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Recognizing and Escaping the Sham: Authority Moves, Truth Claims and the Fiction of Academic Writing About Adult Learning

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Adult learners<sup>1</sup> are often marginalized in higher education systems. They participate in a higher education system whose programmes and policies were largely created with a different type of student in mind, namely, 18-22 year olds (Bosworth et al., 2007). Many of them have embarked on study in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond, precisely because their experiences of compulsory education were unhappy and unsuccessful.

This paper draws on the experiences documented in a five-year, interdisciplinary study<sup>2</sup> of resilient adult learning. In the study resilience was defined after Challener (1997)<sup>3</sup> as the ability to succeed in higher education, despite facing significantly more setbacks and disadvantages than the average student. The aim of the study was to find out what makes some adult learners particularly successful in higher education, despite facing significant disadvantages. A theme that strongly emerged from the data was that learning itself – when it was encountered in its most profound form – conferred resilience on the learner (Hoult, 2012).

This paper explores the specific problems I encountered when I attempted to capture and write up this mysterious process of transformational learning in the conventional academic style. The reduction of vivid and moving personal accounts into the one-dimensional, monochromatic text expected by the academy felt like a sham to me. This paper explores the reasons why. It also attempts to open a conversation about how these issues might be addressed by a commitment to a different kind of scholarly writing practice.

Many of the resilient learners in the study spoke passionately about higher education as a profoundly transformative experience, one that allowed them to escape the economic and social inequalities of their early lives. Resurrection emerged as a key metaphor, and the relationship between hope, love and learning was a clear theme. At the same time, some of the learners were angry with the education system that had liberated them, and they notably existed on the margins between exclusion and full inclusion in the academy.

A key finding was that particularly resilient adult learners possess the capability to resist single, authoritative readings – both of themselves as subject and in their own ‘reading’ practices. My theoretical dilemma was how to write ‘up’ such resilient learning within the restricted vocabularies and dry register of the sort of academic writing that is expected in social scientific publications. Resilience itself emerged as a mutable and prismatic property in the study. A central dilemma was how to capture this sense of resilience in motion. When the participants verbalized what learning had given them, they both used language in a sparse way to indicate profundity (‘It gave me hope’), and they used metaphorical language to describe the impact of higher education on their lives (‘I was flying,’ or ‘It was like star gazing,’ for example). In this paper, I will explore the ramifications of this dilemma: how to communicate the mercurial nature of

resilience as it is performed by the learners in the study; and how to communicate the ability to resist categorization and single readings, without resorting to language that categorizes, controls, and paralyzes the subjects of an academic text. I explore all that this dilemma implies about the limitations and embedded power relationships in academic texts.

As well as exploring the dilemma, I want to tentatively offer an alternative. I will argue that what I will call “poetic writing” – by which I mean language that uses the symbolic as a way of attempting to express what cannot be contained in the rational, logocentric order – has at least as much to offer the researcher interested in investigating and representing notions of survival and resilience as the traditional language of the academy.

Firstly, I argue for the inclusion of the imaginative text – in the form of drama, poetry, and fiction – in social-scientific studies, and secondly, for the judicious inclusion of poetic writing alongside the conventional academic text in the representation of enquiry. The purpose of the article is therefore two-fold. It explores the limitations of academic writing on the one hand, and it aims to open a debate about what other kinds of writing might be of use on the other. In order to do so, I acknowledge the considerable contributions that already have been added to the debate from a number of directions. There are numerous critiques of Western academic writing practice, and the ontologies to which it adheres, from feminist (Cixous, 1975/1986, 1977/1991; Richardson, 1997), post-colonialist (Lau, 2008), and artistic (Lessing, 1981<sup>4</sup>; Horabin-Holliday, 2009) perspectives. This text is informed by all of these.

Here I want to offer some ways out – of recognizing, if not fully escaping – what I provocatively call the *sham* of academic writing. In order to do so, I will use as a framework the notion of *l'écriture féminine*, from the French philosopher Hélène Cixous. As a way of illustrating the possibilities of a different kind of writing, which follows a course of its own, rather than one of the writer's conscious design, I will also use two extended metaphors: a butterfly and a snake.

### *Confession*

For Cixous, any scholar who wants to write faithfully about the world as s/he experiences it will always have an ambivalent place within the academy. There is a tension in any work that sets out to draw attention to the limitations and empty promises of academic discourse, while at the same time relying on an academic publication for the means to disseminate those ideas. I acknowledge, therefore, from the outset, the disingenuity of describing the problems of academic writing while inhabiting that space. A tension, therefore, runs throughout this text. Somehow, I need to find a way of exposing the sham while refusing to collude with the power games that are embedded in academic writing

practice. What are the options open to the academic writer who wants to escape the sham?

- 1) The first would be to escape the academic domain and find other ways of communicating, using language that is more ‘poetic’ – in effect to cross over to a creative form of writing.
- 2) The second might be to introduce a level of meta-commentary, which draws attention to each academic authority move, as I make it in parentheses. (Readers will have noticed so far, for example, that with the use of endnotes and references to other research texts, I am situating my writing in a recognizable field; the use of a French philosopher always confers academic capital on an Anglo-American writer, as Richard Jenkins (1992) points out; and the argument has so far been set out logically, with a reassuring use of sub headings and sections. I could go on. . . ). I think this option would compromise the aesthetic integrity of the text, though.
- 3) The third option is what I will attempt to do – to steer a middle course. I will ask readers to be alert throughout the piece, and to refuse to be seduced by those authority moves as I make each one. I will therefore attempt to walk the tight rope necessary to get this argument into academic print by arranging it logically and placing it in an appropriate disciplinary and generic field, while, at the same time, attempting to illustrate what I am arguing by writing in a style that challenges those conventions. I will finish by attempting to envision an alternative set of criteria for reviewing academic writing, one that refuses to collude with the sham.

