing the codpiece?!?

Princess: <in a retorting fashion> Nonsense NewSense, since when is this feature necessary for battle? Besides, there is no honor in fighting below the belt!

NewSense: Ah, but it is common practice for Ogres, not to mention Trolls. Do not delude yourself Princess; these actions will not help you reach your goals! And have you forgot? The queen effortlessly creates calamity in a chamber pot!   Always directed at you, since you fail to hew!

Princess: But this journey through the bog is about individual fortitude, prowess, and intellect! I possess these traits!

NewSense: Arguably, your skills are Wunderbar, but your status is still not up to par. More like me <whispers "nimble, not noble">, than you care to see. Your bloodline is not pure, evil rivals sense this difference, for sure!

Princess: Perhaps in addition to my "armour" to show strength, I could utilize a form of "amour?"

NewSense: <knits brow contemplatively> Feminine guiles have proven productive in gaining favor and status in the Court and keeping one out of the dungeon, but I have heard later on Courtesans are usually bludgeoned.

Princess: No, no, NO, NewSense, I speak of demonstrating "intellectual passion" for casting a spell on Royals that is binding. Surely they share my same fervor for ensuring the quality of villagers' learning and envision this hopeful goal as progressive in improving the Kingdom for all.

NewSense: Qui, Oui, je suis d'accord, let's hear more!!!

Princess: My love for learning and teaching is paramount, so this will be my platform for action as it has been my quest from the outset of this journey.

NewSense: To put your mind to rest, if I may suggest…to charm, you must never harm. That means if you hear Royal scuttlebutt, you must keep your mouth shut. For when it comes to the Court, one must never openly retort. Members that are mere minions are not allowed original opinions. Those positions are reserved for the Royal sort. And, if you step on their toes, you will surely experience retaliatory blows! And remember, do not blunder by stealing someone else's thunder. Power is protected, underlings neglected. With aristocrats of the Court, you have no allegiance or marriage; therefore, in troubling times, you will be the first to be thrown under the Royal carriage.

The Princess pondered NewSense's insight. She had not previously considered the complexity of underlying power, the jockeying for positions and embedded dominance of some Royals. As she more acutely listened to his warnings, it became clearer that to succeed she must shed some naïve views regarding her quest for rank amongst Royalists. Her vision was not shared by all Royals, as others sought distinctly different endeavors through alternate processes than her own. From this point forward, the Princess treaded carefully amongst court members, remaining affable and unflappable in their company, but tempering her candor with novice diplomacy as she gained a greater sense of the un-level playing field.

Newsense: <facing audience in closing soliloquy>

The maiden continued to present her best.

When challenged, she countered with jest.

Although never invited to the ball,

And felt not the fairest of all,

Triumphantly, she is now Empress In-Press.

Act III – Emperor's Old Armour: The Naked Truth

The Land was in strife. In this particular Kingdom especially so! Knights in Shining Armour and Ladies of Virtue exited in droves as Tax Collectors, sanctioned by King ChaChing, ran rampant. Shrewd Shrews and Tyrannizing Trolls

scourged the land bringing devastation to hopeful progress. Cyclops had free reign across the countryside where new crops were cultivated. Alas, crops were so heavily laden in Manure (of which the Kingdom was in rich supply), none proliferated; therefore, no harvest was yielded. Furthermore, Queen Quagmire prohibited any new initiatives that had not been previously sanctioned by her or had not received official blessing by the King. Growth was stalled, sluggish and stagnant; it was a desolate time.

The Royal Court reacted to the short-comings of the Kingdom and in desperation, commissioned a Visiting Emperor from a foreign land to assist with transforming the ills of the Land into treasures to be touted. Around this same time, Empress In-Press acquired her new title and was appointed by King ChaChing to the Royal Court. With this new rank, she was assigned multiple tasks to assist in the Kingdom's reconstruction.

