

Demonstrating the Therapeutic Values of Poetry in Doctoral Research: Autoethnographic Steps from the Enchanted Forest to a PhD by Publication Path

Methodological Innovations
 May-August 2021: 1–11
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 DOI: 10.1177/20597991211022014
journals.sagepub.com/home/mio


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Abstract

We rarely acknowledge the achievements of doctoral candidates who fought with all they had but still lost the battle and dropped out – we know so little about what becomes of them. This reflective article is about the betrayals of PhD supervisors in one institution, the trauma and stigma of withdrawing from that institution, writing poetry as a coping mechanism and the triumph in completing a Thesis by Publication (TBP) in another institution. Thus, I build on Lesley Saunders's idea about using poetry to operate on 'a personal capacity' in educational research. Accordingly, I present an original autoethnographic poem and other poetic artefacts as well as reflections to sharpen the sociological eye of my story. In it, I merge two different segments of experiences in poetry – trauma and triumph – to draw an image of my doctoral journey, in the moment and in retrospection. By doing so, I illuminate the struggles involved in becoming an independent researcher. I also encourage practitioners to conceive that their negative experiences in doing educational research can be transformed into an achievement depending on the stand they take when faced with it. Certainly, poor academic performance can be closely associated with abandoning doctoral studies, but that is not always the case. Therefore, it is my hope that this autoethnographic work may instill hope in doctoral candidates who are still in the struggle to find a voice.

Keywords

Autoethnography, doctoral experience, thesis by publication, Poetry as therapy, Traumatic experience, Triumph over adversity, Religious poetry, making education count

Introduction

In matters that concern educational research and experiences, poetry is a privileged way of engaging intimately with the reader. (Saunders, 2003)

Today I successfully defended my PhD thesis! 🏆 😊 🌟
 #AcademicTwitter @AcademicChatter @OpenAcademic
 @PhDForum @Write4Research @AcademicDilemma
 @WriteThatPhD @HaPhDSupervisor @PhDVoice 🏆 😊 🌟
 Huge thanks to my examiners, supervisors, independent chair, and to everyone who supported me in getting here!
 Announcements like this are commonplace on social media platforms, such as Twitter, and they often receive many congratulatory responses. Some of us also hear such success

stories through our departmental email communications involving doctoral students and staff. However, success stories are only one side of the equation. A minority of students do not successfully defend their theses (Murray, 2015), while a large number of doctoral candidates fail to submit their theses during their candidature (Litalien and Guay, 2015). In May 2020, I defended my thesis and passed my viva without corrections. Consequently, I earned a doctorate by retrospective peer-reviewed publications that constituted

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independent and original contributions to knowledge from the University X.

But before that, I was also a PhD dropout from the University Y. Writing poetry that affirmed my experiences provided a vehicle for me to travel the bumpy roads of my doctoral journey and obtained a PhD against all the odds. We do not often hear about people who could not make it to the finish line and why they abandon their studies. Students may abandon their studies due to money issues, health issues, fatigue, poor performance, lack of adequate support from supervisors or toxic environments. It is, therefore, too simplistic to refer to them all as ‘dropouts’. This one-word label, ‘dropout’ is not reflective of various factors that underpin the abandonment of studies. For instance, do individuals in all cases leave their studies due to poor performances? Some of them may be good students in toxic educational contexts. Conversely, educational institutions interpret students’ failings exclusively as deficits to be overcome, as Winslade and Williams (2017) observed. I call such students the unwanted ones. ‘A man in an unwanted place is a weed./ When the rain of an incident drops,/ then germinates the revelation crops,/ the maize of gatekeepers or the weed of intruders/’ (Lazarus, 2019a: 2).

Many people do not recognize the achievements of those students who fought with all they had but still lost the battle. Perhaps, this is just a way of protecting them to ensure that once they walk out the gates of universities, their anonymity is respected. Or perhaps I am wrong. Nonetheless, we know so little about what becomes of them once they exit the university gates. Education counts and every experience counts as well. Thus, this article tells the story of my walking out of the gate of one university, why and to what effect; and the completion of my PhD in a new institution. Specifically, the article sets out to illuminate layers of my experiences: the betrayals of PhD supervisors in one institution, the trauma and stigma of withdrawing from that institution, poetry as a coping mechanism and the triumph in completing a Thesis by Publication (TBP) in another institution.

Dropping out or gaining educational qualification is inseparable from institutional, economic, psychosocial and sociocultural conditions (Abdi, 2015; Platt, 2007; Wollast et al. 2018). Dropping out from a university, like divorce, is a gumboil, which is a symptom of more serious underlying conditions. While ‘dropping out’, ‘divorce’ and gumboils are potentially distressing, they unfold over time and not a one-time event. Hence, I see both the abandonment of doctoral study and the completion of doctoral study as the metamorphosis of butterflies. They were embodiments of multiple interconnected stages, and cannot be described as one-time events. Eggs turned into larvae, larvae turned into pupae and pupae turned into adults. Each phase is an apprenticeship in its own right. An academic apprenticeship can be, as Dean (2018) described, a pendulum that swings and pulls passion and publication together as a whole. My doctoral academic

apprenticeship as a pendulum not only blends passion and publication, but also swings across two universities at two points in time. So, the segments of my life experience across this period of time are two sides of the same coin. These two sides, contexts or universities, yielded two different portions of outcomes: ‘withdrawal’ and ‘graduation’.