### **Recognizing the Sham**

What do I mean by ‘sham’? The “authority moves” (Richardson, 1997) involved in academic writing include the adoption of an omnipotent, knowing, authorial voice; deferential (or contemptuous) use of quotations from generically similar texts; employment of a linear structure of ‘rational arguments’ that build from one paragraph to the next; a presumption of transparency -- as if the act of writing had no effect on the subject that is being written about (Holliday, 2005)<sup>5</sup>; and an apparent commitment to literality rather than symbolism in the choice of language.<sup>6</sup> Robert Nelson (2011) draws our attention to the aggression and self-aggrandizing pomposity that frequently attends these rhetorical devices in his paper on the history of rigour in academic writing. It is sub-titled “the nasty side of scholarship.”

Such tropes are not merely stylistic. They emanate from a Western<sup>7</sup>, post-Enlightenment<sup>8</sup>, intellectual tradition, one which, in the social sciences, is intensified by an infatuation with a particular version of science itself. But

whereas such writing arguably is the best and most efficient way to communicate the results of large-scale, quantitative studies in clinical trials to practising medical doctors and pharmaceutical researchers, it is a far less appropriate way of communicating in the human sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The adoption of a style of writing characterized by certainty, logical linearity, and authority moves in a realm characterized by uncertainty and unknowing is much more problematic. It is a defended form of writing that covers up more than it reveals, and as a result, it feels dishonest, and it lacks warmth. Crucially, it does not help very much.

The expectations of the review boards of the overwhelming majority of academic journals will be that a problem or question is set out at the beginning, evidence is presented, arguments are rationally made, and each paragraph builds from one point to the next. Some journals even set out a writing frame with the numbered sections proceeding from the introduction through the results to the discussion and conclusions. This logical, case-building model of writing and clear disciplinary boundaries is presented and generally accepted as neutral – the natural way of writing academically. I argue that it is not neutral, but rather is the product of a highly politicized ontology one that employs a set of authority moves in order to underline its superiority and sense of knowing and separation from those who do not know.

As Lau (2008) argues in relation to the political nature of information-classification systems, “an ontology imposed on another” (p. 1) is evidence of the colonial gesture, and as such, urgently invites critical investigation. And yet for the most part, the criteria for reviewing articles in peer-reviewed journals are dominated by notions of logic, rationality, genre, and disciplinary gestures of compliance. Even those journals that sincerely attempt to offer a space in which the experiences of the marginalized and the oppressed can be represented, do so within a framework that upholds the academic game of privilege and power. The authority moves embedded in academic writing reflect, and at the same time promote, a hierarchical view of the world – it is the master’s voice<sup>9</sup> we read in such texts.

Cixous, after Derrida, describes such writing practice as ‘logocentric’ and she defines its gender as ‘masculine’ (1975/1986). She portrays such a way of writing as poisonous, not only because it marginalizes and ridicules other voices that do not or cannot conform to its norms, but also because – for all of its truth claims – it is not faithful to real, lived experience; it cannot get close to what it feels like to live. Furthermore, in that it does not do what it sets out to do – to reflect what is ‘real’ in a transparent and neutral way – it is a sham. For her, refusing to collude with the sham means refusing to use the tools of the master.

It is this connection between the desire to master and the desire to perform that mastery in scholarly writing that drives Cixous’ rejection of the logocentric

ideal. Her rejection of it is not just a question of taste. Rather, it is the questioning of an entire ontological stance because it is not simply the inadequacy of the conventional social-scientific text that is a problem, but also the sense of separated superiority that it confers on the writer.

The limitations of academic writing practice produce problems and constrain the text, to be sure. More concerning is the visceral effect it has on the writer. We need to be worried about what this cold, detached, and combative style of writing does to us as human beings. As Laurel Richardson (1997) puts it, “the arrogance it fosters in our psyche” (p. 89) is perhaps more concerning than the way it limits our disciplines and depth of analysis. Such writing removes us – readers and writers alike – from what makes us vulnerable, and from the raw messiness of real life. The basic assumptions of the academic game – that knowledge can be mastered, explained, and owned by the writer/researcher – are revealed as a sham as soon as writing becomes ‘feminine’ in the Cixousian sense. In the ‘feminine’<sup>10</sup> economy, the writer/researcher agrees to a certain passivity – to be *written through* by what wants to be known and shared. Such writing cannot be theorized or reduced to the rules of the philosophical game – that’s the point. It can only survive in a different realm, one in which the old rules are exposed, disregarded, and discredited.

You don’t seek to master. To demonstrate, explain, grasp. And then to lock away in a strongbox. To pocket a part of the riches of the world. But rather to transmit: to make things loved by making them known. You, in your turn, want to affect, you want to wake the dead, you want to remind people that they once wept for love, and trembled with desires, and that they were then very close to the life that they claim they’ve been seeking while constantly moving further away ever since. (Cixous, 1977/1991, p. 57)

The pursuit of feminine writing within a research context has significant implications for the way the writer/ researcher, the text, and the subject are positioned in relation to each other. Writing/research becomes an inherently pedagogical activity, not in the sense of exposition, but rather as a way of awakening readers to a new reality. The text writes itself through the author. Unlike the masculine economy, with its strong box and its keys, in the feminine economy the knowledge is not a stable, unchanging entity that is up for grabs, nor is it produced and owned by its writer. Rather, it is a dynamic and fluid force that works through the text. The particular tension in my own work has been about how to find a way of best representing resilience in adult learning that evokes the elusive, mutable, and energetic nature of resilience within an academic language, which itself operates in ways that names and categorizes (and therefore undermines) truly transformational learning.