One task included assisting the Visiting Emperor. During the initial greeting, Empress In-Press and Nimble NewSense, along with other Royals, stood by the King and Queen as the Visiting Emperor entered the castle vestibule. The following conversation ensued:

NewSense: <not one to hold back, whispers to the King> Sire, the Emperor wears no armour, sporting only a
    shiny sword, strategically placed for modesty sake.

King ChaChing: You speak gibberish NewSense! The Emperor's armour is currently being polished to remove
    tarnish and dents incurred from sundry battles and quests of which he conquered many a foe and was victorious in all!
    His armour was once the shiniest of all the Land.

NewSense: <then turning and whispering to Empress In-Press> Dear Empress, in this Kingdom, the King is not so
    dumb but he appears blind to the Emperor's appearance.

Empress In-Press: <in an internal monologue she thinks> 'Odd…reputation precedes the Emperor, but the naked
    truth is he does not don sufficient armour to defend our Kingdom.' <She then shares with the King and Queen by his
    side> The scribes and magistrates from other lands have misled us Sire, or our Royal Court has not made a prudent
    decision with this crucial commission. We must expose the Emperor's stark ineptitude to the Court or be the butt of
    Villagers' joke.

King ChaChing: Blasphemy you proclaim! You are not representing the Royal Court's decree with your critical
    commentary; therefore, you are not worthy of this task unless your stance is hastily altered.

Queen Quagmire: In another era Empress, you would be banished as an outcast, or at worst, decapitated!
    Correct your stance or be removed of your rank and exiled from the Kingdom!

NewSense: <sensing the Empress' astonishment and speechlessness, intervened and interjected> The Empress
    jests not jousts, me Lady, me Lord! With your direction and decision, she is all aboard! <at this point NewSense
    hurries the Empress away so that she may regain her senses to what just occurred>

Lady Buttress, Countess Prudent and the Marquise of Justice, always Royals of fairness, quality and equality, overheard the conversation. Many times in the past they advocated worthy, underserved Royals and this would prove to be yet another circumstance. Later in the day they convened and decided to privately counsel the Empress. One by one, they shared how it was important to one's station to retain genteelness and prevent perceived forceful confrontations with the King or Queen in their Court rulings, as these types of interactions would not yield results sought by the Empress. Sound objections to any Court action needed to be crafted carefully. They must be removed of any perceptions of deleterious appraisals and couched within palatable options, which did not diminish existing power structures. The Empress raptly listened to these confidantes' counsel. Their sincerity of intent was unquestioned but the Empress was plagued with a nagging doubt of any possibility or hope in changing the balance of power. After years of service, these notable and renowned Royals had conditioned a stance of conformity within their ranks. It appeared that even the most able were unable to impact change. In this Kingdom, survival alone was viewed as a victorious act!

Act IV – Turning of the Screw

Empress In-Press continued to serve multiple roles for the Royal Court, offering numerous ideas for increasing quality in the Land and championing novel initiatives which addressed challenges throughout multiple sectors of the Kingdom. Many of her enterprises were stalled or initially dismissed (although some were later plucked by other Royals who received support and credit for the endeavors). Some of her other Kingdom proposals or projects were impeded by the very Royals who directed the proclamations for action. Although she served on many Royal boards and commissions, she felt her efforts were in vain since preordained decrees by higher-ranking Royals ruled ultimate outcomes of board

decisions and commission actions. "What's the use?" she wondered "This is all rubbish!" Always close to her side, NewSense harmonized, "Couldn't have said it better myself, me lady! What you see is plain, origin of the phrase 'Royal Pain…' Your efforts are all for naught, when other Royals' power is bought!"