Consequently, it would be an agony, for me, the poet, to write about one and ignore the other. In matters that concern educational research and experiences, poetry is a privileged way of engaging intimately with the reader (Saunders, 2003). While not all doctoral journeys can be described as a positive experience, many of them have fluctuations, and some of them have dramas (Corcelles et al., 2019; Herridge et al., 2019; Ramos and Yi, 2020; Weise et al., 2020). My first doctoral drama was traumatic. While the act of writing poetry was not new¹ to me before I was traumatized, the poems that sprouted from my trauma were guided by two primary motives: (1) to process my negative experiences in less painful ways and (2) to slow down the process of forgetting these experiences by archiving them on paper. Some researchers have acknowledged that writing poems can heal a troubled mind (Gildea, 2021; Rolfs, 2015; Uchida, 2017). However, for me, the healing effect of poetry has been a new discovery, and this article is about sharing this discovery. The rest of the article is presented in five parts: in the ‘My negative experiences and writing poetry’ section, I describe my negative life experiences during my initial enrolment and writing poetry as a coping mechanism; in the ‘Mastering of scholarly writing and publishing’ section, I outline the consequences of these experiences (i.e. the mastering of scholarly writing and publishing); in the ‘An autoethnographic poem and social reality’ section, I discuss autoethnographic poems as social reality and offer an original autoethnographic poem; and in the ‘Brief reflections’ section, I conclude with some reflections and offer further broader implications from the article.

My negative experiences and writing poetry

Writing poetry as a coping mechanism or poetry as therapy here can be understood as the act of writing poetry as an effective therapeutic tool following negative experiences such as betrayals (Gildea, 2021; Rolfs, 2015; Uchida, 2017). In his analysis of *Man’s Search for Himself*, May (1953) noted that life experience is often the architect of a person’s decisions as well as the guide to their path. There is a dearth of research about factors that shape doctoral candidates’ decisions to adopt a TBP path (Mason et al., 2020). My negative experience with PhD supervisors played a primary role in changing the direction of my PhD route from my initial enrolment at the University Y (the enchanted forest) to a PhD by Publication path at the University X. In retrospect, while my performance was consistent in both contexts, it was devalued in one context and valued in the other context.

Poor academic performance is closely associated with abandoning their doctoral studies, but that is not always the case. For example, before I withdrew from my initial enrolment, I had published two peer-reviewed articles as a solo author on the topic of my PhD project: cyber criminology (Ibrahim² 2016a; Ibrahim, 2016b). I had also published three additional articles on family studies with other authors (Rush and Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus et al., 2017; Ibrahim and Komulainen, 2016). In the same vein, I had disseminated my solo-authored research to a broader range of audiences by publishing its critical points in a widely read and high-quality blog, ‘The Conversation’ (Ibrahim, 2017). The significance of my performance and publication outputs become more apparent when one considers that, for example, many doctoral candidates who have followed the traditional PhD path fail to publish after completing their studies (Francis et al., 2009; Peacock, 2017). Before completing these publications, I had already extracted a book chapter from my master’s dissertation.³ In my undergraduate studies, I received the University Merit Award for obtaining the highest classification grade for a bachelor’s degree in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.⁴ Despite these accomplishments, particularly my publications as a doctoral candidate, I withdrew from my studies at the University Y and walked out of the university gate, a dropout, due to a series of betrayals.

One such betrayal was related to fieldwork. In 2017, my two supervisors (internal and external) insisted that I should rely on university students in the United Kingdom as my research samples, instead of law enforcement officers in a country in Africa south of the Sahara. This was despite the fact that I had planned to conduct fieldwork with law enforcement officers in the research design of my original proposal for this fully funded PhD. They cited travelling expenses as a reason for not carrying out fieldwork in that country. What they omitted to say was that they (the external supervisor as ‘the research team leader’) had themselves applied for a grant to collect the same dataset on the ground in that fieldwork site, i.e. in Africa south of the Sahara.⁵ To add further context and insight into this fieldwork issue, it is noteworthy that it was the internal supervisor who invited the external supervisor, ‘their friend’, to co-supervise me, instead of selecting an external supervisor from the list I submitted to the department. Although the university granted my wish to work with an external academic and dissolve my first supervisory team – of three members, of which the internal supervisor was also a member, this supervisor, fulfilled their wish, in place of mine. They invited their friend instead of allowing me to be supervised by an external supervisor of my choice. For what purpose? When I notified the director of my PhD programme about my decision in keeping to my original research agenda and fieldwork site, they all dramatized me as a ‘problem’:

We know the scrotum of the director,
Carlos himself, is in your palm.