In asking what it is that gives some learners the strength to withstand significant disadvantages and to succeed in higher education despite them, one immediately encounters the fundamental problem of academic writing – how to name something without petrifying it. The search for a type of writing that resists the pull to the binaried thinking which underpins much of the Western, post-Hegelian philosophical tradition, and that separates you from me and death from life, drives much of Cixous's work. She is searching for a type of writing and naming that instead confronts "perpetually the mystery of the there-not-there" (Cixous, 1991, p.3) and which, instead of objectivising and fragmenting the other in language, lets the other live and speak freely in the text.

It's all there: where separation doesn't separate; where absence is animated, taken back from silence and stillness. In the assault of love on nothingness. My voice repels death; my death; your death; my voice is my other. I write and you are not dead. The other is safe if I write. (Cixous, 1991, p. 4)

This raises a fundamental dilemma for any researcher in the social sciences who wants to write about the subject of the enquiry without 'othering' him or her. How to find a way of doing this without excluding oneself from the available publication arenas in the academy is what drives this paper.

There are undoubtedly costs to the writer/researcher who chooses to take Cixous' path. The first and most immediate is that work written in this way can remain invalidated by an academic community, which is tied to logocentric writing conventions. Choosing to go against the rules of the game is extremely risky – exclusion has material consequences in an academic world where publications are linked to income both for the individual and the institution (Hoult, 2012).

The risks to the psyche of the writer are perhaps more severe still; the necessary submission on the part of the writer/researcher to "being 'possessed', which is to say, dispossessed of herself" (Cixous, 1975/1986, p. 86) is a hefty ask. The certainties, elegant conclusions, and logical linearities that emanate from conscious composition are no longer relevant or even possible when the writing is 'feminine.' Where there were solid ladders that took the reader from argument to evidence to conclusion, we find snakes. And snakes, as we know, have a chequered history when it comes to knowledge. Following the desert path of the snake wrenches us out of the safe binaries of the academic world of truth and untruth, real data and fiction, and unknown and known into more dangerous terrain.<sup>11</sup> Moi argues that "Cixous's work bases itself on a conscious distinction between 'poetry' and 'philosophy'" (1985/2002, p. 118), and this would suggest that the poetic discourse is preferable to philosophy.

Two ‘philosophical’ problems immediately arise, though. What authority can the poetic text claim in the context of empirical research? And, how can a writer help the reader to follow complex ideas if conventional logical structures are disregarded altogether? Already, though, I have presented a binary. Without intending to, I have led us straight into the debating chamber and taken up a stance. Once again we find ourselves plunged into an either/or debate. It is a comfortable place to be and it is somewhere we feel at home but this is not a Cixousian position and it is not helpful. Cixous argues that the logocentric system can never be relied on to function totally efficiently. There are always gaps and cracks and places where the machinery breaks down and that this has always been the case. Even when the logocentric reading of the world has been most dominant, still the “uncertain, poetic persons” (Cixous, 1975/1986, p. 83) have managed to get through the gaps into a space where they can be creative and write honestly. Snakes live in the cracks in the dry ground and from the arid desert life breaks through. And there are undoubtedly signs of life in the academy. I like Hamdam’s (2009) notion of ‘quilting’ data, for example, and Eryaman’s (2012) exploration of what a ‘language of Islamic inquiry’ would look like in education research, informed by the Sufi practices of whirling and trembling, is exciting and there are others. Here I want to open up a new split in the dry ground. I want to offer poetic writing as another alternative to the dominant version of academic writing, which we have been taught to accept as the only one that is possible.

I will now illustrate how these limitations I have outlined above restrict research into resilient and transformational learning with reference to data from my own study, and illustrate how I started to resolve those tensions.

### **Attempting to Write ‘Resilience’**

As soon we attempt to capture resilience in words, it dies, like the butterfly, on the paper that is suppose to preserve it. How is it possible to find a way of letting something as profound and energetic as transformational and resilient adult learning live in, and fly through, the text? The problem is a perennial one for anyone who tries to name what exceeds language. As Cixous puts it (1981, p. 45):

As soon as the question ‘What is it?’ is posed, from the moment a question is put, as soon as a reply is sought, we are already caught up in masculine interrogation. I say ‘masculine interrogation’: as we say so-and-so was interrogated by the police.

At the beginning of one of the most helpful and lively accounts in English of the adult learning scene – George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* (1916) –



Eliza Doolittle mistakes Professor Higgins' academic interest in her accent for the hostile note-taking of a policeman (or police informer, as the bystander puts it 'a copper's nark'). In the same way, throughout the study I was constantly aware of the police officer in me who wanted to seize the evidence for resilient adult learning as soon as I encountered it – to take it down and put it in the cells. Eliza's anguished cries to Higgins on their first encounter, "How do I know whether you took me down right?" (Shaw, 1916, p. 11) could justifiably have been the articulated concerns of every resilient learner in the study. Two approaches are sure to kill the subject: the entomologist with his net in one hand, his killing jar and his ethyl acetate in the other; or the police officer with her tape recorder and her explanation of the subject's right to remain silent.

Research demands results – categorizations, definitions, and conclusions – but language itself forbids the real energy that characterizes resilient adult learning from emerging because, "there is almost nothing left of the sea but a word without water" (Cixous, 1979, p. 412).<sup>12</sup> In other words, we trade in our memory of the mouthful of salty water as a wave unexpectedly covers us and sound is suddenly split, for the convenience of a useful and generally recognizable signifier – *sea* – in order to function in the day to day. The act of naming at once destroys what it preserves. Silver-spotted Skipper, Duke of Burgundy, Purple Emperor, Brimstone butterflies all lay dead on the paper that preserves them. And it is the same for all the important words that we encounter in our work with adult learners – transformational learning, resilience, death, hope, and love.

