

The reverberations of childhood poverty: Composing lives in higher education

by

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## ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry unfolded alongside three undergraduate students at a large, research-intensive, western Canadian university to understand how echoes of systemic childhood poverty reverberate through their experiences as they compose lives on the university landscape. While countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and to a much lesser extent Canada, are adopting “widening access” and equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) policies, researchers often ignore the very poor, instead focusing on the experiences of working-class students (Ivana, 2017; Lehman, 2013). Research that does exist assumes a uniform effect of poverty and uniform experiences on higher educational (HE) landscapes (Aries & Seider, 2005; Krause & Armitage, 2014), which reduces students’ lives to a single story (Adichie, 2009). The varied needs of students whose lives have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty are not being adequately addressed or reflected in current educational policies (Nesbit, 2006). I engaged in research conversations with three participants over a nine-month period, seeking to understand their lived experiences narratively; that is, over time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative accounts were negotiated between participants and the researcher. The inquiry makes visible how profoundly silenced students’ lived experiences are on the university landscape and within “widening access” to HE initiatives. Administrators’, advisors’, and professors’ *belief in* participants (Elbow, 2008) was a game changer and crucial for their *survival* in university. Second, while poverty is seen in a box, systemic childhood poverty cannot be erased from participants’ embodied selves; that is, poverty shapes an entire life (Adair, 2003). Third, participation in this research was an act of resistance to living in the shadows and margins of HE landscapes because of a fear being *outed* and *ousted* if their origins become visible. As HE institutions continue to grapple with “widening access” and creating sustainable EDI landscapes, poverty-class students must become a key source of knowledge in shaping socially just policies and pedagogies. These students need to become part of the discussion rather the object of discussion (Adair, 2003).

Keywords: *poverty, narrative inquiry, higher education, access, Canada, qualitative methodology*

## PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Elaine J. Laberge. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “The Reverberations of Childhood Poverty: Composing Lives in Higher Education” (short title: “The Echoes of Poverty: Composing Lives in Higher Education”), No. Pro00063860, April 25, 2016. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

I was responsible for the data collection and analysis, literature review, as well as the manuscript composition. V. Caine and H. Northcott were the supervisory authors and were involved with concept formation and manuscript composition. J. Huber assisted with the development of and contributed to the manuscript edits.

## DEDICATION

Sarah, Margaret Rose, and Mildred, this manuscript is dedicated to you. Your willingness to make visible how systemic childhood poverty shapes your undergraduate experiences will echo across the lives of those who will walk in your footsteps.

This thesis is also dedicated to future undergraduate students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty and who will be composing lives on the higher education landscape.

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This thesis is a community effort and reflects the knowledge that has been passed to me early and along the way; I carry this with deep respect and commitment. Community, in all the ways one can imagine community, echoes throughout this inquiry. I apologize to all the many people that are not acknowledged in the meagre two pages the institutional regulations allow.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### History Repeating

A few years ago, I was attending a university on the east coast. I had moved across Canada, in part, to try to finally finish my first undergraduate degree. While I cleaned a house (this is how I financed my post-secondary education), my client played *History Repeating* performed by Dame Shirley Bassey and the Propellerheads (Gifford, 1997). It was a strangely adrenaline-charged experience. In the moment of listening to the song, I realized that I had come full circle. From a young girl who cleaned, scrubbed, and served to survive, I had built a career and was now a woman who had returned to clean, scrub, and serve to make a subsistence living. I began to understand that somehow I could not *escape* the experiences of childhood poverty<sup>1</sup>. I wondered if my life, as generations before me, was doomed to *history repeating* itself.

Years later, I wondered: If growing up poor affected me, it must have affected others. I wanted to explore how growing up in poverty shapes us—how the might and force of the Welfare system and government institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals) affect poor children. I attempted to investigate these themes in a play I wrote for a Canadian theatre course. However, the instructor of the course did not allow me to pursue this topic using a dramatic form. I began to wonder, where did people talk about poverty on higher education landscapes?<sup>2</sup>

In my after-degree in sociology, I returned to this wonder and wrote a paper about White Trash.<sup>3</sup> Also, I completed an Undergraduate Research Initiative-funded project on media portrayals of White Trash. I explored being Othered<sup>4</sup> in theory papers. I conducted an independent study to attempt to find subversive class-based humour. Inside and outside the classroom, conversations were silent—or

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<sup>1</sup> For this research, childhood poverty is systemic not situational.

<sup>2</sup> Bron (2016) explains higher education (HE) within an American and British context: “HE stands for a tertiary system of basic and advanced studies at university and university colleges. It includes professional and general programmes of different status depending on society and labour market demands” (p. 249).

<sup>3</sup> *White Trash* is capitalized in this thesis to signify a specific group that is *Othered* because of their socioeconomic location. That is, the underclass. For an in-depth discussion of White Trash see Wray (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The term *Other* is taken up in different ways by educational and social class scholars. In this thesis, Other(ed) is situated in relation to how childhood poverty shapes experiences on early and higher education landscapes.

dangerously superficial—on the issue of social class and poverty. As I researched and wrote, I became increasingly pained and shamed. My grades often reflected the tension between my personal knowledge of—and, desire to explore these topics versus what was implicitly required in the courses. There was no place for my unique experiences and personal insight inside academia. I began to ask how sociology—a discipline that is founded upon understanding social inequality—could reduce social class to *mention-in-passing comments* in textbooks and classroom discussions (Sayer, 2005, 2002).

My understanding, still in its infancy, of the complexity of social class and how it intersects with other social characteristics, sat in binary opposition to dominant poverty narratives: the ubiquitous Welfare Queen, George Orwell's (1963) *the lower classes smell* narrative, historical stories of justifiably displacing the poor, and various versions of stories of contempt, hatred, and dismissal toward those living in poverty (Adair, 2003; Rimstead, 2001; Steedman, 1987; Swanson, 2001). How well I personally know these stories; how well I know not to talk about these personal stories.

I learned on my childhood education<sup>5</sup> landscapes to silence the sting of poverty; to silence the burn and shame of a stomach as empty as the barren lunchboxes that I pretended contained lovely food like my classmates. In the larger community landscape of my childhood, I too recall experiences:

As we entered the laundromat, the women all busily doing their laundry and gossiping about life—weather, husbands, children, neighbours—stopped to stare, and, glare. I should have been too young to know why; but, even as a child, I knew. The sound of the chair's legs I was pulling (so I could reach the washing machine) screeched out my identity: *that* kid from *that* family. The women, in defiance of my polluting the machines where they had to wash their families' clothing, rallied around the machines, as if protecting them—and, prevented me from the task at hand. This is one of so many experiences of overt exclusion in a public space by a community because of my family's poverty. I learned in this clean place, and space, that I was dirty because of poverty.

I wonder what made these women decide to practice such cruelty. I was ashamed, hurt, disgraced; I was unable to process this. As a result, I internalized it and blamed myself for my shortcoming of being from poverty. As if I had a choice.

(From my field notes, January 5, 2015)

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<sup>5</sup> For ease of reading, *education* and *educational* versus Dewey's (1938) conception of education as experience are not being problematized in this thesis. Dewey (1938) views *education* different from *schooling* by focusing on lived experiences that shape *educative* or *miseducative* experiences.

The laundromat women, in this rural hamlet, were afraid of my family's clothes, embedded and embodied with our filth, hunger, and shame. Perhaps they worried that somehow these outcasts' cast-offs would taint and infect their clothing and, thus their bodies and lives. These women saw and storied the clothing I dragged in black garbage bags, and myself, as dangerous. By protecting the washing machines, "they could remain untouched" by the stain of poverty (Lugones, 1987, p. 5).

These are early experiences of exclusion because of poverty and they frame my higher education experiences. I am uneasy about telling these stories; however, unless they are interrupted, poverty narratives are destructive and marginalization is damaging (Brown & Strega, 2005; see also Goffman, 1963; hooks, 2000).

Adair (2003) dares to interrupt dominant narratives regarding poverty-class<sup>6</sup> students who are trying to obtain higher education. I stumbled across Adair's (2003) writing when researching a paper on White Trash. It was the first time I heard an academic talking about coming from poverty and how it painfully shaped her experiences as a university student. I thought her profoundly brave and also recognized a shared experience. There were others like me, whose experiences of systemic childhood poverty influenced how they approached and experienced higher education. Although it remains difficult to imagine places or people in higher education who would value my knowledge, interests, and experiences, I had found a way forward in which to take the first step.

Throughout this thesis I draw closely to King's (2003) philosophy "that the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 153). I weave throughout the introduction: (1) how I came to this research; (2) parts of my narrative beginnings<sup>7</sup> in relation to my research; (3) how early research experiences influenced

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize that the term "poverty-class" may be problematic. It categorizes and thus, may be seen to homogenize students who experienced systemic childhood poverty. I use this term and acknowledge that it sits in tension within the context of a narrative inquiry. For a more detailed explanation of my justification for using this term, see *The messiness of social class* section of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> As Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain, "In writing into our narrative beginnings as researchers, we attend through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space to our own experiences. This may mean that we reach as far back as our childhoods to understand, and, at times, to name our research puzzle; it also means that we attend to the places in which our stories have unfolded; and we make evident the social and political contexts that shaped our understandings. [However,] while our narrative beginnings are an important part of our research puzzle, they do not necessarily become, in their entirety, part of the final, public research texts; we share those parts that help audiences better understand our research puzzles and findings of our research" (p. 171). For the most part, my narrative beginnings have been explored and written for private purposes.

the methodological choice; (4) how narrative inquiry shaped the research; (5) how participants' narrative accounts are written and negotiated, and (6) justifications for this research.

### **Beginning in Experience**

*I scrub my skin raw, but I can't wash away the stain of poverty. It's deeply embedded in my self-identity. The shame was bearable until university—a place I believed was never meant for people like me. Now, I live in fear of being outed and ousted.*

This is part of my story. As a child, I struggled silently against the relentless burn of hunger and uncertainty. I scavenged secretly in the shadows and margins of my rural childhood landscape to silence the sting of emptiness. The educational landscape offered me a place for sanctuary and escape; however, solace was elusive. Early on, I sensed there was no space for me in education: I was Other; I was *that* girl from *that* family. I was labeled as *deficit* and not worthy of an education. I was storied as unable and unfit to learn before entering grade one by social workers, educators, and institutions. On the educational landscape I became *that* teenage runaway from a poverty-stricken home, destined to become another one of *those* girls. I learned early on not to trust educational spaces. I learned how to work and survive. I silently accepted educators' and institutions' damaging assessments. As an adult, I continue to experience disconnect and tension as I try to compose a life on the educational landscape that named me outcast.<sup>8</sup> Today, the life I am composing in higher education continues to be shaped by my experiences of growing up in abject poverty. The challenges I face as I compose a life in this place are daunting—and, often lived silently.

I wonder at the invisibility of my experiences in the research literature, in classrooms, in course material, and on university landscapes. I wonder what other students from childhood poverty would say if their voices were *not* silenced? While many navigate higher education hiding their past in silence, my personal experiences shape my research questions, goals, and methodology.

It is on this landscape that I began to wonder about my unyielding belief that attaining a university degree, and receiving the venerated and privileged piece of paper, would cause a magical event to transpire: that the stain and shame of poverty would somehow soothingly vanish from my skin. I

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) chapter is titled "Outcasts on the Inside" (p. 421).

wonder about dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives in relation to my experiences and those of *Others* like myself as we compose lives on higher educational landscapes.

The Nigerian storyteller Okri (1997) helps me to understand how experiences shape lives:

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we can change our lives. (p. 46)

Okri (1997) makes me wonder about the intergenerational aspect of experience: my story does not begin with me. I carry my mother's and absent father's childhood and adult experiences. I carry the experiences of learning from my great aunty. My early education experiences, retold and relived through my memories of my childhood teachers, are part of my story and present understandings of my experiences on a higher educational landscape. Central to my researcher self is my wonder at how growing up in abject poverty, and how my early childhood experiences about school, community, and familial landscapes, shape my experiences on the university landscape.

### **Setting the Research Context**

**An experiential exploration.** Previously, I set out to understand, through an exploratory qualitative research project<sup>9</sup>, the barriers and struggles that students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty contend with as they tried to attain a higher education degree. In this previous study, I became aware of governmental and institutional initiatives to “widen access” to higher education for students from poverty-class families (Kirby, 2009; Krause & Armitage, 2014; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2015; The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2017, 2011). While countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and to a much lesser extent Canada, are adopting “widening access” and equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) policies, researchers for the

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<sup>9</sup> In 2014, I undertook a pilot research project exploring the barriers that undergraduate students who experienced systemic childhood poverty, contend with as they transition into and through university. I conducted semi-structured interviews with three students (one interview per student). This pilot research project, and the methodology employed, deeply impacted my master's research, research wonders, and methodological choice. I report in this thesis some interview excerpts and found poems created from this earlier research.

most part continue to ignore the very poor, instead focusing on the experiences of working-class students (Ivana, 2017; Lehman, 2013; Loveday, 2014; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). Research that does exist assumes a uniform effect of poverty and uniform experiences on higher educational landscapes (Aries & Seider, 2005; Krause & Armitage, 2014; Walpole, 2003) reducing students' lives to a single story (Adichie, 2009). The varied needs of students whose lives have been shaped by poverty in diverse ways are not being adequately addressed or reflected in current educational policies (Nesbit, 2006). Further, prevailing research tends to focus primarily on first-generation<sup>10</sup> students in their first year of undergraduate studies (Granfield, 1991; Krause & Armitage, 2014; Walpole, 2003). Compounding this is the perpetuation of dominant higher education narratives about socio-economically (SES) “disadvantaged”<sup>11</sup> students in the form of fairy tales and neoliberal tales.

**Fairy tales and neoliberal tales.** The failure to understand the complex and unique biographies of students whose lives have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty has the effect of silencing their experiences and making them, as Adair (2003) writes, “both the subject and the object of investigation” (p. 45); they are not part of the discussion of their own experiences. Further, the deficit in research on students from poverty-class backgrounds perpetuates dominant narratives of what defines student “success:” fake it till you make it; experiences should be left in the past; you just have to work hard; you’re here, so what’s the problem?; you’re privileged to be here!; it’s your own fault if you fail, and just assimilate/alter yourself to fit into the middle-class higher education culture (Gosh & Adbi, 2013; Granfield, 1991; Ivana, 2017; Lehman, 2013; Loveday, 2014). These dominant narratives, when unchallenged, are normalized—and at worst, damaging and destructive; they do not bring us closer to socially just education. This type of rhetoric reinforces the ideology that poverty-class undergraduate students are lacking in knowledge, skills, school readiness, and capabilities. A crucial aspect of these narratives from the centre do not allow for understanding how systemic childhood poverty shapes

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<sup>10</sup> First-generation students are the first children in a family’s history to attend university.

<sup>11</sup> While socioeconomically (SES) disadvantaged students is commonplace in research literature, in this thesis “disadvantaged” is placed in quotes to make visible the problematic nature of this term.

undergraduate students' experiences. Finally, these marginalizing narratives further perpetuate higher educational landscapes as places for the privileged (Adair, 2003; Brady, Blome & Kleider, 2016; Burtch, 2006; Ivana, 2017; Hunt & Bullock, 2016; Iverson, 2012; Pearce, Down & Moore, 2008).

To illustrate, in a graduate teaching class I took, many students strongly took the position that if undergraduate students struggle, then they are obviously not “top students” and should not be here. “Top students,” they espoused, are those who hide their struggles and “just figure it out.” Further, they declared, “All students have to work hard; all students *experience* having to work hard the same.” There seems to exist a resistance to the idea that students are *not* positioned equally on the higher education landscape. There is a tendency to believe that poverty and higher education equate to a rite of passage where students exist on ramen noodles; that is, “the student poor” experience. What is missing from these conversations is how poverty is understood and experienced by poverty-class undergraduate students. To demonstrate, I draw on an ubiquitous American university poverty-class student “solution:”

Ivy league American universities (e.g., Stanford University<sup>12</sup>) have varied forms of “widening access” to higher education initiatives for students from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. One such strategy makes “space” for these students in the form of *first-generation and/or low income (FLIP)* initiatives. An approach that has gained traction makes visible a social justice paradox: the anonymous, online, Facebook “class confessional.” Students from SES “disadvantaged” backgrounds can post comments regarding the struggles they experience because they lack resources, support, a sense of belonging, as well as feelings of shame, stigma, and being an “outcast on the inside” (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999, p. 421)—*without* revealing their identity. The irony with these *confessionals* is the need to *confess* that one comes from a lower social class, as if one has committed a sin. The additional contradiction to the *class confessional* is the need for a gatekeeper: rather than the confessional being potentially a place of safety and acceptance, comments must be constantly monitored. People attempt to post commentaries that support dominant, neoliberal dogmas of blaming the individual for their

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<sup>12</sup> See Stanford's Class Confessional Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/stanfordclassconfessions>.

circumstances of birth. These insidious statements make visible the deeply ingrained, historical contempt for the dangerous Other occupying privileged higher education landscapes (Aries & Seider, 2005; hooks, 2000; Reay, 2012; Tyler, 2013, 2009). These same beliefs are heard on Canadian post-secondary landscapes; poverty-class students are seen as polluting the landscape of privileged white Europeans (Burtch, 2006; see also Clark & Davis, 1989; Douglas, 1966). “Widening access” to higher education policies for poverty-class students continues to be neglected and addressed in ways that do not acknowledge how deeply profound social class is experienced—and, the stigmatization of poverty (Adair, 2003; Sayer, 2005).

These are the types of neoliberal tales that blame the individual and ignore the individual in relation to structural inequalities. As a result, we do not move closer to socially just and equitable higher education. These tales fail to attend to lives in the making and unique biographies—and needs—of poverty-class students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I wonder how students whose undergraduate experiences are shaped by systemic childhood poverty *experience* these narratives? For example, how do they experience the ideology of erasing their identities—and, *assimilating* the middle-class, higher education culture in order to be “top students?”

Further, the lack of narratives regarding the lived experiences of poverty-class students who are composing lives in higher education contributes to, as Rimstead (2001) says, “construct[ing] the reality of the poor in the interests of the non-poor” and creating “accounts of poverty [that] impose documented reality upon situated reality” (p. 3). To illustrate, consider Nicholas,<sup>13</sup> a participant in the pilot research project, who recounted an experience as an undergraduate student:

Not little things. Big things. They are big things. In that course I told you about earlier, we had a final that was an essay final. And like you can use whatever notes you want. That’s fine. The thing is everyone else had a laptop. Everyone, everyone—except for me. Everyone wrote on their laptop and they could go online and look up sources. They could use their notes. They could like chat with each other through Google Docs. Whatever. You just had to write. Except for me. Here I am pen and paper. It was awful. It was so—so awful. And embarrassing cause I was the only one who

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<sup>13</sup> All names and identifying information have been changed.

had to go up and hand in their paper. The prof just looked at me with this tight smile. And—so, embarrassing.

(Excerpt from Nicholas' interview transcript, October 17, 2014)

Months after this experience, Nicholas was still filled with a crushing shame. He wondered if the professor's discomfort was because they somehow knew that Nicholas comes from intergenerational poverty. This shame and fear is a thread through Daisy's experiences as well:

Ya. Like am I allowed to study myself? Like you know it becomes a [*long pause*] "Oh, I'm not supposed to be here because we're talking about other people." You know it's just—ya—it's very much an uncomfortable position to be in right because you feel like or at least I felt like um at times where there was something—because of the difference—because of the stark differences of my experiences versus somebody else's experience in the classroom it felt like well if most people achieve X and most people have come from A then it follows that if I come from Y and I come from B I'm not going to achieve the same thing they're achieving right. So you don't want to expose yourself. You think, "Oh my gosh, somebody's going to kick me out! Somebody's going to find me out!"—or, something like that.

(Excerpt from Daisy's interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

Poverty-class students live tension with neoliberal tales and the ubiquitous and firmly entrenched dominant and silencing narratives that support the rags-to-riches, Cinderella-type fairy tales that define *success* in all parts of life, including higher education. To illustrate, the American author Alger, writing in the nineteenth-century, is attributed with the idea that success is attainable to anyone by pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps (for an analysis of the "success myth" see Weiss, 1998). This narrative is so pervasive that it marginalizes poverty-class students by creating a mythical poster child for success. Rimstead (2001) notes that these dominant narratives produce "meaning that marginalizes [and silences] the poor in concrete as well as symbolic ways" (p. 3). These types of narratives promote the ideology that if a student "succeeds," against all odds, by putting their nose to the grindstone, rolling up their sleeves and using some elbow grease, they can have it "all." I wonder how these narratives shape the experiences of students from poverty-class backgrounds who are composing a life on middle class higher education landscapes. How might these narratives help widen or hinder access to education for students from poverty-class backgrounds? How are these dominant narratives experienced by poverty-class students and how do they shape experiences?

**Subjective understandings of lived experiences of poverty.** There are notable exceptions in the poverty and higher education literature. Adair (2003) interrupts dominant narratives regarding poverty-class students who are trying to obtain higher education. She comes from intergenerational poverty; she was a single mother receiving welfare while composing a life on a university landscape; she makes visible how deeply this influenced how she experienced higher education. Fraser (2015) writes about being a “*Hooligan in the Hallway*,” from grade school through her academic studies and academic tenure. Langston (1998) delves into the tension-filled social class waters; she encourages us to think about how “we experience class at every level of our lives” (p. 120). In her monograph, McKenzie (2015), who comes from an intergenerational family of miners, makes visible the experiences of those living in a “notorious” British low-income community—and, her education experiences. Rimstead (2001) provides an in-depth look into poverty narratives by Canadian women. Swanson (2004), based on experiences working with those in the margins, provides a detailed look at “poor-bashing” in Canada and how it shapes “the politics of exclusion” (cover).

**“Widening access” to higher education.** Viewed through a neoliberal economic lens, modern “widening access”<sup>14</sup> education initiatives for marginalized and disenfranchised students are problematic on several fronts (Ahmed, 2012; Brown & Strega, 2005; Burtch, 2006). Diversity<sup>15</sup> and equity initiatives are seen as a social justice measure; education is understood to be a fundamental conduit to improving one’s socioeconomic position in society (Burtch, 2006; Gewirtz, 1998; Walpole, 2003). The assumption seems to be that education is available for all and therefore levels the playing field. Success or failure then depends on the individual who takes advantage, or fails to take advantage, of the opportunities that draw from education. For this to be true, culturally and socioeconomically inclusive educational systems require an understanding of the experiences of students from poverty-class families to reduce barriers to entering and transitioning through university.

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<sup>14</sup> “Widening access” is also known as “widening participation.”

<sup>15</sup> The term *diversity* and “widening access” necessitates the existence of Other in the margins and the continuation of the dominant in the centre (Ahmed, 2012; Brown & Strega, 2005).

The experiences of students who come from poverty need to become visible in the research literature, in the classroom, and on the university landscape in order to develop responsive institutional policies, and successfully widen access to higher education. However, as Nesbit (2006) writes, current higher “educational approaches, structures, and activities ... perpetuate the silence and invisibility of marginalized and disenfranchised groups” (p. 171). Policies and pedagogies need to be developed that will not continue to perpetuate the inherent privilege of higher education institutions. Higher education administrators and policy makers (and governments) must acknowledge as Brady et al. (2016) write, “Institutions tend to continue to affect poverty and inequality without active maintenance” (p. 123). As such, “widening access” and EDI policies must actively make visible—and, work against this perpetuation of privilege. Part of this involves acknowledging, as I espouse, the existence of silencing poverty-class higher education diversity policies that *caste* these students in a box (see appendix D).

Second, initiatives must address long-term success. Getting poverty-class students in the door (i.e., focusing solely on “access”) does not mean they will *successfully* complete a degree, leave before they are ready, or have a “high quality” post-secondary “learning experience” (The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011, p. 40). “Widening access” initiatives must set out to create success both for the individual and institution: they need to be sustainable systems that support students to realize their dreams while recognizing governmental budget constraints and the shifting higher education landscape.

When I wonder about entering onto, and creating a life on the higher educational landscape unsupported, in ways that do not create success, I am drawn to my early education experiences. I wonder about how my experiences on early childhood educational landscapes shaped my understanding of schools as lonely, dangerous places (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Francis & Martin, 2012; Polakow, 1993):

We moved into a trailer on the edge of town in this tiny hamlet. So wonderfully, painfully cliché. The first day of school in this new place, an even smaller school than the hamlet we moved from, I arrived with a cast on my arm. It was the middle of grade eight. I remember my older sister in my class. How uncomfortable this first day was. To be in a new school all of a sudden with a sister, two years ahead of me, sitting behind me. It was so obvious the age difference. I was so much smaller

than she was. I remember the teacher introducing us and telling students to welcome us. We were met with blank stares—some hostile stares. I would later come to learn how truly cruel the school landscape can be. At some point my older sister was no longer in my class or in the school. I'm not sure where she went.

(From my field notes, March 23, 2015)

Marilyn, a research participant from my pilot research project, explains her experiences of isolation on the higher education landscape:

Well, I think that the challenge is the fact that I, I think I'm all alone and where I don't know where to go for help. And I think that's like a clear connection to the fact that like me and my mom were homeless and my mom would never have help from any family and like any friends would help us out. It was always just like I'm always—I'm always felt like I'm in this alone kinda thing. That I don't have any help or nobody cares kinda thing.

(Excerpt from Marilyn's interview transcript, October 22, 2014)

These experiences make me wonder at the silence surrounding social class, and in particular systemic childhood poverty, on the educational landscape and how poverty-classed students *experience* this silence. I wonder how dominant rhetoric, couched as well-intended advice, (e.g., *There are lots of resources available for students to access, they just need to access them!*; *It's their responsibility to make their own way!*), works against creating diverse and equitable higher education landscapes. This brings me to wonder, how does existing research help to understand experiences when they are analyzed through dominant theoretical frameworks? How does existing research, that tends towards generalization, help to understand how growing up in poverty shape undergraduate students' experiences, while *not* holding lived experiences as the main source of knowledge in these lives in the making?

### **Coming to the Research Puzzle**

Central to this research was seeking a better understanding of how poverty-class undergraduate experiences are shaped by unique biographies. How do we understand experiences on higher educational landscapes in relation to larger social, cultural, and institutional narratives? How do students who grew up in systemic childhood poverty understand themselves individually and in relation to the higher educational landscape? How do these students create a sense of belonging? How do they negotiate social

relations and social situations on the university landscape? As I explore<sup>16</sup> my narrative beginnings, I wonder about the ways in which earlier experiences on grade school landscapes shape and reshape my experiences on higher educational landscapes—and, other students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty. I wonder how the echoes of childhood poverty reverberate through students' experiences on the university landscape? How might we understand these reverberations by understanding experiences?

**The messiness of social class.** Sayer (2002) explains why social class is a troubling and uncomfortable subject for both students and seasoned sociologists and educators. He states, “while the beginning students have not yet unlearned their very justifiable sense (albeit a scarcely articulated sense) of the moral problems of class, sociologists have unlearned them and become de-sensitised to them” (para. 1.2). Educational institutes talk about the importance of creating policies and pedagogies that are inclusive of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; however, Sayer (2002) notes that “what is a fraught and highly sensitive issue for many people has all too often become, in the hands of the sociologists, a dry academic debate about social classification schema” (para. 1.2). When community, institutions, and society embrace the idea of the classless society, Langston (1995) writes that the “denial of class divisions functions to reinforce ruling class-control and domination [where] ambition and intelligence alone are responsible for success” (p. 397). Regardless of research contrary to the myth of the classless society, Sayer (2002) notes that class “continues to figure centrally in people’s lives, especially for those who ... lack the privilege to be able to ignore it” (para. 1.3; see also Skeggs, 1997). Sayer (2005) explains that class goes far beyond economics; class defines the moral significance of people on the many landscapes they inhabit. As Aronowitz (2003) notes, social class “remains a salient and powerful category in understanding the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging of students in education” (p. 25; see also Pearce et al., 2008).

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<sup>16</sup> This is in present tense as the exploration of narrative beginnings and wonders do not end.

I suggest that the lack of research on poverty-class students demonstrates that the lower the students are on the social class hierarchy, the less likely experiences are to surface in research. As Marshall, Roberts, and Burgoyne (1996) explain, the poor “are effectively—and, it is now claimed, unwarrantably— [predominantly] excluded from the research agenda” (p. 22). Research also reveals a lack of understanding that there exists a profound distinction between working-class and poverty-class (Adair, 2005). In reality, within each social class there exist multiple layers (e.g., upper, middle, and lower upper-class); the lowest and most problematic class being the *underclass* (Tyler, 2013; Wray, 2006). The American poverty-class scholar Adair writes extensively on the lived experiences of mothers and children living in abject poverty. Although gender is not the focus of my research, her advocacy for a poverty-class/working-class distinction is crucial within the context of this narrative inquiry. Adair (2005) writes of the need for this social class distinction:

In arguing for more finely nuanced and inclusive understandings of class in the USA, I write as a ‘poverty-class scholar’ articulating an identity, experience, marginality, and concomitant consciousness and epistemology distinct from that of working-class academics.... By positioning poor women and children within larger class matrixes, the question of who speaks for, who represents and who symbolizes the identities, experiences, and perspectives of those embedded in the struggle against capital, emerges as central ... questions of voice and authority are central to a multi-faceted and rigorous understanding of the operations of class in the USA, both in and out of the academy. A notable lack of representations of the experiences, perspectives and burgeoning theories of poor women—even embedded in the supposed safety and inclusion of working-class studies—erases many of the complexities of class as it is actually lived, while simultaneously prohibiting first-hand poverty-class analyses of the American condition, to the bane of assiduous class scholars and students.... By developing theories that help us to understand and critique the impact of differential access to economic, social and cultural resources on a range of women’s lives, without claiming an uncontested authenticity or epistemic privilege, and by recognizing the multiplicity and contradictions of identity and community formation, we can begin in earnest to explore rather than overlook the operations of class as it is lived, theorized and contested in contemporary society. (pp. 817-831)

The silence surrounding the experiences of poverty-class students is compounded by an unspoken understanding of the dangerous Other. As Shields (2013) explains, there exists an “insidious fear of otherness in the context of a community based on sameness [that] maintains an elite sense of entitlement and privilege” (p. 54). Shields (2013) goes on to explain that “marginalization with respect to social class ... is more subtle than marginalization due to skin color because class is, in many ways, invisible” (p. 32). However, for those whose lives have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty, poverty has left distinct

visible markers, visible at least to those who come from poverty and who fear that their origins may be visible to others (Adair, 2003; Brown & Strega, 2005).

### **Red worn hands.**

I think of the shame and vulnerability I feel; my aloneness and fear, How I feel so visible because of the stain of poverty, yet invisible. I work hard to make myself invisible. I am defined by the stain of poverty—it is how I define myself and how I perceive others see me or my fear that they will see me this way. I often worry because I walk swiftly and that is a sign of my upbringing. My roughened red hands from years of hard physical labour that started at too young an age. I feel terrified I'm too rough to be on this landscape. If professors find out who I really am, they will have me expelled.

(From my field notes, March 23, 2015)

My *red worn hands*<sup>17</sup> are symbolic of a life shaped by childhood poverty. How often I despised my mother's hands. They were beaten red and calloused. They felt like sandpaper. They looked like dried jerky. I have my mother's hands.

Relaxed hands as if they were attached to a body in harmony. Hands pretending she had no worries but worries and fears persistently extending to her hands' fingertips. Her hands have an unnatural quality (perhaps unnerving to those who hate the poor), like a mummified child-adult from the archaeological Egyptian pictures she had seen. Painful and angry red hues infused with tell-tale signs of outdoor labour. Skin sagging at the joints, as if the skeletal structure of her hands had shrunk, too early, leaving deep grooves indenting and marking the knuckles in a ceaseless circular pattern; surfaces ensconced with cruel furrows and folds.

At each juncture of her hands, across her hands' entire landscape, she sees the deeply imbedded markings, and colouring, of intergenerational suffering; her life—and her hands—have been indelibly shaped and marked by poverty. The skin of her hands reminds her of the first knapsack she made out of gunnysacks when she was a child, valiantly held together with binder twine: useful and practical—rough and worn.

Cuticles lying jagged; angry flesh exposed from relentless, fearful tearing. Skin, at the corners of her middle-fingers and the entire outside area bracketing her baby-finger nails, nails that have not yet been victimized by her teeth, are elevated with hardened, worrisome and toiling callouses. Her right index finger reveals the indentation and callouses of grievously gripping and applying pens to paper in defiance, or resistance, to her origins. Her nails are torn down, close to the quick, leaving behind thin, blood-soaked traces of healthy tissue; deformed nails with dips and grooves like a hillside. Surviving uneven and fragile nails are dotted with dried blood, worry, and white spots.

Hands, with a forced and false casualness, gently splay on the keyboard. She nervously lifts her hands, slightly, until they are poised just above the keys, swollen reddened fingertips quivering apprehensively as she begins to write of a *lived experience*:

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<sup>17</sup> This phrase is shaped from Sean Lessard's (2014) doctoral dissertation title, *Red Worn Runners: A Narrative Inquiry into the Stories of Aboriginal Youth and Families in Urban Settings*. I am using it with Sean's gracious and generous permission for which I am deeply grateful.

A student says, “Aren’t you ashamed of your hands? They look so old!” The only sound her shocked, indrawn breath; the only visible signs of her pain and shame is the stiffening of her shoulders, the tightening of her jaw, the infusion of a red slash across her cheekbones, just under her sunken, saddened eyes, and the heat that envelopes her ears surrounded by a close-crop hair cut. She clenches her hands into fists so no one can see inside. She didn’t know her hands were weathered and old before their time until she entered onto the higher education landscape.

(From my field notes, September 17, 2015)

I try to shift my understanding of my *red worn* hands. This shift helps me understand that wisdom sits on and in my mother’s and my hands (Basso, 1996). Shields (2013) writes:

[Students] who may come from families struggling with poverty, disease, homelessness ... may have learned to cook meals, clean the house, negotiate the local bus system, care for younger sibling ... —all skills that have enabled them to survive, but not necessarily those that help them interpret and make sense of the typical “middle-class” educational landscape and curriculum. This means that, as educators, we must learn to value, and make connections to, a wide range of experiences and cultural capital. It is not sufficient to focus on what students do not know; instead, it is critical to emphasize and build on what it is that they do know and can do. (p. 32)

Shields (2013) is speaking about creating socially just, equitable, and inclusive education. Yet, part of the missing story is that my *red worn* hands also speak to an existence and body shaped by caring and attending to the lives of others in meaningful ways. These shifts in understanding open up the possibility of “the extraordinary potential of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience”<sup>18</sup> (Huber, Caine, Huber & Stevens, 2013, p. 212) as poverty-class students travel “to and within unfamiliar [higher education] landscapes” (Caine, 2010, p. 1304). By attending to experiences and shifting understandings, I wonder about the potential for “deconstructing existing knowledge frameworks and for co-constructing new ones” (Shields, 2013, p. 43).

**Pedagogies of poor children.** On rural childhood educational landscapes, I was implicated as a member of “the dangerous classes” (Polakow, 1993, p. 102). I do not feel there was a malicious intent on the part of educators. Polakow (1993) asks, “Do poor children’s lives matter” (p. 202)? I wonder how poverty-class students might matter if we make visible how childhood poverty echoes across the lives they are composing in higher education. I see the potential with this research in shifting the “poverty problem”

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<sup>18</sup> As Caine, Estefan & Clandinin (2013) explain, “Embedded in the retellings of ... experiences is a notion that each story is always partial and contextual and offers new possibilities as the stories are retold (p. 577). *We tell* and live, *retell* and *relive* experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

from being “framed as individual and private, grounded in intrapsychic or intrafamily deficits” (Polakow, 1993, p. 103) to one where richer and more nuanced understandings of the extraordinary potential of poverty-class students can be realized. From the playground to the higher educational landscape, there is potential in lessening “the distance between theory and the reality of [students’] lives in classrooms in ways that do not diminish their lived experiences” (Polakow, 1993, p. 104). I draw closely to Polakow’s (1993) work as she speaks to “classroom worlds [that] are telling landscapes that reveal shared stories of exclusion, humiliation, and neglect—narratives of experience that speak to broader educational issues” of structural inequality (p. 148).