S-q-u-e-e-z-e at will.
You squeezed the trigger.
Shooting power bullet.
Everyone took cover.
While you sabotaged the blade
Of my peerless hoe,
Roasted my seed yams,
And called me a lazy man . . ./
. . . /Alas! The old gold rush, betrayal,
is the new data rush in academia. (Lazarus, 2019a: 3).

To mine the “gold” of my planned fieldwork in Africa, they problematized and dramatized me for not accepting and following a new, “good-for-nothing” research path they invented. Each time I challenged a treachery, three things happened. First, I was looked down upon as rough around the edges, perhaps due to my accent. Second, they (e.g. ‘the director’) cornered me and advised, ‘take what you get and count your blessings’, that is, the opportunity of having a funded PhD position. Third, I was made to apologize to the perpetrator instead of being protected. By masterfully masquerading microaggressions as supervisions, wolves in sheep’s clothing bullied me into believing that I was the problem: gaslighting. An ‘academic problem’, precisely, they called it. While they perpetuated falsehood about my academic ability, my fate was almost sealed through repetitions of derogatory conditioning. I felt tired and belittled like a wounded little hound tied to barbed wire. “I would not want to be advised by you any longer”, I emailed them. The more I resisted their clutches, the more their clutches tightened. Was I a doctoral candidate or a piece of property? A piece of property cannot run away from its owner unpunished.

The hyenas encircled and could not let go./
The callous cut the pipeline to capitulate my ego./

The director suspended my stipend⁶ to force me into capitulation: the final execution of encirclement. One possible inference is that they thought I could not breakout – that I was doomed to succumb sooner or later. Their confidence seemed well placed. I had no faculty member to lift the siege. I called for help. But, the lawmen on the scene were deceived into becoming mere ‘spectators’. Shocked, confused, depressed, I mentally went into a coma, and my blood clotted in my veins. Each time I, the victim, asked for justice, [T]he fraudsters are also in charge of fraud taskforce. /Rain has fallen into the eyes of a cow, he could only respond by nodding his head./...(Lazarus, 2019a: 2). Writing poetry was the light that saved me from the darkness of trauma. To ‘whatever is too large, too incomprehensible to express in any other way’, writing poetry gives a voice (Soter, 2016: 2). For me, poetry processes and communicates the unsayable about my negative experiences (Saunders, 2003). Without a doubt, the therapeutic values of poetry in processing and saying the unsayable are invaluable in two main ways. First, they helped

me bear the brunt of my supervisors' mental chastisements in less painful ways. Second, they helped me see the unawareness of some friends and family members in a brighter light. As a first-generation college student, some of them had asked me, for example: "Why are you toiling and whining [i.e., attempting to earn a doctorate] instead of looking for a proper job with the university degrees you have already achieved?" Poetry is thus an invaluable toolbox for handling, processing and understanding life incidents and the feelings towards them (Gildea, 2021; Rolf's, 2015; Sharma, 2019; Uchida, 2017).

However, in this article and the accompanying poems, I do not intend to unveil all the dramas and traumas. Particularly, in my poems, feelings are condensed and depicted in words. A poem can be understood as 'a method of data compression that serves as a condensed poetic container' for the poet's feelings and expressions (Furman, 2020: 45), including emotions the writer was not even aware they were experiencing (Masson, 2020). Poetry as a coping mechanism, therefore, enabled me to relive these three chapters of my doctoral experiences as I depicted below:

There were ravages,
 betrayals,
 before the restoration,
 a PhD by Publication,
 and there was a rich city,
 a fully funded PhD,
 before the ravages.

The experience of betrayals can invoke negative emotions and open the negative path (*via negativa*) (Fox, 2000). I had felt like I was falling into a pit when I withdrew from enrolment as a fully funded PhD candidate. As an independent scholar with no reliable source of income, while I was still mapping out a doctoral programme, I often felt like I was choking in the puke of self-doubt in a deep dark pit. It is undisputable that in the abyss of the negative path, *via negativa*, darkness, fear and depression are constant and frequent passers-by (Fox, 2000; Oxford, 2015). Still, I felt my Creator's mysterious and ineffable presence - I recited my lyrics/prayers: The forest of my dreadlocks is on fire, / please fall on me like the rain. / The horse of my strength is dying in a desert /please fall on me like the rain. / From the tower of your paradise, Jah, / Jah, please fall on me now as the rain! So, for me, poetry as therapy was 'a very sturdy ladder out of the pit' (DeSalvo, 1999: 8; Masson, 2020: 6). Listening to the echo of my past gong, that is, re-reading and reminiscing on the following old poem of mine, was also my sturdy ladder out of the pit:

When Every Star Is Away

When every star is away,
 when darkness blinds your day,
 when every track is no way,

do not cry and sob.