Unfortunately, her most grimm tales were disparaging disputes with higher-ranking or more powerful Royals known as the Maskateers: Sirs Scamalot, Boralot, Inoalot and FalseStaff, as well as, Ladies MyOpia, LooPee, CalLoss, and DuPlicity. Never genuine, always self-serving, the Maskateers suffered from the withering lows of jealousy and spite. In good graces with King ChaChing and Queen Quagmire, these Royals served as the sovereign Entourage of Mediocrity and wielded power for their own gain within the respective sectors of the Kingdom to which they operated as overseers. Above reproach by lower-ranking Royals, as well as fair and hard-working Royals of equal rank, the Maskateers were masters of illusion regarding their own accomplishments and productivity in the Kingdom, often pilfering accolades from others with less power and arrogantly spinning stories of puffed up, fabricated associations with aristocrats and leaders of other Lands. They commonly congregated in the Tower of Babble to secretly plan tortures, banishments, beheadings, and coups of any who they named as Disloyal Royals which they perceived would threaten their current reign of power (through voicing of differing visions). In fact, allegiance to anyone other than the Maskateers made one suspect as a conspirator against their control. NewSense often warned the Empress "If you step in a Maskateers' path for power, you will surely suffer their wrath and cower!" This was pragmatic advice considering their temperaments. Sir Scamalot did not possess one single original idea. Any venture or successful quest that he claimed as his own, undoubtedly originated from some unaware lower-ranked Royal. He knew not of the Code of Chivalry. Sir Boralot shared mundane ideas of relatively little substance and unfortunately was equally aurally-challenged: when he headed council, no one's opinion within the Royal Court was allowed to be heard, or he quickly deflected or dismissed them. Sir Inoalot was at least entertaining as he fluently spewed highbrow, abstruse harangues of which he believed would impress the Merry Women, maidens and damsels of the village. He often paraded around the castle sans armour, in tightly fitting linens…totally unaware of the offensiveness of his appalling lack of decorum. Of all the Maskateers, FalseStaff operated as the Pie-Eyed Piper for the Entourage of Mediocrity. His bulbous rosy nose, and at times incoherent speech, revealed he frequented the local ceremonial tavern. This was not his greatest deficit, rather his narrow vision and short-sightedness limited prudent judgment and decision-making effectiveness within his own sector of the Kingdom. And it was well known that FalseStaff had not drawn his sword in decades, rather relied on others within the entourage as proxy to lift and flail it for him. He also trusted past conquests to sustain his power within the Royal Court. The Ladies possessed even fewer redeeming qualities and were not beneath orchestrating cunning deceptions to swindle unsuspecting victims or pull gilded daggers from velvet garters hidden under their pettycoats, which were then stealthily positioned across a dissenting Marquises' or disobedient Duchesses' throat.

The yearly proclamation for a Tournament of the Worthy was announced. Champions rallied for entrance to demonstrate their skills and garner sponsorship of Royals. The Entourage of Mediocrity had selected their candidate and used power and influence to discredit any competitor, including the Empress! This placed her in dire straits toward any hope of victory, especially since her skills were unique to the court and perhaps not fully understood, but she remained somber and sober during her months of training. NewSense, always supportive, helped polish her armour to a blinding degree! The Empress understood that victors of the tournament would henceforth be of the highest-ranking royals and would experience many royal privileges, where those not victorious would be publicly humiliated in the Courtyard. Against all odds, she welcomed the challenge. So, let the good times roll and the tournament proceed…

Discussion

Subjective Sense-Making

First and foremost, this story is a descriptive, existential exploration of my professional identity. Personal value of the intimate writing process and final product is subjective, and has been experienced as an ongoing, identity-defining journey (Boje, 2001; Bruner, 2004). The story was written as an imaginative and evocative auto-fiction, rich with generative metaphors and highly inferential. Secondly, it is a performative political satire imbued with ideological stances and questions, meant to provoke emotional responses, meaningful dialogue, and social critique of academia as a cloaked hierarchical, sometimes hostile environment. It was not written to present truths (although platitudes are playfully strewn about); suggesting those types of findings would compromise the fidelity of individual interpretation of meaning and diminish the potential for authentic viewpoint dialogic exchanges (Bullough, 2010; McDonald, 2009). Also, it was not designed as an analytical piece to be deconstructed for findings; therefore, it has not been analyzed for theoretical

explanations of the socio-cultural phenomena of identity formation within a hierarchical academic environment. However, traditional stories such as folk tales which provided the structure for my story, possess consistent elements such as lessons-to-be-learned, morals and themes which have been transposed onto the story. So, to extend tongue-in-cheek playful writing and creative expression of the author, additional discussion is presented as personal hindsight insights. The author invites critique and counter-interpretations of what is shared as I fully recognize that my perceptions are subjective, riddled with obvious trite clichés, and present fertile fodder for broadening discussion.