A place must therefore be found in the margins between language and what lies outside of it to begin to describe what resilience looks and feels like to the learner.<sup>13</sup> Two examples of this tension follow. The first example illustrates the sham as it experienced by the adult learners. The second both illustrates the way that the academic text itself limits the representation of the adult learning experience, and demonstrates the beginnings of a way out of the sham.

### *Example 1: Experiencing the Academic Sham*

This first example from my data is an interview with a resilient adult learner named Claire. Claire is included here, not so much because of the methodological dilemmas involved in writing up her interview, but more because of her answers themselves, which draw attention to the academic sham. On the surface the interview text is an apparently safe "liberation narrative" (Richardson, 1997) about studying at one of the world's most ancient and prestigious universities as a function of recovery from a marriage breakdown and the dissolution of a previous identity as a wife and mother. Below that is a much more interesting and darkly energetic story in which she gives voice to her anger

about the system that has liberated her; she exposes and reviles the oppressive and controlling nature of her alma mater. The explicit resilience story that structures Claire's narrative centres on learning as the survival strategy in the aftermath of the breakdown of her marriage. It is a familiar but powerful account in which she draws on the feminist understanding of self-discovery to explain how the motivation to learn supported her recovery from abandonment. These are her first words of the interview:

Like lots of women going back into learning, it was the breakdown of a relationship. I was married when I was 19, I was married for 29 years. Basically my old man ran off with another woman . . . I was stuck at 48 wondering what the hell I was going to do for the next, however many years.

As such, she recounts her progress from powerlessness to success via adult learning. Claire's is a logical and linear narrative – her husband leaves her and she applies for a place at a college of higher education and studies for a year. She passes the course with flying colours and then gains a place at the said ancient and prestigious university. Again she is remarkably successful. The liberation narrative is a very important discourse. The tremors that lie beneath it, though, represent a far more interesting account of the real, lived experience of the adult learner's progress. This other account of resilient learning concerns the struggle of the adult learner to achieve and to maintain mature autonomy within an academic system that insists on obedience, and which infantilizes her in order to achieve it. It is the struggle of the adult learner who recognizes the sham but who is dependent on it to succeed. She refers to the academic system as “a façade”, for example, and she draws attention to the way some of the most highly achieving students have learned to adeptly perform in a way that mimics the set texts but that simultaneously manages to stay on just the right side of plagiarism. Both versions of the resilience narrative are in constant play in her interview, and they move against each other throughout the transcript.

There is a running fault line in Claire's account between her endorsement of the educational capital (which, as Bourdieu, 1979/2006, argues is the “certified form” of economic and cultural capital, p. 287) that is provided to her as a student and graduate on the one hand, and her challenge of what she regards as the façade of the system on the other. An unresolved tension lurks beneath a lot of what Claire says about her time at the university. It operates at word as well as sentence level. Throughout the interview, Claire oscillates between on the one hand endorsing a hierarchical understanding of higher education institutions as representative of the natural order together with the corresponding assumption that innate ability – rather than privilege – is what defines the student population, and on the other hand challenging that assumption. She sets up the university as the academic ideal, and those who study there as a natural elite: “You are obviously

being judged with the *prime* of the kids in the country” and “we’re talking about the *cream* of the bunch. These kids have been the best everywhere” (emphases added).

Claire’s account brings to mind another resilient adult learner from English literature: Jane Eyre. In Charlotte Brontë’s novel, the characterisation of Jane is disturbed by, but dependent on, her other – Mr. Rochester’s first wife, who lives upstairs in the attic. I refer to Jane Eyre briefly because Brontë’s illustration of the relationship between the controlled and sensible Jane and the wild and destructive Mrs. Rochester, who lives in the attic, serves as a helpful analogy for understanding the split that occurs in Claire’s account of the benefits and horrors of being an adult learner in an elite university.

*Jane Eyre* is a central text in Gilbert and Gubar’s (1979/2000) argument that the apparently conformist representation of female characters in the work of many canonical nineteenth-century women writers is undercut and constantly undermined by dark rage about the limitations of the reality of those women’s lives. Thus the celebratory representation of compliant domesticity in the heroines is never safe or stable; it is always accompanied by danger and darkness that is located elsewhere in the text. In the same way, Claire’s account of the liberating effect of the university is dependent on, but also constantly at risk from, attack by another version of the same university – one that is controlling, anti-intellectual, and immoral.

At signifier level, the practised, narrative account of resilient adult learning that is presented to the “women at conferences” (through her voluntary outreach work) is always under threat. Just as Charlotte Brontë’s responsible and tame heroine is undermined and exposed by her wild, pyromaniac other self who lives in the attic, Claire’s words are at constant risk of setting fire to themselves. She talks about the system as a façade, and of the serious moral implications of presenting academic texts as evidence of the world to privileged students who will go on to take up powerful political positions.

Although it is painful, Claire presents her position as a mature student as something that gives her direct access to perceiving the sham in ways that are not open to younger students. Claire’s age, besides setting her apart from the norm, is the source both of her resilience and her conflict with the system. Her maturity is a constant source of difficulty for her. She distinguishes between the good teachers who were not threatened by her and those who were. Not only did she present tutors with pedagogical challenges but also her own sense of identity was challenged by the system.