When every touch is a blow,
 when demons monitor your show,
 when every effort seems below,
 do not sob and mourn.

When your heart is broken,
 when all it takes is token,
 when all you have is taken,
 do not mourn and break.

When every stage depicts the end,
 when every punch is from a friend,
 when fire consumes all your mind,
 do not break and fall.

When old fruits of promises decay,
 when every new handshake is a snare,
 when your own feet lead you astray,
 do not fall but stand.

I remained standing against all the odds. My engagement with poetry instilled hope in me. Writing poetry, such as the stanzas below, was a sturdier ladder out of the pit in which I had fallen – at the hands of my supervisors. The relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors or 'academic midwives' embodies unequal power resources, exercisable in varying degrees. Accordingly, 'the foetus' in the poem below represents more a part of its features – the foetus, which one could describe as 'vulnerable, depending exclusively on others to survive'. However, the foetus here is filled with the Holy Spirit (and not possessed by a demon). Therefore, simply put, the foetus does not need any form of exorcism, which is a biblical allusion to enhance the meanings the poem holds:

The same driving tutors who filled the fuel tank with water/
 in the dusk, also derided the learner driver/
 on the London Orbital Motorway at dawn./
 Thundering! Lightning! Rupturing! My eardrums./
 The sound of a million football hooligans./
 "drive this damn car goddamnit!"/
 "drive this damn car goddamnit!"/
 "drive this damn car goddamnit!"/

I'm the foetus in whom dwells the mighty holy spirit./
 Did you think you could murder my mother in whom I was?/
 Academic midwives, tell me, tell me, tell me now!/
 What is the wisdom in eating the umbilical cord of the unborn?/
 Roasting and eating my cord while I was unborn indeed made me/
 stronger and braver in this wilderness called academia (Lazarus, 2019a: 2).

'Roasting and eating my cord . . . made me stronger and braver', and the weapons fashioned against me empowered me in following my research path 'in the wilderness called

academia'. Like all poems, my poem above may have many meanings, but the one I highlight here offered me 'greater self-understanding, clarification, resolution and control' (Baker and Mazza, 2004: 144). Confident in my ability to develop ideas at a high level of abstraction (see Lazarus, 2019b; Lazarus, 2019c) and act independently with originality in applying new research approaches (see Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus and Okolorie, 2019), I embraced the challenges and responsibilities (e.g. money issues – given that I changed the direction of my PhD route from my initial enrolment, which was a fully funded position to a PhD by Publication path, which I self-funded) of an independent researcher, without knowing precisely what lies beyond 'the publication point' (Lazarus, 2020: 13). Surely, I know that I have been intrinsically motivated in researching multiple topics of inquiry. I was firmly convinced that making a significant contribution to knowledge is an invaluable contribution not only to academic progress (Starrs, 2008), but also to other domains of life. Retrospectively speaking, choosing to change the direction of my initial doctoral journey enabled me to explore a more appealing, fulfilling and independent way of arriving at my destination, that is, obtaining a doctoral award – my 'membership card' to the academic community. Metaphorically speaking, therefore, the debris of a negative set of my experiences transformed me into an independent scholar. The prophetic success expressed in the poem below is more a realization of myself as a scholar, despite tremendous obstacles:

Four days. Even death couldn't decay me./ I'm Lazarus. A friend of Jesus. Here I am/ The forty tubers of yam/ from my father's barn are mine./...[and]...now secured in a prestigious museum,/ "Telematics and Informatics".../... (Lazarus, 2019a: 5).

I may be just the morning dew,
but I'm still dropping-in ink on paper,
my ink cartridges amount into a mountain.
I'm Kilimanjaro!
I'm Chappal Waddi!
I'm also Grossglockner!
Climb me. Climb me now.
Come, climb me. That's what I thought.
Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!
Jesus, I know!
Paul, also I know!
So, tell me, Professors!
Who are you? (Lazarus, 2019a: 5)

Because I have dropped ink on papers many times, 'my ink cartridges amount into a mountain'. But that is not all. While I was still a 'dropout', I was still dropping ink on paper and my publication outputs have metaphorically speaking, 'amounted into a mountain'. As Nin (1975) rightly noted, 'We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect' (p. 149). In the stanza above, I 'tasted life in the moment'

depicting the period I was writing, submitting, revising, resubmitting and publishing the series of publications that accompany this critical narrative.