Educators, community, and family assumed I would travel the same path as generations before me. No one expected me to succeed in education. I could hardly imagine anything else for myself: to imagine a life beyond the wrong side of the social tracks was too much of a stretch. I draw on Polakow (1993) who explains the lives of poverty-class children on early education landscapes: I was “already condemned” before I entered grade one; “classrooms became at-risk landscapes that impair[ed]” my young “self-esteem, [and] increase[d] the stresses already present in [my] vulnerable” life (Polakow, 1993, pp. 150-151). I entered onto the childhood education landscape, as Polakow (1993) writes, “fragile and enormously stressed from coping with daily struggles of [a] life in poverty” (p. 151). I became storied as the girl who constantly fell asleep in grade nine because she did not care about school. However, on the rural landscape educators and community did not want to engage in alternate discourses regarding me; discussions that would have acknowledged my being 15 years old, living on my own, and trying to make enough money to survive. I was constantly exhausted from the relentless hours I worked and suffocating stress of worrying how I would pay rent. I could not afford, nor, did I have access to adequate nutrition; I lived a malnourished life on and off the educational landscape. Now, I realize how Clandinin’s (2013) early education experiences resonate with my own: Clandinin writes, “I always kept myself on the edges of dominant stories of school” because “schools were never easy places for me” (p. 26). Yet, I continue to try to compose a life here. I understand

the potential of learning as Clandinin (2013) says, “about what we call stories of school and about how we might begin to shift those stories” (p. 104).

As Polakow (1993) explains, “decades have relegated poor children even further to the fringes. The distance between their world and the world of the classroom has widened, as their prior experiences have been devalued and targeted for reshaping” (p. 152). These early experiences on educational landscapes continued to shape my experiences throughout my master’s program. The pilot research participants’ and my own experiences (and master’s research participants) directly challenge the fairy tales and neoliberal tales that dominate educational conversations and policy. Our experiences also lay bare the gaping holes in understanding experiences on higher educational landscapes.

**Gaping holes in understanding the experiences of poverty-class students.** I am reminded of Dr. Seuss’s (1978) words:

Young cat!  
If you keep  
Your eyes open enough,  
Oh, the stuff you will learn!  
The most wonderful stuff! (p. 19)

There is the most wonderful stuff to learn when we create spaces for different ways of understanding and being, places where, when our eyes are open, wonders emerge that can create inclusive educational landscapes. Nicholas, a participant from my exploratory research project, whose undergraduate experiences were shaped by intergenerational poverty, makes me wonder about the many things that can be learned by understanding experience. I draw on prose I created from his interview transcript (October 17, 2014):

Nicholas is in his mid-twenties  
In his third year of his undergraduate degree  
He is a reserved young man  
Simultaneously self-conscious and pretending a confidence in sharing his stories  
Nicholas is cramped into an ill-fitting chair across from me  
Constantly tugging at the sleeves of his shrunken, timeworn, grey sweater  
A childhood sweater that been washed until the weave of the wool has become distorted  
Fraying leather shoulders straps, once black,  
    now slowly blending into the greying, woollen sweater  
Broken buttons futilely holding down their curving edges  
Tugging at the sleeves as if he can somehow ease—or erase—  
    the signs of intergenerational poverty  
Anxiously and sporadically gripping at the hole in the right sleeve  
Trying to hide what he perceives to be the many markers of poverty on this Goodwill sweater  
I painfully watch him and silently wonder about students  
    who have the privilege of intentionally displaying the holes in their designer jeans  
I wonder how Nicholas experiences these differences  
I wonder at the stories woven into his sweater

When I kept my eyes open, I came to understand that the participants' and my experiences are complex. I continuously wonder why he kept wearing this childhood sweater. How did he story himself in relation to this garment? I wonder how filling in the gaping holes of knowledge, regarding students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty, can help in informing educational policy if we understand experience and understand it narratively.

**Narratively understanding Othered experiences.** I wonder how this research can contribute to making experiences such as Nicholas' visible, and as holding potential for interrupting dominant social, institutional, and cultural narratives. Nesbit (2006) writes:

Educational systems are ... one of the most important vehicles for *hegemony*, the process by which a society inculcates and maintains dominant ideas by portraying them as natural and normal ... [however,] ... [e]ducation can also counter hegemony by helping people understand how they might resist and challenge oppressive social structures and behaviors. (pp. 172-173)

Ghosh and Adbi (2013) discuss the need to contribute to opening up spaces for conversations where “student experiences and their historical, social, and cultural conditions ... [are] viewed as primary

sources of knowledge” (p. 23). These scholars are speaking about interrupting dominant narratives that silence and marginalize SES “disadvantaged” students. It is important to open up spaces to understand the “multiplicity” of lives to include the multiple locations we each occupy in life (Huber, Clandinin & Huber 2006, p. 219).

These scholars helped me realize that this research has the potential to create counter dialogues, which allow for student *success* to have multiple meanings and alternate possibilities based on understanding poverty-classed students’ experiences. This research has the potential to interrupt dominant narratives regarding social class on higher educational landscapes by contributing to the pioneering work of poverty-class scholars such as Adair (2003). Her courage to publicly share her experiences in academia both as a student, and now as a professor, inspires me and gives me courage.

This is the goal of this research: by beginning to understand the *lived experiences*<sup>19</sup> of students from poverty-class backgrounds, who are composing lives on higher educational landscapes, individual lived experiences become visible. In this way students may start moving out of the shadows and margins of society and educational landscapes.

I imagine, for example, that this research can contribute to *seeing* the potential for understanding experience in terms of the “missing stories of self” (Adair, Brown, Perez-Cotrich, Clark & Stanfield, 2007, p. 135). In addition, connecting these narratives to “larger questions of social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 121-122) makes visible universities continuing to be sites that maintain privilege versus their role in working against the perpetuation of poverty.

In essence, this master’s research focuses on understanding the experiences of university students from poverty using narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) research methodology is built upon the philosophy that “experience is what we study, and we study it narratively, because narrative thinking is a key form of experience, and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18).

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<sup>19</sup> Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define *lived experience* as “lives and how they are lived” (p. xxii).

## Coming to Inquiry

**Methodological experiences.** Prior to this master’s research, I conducted an exploratory research project. I sought to understand the barriers that students who have grown up in childhood poverty face as they try to obtain a university degree. As I thought about the participants, I was deeply troubled about the research process experience. I wondered how this process affected participants. For the first time, participants shared their struggles of coming from poverty and being in university—and, with someone on a higher education landscape. After a brief interview, we abruptly parted ways as if suddenly walking out in the middle of a conversation. There was no discussion of having ongoing conversations or how I would interpret their words. I did not know how they experienced the research interview. I felt like I was on a fact-finding mission, ignoring the very thing that I know is so deeply important—experiences.

Conducting these interviews, there was not an opportunity for as Rimstead (2001) writes, for “poor subject[s] [to] tell their own stories” other than in superficial ways nor to begin to “disturb naturalized images of” students from poverty-class backgrounds as “outsiders or inherently inferior” (p. 6). Nor could I understand experiences from fragments and splinters—or silences—such as what the participants in the pilot research were able to share in our brief time together.

The tensions in conducting single, one- to two-hour, semi-structured interviews, looking for themes in order to code the data, and then using this or that theorist (Bourdieu, Foucault, Goffman, Marx—who to use?), to analyze the findings was reductionist.

I did know we were poor  
I did know that people made fun of welfare  
I remember a kid named Y  
There were a bunch of kids  
Sitting around the field singing: “Y’s on welfare! Y’s on welfare!”  
I’m gonna shut right up!

*Daisy shut right up  
And so she remains*

(Found poem created from Daisy’s interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

Daisy is a university student in her late 20s. Tall and willow slender, she moves toward our meeting area with a quiet, reserved, and uncertain grace. When I think of Daisy today, I imagine her composing a life on a university landscape, swathed in the frayed-edge, poverty-stained curtains, which framed her destitute-stricken childhood home. As I continually revisit Daisy's interview transcript, I catch *glimpses* of possible understandings of her experiences.

I think I always knew. There's a bit of shame involved in living the way that my family lived—and then maintaining my life outside of my family. So it's like the rose coloured glasses. Or what is it—the closed curtains? What's behind the closed curtains you don't see, right? So, I knew that it was different from a very young age—as far back as I can remember.

(Excerpt from Daisy's interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

I ask Daisy, "What kinds of conversations were happening in the home about education?"

None really. I mean nobody really spoke about getting an education and it being important. It was very just kind of [*long pause*] like mom didn't really care if we went to school or not. I would wanna go to school because of the shame of friends asking where you were, when you weren't there for a few days, right? You are like, "Oh, well. I don't know." So from there, there wasn't too much going on.

(Excerpt from Daisy's interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

But there *was* so much going on that I do not know or understand from our brief time together.

Neither the above poem nor these excerpts begin to show Daisy's experiences; I sensed it when I interviewed her.

As we walked out together from our meeting place, Daisy quietly, almost reverently, thanked me for tackling this subject. I remember tremendous uncertainty about the project experience—and, ethically if I did harm. I asked Daisy to enter a space to share her experiences and then, because of project limitations, quickly disappeared. Suspended on the threshold of the building's entrance, we wavered, both knowing that the next steps we took would thrust us back on educational landscapes, where we would *separately* continue to silently compose lives in the shadows and margins.

As I was writing the final paper for my project, I became increasingly uncomfortable, confused, and pained about my research experience. During the analyzing and writing processes, I felt I was committing an injustice to the participants' stories. I found myself increasingly distancing myself both as

researcher—and, member of the very group I was studying. As I remember it: “learning” and leaving. I began to wonder if I had re-victimized the participants.

I started critically examining potential qualitative methodologies, trying to find a methodology where I could inquire more fully about *narratives*, not fragments of experience, for the continuation of this research in my master’s studies. As I wondered, I came to understand that the above representations of Daisy’s experiences were in fact my desire to *prove* that other students had the same experience as myself; I was looking for *proof* that I was not the only one who felt the stigma of poverty, the trauma of marginalization, and the pain of isolation. I have come to understand that the following found poem I created from Daisy’s interview transcript may not accurately reflect Daisy’s experience—it may be about my experience, and unknowingly, this word image may have a personal agenda (Ely, 2007, p. 9):

I’ll find my own little niche  
Just find safety in that

Stay lost in the crowd  
Outsider playing along

(Found poem created from Daisy’s interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

In the method I used (qualitative, semi-structured interviews), there was not sufficient opportunity to begin to understand Daisy’s or my own experiences of composing our lives on a university landscape. Daisy has never seen these word images or excerpts; I do not know if they accurately represent her experiences. Perhaps, for Daisy, *finding her own little niche* means the possibility of *finding* unexplored spaces and relationships instead of existing in the margins and shadows of the university landscape where she can safely hide her feelings of isolation and being Othered?

Months later, as I re-listened to our interview transcript, I heard myself ask Daisy why she felt she needed to hide. When I originally transcribed the digital-recording of the interview, I was not able to hear her say, “Shame.” I wonder if it might be because of how shame is so deeply embedded in my being. The

shame I experience on higher educational landscapes is deeply rooted in how I was storied as a child on community and education landscapes; rooted in silent and silenced stories:

Imagine I told you a story about a girl from a rural Canadian community who was born into intergenerational poverty. Imagine stacks of metal frames cradling sagging, dilapidated mattresses—and, her thin, beaten, and starved frame. Tattered woolen blankets biting her skin raw like the mice in the attic relentlessly scratching and gnawing at the shack’s ceiling. Fine granules of wood gently raining down on every surface as the mice’s valiant efforts to breach the ceiling succeed. Frayed, sullied curtains perpetually closed to those who might try to curiously glimpse what Others lurked within. Lunchboxes inconsiderately ignored for lack of sustenance to line their insides. Her body swathed in stale castoffs mysteriously appearing on decrepit porches holding on for dear life. The smells of poverty infusing, searing, her young, fragile mind with want and lack: musty dreams, sweat, fear, urine, hopelessness, shame—interspersed, on the rarest of occasions, with the softness and wistfulness of laundry fresh off the clothesline.

(From my field notes, January 12, 2016)

It is through Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative inquiry research methodology that I can now understand the tensions I was experiencing in my exploratory research project. Clandinin (2013) writes of the tensions she felt as she conducted her doctoral research:

I was struggling to find ways to represent experiential knowledge of the two participants in my doctoral study. I was concerned that my analysis of what I was calling their images, part of their personal practical knowledge, had resulted in my taking away, or diminishing the wholeness of their lives. I had, in a way, dissected them. Dissection had not been my intent. (pp. 9-10)

I could analyze Daisy’s experiences according to Goffman’s (1963) theories of stigma or Bourdieu’s (1999) theories of forms of capital but then I will be doing the same thing that did not sit well with me as I accessed research on my subject (i.e., reductionism and overlaying theory on experience). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write of their early research experiences: “We found ourselves quantifying what interested us, and of course, as we quantified experience, its richness and expression was stripped away” (pp. xxv-xxvi). I now realize that part of the tensions I struggled with the idea of contributing to a “‘grand narrative’ of social science inquiry” as the “only valid story” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxv) where the plotlines of participants’ experiences and my own experiences are threaded into dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives. These tensions are also tied to the “danger of [creating] a single story” (Adichie, 2009, n.p.) of the experiences of students whose lives have been shaped by poverty

and who are composing lives on a university landscape. I had to be mindful not only of the dangers of creating a *single story*, but as Adichie (2009) says, creating single stories which lack balance. Our experiences are not simply tales of woe; they are heart-wrenching *and* joyful.

The methodological choice for this graduate research dramatically affected how I came toward my research puzzle—and, came to understand myself in relation to my research, as both researcher and member of the group I researched. Narrative inquiry as a methodology provided for imagined and unimagined possibilities “that are ‘moments of revelation, powerful enough to address larger professional and social issues, [and] are also at times powerful enough to challenge conventional thinking or existing paradigms’” (Ely, 2007, p. 43). Possibilities exist because experience is not bounded or constrained by dominant theoretical frameworks; there is the possibility for understanding multiple selves and multiple storied lives. This research methodology allowed for, as Rimstead (2001) writes, “hold[ing] back from generalizing and to draw on many sources of knowledge, both academic and non-academic, to avoid imposing yet another top-down analytical structure” (p. 4) on students whose lives have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty.

**Turning toward understanding students’ experiences.** Shields (2013) emphasizes that “structural and systemic barriers cannot and must not simply be viewed as the responsibility of those who have suffered” (p. 32). I wonder if part of potential strategies for creating equitable and socially just educational policies and practices is shaping educational landscapes, where experiences once shamed and silenced, can be imagined and cared for? Kenny (2012) brings us closer to understanding that the “ever-constant power of story” can liberate education from the controls of elite power (p. 7). Kenny (2012) tells us “all cultures are sustained through stories that integrate past, present, and future” (p. 7). For Giroux (1991) this means “there is no tradition or story that can speak with authority and certainty for all of humanity” (p. 231).

As Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) explain, I could depart from the opening lines of my experiences of feeling fearful of being *outed* and *ousted*, “to discuss substantive issues of” (pp. 576-577)

coming from the wrong-side of the tracks, the pain of trying to be a student in a space that I do not fit, or my struggles in trying to stop the cycle of poverty by attending higher education. However, as Caine et al. (2013) also note: “as narrative inquirers, we cannot so easily depart at the ‘last sentence’ if we want to understand experiences in the past, present, and future. Wonders continue to emerge and we attend to them as narrative inquirers, as people” (p. 577). We also attend to the “many untold stories we already know, or whose existence we sense in the present moments of our lives” (Neumann, 1997, p. 109); we attend to “silent and unspeakable stories, stories that can possibly be traced on people’s skin, and stories that are visible but also hidden ... to live with difficult stories that cannot be forgotten ... unfitting stories” (Caine et al., 2013, pp. 578, 581; Prosser, 2007). Tracing experience on *people’s skin* becomes salient in terms of students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty. Adair (2003) retells how childhood poverty has shaped her embodied self:

As a child, poverty was written onto and into my being at the level of private and public thought and body. At an early age, my body bore witness to and emitted signs of the painful devaluation carved into my flesh; that same devaluation became integral to my being in the world. I came into being as a disciplined body and mind, while at the same time I was taught to read my abject body as the site of my own punishment and erasure. In this excess of meaning, the space between private body and public sign was collapsed. For many poor children, this double exposure results in a debilitating—albeit politically useful—shame and lack. (pp. 29-30)

No amount of education, as I wrote in the beginning of this proposal, can erase the stain and shame of my poverty. My *red worn* hands are a testament of stories that can be traced on people’s skin and stories that are visible but also hidden. As Adair (2005) retells, “class (de)valuation has been indelibly written on my mind and my body in ways that can be resisted but never erased” (p. 225). Adair’s research and writings made me wonder at the complexity of experiences, experiences that may resonate with my own, or depart dramatically. I no longer looked for confirmation of my own experience. I continue to wonder at the permanency of experience that can be written onto and into our bodies and how this shapes poverty-class students’ experiences on higher educational landscapes. I wonder about Young’s (2003) *intergenerational narrative reverberations* and how reverberations of experience from past generations

shape future generations. As a research methodology, narrative inquiry allows for wonders and possibilities—and, “allows us to understand experience beyond the lens of the researcher” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 575).

**Narratively inquiring into lives: A methodology.** Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that narrative inquiry “is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience. It is nothing more and nothing less. Narrative inquiry is situated in relationships and in community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways” (p. 13). Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) methodology is premised on the philosophy that “[r]elationship is at the heart of thinking narratively. Relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do” (p. 189). This is what drew me to this methodology for my research interests. As Clandinin (2013) writes of her early discoveries, “we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others” and actions in relation to larger social contexts (p. 10). In essence, “narrative inquirers study experience” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13) expressed in narrative form because we all “lead storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 8). What drew me to narrative inquiry is that it “is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). Clandinin (2013) explains that “[n]arrative inquiry begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experience” (p. 18). This is fundamental to the approach I took with my master’s research.

**Experience as phenomenon.** Central to my research was studying the *phenomenon* (of experience), to understand how the echoes of childhood poverty reverberate through students’ experiences as they compose lives on the university landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I sought to explore this research puzzle by “inquiring into experience through collaboration between [myself as] researcher and participants, over time, in a place, or series of places, and in social interactions with milieus” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 82). As Murphy (2002) writes, we “tell stories in order to explain experiences

and to understand and shape experience” (p. 43). How *experience* is understood within this methodology is founded on the late American educational theorist John Dewey’s<sup>20</sup> (1938) “theory of experience.”

Clandinin (2013) explains that “Dewey’s theory of experience (1938) ... [is] the philosophical underpinning of narrative inquiry” (p. 12). They explain:

Dewey’s two criteria of experience—interaction and continuity enacted in situations—provide the grounding for attending to a narrative conception of experience through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality. Paradigmatic and narrative knowing (Bruner, 1986), narrative structure and coherence of lives (Carr, 1986), concepts of continuity and improvisation as a response to the uncertainties in life and life contexts (Bateson, 1994, 1984), and narrative in life and teaching practice (Coles, 1989) also ground our understanding of experience as narratively composed. (p. 12)

For Dewey (1938), *interaction* is understood as “experience [that] is both personal and social. Both the personal and social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in social context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). This is a distinguishing feature of narrative inquiry: it is not about participants and me telling stories around a campfire; rather, we *tell, retell, live, and relive* “stories of [our] experiences” that are in relation to larger social issues (Caine et al., 2013, p. 574; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Clandinin (2013) explains that “the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals’ experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experience were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (p. 18).

*Continuity* is “the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an

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<sup>20</sup> Clandinin and Rosiek (2014) state that narrative inquiry “has its roots in John Dewey’s (1938) pragmatic philosophy” (p. 7). They write “there are two particularly salient features of Dewey’s (1976) conception of experience ... experience is the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry—narrative or otherwise—proceeds ... Dewey’s ontology is not transcendental, it is transactional” (p. 7). Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience “implies that the regulative ideal for inquiry is not to generate an exclusively faithful representation of a reality independent of the knower. The regulative ideal for inquiry is to generate a new relation between a human being and her environment—her life, community, world—one that “makes possible a new way of dealing with them, and thus eventually creates a new kind of experienced objects, not more real than those which preceded but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive” (Dewey as cited by Clandinin & Rosiek, 2014, pp. 8-9). Clandinin and Rosiek (2014) explain, “In this pragmatic view of knowledge, our representations arise from experience and must return to that experience for their validation” (p. 8).

experiential future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). As such, one sees the fluidity of experiences over time. How experience is understood is within the metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry place of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The first dimension, *temporality*, refers to the fact that “we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along ... to live this story is to tell it, to ourselves and possibly others; and in this case to retell it again and again, revising it as we go along” (Carr as cited in Clandinin 2013, p. 39). This is why memories of experiences ebb and flow—*backward* and *forward*—and why understanding experiences are not static. As Clandinin (2013) explains, “Attending in temporal ways points inquirers toward the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events under study” (p. 39).

The second dimension, *sociality*, directs us to the fact that “narrative inquirers attend both to personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 40). Personal conditions speak to the *inward-looking* at “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 480). Social conditions, conversely, require an *outward-looking* “toward the existential conditions, that is, environment” (Murphy, 2002, p. 43). “These social conditions are understood, in part, in terms of cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic narratives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 480). Part of the environment is the “relationship between researchers’ and participants’ lives ... narrative inquirers cannot subtract themselves from the inquiry relationship” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 41). Even after the research is over, the participants’ experiences will continue to live in me and shape my understandings and experiences on higher educational landscapes (Huber et al., 2006).

Finally, the third dimension *place*, “attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51). In essence, “people, place, and stories are inextricably linked” (Clandinin 2013, p. 41). As I began to explore my narrative beginnings, I understood “the relationship between [my] memories of [my] life and the [educational and familial] landscape[s] on which [my life was] played out,” is why the higher educational landscape is part of

educational landscapes in their entirety in which I have long felt an interloper (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 53). My struggles on the university landscape began long before I entered this space, as far back as grade one—and, likely earlier in the lives of my ancestors. My experiences on the higher educational landscape have been shaped by my experiences in the home, in rural communities, and early educational landscapes.

As Murphy (2002) writes, “To experience an experience is to simultaneously experience it” in the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place, and to “ask questions pointing each way” (p. 43). Further, in wondering about my research puzzle, I sought to understand experience (of both participants and the researcher) through thinking with storied experience by staying attentive to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

Attending to this space, I move backwards in time and explore my experiences with teachers on early educational landscapes; I realize that these experiences shape my experiences on the university landscape and help me understand my feelings of shame, isolation, and fear. Temporality, sociality, and place intersect in the *retelling* and *reliving* of these experiences. This shows me, that as a researcher conducting narrative inquiry, I am always coming in the “midst of ... stories” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 576).

### **Research in the Midst**

When speaking of entering into the *midst of stories*, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) draw our attention to the fact that participants are “in the midst of living stories” when the research project begins (pp. 63-64). They explain that participants’ “lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which they live and work, their classrooms, their schools, and their communities, are also in the midst when we researchers arrive” (p. 64). This is why understanding experience attentive to the dimensions of *temporality*, *sociality*, and *place* becomes critical and just as important, in understanding the *retelling* and *reliving* of experience. To illustrate, the research relationship with participants began on the university landscape “as well as within the context of research” (Huber et

al., 2006, p. 219). My relationship with the participants extended to include entering into research conversations<sup>21</sup> and living alongside them in their familial and social landscapes.

Huber et al. (2016) help me understand narrative inquiry as a *relational* research methodology:

Nested within ... multiple contexts ... [the participants and myself as researcher will share] stories of our lives, both in and outside of [higher educational landscapes]. Our stories [are], as is common in friendships, tellings of the multiplicity of our lives, that listened to the tensions and complexities of our present lives and that tried to help us each imagine our future lives. (p. 219)

Throughout the narrative inquiry research process, I imagined the participants and I “might [come] to know one another’s lives and in the process ‘restory’ who we are and who we are becoming as students” as we composed lives on higher educational landscapes (Huber et al., 2006, pp. 220-221).

Caine et al. (2013) explain that a defining feature of narrative inquiry is that the “ontological commitment of a narrative inquirer shapes each stage of a narrative inquiry. As we consider our research puzzles we draw upon our own experiences, which orient us to the inquiry” (p. 576). As Clandinin (2013) writes, as researchers we “are in the phenomenon under study ... we are ... also making and remaking our lives. We, too, are in the midst [and as a result, we] need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we, ourselves, are part of the storied landscapes we are studying ... we helped make the world in which we find ourselves” (p. 82).

This is, in part, why this particular form of narrative inquiry is seen as “relational research” (Clandinin 2013, pp. 81-82) or “being-in-relation” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 580), which impacts being in the field, composing texts, and ethical obligations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Huber et al. (2006) explain that narrative inquiry is “collaborative research” (p. 211). Yes, this can be messy, as wonderfully messy as life itself is! As a narrative inquiry researcher, my life did become, as Huber et al. (2006) write, “entangled in [the] inquiry with the life of [the] participants” (p. 211).

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<sup>21</sup>Narrative inquirers engage in research conversations rather than conducting interviews. This allows for a relational way of being and understanding possibilities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather than seeking definitive answers via a well-crafted interview guide, narrative inquiry uses “conversations [as a way] to create a space for the voices and stories of both participants and researchers to be heard and composed” (Clandinin & Caine 2013, p. 167).

**Inviting participants.** Narrative inquiry requires long-term, ongoing research conversations with participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain of narrative inquiry, it is “both a view of the phenomena of people’s experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience” (p. 166). They say that this methodology “allows for the intimate and in-depth study of individuals’ experiences over time and in context” (p. 166). This is what drew me to this research methodology. It is poverty-class students’ lived experiences that I sought to understand—and care for—as we are composing lives in higher education.

I engaged with three participants (Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah) over a six- to nine-month period, depending on the commitment that participants were able to make. There was a fourth participant that chose to leave the study. I invited university undergraduate students from a research-intensive, western Canadian university to participate in this research. This research was conducted on Treaty territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people. Research posters were placed throughout the campus in high traffic areas. The research recruitment poster stated that I was looking for participants who (1) grew up in poverty; (2) wanted to engage in on-going research conversations; (3) were undergraduates from any discipline; (4) were able to meet in-person over a six-month period. The goals of the research project were listed as: (1) to understand how universities may shape diversity policies; (2) to make visible poverty-class students’ university experiences.

While there were concerns in recruiting enough participants, especially in light of a master’s research timeframe, more participants came forward than could be included. Student participants were over 18 years old. They were in their second- to final-year of undergraduate studies.

As I was interested in understanding experience, and understanding it narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I did not look for specific social characteristics such as indigeneity, immigration status, race or gender; participants self-identified as coming from a poverty-class family/background. I focused on participants’ subjective and narrative understandings of systemic childhood poverty. While race,

gender, immigration status, and other social characteristics were part of their stories, these features were not the central focus of this research project.

**Ethics approval.** Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Participants were offered written and verbal information about the study. To ensure confidentiality, all names and identifying information has been changed.

**Defining poverty.** My research did not seek to develop a *better* definition of poverty, or contribute to existing definitions of poverty, as this could have the effect of further reinforcing single stories of poverty. McKenzie (2015) reinforces the need to *narratively* understand how our lives are shaped by childhood poverty—and, our lived experiences on higher educational landscapes—rather than developing a single definition of poverty:

The poorest groups and neighbourhoods within the UK ... have been conceptualised, and known through many modalities, and the definitions constantly shift. Those definitions have led to specific and often negative understandings of poor working-class people, and it is through these negative definitions and damaging narratives that policies have been prescriptive. (p. 17)

When asked how I could do this research *without* defining poverty, the question was asked in terms of how poverty is normally defined: economics. Economic definitions of poverty do not bring us closer to understanding how the unique biographies of students whose lives have been shaped by poverty are composing lives in higher education. Further, economic definitions reduce lives to statistics; money is a single thread in the experiences of poverty. While living close to or below the poverty-line does shape the lives of undergraduate students, it is not the only factor that needs to be considered. Participants in my exploratory research project did not story themselves in terms of not having enough money for this or that. It is how they *experienced* poverty, and how they were storied on educational and community landscapes, that was damaging. In terms of education policy, Brown and Strega (2005) caution that predominant definitions of poverty are based on “neo-liberal economic ideologies and their spawn, managerialism, [which] have demanded that practice and policy be assessed in terms of fiscal accountability and little else” (p. 5).

Finally, what was crucial with this research is that I am not the gatekeeper of what experiences matter. Nor, could I set an arbitrary threshold of what constitutes the “right” type of experiences. The purpose of my research was *not* to make generalizations, but to study narratives in an inclusive manner with the focus on systemic childhood poverty. To respect their lived experiences, participants self-identified with their *subjective* definitions of poverty.

**Negotiating space and representation.** Caine et al. (2013) state that “the first responsibility of narrative inquirers is always to participants. The negotiations<sup>22</sup> of entry and exit, as well as the representation of experience, are central ethical concerns ... representation is a relational knowing” (p. 580). The implications for my research were such that I negotiated not only the start and end dates of the research with participants, but also their time commitment, research spaces, field texts, and narrative accounts.

Not all private stories became public stories. This was negotiated between each participant and myself. Although I was working toward understanding the “multiplicity of lives” (Huber et al., 2006, p. 219) we are composing on a higher education landscape, with narrative inquiry, I attended to participants’ wishes and hence, some stories do not appear in the final research texts. This means that interim research texts were negotiated with participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, “when researchers enter the field, they experience shifts and changes, constantly negotiating, constantly reevaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an every-changing landscape” (p. 71). In short, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that “the negotiation of a research relationship is ongoing throughout the inquiry”—and, at times “one can feel on the edge almost as an uninvited guest throughout the fieldwork” (p. 72).

When I think of the exploratory and master’s research projects I conducted, I am drawn to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) research experiences: they write that “there have been times when the

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<sup>22</sup> Clandinin and Caine (2013) write, “Negotiation involves a continuous dialogue, in which both participants and researchers are equally engaged and that is reflected in the conversations, actions, and commitments to the ongoing relationship” (p. 167).

gap between a researcher's and a participant's narratives of experience have seemed too great" (p. 72).

This is evident within the participants' narrative accounts. In particular, I make visible the tensions that I brought into the research relationships with Sarah and Margaret Rose. I carried with me white settler anxiety and damaging stories planted in me and early along the way about Indigenous Canadians.<sup>23</sup> It took me many years to be able to get close to these experiences and stories, especially those from my childhood. For now, these stories remain private; they are too difficult and will need much more unpacking to understand. Yet, exploring these narrative beginnings was a crucial part of this inquiry.

I "'world'-travelled" (Lugones, 1987) to unfamiliar landscapes and lived experiences—and, held close stories to live by and lives in the making (Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To illustrate, with this master's research, I negotiated relationships with participants and respected experiences—beyond my own understandings. Participants only asked that I honour their experiences through the writing. I was often very nervous with co-composing their narrative accounts because this is the first time they shared how childhood poverty shaped their lives and undergraduate experiences. Within each relationship, we remained very aware that too many poverty-class students and their lived experiences remain profoundly silenced.

When I think of participants in this narrative inquiry journey—and, the commitment I asked participants to make, I am struck by Coles's (1997) words—and, my responsibility in conducting this relational research (as cited by Huber et al., 2006, p. 211):

What are one's obligations not to oneself, one's career, the academic world, or the world of readers, but to the people who are, after all, slowly becoming not only one's "sources" or "contacts" or "informants," but one's graciously tolerant and open-handed teachers and friends—*there*, week after week ... *there* in their available yet so vulnerable and hard-pressed and precarious lives? (pp. 61-62)

As Clandinin (2013) explains, in this methodology, researchers do "not stand metaphorically outside the inquiry but are part of the phenomenon under study" (p. 24). As Clandinin (2013) notes,

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<sup>23</sup> I am deeply grateful to Dr. Trudy Cardinal, a professor at the University of Alberta's education department, who came alongside me as I struggled to unpack what I was experiencing. Dr. Cardinal was gracious and kind. She created a safe space where I could talk about my white settler angst. Her support resonates through and across the narrative accounts, narrative threads, and thesis conclusion.

“Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry. The stories lived and told in a narrative inquiry relationship are always a co-composition, an intentional co-composition” (p. 24).

**Types of field texts.** Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain that field texts “refer to the records” that are “composed or co-composed by researchers and participants” (p. 166). They write that field texts (data) “signal that these texts are experiential, intersubjective texts rather than objective texts” (p. 166).

Clandinin and Caine (2013) write, “There are multiple ways to gather, compose, and create *field texts* (our term for data) from studying the experiences of participants and inquirers in a narrative inquiry” (p.166).

To illustrate, in this research, “field texts [were] composed [and] co-composed, by” participants and myself” including “field notes, transcripts of conversations, artefacts such as” special clothing, sacred gifts, magazine articles, school assignments, pictures, university strategic plans, and food prepared from family recipes (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 166).

The diversity of field texts allowed for opening up spaces for respecting subjective lived experiences. As a researcher, it was not my role to *assume* or *impose* my own understanding and experiences upon research participants. How I experience, for example, shame on education landscapes does not—and, should not, be assumed to be the same for Margaret Rose, Mildred, or Sarah.

***Field texts with individual participants.*** I recorded and transcribed research conversations with the participants and kept a field journal. As part of my field journal, I wrote observational notes. I generated additional field texts based upon negotiation with the participants such as chronicles of their educational journey. Given the relational and reflexive nature of narrative inquiry, it was important that I kept field journals of my experiences and shifting understandings, which are also inquired into through the three-dimensional space of sociality, temporality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); I, too, am a participant in this research. As I came alongside participants, I attended to my own shifting understandings; I explored experiences safely tucked away in my “heartbreak box,” education annals, and journal writing.

***From field texts to interim research texts.*** Field texts (e.g., transcribed research conversations), “are shaped into interim research texts, which are shared and negotiated with participants prior to being composed into final research texts” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 173). For some, this was a point of concern as they worried that negotiating the interim research text with participants could hold up the research process. However, in keeping with the relational nature of narrative inquiry, it was important that participants were comfortable with how their experiences were being represented. This negotiation ensured that I was not choosing this or that powerful quote to further my own research agenda, (un)intentionally silencing participants’ experiences, or reducing lives to single stories (Adichie, 2009).

***From interim research texts to research texts.*** Finally, the accessibility of research texts is of paramount importance for me. Ensuring that my research findings are accessible both within and outside of academia (and to participants) was central to the development of the research texts. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution those new to narrative inquiry: “Each particular narrative inquiry [needs to be positioned] within an ongoing scholarly conversation” (p. 167). Research texts must be tailored for particular audience members, be it for publication in journals, or books, delivered at conferences, or the many possibilities I have yet to discover to make participants’ voices ring loud, clear, and true.<sup>24</sup> They helped me realize the importance of understanding and writing for diverse audiences. There is creativity in the final construction of the research texts; however, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution, “we need to shape our texts so that they have a chance to push boundaries, yet not stretch them beyond audience belief” (p. 168). For instance, I was rediscovering my creativity through the writing process. As someone who loves metaphor and poetic language, this presented interesting challenges. Was I successful in getting what I imagined in my mind onto the page? Did I push metaphor too far? Did I use language that was too obscure? Did I write in ways that silenced participants’ experiences? These wonders I carried with me as I co-composed the narrative accounts.

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<sup>24</sup> The potential of how I may make this research visible is shaped from a conversation with Dr. Susan Strega (Professor), School of Social Work, University of Victoria. I am deeply grateful for her support in helping me to understand the possibilities in making voices ring loud, clear, and true.

***Shaping the narrative accounts.*** Each narrative account is prefaced by a prologue explaining the logic behind literary choices. The narrative accounts do not seek to present a linear accounting of how lives are unfolding; participants *told, lived, retold, and relived* experiences as they travelled backwards and forwards across time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Clandinin (2013) notes, “Although interpretation is always underway as the inquiry is lived out with participants in the field, at some point there is a move away from the close intensive contact with participants to begin to work on the field texts” (p. 47). Given this, as I wrote the narrative accounts, at various points I shared sections of the writing with participants in person and via email. Upon completion of each narrative account in its entirety, participants *lived* with their narrative accounts to allow for sufficient time to wonder about their stories and how they were being represented. Participants brought forth new wonders—and, changes (e.g., corrections to how Indigenous ceremonies and rituals were portrayed). Clandinin (2013) illustrates the narrative account co-composition process:

In composing interim research texts, narrative inquirers continue to think narratively; that is, they attend closely to the field texts within the three-dimensional space [of temporality, sociality, and place]. Interim research texts are often partial texts that are open to allow participants and researchers opportunities to further co-compose storied interpretations and to negotiate multiplicity of possible meanings. Bringing back interim research texts to further engage in negotiation with participants around unfolding threads of experience is central to composing research texts. The dialogue with participants around interim research texts can lead the inquirer back for more intensive work with the participant if more field texts are needed to be able to compose research texts that research and participants see as authentic and compelling. (p. 47)

To demonstrate, I printed out Margaret Rose’s narrative account; each section was on a separate page. She spent many hours piecing together the sections; she gently reminded me, that although I wrote her narrative account, she had agency in choosing how her story would be presented. Mildred guided me with language; often I used words and metaphors that were culturally out of context, or too vague and academic. Sarah read her narrative account at home. We then met to ensure, for example, that ceremony descriptions were being attended to in respectful and accurate ways. Sarah’s understandings were shifting

so we added an epilogue to her narrative account to bring forth wonders she was exploring in her creative writing class.