A Not-So-Cautionary, Cautionary Tale

Folklore, as a writing genre, often presents cautionary tales with a lesson implanted to warn readers of potential dangers around them. The story in this paper appears to convey cautionary lessons, if not foreboding stance, that a novice academic's entering disillusionment or naïve perception about the existence of pluralism in academia will not lead them to a fairy tale ending. In fact, that perspective may negatively impact their academic identity and thwart their aspirations and progress. But, the story is not-so-cautionary in that it provides glimpses of hope through "morals of morale" that permeate the plotline.

Morals of morale. One encouraging moral embedded in the story is that of agency. Challenging goals can be attained and change can occur through resourcefulness and individual actions; even in a not-so-benevolent environment. The very act of writing the story where I *create* characters and *invent* the storyline is a self-generating process for identity building (as a self-established authority producing my own *truth*); albeit, it is highly subjective and I recognize that all social, cultural and political aspects of my experiences influence my views and dialogic imagination in subliminal ways of which I may not be aware. Additionally, publication of the story validates my scholarship through an audience of peers beyond my academic setting. It therefore serves as tangible evidence of my identity forming actions as a scholar. And although this deed may or may not be acknowledged as worthy by my institutional colleagues, it represents a more global affirmation from others.

Another hope-infused element of the story, although highly contingent upon luck or situation, is collegiality (referenced in the story as the *Enchanted Chamber* comprised of Critical Friends). There is power in numbers, but more importantly social support is invaluable when facing challenges in academia, as well as highly impactful on the psychosocial identity formation process, which most likely places the greatest impact on retention in academia. My Critical Friends from different institutions have played a significant role championing my academic strengths. *Moral of the Story* - Few will stay where they cannot effect change and no one wants to stay where they are neither welcomed nor accepted.

On the Margins

One overarching theme of the story as a performative piece, as well as narrative work, is exploration of margins. For me, margins are experienced as liminal and ambiguous spaces of being, not limits as inferred by definitive borders Experiences of margins in this story include: otherness, scholarship, reality versus fiction, seriousness versus humor, professional marginalization, and experiential edge.

Identity as "other." The story highlights a maiden's perception of marginalization as an outsider of academia, her "otherness" within a new frontier of formidable borders. She is on the outskirts of the academic community, but eager to establish a settlement of her own design (specifically regarding qualitative research) and be recognized as a welcomed and valued neighbor. In Act II, the maiden is on the margins of transforming and anchoring her academic identity as *Princess of Inquiry* (aka – Assistant Professor). It is not evident that her identity as an insider within the Royal Court becomes anchored though (as *Empress In-Press*, aka – Associate Professor), for her seeking of validation continues in Act III when she guilelessly counters the authority of power figures (*King ChaChing* and *Queen Quagmire*) and then later attempts another transformational level in Act IV when she enters the Tournament of the Worthy. These actions are indicative of the ongoing, and evolving nature of identity formation (Boje, 2001; Humle, 2014). So, for me as the Maiden in the story, acceptance as an insider is never quite reached. Although promoted, I continue to experience political pressures that reiterate my "otherness" i.e., as in Act III, *Empress In-Press* was reprimanded because she should not have challenged authority since powers-to-be must retain control. Within this institution, my professional views have regularly and systematically been squashed throughout my tenure. I have reflected on if I ever felt accepted as an insider within this institution would my "otherness" be retained to some degree? I am not sure, but feel that my scholarly image involves and is a result of psychosocial processes such as organizational reproduction for molding appropriate faculty members

(Alvesson & Willmontt, 2002) as well as my own self-defining actions. I believe these different influences account for my polyphonic (almost oxymoronic) views of identity within the institution as a congenial heretic. Additionally, I find it ironic how I have sought acceptance within an organizational culture that perpetuates my "otherness." So, for me, what would be the benefits and/or conversely, the detriments of occupying space within this academic milieu if ever accepted as an insider?