Equally, even though the evidence of citations is inadequate in itself to show researchers' significance and impact (Lazarus, 2020), for me, when I was a PhD dropout, devoid of most markers of respect in academia, citations mattered. They could replace in part the markers of academia that I had lost. I have metamorphosed. 'Academia is embedded in prestige economies' (Baker, 2019: 1) and I am now a doctoral graduate. Even as I was still wearing the cloak of stigma often bestowed on individuals who have withdrawn from the educational system, I was nonetheless validated and cited by some important figures in multiple fields of study, such as religious studies (Recio-Román et al. 2019; Van Liere, 2020), family studies (Ribbens-McCarthy, Gillies and Hooper, 2019), organized crime (Hall et al. 2020), counter-fraud studies (Button and Whittaker, 2020; Wang et al. 2020), social psychology (Nartova-Bochaver et al. 2018; Tsumura et al. 2018) and legal studies Kirillova et al. 2017; Orji, 2019). An author's career stage and popularity in the field can influence the citation rate of their publication outputs (Lazarus, 2020; Nightingale and Marshall, 2013). Therefore, in retrospect, these citations were tremendous accomplishments in their own right, given my disadvantaged position as a dropout – standing outside the school gate, from the outside looking in through the publication process – scholarly writing, submission, rejection, revision, acceptance and publication.

Beyond the realm of citations, prominent scholars such as Professor Lucinda Platt, Professor Biko Agozino, Dr Stephen Wyatt and Professor Jovan S. Lewis, have embraced me as a 'friend', a fine student, an emerging scholar. Thus, the above stanza depicted these powerful individuals in my research life as, 'Jesus' and 'Paul'. Jesus Christ himself and Apostle Paul, therefore, serve as a positive nest of support network for me, the 'learner' researcher, especially in mentally agonizing and depressing times. The poet asks the antagonists in a sarcastic tone, 'So, tell me professors! Who are you?' This gives the poet not just a voice as a survivor, but also a platform to witness the defeat of tormenters who had tormented the poet. The question indeed embodies sarcasm, a sense of relief, satisfaction and victory. Indeed, my intrinsic motivation merged with the inherent satisfaction in flipping my negative experience and turning it into my achievements has been the impetus behind many publication efforts (see Lazarus and Okolorie, 2019; Lazarus 2019b; Lazarus, 2019c; Lazarus, 2019d; Lazarus et al. 2017; Ibrahim and Komulainen, 2016; Ibrahim, 2016a; Ibrahim, 2016b; Rush and Lazarus, 2018) and the methodological innovation developed (see (Lazarus, 2019d). The above stanza highlights that the critical step to a new beginning is to believe that one is possible. It also exemplifies that human suffering, for example, negative life experiences, could be transformed into human achievement depending on the stand the experiencer takes when faced with it (Frankl, 1978). This would not have been

possible had I given up or remained in the previously abusive and restricted route of the traditional PhD model as I had experienced it at the University Y. Having commented on my negative experience as a traditional doctoral candidate and poetry as a coping mechanism, I will now continue with the consequence of my experience: the mastering of scholarly writing and publishing.

Mastering of scholarly writing and publishing

The idea of becoming is an embodiment of a continuous process of change, creativity and growth (Deleuze, 1994). The redirection of my PhD route allowed me to engage more actively with many reviewers involved in different layers of the publication process. However, within the pedagogy of traditional PhD models, the ‘issues of writing and publication’ are less systematically and adequately addressed in its design and approach than that of the TBP path (Lee and Kamler, 2008: 511). Academic writing and publishing are, as Jalongo et al. (2014: 241) observed, ‘a constellation of skills, understandings, and dispositions too important to be left to chance’. Becoming an independent researcher has facilitated me mastering the skills required in dealing with negative and positive responses from anonymous journal reviewers and editors. Becoming an independent scholar also equipped me with the pragmatism needed in navigating what researchers have called ‘the politics of publishing’ (Mason and Merga, 2018: 140) or ‘the rules of the game’ (Wilkinson, 2015: 99). For me, mastering the negotiations, dialogues and pragmatism with these gatekeepers of the publication venues was an invaluable apprenticeship in its own right.

For instance, dealing with the ‘good’, the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’ of reviewers, editors and paper rejections does not happen without some negative psychological impacts, which one never grows fully used to. For me, becoming an independent scholar involved dealing with these additional layers of negative emotion in isolation. Thus, unlike Teman (2019: 65) whose ‘academic soul shifts free of the bullshit that is much of scholarly work’ to embrace poetry, my academic soul and poetry are beneficially intertwined. For me, poetry has been a safety valve whenever the pipeline of academic writing and publishing is blocked. So, if poetry unblocks the pipelines of my academic writing and publishing, this is because my engagement with poetry is the soul of my academic writing and publishing. Mastering scholarly writing and publishing has enabled me to adapt my writing to a wide variety of audiences and disciplines, such as religious studies (Lazarus, 2019c), feminist epistemology of digital crime (Lazarus, 2019b), family studies (Rush and Lazarus, 2018), citizenship/‘race’ (Lazarus, 2019d), sociology of online deviance (Lazarus and Okolorie, 2019), musicology and social psychology (Lazarus, 2018).