One of them actually said to me, ‘you must remember, I am the teacher.’  
It is very difficult if they take that stance. You go back to being a child again.

The child is a recurrent theme in many texts that feature adult learners. Many adult learners talk negatively about the experience of returning to education as one that forces them back into a dependent, child-like position. They complain that their years of experience count for nothing and they are expected to behave like teenagers. For Claire the pressure to become “a child again” in order to make her teachers feel secure inhibits her development and diminishes her faith in the pedagogical process. She resists the characterization strenuously.

I wanted to think carefully about this enforced childishness, which seems an inescapable experience for the adult learner. I wondered if there is a more positive way of reconstructing it, one that allows the adult learner a particular strength. Literature offers a more radical position for the figure of the child in the adult learning scene than the one that Claire rejects. In Hans Christian Anderson’s story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, the population of the country is told that only the innocent can see the fine clothes worn by the emperor, which have been created for him by the tailor. Only a little boy can tell the emperor the truth – that he is naked. The sham is revealed. The figure of the child in the story starkly illustrates the bounden duty of the truly innocent – to look intently and to speak freely. Claire’s problem is that, like the little boy, she perceives and can articulate the sham but, unlike the little boy, her innocence is not protected. She is in the tortuous position of serving the sham while seeing it for what it is, as the following quotation illustrates:

It seemed to me that a lot of academia is a façade. I don’t know how you can go through the (elite university) system, if you have any intelligence at all, and not question it.

The façade is vigorously upheld by those it serves but also by those it doesn’t, just as the citizens in Anderson’s story all buy into the fiction of the fine clothes. The very fabric of the work of the university supports the sham in Claire’s account. Its regulatory systems, including its heavy focus on summative assessment; rigid disciplinary boundaries; positioning of teachers and learners; the way it differentiates what is real and valuable from what is not; and the way it demands that questions are framed are all based on an understanding of learning that obviates risk and encourages frightened compliance. As a mature learner, Claire can see these structures and boundaries for what they are, and she condemns them.

The discipline itself is portrayed by her as both shameful and shameful:

People are sitting there saying to me ‘you need evidence’, and that’s somebody’s quote from sitting in an office. That’s opinion, it’s not evidence.

The university thus engages in its own reproductive project, forcing its learners to endlessly replicate what stands for reality in a never ending

performance of scholarship that hermetically seals texts and keeps the messy world outside. The way that the university conspires to foist this repeated act of cloning on its learners through its reading practices is an idea that is taken on by Wood (2006). In her exploration of the potential for a model of learning that is not based on property (what Claire calls “opinion” and what her tutors call “evidence”), Wood cites Derrida’s ideas (1976/1992,) about academic reading in ‘Of Grammatology.’ Derrida characterizes the sort of deferential referencing that Claire’s teachers tell her is ‘evidence,’ and which is a core feature of academic practice, as operating as “a guardrail.” Wood (2006) takes the notion of the guardrail further, emphasizing its restrictive function, “Jump over a guardrail and you risk falling, or being swamped. Remain this side and you risk sterility” (p. 54). Claire resists and condemns the guardrail. For her it does not just exist to prevent learners from taking risks, but it guards the texts themselves from really being interrogated or even being disturbed by juxtaposition or comparison. She made the point, for example, that hardly any books from academics at the most obvious competitor elite university were included on the reading list, thus protecting the illusion that the version of reality that has been carefully constructed by the academic discipline is even more rarefied to one which is produced in house. The problem for Claire is not just the effort needed to hold on to her honest vision, but how to contain her anger at what the sham produces while still remaining inside the system.

I spoke to a lecturer and I said, ‘don’t you feel that this is not only indefensible, it’s immoral. You’re teaching these children that you can learn about something that is as complex as social exclusion in three and a half days...’ This wouldn’t matter, except these children will be in positions of power where they’re making decisions about ordinary people’s lives. That’s immoral.

The university is operating its own robust version of social exclusion by insisting on closed reading of a restricted range of texts, and maintaining that reference to these texts is more valuable than other forms of knowledge (such as the adult learner’s own understanding of the world, based on experience). The socially excluded subject includes what can’t be said (“the emperor isn’t wearing any clothes”) or read, within the university walls, or at least within the undergraduate assessment framework. Claire objects to the way that the powerful elite (interestingly she refers to them as ‘children’, apparently neutrally) is being educated – not just for their own welfare but for society’s as well. She sees past the veneer to the political purposes and structures that have created the system:

I mean, it’s constructed isn’t it? You know education is constructed. Even by the reading list it’s constructed.

The recognition of construction is not a blissful moment of enlightenment. It is painful, and it leaves Claire in a place of struggle and anger. She is deconstructing the façade but she still depends on it, and that leaves her stranded in a horrible place. She is deconstructing a system that has the power to award or take away symbolic capital at the stroke of an assessor's pen on the mark sheet, while at the same time trying to remain resilient within that system.

Claire needs to angrily resist the nonsense but she also needs the time and space to construct new meanings, and to lay down new cognitive ground. Deconstruction alone can't protect her because there is no space for *jouissance*, for joy, in a system that insists on "24 essays in two eight-week (semesters)," and where only a narrow range of "academic skills" is rewarded. Deconstruction without reconstruction keeps the learner in a place of opposition. Evidence itself is highly suspect and of her own dissertation she says, "It's very easy to read the story in sound bites for interviews." There is a strong sense that lived reality is not usefully represented in academic discourses. She contests not only the way that knowledge is conveyed and communicated but the nature of the knowledge itself, drawing attention to the dishonesty of the epistemology of the evidence-based disciplines ("social science and education research"), much of which is gathered by sitting "in a corner with a clipboard."