I cannot claim that "otherness" has been transcended or even shed within my current institution, but through writing the story I have elaborately contextualized situations and experiences that allowed for self-construction of my *imagined* scholarly identity. This sense-making action directly impacted my current view of self as a proven academic, which now supersedes how many others within the institution may view my qualitative research as second rate. *NewSense*, as my alter ego (in some ways, shadow self), helped repair my self-image through the power of humor and assisted in my transformation to an empowered "other."

Scholarship "caste aside." The margins of scholarship are tested through auto-fiction as a novel research approach. It is an "other" form of research that differs significantly from more traditional or conventional forms of research methods (noted within my institution); thereby, potentially placing it on the fringes of scholarship for some organizational standards. But for my own self-claims of scholarly identity, this writing approach has helped me define identity on my own terms where I am not "caste aside" as a second-class researcher. In my experiences, academic hierarchy places importance on pedigree (i.e., institution from which you matriculated, university where you are hired as a teaching or research institution, journals in which you publish, etc.) and rules as the standard from which you are judged and viewed as a scholar. Pedigree also often defines one's sphere of scholarship and opportunity, but can be trumped (although rarely) by individual actions, initiatives and accomplishments. The challenge is in developing agency without privilege and rupturing one's own limiting views on what can and cannot be done regarding identity goals.

Reality versus fiction. The margins of reality and truth are blurred in auto-fiction. With respect to research, can truisms be the result of fiction; most notably, expressive fiction? Is truth-reporting more important than truth-seeking prose? Which is more powerfully influential? Which is more meaningful? In Act II of the story, *NewSense's* prophetic vision captures some evidentiary truth to the *Princess of Inquiry's* experiences of attempting to gain entry to the *Royal Court*. The tasks described involve many demonstrations of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, some of which are neither reasonable nor warranted for the entry-level princess role, but none-the-less are apparently required or expected by the *Royal Court*. Although fictitious, the story parallels real experiences of faculty in gaining tenure. Effective fiction suspends disbelief of the ridiculous or unbelievable, while seamlessly projecting realness and inherent values into a fabricated storyline. Factual or not, readers are universally receptive to ideals shared in a piece of writing that resonates with their own perspectives or world view. Authenticity, in the telling of the story, cannot be denied. And all stories, reality-based ones included, are steeped in subjectivity.

Seriousness versus humor. "Just because you can laugh doesn't mean you can't tell the truth. Truth is often the jester" (Anonymous). Play, as a functional activity, provides safe practice experiences in which to build skills and attain knowledge (Harris, 2006; Pellegrini, 2009). However, in academia, use of humor in writing to playfully express one's thoughts or attempt to reflectively resolve professional issues is often dismissed as inconsequential. Humor, as a writing element, allows more space for improvisation, more opportunity to shape and build knowledge and skills through error; therefore, it is a creative tool to which I was quite naturally drawn.

In my story, humor serves a serious function and the margins of seriousness and humor are truly challenged throughout the narrative. Using humor to poke somber political fun at dominating power is very Don Ricklesesque. The laugh is rarely the sole (or soul) goal. But a nagging question lingers, is *NewSense's* proclamation "playing is much more appealing than slaying" echoed in academic ears as an unproductive, frivolous voice, void of academic intentions or one that reverberates a decree of intellectual freedom, that critical reflective thinking can be expressed creatively and humorously? In my current institution, fictitious, playful writing is not considered academic. Part of my perception of "otherness" in academia is my use of humor, but this is the very device that broadens the borders in which I play and explore my academic identity; most notably, affective elements of self (another potential theoretical taboo). A conundrum exists.