Notably, this type of apprenticeship in becoming an independent scholar is more stimulated in the TBP path than in the pedagogy of traditional PhD models (Lazarus, 2020; Mason, Morris and Merga, 2021; Mason and Merga, 2018; Mason et al., 2020; Peacock, 2017). It is not far-fetched, therefore, to attribute my mastering of scholarly writing and publishing, to a great extent, to the redirection of my PhD from a traditional one to a TBP path and poetry as therapy. Becoming an independent author of multiple peer-reviewed publications has also opened a window of opportunity for me to be in constant dialogue with fellow authors as a reviewer. Paradoxically, while many interpreted my withdrawal from the University Y as representing my deficits as a scholar, which humiliated me, I have reviewed many papers authored by other scholars – some of whom were professors. In particular, I have served as a referee for many established journals (Publons, 2020), whereas many people in the academic community stigmatized me solely because I walked out of the gate of a university where I was betrayed. In addition to that, I became an object of amusement and gossips for some of my fellow PhD candidates, and other members of staff – ‘scattered spectators’ – whom I had considered to be solid allies. These series of disappointments not only made me more angry, they made me furious. Thus, the poems hold anger. They hold fury. They also hold victory:

Anger cut down the palm kernels, and fury,
his twin brother, picked up all the pieces in a hurry.
Scattered spectators are birds from a falling tree,
flapping wings, gossip cameras, here and there.
My firewood was from an evil forest,
just because I gathered the best?
Out of frustration, ‘worthless’, my firewood you marked!
But pure ‘gold’, the three loupes of the CCJLS⁷ stamped.
(Lazarus, 2019a: 4)

The act of writing poetry, for me, therapeutically enhanced my ability to be spontaneous and embrace all contours of my feelings and thoughts as they emerged from places unknown (Bracegirdle, 2011). Writing poetry combined with this role as a reviewer has psychological benefits. They have helped me to reduce internal conflict, self-doubts and restore the psychological balance I needed to continue my research as an independent scholar. In retrospect, poetry as a coping mechanism blended with my role as a reviewer have replenished my confidence as demonstrated especially in the fate of my PhD chapter, ‘my firewood’ (Lazarus, 2018) which was ‘marked’ ‘worthless’ by my then supervisors. I subsequently submitted it to a journal, and it was accepted for publication and recognized as ‘pure gold’ by three anonymous reviewers, who I refer to as ‘the three loupes’ in the stanza above. Now I focus on sharpening the sociological eye further by engaging with an original autoethnographic poetry below.

An autoethnographic poem and social reality

Different expectations and norms for prose and poetry influence what we can write about, and the form in which we write shapes the content as well as its consequences (Phipps and Saunders, 2009; Richardson, 2002). The poetic representation of knowledge gives the writer more opportunities for self-expression, subjectivity and composition than prose can offer (Saunders, 2003). Thus, the sociological eye can be sharpened by our engagement with autoethnographic poetry (Longo, 2016; Phipps and Saunders, 2009). In the autoethnographic poem below, I rotate outward and inward to unfold outward social and cultural realms of matters with inward insights from my doctoral experience (see also Dean, 2018). The underpinning is to engrave visible and valuable signs of lived personal experience on paper for the present and future doctoral candidates and their supervisors. Traces of sociological applications of literary text such as poetry as a resource for understanding are not new (Longo, 2016; Lazarus, 2019d), but the roads on which they imprint are not well-travelled. While it may seem strange to some modern sociologists, as Longo (2016: 56) and Lazarus (2019d: 5) observed, ‘traces of sociological applications of literary works as tools for a better understanding of human experiences and reality’ were commonplace in the 1920s. Here, I acknowledge early sociologists who have endorsed the suitability of subjecting autoethnographic poems to sociological analysis of a person’s subjective experiences (Farrell, 1954; Park and Burgess, 1921).

In exploring the utility of poetry as a sociological resource for understanding, I present an autoethnographic poem, *From the Enchanted Forest to a PhD by Publication Path*, which as a pendulum swings from one institutional context to the other, painting images of my educational journey, in the moment and in retrospect. The process of my transition from a traditional PhD route to that of a TBP path was an accident, a crash, a breakdown, an afterthought, which transformed into resistance, political statements, tests of perseverance, innovations and triumphs. Because I was betrayed, I transitioned from a traditional PhD route to a TBP path. So, the autoethnographic poem embodies the subjective experience of the experiencer, specific social intercourses and real-life situations as opposed to the work of fiction.

Indeed, the sociological eye can be sharpened by our engagement with autoethnographic poetry (Longo, 2016), which is concerned with relational processes, social relationships, social constraints and oppressions, from the subjective voice of the storyteller, the experiencers themselves. The poem pulls scenes of my doctoral journey together as a whole. But that is not all. A poem can pedal the impossible to become possible. Thus, the poem, as a prophecy, foretells the completion of my doctoral degree. I, the author, the then-doctoral student, Mr Suleman Lazarus, defended my PhD thesis and passed without any corrections needed. I, the

author, the now-doctoral graduate, Dr Suleman Lazarus, have, therefore, transitioned from a traditional PhD path to that of a TBP route as narrated in the poem below to sharpen the sociological eye of my story:

From the Enchanted Forest to a PhD by Publication Path

Scalpels and scissors cut a coup d’état to glom my chest
and harvest vital organs and sell my thesis in spares.
What would have been the body without its organs,
had I succumbed to the spell of false consciousness?
I ran from the enchanted forest,
to a PhD by Publication path.