Submission of the learner is guaranteed if the learner is always a guest in disciplines that are not her home. Claire cites the way that different disciplines have different writing conventions, which seem natural and invisible to those inside the discipline, but which are like separate languages to outsiders who are temporarily spending some time in that discipline as a learner.

Now, that's difficult. So you're changing the way you write and the way you present. The people who are giving you supervision are expecting different things.

Two processes come into play – the pressure to stay in the *habitus* and the need to submit to a very narrow version of the potential for writing. Instead of enjoying writing with all its potential for transformation and adventure, Claire has to learn how to perform academic tricks, "churning out" essays that are bound by a very tight structural straitjacket, "cracking great introduction, three black, three white, cracking great conclusion." She studies three disciplines in the social sciences in her first year. Each discipline demands that its own protocols are adhered to and reproduced. Inter-disciplinary work, by its very nature, gives the learner the privileged insight into the sham if she is prepared to take it. She identifies rigidity of genre boundaries (which operate like national borders, artificial, man-made constructs grafted onto the Earth's surface), and the constraint of academic mono-linguality within the disciplinary fields.

Claire's own dilemmas are partly resolved by the end of her account. She graduates successfully, and she finds some meaningful engagement in the process of researching and writing her own dissertation. Her responses highlight deeper questions about the responsibilities of the educational researcher to write in a way that goes beyond the arrogance of the person "sitting in an office churning out quotes."

*Example 2: Limitations of the Academic Text*

This second example draws on an interview with Sarah, a woman who had returned to learning in her 60s. As an account of resilient adult learning, the interview text works on at least two levels, or rather at least two forces are at play within the text. The first is a rational and sensible account of the strategies and sources of support that Sarah employed in order to gain her certificate and then master's degree in history. I can play entomologist with this discourse of resilience, neatly catching each theme (institutional support/resistance of peer group pressure outside the institution/understanding of self, as one who doesn't give up) and arranging them neatly into themes. Each butterfly dies quickly but I can at least catalogue them, and draw some sensible conclusions from the arrangement. Behind it, or within it, or below it, is another account, which is far more difficult to capture and categorize. The police officer wants to exclude this second account because it is impossible to frame. Whereas the first account is earthborn, the second is cosmic. The first one employs familiar language to describe what is known, the other struggles to find a language – it trails off, it hesitates and it exclaims, "It was like star-gazing!"

What mediates these two discourses is the interview itself. My questions form a boundary fence right down the middle of the conversation. Sarah's second electrically charged discourse keeps emerging from behind the fence I have erected. The fence is, as Cixous (1975/1986) puts it, "in the process of being undermined by millions of species of mole (Topoi: ground mines)" (p. 65). The more I attempt to patrol the fence by attempting to herd the conversation to one side of it, the more the second discourse breaks through. The energy of the text is borne out of the pull and resistance between a logocentric discourse about resilient learning -- framed by my questions that correspond to my semi-structured interview plan and with which Sarah's responses are partly compliant - - and the second, wilder discourse that Sarah leads and to which I respond.

She tells me that as a result of adult learning "everything has just opened up," for example, and her answers serve to open the interview beyond the tight boundaries of the social scientific text all the way through. She tells me that life has "expanded . . . That's what I really do enjoy. And I just feel so privileged. It just amazes. It's almost like a Disney: star gazing." This passionate account of

transformational learning exceeds any framework we might try to impose upon it, but perhaps the text is more interesting because of the struggle than it would have been if these issues were more fully resolved. In this sense, perhaps it is helpful to think of interview analysis as an elliptical text, and to celebrate that. To hunt for what is lost in it would be to collude with what Derrida (1978/2007) calls “the phantom of the center” (p. 375). There is a kind of benign violence in the transcript – it moves backwards and forwards, resisting closure. What is thinkable and sayable appears at times to be sovereign, but at others it gives way to something far more fluid, open, and dynamic.

When I constructed the questions for the semi-structured interview, I was thinking in terms of oppositions – those “dual, irreconcilable” building blocks of logocentric thought (Cixous, 1975/1986). I imagined my resilient learners in terms of what they were clearly not (those unresilient learners with whom I also worked), and I also thought in terms of challenges/benefits, teachers/learners, and carrying on/dropping out. What I had constructed, therefore, was a logocentric framework into which I tried to drive Sarah. Holliday (2004) argues that this pattern of researcher-designed research questions, which “drive” the research and consequently render ‘results,’ is the most common model of qualitative research (p. 278).

In this interview, Sarah complied with my researcher’s desire to drive and control by providing answers on the first level. She tells me, for example, that dropping out was never an option for her, even though she was tired, and that she did not feel supported by her friends at home because “I would regret and never forgive myself if I did.” It is relatively easy to capture such an answer as evidence of a personality trait such as tenacity if an essentialist approach to resilience is taken, or of a capability to resist social pressures if a performative approach is taken. A Bourdieusian reading might allow for a reading of the statement in terms of internalized symbolic capital.

None of these explanations are enough though. Sarah challenges and undermines these simple readings at a second level in a way that shows that, as Cixous (1975/1986) puts it, “she is not attached to herself” (p. 89), and she resists all my attempts to put her back in touch with material explanations for her resilience. The refrain ‘only connect’ occurs throughout the early part of Willy Russell’s (1981/2000) great play about resilient adult learning – *Educating Rita*. It is an explicit intertextual reference to Forster’s (1910) *Howard’s End*, a subplot of which is the sad case of the unresilient working class learner. Connection is a quintessential feature of the resilient adult learning experience. The connections in Sarah’s text, though, go a long way beyond intellectual, social, and cultural ones. She can certainly now go to a historical bar and imagine its origins, or she can read an article in a weekend newspaper about John Berger or Virginia



Woolf and link it to what she knows. But there is a far deeper philosophical sense of connection at work:

I think I, I think I came to a point in my life where, how can I put it, where I suddenly noticed connections in my life. You seem to know that you – this is something you have to grab hold of, or at least try it.