Participants and I negotiated which experiences would be made public; we were mindful that some stories are not ours to tell. We were sensitive to how some stories may be taken up in damaging ways; however, we were sensible to the fact that we cannot control this. Dr. Vera Caine and Dr. Janice Huber provided guidance to me when I felt unsure about making some stories public. For example, Margaret Rose was criminally charged and could not enter into the education faculty. My instinct was to exclude this; Dr. Caine helped me realize that this is part of the criminalization of poverty. Mildred and I were thoughtful how we could unintentionally story people from her early landscapes in damaging ways. Participants and I remained focused that central to this research is how systemic childhood poverty shapes their undergraduate experiences. Although I am a participant in this narrative inquiry, both as a student whose life is shaped by childhood poverty, a master's student, and a researcher, I am not the focus. However, because of the relational nature of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry methodology, my voice appears alongside participants as we co-composed their narrative accounts. Before this inquiry began, I remained resistant to the idea of conducting an autobiographical narrative inquiry; I was not ready to be immersed in my own narrative beginnings. Yet, I was, as Dubnewick (2017) writes, "wakeful and open" in my inquiry "in [a] relational knowing and being" manner (n.p.).

In the co-creation of the research texts, I remained attentive to a narrative inquiry relational way of being: I did not seek to include resonant threads because they might be the most literary compelling pieces. I was attentive to the "unfolding threads of experience" (Clandinin 2013, p. 47) and remained open to exploring these experiences alongside participants.

I did not want to begin writing; I did not want to stop writing. I wanted to leave the narrative accounts; I did not want to leave the narrative accounts. The participants' narrative accounts remain unfinished; Dr. Caine worked with me to help me understand that the narrative accounts—and, this thesis, remains a work-in-progress. At some point, the research conversations and co-composition of

narrative accounts had to come to a conclusion. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us, we enter into the midst of participants' lives in the making; there are no concrete beginning, middle, and end points.

Participants have experienced being silenced most of their lives on the many landscapes they have inhabited; they have lived a life of hiding how their lives are shaped by systemic childhood poverty. For this reason, I asked participants to choose their pseudonym. They chose names that deeply resonated with their lived experiences. As a student and researcher, whose higher education experiences are shaped by systemic childhood poverty, I was sensitive to imposing anonymous names upon participants; I did not want the responsibility. It also felt too great a responsibility.

Transitioning from interim research texts to research texts (narrative accounts) was deeply shaped by participants being current undergraduate students—and, myself as a master's student. Just as important was an early research awareness: I realized participants are *living* the research gap I found for this inquiry. It was instilled in me that the *research gap* is hailed as a *pièces de résistance* in academia; yet, it was a difficult understanding to see how deeply participants *experienced* this research gap. When I first recognized this, I felt shamed. I wondered how I could have gotten so caught up in the academic notion of finding the all mighty research gap—without stopping to consider what this means for lives in the making.

**Resonant threads.** Clandinin (2013) notes that with narrative inquiry, we move through several “level[s] of analysis (p. 132). From field texts (data), I co-composed research texts: *narrative accounts*—that is, “a representation of the unfolding lives of both [the] participants and ... [myself], at least as they became visible in those times and places where our stories intersected and were shared” (Clandinin 2013, p. 132). Clandinin (2013) explains that these “drafted narrative accounts” were negotiated with participants, which is a process unique to each research-participant relationship (p. 132). I read across all three “narrative accounts to inquire into resonant threads or patterns that [I] could discern” (p. 132). Although only I had direct contact with participants, Dr. Janice Huber and Dr. Vera Caine “engaged in this process as a collaborative research team ... with an overall intention to open up new wonders and questions” about how growing up in poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences (Clandinin 2013, p. 132). “Narrative

threads can be understood as a way of looking at experience as a whole while not fragmenting experiences into themes” (Genoway et al., 2016, p. 435; Riessman, 2007).

For the purposes of the findings in this thesis, two narrative threads are foregrounded for discussion: *belief in* and *poverty is not a box*. These threads make visible aspects of each participant’s experiences in relation to larger social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives. I did not seek to generalize; as Clandinin (2013) explains, by “intentionally focusing on ... *threads*, [I was] interested in following particular plotlines that [are] threaded or wove[n] over time and place through an individual’s narrative account” (p. 132). This process entailed metaphorically bringing the three narrative accounts alongside one another, searching for “what we, as a team, saw as resonances or echoes that reverberated across accounts” (p. 132). Throughout, we were attentive to the whole life in the making. Clandinin (2013) explains that in “looking across the narrative accounts co-composed between researcher and participant ... [we] hold onto storied lives and [do] not ... reduce them to themes or categories” (p. 137).

### **Relational Research Ethics**

As Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain, “Throughout this [research] process, ethical considerations require that researchers remain attentive to ethical tensions, obligations, and responsibilities in their relationships with participants” (p. 166). Narrative inquirers speak of “response[s]” to “refer to the ways in which researchers and participants work in relational ways” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167). They go on to explain that a “response is guided by relational ethics and an ethics of everyday life ... [r]esponse also refers to the community in which each researcher is embedded; it is the response community, which supports each researcher throughout the inquiry” (p. 167). It is important to note that in terms of ethics, as a researcher, I lived “in collaborative ways in which [participants and myself] ... co-compose[d] and negotiate[d] stories. This ethics of care also calls forth social responsibilities, with an attention to equities and social justice” (p. 168). My teachers and response communities helped me shift my understanding of the ethical responsibilities I have toward my family and communities.

I cannot speak for my mother's experiences and understandings of education landscapes. I only know splinters of her experiences on early education, familial, and community landscapes. I have an ethical responsibility to *not* contribute to reinforcing damaging narratives of a woman who comes from intergenerational poverty. I do not have the right to name communities; I can only speak to my own experiences and how these (re)shape my experiences on higher education landscapes. A teacher asked me, "How would my mother tell her experiences if she could have a voice?" Her experiences will remain silent because I am not able to ask her or to wonder alongside her. I cannot "world'-travel" to many of the places she has been; however, I can "world'-travel" to many places she cannot go because of her origins and life shaped by intergenerational poverty (Lugones, 1987).

**Relationally speaking.** Narrative inquirers take a "relational ethical stance [that] is founded in an ethics of care" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170). In part, this is what drew me to narrative inquiry. Relational ethics required that I understood my own narrative beginnings in relation to this research and how my own understandings shaped the research and research relationship. Dubnewick (2017) explains narrative beginnings: "In narrative inquiry, narrative beginnings are the beginning of the self-facing, the autobiographical inquiry that keep us each asking who we are in each research study" (n.p.). This helped me to attend to the lives of participants and myself. Relational ethics allowed for opening up possibilities for wonders and shifting understandings—and, interrupting dominant educational narratives (e.g., *It's in the past so just get over it!*). As Clandinin and Caine (2013) write:

While our intent is to enter the relationships with participants as researchers, participants come to know and see us as people in relation with them; a reminder that we always carry ethical responsibilities. As we are guided by relational ethics and always remain aware of our short- and long-term responsibilities, we try hard to negotiate ways in which we can be helpful; we do not turn away from participants' needs and wishes. This, too, means that we spend sustained time with participants, their families, and/or communities. (p. 170)

Relational ethics does not mean my role is to *fix and serve*; as Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain, relational ethics means the "importance of acknowledging that neither researchers nor participants walk away from the inquiry unchanged" (p. 171). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) clarify: we enter the research

relationship in the midst of our lives and end in the midst of lives in the making. We all leave the research changed in significant ways; the same is true for myself.

### **Study Limitations**

A narrative inquirer enters into the midst of lives in the making; as such, I cannot provide a finished product of a life (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). This inquiry's "data" does not present one singular truth or one plotline. As Clandinin and Caine write, "Each story is embedded in [the] context" of temporality, sociality, and place (p. 177); thus, I provide no generalizations. This inquiry is an "in-depth study" of poverty-class students' experiences "over time and in context" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 166).

"Narrative inquiry ... does not attempt to offer a final story" (Caine, Estefan & Clandinin, 2013, p. 582). Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah are not necessarily representative of any larger poverty-class student population at Canadian universities. While experiencing systemic poverty was the focus of this research, experiences were shaped by differing social characteristics such as race, indigeneity, gender, and age.

Through her research and writing, Kimpson's (2005) unfolding understandings of truth helped ground this narrative inquiry:

I do not pretend to have the answers or the truth. Adrienne Rich's (1979) words ring in my ears: "There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'—truth is not one thing or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (p. 187). Indeed, the truth of any situation is to be found through the interweaving of many voices and perspectives, and is socially constructed.... I am once again attempting to join landscapes of consciousness and action to demonstrate how a critically self-reflexive autobiography might function as a research text. (p. 77).

Often I was asked, "How will you know if participants are telling you the truth? How will you know your 'data' is valid?" These types of questions bump up against dominant notions of "data" in sociological research; that is, what constitutes "objective" data—data that is used to generalize to a population. Yet, as I let go of this type dominant research narrative, I embraced that a goal of this research

is to make visible how these particular participants' undergraduate experiences have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty.

### **Ending in the Midst**

Central to this research was understanding the experiences of students from poverty-class backgrounds who are composing lives on higher educational landscapes. Thus, I was interested in their lived experiences, which required a methodology such as Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry. Merely seeing people as single stories, or as representatives of single categories and therefore, not as people composing lives across time, place, and social situations, did not fit with my research goals. For example, I hope to influence "widening access" to higher education institutional policies for greater inclusion and diversity based on social class; to interrupt dominant social, cultural, and institutional historical narratives regarding poverty and students from poverty-class families on educational landscapes. For poverty-stained students, my research holds the potential for them and me to begin to tell the *missing stories of ourselves* (Adair et al. 2007, p. 135). Perhaps more realistically, I hope to contribute to the conversations that poverty-class scholars such as Adair (2003), McKenzie (2015), Rimstead (2001), Steedman (1987) and the late Swanson (2004) are engaged in.

### **A Wishful Conversation**

Clandinin and Caine (2013) explain: "Even though our lives meet in the midst as we begin the inquiry together and even though we leave in the midst as final research texts are composed," as narrative inquirers "we realize that the relational space of telling, and retelling stories has shifted who we are as we continue to relive and retell stories long after the inquiry in the field" ends (p. 170). This draws me back to an all too familiar conversation Daisy, a pilot research participant, *wished* she could have had with a professor:

I remember early on um when things—you know you remember when things just having to be handed in on the computer—there was like this—it was a critical period between writing things down in an essay and then having making sure it's typed up. It was never really like a black and white transition. All of a sudden teachers just started expecting this. And I never had an access to

computer. So there was that really implicit discrimination [happening] where I felt like I wanted [long pause] to say, “I don’t have a computer.”

“Well, find one. It’s easy enough to find one.”

“How?”

“Family members.”

“I don’t have any family members that have computers.”

“Library.”

“How am I going to get there?”

[silently] Like I don’t have any money for the bus. Like all of these things that would ...

“Library campus.”

“Okay, but they’re closed and I work.”

Like all of these things were—like you could just let me write it down!! And is it really a problem? You know those types of things. So there’s that example that I definitely feel. There’s other examples, like monetary examples where you know there’s um class outings or pot luck dinners and things like that and it was just overwhelming to think that you have to stress yourself out to contribute. Um, and then there’s also you know topical stuff, when you’re actually talking in class and talking about the “Other,” but you’re the other. It’s like, hmm, okay, be a little more sensitive here.

(Excerpt from Daisy’s interview transcript, November 5, 2014)

I am drawn to how attending to lives can shape socially just and equitable educational landscapes. I wonder how creating inclusive educational landscapes can shape poverty-class students’ lives in meaningful ways. I wonder about creating educational places where poverty-class students’ *experiences* of not being able to access library computers after hours are not a cause for shame and pain.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CACTUS

#### Prologue to the Narrative Accounts

Anzaldúa (1999) writes, “*Soy nopal de castilla*<sup>25</sup> like the spineless and therefore defenseless cactus.... I have no protection. So I cultivate needles, nettles, razor-sharp spikes to protect myself” (p. 67). Narrative inquiry challenges me to ensure that I cultivate needles, nettles, razor-sharp spikes to protect participants<sup>26</sup> and myself. As a relational methodology, narrative inquiry requires that participants be protected beyond institutional ethical considerations of anonymity.

I do not speak of a paternalistic protection which silences. In the retelling of participants’ experiences, not all private stories become public. Experiences of family and friends are not our stories to tell; family and friends still live with hard stories. I do not seek to sanitize experiences; I do not seek to glamourize experiences. I do not seek *selective* intersectionality to further my own research or academic career agenda. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, I must be wakeful and not fold participants’ experiences back into dominant institutional, cultural, social, or educational narratives. I am mindful not to contribute to, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) say, a “grand narrative’ of social science inquiry” as the “only valid story” (p. xxv) where the plotlines of participants’ experiences and my own experiences are threaded into dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives.

Narrative accounts are written to reflect participant’s experiences so the reader can hear their “silenced dialogue” (Dickar, 2008, p. 115). I strive to make visible the relationships I developed with participants as a researcher. I compose field texts from field notes, digitally-recorded conversations, casual conversations, participant journals, email and text messages, phone calls, and participants’ chronicles. Field texts take single and multiple forms (e.g., dialogue, poetry, prose). As Clandinin and Connelly

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<sup>25</sup> *Soy nopal de castilla*: a large cactus that has no needles.

<sup>26</sup> Participants and other individuals referenced in the narrative accounts are pseudonyms. Personal details have been anonymized.

(2000) explain, narrative accounts are field texts and “our way of talking about what passes for data in narrative inquiry” (p. 93). They (2000) note of field texts in narrative inquiry:

Unlike data, which] tends[s] to carry with them the idea of objective representation of research experience, it is important to note how imbued field texts are with interpretation. As we move into our inquiry fields, we are already telling ourselves and others stories of our research purposes. Our special interest in the situation is ... repeatedly and continually stated and negotiated with participants. Therefore, the way we enter the inquiry field influences what we attend to. We deliberately select some aspects that turn up in field texts. Other aspects, less consciously and deliberately selected, also show up in field texts. To understand what narrative inquirers do as they write field texts, it is important to be aware not only that selectivity takes place but also that foregrounding one or another aspect may make other aspects less visible or even visible. Field texts, in an important sense, also say much about what is not said and not noticed. (p. 93)

I did not “seek to present a linear set of arguments” (Markham, 2005, pp. 814-815; see also Richardson, 1995) about the individual in relation to larger structural reasons for social inequality; I seek to “revoke silences” and evoke shifting understandings of poverty narratives (Emmel 2015, n.p.). I purposefully present fragmented narratives as they “tend to reveal and, therefore, make available the interstices of reading, so that the reader is not locked into a single line of argument ... multiplicity is made more possible” (Marham, 2005, p. 816).

*Bricolage/pastiche* (these terms conjure collage) reveal tensions and bump up against dominant narratives that silence. Mixing literary devices and genres may generate ideas and ways of thinking about how systemic childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students’ experiences. Narrative fragments collide and bring attentiveness “to the way fragmented discourse functions helps us not only understand how people are experiencing everyday life but also, as scholars, explore new ways of making sense of social life and expressing knowledge” (Markham, 2015, p. 815). When I moved passed fretting if I was getting the “right” stories, and respected that the experiences participants shared with me were the ones *they chose* to share, a world of wonders and possibilities opened up. In the writing process, I allow myself to get lost and be playful. The tension between creative and traditional academic writing bumps along behind me. The sound of this tension is like the clackety-clack banging of tin cans tied behind a newlywed’s vehicle. I rejoice at the spectacle; I cringe at the spectacle.

Caine, Murphy, Estefan, Clandinin, Steeves and Huber (2016) explain “the purposes of fictionalization in narrative inquiry:”

We draw attention to how fictionalizing has become a common and often unquestioned part of responding to concerns about anonymity raised by research ethics boards, but we also move beyond those concerns to other intentions and purposes of fictionalizing in narrative inquiry. We see three purposes for fictionalization: (a) protection of the identities of participants, (b) creation of distance between ourselves and our experiences, and (c) a way to engage in imagination that enriches inquiry spaces and research understandings. (p. 2)

I focus on *experiencing* participants’ experiences and the experiences of writing. I return to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) experiences: “We found ourselves quantifying what interested us, and of course, as we quantified experience, its richness and expression was stripped away” (pp. xxv-xxvi). I am not analyzing experiences; I am unpacking experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Yet, as Markham (2005) writes, “Figuring out what to leave in, what to cull out, how to guide the reader through the presentation of discourse, and how to help readers understand what it all means while being self-reflexive about the researcher’s role in the process” indeed feels like a “slippery slope” (p. 832). When I let go of academic-speak, imagery comes forward that resonates in *demonstrating* and *showing* experiences rather than *concealing* and *telling*.

I cannot control how narrative accounts will be experienced and taken up in conversations by readers. The needles, nettles, razor-sharp spikes I cultivate in the retelling of participants’ experiences in this thesis are a diversity of literary devices—as diverse as participants’ biographies. These devices and language are used purposefully in the shaping of narrative accounts. Creative non-fiction, play, found poems, chronicles, transcript excerpts, and field journal excerpts come together to shape narrative understandings of experiences.<sup>27</sup> Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah’s narrative accounts are co-composed so that we may, as Greene (1995) writes, “see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or ‘common-sensible’ and to carve out new orders in experience. Doing so, a person may become freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be and what is not yet” (p. 19).

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<sup>27</sup> To ensure confidentiality, names and identifying information has been changed.

Anzaldúa (1999) offers a Mexican saying that reminds us that, “Out of poverty, poetry; out of suffering, song” (p. 87).

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## CHAPTER THREE

### SARAH IS SEEKING

#### **Prologue to Sarah's Narrative Account**

A calmness clings to Sarah. She is a perpetually curious traveller. She reminds me of hippies I have seen in Woodstock documentaries. Sarah is unrestrained; she is thoughtful. She wears ponchos threaded through with curiosity and wonders. She is witty and fun; she is sharp and strong; Sarah embodies a free-spiritedness. To capture her lived experiences required a *freestyle*-type narrative account form. She does not see herself as an artist; yet, she is a combination of art nouveau to contemporary to late modern styles. Sarah is an understated panache of intrigue. I felt the need to experiment with different forms in the retelling and reliving of her experiences. I *needed* to explore creativity. I am still unsure why; something about Sarah inspired me. She is courageous and trusted me with experimentation in the representation of her experiences. Sarah seeks new ways of understanding. As Sarah and I negotiated her narrative account, I told her I had wanted to write her entire account as poetry; she thought this would be wonderful. Although I lost my courage, Sarah's narrative account contains elements of poetry. It is intentionally free-flow in style. It pushes against restrictive academic structures that exclude and silence and embraces, for example, fragmented sentences, numerous found poems created from the transcripts, deconstructing and reconstructing her education journey chronicle, and body artefacts. There are tensions visible in Sarah's narrative account; I do not seek to smooth or ease them. Throughout, Sarah is seeking.

## Entering into the First Research Relationship

Half-way through summer

Can't make a decision where to meet  
Either of us!

Last minute  
First research conversation  
Booked

I wonder, "*What will she think of me?*"

Maybe Sarah will reschedule  
Give me a reprieve

My whiteness blinding me

I felt uncomfortable to suggest a meeting place. Theoretically, I understood that where we met would shape our research conversation. I made some half-hearted, tension filled suggestions. After multiple back-and-forth conversations, Sarah suggested we meet on campus at the students' union building. All very last minute. Suited me. I do not like to make plans. I did not tell this to Sarah. I was on the edge of panic when I walked up to the couch to meet her. Apprehension at having the first research conversation—with the first participant of this research journey—left me deeply unsure. Fear of entering into a long-term relationship made me shaky.

I told my narrative inquiry community that I was looking for research participants. Roxy and I are both members. Roxy reached out immediately to her communities. Sarah, Roxy's cousin, contacted me within a day. She told me Roxy brings forward learning opportunities all the time. Sarah wanted to be a part of this learning; she was curious.

It was mid-morning when we met. On this summer Sunday, all was quiet and hushed on the university landscape. There was a deserted—akin to abandoned—feeling this time of year. I love silence; the quiet today was unnerving. Three tenacious food kiosks are open, perhaps out of institutional or corporate requirements. The smells of coffee, scrambled eggs, ever-present Canadian breakfast hashbrowns, muffins overzealously enveloped in saran wrap, and ubiquitous sub sandwiches infuse the

air. I nervously scurried to and fro around the kiosks. I was wishy-washy. Hemming and hawing, I settled on refilling my water bottle.

There was a hint of a sprinkling of spring session students. Their backs curved as they huddled over laptops and phones precariously placed on books strewn on tabletops. A sea of lonely tables with their partner chairs correctly aligned. I love silence; I longed for boisterous clamour. The regular school term chaos might have drowned out the noise of my pounding heart. Perhaps, the normal chaos would have made the white settler noise in my soul recede into the background.

With frayed nerves, I approach Sarah tentatively sit on the edge of the tattered couch. Taking deep, steadying breaths, I hyperventilate intentionally. I am drawn to early “breathing” experiences. As a child, we took swimming lessons in the summer at a northwestern Alberta lake. I passed the *polliwog* and *guppy* levels. I was able to keep my face underwater for a little bit of time and flop around in the water for 15 feet. I did not graduate and get my *minnow* badge. I never become comfortable with water. I am terrified if I cannot breathe. I am terrified of the *thought* of not being able to breathe. As an adult, I allowed myself to be pushed into taking scuba diving lessons. I had to swim from one end of the pool to other without coming up for air. I learned a trick: hyperventilate just to the point of passing out. Take one last breath and go for it. I did this right before I plonked down kitty corner to Sarah on the couch. I launch into a diatribe-type explanation of “ground rules” before my tattered nerves could unravel before her. I did not come up for air.

“There are a couple of things if I can discuss with you. Difficult mom stories. We will probably have these difficult mom stories but those difficult mom stories will never be made public. Because they need to be respected because they're complex.... I want you to be really comfortable with saying, ‘Elaine, we need to stop this conversation.’ And I may need to say to you that I need to stop the conversation ...” I did not start with, “Hello, how are you? It’s nice to see you,” or any number of normal Canadian prairie greetings. I stopped long enough to say, “Okay, I need to breathe.” Sarah chuckles and says, “Don’t forget to do that.” I entered the research relationship still struggling with difficult mom stories. I wonder how this shaped the entry into the research relationship? I wonder how Sarah experienced this entry? I wonder

if she thought I assumed she had hard mom stories because of a life shaped by childhood poverty? I did not start the relationship with Sarah's voice at the centre. I wonder how she experienced this.

I was like the small child on skates for the first time. Fumbling and stumbling. Tripping over my feet in eagerness—and, trepidation over the fear of falling. It was as if I was learning how to navigate an ice rink for the first time. I was a run-away train wreck of words; a mish-mash of anxiety-ridden stories planted in me about Canadian Indigenous people. All of this made me feel as if I was being pushed ahead like boxcars on a high-speed rail. My jittery words fell over themselves. I could not stop myself. Sarah was patient with me; she was attentive.

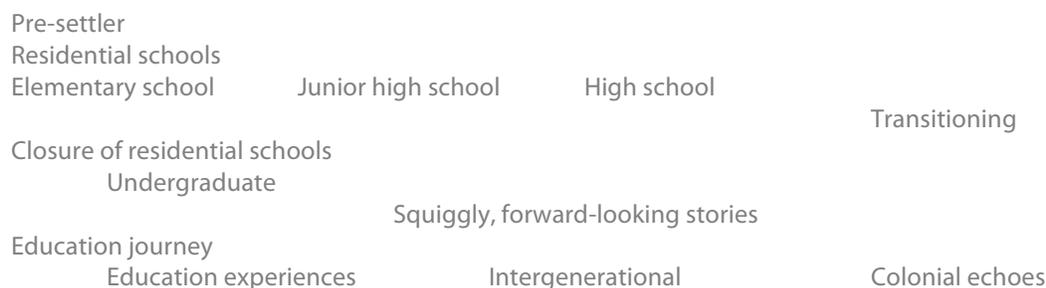
All I can visually recall of Sarah from our first research conversation was her poncho, long wavy hair, and a husky voice that was deeply soothing to my frayed nerves. It was like cramming for an exam: walk in, write as fast as you can, and leave. Immediately, you realize that you cannot remember what the questions were. Nothing makes it into long-term memory. It is all fuzzy and hazy. But, you survived.

I had many discussions with my supervisor to understand how narrative inquiry works in practice. Difficult mom stories sat heavy with me. As I entered into my first narrative inquiry research conversation experience, this was the first thing that came forth in my hurried preamble. I wonder how Sarah experienced my tension. I wonder how coming alongside participants shapes and changes the entry of relationships with successive participants.

“With this method I'm using [*long pause*] everything is negotiation about the process. How much time we spend together, how often we meet together, what stories become public, um.... Where we meet to take pauses and breaths [*long pause*] so we're not having interviews. We're having conversations and [*long pause*] and, we will see where we go from here. Okay [*long pause*] so one of the places, if you're comfortable, I would like to start about art.” I panicked. I jerked. What had I just suggested? Something I am too scared to get close to! “I'm not asking you to be an artist,” I try to apologetically backtrack. I react as if I had just asked Sarah to do something bordering on illegal; she laughs softly. “I would have, a you know, slight heart attack.” Sarah laughs again. I have just proven my ability for understatement. I have not

drawn since I was a little girl; it was a pencil drawing of the barn that I gifted this to my great aunty. It hung on the living room wall for years. It was frayed and yellowed and covered in flecks of fly debris. She did not discard it; this memory travels with me. I wonder what memories travel with Sarah. I wonder what intergenerational experiences echo through her education journey.

### Sarah’s Education Chronicle



“Let me take back the word ‘art.’ Let’s open with where you started to how you’ve got to here. Whatever it looks like.” I thought drawing out Sarah’s education journey would be easy. A simple starting point. I had spent a year struggling with understanding my own education journey. I forgot that it is not a simple process. I had to travel back and forward in understanding how growing up in childhood poverty shaped my own childhood and higher education experiences. I asked Sarah to do the same—on a moment’s notice. “A drawing ...”

“Okay ...” A dense pause hangs over the conversation; it obscured my vision of Sarah.

“Just...,” I say. My thoughts are cloudy and obscure.

The hazy tensions get some breathing room as I place the pencil case Sunwoo (선우), a visiting doctoral student from south Korea, sent me when she returned home. This is a friendship artefact that is a treasure to me; it is a symbolic artefact of Sunwoo and my friendship. It represents our immediate—and, long-lasting connection—regardless of geography or time. I put this friendship artefact between Sarah and myself. “I see what you’re saying [*long pause*] from where though—from what...?”



Pencil case from Sunwoo

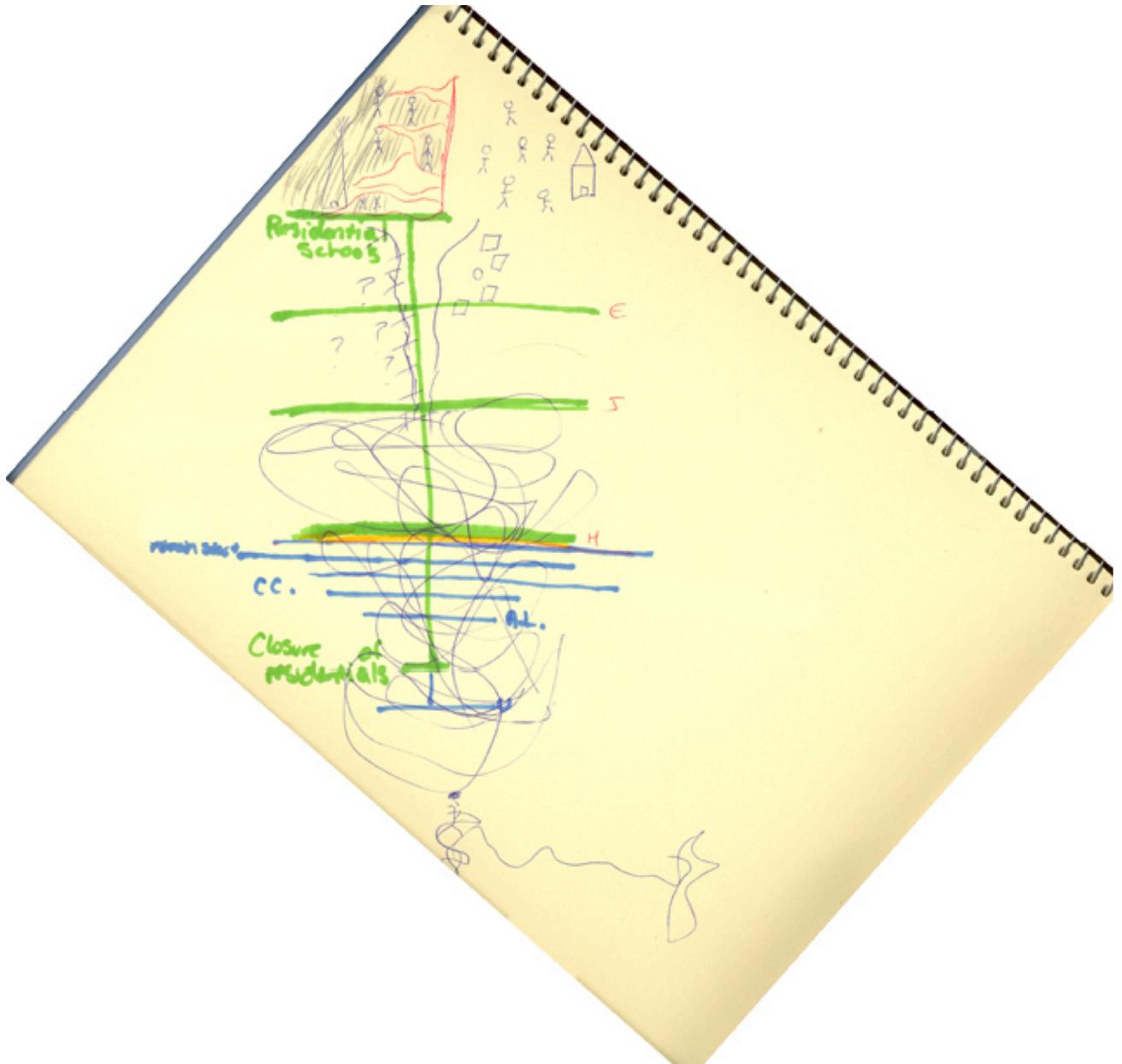
“Pick whatever things are important to you.” I dumped the contents of the pencil case onto the tabletop. Markers, felts, pencils, pens, highlighters all tumble out in disarray across the table. “Pick whatever things you want to use. Well you can’t use the hand lotion or toothpicks. This is what ends up in everything I carry—a mess of stuff.” An apt metaphor for the complexity of how lives are shaped in unique ways—and, lives in the making. Need to unpack the messy hodgepodge of experiences. “If you need a toothpick, you’ve got some there.”

The dense pause slowly dissipates. “So from [*long pause*] from where? What point? Where am I starting?” Sarah laughs and the atmosphere clears. I am taking deeper breaths.

“I don’t know,” I say with a feeble pseudo-confidence. I really do not know. The starting place of my own education journey continues to shift and move backward and forward across time, social relations, and place, as I attempt to understand how my own early and higher education experiences are shaped by growing up in childhood poverty. I feel myself take a small step closer to Sarah’s curiosity.

“Oh. Okay. Hmm. Where do I start...? I think I’ll pick a coloured one. Don’t want just a pen.”

Sarah explains her education journey in an artistic and lyrical form



## Dividing and Conquering

Tee-pee

Some little kids playing

This over here will be  
Some sort of house  
These will be—  
Can I just say white people?  
I know it's not like that  
The European—  
The European people

This will be my family here

And then

Somewhere along  
I feel like—

"Does this have to look nice in the end?"

"I can't even draw a stick person!" I raise my hands and lean defensively away from the sketchbook.



I feel like after all...  
They meet  
They're in the same area  
I feel like everything that was like

First Nation was consumed  
By horrible colonial fire

Everything gets really dark

Path that's been hidden for a long time  
By ashes and dust

This is everything  
All of Colonialism  
All the way up to residential schools  
And then—

## Fitting in the Messiness

—From there  
Somewhere between this life  
And this life  
For most of my life

This side here  
For a very long time  
Shameful  
Confusing

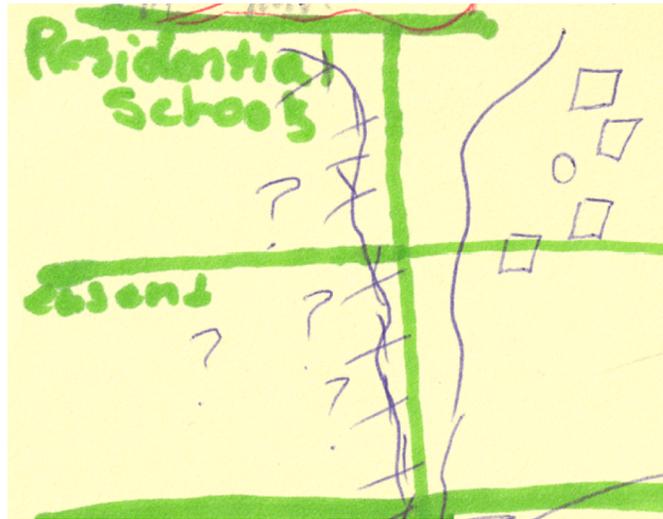
?

Didn't know how to relate to it  
Didn't know how it was a part of me

?

This part over here was just like [ ]

?



I don't know

Just a circle  
In a bunch of squares  
Something like that

?

Just knew there wasn't something—  
There was something that didn't fit

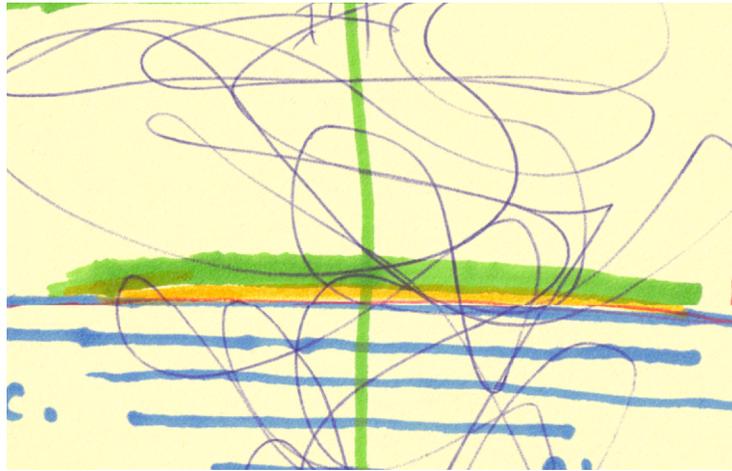
?

This crazy ...  
Junior high and adult years  
Everything was a mess  
Dealing with so much trauma  
Just like craziness  
Craziness



And then finally—

—Maybe three years ago  
Started university  
A really good point  
Things really started to get  
A little bit less crazy  
Smaller amount of craziness  
Some points little bit crazy



## Loss and Connection

Sarah went through a painful loss. Right at the time things were finally starting to make sense. She was in university. Like a perplexing puzzle, she could see where the question mark pieces fit. Sense making shifted confusion. Circles and squares were no longer at odds. A life in the making. Now crippling loss.