A break-even point, there’s no loss or gain.
Not every student who drops out, a loser.
Not every student who graduates, a winner.
What nobody asks, what becomes of them?
What nobody knows, what becomes of them.
I ran from the enchanted forest,
to a PhD by Publication path.

Just as I traced back the dark tunnel, there she was,
Doctor professor brigadier field marshal,
Rumpelstiltskin, the deal maker herself!
‘Every agreement comes with a price:
every disagreement comes with a price’.
The genie once woke from their slumber,
granted my wish for *Jasmine*, what was mine,
to escape from your dungeon beneath the sea,
and look further ashore for stars and directions.
You conjured the genie bottle away from me,
and granted your own wish, in place of mine.
Why must I, the learner researcher, the owner
of the data, be penned as a *Pinocchio* in your memoir?
Don’t you know the corn in a bottle is more than rats?
Throwing the evidence on fire in winter,
does not bottle the ashes into a cold case.
Light and darkness always have their reckoning.
It was you the in-house rat who told the bush rat,
that the lid of my cookie jar was open for ransacking.
Alaye waylaid a one-way ticket-out
from the enchanted forest.

Oh, Rabbi man bless me!
Instantly my ink flooded the colossal castle of narratives,
pushed the pillars down flat like the walls of city Jericho.
I melted the scrap metals of your failed coup d’état,
to decorate the cornerstones of my doctoral agenda.
Midnight turned pumpkins into a chariot.
A chariot charioted me from the enchanted forest,
to a PhD by Publication path before midnight.
I thank the hand that reshuffled the cards, the chariot!
From the enchanted forest, to a PhD by Publication path.

Jesus Rabbi man bless me,
as I walk in the gate of the new University.
Light! Light! Light! The journey of light!
I walked in the gate and angel *Mark* appeared

and instantly I was cured of my leprosy.
 ‘The old things passed away’,
 now I am no longer a *Pinocchio*,
 the wooden shell spell fell off my skin
 down flat like the walls of city Jericho.
 Now I am a doctoral graduate.

I thank the hand that reshuffled the cards,
 a second chance! A second chance!
 I charioted from the enchanted forest,
 to a PhD by Publication path.

Brief reflections

The poem gives me ‘the opportunities for truth-telling, self-expression, subjectivity and the composition which a research report cannot offer’ (Saunders, 2003: 186). In the poem, I draw the image of my educational journey in the moment and in retrospection. The poem illuminates segments of events, encounters, experiences and prayers, which merge in the poem to illustrate how human setbacks can be transformed into achievements (Frankl, 1978). Looking back, a PhD by Publication was my second chance as well as acquiring a complete autonomy over my own doctoral trajectory. This second chance, the unconditional offer from the University X to submit my works for a TBP award served as an additional validation of the quality of my independent contributions to knowledge. While paradoxically I had been discarded as ‘dropout, a loser’, I have always been ‘a winner’ in disguise. This second chance lifted me up with two hands as a mother to a wailing child while poetry as therapy fed and energized with her breastmilk all along the way to the finish line. Without that, I would have remained a dropout eternally. Many do not rise again once they have fallen. All too often, doctoral dropouts wear the gown of stigma, self-doubt and psychological distresses arising from social distancing in academic community, since the academic community is fundamentally embedded in prestige economies. Earning my doctoral degree at the University X uprooted the root of my distresses.

However, psychological distresses can manifest in researchers when they use themselves as a resource in research (Chadwick, 2021; Letherby, 2000). To write this article, I listened to audio recordings of particular meetings and reread emails that embody my struggles at the University Y, which triggered sadness, anxiety and panic. My success at the University X had tempted⁸ me to retreat from having to confront once again these triggers of negative emotions. Still, my intrinsic love for poetry overwhelmed my fear and stimulated a productive engagement with this reflective article. I immersed myself in uncomfortable reflections to contribute to greater academic insight, substantively and methodologically.

Thus, the narrative and poetic artefacts give insight into the emotional depths and ordeals of PhD experience that are rarely heard. The article makes a case for attention to

be given to the ‘dropout’ PhD student voice which is often ignored, or even denied. By challenging convention, this article invites readers, PhD students/supervisors, to pause, reflect, write diaries about their doctoral journeys (e.g. as a student or supervisor) in the moment while they are still on the road, and in retrospect, when they have arrived at their destinations. Indeed, every doctoral journey can become a memoir, a reference point for further contributions, if the travellers pause to archive the footprints of their journeys. Every footprint is unique in its own right. Thus, even the recording of small sorrows and successes, little feelings and fluctuations along the PhD paths on paper/computer, as Dean (2018) observed, would not only be catalysts for the authors to learn, but also be catalysts for many other layers of readers to learn too. Indeed, a person’s work has consequences for others and themselves (Richardson, 2002, 2004).