The subject is thus propelled along by a stronger force. She goes stargazing and resilience comes from this deep understanding. But this was going on before the formal learning began. Before she even started to learn history she was already walking on the edge – tapping into something that allowed her to delight in danger while knowing that she was completely safe. When she retired in her late 50s, she had time to herself,

And what I did when I first gave up work, now this is another odd thing, I suppose. Well, I don't think it was odd, but I would have what my other friends would call my destiny. I'd come up to London on the travel card and I'd hop on a bus. And sometimes I did go to one place and I'd end up in another, because you can never be lost. I walked towards Docklands as it was being developed. Sometimes I would think 'God, nobody knows where I am.' If I was mugged, killed, anything, nobody would have a clue. But it opened up a lot.

There are echoes here of Virginia Woolf's (1925/1976) Mrs. Dalloway's pedestrian tour of the capital and the resultant thoughts about herself. Whereas Sarah is revelling in the opening up (sorties) and the expansion, Mrs. Dalloway's experience is portrayed as a loss:

But often now this body she wore . . . , this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying; no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway, not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, pp. 14-15)

Whereas Woolf explores the loss of a woman's identity beyond the traditional scope for it as the angel of the house (this is a study as much of the invisibility of the middle-aged woman as it is a meditation on the loss of self in an ideological context), Sarah delights in the dissolution of herself. The two accounts could be read as illustrations of the contrasting theoretical 'feminist' approaches to self – the Anglo-modernist approach of Woolf compared to the Franco-post-structuralism of Cixous. Sarah's account is celebratory. The loss of self is supported and also celebrated by Cixous (1977/1991):

I am under the cosmic tent, under the canvas of my body and I gaze out, I am the bosom of happenings. And while I gaze, I listen . . . I am invaded. I am pushed to the limit. A music floods through me, inculcates me with its staves. (p. 53)

There is a sense of joyful annihilation here – the loss of self is intrinsically bound up in the thrill of opening up. A profound sense of cosmic safety that goes well beyond any notions of physical or psychic danger underpins the statement. This precedes her ability to get lost in learning. When it is transformational learning, it allows (insists that) the learner get lost, be in danger, while at the same time, letting her know that she is completely safe.

Returning to learning therefore crystallized what was already going on for Sarah. The alternative would be to succumb to a kind of death:

Now this sounds very dramatic, but it's almost as if I didn't do something, you know inside you, when you know . . . you don't know what it is, you know you've got to do that, or you almost feel you'll die if you don't.

Learning is therefore, in the final analysis, the alternative to death. Through learning history, Sarah is able to refuse to collude with the death of others like the subjects of her own historical investigations. She is learning, alive, excited, open, and available to those subjects, and their stories make themselves heard through her writing. She learns and lives. It is a clairvoyant text. The analysis of the text in this paper has helpfully illuminated some methodological issues. The struggle between the poetic and the analytic ways of writing remains unresolved. The interview with Sarah allowed me to understand that the tension between the academic and the poetic, or the logocentric and the feminine ways of writing, need not finally be resolved on one side or the other. In fact, this interview was served well by their mutual co-existence.

### **Escaping the Sham**

The example of the write-up of the interview with Sarah demonstrates how the use of texts that would not normally make a functional (as opposed to a decorative) appearance in the research papers, work to open the text in new ways. When we juxtapose generically diverse texts, each one deconstructs the others and in this constant undermining of truth claims we can find a way forward – as Blake (1793/1975) suggests, “without contraries, (there) is no progression.” In a study that includes multiple texts from different genres, we have to acknowledge that each text has an equal claim to represent reality and, in so doing, we concede to its partiality.

In my own work, serious consideration of Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* (1981/2000) and Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916/2007) (as well as David Mamet's

*Oleanna* [1993], which provides an apophatic representation of resilience) are placed alongside empirical data, such as interviews with real resilient learners and my own autobiographical account of resilient adult learning. The artistic texts are not secondary or accessory forms of data, they are taken as seriously as other forms of data. Each text presumes to represent reality faithfully according to its own terms. Only in the constant exposition of the sham can we get anywhere near an honest account of the deepest and most transformative human experiences. The sham is revealed when a text, which claims authority and a privileged relationship with the truth and demands to be taken seriously, is placed next to another text that operates in an entirely different way, although it deals with the same subject matter. Once the space has been opened up for different types of writing to exist alongside one another, types of writing that deliberately transgress the defensive rules of the academic game can be included.

I will finish by tentatively offering some alternative reviewing criteria for a journal that wishes to escape the sham. I do so in the spirit of opening a conversation rather than closing an argument. In addition to the set of criteria that are sent to reviewers, I would suggest that the following set of criteria are also applied:

- 1) Does the writer admit that the data presented can only ever claim to represent reality partially?
- 2) Is there evidence of humility in the text (i.e., does the writer acknowledge that there are other ways of understanding the phenomena than the ones he or she has presented)?
- 3) Are participants and other writers treated with compassion and warmth?
- 4) Is there evidence of the tolerance of contradiction and celebration of multiple readings of whatever phenomena is being discussed in the text? Keats' phrase 'negative capability'<sup>14</sup>, is helpful here. He described it thus: "I mean negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason . . . "
- 5) Has the writer taken any risks with this writing, or is it merely safe reproduction of what has gone before?
- 6) Does the writing open up the debate or seek to close it down?
- 7) Has the writer accessed, or at least acknowledged, entirely other ways of understanding the phenomena from outside his or her field (for example, the arts, religion, philosophy, psychology, indigenous wisdom, etc.)?