Humor, throughout history and across societies, utilizes and capitalizes on imperfection (usually, someone else's). Physical humor is base and crosses cultures and languages because we can all experience and understand it, e.g., a person slips on a banana (an "other" experiences the mishap). Humor in language and dialogue is much more subjective but still rooted in error, e.g., a play on words or someone's misinterpretation of meaning such as a malapropism. *NewSense*, as a

comedic character, exploited use of lowbrow, at times vulgar language. But through humorous presentation and crafty double entendre, was not perceived as threatening to power players in the story. Most often when we laugh, we are doing so from a safe position; as the one who is *not* the recipient of the prank or butt of the joke. But humor *is* hierarchical and expresses power (just not always recognized by the targets); therefore, it is a sublime vehicle for juxtaposing examination of hegemony in academia (and perhaps even chipping away at its foundation).

Professional marginalization. Three distinct themes of professional marginalization as "otherness" are evident in the story: qualitative research, gender, and lack of pedigree. I have experienced marginalization in academia based on being a qualitative researcher. This aspect of marginalization is less evident today than in the past, but still exists and tacitly presents itself through the imbalance in the higher number of quantitative courses required in programs offered at our university compared to lower number of qualitative courses. Many of my colleagues still perceive qualitative work to be less valid, non-rigorous or not as important or significant regarding scholarly status. As a qualitative researcher, I am often dismissed as a second-tier scholar.

Another theme of marginalization shared in the story is of gender (referenced by *NewSense* with "how can you defeat a beast when you are defiantly missing the codpiece?!?"). Yes, females continue to experience oppressive acts by others with power in academia (including other females) and in general, females possess less professional power and fewer leadership roles in the overall academic structure (discussed further below).

And lastly, there is the theme of marginalization via lack of pedigree. As a first-generation high school graduate and first-generation American on my mother's side, second-generation American on my father's side, I experienced marginalization being raised in a low-socioeconomic household that utilized non-standard English. A lack of entitlement generated both challenges to overcome and a survival hardiness that would not have manifested through less rigorous life experiences. According to Lubrano (2013), blue-collar perspectives and identities are carried forward into white collar careers where otherness and outsider status remain with them in their professional life journey. For me, education was a beacon of hope for progress in life (beyond a blue-collar life station), and fortunately I was able to seize an opportunity to acquire higher education degrees; albeit, a four-year stint in the military. The latter heightened experiences regarding gender marginalization in that at the time of my enlistment there were 4,400 female and 190,000 male soldiers. Although there were statistically strong opportunities for Saturday night dates, this male-dominated society, operating from a non-questioning hierarchy of power and control via rank, spawned a fertile environment for gender oppression. My saving grace in this milieu was use of strategic intelligence which garnered promotions, but matched to males of similar rank, no power was comparably awarded. A parallel experience has been replicated in academia, acquired rank and added workload, with limited decision-making power in comparison to most males of the same status. My predisposition to "play fair" and blue-collar value of "work hard" directs my professional actions, but these inherent quality traits are abused rather than empowered within academic institutions dominated by male, white-collar administrators.

In summary, I have a history of perceived *otherness* baggage that has been carried with me throughout my academic journey; where I always travel coach, experience delayed manifests, possess old maps or no GPS resource to navigate towards the destination, but somehow still manage to arrive…always out of breath.

Experiential edge. Surviving on the margins is demonstration of code-switching and migratory adaptation skills one acquires from living on the edge; from having to breach many different borders, including those edges that suddenly drop away from under you. Perhaps, because of the tenuousness of the margins, the edge is the space where identities are strengthened, forged, and defined. Although an uncomfortable place and space, the edge is where I thrive as I scramble to get across, over or through onto the "other" side. Once there, I often no longer recognize the edge; no longer as distinct, it has changed from my crossing and my new position provides a different perspective from which to view the landscape since I have changed as well. Edges are also the farthest point away from the center, so feelings of *arriving* are elusive and ephemeral and reinforce how identity is ongoing, changing, and never fixed (Boje, 2001; Bruner, 2004; Humle, 2014). If I ever found myself at the center, I would probably spin in a circle to gain a panoramic view of experiences, but would definitely lose my balance and undeniably my edge.