So, by encouraging creativity, reflection on research journeys and the PhD student/supervisor relationship, I offer further broader implications from this article. While some readers have positive PhD experience as students, not all of them would be sensitive to the negative experiences of others who are often marginalized. As a consequence, some of them might even go as far as saying, for example, ‘this reflective article fails to connect or resonate with my own lived experience and understanding of the doctoral supervisory process as one inherently more compassionate and supportive’. While such a comment neglects the significance of subjectivity in human social life and experience, it may be in part a wish not to unsettle the status quo of academic consensus and dominant narratives. By the same token, such a comment may also be reflective of the unequal power relationship between the dominant and marginalized voices about what ‘truth’ is. Whenever truth is claimed is power: the claim to truth is a claim to power, as Richardson (2002), Agozino (2003), Turner (2021) and Bowleg (2021) discussed. Every experience counts. Negative lived experiences are no less significant than positive ones; however, different they may be. We would achieve more, and quicker, if we listen to one another, even though we may experience the same space differently – perhaps on the basis of our different axes of differentiations (e.g. class, gender, sexuality and ‘race’).

In conclusion, I have reflected on the steps of my academic journey, which led to the completion of my doctoral degree. Poetry as a coping mechanism was the impetus that pedalled me out of the enchanted forest to a PhD by Publication path. While sharing doctoral experiences through the poetic medium of expression is not a well-travelled path, I engaged with feelings of discomforts to write it because its benefits outweigh its costs. Sharing my experience with poetic artefacts has empowered a deeper understanding of my experiences and created fresh insights. My aim, therefore, is that this article and accompanying poetic artefacts contribute to the field of doctoral education in general, and specifically, the TBP model. Since many PhD candidates attempt without success to complete their

studies, and some of them consequently may experience trauma, insights from this article may be valuable to them. As ‘poetic healing not only engages a person in self-discovery but also in sharing that discovery with others’ (Coulehan, 2010: 115; Sharma, 2019: 32), the following suggestions may be made about my discovery.

It is my hope that this article and the accompanying poems will resonate with doctoral candidates and other categories of learners, who may find themselves dramatized as ‘problems’ in the theatre of universities. We rarely acknowledge the achievements of these groups of learners who often fought with all they had but still lost the battle, and ‘dropped out’ – we know so little about what becomes of them. Future research should explore what becomes of them once they exit the university gates to appreciate their achievements better. Hence, this article offers insights into potential support strategies to better support doctoral candidates. Insights from this article may also be adapted by other categories of individuals for other situations not yet envisaged. Poetry, my garrison, defended when I was defenceless. Without poetry as therapy, for me, there would have been a different outcome. Imagine that.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Jah, for making ‘the rough ground to become level’ for me to complete my doctoral journey. Edith and Blessing, even though you are no longer with us physically, I am very grateful for your moral support - Rest in Peace. Thanks, Geoffrey, for your encouragement when I struggled to find a voice as a doctoral candidate. I am also thankful to the editors and anonymous referees for their deep engagement with the article/poems and their insightful questions and suggestions.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Writing poetry was not new to me. However, it is noteworthy that poetics in general or the therapeutic value of poetry, in particular, was not a part of any of my university degrees. Specifically, I obtained the following university degrees: Sociology and Psychology (BSc), Criminal Justice Policy (MSc), Cyber Criminology (PhD).
2. Ibrahim: In 2017, I changed my surname from Ibrahim to Lazarus.
3. Dissertation: In 2015, I extracted a book chapter from my Master’s dissertation submitted at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 2014. When I was a student at the LSE, I had a positive experience.

4. Sciences: I received the University Merit Award from the University of Greenwich (UoG) in 2013. When I was a student at the UoG, I had a positive experience.
5. Sahara: Apart from this point, the financial justification for insisting that I conduct my fieldwork in the United Kingdom instead of Africa south of the Sahara also displayed a double standard. My PhD funder fully funded other PhD candidates in the department who required fieldwork in foreign nations. I was awarded the scholarship based on my original research proposal involving a fieldwork site in Africa.
6. Stipend: They stopped my maintenance grant for living cost because I stopped meeting supervisors after emailing them that I would not want to be advised by them any longer. However, my stipend was later paid up to my withdrawal date when I complained to the university.
7. CCJLS: CCJLS means, Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society. It is the official journal of the Western Society of Criminology.
8. Tempted: Also, the elevated level of restrictions, strain and suffering resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic at the time had intensified the temptation to recoil from writing this reflective article.

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