Went through huge loss  
Ya  
Worst thing  
  
I have *ever* in my *entire* life experienced  
So hard

As Sarah shares this, I feel inadequate. “Sorry,” I whisper. I do not know how to be in relation with her at this moment. “So sorry.” I wonder, what is the protocol? What should I say? My own experience with loss is problematic. At the age of twelve I experienced a monumental loss when I realized my mother did not love me. It would take many years to realize that she could not love me. At least in ways I fantasized mothers loved their daughters. She was herself a broken, cast-off child; thrust as a baby into the Canadian foster care system—and, forgotten. A life shaped by child- and adulthood poverty. This early familial experience echoes through my early and higher education experiences: not feeling safe to seek out professors for help. Not feeling adequate or equipped to enter into relationships. Any perceived rejection by a teacher, small or large, caused a knee-jerk reaction of further withdrawal. Sarah, too, lacks family education support as familial relations are fragmented from generational poverty, Colonialism<sup>28</sup>—and, residential schools.

I wonder how this shaped this moment with Sarah. I wonder how my experiences with loss shaped our research conversations and relational way of being together. I wonder if “sorry” was a distancing mechanism. She (or we?) did not sit with this experience. Sarah experienced this loss at the

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<sup>28</sup> Colonialism is capitalized in Sarah’s narrative account as she views the capitalization as (1) a way to not mitigate the continuing reverberations of colonialism and (2) to resist the ideology of post-colonialism. She continues to explore wonders about what defines colonialism and how it shapes Indigenous lives in the making.

beginning of a school term; four months Sarah lived with her grief; I wonder how it shaped her undergraduate experiences that semester?

Community would be the tool to unravel the squiggles—and, this experience.

No community  
Still in school  
Harder  
More isolated  
Community in life  
Lack of community  
Struggles in school  
Hard to keep going when things are hard  
Without community

We need community  
Creating change  
Making a real difference  
For conversations  
For support  
Creating a safety blanket  
Protection for people  
Supporting for people  
To network

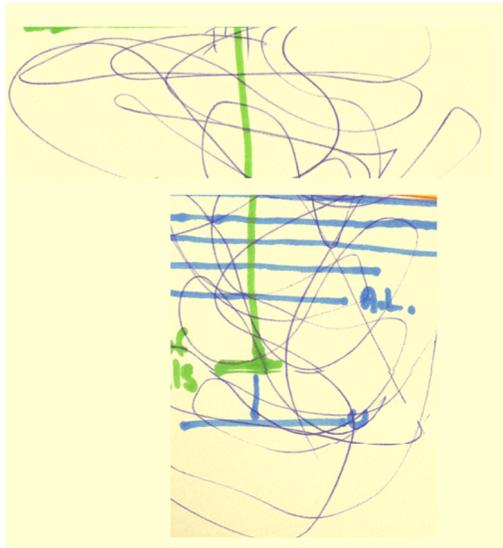
## The Healing Path

Four months after her loss, Sarah's journey shifted, unexpectedly. She resisted. Community was committed to her.

Went to an event  
Friend convinced me  
Conscious community festival  
Three days...  
Five days...

Outside my comfort zone

The moment  
Everything taking shape  
Things more flowy  
Sense making  
Healing path  
Sense making  
Healing path becoming clear  
Less scribbles and squiggles



Still moments

Feel like I'm here



Most of the craziness  
Luckily  
More a part of the past

## Unsettling the Settler Line

I harshly shift topics. I abruptly end her sense making experience. I did not mean to cut her off the path she was sharing. I fear prying. I place the burden of the relationship on Sarah. I need her to guide me. “So, where does education fit? The idea of education fit into this flow?”

With a thoughtful pause, Sarah says, “Well ...”

I do not take the time to let the pause linger in wonder. “And we could be talking about primary or high school or higher ...”

“Education [*long pause*] in all forms?”

“Let’s start with western education.” A missed opportunity. As I unpack my own early education experiences, I draw closer to the non-institutionalized education that my great aunty taught me. At this moment, I was still waking to this type of education.

Sarah says, “I really feel like western—”

Like an instructor, I say, “—Let’s do that in a different colour so we know.”

Sarah asks, “Maybe red ... black...?”

“Whichever. Sorry. I didn’t bring enough colours.”

Sarah is decisive: “Let’s do green. Green is good.”

“Unsettling green,” I think.

From the threads she was untangling, Sarah wove for me a glimpse into the interweaving of Indigenous histories alongside the institutional and familial. Too often, I interrupted with the confrontational “Why?” I am still struggling to bring forth my curiosity in a relational way. I remove myself from this piece of Sarah’s narrative account. I push out my silencing “whys.” I cut out the “whys” that demand justification for lived experiences and a life in the making.

Thick, green, perpendicular line  
 Abrupt  
 Vanishing  
 Aboriginal education  
 Green line runs over it through it cuts it

Western education started here  
 Colonial period

First nations education  
 Completely different  
 Not how we did things  
 The way we do things now  
 For sure  
 It starts here  
 Colonial education



Residential schools opened  
 Became what education is  
 For a very long time  
 For First Nations people  
 For a very long time  
 Continues to closing  
 Shutting down  
 Residential schools  
 Not specifically for me  
 For my family my dad  
 For me—I'm a kid here elementary western school  
 Start to notice / division between myself and being First Nations  
 When you're really young you don't  
 Really have big cognitive awareness  
 Until grade four or five start to be aware  
 Difference  
 Start to experience difference  
 Start to notice  
 My home is poorer  
 Different  
 Why does it look different than others?  
 Low-income housing  
 In the city  
 No community  
 Government housing  
 Métis houses random  
 Area surround one school  
 Start to notice difference



Junior high

Craziness began  
All the stuff came out  
Went to horribly, horribly upper middle class school  
One Black kid  
Two Asian kids  
Me and one other Native kid  
From kindergarten to grade 10  
Mostly white middle class kids  
And then...

From there I dropped out of...  
Went to an arts high school among all this craziness

High school

Arts school  
Started to experience change  
Shift in perspective  
Lots of arts students liberal minded open-minded  
Different ethnicities different genders  
My choice  
Junior high friends elsewhere  
I picked an arts school

Fed up  
Dealing with exclusion white, middle class kids  
Loved art  
Maybe an artist one day  
Went there dropped out grade twelve  
Orange for creativity  
This is the art school  
This is my art  
Four months left

Dropped out

Upgraded at college

Working at department store  
"I can't do this for my whole life. I need some sort of education."  
Better finish high school  
That's how I got there upgrading  
Stops and starts  
Two years in university  
That's where I'm at right now

Big leap from here  
to there

to here—

## Leaping Forward to Here

Go back to go forward  
Mature student  
Upgrade  
Sarah  
High school diploma  
Enter undergraduate studies  
Mature student. Straight-up Cree. Woman.  
Each step is a significant leap forward  
Not the Hare-type leap forward  
The Tortoise-type leap forward

Grounded in forward-looking stories

“So how did you get to the [university]? What brings you to the [university],” I ask. My inquiry sounds like I am seeing someone in a place I do not expect to see them. I ask in that, “Oh, what brings you to this neck of the woods?” manner. I felt like I was conducting an interview. I brought a list of questions—just in case. This list bumps up against a relationship in the making. The surface of the pages are dotted with highly structured lists of questions; they do not lie still against my right leg on the sofa. I feel their presence. The pages are coloured with white settler noise.

Sarah says, “I wanted to be a social worker, so I knew I needed to have at least a degree.”

I ask Sarah, “When did you know you wanted to be a social worker?” I wonder about students who know what higher education can give them—that is—education’s utilitarian purpose. I am curious about students who can imagine what their career will look like. I wonder about students who are confident in what they will *be* when they graduate from university.

Sarah says, “I think I’ve always kind of known I wanted to be a social worker.” It was an opportunity to take the “second trip” of her life that solidified this understanding for Sarah. Before being able to travel, Sarah had decided she was going to be an “ultrasound tech” and took a physics class to prepare herself.

“Oh, okay. That’s why physics.” Not the most pleasant of education experiences for Sarah. (My fear of math temporarily subsides.) She knew she “wanted to do something that gave [her] more room to

travel and stuff—and, broader life experience.” She asked herself, “Why would you want to be an ultrasound tech? What a friggin’ boring ass job to have for the rest of your life. So ...”

“What does social work mean to you? What does university mean to you?” I ask with unease. My own childhood experiences with social workers and the Canadian social services institution are troubling. I tense when hearing *social worker*. The job title is deeply entangled in complex and hard stories for me. Social work itself is not the focus of the research; I try to remain attentive.

“Social work for me means [*long pause*] it’s about change. Ya, it’s about change. It’s really mostly about change.” Sarah’s mother had wanted to be a social worker; however, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) families often have such tragic experiences with the Canadian welfare system. “Social worker” too often equates, historically and today, with the people who come and take away children to residential schools and foster care. Sarah makes me wonder how disquieting lived experiences with social workers can shift through her lens:

I don’t think “social” in the ways that we define it makes a lot of sense to me. When I envision, when I envision young, when I envision young girls who’ve never experienced any trauma within their entire lives going into these communities and expecting to make change, that’s exactly the opposite of what I think social work needs to be. And for me “social work” means to be the whole of what the experience of what is occurring—are the people that need to make these changes and not just hoping for change. But the one who’s creating the change.

I wonder how poverty-class students sustain hope. I wonder about silent social services’ stories Sarah may or may not have experienced. Wonders swirl around how Sarah’s early childhood experiences shape her understanding of social work—and, of entering into higher education.

“As far as the degree goes, I would say a long time ago you could probably get a job in social work without a degree. You still can in group homes and things like that. But it is becoming more and more important if you want a job that is more on the policy making side or the running of ...” I wonder how Sarah’s early experiences shape her experiences with the *need* to have a university degree to sit at the policy making table. Where she worked before, you could support individuals and communities without a

degree. Employees without university credentials have been grandfathered in; new hires must have the piece of paper. For Sarah however, university “is not about prestige or anything.” She stories higher education as wanting “all the doors and all the organizations to be open” to her. Part of what sustains her on the higher education landscape is to not be “set back because [she] doesn’t have the degree.” While Sarah is confident of a future in social work, I have wonders about this confidence in imagining a future with such clarity. I wonder, how do students who experienced systemic childhood poverty see potential and possibility for careers? I wonder how they experience higher education in relation to realizing their dreams. These wonders I have for myself. Unlike Sarah, I have never had any sense of surety in a future vision for myself. I felt that I was meandering along, taking steps, not leaps, forward—and, backward. As I progress through my masters, with the support of people that see forward-looking stories about myself, I begin to imagine new ways forward.

“Have you ever thought about going to higher education and getting a degree such as sociology, marketing or physics or math or engineering—fine arts? Did you ever think about those things?” I wonder about how the idea of exploration in higher education figures in poverty-class students’ narratives.

Sarah asks, “What do you mean? Like if I hadn’t gone—“

“—When you came to university, did you know you were eventually going to go into social work?”

Without hesitation Sarah says, “Oh, yes!”

I am curious: “Had you ever thought there would be any other avenue? Any other subject that you would study?”

“Well, ya. But it’s all kind of related. Like I definitely had thought about psychology. That was definitely a route I had considered. I think I mildly played with the idea of an arts degree when I was younger and more into fine arts and things like that. But it was never something serious. For me, now anyways, or when I decided to go to school, it was more of a *[long pause]* like a *[long pause]* point you need to go in-between for a career and where you’re at. Something you needed to do. I always thought it

was really dumb to go to school without that in mind Why waste the time? Why waste the energy? Why waste the money when it's just for some [long pause] cause I never felt, I never really felt like higher education was really worth anything unless it was [that] something was going to eventually benefit you for what you're gonna do after. Why would you waste the time and the money to do it? That's how I felt about it." Part way through our research conversations, Sarah told me she was looking for a new job. I sent her a link to a part-time position with a theatre. She was excited at the idea of working in a theatre. To my mind, Sarah is extremely artistic. Not just anyone can rock a poncho with such ease and naturalness as she does. I wonder what stories were planted in her about education being a means to an end. I sense in her an artist is laying dormant. I wonder, at some point was Sarah artistic, and if so, what happened to this artist? I wonder if I am romanticizing Sarah.<sup>29</sup> I wonder if I am imposing my own desire to rediscover the artist child in myself left behind in the daily grind of childhood survival?

I wonder how pragmatics shapes poverty-class undergraduate students' education choices? I wonder at the lack of exploring passions and experimenting with subject matters across disciplines. I felt tense. I first went to college and took accounting: practical. I went on and obtained another diploma in computing science: practical. I worked toward a psychology degree: practical. I stumbled back into the arts: symbolic education that I did not see as practical but I had a hunch to keep at it. I did not share this with Sarah until she read her narrative account; we did not explore dominant understandings of *sensible* higher education paths.

"Speaking of that, what kind of conversations were happening about education while growing up?" Another hard shift in avoidance. A question from my exploratory research project.

"Um, I'm trying to think ..." I left Sarah with her thoughts and took a bathroom break—a break from my fraught self.

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<sup>29</sup> As Sarah and I were negotiating her narrative account, she wondered if the idea of romanticizing her was because of my settler relationship with Indigenous peoples. As she explained, there still exists a tendency to romanticize and fetishize FNMI peoples. I shared that when I wrote this, I was thinking back to the days on my great aunty's farm, moments when it was just she and I. I romanticize these peaceful and quiet moments. I cannot answer Sarah's question; I am still unpacking the many stories planted in me about FNMI peoples on and off education landscapes.

## Familial Education Conversations

“So, how you got to school. Can we talk about the many wonders about your understanding of education? Different points in your life from the little girl until now? What those have looked like...?”

Sarah asks, “About university?” Personally, I still struggle to understand that education can take many forms. I used the word *education* in a fixed way—fixated on western, institutionalized education. Little room was left for wonders outside this paradigm.

I attempt to clarify what I am asking: “Right from I guess about pre-daycare to those different points in your life. What kinds of conversations were happening about education? What kinds of experiences maybe your mom was having, family members were having [*long pause*] what kinds of experiences do they bring forward and you bring forward that have shaped your understanding of education? And experiences with education? I know that’s big.” My shoulders stoop as I try to catch my breath.

“Ya,” Sarah says with quiet tension.

“Maybe we can chunk it into [*long pause*] we could go back to those early understandings of what education even was. How education was defined perhaps. Who it was for? What those spaces, places versus knowledge versus bodies.... Did you ever think you would go to university?” Ending with this last question, there was little room for Sarah to wonder—for myself to wonder alongside her. In my unsettled settler nervousness, I brutally unsettled Sarah’s senses.

“I figured out that I would,” Sarah says thinking back. She follows this with a confident, “No. I think I always thought I would.” Conversations were happening in the home about higher education. “Cause my mom went to university so she was really adamant about it happening. Not like super pushy but she would bring it up in conversation here and there. It was never planned for. We never talked about after high school or anything like that but it was kind of—at some point ...” I wonder about dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives surrounding the “right” familial higher education conversations and the “right” familial planning for children’s education. I wonder about dominant narratives regarding “responsible” parents in relation to their children’s future education.

“When did you start having these conversations do you think?”

“I wanna say not until I was older. That’s why I was like, like later teens, early 20s maybe, I guess. Cause I know she didn’t finish her [university] degree until.... I don’t know. Later thirties.”

I ask, “What was grade one like? If you can remember. Grade one to grade three years?”

Sarah says, “I don’t want to talk about this. No. No. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s just one of those weird moments cause you mention grade one. Or, maybe it was later. Grade five. I don’t know. But I remember about how we talked about poverty and how [*long pause*] no, no, to this conversation. I can’t have this one. Um, maybe at some point. I had a lot of shame form my actions. Even though I was a kid, I still feel guilty about it. Ya, I think grade one to grade three was okay ...”

I warily tread into mother–daughter–women education conversations with Sarah. “So, [*long pause*] I want to be sensitive to what I ask. Has your mom been encouraging of you to go to school?” I am *hyper-sensitive*: neither my mother nor my great aunty was able to encourage me to obtain a formal education—to escape poverty.

Sarah says, “Ya. Not super encouraging. She was like, she was more like you should do this but I’m not going to help you in any way. Support you in how this needs to be done. And that’s how it’s always been.... Like it was kinda just like, just saying, these are the things that I’ve done in my life that have worked and I think you should do them as well. But you need to figure out how these things are gonna get done for yourself.”

“And she was taught that by somebody whose relationship with education, White European education was [*long pause*] somebody taught her, this is the model sort of if you will ...”

“I don’t know who taught that to my mom. My mom didn’t come from a family—nobody in my family is educated except for her. So, I don’t know where that came from.”

Echoes of colonialism<sup>30</sup> reverberate through Sarah's life. I ask her, "Who was your mom raised by?"

"My mom was raised by her dad, mostly. Ya, I guess my grandpa raised her. My mom's mom [*long pause*] died when she was ten or so. So I think it was just my grandpa. But my grandpa never ..."

"Did your grandpa come from residential schools?"

"I don't know if my grandpa did. I don't even know if my mom knows that. No, I don't think he was. My mom's side is Métis. So, there was more French on that side. I know there were some Métis people that did go to residential schools but that was a different lineage. I'm not one hundred percent familiar with that. My dad's side was treaty; [they] went to residential schools."

There are foggy education understandings I seek to make clearer alongside Sarah. She tells me, "Somewhere, somebody, something told my mom to go—but it was after my grandpa died. It was after she got out of an abusive [situation]. So I almost feel like she just decided. I feel like there was nothing [*long pause*] she just thought [*long pause*] I think she saw it as a means to get out of [*long pause*] escape—to get a better life for herself." I wonder how this shapes Sarah's experiences and understandings of higher education? I wonder how families broken apart from colonization and residential schools shapes Indigenous poverty-class students' higher education experiences. I wonder how silent and missing stories shape students' experiences.

Sarah's retelling of these experiences makes her curious. "It's weird cause it's like, where do you get those ideas if you're not being fed them from your parents or [*long pause*] or, was it just media or—what? Cause nobody went to school. But I sort of vaguely remember [my mom] telling me, but I could be making this up, cause I don't know one hundred percent. But I sort of vaguely remember her telling me that she had a conversation once with a woman at a women's shelter."

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<sup>30</sup> Colonialism is used as a noun, which creates a static space and closes conversations. Named as an idea, it does not show a way forward for how to reconcile the impact of colonialism and residential schools. As well, the noun does not make visible intergenerational narrative reverberations of colonialism and residential schools (Young, 2005). An analysis of colonialism is beyond the scope of this inquiry; however, it is important to acknowledge the problematic nature and complexity of the word.

There was a woman at this women's shelter who shifted understandings and opened up possibilities for Sarah's mom—and, for Sarah. The woman “basically told her that you have to go to school. You need to get an education to get a good career and take care of the kids. And I'm pretty sure that kind of made her [go to school]. That there was more of a life for her that she could do. And that was when she was like, okay, and just decided to go to school.” Four walls safely encasing women and children fleeing from danger and abuse. With nothing but their fragile bodies and selves, women and children arriving on the doorstep seeking shelter. In this sanctuary, Sarah's mom's life shifted from oppressive survival to extraordinary potential. One woman believed in her. I wonder how this experience reverberates through Sarah's undergraduate experiences. I wonder how a single person believing in the extraordinary potential of poverty-class undergraduate students can shape lives (Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013). I wonder how powerful moments of possibility can push against deficit dominant familial, cultural, and institutional narratives. I am drawn to how the woman at the shelter opened up understandings of higher education beyond utilitarian purposes. I am drawn to how a single moment in time, when a single person is wakeful and attentive, can profoundly shift a life in the making.

“How did you know that there was an alternative life to the one you grew up in?”

“It wasn't even knowing that there was an alternative life. It was deciding that my life wasn't good enough, wasn't where I wanted it to be. I wasn't feeling—I hadn't felt joy. I knew that those were feelings that were possible—if there is something you want—you know, 'I want that, I don't want to live like this. I'm not going to live like that; I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure that I'm not living [without joy] anymore.'” Sarah staggers me. I see her as profoundly brave. *Joy*. I am warmed and deeply hopeful of a life shaped by childhood poverty and seeking education as part of a journey to create a joyful life. I am filled with many wonders about how poverty reverberates through undergraduate students' experiences. Sarah reminds me that our lives are not single tales of woe. They are hopeful—and, joyful.

## **Bumping up Against Poverty Language Experiences**

Disgusting, revolting, illegitimate, and wasteful subjects; disposable population; undeserving poor; underclass; dangerous Other; poverty-classed society; moral outcast; welfare queen; the unwashed. I found most of this language in research literature. This is a sampling of the terms that are used in scholarship; the list is extensive. I learned that my family is labelled as White Trash in an undergraduate class. Several white students self-identified as rich because their parents were wealthy. Throughout the semester, these students called poor White people White Trash. People laughed. No one challenged this, not even the instructor. A horror and agony silenced me. This is (was?) my label, certainly my origins. I learned this formal derogatory label in higher education. Prior to this, I had only known the term welfare queen.

Through higher education and this research, I have learned that language to label those in poverty evolves—globally. Some terms remain constant; some fade into the background. New terms are invented and come to the foreground. I wonder how poverty-class students experience this type of institutionalized language. I wonder how they experience *street* poverty-class language.

“I wonder, if you’re comfortable, what kind of language have you heard surrounding students from poverty and in terms of gender, and race and culture?”

“What kind of language have I heard in general?”

I forget how immersed I am in this subject. “And experienced personally?”

Sarah says, “Ask again. I’m going to write it down cause I’m more of—poverty language [*long pause*] in regards to education or more in general?”

I do a white settler stumble: “It’s about people [*long pause*] poverty language about women, plus women, plus race, plus ethnicity.... I think Aboriginal should just be ...” My words fall away. I know some of the dehumanizing language used as a weapon against Canadian Indigenous people in this country.

Sarah says, “In Canada it could be—cause it’s such a distinct experience for sure, so ...”

I say, “And think about on the university campus, off the university campus ...”

Sarah says, “Oh, interesting. Okay. University talk. Non[-university]. Okay. So then, let’s see ...”

## A Conversation in Poverty-Class Language

**Sarah**

University Talk                  non-university talk

*Bum* like homeless person  
    *Bum* off campus; homeless person on campus  
Poverty language  
Off campus: welfare  
    A word used a lot  
    On campus: social assistance

Hear *ghetto*—a lot  
I've heard it in lots of different ways  
Talking about basically poor people in general  
Like *thugs* you know

*Gangster*  
    Just like poor people  
    This word is used a lot  
    A lot of people really, really dislike that word in  
the university or working with people in social areas  
    Friend works with mostly homeless population  
    They really dislike that term *ghetto*  
    In university—*impoverished* areas

Sanitized                          exactly  
Writing that down  
I like that  
What else do I hear—?

*Drunken Indian*  
    Just saw that on Facebook today  
    Someone faced discrimination  
    That's what happened  
    On CBC Aboriginal  
        Always posting tons of articles  
    Don't read all of them                  too much

**Elaine**

I realize how immersed I am in  
    this type of dialogue

I see and hear it everywhere

This awareness comes with a  
certain privileged awareness of  
    Othering

White

*"Who's ghetto?"*

*"So it's kind of sanitized?"*

## A Conversation in Poverty-Class Language

**Sarah**

Haven't heard the words  
Know the concept  
This one I get more  
Friends say it doesn't bother them  
Know it bothers them  
Slide it into conversations  
    Very casually  
    Making it a point  
        "I'm swimming up"  
        "I have this much student loans"  
        "If I had financial help..."  
        Things like that  
            I know what you're doing

I'm aware      I'm blessed  
    In the sense that I'm getting sponsored  
    Work to pay rent

Comparison

Different narratives  
    White friend                  upper-middle class  
    Parents saved all the money their kid needed  
    To go all the way up to master's  
    You don't think there's anything wrong with that  
    You think that's great, that's wonderful  
    Good for them

Where's the difference?

    Just somebody helping me  
    Education is still being paid for  
    Not getting an education for free  
    University still making all their money  
    It's not just all coming right out of my pocket

**Elaine**

*Told by some Aboriginal students  
last semester that they're called  
the ... they're storied as ...  
they're only successful because  
they got money to do it. There's a  
term, but sorry I don't remember.  
Something about winning the  
lottery.*

*Education massively funded by  
Canadian taxpayers.*

*Can we acknowledge this  
concept.*

Sarah unpacks dominant Indigenous sponsorship higher education narratives. I ask her, "You said something intriguing that I hadn't thought of in this way. They're sponsored by their family; you're being sponsored by a community." Sarah explains the difference:

I think the difference comes from the fact that technically the money that's given to reserves and that's given to Indigenous peoples is still coming from the Canadian government. So in the way that people view it, the government is paying for Indigenous people to go to school. That is not the case. The government signed treaties in return for use of the land, which they never honoured. So my thing about this is you guys, had you never immigrated here, not taken over our country, Indigenous people would have had education. Everybody would have had education. That is the way that Indigenous cultures work. It's not your government giving us freebees, you're giving back to us what is rightfully ours. That's the thing; that's the part that's not grasped.

I ask Sarah, "I wonder if it's bigger than that. As you said, the lack of understanding of history at all. And what the history means?"

Sara continues: "My blood starts boiling. I get so frustrated. I get so angry. Because I have to explain to *every single person* who doesn't know what [*long pause*] but I can't."

The Indigenous installation on campus  
The bear is talking about kinship terms  
Talking about respect  
All my relations  
It's got all my relations on it  
All my relations encompasses a person's interrelatedness to life on all aspects  
    To people  
    To animals  
    To land  
        That we come from  
The responsibility we have to our future generations  
    To our past generations  
    To current generations  
    As an Indigenous person  
    As a non-Indigenous person  
  
People taking pictures  
    *Like tourists*

Hard to be the person of the minority  
Being picked on  
Being able to stand up  
People on the outside looking in  
"Actually, no, you need to have this conversation!"

Being in power  
Person who stands up to the bully  
Honourable thing to do  
It should be easier  
It should come more naturally

It's hard when somebody's picking on you  
To stand up to the bully

## The Privilege Walk—and, Talk

For clarification, I ask Sarah, “You have community here on campus?” I do not want to assume she is part of the Native community centre on campus.

“Ya, I have community.”

“What difference does it make?”

“It’s *huge!*”

“Do they know you come from poverty?”

“Um, I think that I just assume that all First Nations people come from poverty,” she says with factual numbness.

“Do you guys have the conversation?”

“No. We joke about it. Sometimes, very casually it will get brought up...,” Sarah says with wonder.

I did not grow up with much humour. I am curious about humour and how it shapes lives in poverty. I ask Sarah, “In a satirical way?”

“Ya, in a joking way. We don’t really—Native people have a really profound sense of humour and we’re extremely resilient, so, it’s not that we would naturally talk about our past in a way like that. But!— Oh, I told you we did that *privilege walk*<sup>31</sup> [in a class]! That was an experience where there were questions related to poverty. We [Natives] all took steps back for the most part.” After reading her narrative account, Sarah told me that the Native students could not take any more steps back; their backs were pushed up against the wall. The non-Indigenous students could not see who was behind them. One of her Native university friends started to cry. It was a painful—highly visible—experience.

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<sup>31</sup> A *privilege walk* is designed to be an educational exercise to make students aware of their own positions of privilege in relation to those around them. This can take a myriad of different forms. For example, there are online exercises where a student answers a series of questions about their upbringing (e.g., Did your family ever go without electricity? Did you have a cell phone growing up?) and each question gets a score. After all the questions are answered, the student receives a score. This score places the student on a social class scale of, for example, upper- to-underclass. In Sarah’s example, each question posed by the professor, students either took a step forward or backwards. At the end of the exercise, the closer a student is to the front, the greater their position of privilege.

As a White person, I would not have to take as many steps back as Sarah. I would be standing in front of her. My fingertips are quivering; the tears sitting on my eyelashes are blurring my vision. I cannot bite my nails to ease the burn in my heart; my nails are burning from being ravaged. Sarah, who has so graciously been a part of this project, sharing her experiences and wonders, would be standing behind me. If we did this type of *privilege walk* together, Sarah and I would no longer be coming alongside one another; I would have to leave her behind. I wonder, would I have looked behind to see who whose back was up against the wall? Would I have even thought that any student would have to walk that far back? I wonder, if the wall literally had not been there, how more steps back would the Native students have had to take on this *privilege walk*? Sarah brings forth many wonders about early education experiences I have experienced—and, have learned through others. Being forcibly—and publicly—separated from friends because institutional policies grouped students into this and that category.

I share with Sarah: “I was walking back from my summer job on campus and some group was doing that *privilege walk*. I couldn’t believe it. ‘No way! I thought.’ You just mentioned it when we first met and wow. It was interesting to see the placement of bodies and the number of bodies at certain places. It was deeply uncomfortable for me to see because I know where I would have been positioned. I don’t know if I could have publicly done it. I had this thought that I would have to be careful in the conversations and activities I ask others to engage in, because I would be uncomfortable to be forced into doing it.”

Sarah says, “It is—painful.”

I confess to Sarah: “To make myself publicly exposed about where I come from.... I would have been horrified for people to publicly know where I come from.”

Sarah explores this thought. “I think it’s different. I think that if I had been in a class where it was consisting of mostly Caucasian people, I probably would have felt very uncomfortable. But because I was in a community of Indigenous people, we were there together in solidarity, so it was different, right.”

Sarah brings up emerging wonders about privilege on the higher education landscape. I am drawn to an early experience as a master's student. I was an observer in an undergraduate class. The professor used a form of the *privilege walk* while students remained seated. Students rated themselves on an inequality scale based on an extensive list of questions. After this, students were asked, voluntarily, to come up to the white board and mark on a line where they were located: the highest level of privilege to the lowest level of privilege. Many students eagerly rushed up to the board to put their mark on the social class line. In a diverse (although white dominated) class of around seventy-five students, not a single student walked up to the board and put a tick further down the line than lower-middle class. I wonder how the "statistics" would have looked if this exercise had been conducted anonymously. Many students chose not to go up to the board and reveal their position on the social class line.

Marilyn, a participant from my exploratory research project, told me that she did the *privilege walk* online for a class. She was extremely distressed. She told me, "I knew it was bad, but I didn't know I was that low."

(From my field notes, August 14, 2016)

I say, "Okay. Interesting. Cause the group I saw, lots of Whites. Lots of international students—maybe. I know my struggle in White versus White and being silenced by all other ..." I still struggle to turn down the volume on the white settler noise.

Many connotations of the *privilege walk* march through my mind. I wonder how poverty-class students experience these tensions. I wonder if academic lessons, such as the *privilege walk*, fracture and fragment, rather than illuminate shared experiences to build new understandings and shift ways of being—and, seeing. I wonder about how poverty-class students experience these academic lessons.

I have no community with other poverty-class students on campus. It feels too big a stretch for me to travel to Sarah's world. I am a White body in a sea of disconnected White bodies—on and off campus. I am still learning what community is in loving ways—and, what it feels like to be included and valued—just because of whom I am rather than what serviceable purpose I serve. Sarah leaves me with many wonders about community and how it shapes poverty-class undergraduate students' experiences.

(From my field notes, October 12, 2016)

### **Early Research Beginnings**

Sarah was the first participant I had a research conversation with for this narrative inquiry. Our first meeting was also the first research conversation I had as a narrative inquirer. Our conversations took place over the summer and into the fall term. As we prepared to leave our first research conversation, I

struggled with my emotions. I struggle with this paternalistic-type feeling of needing to make sure Sarah is okay. She has not communicated that our conversation is causing her distress. My white settler stumble and fumble continues: “I wanna make sure when we leave our conversations that we feel okay. Cause I know sometimes the conversations are hard. You brought up the word shame, which is [*long pause*] a theme that comes up in every conversation that I’ve had but in different ways for different reasons. So, I want to be very attentive to that.” “I sound like an idiot,” I wrote in my field notes.

“How crazy and exciting,” Sarah says. The distress and anxiousness I feel are shaped by my own experiences on early and higher education landscapes. Sarah leaves me with many wonders.

Sarah takes me to different understandings of how poverty is discussed. Poverty was never discussed outright on the familial landscape. I understood poverty from the multitude of objects, from twist ties to newspapers, my great aunty hoarded. If a single bean was in the bottom of a pot, it had to be saved for the next day. Socks that could not take another darning, were put to other uses. Not a drop of water or cow’s milk was squandered. I was not allowed to peel potatoes because I could not peel them fine enough. I did not have the opportunity to master the art of potato peeling. This takes a very light touch: the peel must be thin enough to see through. These were poverty discussions.

(From my field notes, October 12, 2016)

We walked out of the students’ union building and when I asked Sarah when she would like to meet again, she stopped and looked at me. “I don’t like making plans,” she said. “What a relief!” I said to myself. “I hate making plans. It causes me distress,” I said with relieved joy. We have things in common. We decided to see how we felt at the time when we were making plans for our next conversation. My whiteness does not feel so blinding; the white noise seems to have dimmed. Sarah explains what is still too difficult for me to articulate: how the *current* experiences of those living in poverty shapes undergraduate experiences.

**Othering Headlines.** Sara tells me: “I see things like what happened [in the *privilege* walk] and I [then] read.... I watched a video posted on Facebook today about an African-American who had this really crappy experience in a grocery store with her sister ... who was half Black and looked very White. How [her] experience with the cashier [differed] as opposed to [her white-looking sister], and how it

became this big thing. And it was so horrible. It was something I totally understand exactly what they're talking about. But reading the comments underneath—”

“—Oh, no! You don't read the comments?”

Sarah says, “I know I shouldn't have. One of the most infuriating things I had ever read. I know I shouldn't have. But this is the feeling you get when you feel so frustrated with people. When you're just like.... I wish I could go to each one of you and tell you how history has shaped the way these people live. They're similar to us. With Black people. Or Mexican people, well—really any you know—anyone who has experienced something like this. But you can't. So you have to emotionally [*long pause*] like my chest actually gets tight dealing with these things. You have to emotionally separate yourself from that. And try and look at things as a bigger whole. But you can change things—you can have people who are producing things that instead of saying things like, *so sad that mother is so horrible, another Indigenous life in such a short period of time*—something like that. If that was the headline—and these are the things that shape and change people.”

I wonder how these types of —ism demonstrations (racism, sexism, elitism, classism, etc.), on and off the university campus, shape poverty-class students' undergraduate experiences? How do stereotyping conversations, or ones that lack nuanced structural inequality and injustice understandings, shape their education experiences? I wonder at how dominant narratives planted in us as children, about us or Others, shape our higher education experiences?

### **Shifting the Single Lens of Poverty**

We were meeting at a coffee shop not far from campus. I arrived earlier than Sarah. I have this obsessive fear of being late. It seemed to be a trendy place and an eclectic mix of patrons. I was uncomfortable in this, what I perceived to be, a higher-class, educated yuppie space. It seemed too cool for me. I rarely go to places around campus. I feel out-of-place. Places with long lists of imported and locally-brewed craft beers I cannot pronounce—and, have never heard of. Wine lists overflowing with hints of this herb or berry. Juices infused with subtle, fragrant undertones of obscure flowers. Water arrives with ubiquitous fruit

slices. Fussy food items such as hyped up, elevated, mac and cheese. I am more comfortable in, what are described as, dives. I awkwardly stood at the cashier station waiting to order something to drink. I ordered an oatmeal cookie and, ironically, a mango smoothie. Mangos—a Canadian-grown delicacy. I felt so obvious as I waited for Sarah. Thankfully, I did not have to stand pretending I belonged for long. Sarah arrived—wearing a poncho and smiled warmly at seeing me. I felt slightly less nervous than our first meeting. After she ordered a tea, we jointly decided to sit in the corner at the coffee bar for privacy. The hissing of the beverage steam machine was our constant companion.

Going into this research, I chose not to define poverty solely based on standard economic definitions. I knew that I would have challenges to see how poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences beyond my own lens. What I had not considered is how Colonialism shapes understandings and experiences for Sarah as a Cree student. Sarah had much to teach me.

I start the conversation: “One of the things we talked about last time was how different groups think about poverty. You had mentioned that the assumption that with Aboriginal groups everyone comes from poverty and that you think about poverty in different ways. Can you help me understand this a bit more?”

“I think there is kind of, I think there is just kind of an assumption, because the majority of Indigenous people grew up in poverty. It is almost unheard of for an Indigenous person to have grown up in a well-to-do, wealthy family. I have one cousin, out of all my cousins, and that's because they had a ... company. They did very well for themselves. But for everybody else, they just didn't. So, it's ya. It's just, I guess it's kinda like this. You just kind of assume that people had struggles financially in that sense. And, *[long pause]* I don't know what else you are asking.”