Conclusion

This auto-fictitious narrative folktale provides valuable contribution to the current body of research in that it presents a novel approach and unique text for examining identity formation through a significantly contrasting form to what is shared in traditional narratives. One goal of my story was to raise questions and rouse discussion regarding current constructs of scholarship, and explore the margins of legitimacy across borders into a mythical, mystical, and metaphorical land. As a

performative piece, I question, does the metaphorical story of a kingdom as academia generate connections and resonate with readers? Or will it speak to only same-self others? For, although folklore genre is commonly known, a kingdom theme that helps unify my identity-seeking experience may diminish multiplicity of other voices. Ideally, the story would incite critical thinking or dialogue of the current academic culture. Another goal in writing this article was to potentially enhance existing research regarding identity forming actions, if only as a descriptive piece. Lastly, I would hope that the story inspires research interest in others as this would indicate significance and validity as a scholarly piece. I am on an ongoing transformative journey of scholarship, building academic identity, crossing borders and breaking down barriers along the way, so "let the good times roll" (Ocasek, 1978).

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Appendix A

Translation of Motifs

Court Jester "Nimble NewSense" – Author's Alter Ego

Trainer of Youths – Teacher

Artisans of the Village – Teacher Educators

Wizard – Dissertation Chair and Methodologist

Chronicles of the Learned – Educational Research

Alien markings, cryptic messages, etc. – Statistics

Kings, Rulers, Giants, Sultans, and Emperors – Academic Administrators or Leaders

Ivory Tower – Academia

Dragon of Research – Conventional Research Paradigm

Boracle – Scientific Knowledge

Prophecies – Universal Truths

Gypsy Spirit – Progressive Thinker

Fresh Air – Practical Teacher Knowledge

Sages of the Land – Qualitative Researchers

Translating the Chronicles – Qualitative Research Methods

Transformation – Professional Identity Shift

Princess of Inquiry – Assistant Professor

Crystal Ball & Magic Mirror – Mac & PC Computers (respectively)

Knights of Knowledge – Publishers & Editors

Dukes of Degrees – Renowned Researchers

Ogres of Authority – State and National Education Policy Makers

Counts of Statistics – Quantitative Researchers

Shiny Sword – Power & Influence

Dungeon of Tenure – Tenure Track Challenges and Requirements

Enchanted Chamber – Critical Friends

Crusaders of Inquiry – Quality Seekers

Shrewd Shrews & Tyrannizing Trolls – Power Seekers

Merry Men & Women – Graduate Students

Suit of Armour – Research Publications

Bog of Perpetual Rank – Promotion & Tenure Review

Cyclops – Single-Vision Thinker

Seuss – Icon of Rhyme

Calamity in a Chamber Pot – Make something out of nothing or generate a fabricated problem

Empress In-Press – Associate Professor

King ChaChing – Conventional Administrative Values and Perspectives in Academia

Royal Court – School of Education

Knights in Shining Armour and Ladies of Virtue – Exemplary Academics

Tax Collectors – Micromanagement

Manure – Untruths (spread, unquestioned and accepted as valid)

Queen Quagmire – Oppression through Hierarchies of Power

Rubbish – Biased Inequities Wielded through Power

Maskateers – Self-Serving Faculty

Scamalot, Boralot, Inoalot, FalseStaff, MyOpia, LooPee, CalLoss, & DuPlicity – Idiosyncratic Personalities

Entourage of Mediocrity – Groupthink Phenomenon

Tower of Babble – A place where Groupthink Phenomenon occurs

Disloyal Royals – Perspectives or Opinions Different than Groupthink

Code of Chivalry – Ethical Actions

Tournament of the Worthy – Full Professor Review