## **Conclusions**

This paper has argued that the near ubiquity of a particular model of academic writing in mainstream social scientific arenas is unhelpful, and that it

prevents us from getting close to what is real in the lives of adult learners. I do not want to argue for abandonment of the rational, logocentric academic project. Rather, that such writing is only helpful if it is accompanied by other types of texts, and that one alternative way of writing that could accompany the dominant model is a form of writing that marries the scholarly with the poetic. It is important to acknowledge that there is some use and worth in the academic way of writing, but that it must not be allowed to continue its dominance unquestioned. As Nelson argues (2011, p. 385)

... the only rigour worth having is the one that deconstructs itself, that makes reflections upon its use, that cites learned authors but then contemplates the limits of the discourse that relies upon such texts or for which such texts create the conceptual parameters.

*L'écriture féminine* posits writing as a form of enquiry – of writing one's way through knowledge to a state of unknowing insight. The very purpose of such writing is to depart from the familiar, logocentric understanding of the world, and to find new ways of knowing and indeed unknowing. Writing as enquiry is not a report on what is already known; rather it takes the researcher to new places. This is a risky business because writing in the Cixousian sense means giving way to an entirely new way of knowing through “a disrupting and liberating mystical excess” (Hollywood, 2002, p. 4)<sup>15</sup>. This transformational writing experience is wild and profound, though, and it calls for a good deal of resilience to survive it. Escaping the sham depends on the extent to which we are prepared to take that risk.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Also sometimes known as mature students or 'returners.'

<sup>2</sup> The examples included in this article were previously published in the book that emanated from the study, Hoult, E.C. (2012). *Adult learning and la recherche féminine: reading resilience and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. A fuller account of the study as well as a more developed application of Cixous's ideas to educational research can be found in the book.

<sup>3</sup> Challener's study of stories of resilience in childhood defined the resilient child as “one who faced considerable challenges – more than those of an average child – yet ultimately was able, as an adult, to function as an independent, caring individual.” (p. 7)

<sup>4</sup> See her comments about academic literary analysis in the introduction to *Shikasta*.

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<sup>5</sup> As Holliday has argued (2005), for example, the third person distance of the social scientific writer is “naive in its ignorance of the creative presence of the researcher.” (p. 307).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, much academic writing is highly metaphorical, as Laurel Richardson points out. Metaphors of ‘frameworks,’ ‘scaffolding’ and ‘building’ arguments, and ‘defending’ points proliferate.

<sup>7</sup> I am wary of setting up an implied binary here between ‘Western,’ equating to rationality, and ‘Eastern,’ equating to irrationality. Said, among others, has drawn attention to the effects of this Orientalizing tendency in some European and American academics (1978/2003, pp. 45-46). Rather, I am making a specific, historical point that the commitment to logic as a preferred way of thinking, which grew out of a particular philosophical tradition located in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has come to represent scholarly thinking per se in the West. My attention was drawn to the way that a commitment to rationality and logic in the Western academic tradition dominates almost all of our scholarly processes, when I was presenting some of the ideas contained in this paper at the University of Kerala in 2010. Dr. B. Hariharan, a colleague in the Institute of English, pointed out that the content of my argument was undermined by my pedagogical approach, which was to lead the listeners through a series of logically linked points towards a convincing conclusion. Even though I had tried to use art work and photographs instead of language in my presentation, and had strenuously attempted to depart from teaching as a display of ‘mastery,’ my mode of delivery was still entirely saturated in a Western commitment to a particular form of thinking. It was a sobering lesson about the limitations of our ability to even recognize the sham, let alone escape it.

<sup>8</sup> Cixous specifically challenges the philosophical tradition of ‘othering,’ which she traces back to Hegel and his successors. She links this to her own autobiographical experiences of growing up in occupied Algeria.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous considers the ambivalent notion of mastery in teaching and learning directly in her exchange with Catherine Clément at the end of *The Newly Born Woman* (1975/1986). “There is a drawback we all know as teachers, which is the almost insurmountable difficulty of occupying a position of mastery.” (p. 140)

<sup>10</sup> As with masculinity, femininity is a performance which is available to everybody.

<sup>11</sup> See Hoult, E.C. (2012). *Adult learning and la recherche féminine: reading resilience and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.191-192 for a more detailed application of this metaphor.

<sup>12</sup> Cixous, H. (1979), *L’Approche de Clarice Lispector*, cited in *Moi*, (1985) p. 113

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<sup>13</sup> Cixous' (1993, p.213) dire warning that "if you love ritual of truth more than yourself you will be rejected by publishers and academies" is bleak, but her own prolific output and the intellectual capital she enjoys internationally within her own academic field belies the universal application of her statement.

<sup>14</sup> See his letter to his brothers on 21<sup>st</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> December, 1817.

<sup>15</sup> Cixous's work is protean, as Hollywood has stated elsewhere (2003, p.148). It withstands any number of thematic readings. My reading of her work draws the mystical and excessive. This is in line with readings of her writing recently explored by Hollywood (2002 and 2003), Renshaw (2003 and 2009), Gough (2000) and, to a lesser extent, Berkowitz (2003). This is not to deny the strong Lacanian themes in Cixous' writing. The two readings are not mutually exclusive; Lacan himself requested that his own writing be read as canonically similar to that of Saint Teresa of Avila, Hadewijch d'Anvers, and Saint John of the Cross (1975/1999), p. 76.

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