I could not just get to the point. Rather, I was skirting my question: “So, how does being Indigenous shape your experiences and understandings of poverty?” Rather, I asked about this, in a painfully, choppy manner. “There's this belief in the myth of the classless society in North America. In Canada and the USA it's been shaped differently than Europe because Colonialism—that there is only one

social class. The middle-class based on achieving the [mythical] American Dream. But we don't really talk about social class in Canada. We don't want to have that conversation. Yet, social class cuts across every other social characteristic." I sounded like I was giving a class lecture. "But if most Aboriginals are living in poverty, then maybe social class isn't part of the conversation? Maybe it is a single social class? And that is of poverty?" I am losing myself in my white, settler anxiety.

"For Indigenous people specifically?"

"Ya ..." I get an authentic lesson in Canadian history:

I think it depends on where you're talking about because there are so many differences throughout Canada. Specifically in [the Canadian prairies], ya, I would agree with that. Definitely. And I think that a big part of that has to do with when the treaties were signed and reserve land and the way that it became federal responsibility well then in a lot of ways we were left to depend on the government financially. A continuation of what is happening. And that was because there wasn't enough funding for all the things on the reserves that need to be done. There still isn't. There's thirteen places in Canada that have water that's not drinkable. And so—I think in a lot of ways in certain places it is definitely you know—in a sense created a dependency—like wards of the state. We became, we didn't know how [long pause] we weren't set up ever to create economic growth or wealth with our people because so much was [long pause] so much of our rights were stripped away. But if you even look like way back there were like laws setup [long pause] Indigenous people needed a pass to leave the—reserve. There are times where we weren't allowed to sell produce. There's all these kinds of things that were in place that you know if you look way back that created a system for us that almost forced us continuously to live in poverty. So it's been like this continuous cycle over and over and over and its really hard when you're in that cycle to get out of it. I think it's possible; I just think it's incredibly difficult when you're set up in so many ways to fail.

Sarah makes me wonder what it would have been like if my great aunty had not been able to sell eggs. This was her only means of being able to make a living. She secreted away the money she made for moments when there was no food—and, as a way of having a sense of power and independence. I wonder about how my mother's life was shaped by being put with an abusive rural foster care family and forgotten by social services. I wonder how my life might be shaped if I did *not* have the *choice* to leave the rural hamlet and seek out education and different opportunities.

Any "understanding" I have of how Colonialism intergenerationally shapes Indigenous undergraduate students' lives is—*foreign*. I say to Sarah, "I have been taking up this conversation from a White person perspective and my own personal experiences. For me, it was intriguing about your

community in university and how everybody comes from poverty. So, you don't talk about how lives are shaped by poverty. It's how lives are shaped by colonialism?"

"Ya. I think that's why when we first started I was kinda like, I really don't know what I have to offer because I don't think like—like my family was just poor. We never thought about our lives being shaped by poverty. And I don't think, but I can't say, but I don't think that a lot of Indigenous people really feel that way. We kinda just laugh about it. It's a thing that we just accept as part of our history and what we're continuously going through. And so when we [*long pause*] there's the other things that we look at that shape us. I don't think poverty is one of them. I think poverty is something we look at as to overcome. But it's not something that shapes who we are. Does that make sense?"

"Yes." For myself, this was a defining moment in our relationship. I began to question and wonder if my understandings, based upon personal experience and the research literature I accessed, about this research are really based on British and colonial notions of social class and poverty. I began to wonder if "poverty" is defined and understood from a dominant white western construct? I wonder how poverty is understood and experienced in unique or similar ways by people whose countries have been colonized. I need to see past any singular term or understanding of systemic childhood poverty to see the unique biographies of poverty-class undergraduate students. "What shapes who you are?"

The things that shape who we are I think a huge part of it is a lack of identity. Coming from [*long pause*] because so much of our culture was stripped away and we were not allowed to.... I think that's what shapes us. I think that we look at people who are [*long pause*] when we talk about healing in Indigenous cultures we always talk about coming back to our culture. So for us, it's the cultural aspect that shapes who we are. It's like our connection to creators, connection to rituals, connection to our community, to our families, to our future generations and our past generations. That's the underlying focus of our work, like a religious belief system. But it's not religious. It's spiritual. But that's what shapes us. All of these other things like branch off like poverty or abuse or things like that, those are just things we see as obstacles that we must overcome. But not things that shape us or who we are. Does that make sense?

"Yes, yes it does." Yes, it makes sense—to a point—for me as a white woman. I understand the lack of identity. I do not have connection to culture or rather, a culture I *want* to return to. I respect

Sarah's strength and ability to see the nuances of how lives are shaped. I am still learning this. I carry invisible colonial notions of poverty that I am still unpacking. Sarah's strength is palatable. Her voice has a soothing deep, richness. Her body does not seem to be tightly coiled like mine. She sits relaxed on the high bar top stool; I fidget relentlessly. I am tense for fear of crying; her presence calms me. Beside Sarah, I feel myself become surer in our conversation. I take, what is for me, a leap into tenuous waters. "Did any of your immediate family members need welfare?" I was afraid to go to this place. The dominant narratives I have "learned" about Canadian Indigenous people and their "over dependence" and "abuse of" welfare are deeply disturbing; yet, permeate open and hidden conversations.<sup>32</sup> I took the step to open up this conversation. It became a powerful moment in shared lived experiences, which I leave uninterrupted, *sans*-commentary:

Sarah: Um.... I still have multiple family members on welfare.

Elaine: How is that conversation taken up or how does that shape identity, understandings of oneself?

Sarah: I think there's a lot of shame around it. For sure. I think it's not something that necessarily like to talk about but we understand that it's there. You kind of just know because when somebody's not working and they're raising a family and not doing anything well you have to wonder where that income's coming from. So you kind of know. And some people are a little bit more comfortable with it. It's um, it's unfortunate that there's so much shame around it cause the truth of it is that the reason people as far as my family goes are on it isn't because they're lazy, isn't because they don't want to work. It's because they're so messed up. Everything that's happened to them. They're incapable of employment. They're incapable of keeping a 9-to-5 job. They're just doing everything they possibly can just to survive right.

Elaine: My mother was on welfare most of the time I was growing up. We were *that* family in a little rural village. But people who need welfare are storied is just exactly as you said: without people understanding the complexities of lives.

Sarah: Ya!

Elaine: I don't think I was ever able to be kind enough to my mother to acknowledge how damaged she was from the foster care system she was put into and the horrors that happened. But you're right. Worrying that the social worker is going to arrive on the doorstep. I was at a meeting with grad students. One of the students said a social worker was going to be coming to their place—and, in that moment I couldn't breathe.

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<sup>32</sup> Often these narratives are supported through, for example, the media. These narratives are complex and my understandings of these Canadian Indigenous stereotypes and myths "planted in [me] early or along the way, or ... the stories [I] planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in [myself]" (Okri, 1997, p. 46) will take me much more time to unpack and unravel.

Sarah: All the surveillance and judgement.

Elaine: God forbid your kid has a snotty nose and what does that mean versus... One of the things about that I'm trying to understand the Indigenous part of this [*long pause*] so much scholarship centres on whites and blacks or this group or that group is .... Britain needed to get rid of their poor whites and that's how poverty is understood today. These problematic bodies and got rid of the waste by sending them to create the new world. It was okay if they died, starved, beaten, put into indentured servitude because they weren't real humans anyway. It's part of this colonial legacy. As a white person, it's part of how I carry experiences of poverty. So I've been sitting here trying to understand the Indigenous perspective. Am I making some sense?

Sarah: Ya.

Elaine: For my mother it was the white woman with multiple kids, playing bingo, drinking ...

Sarah: It's not a lot different than the Indigenous perspective either. But I don't know how much that has to do with colonialism, which is confusing right. Because we ... because it was created by colonialism. Is this a reflection of Indigenous people or a reflection of Colonialism? Which I think is more the latter. These things were never [*long pause*] these things were never [*long pause*] this was not the way it was for us. It was never like that. It's funny I was just reading this article. It's a little bit off topic. But that young, young girl and young man who were found dead on the reserve up in [a northern community]. And there was an article that my friend posted and it was just talking—about a news story. But I found it really interesting that when you read the news story, of course the one thing out of everything that they interviewed these parents about the one thing that they put in giant letters across the article was: “**I had 9 children.**” And I thought this is exactly why these stereotypes are continuing. This is why you are continuously telling us that our lives don't matter. Cause somebody's gonna read that and think: “Oh, just another native person having 20 kids,” and you know like, “Can you imagine the conditions in this household! With all these children!” It devalues what was actually happening. What happened to those children.

Elaine: And all the subtext.

Sarah: All the subtext. They didn't put it in big bold letters, “**I'm so sad. I'm so heartbroken. I can't believe I lost my child!**,” like all these things. This is what they chose. Of course I was just [*long pause*] ya, it's exactly like that. I think I was telling you about my friend because the *Metro News* had to retract because they said he came from a background of abuse. And he said, I never said that I came from a background of abuse. I don't know where you're getting this information from. But it was that assumption. These are the things that are happening.

Elaine: And so deeply embedded that even people that are supposed to be critical in their writing and thought just—and, it reminds me of an article, I took such great exception to in the USA talks about students from poverty going into higher education and are so problematic and bring all their problems with them. Their poster child is a white, overweight girl with a mixed race child, her father is sick and an alcoholic, needs welfare, and the father of the child is in and out of jail. It doesn't show a picture of the father. Of course the message is it's a black father. Although the child you can't quite tell if it's of Asian descent or black. It pulls on all of those stereotypes and fears. The image means you don't even need to say anything.

Sarah: Ya, because it makes people more comfortable, right. People can relate to that. [*Sarcastically Sarah says,*] “Oh ya, a single mother with a [different] ethnic partner who's gone to jail! Oh, I totally feel for this person!”

Elaine: But I don't have to get close to it!

Sarah: But I don't have to get close to it—

Elaine: —Or, think any differently.

Sarah: No ...

Elaine: The idea that post-colonial period is here ...

Sarah: [*laughs*] No one told me. People don't even acknowledge that colonialism exists. And most people don't even know or understand what that means. Like to be as ignorant as some people are and make the judgements about the way Canada is, there is no way they have any idea of Canadian history. Because you wouldn't [*long pause*] if you knew what happened in Canada's history there's no way you would make those assumptions about poverty, about race, about things like that. There's, just you couldn't. There's no way. The facts show [*long pause*] like in a very easy to read sequence of why things are the way that they are. If you look back. So ...

Elaine: Yet, it's sad. I have a minor in Canadian history and we've never had these conversations.

Sarah: I know. It is sad. It's horrible. It makes me really upset.

Elaine: And in all those history classes; *never* once was it discussed what Britain did to the poor.

Sarah: That's funny, hey. It's not even something I'm even familiar with. I had no idea [*long pause*] the way—everything's so vague when they talk about these things.

Elaine: It was between 1875 and something, a very short window a 100,000 children were taken off the streets of London and out of parents' arms who were poor, who were poor because of [social and economic] structures and sent to Canada to be indentured servants during the 1860s Gold Rush. Because they were expendable. If you are poor parents you shouldn't be raising children cause you you're immoral, wasteful, lazy—all these things. Not the structural reasons for it. The few controlled everything. I didn't know this. I started to find out about it through a Canadian author [Rimstead (2001)] who talks about single mothers in poverty.

Sarah: I felt so.... Actually the person who posted it was the guy who won the scholarship to Oxford and I was very surprised. I didn't want to say anything that he didn't catch that, that it was the one thing cause he talks about it because he was the one who wrote that article because they assumed he came from an abusive family. But ...

Elaine: I have found the things I'm getting really upset about I didn't previously [*long pause*] I lived it but I wasn't willing to be aware of it because it was too close. But once I started accepting things I had experienced, and this is not okay, then it started getting harder. But still I'm realizing more and more how narrow my vision is. Because this piece of poverty and I'm aware of conversations and I know I feel shame attached to it. But had I not had those experiences in early sociology and theatre classes—penalized for trying to talk about it [*long pause*] maybe I was sitting here with my head in the sand. This morning the news was talking about a German who stabbed someone and they said he was German of some Asian descent. No! They *are* German. Why did they have to add the descent? If it was me, they wouldn't say, "Elaine, the Canadian of some *Heinz* 57 descent?"

Sarah: No. Of course they wouldn't. I'm starting to hear this too. I should write about that. Write about the nine kids. I should make a mental note to write about it ...

## **The Other Kid**

I share with Sarah that I am trying to understand discrimination and oppression because of poverty on urban versus rural landscapes. I struggle to understand the distinction—while not making generalizations. I share with Sarah, my experiences are shaped by childhood poverty being visible in different ways based on geography. I am learning that for children in school, their experiences can be very diverse based on the landscape they inhabit. I share with Sarah that a child, “We were all stuck in one school together. How teachers treated me, how community treated me, was very, very painful. My family, we were the ones the ones who were the problematic bodies. How I experienced poverty was very different in the village versus the farm.”

“Ya. It’s funny that you mention that. I was having a conversation with my mom the other day. I have a [relative in high school]. But they were going to a predominantly White school when they were younger. And she’s like, ‘None of the kids would play with them.’ And I was like, ‘Seriously?’ And she was like, ‘Ya, don’t you remember that?’ And I was like, ‘Not really.’ And she was like, ‘There was a year or two in that school that they just didn’t play with them.’ And I was really saddened by that. It brought me back to my memories when—although, I was never aware of it when I was a child, having a vague, sort of a vague understanding of, ‘Okay, I’m different, I’m getting treated different. I don’t know why I’m getting treated different? But I am getting treated different.’ But then looking back, and being able to see that, ya, it was simply because I was Indigenous. That was the only reason why I was getting treated differently.”

Visibility as Other is my constant companion. Moving from a rural to a White-dominated urban area, I became anonymous. I could escape how I was storied—as long as I kept to the shadows of the college landscape—and, stayed away from “classy” people and places I had no experience with. Outside of native-shaped spaces and places, I became aware this is not the case for Sarah. She shared a story of how a child from poverty was treated on her early education landscape:

There was a family that was particularly—distinctive  
It was a white family  
For some reason, it was well-known they were poor  
They were the stereotypically white poor family  
They definitely were treated differently.

There was a little girl  
She was in the same class as the little boy.

One day, the little girl's felt markers went missing  
The little poor white boy had the same markers  
The same markers as the little girl's that went missing.

"Hey, those are my markers," the little girl said  
"No, they're not! They're my markers," the little boy said.

Because the little boy's family was poor  
The teacher assumed the little boy stole the little girl's markers  
She took the little boy's markers away from him  
The teacher gave the little boy's markers to the little girl  
The teacher called the little boy a liar  
The little boy was so upset  
His face was coloured red  
He was shamed.

The teacher did this in front of the class  
The little boy was so sad.

The teacher assumed that because the little boy was poor  
Because he came from this poor family  
That obviously because he is poor, he would steal.

The little boy had to go home  
He had to tell his mom he did not have his markers anymore  
His mom did not come to the school  
She did not come and ask for her son's markers back  
She did not come and defend her son.

The little girl found her markers at home  
The little girl was little  
She did not tell anyone.

The little boy was sad  
The little girl was sad  
The little girl grew up  
She is still sad.

She still thinks about the little boy  
It makes her sad.

Sarah has “always felt so bad for this kid, that he was going through that.”

“It’s how teachers [can] treat ...” I cannot finish my thought. It brings me too close to early education experiences I am not ready to discuss—outloud—or, on paper. These are experiences I do not feel safe, in most spaces, to share.

Sarah says, “It’s true. Ya. It was a horrible thing. ... I mean I felt—I was a seven-year-old kid who lied about my markers. They were gone, but I mean, I did lie. But, I was a child. But what [the teacher] did this to this child *in front* of the class, it was horrible. To make him feel like that. To make him feel less than. He already feels this. And that was a hard thing and I was never [*long pause*] I was never proud of that.”

I painfully say, “It’s the loss of those markers for that kid, it was huge because, the loss of any item—”

Sarah is saddened: “—I know.”

“So ...” My words disappear like the markers.

Sara tells me, “You know what makes me sad now, and I don’t know, I may have actually contacted him, and apologized for it and if I haven’t, I had thought about it many times. But what made me sad was the thought of this little kid going home and explaining to his mom what happened, and his mom understanding that there was the belief that he could do it. That there was an assumption that was going to be made and there was the assumption that there was nothing [his mom] could do.”

“What power did she have with the authorities?”

“No power.”

“So, [*long pause*] okay, we’re going to come back to this story.”

“Okay,” I mumbled.

I cannot bear the pain of this story. I cannot bear the pain for the little girl and boy. Sarah’s pain cuts deeply. Sarah’s care and concern how this little boy’s life might have been shaped by this experience, moves me. Her wakefulness of marginalized lives is a balm for these hard stories. We never come back to this story.

**Beef-a-Roni Crimes.** I confess my childhood sin: “I’m going to tell you something to make you feel better. So, I was really always very envious of food because we had none. But you had to pretend you weren’t hungry. I had a friend. My mother let me go over to this little friend’s house. They had this pantry, a walk in pantry—”

“—With all the things—”

“—With canned food. Beef-a-Roni. And I stole a can!”

“Oh, you stole a can of Beef-a-Roni!” Sarah says with childhood wonder, as if I had just told her I saw Spiderman scaling the wall—in person!

I say, “Even though I knew if I got caught, it would mean the belt. I don’t mean, I mean, I [*long pause*] yup and you know [*long pause*] and I would never be able to go to her place again. But um—I had many, many, *many* thoughts as a child to steal.”

Sarah pragmatically says, “Sometimes I did.”

Confidentially I say, “Oh, I did too! I stole twice with horrible consequences. Well three. Two physically and one emotionally. But I lived with absolute shame until two weeks ago when I learned I wasn’t the only one who did these things.”

“Sometimes it’s important just to talk about them.”

“Ya. Want and need and desire is.... How did you know this kid was poor?”

“That’s a good question.”

“How big was this school?”

“Like an average elementary. I don’t know how many kids. Like in a class I think there was like twenty kids maybe. The way they dressed I think. Their haircuts were kinda like not, they were straggly.”

I share a common experience: “Like mom put the bowl on the head. That’s what she used to do.” And masking tape across the bangs to try to cut an even line. I was always embarrassed. Welfare glasses.”

“Ya, like something like that.”

“It’s kinda not even funny today. But haircuts cost money.”

Sarah says, “Ah, I hope parents still don’t do that. It’s awful. Ya, I guess a lot of it had to do with the way that they dressed. But there was also an understanding that they had a lot of emotional problems. These children were very emotional. They were the *problem* children. You know the ones—it’s so horrible that schools do this—where they essentially isolate the children who are having difficulties learning or being social. Things like that. Reprimanding them and getting angry with them or getting frustrated or telling them they’re a *bad* kid. Which is not.... So, he had a lot of problems and he would get very frustrated and emotional. I think that, combined with the other parents like just kind of [treated him bad], like we understood that there was something different about him.”

“Was it always obvious how the teacher treated him differently? Teachers? And kids?”

“I don't know. I don't remember a lot of my childhood. But that was one of those moments that stick out for you. But ya, probably, I'm assuming.”

To stay with these hard stories  
Stay with all these lived experiences  
Not to lose yourself  
Not to have a breakdown  
Belief in change  
Belief in hope for change  
Can't live with it 24-7  
    Would drown in it

## Let's Not Talk About (In)Difference

I go back to an earlier conversation with Sara: “Did the teachers, I think you said it was about grade four, you started to notice that you were different?”

“Ya, it was probably about then I would say.”

“And I think you said it was when you went to other people's houses that you started to notice the differences?”

“Ya, you definitely did. And it's those things like that, the pantry. Or like seeing my friends have these giant Barbie houses or you know like all this stuff. And I always thought, what an abundance of things that you have. Really wowed by that. Without realizing that was just like a normal amount of things... I think it was about then that I noticed.”

“Did you go home and say, ‘Mom, what the heck?’?”

“I don't think so. I don't think I ever really said that. I don't really know.”

“Did teachers treat you differently from other students?”

“Not that I was aware of. Never that I could outwardly say that I was treated different.”

“Cause you talked about at some point that you had enough being around these White, upper-middle-class kids and you moved. You switched to [the art's] school.”

“You know what, sorry. This might be off topic. The only thing, when I recollect, when I recall my experiences in junior high that was the worst, it was awful. We had done this project in English class. This is probably way off track. We did this project in English where we created our own books with poems or stories or whatever it was. I created this book and my sister still has it. And there's legitimately a picture, like a poem written with my, with a hand drawn on it, with a slit wrist with blood dripping down on it. And there were other ones. The teacher didn't say anything to me about it. It just boggles my mind. I was a thirteen-year-old girl, with pictures of suicide in this book and they never once thought, ‘Maybe I should tell her parents about it or talk to the principal about it.’ I got a good mark on it. Several of them wrote back, ‘Good job.’ Isn't it horrifying? I don't [long pause] maybe it was an assumption based on race or the teacher

didn't care about his students or what. It blows my mind that was. Like if I ever saw something that a thirteen-year-old girl did like that, I would be instantly, 'What is going on here? This is not okay!.'

"Even if you are the most elitist, ignorant—"

"—Asshole—"

"— On the planet, how could you discount and dismiss any child?"

"Ya. Right."

"I don't care how racist you are, how prejudiced, how anything you are. Teenage years are horrible—"

"—Ya."

"And it can be so much harder for girls. I can't—I can't even fathom this." I think, "Oh, yes I can! But I am not going near my own or my sisters' or my own experiences!" I keep this to myself.

"I know. Pretty messed up. That's what it reminded me of. I don't know. It's hard to say if those things are based on race and/or poverty. I don't know. I'm trying to recall. I know that people treated me differently. And I get it. Did people treat me differently because of who I was or they didn't like who I was because of the colour of my skin? You don't really know sometimes. Especially being that age."

"I know that lots of my early education experiences were based on coming from poverty because they were in rural communities. When I ran away from home, we lived in this village and I got storied as a girl who was immoral and loose and had bad ways simply because I was poor. So, it's always a curiosity for me how children are treated. And how that goes on to shape lives. I'm going to sit with that book you did for a long time."

"It's very sad."

"Who knows what was going on with the teacher. It's hard to fathom that anything big enough was going on to ignore you."

"Ya, it is. It is very hard to imagine that."

“If I would have had that experience, I think I would have a hard time *not* saying it’s *because* I came from poverty. But maybe it wouldn’t have anything to do with that.”

“But I think it could though. If people have that assumption, ‘Okay, well they’re just messed up because they’re Native.’ That’s how things would probably feel by people in poverty. That assumption was made about that young, [poor White] kid, that he would steal [the markers] because he was poor. Poor people automatically steal. There are, there’s probably lots of experiences are shaped like that. ‘Why wouldn’t he stand up?’ Why didn’t that teacher with that kid respectfully be like, ‘Oh, we’ll call your parents and sort this out. Don’t worry. We’ll figure out what happened.’ But she just made an assumption and literally took this kid’s markers away.”

I wonder, even if the mom would have contacted the school, would they have believed she bought her son the markers? I wonder if the little boy was vulnerable to this treatment because the teacher *knew* the mom would not come to school? Sarah and I remain with wonders what the little boy said when he went home, how he felt, how his mom reacted, how this shaped both their lives and understandings of education landscapes as dangerous places.



## Humorous Healing

The late German Marxist playwright Brecht (1991) wrote, “Describing ... having pains in the back [and] paying one’s account is ... a depressing affair” (p. 564). Linking Brecht to comedy and childhood poverty is interesting. He is most known for his dark, anti-capitalist plays that advocate for socio-political change. However, Brecht did not believe theatre is meant as a tool for moralizing to the audience. He felt the audience would, as an ensemble, head straight for the first exit (Brecht 1991, p. 564)! (I hope this thesis does not inspire immediate and rapid flight!). Rather, he posited that “theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre, it will amuse” (1991, p. 562).

I can be funny. Really! I told Sarah that I barely graduated from high school. I scraped by with a fifty percent—overall average. I only made it because of home economics, which I took through distance learning. I baked some cupcakes, sent them in the mail (yes, this is the way it was done back then), and the teacher loved them. Somehow, the cupcakes made it *sans*-mold, *sans*-pile of crumbs. My humour does not extend to poverty discussions or experiences—yet. Nevertheless, I find Sarah’s view of humour thought-provoking. She challenges the way I perceive the role of humour with hard stories and difficult topics. Sarah makes me wonder about how I frame and understand humour. I find nothing funny about White Trash or White Trash reality-based television shows. Sarah shifts understandings to the importance of *location*.

I say, “I struggle with humour because I do not see the humour of poverty, unless it is being used by people who know what they are doing. But I had a university teacher who said to me that she has a friend who dressed her young daughters up as White Trash for Halloween—”

Sarah sardonically says, “—Ya, cause people do it all the time ...”

“Of course the kids didn’t understand what this meant. And her friend made some smart-ass remark. My professor said to her friend, ‘Hey, you’re talking about my peeps!’ And I looked at this professor and I said, ‘What?’ And she said, ‘I’m White Trash!’ I wanted to say to her, ‘Oh, my god! This is not funny. Do you not know what this [label] means?’.”

Sara explains her understanding: “It is like the same way when my friends get together. We make fun of rez things.... Some people, who are not Indigenous, may find this inappropriate. Most of us think it’s hilarious. But another person who comes from the outside ... they don’t understand: this is part of our race.... Like Black people, or Mexican people, or Native people all have this stereotypical thing that we all laugh about and joke about. This is *our* thing and we are laughing about it and we’re making a joke about it, and we’re making a satire and it’s hilarious. That’s where I’m thinking it comes from.” Sarah challenges me further: I “can watch *Trailer Park Boys* and think it’s hilarious. I’m not White. I didn’t come from poverty like that. I never grew up in a trailer park. I’m not making fun of these people.”

“I wonder if it is pure intent. *Trailer Park Boys* is so over the top and with the intent to be hysterical and push back at stereotypes. That’s how I took it up. People living in poverty don’t walk around cooking baloney on the radiator—”

“—Hot dogs on the radiator—” Our discussion is getting heated.

I fire back, “—Have a drink that never spills. All the women are screwing twenty guys—”

“—That’s the same thing. I think we’re just disagreeing. I fail to see a difference between people who are wearing white [cut off] shirts and drinking Baby Duck out of a paper bag [at a *White Trash Wednesday* bar event] as not being the same thing as satire of how these stereotypes are portrayed.”

We are unable to resolve the issue of White Trash—or, poverty being used in satirical or humorous ways. It is Sarah who helps me understand that I am too close to this subject: “Well, I think because you did a lot of research on it, you do understand it on a much deeper level. And that’s the thing. No one understands it the way you understand it.... That’s where I’m coming from. Drawing that line and understanding.”

“Who’s the out-group and who’s the in-group and the out-out-group? Who gets to cross the line?”

“I talk about that with my friends, too. Like context and how important that is and how it does mean something. It’s hard, just hard, to know where those lines are—and, who can say those things, without triggering other people or hurting other people.”

The complexity of language and humour around the oppressed and marginalized is exhausting. However, we both are very conscious of how hurtful it can be based on life experiences. I lack Sarah's confidence. I am too tender, or perhaps voiceless, to not be affected by slurs, especially on the higher education landscape where I do not expect this to happen.

I say, "I love satire but I lack understanding of how humour is used to heal." I keep seeking through our research conversation.

Sarah explains: "That's something Indigenous. And that's why we laugh at ourselves so much. That's why we laugh about the fact that we eat baloney everyday. Where it might hurt other people when we think it's hilarious. Because we *have* to. Because it's funny."

"Baloney used to be a poor man's food. Now you can't afford it. It's so expensive. I eat the rind off first."

"Oh, me too!"

"With a little bit of mustard. When I'm feeling really rich, put some cottage cheese in there and roll it up! Make it Italian!"

"Like a cannoli. A baloney cannoli. I love that." We are both laughing. People are staring. "See, that's funny."

"And, it feels good. Cause food is problematic. Lack of food can cause deep pain and shame."

"To have community ..."

"I really want to understand humour and what people think and the idea of healing with humour."

Sara shares her new knowledge: "It's a very small thing. I just learned about this recently. One of my friends, he recently came back from a Sundance ceremony. And he was talking about how they do these dances. A Sundance ceremony is essentially all about suffering. It's this idea of suffering. I guess through suffering it kinda humbles you and transcends human experience. Like life is kind of suffering. And the last round, right before the last round, sacred rounds that come out, and they go, they are fasting

for four days, no food, no water, and they go in front of the group and like [the group] taunts them and drink like cans of Coke. It's like this really funny thing. You could take it to be something that is hurtful and horrible. And it's not. You need them to joke about this to show you that you have—like you are laughing at yourself. I never thought about that.”

I share my philosophy: “Laughter is a natural anti-depressant. When I laugh hysterically I feel this release and things get perspective. Not so dire.”

Sarah says, “Laughter and humour are super important.”

I try to convince Sarah I am not a drag: “I love laughing. You may not think it but I love to laugh hysterically. I love to laugh over things that don't even make sense to people.”

Sarah says, “I know.”

I say, “Laugh at a piece of fluff. So tired and it's so funny.”

Sarah says, “For whatever reason, it's friggin' hilarious.”

I say, “I know when I haven't got balance, it's because I haven't been laughing.”

Sarah says, “That's really good. That's interesting.”

I wonder outloud: “Got to look into healing through humour. I can see.... I also want to teach a sociology of humour class. Not that I'm qualified to do it, but how can we use it in good ways.”

Sarah tells me, “Humour has such a power to transform things. I don't have the solutions. I'm just trying to figure it out too.”

“One conversation at a time.”

“I have all these things to think about now. I'm really grateful for things like this because it gets me thinking again about the things that are important to me. Not being in school [at the moment]. It's nice to have conversations and be like, ‘Oh ya, the wheels are turning!’.”

## Philosophical Education Underpinnings

Sarah was able to travel and experience Buddhism. She has attended community gatherings abroad and at home. Pushing herself out of her comfort zone, she has experienced “people being open and loving and confident and just really [seeking] expressions of themselves.” She says, “I want that; you know, I want to feel like that. So, I’ve just been seeking it out and I’ve been pushing my boundaries a lot to connect with people that I don’t know, forcing myself to be vulnerable, [experiences] that are going to force me to grow.... A lot of the work for myself has been seeking out spiritual teachers and people who can guide me when I don’t feel like I have guidance [that I have] community.” She helps me understand what sustainability means as an individual, a human being and a life in the making. “You have to be gentle with yourself and allow yourself the room to be human, too.... Because being so strict and hard on ourselves..., it’s not about how we feel, it’s about how we feel about other people!” she says with joyful laughter. Sarah feels “really blessed” that she is “in school right now” and is okay with “throwing a lot of money towards” herself to get an education. “In school right now” is said in the context of being a student even during the summer when she is not in class.

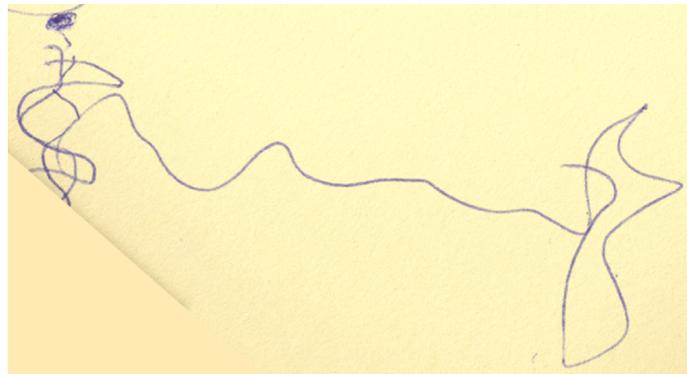
I say, “But you’re also sacrificing to be able to be here.”

Sara tells me, “But I also know, and I can see it as a way that I can directly benefit the world, that it’s not just for a benefit for myself. I see myself being—having conversations with people who need to have conversations. I see myself becoming less caring of status, less caring about power, less caring of identifying. I totally *wanted* to be published.” Not anymore. Things have shifted. “That’s when the real work is done. It’s not about reaching a stage of bliss, which is fine, which is great to be a part of that sometimes. But it’s about becoming a more compassionate person.”

I share: “You so much remind me of my supervisor, a person foremost, she just cares about lives, and she lives that. She’s not rich; she’ll never be rich; she doesn’t care about it. But she could care all about herself, and she doesn’t—she just ...”

Sarah says, “There is a balance, though, too. I was having this conversation [with someone], and I think they were a little taken aback when I said that, ideally, when I’m done all of this, I’d only want to be making, like, \$70,000 a year. And I realize that for somebody coming from poverty, or somebody living the lower means of the spectrum, that that’s a lot of money. It’s not about because I want to be ridiculously rich; I want to be comfortable. I want to be comfortable in a place where I’m not worrying my whole life” about surviving. Putting “things into perspective is where things are helpful. I would love it if I could help even my family members. Like, if somebody [needs], like \$1,000, I’d love to be that person to be able to help them.... I think I’m not somebody who doesn’t want to make any money, I’m somebody who wants to take care of myself, too.” We both agree a life shaped by relentless poverty, living hand-to-mouth is not sustainable, or helpful to our individual selves, family, or community. Sarah says, education is a “way that [she] can directly benefit the world, that it’s not just for a benefit for” herself.

### **Squiggling Forward**



As our time comes to a formal research-participant end, the poncho-wearing, curious and seeking Sarah remains with me. I am honoured to be with, and learn with, Sarah. To me, Sarah is a life in the making, with squiggly lines extending forever. Weaving, twisting, turning—seeking new opportunities for discovery and growth—always moving forward to contribute in meaningful ways to individuals, family, and community. Each experience adding onto the next. I imagine her on the stage, performing her funny

lines for healing: “Baloney cannoli—indeed!” Indigenous and White theatre patrons laugh alongside one another.

## **Epilogue**

As we were negotiating her narrative account, Sarah shared a new understanding that is shifting her understandings of higher education. Sarah’s understanding of the value of university, and the potential of what one may study and become, is undergoing many changes. This is happening through relationships.

Sarah’s friend, and fellow student, shared their philosophy of higher education: Sarah’s friend is “surviving” on student loans—and, living an incredibly frugal life. She does this so she can study philosophy. As they talked, Sarah questioned the wisdom of a degree that will not land her friend a job at the end. As her friend explained, she is willing to invest in a philosophy education, and live a meagre life, while accruing debt, because of what she is learning and experiencing. For Sarah’s friend, education is what you take out of it, things you have yet to discover. Higher education for her friend is about being enriched as a whole person and life in the making. Sarah’s friend does not view university in a utilitarian manner; for her, education is not something to merely provide a job—that is, it education is not just a means to an end. This requires a leap of faith; it requires an understanding that to have this “freedom, you need the privilege to fully immerse yourself in this way of life.”

As we talked, Sarah shared emerging possibilities beyond becoming a social worker. Notably, she is wondering about exploring spirituality; she confidently says, “I’m just in my second year.” Yes, she has begun her undergraduate journey; Sarah now sees the value in university as an opportunity for exploration. Sarah is mindful that this is a privilege that not all students have. She is respectful of her treaty band’s support; she also has a job so she can afford to live on her own. Her shifting understanding of the possibilities of higher education is rooted in her relational way of being with other students. Sarah is opening to all sorts of education wonders. Her life is being shaped, as Lugones (1987) writes, “playfulness, ‘world’-travelling, and loving perception” (p. 3).

Sarah is in a creative writing class; she tells me she is excited—and a bit surprised—to be engaged with creativity and exploration through writing. She said that she aspires to be like her Indigenous creative writing teacher one day: powerful, confident, caring, and working towards social justice through storytelling.

As our research conversations come to a close, Sarah settles on a pseudonym. She wanted to use an Indigenous name; however, she has not been given a name yet through Indigenous ceremony.<sup>33</sup> Sarah shares why she chose this name: “Sarah is my *kokum*’s name. She passed away, long before I was born. I wish my mom had had her longer. I like the idea of using her name.” Reflecting on her choice was a bittersweet moment; yet, a moment that is a way to honour her *kokum*—a woman who left Sarah’s mom’s life much too early.

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<sup>33</sup> Qwul’shah’yah’maht (Thomas (2005)) explains the Snux’ney’muxw (Coast Salish) Indigenous naming ceremony: “At the naming ceremony, we have a system of paying ‘witnesses,’ representatives from different communities who are called upon to witness the event. Witnessing is a huge responsibility because you are asked to pay attention to all the details of the evening (what the name was, where it originated, and the protocol that was followed to ensure that I had the right to use the name as well as other details)”(p. 243; for an in-depth explanation of Canadian Indigenous naming practices see Devine, 2004).

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### MARGARET ROSE IS WONDERING

#### **Prologue to margaret rose's Narrative Account**

margaret rose's<sup>34</sup> narrative account is fragmented. There is no tidy familiar plot structure. Wonders continue to emerge as we engage in our seven months of research conversations. New possibilities of understanding lived experiences surface. The following fragments are representative of how research conversations flow. They are choppy and mishap; they have an intensity that match margaret rose's precarious personal and undergraduate life. There are hard stories; there are hopeful stories. This is the first time she shares these stories. To provide a smooth plot line, with a common theme, would silence the complexity of how margaret rose's undergraduate life is shaped by systemic childhood poverty. As we meet, many things are shifting in her life. She is awakening to new ways of being and new possibilities for the future. Her narrative account seeks to demonstrate the relational way we were together in these research conversations. The fragments in this narrative account weave together experiences margaret rose is living in the moment and reliving. margaret rose chose how her narrative fragments and found poems would be arranged. margaret rose is wondering.

#### **Feather Reed Grass Illusion**

I want to acknowledge the healing journey that I am on  
And the continuous ceremony of learning  
I am still in recovery from colonialism  
I am still trying to find that balance

On this hot summer afternoon, the feather reed grass mesmerizingly weaves back and forth, lulling me, a distant observer, into a sense of being one with nature's serenity. Each plant maintains its respectful place; a single line of gently swaying, rural-like feeling, little toy soldiers dutifully playing their role. Their mission perhaps, to separate the harshness of the cement, steel, glass, and faux outer walls of two newly

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<sup>34</sup> margaret rose is the pseudonym that she chose. It is in lower case to reflect resistance to colonization. Although I use she/her pronouns in her narrative account, margaret rose identifies as she/they.

constructed structures on this higher education landscape. As the wind teasingly subsides, the reed grasses halt and maintain their composure; to me, they seem to look dutifully uniform. Seemingly symmetrical, planted and spaced perfectly apart, as if they all have the same chance to grow at the same rate. Outwardly, each grass plant appears to have equal exposure to the sun and rain's nutrients. Such soothing sameness; the illusion of fluidity and homogeneity. Reed grasses are dutifully kept in line by their rectangle cement enclosure; they are protected by a shiny black, wrought-iron railing.

Floor-to-ceiling windows let in sunbeams that warm rows of fading, beige and industrial green, lightly checkered couches, structures whose fabric's strength is waning. I casually observe dancing dust particles weaving to and fro. Bodies lounging on sofas, catching a few moments of sleep; students engaged in excited conversations; lone students snuggled in the sofa corners, reading or eating. The constant din of voices echo across from the comfortable row of time-worn, undistinguishable sofas. The vast windows make visible the intermingling of natural and urban; creating a welcoming illusion of diversity

Sometimes they don't know that ...

This cement and steel structure is planted on traditional Indigenous land; it is a deeply rooted creation that rises up majestically. It displays powerful and sacred institutional stories. Celebrated for its architecture and glorious history, it houses boxes of franchised fast food kiosks, chained together by recognisable sights, sounds, and smells: faux facades, buzzing bodies snake towards order clerks, hot deep fryer oil permeates the air, sizzling convenience food is consumed at great speeds, and winding lines at the microwaves. Cafeteria tables and chairs permanently fixed to floors sit adjacent to pillars whose breadth reminds me of *Romanesque* coliseum-type supports. I wonder at the illusion of this higher education fortress. I wonder if there are any symbolic cracks, even the smallest, most indiscernible of fissures. Cracks that may allow for marginalized poverty-class voices and lived experiences to become visible.

The ping of my cellphone interrupts me; minutes prior to our first conversation, Margaret Rose sent an article from a university magazine that featured her. The article's first page is taken up by a depiction of her laying tobacco by the base of an ancient tree on the university campus. She makes herself visible. She is dressed in a black polyester suit with snappy, open-toed, silver sandals. Her long black hair is pulled back into a rigid ponytail, which rests high on her head. Her hair captures the sun's rays. Margaret Rose's red, white, and yellow feather earrings gently brush her arms as she humbly touches the tobacco at her ancestors' roots with her fingertips. Her gaze is soft and reflexive. I have *seen* this tree; she *knows* this tree.

As the sun starts to set, the reed grass continues its lulling dance in the breeze. A student emerges through the doors, wrapped in sun, wind, ancestry, burgeoning traditional knowledge and intensity; a Cree warrior disrupting the constraints of the concrete-pillar space. Six feet tall and broad-shouldered, her long, straight, glistening black hair catches the manufactured lighting. Nature and power swirls around her. She strides past plants that sway under the intensity of the natural elements she embodies. The glass walls seem on the verge of shattering from the intensity of the energy that envelops her. She boldly makes her way; her presence is transfixing; she walks like a Canadian prairie thunderstorm approaching.

*She's a warrior  
Her warrior strength  
It dances around her*

Sit beside me  
Don't worry  
I'll guide you

An Elder told her  
We have a responsibility to share our knowledge  
Can't keep all this goodness to ourselves

Let's share

## Nutrients for Lives on the Higher Education Landscape

Our times together are an intermingling of laughter and tears, hopes and fears. Our relationship overflows with wonders; we wonder, how do the pieces of our lives cohesively fit together? I tell Margaret Rose that Clandinin (2013) says that tears are a part of narrative inquiry. It is a way for me to justify crying on the academic landscape. Margaret Rose says, “I used to be really um ashamed of crying in public up until just shortly before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] happened here” in the city. *Set aside your white settler-guilt. Listen like you do to the wind in the trees.* “I was here on campus. The TRC happened in March. I decided to become sober.”

Some time had passed  
It was now spring session

“I was doing scholarship applications upstairs in the transition year program lab—computer lab. And, [Sage,] the coordinator, was like, ‘Hey, there’s some stuff happening at your faculty. Do you want to go check it out?’ And me, my first response was, ‘Will there be food?’ And she’s like, ‘Yes.’ And I’m like, ‘Let’s go!’”

*Remember Margaret Rose when we talked about carrying to-go containers everywhere in case there is food we can take home? We both laughed at how we don’t feel shamed about that anymore. At some point, we realized we were tired of being hungry and feeling ashamed about our empty fridges and wallets.*

The first thing that Margaret Rose noticed was, “wonderful, wonderful, amazing” Indigenous people from British Columbia. Unlike her usually exuberant self, she retells this experience with an awe-inspired voice: “They were bringing these massive, massive, *massive* copper shields. They were taking them from their territory all the way to Ottawa. But along the way, they were having people just pray.” She shivers. The Elders said, “If you want to touch it, if you don’t, don’t. We just need prayers.” This is a pivotal moment: Margaret Rose can “*flight hard*” or stay with this unfolding experience. She “*stayed hard.*”

I have stories upon stories

At the copper shield ceremony, an Elder gifted his story. margaret rose said, “His story just resonated with me because I’ve always questioned my authenticity. I’ve always questioned like, “Oh, I was so rugged. Like the drugs that I’ve done, the situations I’ve been in, the experiences I’ve had ...”

*Margaret rose makes me think of the leaves on the trees and how they weave in the wind together. As autumn flows through, the multi-hued, fall-coloured leaves fly from their trees, but join one another. They look different—and, alike; they share similar experiences and knowledge.* margaret rose retells a nourishing experience:

When that Elder shared his story, he explained about when he was young, and what he went through and the drugs and the substances and then becoming sober and all the teaching he’s had and where he’s at now. And I’m like, I just start crying cause it was just so touching right. I’m just crying and crying and crying. And then he was sharing his story. He was talking about how those tears are healing and to not be ashamed to cry. And he couldn’t see me crying, right. But he was just sharing his story and how you know he was a man. He was a man and questioned his masculinity but tears are healing and I’m sitting there and just crying for the first time ever in public.

margaret rose does not take a breath in the retelling of this story. My fingers constantly waver above the keyboard. With each tap of my fingertips on the keys, I keep thinking how desperately I want to take a breath.

I share my burgeoning understanding of crying with margaret rose. “I have had *ugly cries* at my weekly research issues meetings. Experiences that deserve an *ugly cry*. And no shame in it. I think there have been times that I didn’t have the energy to think to be ashamed.” We both laugh.

“Hey, it’s raining,” says margaret rose. It is a rain where sunbursts pierce the clouds and penetrate every animate and inanimate thing with warmth. “The only reason I know *ugly cry* is that a few young girls I was working with talked about *ugly cry*. And I’m, ‘Oh, what’s that? They said, ‘Oh, it’s like when snot’s running down your face!’.” We are both howling with laughter.

Happily margaret rose says, “Ya, that’s me everyday! It’s good. Like I’m teaching [my son] that it’s okay to cry. My son ...”

margaret rose teaches me this by the way she cries. She holds her head upright and lets the tears fall. Often her tears fall into her lap or onto her narrative account as she reads it. Sometimes, she carelessly

takes a swipe at her raindrops of tears. At other times, she will grip my hand or forearm as her tears heedlessly forge paths down her cheeks. She never apologizes. Her tears nourish her spirit and soul. They make her vulnerable on the academic landscape. Each tear droplet represents experiences of a life shaped by childhood poverty—and, a life in the making. The Elder taught Margaret Rose that tears are healing; she teaches *us* that tears are nutrients for the higher education landscape.

**A roundtable discussion.** Yesterday, we went to a roundtable discussion hosted by a branch of the Canadian government. The governmental representatives were seeking input on what equity, diversity, and inclusivity means and what policies already are in place. A fact-finding mission of sorts, I suppose. The theatre-style seating room was filled to capacity. The burning intensity of the industrial, fluorescent-tube lighting hissed its glare from its high vaulted perch. I imagined a motley crew of administrators, professors, and a few sparse students, filled the new ergonomic office chairs that soundlessly bore the weight of bodies.

The deficit conversations regarding Indigenous students is deeply disturbing. A dean said their department “saves seats for Indigenous students; however, they are ill-qualified for the program.” As each person spoke *about* and *for* Indigenous students, Margaret Rose’s shiny cheeks infused with a deepening red. Her arms death-gripped her stomach. Her clenched fists spasmed. Tentacles of tension swirled around her. Widened eyes became vessels holding unshed tears. Her frame rigidly contorted erect. Her body pitched to and fro, forcing the piece of generic furniture into a simulation of a rocking chair—without the peaceful sensation. At moments, her rocking intensified until it seemed as if she was on a pendulum ride at the fair. I wondered if she might take flight. In the briefest of fleeting moments, she lessened her grip, pulled her black shiny hair to the side, then resumed the rocking motion. I recognized this motion. It has a purpose: to control and hold pain at bay. I used to do this as a child. I pass her Kleenex. She shook it away like she does to wasps: without glancing at me, she shook her head and dismissed the tissues with an “*Owasp! Owasp!*” motion of her hand. She did not swipe at her tears; she refused to hide her tears.



Breathing

Have to remind myself to breath

*Where did they get that?*

*Who did they consult with?*

*Who storied this?*

Wave the wand

Wake up

## Gifting Stories

margaret rose creates a space where we can come together and share our come-together experiences.

margaret rose teaches me about the power of gifting stories. She helps me understand that we all have positions of privilege. Her partner, tanis, teaches her about privilege in relation to traditional Indigenous knowledge.

margaret rose met her partner, tanis, three years ago. tanis grew up learning traditional knowledge and part of her culture; tanis speaks English; she did not learn her native language. margaret rose says, “I never grew up with my culture [*long pause*] cause my dad is a first-generation residential school survivor, that’s why.... My mom is a second-generation residential school survivor. You know that makes [me] second- and third-generation survivor.” In this moment, margaret rose draws close to her okâwîmâw’s<sup>35</sup> experiences: “So I get it now, why she did not grow up with Indigenous cultural teachings. But, my partner on the other hand, was taught, was given these teachings. So my partner so graciously shared her knowledge with me and I’ll always remember the one time she shared this story about her *musom* who lived to be well over, I don’t wanna, over one hundred years old. Over one hundred years old. I don’t know exactly, but over one hundred years old.”

In the beginning, margaret rose started sharing this story to help me with my white settler guilt. “And he always, always, *always* told my partner, ‘You’re not Cree, you’re Beaver. All of the Indians this side of the Athabasca River are Beaver Indians.’ He’s like, ‘Those Crees, those Crees came from the east, and you know why they call them sneaky? Because, they’re quiet. Those Crees came over here.’ And this isn’t the first time that I’ve been told about Crees, okay? And I’ve grown up, ‘Oh, I’m Cree! I’m Cree! I’m this. I’m that. I’m awesome! I’m Cree!’ But you know what?” margaret rose leans in and whispers so no one but me can hear: “My people, my relatives, they came over here and they took land that wasn’t theirs either. You know they [*long pause*] and that’s a hard lesson because [*long pause*] and that’s why I’m really cautious who I share this story with because there are some Cree people, myself included, in the

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<sup>35</sup> *okâwîmâw* is Cree for mother.

beginning, who get hurt and who get mad and who say, ‘No! That’s a lie! That’s a lie!’” But *[long pause]* that’s a part of my history. That’s very much a part of you know, winning the genetic lottery of having fair skin, right. Because one of my [inner city] youth told me, ‘The reason why you don’t have a hard time is cause you look White.’” margaret rose gifts me with tanis’ *musom*’s story; but, it does not wipe out my white settler guilt. The gifting of this story opens up a safe space for margaret rose and I to share—and explore—experiences together. The gifting of this story creates a space for me to “‘world’-travel” to margaret rose’s lived experiences (Lugones, 1987).

Wearing masks  
A white mask  
Masks to fake it  
Killing my soul

Rugged ass hair

Words are medicine

Peace out  
Carry on

Thank you Creator  
Thank you Aunty Jane

## **Buffy, the Colonial Poverty Slayer**

Do not ask Margaret Rose how this or that regional, provincial or national policy is going to end poverty in five years or a decade. Do not reduce experiences to dominant Canadian poverty-Indian narratives. If one is going to stand up as an expert on Indigenous subjects—and, subject matter, she asks that you acknowledge your privilege and why you have the authority to be teaching her. In her first year as an undergraduate student, Margaret Rose says that “her first native studies professor ... [was] a White man that gets it.” A splinter of the story. “And I grilled him that first day.” This was Margaret Rose’s and my first research conversation. I had no context as to what she meant. She challenged institutional authority; *grilled* made me apprehensive.

“As a first-year, native studies course, you know, I go into class and there’s a White guy standing in front. We’d all pile in and sit down in our respective seats. You know, after he introduces himself, the class goes on. You know, I didn’t feel like his answer was sufficient enough. I went up to him right away and said, ‘Who are you and why are you here? Why are you teaching me these studies?’”

I hear the fear pounding through my being; I feel the fearful tensing of my body.

“And he said, ‘Well, I’m sorry that I didn’t explain myself well enough in the introduction.’ He’s like, ‘I’m from this territory. I acknowledge that I’m a settler. I do work [on a reserve]. I work with the inner city populations.’” As I sit with Margaret Rose’s experience, I come to realize that what I see as courageous is a woefully poor and simplistic understanding. “And he really shared with me on a human-to-human level what he’s doing and why he’s doing what he’s doing. So from there, you know, I had respect for him.” The pace with which she shares each experience, and pulls all the fragments together to create a cohesive account, is extraordinary. “And this man introduced me to Buffy Saint-Marie.”

“He did not!” I exclaim with child-like glee.

“I had no idea who she was. I had no idea about...” Margaret Rose says with sad wonder.

“I know her from *Sesame Street!*” She does not say Cookie Monster, Oscar the Grouch, or Big Bird might be her favourite characters; yet, I *assume* we have a shared experience.

margaret rose tells me, “I didn’t even know about the civil rights movements. I didn’t know about the American Indian movement. Like ...”

“Why would you know?”

“Ya,” she says with recognition of, “Ya! How would I know? I didn’t have access to that kind of schooling!”

She never saw *Sesame Street* as a child.

A few weeks ago, margaret rose invited me to her home for supper. On her bedroom wall proudly sits a framed picture of Buffy Saint-Marie.



Play

tanis introduced music into my son's life

Art is medicine

*Arts-based research*

*Art-based therapy*

*I need to go to that*

Me too! Take me with you!

*I want play dough*

Just to make sculptures

*I want to finger paint*

No brushes

Just fingertips

## Ceremony

Seeking place and social relations where she is loved and accepted as a life in the making burns within margaret rose's spirit. In her young and adult lives, she darted to and fro with no clear direction. *Plan B*, any plan, is a foreign concept. I imagine her as a traveller, hitching a ride on railroad boxcars. Sleeping where and when she can, never knowing where the next stop will land her, running, always running, hoping that when she leaps she will firmly grasp the boxcar's frame. Connecting with people and sharing experiences, she learns and grows, enriches lives. Each mile of the journey takes her closer to an unknown destination; yet, a place where she is destined. Her life has been shaped by a yearning for ...

She seeks safe places where she can call home, spaces where she does not have to wear a mask. She pretends that having to *move along*, because somebody else is appropriating her place on this or that person's couch, does not faze her. Her body is blanketed by relentless dislocation; her spirit is blanketed by connection. She yearns for a "symbiotic" relationship between her Aboriginal heritage, nature, and being a good relative.

I go sit by that tree  
I'll talk to trees  
I don't care  
I'll go hug trees  
The trees are my brothers  
The trees are my sisters

It is on the university landscape that margaret rose was taught, by an Indigenous alumni of the university, that in order to reconnect you must first connect. margaret rose spends time with the trees on campus, lays tobacco at their base and prays to the Creator because of this woman's story: "She came in and she shared about how she survived this institution. And how when she was feeling like she needed to reconnect, she would go sit by a tree." Today, margaret rose says the Creator brought this woman into her life, a person who would become her Indigenous aunty. The same year that margaret rose met this woman, things began to unravel—again. "That was the year that I actually got charged and I was like not able to enter the faculty of education. I thought my life was over. I was gonna quit. I was gonna kill

myself.” margaret rose does not explain why, but something moved her to “reach out to [Indigenous aunty via their] email address.” She says, “And it was a weekend, it was a Sunday, and she came and picked me up!” margaret rose’s speech quickens as she says in wonder, “Later I found out she used to date my late uncle—so now she’s my aunty and she brought ceremony into my life. She’s a support system til today. She’s actually doing her PhD ...” Her life has been shaped by a yearning for—ceremony.

Never even thought about the trees  
Ever giving a shit about me  
And vice versa  
Right  
Now I take the time to enjoy  
The beauty of creation

### **Entering the Higher Education Landscape**

margaret rose entered university without a high school diploma; she was categorized as a mature student.<sup>36</sup> Because of this, she “had to jump through all these additional hoops just to even be within this space.” Her next thought is, “luckily” she met people who cared. *Can you hear the telling whisper? In the most fleeting, barely discernable of moments, there is the smallest hint of frustration; there is no lingering of anger or shame. There is the smoothest of transitions from experiences with rigid institutional regulations to those who attended to her life in meaningful ways.* margaret rose remembers with wonder, Clover, an academic advisor from a college-sized<sup>37</sup> university, who brought her here to campus. “She specifically took me straight to the Aboriginal Student Services. So she was already creating that community for me. And then through the Aboriginal Student Services Centre, I found out about the Transitional Year Program [TYP].”

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<sup>36</sup> Most often, a mature student in Canadian universities and colleges is someone who did not graduate from high school and is allowed, with conditions, to enter university after the age of 21. One of the requirements generally involves upgrading high school grades, taking high school courses, or taking remedial courses to “prepare” them for college or university. These students may be required to take courses at a college before they are considered for entry into university. Mature student carries a connotation of someone who is not following the “normal” academic trajectory of transitioning directly from high school to university because they did not perform adequately in high school. This institutional defining of *mature student* differs from the older student, who did “well” in high school and who chooses to enter into university after a period of being away from high school (e.g., enter into university because one desires a career change). However, in both instances, the student may be storied in damaging ways (e.g., You’re so old, why are you in university? Shouldn’t you have done this when you were young?).

<sup>37</sup> A college-sized university can be a college that is transitioning to university (degree granting) status or a university that is much smaller (e.g., Dalhousie University) than research-intensive universities (e.g., University of Toronto). “Smaller” can refer, for example, to the amount of land that buildings occupy.

This is a first-year program specifically for FNMI (First Nation, Métis, Inuit) students. Through the TYP program, Sage, the coordinator, “she prepares you for the first year.” There are two specific courses tailored to teaching FNMI students in the TYP program, in which Sage teaches students how to use the university student website, and how to design your degree. Sage “brings in alumni to come in and let us know, ‘Hey, you can do it! You can get through this.’ So, that’s why I’m still here today.” Margaret Rose does not retell and relive these experiences with despair. She understands that “historically, these spaces were not meant for ‘Indians’ or even women.” But “reconciling with these truths is challenging” for her. One of the truths is that “other Aboriginal students who might not have accessed [the TYP], I know they’re not here today. Because that community within a community is so integral for us to survive this institution.”

Survival  
Survival in the higher education institution  
A colonial rite of passage

Sage is “the one who decides who’s teaching the courses,” Margaret Rose says as she leans in closer.

This matters. Margaret Rose retells a powerful story about her first-year English teacher:

I still quote [her] everyday. She taught me that everyone has a story. Everyone has a story. It doesn’t matter where you come from. Treaty, non-Treaty, Indigenous, non-Indigenous—it doesn’t matter. We all have a story to tell. And that’s something I’ve always, always, always, kept with me. She actually created a safe space where I was able to disclose through a paper about my own [*long pause*] experiences of being molested as a child and how it subsequently affected me in adulthood. So, it’s, it’s been quite an up and down academic journey.

Margaret Rose keeps these experiences close to her. The opportunity to explore lived experiences and knowledge—from the margins—inside of academia profoundly shapes her. It is reshaping the way she understands how she can be a part of opening up spaces to have different conversations that push up against institutional privilege—even when she feels she is “too deep into this institution.”

When Margaret Rose speaks of the ups and downs she says, it is “not only emotionally, spiritually, physically, but also academically. Like my grades aren’t the greatest. But that’s okay. I’m still here! They haven’t kicked me out yet.” She laughs with delighted abandon that some might mistake for flippancy. She

is deadpan serious; she is joyful. margaret rose is on academic probation—again. This time however, she has ceremony—and, for the moment, secure housing.

Not drinking the colonial koolaid

## **The Academic Linear Fallacy**

I must lean forward, get close, to hear a resigned-margaret rose. In an almost an inaudible whisper she says, “I have been trudging along since 2009.” For six years, margaret rose continues to chip away at her undergrad degree hampered by a life shaped by childhood poverty—and, empowered by a belief in forward-looking stories.

Hers is not a story that is inline with the traditional Aesop’s *The Tortoise and the Hare* fable that I learned as a child. Her experiences do not fit into any tidy, idealistic fairy tale. margaret rose did not *know* any other version of education other than a linear fallacy. There is a higher educationalized version of Aesop’s fable. The education institution challenges the slow-moving, poverty-class Tortoise to a race against the swift and privileged Hare. If the Tortoise arrives at the starting gate, it sees the racecourse but it is a track it has never imagined; the Tortoise has no map for navigation, does not have the *right* gear, and does not know the rules. If the race is a draw or if the Tortoise wins, it is because they assimilated the middle-class higher education culture or faked it till they made it. If they lose, they are not the right kind of academic athlete; their record will reflect this loss for years. Win, lose, or draw, the Tortoise is at a disadvantage. The Tortoise does bring experience to the race; however, it is not the kind of knowledge that is privileged in institutions. It is not knowledge that is honoured and valued. It is knowledge that is silent and silenced. Institutional policies and histories continue to pit the socially, culturally, and economically disadvantaged Tortoise against the Hare on an uneven playing field. The dominant linear fallacy continues. I wonder how this fallacy can be interrupted.

Historically speaking  
Historically this  
Oh fuck!  
Historically—that shit ain’t working!

## **Making Visible the unNormalized**

margaret rose’s life has been shaped by disconnection: from and within family, communities, institutions, colonial schooling, and Indigenous education. Each footstep from her early beginnings to her life as an

undergraduate student is shaped by precariousness of space, place, and social relations. Until I met margaret rose, I had not thought about what is normalized in the life of a child from a poverty-class family. I begin to wonder about the feel of rocks, gravel, harsh and sharp grooves of hardened tire tracks, barnyard debris, twigs and weeds beneath my child bare feet, and how familiar these sensations became. This is not a Norman Rockwellesque normality, rather a symbol of a lack of normality. Entering on early childhood landscapes, with feet safely encased in ill-fitting, cast off shoes, every step was painful. As an adult on higher education landscapes, with feet safely covered in footwear I purchase, every step is raw.

margaret rose never imagined a life beyond the daily struggle of shifting places, seeking safe nooks and crannies where she could rest, if even for a moment. Fragmentation of place became where she rested her head at night. I begin to wonder about the feel of lurking homelessness and looming authority blanketing her in a known normalcy. Entering onto early education landscapes, displacement threads throughout her existence; as an adult, homelessness and rootlessness is woven throughout her survival garb.

Elaine: I can't trust a scholarship. So when I read the story about you and we've talked about *homelessness*.... It feels like that lacks what it really means.

margaret rose: Ya. Ya.

[*long, comfortable silence*]

Elaine: I know how you can live September to April on campus. Cause the Students' Union Building is open 24-7.

margaret rose: [*laughs*] Yup.

Elaine: [*laughing*] We have access to go use—

margaret rose: —The showers over there and downstairs too just so you know.

[*both laughing*]

Elaine: Oh? Okay.

margaret rose: I know some good spots to hide out. I know, maybe we'll compile a list. Let's take back some space! I'll build you a Teepee right beside me girl!

Elaine: I like that! Let's go and take these dirty problematic bodies from poverty and come and contaminate this space.

margaret rose: Ya! We can be neighbours.

I wonder if margaret rose ever has a peaceful sleep. I wonder if fragmented resting and education places are relentlessly disrupted by the fear of homelessness and destitution.

Excuse me if I'm trying to find secure housing  
Hopefully one day I get to the point—  
Not carrying this knapsack around anymore  
Just throw that knapsack away  
Maybe invest in a satchel  
I can put my medicines in there

## First Nations Shuffle

Last summer when I sat in that welfare office downtown—  
Having a hard time  
Trying to figure stuff out  
I go into that space  
I'm not treated with respect to begin with  
I'm treated inhumanely  
    If you sit down with me  
    Have a conversation with me  
    I like to think I'm a good human being  
Not being able to speak to a social worker  
First being denied  
Have to appeal it  
All these steps  
Then you get the same reaction that I got before when I was on assistance  
    "Oh, but you're First Nations. Can't you go just go back to your reserve?"  
    "Oh, you're First Nations. Doesn't your band give you money for welfare?"  
    "Oh, no! That's not our responsibility. You're gonna have to go ..."

So unaware  
I don't like the way I was treated  
I volunteer with inner-city youth  
I'm making sure that my young people aren't going to feel the way that I feel today  
I know that I'm privileged  
My young people  
Our young people downtown  
The ones that are like in the legit trenches  
The ones that are trying to survive  
They don't have the opportunity to sit in a 200- or 300-level course  
\$100, \$500 course to learn  
The different treaties  
The federal government and the municipalities  
And how all that works—

It's not their fault  
It's not their fault  
Don't turn away  
Don't turn your back on us  
Don't turn away from our experiences

## White Mask; Single Story

Come out of the poverty closet  
It's nice not to be in poverty  
Coworkers look at me  
"You're in poverty? What are you doing here?"  
Oh, I'm surviving.  
Struggles real  
Wanna have tea after?  
I'll break it down for you

What echoes throughout margaret rose's undergraduate life is having to wear a white mask on the higher education landscape. As an Indigenous person, margaret rose defines a *white mask* as, "I have to speak a certain way. I have to dress a certain way. I have to, I'm expected to act a certain way now." The appropriate higher education institution-*speak* is complex with hidden punishments for those who may choose to push against, or live outside of, unwritten norms. margaret rose's experiences on the higher education landscape are a struggle; she says, "this colonialism is everyday and it's a battle I face—*every single day*, especially coming into this institution now having to wear you know white masks."

We have had many conversations about what we learned on early education landscapes and in university. I share with margaret rose that to understand the history and current realities of the White underclass (i.e., White Trash), I have had to learn on my own, purchase books, scour the library stacks, and listen to damaging stereotypes via the media and government. We talked about how frustrating we feel because of the lack of discussions about poverty—beyond economic and neoliberal lenses; margaret rose says, "There's a lot of privileged people in this space. I'm sorry guys, but you guys need to know the truth. And ya, I paid \$500 to find my history. I paid over \$10,000 per year, out of my own pocket, sometimes, just to be here." margaret rose says she has accepted that she has to "live the student loan life." She *spits a truth* that pushes against the dominant narrative that education is "free" for Indigenous students. She does not stay with anger. She sees a way forward, where students don't have to wear white masks or learn higher education speak. "And you know what, I'm sharing [my] knowledge with you now cause I choose to be part of the solution rather than the problem." margaret rose struggles to live an

authentic life on and off the campus: “I know that dialogue and storytelling is integral to who I am as a Cree person.” She keeps this knowledge close. “I try not to be mad anymore about the fact that I paid \$500 to find out my history.” But she acknowledges that it is something she has to constantly work on. margaret rose breaks out into her signature full-bodied laughter.

### **Reconciling Truths and Lived Experiences**

As we spent time together, margaret rose was sharing present experiences that are shaping her understandings of what it means to be on the higher education landscape for Indigenous students who are not the portrait of the “right” or “top” students. Now that she is temporarily on the “other side of the table,” her vantage point is fraught with painful tensions. In this contract position, trying to reconcile truths is a daily battle.

Obviously Creator has placed me in this position for a reason and now I’m on the other side of the table. I have access to stuff. And with access to stuff comes a responsibility. All of this just clicked before I came here. I was putting together promotional items for first-year FNMI students. We’re recruiting, recruiting, recruiting grade twelve students but the reality is a lot of the First Nations communities don’t even offer the 30-level courses. So they’re gonna jump through hoops much like I did. Probably quit half-way through cause it’s really hard transitioning into an urban centre when you have no supports.

Can’t afford to eat. Too ashamed to go to Welfare, right? Don’t wanna tell your professor. So I’ll just quit. Right?

So when I was [doing my job], I just [*long pause*] was getting emotional because I’m like maybe I should be praying with every [task]. ‘Please Creator, guide this counsellor, help this young person that wants to come here. Please Creator help these young people that are going to be coming in here because I’m not going to be here forever and I could probably get a nice shiny desk, with you know a good paying job, and just live the rest of my life comfortably.’

But, I know that I have a responsibility as a Cree woman. I have a responsibility as an Aunty. I have a responsibility to be a good relative and to ensure that this space is ready for our people. And not only our people but my relatives that are non-living. Some people might think that that’s tree is non-living but that tree is my relative. This air, these bugs, everything [*long pause*] we are all interconnected and regardless of [*long pause*] if we’re gonna acknowledge it or not, we are.

So that’s where I’m at and like, really trying to find my fit within this institution and quote-unquote employee. Right?

margaret rose sees her young self in these children. Each trip to a school on or near an Aboriginal reservation is like peering into a looking glass. She cannot look away; she wants to protect them. I cannot

make this easier for Margaret Rose; she does not ask me to. This was one of the hardest stories she shared with me. Harder perhaps because it is happening as I am coming alongside her. All I was able to muster, through my tears, is, “And that’s heavy and hard. And I just—you know sometimes I can’t breathe.” Exhaustedly and calmly, she says, “Yup.” There is a momentary silence, a silence I need to fill because I hurt. Margaret Rose alleviates *my* pain and helps *me* reconcile truths when she responds, “Right!” I wonder how higher education institutions may reconcile these stories.

Six years  
I still struggle  
I’m not good enough  
Still question if I’m meant to be here

### **Identity in the Making**

If colonialism didn't happen  
I wouldn't have to pay to know my history

The sun seems to have forsaken us for many days now. A damp and dreary cold seeps into her thoughts and heart as she wonders about her journey. Margaret Rose’s *Two-spirit Cree woman* versus *assimilation* identities sit in binary opposition; her life on this colonized university landscape is fraught with great tension. Hopelessly, she says, “Sometimes I wonder what life would have been like [long pause] had we been given the right to be the people that Creator meant for us to be.” She declares with hopefulness, “I have a responsibility to make this space ready for my people and the youth who will follow me!” To hold this place for any length of time is a test to the challenges this warrior struggles with—daily. “I get so lost in this [colonial, capitalist] mask that I’m forced to wear for my government rations:” university paycheque rations, student loan rations, academic transcript rations.

Lived most of my life  
People telling me I'm too emotional  
What's too emotional?  
What's the threshold?  
Not enough  
Too much  
Just right  
I'm not buying into that anymore  
Except on the university landscape

## Privileged Piece of Paper

How often Margaret Rose and I have heard, “Top students figure it out,” or, “It’s a student’s responsibility to ask for help,” or “I’m a nice, approachable professor, why don’t struggling students just come to my office hours?” Margaret Rose explains the danger of authority:

I didn’t even feel comfortable accessing a “social worker” because of my experiences growing up, my brother being taken out of our home, put into child welfare system, and the subsequent abuse that followed [*long pause*] because of my personal interactions growing up, you know a social worker has that status—I’m scared! I’m scared and I don’t trust. I don’t trust. I’m sorry if I don’t trust a lot because of my history with these different systems. And people in positions of authority. Right. Like, can I trust you? Can I not? Are you gonna, like you know ...

She cries  
She does not bow her head in shame  
Margaret Rose knows how to run

I share with Margaret Rose that when I heard someone say a social worker was going to come to their home to do an assessment, instantly, I could feel my insides sickly contort. After all these years of not needing to fear a visit from social workers, my body and mind still jerks and goes into panic mode. “Anxiety,” is all Margaret Rose needs to say in response. A heavy silence sits between us. A bond formed based on common experience. “The fear of the social worker coming to the door is terrifying,” I say shakily.

Lowering her voice and leaning forwards, she concedes, “The police, too, right! Even campus security! My heart just palpitates.”

Like a partner-in-crime, I howl, “Doesn’t it!”

Holding up her hands mockingly, she proclaims, “I’m not a criminal! I’m sorry!”

We are laughing now, but it is a tense laugh. “Sorry, I don’t even look that brown. I hit the genetic lottery, please. Please—my grandfather’s a French Canadian. We all gotta get along.”

Hers is a coexistence fraught with heightened tension on the colonized, middle class higher education landscape. In her quest for the privileged piece of academic paper, Margaret Rose questions how to honour her ancestors, Elders, Indigenous youth, her partner—and, her son. Margaret Rose emails me:

“I’ve come to terms with my privilege. Not many of my *relatives* can ‘survive’ within these spaces.... I can.

I can walk both worlds, encouraging understanding. Wow. Now I’m gonna cry.”

Circus performer of her story  
Will act for rations  
Pantomime  
    Changing looks  
    Changing shapes  
    Mischievous  
Trickster  
Cree mask  
Two-spirit mask  
Storyteller  
  
Stilt walker  
Straddling multiple worlds  
Balancing multiple identities  
  
Entertains wonders  
Entertains possibilities  
Contorting embodied being  
Marked and shaped  
  
Price we pay to belong  
To conform  
To choose not to belong

“I’ve questioned, ‘Am I ever going to be an Elder? Am I just going to like get old and die and—never get that prestige title?’” This painfully bumps up against the academic privileged piece of paper like bare knees on cement. “You let me know how your journey goes because I am trying to figure out what I want to do. Okay, I know that I’m working in an office. And I’m on the other side of the table. And reality’s setting in. And I know for sure that I wanna smarten up and get my GPA fixed because I wanna do graduate studies. Let’s be real. I want that title. I want that privilege.” What Margaret Rose wants is to “be taken seriously when [she has] conversations” about social justice. Margaret Rose continues to wonder.

I arrive back from a conference in Montréal<sup>38</sup> and we take up our conversation again. Margaret Rose has been sitting with shifting understandings—embracing new ways of being. “I can be an Elder and have a PhD. I’m learning that I can’t romanticize my culture and traditions. These are ‘new’ traditions.

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<sup>38</sup> My sociology department, the Graduate Students’ Association, and the Faculty of Research and Graduate Studies funded my attendance at this conference to co-present with Dr. Vivyan Adair, Hamilton College, New York.

We are adapting as Indigenous peoples, utilizing ‘new’ gifts for oral traditions. Wow. Those readings you shared, plus this new book I’m reading are changing me. I’m learning that I can change and that I can grow. That the way I think today could be different tomorrow. How else am I going to evoke change, unless I accept it as well?”

*October 21 email to margaret rose:*

Greetings margaret rose: Something came up in your narrative account that I would like to explore if you have time. We can do this by email if it is convenient: What creates an environment of tension between academia and being an Elder one day? What’s creating the tension between wanting the privileged piece of academic paper versus being an Elder? You talk about these two things quite differently. Can you have a PhD and be an Elder?? Can the two co-exist together??? How do you imagine what this life looks like??? Looking forward to your thoughts and wonders? Cheers elaine

*October 25 email from margaret rose:*

tan’si sister: To start, I want to acknowledge the healing journey that I am on and the continuous ceremony of learning. I am still in recovery from colonialism. I am still trying to find that balance. I’ve come to realize that academia could only take me so far, now it’s up to me to go out and find the traditional knowledge of my Ancestors. Some things cannot be learned within this institution. Historically, these spaces were not meant for “Indians” or even women.

So, reconciling with these truths is challenging. Trying to find a balance (emotionally, spiritually, mentally, physically) is something I am aware of every single day. Questions surrounding authenticity because of who my Ancestors are (French-Canadian and whomever else I’ve yet to uncover). Sometimes I feel like my life is one big jigsaw puzzle, slowly trying to figure out how all of these various pieces fit together.

While I am grateful for all of the knowledge that I have been given, a part of me is still pissed off. I mean, if Colonialism didn’t happen then I wouldn’t have to pay to know my history. Nor would I be working for government rations. My ass would be sovereign- no government rations needed as I could live from Mother Earth. I guess change takes time. I come from a generation of instant gratification, which is another hard truth to learn.

It is my hope that I will become an Elder one day. Looking back at all the lessons I had to learn, and hopefully laugh. Laughter is the best medicine. It would be nice to have a PhD one day too, but it’s not my end goal right now. I just want balance.

Since beginning my academic journey back in 2010, I’ve come to realize that this institution is science (fact) based. It seems to me that science = truth within this institution. But I’ve come to learn about [an indigenous] worldview, and seeing relationally (knowing my responsibilities as a good relative).

## **Walking the Grid**

Grade six became the pivotal moment when her young life abruptly careened into adulthood. Her mother became ill and margaret rose quietly bore the parental role of raising her much younger brother. She relives how this shaped her life: “Just being a caregiver.... I’ve never—well, first of all I’ve never had

anywhere to go back because of my dad's [illness]—and living on the reserve and stuff like that. I guess if I really, really, *really* had to, I could go stay on a trailer somewhere on the backroads—if I *really* had to. But growing up, I never had that *Plan B* [long pause]. I've had phenomenal friends that have taken me in that are probably more family than my entire family." She is not angry or bitter. She moves closer to kindly understanding how her life has been shaped.

"It's not my family's fault either. They don't know what a family unit is—colonialism ..." She is joyful: "Like I tell" my son, "Thanks for growing up with me. Like I don't know what I'm doing. We're just growing up together." She marvels about the "fact that we're still alive ... we need to give ourselves pats on the back." Yes, they are still alive; she keeps "walking the grid"; she keeps living with hard stories.

### **Storage Container Learning**

There are early childhood education experiences that have left gashes in Margaret Rose's spirit. Educators storied and treated her in scarring ways; they planted stories in her, knowingly or unknowingly, that figure prominently in how she understands herself in relation to higher education (Okri, 1989). As a child, Margaret Rose was evicted and torn from the education landscape because she was a *bad* child.

This is our last official research conversation. We are having supper in the basement of a pub. The staff gave us a quiet, dimly lit room all to ourselves. We pretend we are *high class*. Our attire mocks our playfulness. Rock music plays softly in the background. The room is closed off from the main part of the lower-level by two wooden doors sitting slightly ajar to allow the server to move in and out without interruption. The server is like background ambient noise. We feel special. We sit on tall, high backed chairs. Coloured felt markers, artbooks, the brightly coloured pencil case my friend case Sunwoo (선우), from South Korea sent me and the digital recorder, are strewn on the wooden and worn, roundtable top. We pretend this place is just for us *because* we are not *regulars*. We pretend that not just anybody gets this kind of treatment. Margaret Rose orders chicken fingers and salad "so she can live long enough to look after her grandkids." I say it is a good thing I do not have kids so I do not have to worry about living that

long. She says I am coming along with her: “You’re going to live that long because I’m sharing my grandkids with you.”

“I would rather you share your chicken fingers.”

She orders Italian dressing because she “does not know what the fuck balsamic vinegar is.” I order mashed potatoes.

margaret rose met her son’s father at school. “Cause at that point in time I got kicked out of regular school so I was in an LRH program.”

“What’s that?”

“An outreach. It was a building where you did module work as opposed to be in a classroom. You just worked at your own pace. I didn’t fit the traditional mould of students.”

“How old were you?”

“Grade seven. My son’s age.”

“You were kicked out in grade seven?”

“Grade five and then again in grade six.”

“Was this a White school?” (I use this as code for Catholic-based, Canadian residential schools.)

“Ya. A Catholic school. Grade five was because my friends, and I’m guilty by association, were trying to burn down the school.”

“Did you understand what that meant? Or were you just ...“

“I was just happy to have friends cause I was a loner.”

“So you guys tried to burn down the school? And they expelled you?”

“And then I went to another [*long pause*—I got kicked out of the Catholic school and went to the other predominantly White school. Finished my grade five there. And that’s about the time my mom” suffered a horrific tragedy and got sick. “She was hospitalized. Everything changed. Then I’m going into grade six. I get kicked out of that school—again—but this time because of peer stuff. Unhealthy friendships.” Her single-parent mother, a residential school survivor, enormously fragile from illness and

relentless poverty, struggled to intervene. “So my mom pulled me out of that school and put me into the outreach school where I had to sit in a room all by myself. I finished grade seven and eight in one year. So, ya. I finished grade seven and eight. Oh, grade nine rolls around and I have to be put into the bigger room with everyone else and that’s when I met [my son’s] dad. Start weed, trying to be cool ...”

“So you went from complete isolation to now they’re going to put you back with human beings...?”

*I just keep eating mashed potatoes. Feels like sawdust dipped in gravy.*

“And then I did what every other young person did at that time.... I went through life, went through life, went through life ...” Five years ago Margaret Rose and her mother *spit some truths* that had long been cobwebbed by silence. “So then she starts crying and I start crying. Thankfully my first year of university, my first English professor, the one that taught me we all have a story. That’s when I can say a lot of my healing started cause for one of my papers I wrote about [a painful childhood] experience.” Learning that her experiences and knowledge matter, and that writing about them in academia is legit, continues to resonate on and off the education landscape for Margaret Rose. This teacher planted an empowering story in Margaret Rose: writing of experiential knowledge “was a way to not be ashamed anymore. To know that, and at that time I was meeting a lot of people who had gone through the same shit too.”

One of my good friends  
I guarantee you  
1 in 3 Indians have been sexually molested  
Cold, hard stats  
A reality  
Residential schools  
Foster “care”  
What?  
Writing, not blaming  
Families just separated

“But anyways, the families just like separated. I went into the outreach school. I was isolated for an entire year. Then the next year, I get thrown into grade eight. Everything changes.” Lives shaped by

poverty and intergenerational suffering leaves this life fragile and vulnerable to institutions. Her mom is too sick to care for her children; there is a scarcity of *safe* support systems for her mom and her children. Her mom knows the dangers of reaching out to governmental institutions; she risks social services swooping in and taking away her children.

margaret rose *“peaced out.”* She peaced out by disconnecting and abusing substances in a futile effort to distance herself from the “blame” she lugs on her juvenile, malnourished shoulders. Quietly sobbing on her cold, congealed supper, she says, “If I just would have stayed, I could have prevented this, I could have prevented that. And I could have saved everyone.” I wonder, who planted this story in her?

*I spit a truth:* “Failing to understand you were just a child yourself?” *Why did I use the word ‘failed?’ Such a common phrase but one that says, “You should have known better.”*

“Right!”

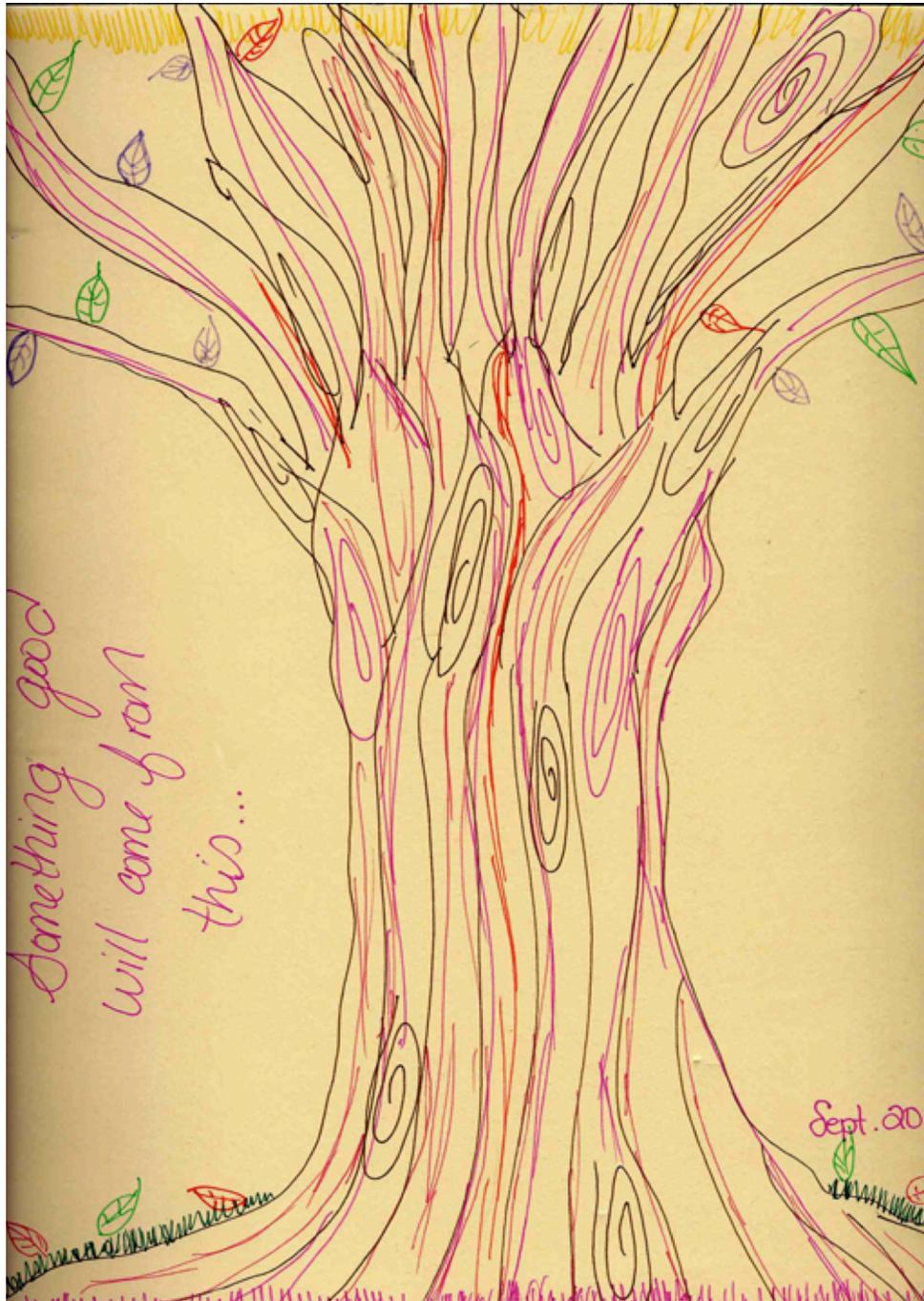
“You were a broken and hurt child. You just make me [*long pause*] again, once again, so grateful that when I ran away I was able to rent a room, had a job [*long pause*] if I would have ran away to the city, oh my god, what would have happened to me. At least in this tiny little community, where people were horrible to me, but at least I didn’t have to become a prostitute or drug addict. At least I had a job working in this restaurant. I don’t care it was illegal child labour!”

“Struggle’s real.” margaret rose shares how ceremony is a way through the struggles:

I can just see my partner—cause she’s got eyebrows—I just aspire to have eyebrows like that. I’m like what’s wrong? Are you on Facebook? Who are you arguing with now? Get the smudge bowl ready! I’m like, okay I get the medicine. Take off my glasses, take out my earrings, here we go, Aunty Jane. Let’s light this up. Roll out the smudge bowl, prayers go up, help me, you know. Cause otherwise it’s going to get ugly. And then I’m like smudging her while she’s like typing. Please Aunty Jane, help us! So she had to go off Facebook for a while.

margaret rose takes me back to the two-sinked, westend story.

It’s not so pretty on this side



*"Ancestors & Relatives"*

*margaret rose drew this early on in our research relationship as she explored how her undergraduate experiences have been shaped by childhood poverty*

## A Token Indian: Rags to Authenticity

Early on in her undergraduate studies, margaret rose met a Cree professor, nadie. Quickly, margaret rose gained the confidence to share how her life has been shaped by childhood poverty, colonialism, residential schools, and the struggles she faces as a student. nadie took the time to attend to margaret rose's life in meaningful ways. In large and small ways, nadie was crucial for margaret rose taking the first step in walking the Red Road<sup>39</sup>—and, not dropping out of university. Yet, for all of nadie's academic and community prominence, nadie is viewed as not quite Cree, not quite Indigenous. Powerful tensions surface as margaret rose retells of her experiences with nadie. margaret rose tries to make sense of competing identities: Two-spirit Cree woman, student, partner, daughter, sister and mother whose life has been shaped by on and off reservation poverty; good relative; aunty to inner city youth and a second-generation survivor of residential schools. Her voice trails off when she speaks of nadie: "It's because of [her] I felt comfortable ..."

I say that I would be honoured to meet this teacher. margaret rose dejectedly says, "She's a really, she speaks such good Cree but she looks like, not Cree and she gets a lot of flack for it." I wonder outloud, "What is that? You look Cree? You don't look Cree?" margaret rose looks directly at me. Her body is shaking as she says, "It's this whole bullshit with authenticity and someone saying you're not authentic. Elaine, I still struggle with it every fucking day in the morning. Be nice, say good things, make sure you smudge, grab your rock, grab your beads, put on your blazer, you're nice, you can do this." I silently add: "Pull your hair back into a tense, rigid bun, watch your language, mind your manners—be visible but not too visible—fit in." margaret rose makes me wonder about identity on the higher education landscape and what constitutes the *right* student and how to live authentically, not cave into the pressure of faking it until

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<sup>39</sup> (Patterson Silver Wolf, 2017) "Walking the Red Road is a determined act of living within the Creator's instructions. Basically, it is living a life of truth, humbleness, respect, friendship, and spiritually. Those on this road are by no means walking a perfect path, but are in search of self-discovery and instructions. While there is much more information and teachings about a life on the Red Road, a more complete understanding would come from our Native American elders and leaders, who themselves have traveled this path for a while." (n.p.)

you make it, or assimilating the middle-class university culture. Yes, Margaret Rose has no patience for Pocahontas. She cannot afford to. She does not believe in this colonization fairy tale. She cannot afford to.

Oh my god, you're poor!  
Let me feed you.  
I got a ten-bedroom house  
Just come kick it on my couch!

### **Connecting**

I had forgotten that Margaret Rose had contacted me. I received an email from her in mid-May inquiring about participating in this research project. “tan’si! My name is Margaret Rose and I am a 4<sup>th</sup>– 5<sup>th</sup> year student within the Faculty of Native Studies. I am interested in being a part of your project. Could we meet sometime soon? Hiy hiy!” I cringe, “Oh, dear. She’s Aboriginal. Can I deal with my white angst?”

I expend great energy to keep at bay wonders about what stories were planted in me as a child and adult about Canadian Indigenous peoples. I received a reprieve from exploring these understandings—until mid-August, when Margaret Rose contacted me again. “tan’si. I hope this email finds you well. Just seeing if you have enough participants yet? I am still interested and on campus now, as I have secured a 4-month contract.” Three days later, we had our first research conversation.

Many times, over the course of this narrative inquiry, I would also wonder about something that had not occurred to me: asking students, whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty, to participate in on-going, long-term research conversations when they may not be able to “afford” to. Margaret Rose needed work in order to participate; without a paycheque, participating would have been beyond her reach. *Afford to* has multiple meanings.

“Funny story,” Margaret Rose seemingly says out of nowhere. Offhandedly she says, “I actually saw your poster. I originally emailed you before, right? Forgot about it because I was homeless again.” In our all too brief time together, Margaret Rose moved three times.

“And when I saw your poster again—where did I see it? I think I saw it on Jewel’s, on the” undergrad funding office wall.

This sets the tone for our conversations. Fragmented. Rollercoaster emotions. Ebb and flow of past and present experiences that are relived in the retelling, moments that are so deeply profound they physically hurt. Harsh and tough stories; soft and tender stories. Often Margaret Rose sits with experiences for moments so fleeting I feel inadequate to keep pace.

Margaret Rose “made it” from the inner city to the suburban westend—temporarily.

Got setup on the westside  
Living in a very class-based community

The only brown person in my cul-de-sac  
I’m just proud  
I have my upside-down Canada flag in my garage

People want to come over and have tea with me or smudge or have some of my books  
My door’s always open

People won’t come into my house but still...

The fact of the matter is that I’ve made it  
I didn’t have to fake it

I made it

*margaret rose, when I emailed you the first few fragments of your narrative account for review, you wrote back and said I was a word warrior. I did not respond. I never do. Not out of disrespect rather, I stopped being creative when I was 10 years old. I want to embrace my creativity again and believe in this part of myself the way you are whole-heartedly embracing your two-spirit, Cree identity seeking journey.*

Within the first twenty minutes of our first conversation, Margaret Rose and I realized we had another shared experience: we both had received undergraduate funding for research projects. More importantly, we had both experienced what it is like to have someone see the potential in us as students, researchers, contributors to community, and as individuals with value. I retold how Jewel, the coordinator of the program, was amazingly supportive. “Jewel was always there. She’d make me brownies. On my first day of grad school, I went to her office, she made brownies and I bawled my face off. I couldn’t even bear to go to class I was so scared.” Our experiences with Jewel are intertwined.

Margaret Rose says, “Yup, she sat with me—that proposal was due at, I want to say 4:00. I literally sat in that office, in that space from 8:00 right until I submitted and Jewel was right beside me. And Jewel was like, ‘I believe in you. Your research you’re doing, it’s needed.’” The retelling of the rest of this experience is a hard story. I, too, know these stories, but have not yet shared them with Margaret Rose. “I ended up not even finishing.... I still haven’t talked to Jewel because I’m too ashamed I didn’t finish.” I suspended every thought, pushed against any reactionary judgement, and let the silence sit. *Listen to the silence. It is telling you something.* She did not finish the research. She shares with me, “Because that was the point when I first became sober and didn’t realize that becoming sober, like all those like everything inside was going to bubble up and either I could choose to revert back to using substances, or I could learn a new way of dealing with this shit, right.” She chose something more important than finishing an academic project. As Margaret Rose explains, “I chose to deal with all this shit because I have a twelve year old. I don’t want my son to grow up and have all this shit bubbling up.” She tells me, “It’s like okay. Let’s deal with the *now* times. Let’s deal with the intergenerational colonialism today! Right?”

Margaret Rose is a marvel to me. I am twenty years her senior; she teaches me each moment we are together. She is able to switch from the painful to the hopeful. I do not mean in a *Pollyanna*-chipper way. She has pragmatism and an ability to pull from deep within her spirit to recognize that she does not need to be defined as a “failure” for anything. She doubts herself; she questions if she is the “right” kind of student to be on this landscape. However, in all our time together, she has never overtly identified herself

as a failure. “Right. So, Jewel’s phenomenal. And I’ll probably end up like talking to her now. You’ll be the segue in and I’ll be like ya, [*long pause*] ‘I’m sorry I didn’t finish; but, I found someone ...’”<sup>40</sup> Since not, what she perceives to be as “completing” this academic project, margaret rose continues walking the Red Road.

She’s sober  
She’s not clean and sober  
She was always clean  
She never thought she was dirty

Towards the end of our first conversation, we notice a child cheerfully slurping on an ice cream cone. “That’s how I talk when there’s ice cream,” I whisper in conspiracy. “Or potato chips and dip,” I say to margaret rose. “At three in the morning, I was coughing so bad so I got up and ate potato chips. Who runs out of potato chips before dip? My life sucks!”

“Put that dip on your bread!” margaret rose commands.

“If you eat potato chips and dip for breakfast, you’ve got a lot of food groups. And let’s say with a glass of orange juice,” I say with nutritional wisdom.

“You’re golden,” says margaret rose.

“Who said potato chips aren’t for breakfast?”

“It’s a potato, a potato!”

“I know, right!”

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<sup>40</sup> margaret rose connected with Jewel who explained that margaret rose did finish the project. This initiative focuses on what students learn rather than any academic view of what is produced. That is, this funding is, in large part, intended to empower students to realize they are contributors to community and can affect change for themselves and their world.

## A Long Avatar Braid

I prayed to the Creator for someone with a long braid  
I associate it still to this day  
With authenticity  
With a long avatar braid

margaret rose's thick, luxurious hair is defiant in its disarray; her finger-combed, windswept mane rejoices in its release from the confines and restrictions of rigid, office regulations. She does not have finishing school poise; she walks with authority. Her aura demands recognition; she is on a quest.

margaret rose reminds me of the feelings of humbleness I experienced when sitting on the cliffs of Newfoundland, watching the power of the waves crash upon rocks and shorelines. I often wonder how the waves shape and reshape the landscape. When the wave's misty touch reached my cheeks, I wondered what truths and knowledge nature was spitting at me. I continue to be deeply drawn to the kind of magnificence made up of fragility and strength. Sitting fascinated and apprehensive inside this institutional structure, there is no time for me to overly fret about my whiteness, or rein in my white settler guilt. I do not know why margaret rose is participating in this research project, beyond growing up in poverty. I sense she has stories she must tell. I am humbled; like the ocean, I will learn, she is going to unapologetically "*spit some truths.*"

margaret rose is not to be confused with some *Disneyesque* Pocahontas. She is not a colonized version of some exotic tribal beauty, noble savage, who frolics in the trees on campus. She does not traverse the university landscape belting out sweet songs as the omnipresent squirrels, rabbits, ravens, and magpies sway to and fro to a magical drumbeat in the background. She says, "I'm still dealing with this internalized colonization that I do to myself. And I fucking hate Pocahontas. Fuck her."

margaret rose, the pseudonym I choose  
The white name a Jesuit priest gave my kise-okawimaw<sup>41</sup>  
Who was she?  
What is her Cree name?  
No artefacts exist  
Only silences  
A missing Indigenous woman  
A life unknown  
Her life sits heavy  
Her presence is palatable  
She's not forgotten  
I don't remember her  
I won't forget her

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<sup>41</sup> kise-okawimaw is Cree for paternal grandmother; however, this is a very loose translation, which does not depict the complexity of what the title means.

## **Broken-up Silences**

margaret rose tells me, “I go home and ask my partner, ‘Hey babe, how many times have you moved since you got here [from the rez]?’ She’s like, ‘More times than I can count on my hands.’ And, I’m like, ‘What? So wait a minute, my experiences are similar to your experiences?’.”

I can feel a soft, wondering silence sitting between them. I imagine a silence that is not broken or drowned out by filler words. In this shared experiential moment, margaret rose can say to her partner, “We both want stability. We both want to feel safe. What can we do now moving forward?” There is a shift in margaret rose’s understanding of how childhood poverty shapes her life and undergraduate experiences. For margaret rose, precarious housing takes on a personification of “moving and disruption.” It is like the jarring of a jackhammer relentlessly pounding and punishing down to the core of any semblance of permanency. I think about people walking down streets, soundlessly making their way as if they cannot hear the vehement screaming of a sledgehammer hitting the cement, breaking the cement apart into unique but indistinguishable pieces. In the moment margaret rose retells and relives this experience, I can imagine if poverty-class students knew that they were “not alone,” they would hear “silenced dialogues” (Delpit, 1988, p. 280; Dickar, 2008, p. 115). These unspoken narratives hold the potential to shift understandings from the individual experience to one in relation to larger dominant narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

margaret rose never sought a two-sink home.

That moment when you're not alone  
That silence  
Broken

Our personal lives and academic lives feel the strain of fearing, or actually being without, a secure place to rest our heads. This fear echoes through margaret rose's daily life. Fear is such an inadequate descriptor. This fear is shaped by the power of housing authorities and rivals with her need to focus on school. margaret rose and her partner were having difficult conversations with their landlord. There are many silenced dialogues: "Doing as best we can to keep the house clean, the exterior clean, so we're good tenants, so we don't lose our place."

margaret rose explains, "I just happened to find out about this place through my childhood friend who was working at a group home behind the house I was renting." The fear of eviction from place—home and university. margaret rose cannot go back to where *back* is. She constantly fears eviction, which is why she seems obsessive about having a lease. The idea of a lease provides for security and permanence that her embodied being craves. If she cannot sign a lease, she has to live a borderlands non-lease life. *Moving and disruption*. They cannot go back. There is no home or community to go back to or forward to. "That's rough," she whispers.

I've yet to attain singing outside of Karaoke  
My partner is super gifted  
My son is super gifted  
I'm probably going to have to bring out the tambourine  
Starting playing the tambourine cause I'm classically Pentecostal trained  
People are like, "You can't say that!"  
Like, what? It's my truth.  
They trained me to clap for Jesus.

margaret rose learned to clap for rations:  
welfare rations  
university contract paycheque rations  
student loan rations  
academic transcript rations

Education or prison

Pick your institution

## Academic Harlequin Rez Romance

When margaret rose got the required-to-withdraw (RTW) form letter from her university in the mail, she had had enough. At some point, it feels like too much of a stretch. It takes too much to keep struggling to survive. margaret rose was engaged in long-drawn-out battles with higher education, welfare, and housing institutions. She was done. We have to back up for a moment. margaret rose has been working on her undergraduate degree for six years. Without fear, I tell her, “It took me fifteen fragmented years to finish my first undergrad because I kept sabotaging it. Cause I was terrified what would happen when I would finish.” Excitedly, margaret rose leans forward and says, “Oh, is that what that is?” I have no answers for her. Based upon my understandings, still in their infancy, I offer margaret rose what I can: “I would change majors; I would quit; I would screw it up ...” My wonders taper off and scatter like ungrounded sentence fragments.

margaret rose is thrilled to learn of a potential reason for her RTW. The unfolding of this RTW-saga speaks to stories of poverty-class students that shape their lives in ways that remain shrouded in silence. Imagine an inner-city apartment:

Elaine: Took me fifteen [fragmented] years to finish. Got kicked out. Took years to get back in. Kept sabotaging myself.

margaret rose: [*to Elaine*] Weird thing, I had this conversation with myself at my other low-rent house cause I was trying to quit. And I was like, F this, I’m outta here. [*turns to her partner*] Love, let’s just move to your community.

tanis: Okay, that’s cool. But where are we gonna live?

margaret rose: [*to Elaine*] There’s already my partner and her one, two, three, three kids plus two grandsons living in a two-bedroom reserve house with inadequate water. And then I’m gonna move my partner, myself, and my son who’s never lived on the reserve before. And then we’re what...?

Elaine: Kumbaya.

margaret rose: Sing pow-wow music. Just braid each other’s hair. No, no, *no* ...

Elaine: And the buffalo are going to appear. And just get a traditional education. And, ya.

margaret rose: [*to Elaine*] It’s going to be grand. Then I was sitting with myself and I’m like, “Why am I doing this? Why didn’t I just do my work?” Maybe cause I’m scared of the next step? What am I really scared of? When I told my partner that I want to move to

the reserve, I'm like, "I wanna be in the trenches! I want to be with the young people! I'm going to save the world!"

tanis: Okay, babe. Let's do this—if that's what you want to do. Okay, that's fine.

margaret rose: [to Elaine] I got my RTW. Everything's set. [long pause] Maybe I don't wanna leave. My academic advisor calls me on my *personal* cell phone ...

Sage: Hey, margaret rose, I really feel like you should appeal this. If you need my help, come see me.

margaret rose: [to Elaine] Then I finally decided to appeal it. In the last couple of hours my academic advisor calls me again.

Sage: Hey, margaret rose. Just checking to see if you got your letter done. If you need any help let me know. Please get your letter in. I don't care what it says. Get something in to me by 4:15.

margaret rose: [to Elaine] So, I didn't know this but my partner *actually* prayed for everything to work out. Cause she doesn't feel safe in her community. [sadly] My partner doesn't feel safe, you know, my partner doesn't want to go back to the reserve. I, on the other hand, have not had that experience. I've lived in the urban inner city my entire life. So, I have a romanticized idea of reserve life.

Elaine: Remind me to tell you about Halifax. The academic *Harlequin Romance* gone awry.

margaret rose: [to Elaine] I ended up getting back into the faculty. I ended up—my loans came through. I ended up acing my summer courses. Mine could've ended up as the academic *Harlequin Rez Romance* gone awry.

What we do not hear about on the higher education landscape, or rarely read about in scholarly literature, is as margaret rose says, "The struggle's real!" She explains that what we also do not hear is that for too many Indigenous students are here "because [they] jumped through hoops to get to where [they] are. First Nations, Intuit, Métis." She asks an important question: "Why should we overgeneralize that as [Indigenous] students, we have a harder time adjusting to this institution and failing classes?" She does not expect a response; we both know the answer. There are dominant, deficit-based narratives specific to Canadian Indigenous students that are unspoken.

margaret rose explains what is not widely understood about poverty-class, Indigenous students: “If you lose your sponsorship,<sup>42</sup> like if you fail more than a couple of classes, you’re done.” I wonder, does “you’re done” have a different meaning for poverty-class students than for students from privilege? For students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty, where do they go if “you’re done?” For now, margaret rose will not have to face the dilemma of having to go back. “I came back to school. I finished my summer courses and all of a sudden a contract position comes up. And, ya, we just [*long pause*] everything worked out. Now we’re living on the westend and we’re safe and we’re not feeling like we’re in poverty. Not really too sure—so ...” She is safe, for now ...

Within this institution  
The work we’re doing in our different little silos  
Within this institution  
Ready to quit my job—  
Only my first week  
“Fuck this shit!”  
“Wait! I need a paycheque”  
“Okay. I’m okay. I don’t wanna be poor!”  
So be nice!

### **Mobility: From the Hill to the Hood**

Ever more grateful  
Ever more humble  
That’s for sure

*Bouncing from place to place* becomes a banal statement in relation to margaret rose’s life—and, life as an undergraduate. At some point, keeping track of how many times she has moved while in university becomes merely a mathematical exercise. It is the relentless, precarious housing she lives in because of unyielding poverty that shapes her undergraduate experiences. Before margaret rose and her partner, tanis, “moved into this really beautiful house” in the middle-class, westend, they were trying to live in a

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<sup>42</sup> There is a dominant narrative that Indigenous students have their way paid; the assumption is they are privileged—on the backs of white taxpayers. This belief is deeply embedded in a *lack* of historical understanding of the reverberations of colonialism and residential schools (Young, 2005).

costly university family residence area. Distantly she says, “I chose to not go on that hill. I didn’t want to die on that hill.” Playfully she recounts, “I was like, ‘Fuck it. Let’s move!’ So my partner got us a house back downtown—right in the heart of the hood.” Let us bounce back a bit.

Prior to moving to the westend, Margaret Rose was living in a “low income apartment” in the inner city. For the first time, she could breathe. “I was comfortable. I was cool. I thought I was going to survive the rest of my degree there, but that’s a whole nother story. So we bounced from the inner city where I absolutely hated it the *first* time, to the southside where I absolutely fell in love with it, but it got to be too expensive, back to the inner city to this ... one floor, two-bedroom, run down ...” It is exhausting to imagine the uprootedness of her life while trying to compose a life in higher education. Margaret Rose says, “I was just like, you know what, ‘I have a home. I’m not going to complain. I’m close to [inner-city youth]. My youth know where I live now. If my youth need me after hours, they can come. I’m an aunty.’<sup>43</sup> You know my heart doesn’t shut off at 6:00pm.” She says, “And I just embraced [being in the inner-city]. I just—*miyasin*, Creator.”

*miyasin*—I’ll get back to you—I’m still learning my Cree—this Cree language. [*miyasin*], *everything is beautiful*. I’m still learning. My dad’s so fluent. He’s like, “My girl, just come home.” I’m like, “Okay dad. Where am I going to live? In your one-bedroom trailer with like an outhouse?” I’m too rotten to revert back to the traditional ways. *margaret rose gladly laughs at herself*.

margaret rose, people say to me, “Why don’t you camp?” Cause on the farm, before we had to move to the village, we had no running water. We had to use an outhouse. Kay. No! Why would I spend money to do that—intentionally? No! *I do not gladly laugh at myself*.

margaret rose’s second stint at boot camp living helped her to draw closely to her partner’s childhood world. Three days in, they were without power. Her son was having none of this; he moved in with his *kokum* (maternal grandmother) down the block. For six weeks, Margaret Rose futilely—mechanically—flicked on light switches, tried to access the internet, and open the dark, barren fridge.

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<sup>43</sup> Margaret Rose explains what an *aunty* is: “Being an Aunty comes with responsibilities—deep ones—ones that help the next generation. One that shares, not expecting anything in return. One who loves unconditionally. One who speaks those truths that need to be heard. In Cree, “aunty” translates to “little mom.”

They lived this way for six weeks; margaret rose never complained; she “just embraced it.” margaret rose did not romanticize this *way of living*. tanis “gently reminded” her that “this is how I grew up. We went to an outhouse. When you were cold, you went and got wood.” I have to interject: neither tanis nor I are one hundred years old. We have common experiences. I shared with margaret rose: “In the winter you peed in an old, big, five gallon oil pail” in a room that was called a *bathroom*. “Everyone bathed in the same tub of water” that doubled for washing large farming equipment grease out of work clothes and cleaning slaughtered chickens.

“And I didn’t have that,” margaret rose readily acknowledges. “So when my partner *spit some truths at me*, I’m like, ‘Thank you babe. Thank you for reminding me to be humble.’ So I embraced all of it. No power. We made it work.” They made it work until there was no water; yet, they were left with a \$900 utilities bill. At this point, they cannot sustain this façade of a way of living. Inner city boot camp living is finished. They have to bounce to another place.

“Luckily, our friend on the westside, I don’t know if you want to call it ‘luckily,’ but she couldn’t afford [her place].... And that’s why I have two sinks and I’m so grateful.” The decision to move to this place was impulsive and driven by instantaneous need. It was based on margaret rose’s romanticized, idyllic notion of middle-class living. Their friend said, “Hey, I need roommates!” margaret rose said, “I’m like, ‘Oh my god, we need to move!’ So we’re moved within two days! Packed up everything. Moved to the westend. We’re co-existing together. She has the downstairs. We’ve got the upstairs. We’re trying to live traditionally. Take care of each other’s kids. Feed each other.” She exhaustedly sighs. “So, that’s how I ended up in such a beautiful home. Thank you Creator. Like I was humble in the inner city. I didn’t complain. And when the opportunity arose to get the fuck out of there, we got the fuck out of there. So ...” margaret rose would lose her two-sink living within weeks and have to bounce once again.

During our final conversation, margaret rose comes back to her two-sinked, westend story. I am perplexed why she has moved again: “I thought it was a good, safe place? Cause you were so excited when we first met?”

“It was a good space and place, but now in retrospect ,when I’m sitting back and really thinking about it [*long pause*] my partner and I were in a very vulnerable moment in our life.” There is a tender silence between us as margaret rose reflects on bouncing and landing in a new place. “My partner and I were in a vulnerable moment in our life. When I met my partner, I was living in affordable housing.”

People taking a shit in the laundry room  
Ya  
Can’t do laundry  
Ya  
People banging needles in the back staircase  
Ya  
But hey, paying \$400 for a two-bedroom apartment  
Utilities included  
Can afford groceries now  
Not going to say, “Fuck ya all.”  
Not going to say fuck all  
Just here with me and my kid

Her partner came into her life and told her, “This is not normal. This is not normal that your son doesn’t feel safe to do his laundry. This is not normal that my niece down the hallway can’t even use the back doorway because people are fucking. This is not normal that there’s used needles in the hallway where we have small children in the building.”

I think to myself: “But it’s \$400 *including* utilities! She can afford to buy food—healthy food!”

margaret rose says reflexively, “And I’m like, okay. I’m really taken aback. I’ve never met anyone who’s been so vocal for what they know is right.” tani started *spitting truths* and asking margaret rose these questions. tansi did not get angry; she sees through a pragmatic and supportive lens. margaret rose explains, “She did not get mad at people for what they were doing. She was them on a human level. She just said, ‘You know what? The struggle’s real. You’re doing what you gotta do to survive. I just need you to be respectful and not do it in this space. If you guys want to sleep in the back doorway at night, by all means. But please, be respectful. We have babies in this building.’” *I struggle to be so gracious and live in such a loving way. But I do not tell margaret rose this.*

margaret rose tells me, her partner tanis, she “really started building for real a community within a community. So then she inspired me. I became friends with my neighbours, which I had never talked to anyone. I had blinders on.” margaret rose had good cause to have blinders on; she says, “I didn’t want to cause any attention because for once in my life I could afford a place by myself. I didn’t have to be with anyone because I had *survival* partnerships for every year I’ve been here.”

Fight or flight  
I fucking flight  
But I flight hard

## **Brazilian Beads**

At the end of our first research conversation, I was feeling a distinct sense of disconnect and loss. I wondered how Margaret Rose felt. I did not ask; I did not know how to ask. Although we pseudo-committed to get together for another research conversation, I wondered at the unspoken truth between us: because of Margaret Rose's precarious housing position, and perpetual struggle to financially and academically survive, nothing was certain. Her life is fraught with profound uncertainty. The space between this present moment, and potential future research conversations, sat as a heavy unknown. I felt the need to give her something that she could physically hold on to. I know that she is facing immense tensions in the life she wants to live—and, the life she is forced to live. I wanted to give her something that would help her remember that there were other students from poverty on this landscape. I wanted to remind her of our time together where we both felt safe to *spit truths*. I do not mean in a, “Oh, you gave me something, so I have to reciprocate” way.

While an undergraduate, I connected with Nessa, a visiting PhD student from Brazil. On a fleeting return visit to the university, she met and gifted me with a wisp of a necklace. Multi coloured beads are threaded around a slip of leather. The honour amazed me. I wore my *Brazilian beads* everyday. I clutched them when I felt vulnerable; I toyed with them when I was happy. The beads were a permanent fixture on my being; the beads are a part of my embodied self. The beads are now a permanent fixture of Margaret Rose's being; the beads are a part of her embodied self.

**A brief research interlude.** I met Margaret Rose at her office and she snuck me some stew. Like juveniles, we madly rushed out of her office before we were caught. We sat outside by the trees and a garbage can over-crowded with beginning-of-the-fall-school-term steaming garbage. Wasps were busily flying everywhere, crowding in on us, looking for food to sustain themselves for the winter. I was busily trying to shoo them away without triggering a raging swarm; Margaret Rose spoke to them in a soft, indistinguishable language. Margaret Rose has exactly thirteen minutes to chat. She is distraught. “Hierarchies in the office. Then there's the top dog. Then there's the other top dog. Then there's the next

under the top, top dog. And then there's the rest of us that are out doing the face-to-face interactions.” This is not what has her riled up in a frenzy. An inner-city youth is struggling in her first week at the university. The student was “feeling extremely triggered and [has] severe anxiety; they were sitting outside of the students’ union building because they didn’t know what to do, didn’t know where to go.” As Margaret Rose is wont to do, when the student reached out to her, she went and “found her, brought her back to the office, [and] introduced her to everyone.” Because of personal experience, Margaret Rose is very attuned to how difficult this landscape can be. She *regifted* to this student what others had *gifted* in support to her.

Margaret Rose strives to live a life where she is a *good aunty* and a *good relative*. This means attending to lives in meaningful ways; she puts lives before tasks, policies, and damaging politics. This bumps up against institutional structure and hierarchy. She explained the significance of the pipe ceremony to the student. She talked about what being a *good relative* means. Her supervisors were focused on Margaret Rose completing her work tasks. In her work space, they publicly chastised and reprimanded Margaret Rose in front of this tender student who needed someone to be wakeful.

Margaret Rose’s emotions ebb and flow between anger and pain. “You made my *niece* feel uncomfortable,” she silently shouted. “You’re making her even question if this is even a space for her now because someone in a position of authority is making me feel inferior and not capable of doing my work,” she soundlessly screamed. She cannot *spit these truths*. She has an unyielding contract and needs the money to survive and finish her degree. I wonder at the vulnerability of Margaret Rose’s position and her instinctively reaching out to help this vulnerable student. This contract position reminds us both of the temporary contractual nature of students’ lives in higher education.

Raggedly sobbing, Margaret Rose says, “Ever since that day [*long pause*] I held it together until I got downtown and saw my partner, and I was telling her this is so upsetting in so many ways.” *The wasps are consuming my forgotten stew*. “I’m trying really hard to be nice and to create this space—and it’s like—the lack of empathy and understanding” on this university landscape. Pulling the *Brazilian beads* from the left

side of her bra, margaret rose says, “So when I told my partner what happened, she suggested I start carrying these beads with me again. She said obviously Elaine gave that to you for a reason so you should start wearing it.” As the tear drops streamed down her face, margaret rose tucked the *Brazilian beads* safely back into the left side of her bra and patted it to make sure the necklace was securely against her heart.

margaret rose did not come back onto the campus for two days after her student-wakeful-moment experience. Before she left the house the morning to return to university, tanis said, “Take those beads with you!” margaret rose has not been without her *Brazilian beads* since this one-sided confrontation. But she tests the beads. When she was challenged for coming back a few minutes late from break, she *spit out a truth* at one of the top echelons: “I can’t exactly interrupt an Elder when I’m in the middle of nourishing my spirit at the Aboriginal Student Services Centre. Excuse me if I need to take an extra five minutes at lunch.” The beads passed the test.



Her supervisor said, “Oh, well, I just don’t want you to get in trouble.”

margaret rose is remembering to breathe. “I swear, ever since I have been carrying these, she just like doesn’t even, there’s no interaction, there’s no her coming into my little bubble. So I’m just like... the beads... hmm ...” margaret rose decides that “Maybe they don’t have such good intentions so just keeping these beads on me and going to go home and smudge super, super hard ...” With infinite humbleness, margaret rose thanks me for sharing the *Brazilian beads*.

*Owasp. Owasp.* “I know that wasp is just after you!”

“Nah, it’s after my delicious stew! I want the recipe for the stew. I’m serious!”

“I’ll inquire ...”

*Break’s over.*

**Temporary lives.** I am left to wonder about this after our waspy interlude. margaret rose is infinitely reflexive. She says, “I think that maybe with my honesty of the fact that I’m only here til December, I think that has offended. I think that space is there forever and that space [where I work] is mine forever. I already knew that day two.”

I am frustrated. “They could have talked to you like you know two adults, three adults.”

“No, it’s not like that,” she says without any spirit.

“And contracts are setup so you feel temporary—temporary means no stability. How can I create a home and a space ...”

margaret rose wants to shape the university landscape in ways that honour all students and help them realize their dreams. She thinks about the legacy she wants to leave as a student and temporary employee. She sheds light on the transience of student life. She makes me wonder, can poverty-class students shape this landscape in visible ways? I share this wonder with margaret rose, in ways that I cannot say outloud to her:

margaret rose, yesterday, when you told me about your friend who has just completed her masters, and whose thesis would be published, you were so happy—and, radiant. The Creator just gifted you the opportunity you have been patiently waiting for. You said your friend asked who this Elaine was. When you explained that I was your *safe person* and about this research project, you said she started to cry. You told me she said it was about time someone started having these conversations. As always, I remain silent. You have become the voice, spreading the word, so students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty can come out of the shadows and margins of the higher education landscape. You are creating safe spaces and community by your courage and willingness to share your journey and wonders.

Our first research conversation is a two-hour, intense, marathon-like experience. I am exhausted. margaret rose is invigorated. She could go for several more kilometres. For her, this is the first time she had talked about how growing up in poverty has shaped her higher education experiences. She took a deep breath and started retelling experiences with a might and force that was awe inspiring in its intensity. There is also a profound silence between us, an unspoken knowing, that I may not see her again. She does not explicitly commit to ongoing research conversations. She cannot afford to.

The campus is dotted with lines of incoming students politely following designated student tour guides in brightly coloured t-shirts. As we walk toward the bus stop, a campus tour for new students piques margaret rose's interest. This student volunteer is leading a rule-abiding line of extremely silent bodies. The tour guide pauses when she sees margaret rose; they awkwardly acknowledge one another. They have a history I do not know about. The uneasiness is markedly on the part of the young tour guide; margaret rose is mischievous. margaret rose is over six-feet tall; her presence cannot be overlooked. This is like an operatic moment that I have seen on television: margaret rose lifts her arms and eyes to the sky. With an opera singer-like voice, delivered the prologue of a life in the making: "Where's my people's voices? Where's my people's histories? Where's my people's poverty histories?"

The group and tour guide met her declaration with an uncomfortable, eyes downcast, toe scuffing the ground, angst. margaret rose is not angry; she is passionate.

### **Disrupting Narratives and Opening up Possibilities**

As we were discussing a shared fear of authority *off* campus, I started to stumble and fumble to ask her about *on* campus. Try as I might, I struggle not to look for confirmation of my own experiences. I am

brought back to why I am using narrative inquiry: the potential for shaping understandings and discovering hidden jewels that can heal and push against dominant narratives surrounding students whose lives are shaped by poverty. I ask Margaret Rose, “Cause—this is where—in school, did you ever, were you ever, fearful of the power of professors?”

She quickly responds, “Oh, ya.” However, on the heels of this response, my question evokes humbleness in the retelling of a different story. Without an *I’ll get back to you* pause, Margaret Rose reminisces about educational experiences that continue to reverberate throughout our conversations. I think of her teachers, the ones that she says, “saw something in her,” as her muses, inspiring her to continue to shape her life in ways that are meaningful to her. Margaret Rose is not a blank canvas who is awaiting a single educator to come forward and save her—or, show her the one true path to some singular story. Nor, do these muses try to shape her into, or encourage her to be, a token Indian with a palatable, colonial rags-to-riches persona. Her life is fragmented and messy. It is the retelling that is so telling. I directly write the following to Margaret Rose into her narrative account:

margaret rose you have taught me much about humbleness; a humbleness that does not come from a place of deficit or disadvantage. I am uncomfortable in making some of your experiences visible; I know you must spit your truths. I want to protect you; I want to prevent you, a Two-Spirit Cree student, or any other poverty-class undergraduate students, from being seen as clichés. I don’t want to further support damaging stereotypes. I wonder if *my* own experiences of being treated as Other because of growing up in poverty has the potential of creating a researcher-patriarchal world on these pages. I wonder if I am being paternalistic? You know I am also a participant in this research project; my own experiences will be included. I wonder what would you make visible about my experiences?

I had to go back to my early narrative inquiry teachings. My teacher that I have spoken often of, Janice Huber, drew me back to Audre Lorde’s writing, at the moment when I needed these words. Lorde (1984) writes, “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood (p. 41). You understand the risk of being bruised or misunderstood when you *spit your truths*. I gather strength from you.

From the first few minutes of our initial research conversation, Margaret Rose wanted to share her experiences. She has always been aware that when she speaks of what is most important to her, often it comes with punishment. When she places tobacco at the base of trees on campus, people stop to stare and

laugh. When she tries to talk about her experiences, beliefs, colonial tensions, and flourishing Indigenous knowledge in classrooms, she is met with ridicule. When she talks about the university culture not being ready for Indigenous students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, she feels the sharp sting of silencing from those who brandish their financial and academic power over her. I must honour the stories she is *giving* me. Margaret Rose, like Lorde (1984), believes in the power of “transformation of silence into language and action” (p. 41).

Personal experience  
Write, write, write  
Hand it in  
Can't bear to read it  
Have someone else read it  
It's like no

I'm done  
I quit  
Whatever

*miyasin*                    everything is good and beautiful  
Draw on the footsteps of ancestors                    of others  
Gather strength                    from the footprints you will leave for youth  
My responsibility                    to make place ready for my  
people  
Trudging along for six years  
I haven't faked it

Be a good relative  
Be a good relative  
Be a good relative

## **I'll Just Go to School**

This is the way it starts  
People caring about us  
Creating safe spaces so we feel comfortable sharing our truths

The first four years of my degree  
I was ashamed  
When I became homeless the first time as a student  
I didn't tell anyone

Staying on a friend's couch  
*You know my boyfriend's coming back*  
*I have a little boy*  
*There's not really any room for you*

Just went to school that day  
No where to go  
*Fuck it. I'll just come to school*

Softly weeping, margaret rose tells me,  
"I went to go see Sage, the coordinator from the TYP program. She wasn't even my advisor anymore."  
*I just went to see her*  
*I just broke down*

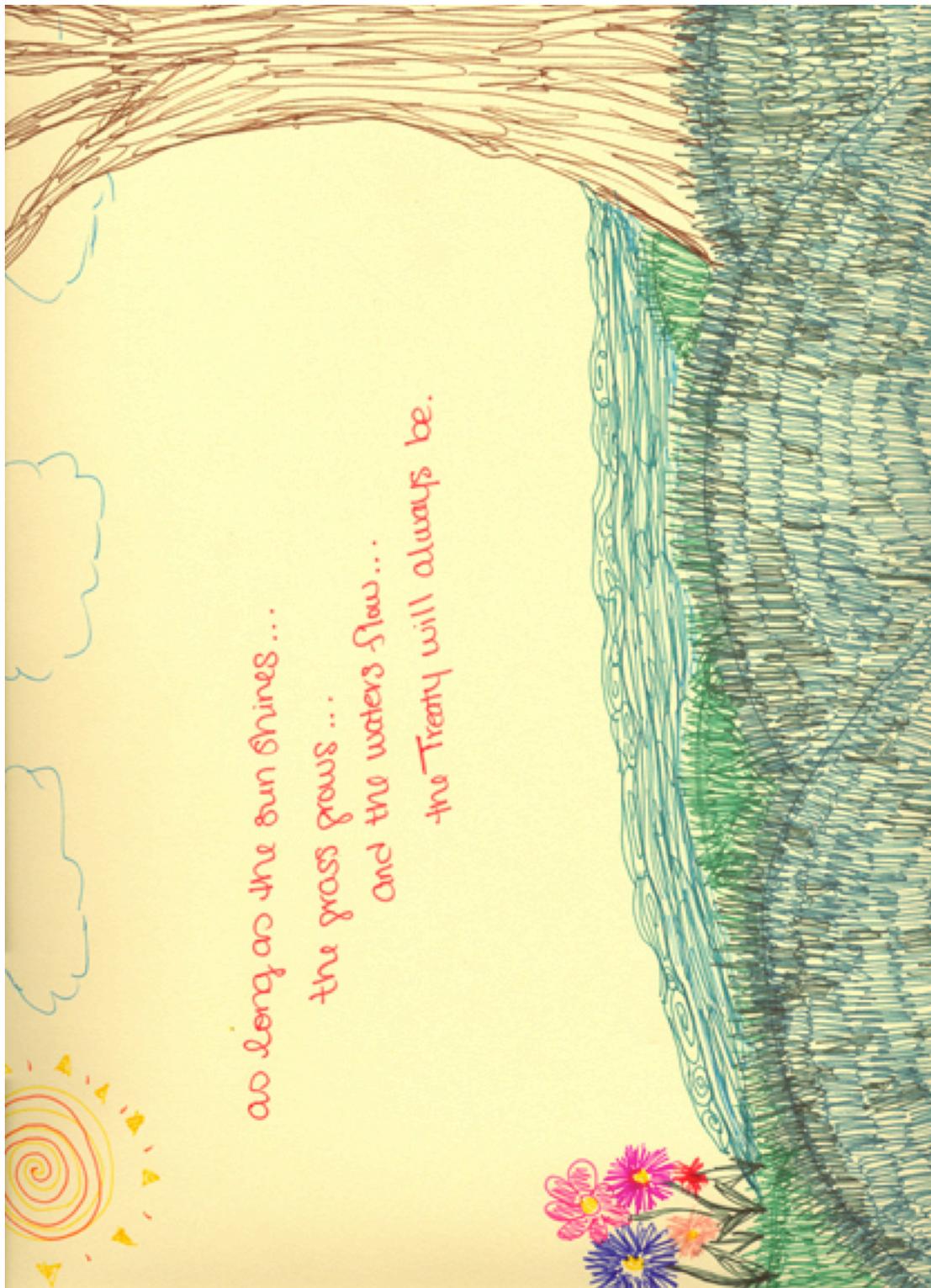
Despair tempered by calm, Sage asks margaret rose, "What's going on?"  
"I don't know what to do."

margaret rose does not tell me what she told the coordinator. I only know she was homeless. That is what she chooses to share with me. "Oh, my goodness, margaret rose. I can set something up with someone [*long pause*] if you feel comfortable disclosing."  
*And I agreed—thankfully*  
*The counsellor helped find room for me*

Sometimes I forget where I come from  
Try really hard to be solid  
Try really hard not to get too emotional

Sometimes remembering—  
Those really hard times  
When I really, really, *really* struggled  
*Compared to now*  
Where I get a paycheque on Thursday  
I'm so excited  
Being able to buy my son new shoes  
And shit that comes so simple  
*For other students*

It's just ...



"Wondering"

*At our final official research conversation, we grazed on supper as Margaret Rose silently drew the chronicle of her education journey. We do not discuss what the image means. We do not need to discuss what it means. It represents the complexity of a life in the making.*

## Weaving Stories Together

“I remember being about eight or nine years old when my Catholic school was having a career fair. Students were encouraged to dress up as what you wanted to be when you ‘grew up.’ I wore my mom’s grad cap and gown from the local college, where she finished her high school degree while my brother and I were in daycare/school. I remember walking around the gym, and someone asking me what I was. I responded, ‘A graduated student.’ Guess this was always my path.”

reading my narrative account

I  
tanis and I  
cried and laughed  
cried again  
healing tears

leveling-up

remembering and reliving these stories  
all that truth I spit  
I feel awakened even more

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### MILDRED IS DREAMING

#### Prologue to Mildred's Narrative Account

I just laugh a little bit  
Just to help me calm down  
I just do that

Mildred<sup>44</sup> determined the topic for each research conversation; she came prepared. Often she started our conversations with, “Let me tell you a story,” or “I have to tell you something that happened!” I came into the midst of Mildred’s undergraduate life when she felt ready to retell and relive experiences—and, awoken to new wonders and possibilities. She asked that I “honour her experiences” through her narrative account. In our time together, many wonders emerged for Mildred.

In what follows, there is great movement between time, place, and social relations. Mildred immigrated to Canada in the latter years of high school. She takes me on a journey from western Africa to Canada and back again. Mildred’s stories lull and flow forwards and backwards. The retelling and reliving of her experiences is chaotic and hectic; ordered and peaceful. At times she struggles to find the words to describe experiences; *how* she retells experiences is as important as the experiences themselves. I was respectful this is the first time she has spoken of her experiences. I do not silence Mildred by hurrying her along or “fixing” her words.

I do not attempt to present her experiences in the narrative structure we are used to in western novels. These are not fixed fragments. Sections transition, interrupt and intertwine to form a part of Mildred’s life in the making. Found poems presented in this narrative account have been created from her research transcripts; “I” in these poems refer to Mildred. Mildred is a profoundly gifted oral experience and knowledge teller. Mildred is dreaming.

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<sup>44</sup> Mildred is the pseudonym that she chose.

## Connecting

June 9, 2016: *Dear Elaine, my name is Mildred. I AM A 6th year ... student.... I noticed the advertisements for your research on the notice boards, and I want to know if you are still recruiting people for the project if so then I am interested because I have an experience of what it means to be in the university, and coming from an impoverished background. Thus, I would like to contribute to your research project and make a difference in the lives of other people who are in the same condition as I have being. Thanks for considering me, and I am looking forward to hearing from you soon.*

A potential second participant! Overeagerly, I email Mildred immediately from my phone:

June 9, 2016: *Dear Mildred. How wonderful to hear from you. I would very much value your participation and sharing of your experiences. Please feel free to email me or text. I'm very much looking forward to meeting when it is convenient for you. Warmest regards. Cheers Elaine.*

A silent week stretches like eternity. I am anxious. I worry that if I follow-up with Mildred I will appear desperate. I convince myself that it is okay to contact her again under the guise of being helpful.

June 13, 2016: *Dear Mildred. I hope all is well. I thought I would pass on a bit more information about this research project. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Cheers Elaine.*

Mildred responds immediately:

June 13, 2016: *Hello Elaine, thanks for the details on the study, I am excited about this research and I cannot wait to meet you. Currently, I am preparing for my final exam on Thursday for a spring class, which I am enrolled into. Please is it possible to meet this Friday? If so please let me know if there is a time and place, which will be convenient for you. Thanks very much for this opportunity.*

June 13, 2016: *Greetings Mildred. Ohhhh I do not miss final exams!! Spring and Summer classes are such a mad dash to the finish line. How quickly they go. Friday is great to meet. I am on campus. I have a meeting from 9 to 10 and am done work at 2:30pm. Would 3pm work for you??? Cheers Elaine.*

June 13, 2016: *Thanks for understanding Elaine. Sure, 3:00 WORKS FOR ME.*

June 13, 2016: *Dear Mildred, Of course I understand!! I am so very deeply grateful that we shall be having research conversations that can shift understandings of how poverty shapes lives. How about in SUB at 3pm on Friday? I can wait by the coffee shop in the food court then we can find a place to chat. Until Friday look after yourself as you study. ☺☺ Feel free to text. Cheers Elaine.*

I can breathe. I have a second participant—hopefully. I try not to get overheated in my excitement:

June 17, 2016: Hi *Mildred*. *I have blue glasses, purple shirt over a green shirt. Black pants ☺. elaine.*

It felt strange that an undergraduate student sees this research as a way to “contribute” to other lives. I was intrigued that Mildred wrote as if she were applying for a job, as if there is the potential she would not be accepted for this narrative inquiry. The recruitment poster stated, “undergraduate students who grew up in poverty.” I wonder how Mildred experienced this poster.

Her emails made me want to meet her beyond a researcher-participant way. How gracious I found her words. Her words were a soothing balm to my overwrought, beginner researcher nerves. I was intrigued by this student and curious to meet her. I wondered what made her feel “excited” about a topic that is personally hard for me. I was deeply drawn to the gentleness I read in her words.

### **Entering a Relational Research Relationship**

June 17, 2016: It is 2:45pm. I am covered in mud, dirt, and snippets of weeds. The knees of my work pants are stretched, baggy, and dirt-worn. Sweat congeals my hair into a haphazard muddle. The searing summer sun leaves tell-tale markings on the underarms of my shirt. These are tired symbols that bear witness to my struggle in transitioning from worker to scholar.

I feel like a walking glue stick. Waiting to meet a research participant for the first time makes me sweat anxiety. There is no time to go home and clean myself up. I have been up since 4:30am. I leave for work at 5:30am. Fuchsia pink toes peek from beneath my scruffy pant legs. I stand anxiously by the railing kitty corner to the coffee kiosk. I can feel myself weaving on my feet from exhaustion.

At this time of the year, there is not the traditional boisterous school term mayhem in the students’ union food court. Sprinklings of spring university students sit in the midst of children visiting on campus for special events. Occupants mill around fast-food kiosks. Children squirm in their seats or scurry between tables in their excitement to be here. Parents do not seem to anxiously hover. They generally sit in groups, sip coffee, and let their children delight in the food court as a playground. I

wonder, do parents feel this space is safe for their roaming children? Is this a treat for children? I wonder how this early experience on the higher education landscape may shape these children's lives.

I watch older workers at less popular food outlets. They shift their weight from foot to foot to relieve the burden of a day spent on their feet. I recognize the pain of idly standing in a required spot for too many hours. The black, rubber fatigue mats doing little to alleviate the ache in their backs and swollen feet. At the end of my workday, my knapsack is a burden against my overheated back. I feel my shirt becoming heavy with moisture. As I wait for Mildred, part of me wants to run; however, I stand firm even though I sway from exhaustion and tension. Relationships are a challenge for me. I am too exhausted to overthink my fear. I wondered who Mildred was. I did know what she looked like. I wondered what she would think of me when she saw my disheveled and sweaty self? How she phrased her emails made her seem very kind. When I worried I thought, "Oh, well. This is poverty research!"

A young woman enters from the far end of the room. She looks directly at me. She smiles as if we know each other. I resist the urge to look over my shoulder to see if she is smiling at someone else. I sense it is Mildred. Our physical distance cannot disguise my appearance. She is dressed very prim and proper, as if she has just come from a church office. Atop her head is a brightly coloured *dhuku* that her slender frame carries as if it is weightless. She glides as if on clouds skimming the marble floor's surface of the students' union building. I cannot feel or see her footsteps. I am mesmerized by the kindness I see in unwavering gaze. To me, watching her approach is like an eternal first glimpse of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. She is stunning—and, a mystery as she advances. She walks as if she learned her posture by balancing books on her head like young girls of English nobility sent to finishing school. When she reaches me, I see her collarbones protrude sharply above the collar of her neatly buttoned-up blouse. Her cheekbones are high and clearly defined. I imagine that my small hands can easily engulf her wrists. Her tall, lanky frame seems malnourished. Mildred walks up to me and hugs me. I can feel her ribs clearly through her top. I worry I shall break her but physical fragility is illusory. "Sorry, I probably smell," I mutter.

"Oh, Lady Elaine! You don't smell!"

I try to rein in my discomfort. Mildred is as excited as the children scurrying in the food court. My face turns red and I shuffle my feet. I resist the urge to lift my arm to face and smell my right underarm to see if Mildred is correct. She engulfs my red worn hands in her long, slender, pianist-like grip. She laughs joyfully at my comment. She shakes my hand but not in that awkward floppy handshake way. Her long, slender fingers encase my hand in a resilient jar-opening grip. A mere thirty seconds has passed in this intense first encounter. I ask if she would like something to eat or drink but she demurely declines. When I meet someone, I decline that I want or need anything. It stems from childhood through adulthood and not wanting to spend money on food outside of a grocery store. Yet, it does not occur to me to say, “It’s my treat.”

Mildred’s poise is no mere accessory nor is it a result of finishing school. Mildred is soft; I am hard-edged. Her voice feels like a refreshing rain; my voice feels like a deafening crash. Mildred glides onto the students’ union sofa with a ballerina grace; she maintains a swan-like motionless aplomb. I plop down on the couch like a grouchy two year old; I squirm and squiggle. Her *dhuku* is a lively mosaic of tradition, feminine strength, wisdom, and fragility. I wonder, what kaleidoscope of stories will she unravel in the coming months?

“I have to tell you, I think I need this more than you do—honestly—because I think I have lived an impoverished life.” Her voice reaches out to me like the tentacles of a warm, gentle breeze. Mildred’s statuesque posture remains in a loosely, highly coiled, poised position on the sofa. I must lean in to hear her barely audible words. Her voice is so soft it feels like reaching out to grasp elusive dandelion fluff that ceaselessly teases your fingertips. Mildred’s voice is tinged with a conspiracy-type playfulness. Her demeanour conveys a miniscule-sized, grain-of-salt excitement: “Let me tell you a story!”

### **The nice-Man**

Mildred’s parents moved her and her siblings to an area in western Africa, in Canadian terms, under low-income housing development. It was a place of relocation. “It was a place where they were building new homes and people who are brought here are the ones building the homes. My parents rented a place there

and that's where we lived." This was not a "real city-city" location; it was not an aspiring upwardly mobile area. It was a mishmash of concrete, one-room boxes with corridors far-reaching enough to house bodies. It was a place of boxed lives under perpetual construction. Mildred and her three siblings occupied the lone bedroom, "because there were many of us, we were kept in that room." Her parents slept in the lanky hallway. Bodies and limbs intertwined, and fumbled and stumbled, during rest and activity.

It was a patchwork community where "some people who were really not bad, like, rich, but okay." It was a community of under- to middle-class families, carving out lives in the sprouting, cement pseudo-suburbia. There were "*okay-people*" Mildred recalls, that were "helpful too." Like the "man who was really, really, *really* nice." People living impoverished lives were not necessarily invisible to him. Perhaps he did not see people in this community, whose lives were shaped by poverty, as the dangerous Other. He did not discount them.

Dewdrop tears fall from Mildred's tremendous, brown eyes, rounded by fraught-filled fear, in the retelling of this man's kindness. Unheeded, droplets make a nourishing path down her cheeks before gently raining down onto her lap. I cannot hear her breathe. I am suspended in her stillness. I do not fill the abyss of silence with nothingness. I wait. I let her tell me her story:

I remember—okay, my little sister got burnt. She [got] hot water [on her] and she has a really, really deep scar [*long pause*] even at the age of eighteen. We wanted to get her for surgery, but that's a whole different thing; we can't do that for her because—yeah, her body's different ...

*Let Mildred tell you her story:*

So there was this man who was really, really, *really* nice. He immediately noticed that my sister had that condition, he needed to take her to the emergency. He was, say, one of the rich guys in the community; he was really, really helpful. Just straightaway, took my sister to the hospital in his car, in his private car, which [they don't do for] poor people mostly. Even here [in Canada], it's like that; rich and poor really, some—it depends. But he was nice; took my sister to the hospital, made sure that the doctors came to attend her immediately because of his status. When you get people like that to go with you to places, it really makes a difference than to go by yourself.

"They have power 'cause they're visible," I whisper with feigned nonchalance. I never tell Mildred I do not want to become intimate with this story. Like a child at Christmas, I wished she would say her sister had tonsillitis. But, I know what is coming. I have lived hard healthcare stories because of poverty. I do not

want to stay close to my experiences. I cannot flee. She cannot stop the retelling. She shares this story neither in a matter-of-fact fashion nor in a run-away-train manner. She is not angry or bitter. Her words roll as gently and beautifully as the rural prairie hillsides I remember from my childhood. She paints a masterpiece.

“Right. That’s what society sees them. And that was really, really nice of him.” The *nice*-man saved her sister’s life. “My mom and dad really wanted to talk to him because he made such a difference.” Mildred’s parents “knew” the *nice*-man; they knew him in that way one recognizes status swirling around a person situated on a prestigious hill—or reduced to the lowest depths of a gutter. In everyday living, they had only inconsequentially crossed paths with the *nice*-man. They were kept strangers by a divide as uncompromising as the cement boxes that marked the community landscape. No one could have imagined that their lives would become intertwined—for that brief moment in time. Nor, could the *nice*-man imagine how this experience would be like the skipping of a stone on the water and reverberate through Mildred’s undergraduate experiences. “You know, my sister could have lost her life at that moment as a kid, and blood coming and all—well, at that time, blood was not coming, but as the skin began to—oh, I couldn’t—oh, I don’t want to talk about that; that was a horrible day, very horrible day, just to see my little sister’s skin coming off. That was a horrible day.”

Her little sister survived. Not all the children that day or the following days survived. Other children, scalded bodies twisted savagely from their tender flesh being ravaged by hot water, perished. The *nice*-man, cloaked in privilege, saw an impoverished child in need, and acted. Visiting her sister in the hospital was painful for Mildred at that age. How she feared that each day upon her visit, the hospital bed would be neatly made with crisp, white linens—and, void of her beloved sister’s body. Her *hope* transcends her agony because the *nice*-man attended to her sister’s life in a meaningful way. I wonder how he storied Mildred’s sister and her family. Did he see Mildred’s sister as more than an impoverished child or a wasteful life? I wonder, did the *nice*-man story Mildred and her siblings as lives in the making? Mildred never storied the *nice*-man as taking pity on her sister and their family. She did not story him as someone who saw her

family as a charity case. Even Mildred understood that the *nice*-man had the power and knowledge to navigate institutions in ways that were inaccessible to her family. She experienced how privilege and poverty both shape lives. The fear of losing her little sister still echoes throughout Mildred's life.

I can face fears I had in childhood  
My past fears  
    Challenges in education  
    Challenges in academics  
        Not something I had control over  
Instances in my childhood  
    And now  
    Landed me the way I am  
    In spirits  
    In education  
    In challenges in life growing up  
Like therapy for me  
    Hands down  
    Let's reflect  
    Put past experiences into perspective  
    Retrospection  
    Put it into  
    Put it into something  
    Not too abstract  
Let us be realistic  
See why I am the way I am right now  
In my life

## **Impoverished Thoughts**

Mildred makes me wonder how space shapes poverty-class students' experiences. In the homes she has lived, cramped boxes with intertwining bodies, there was no breathing room to explore. "You don't really, really know yourself, because you kind of don't have that privacy to reflect on certain things, so you just jumble around and go with the flow."

I am drawn to my early experiences. I would find nooks and crannies away from the chaos. At my great aunty's house, a favourite spot away from the constant chaotic din was a closet at the top of the rickety stairs. I would hide behind the tattered couch. I would sneak out to the loft in the barn. I would snuggle with Genie the dog in the ramshackle tool shed. Any place where I could read my hoarded stash of books that smelled like the old library stacks. Mildred continues, "No reflective time to sit and ponder about things. I think for me, I probably had, trying to see myself or knowing myself and being conscious of who I am, it's because I probably have this idea that my life, it revolved around these people, the environment, the kids I play with, that's who we are."

I wonder about growing up in isolated places where bodies are viewed as homogeneous. I wonder how we imagine different possibilities for lives. "We come from the world of the jungle," Mildred says tongue-in-cheek. "The kids were pretty nice, but it's just that you didn't see anything that would make you question where you come from. You didn't really see anything that would make you question.... Most of the kids in the same area have that kind of class level, so we do the same kind of things. We don't really see beyond our class because we have not been to the other part of it." I wonder how this sameness in social class in geographic place shapes poverty-class undergraduate experiences. I wonder how this isolation of place shapes experiences when students enter onto the middle-class higher education landscape.

Started from here—personally  
Started from here—the bigger society  
Ask really, really big questions  
Those are the questions  
Not everybody will go with you  
Sometimes you're alone  
Sometimes you're alone  
Stand firm

*Like flowers in the breeze*

## Early Childhood School Experience

How I learned about what school means: A place where one gets discipline, but I always had a wandering mind. I was always day-dreaming about how I wished I had his or her ~~to~~ how I yearned to be at a place or with someone other than my own.

My definition of what life as a woman is suppose to be was based on my concept of what my religious belief deemed as right. I had a narrow mind set about my future. Eg: At school when some students (my colleagues) were bold enough to express their opinions and to say what they wanted to be I would not express myself on such topics because my primary social network (Church and home) did not include people who ~~were~~ could become mentors to aspire me in <sup>my</sup> education.

### Aspiration

• Every person needs some aspiration in one form or another in the form direct or indirect aspiration and it can...  
I did not see my future as a university student or graduate because I did not have the privilege of being inspired to desire for a life better than my past because I thought that living a better life is an opportunity for some selected people excluding me.

## Elementary School Experience

School was boring, I had a lot of day dreaming experiences and I still do now. I will day dream about being married and what I will be as a wife and a mom. And oh I sometimes day dream about wise experiences even upto day.

School was boring because my mind was always filled with something different than what the teacher was teaching about. I had a short attention span, I could not focus in class to enjoy the class room material. My day was filled with the <sup>struggle</sup> ~~complexion~~ of focusing in school as well as finding my self and my future in my fantasy imaginations.

My definition of what is important in life was based on prototype of ~~what~~ <sup>others</sup> ~~these who~~ including people who I stood afar to admire and these included teachers, members of our Church and social figures (new presenters, TV guests) hosts and etc). I yearned for the life and of giving someone the care and guidance, in attention which I was looking for which ~~and this would have~~ shaped me a bit different in terms of what I chose to pursue in my undergrad as a Bachelors degree. I may have ended up being a teacher or someone working along students.

## Stories of Silence; Silenced Stories

Can't tell their own story  
Generalizations  
Stories have to be told  
A lot of stories have to be told  
We tell their story  
Easy at a distance

Many wonders swirl around stories that are visible and those that are silenced. I wonder as to the silence of poverty-class students' narratives. Silence itself is a familiar story. I am reminded that I did not write or publicly talk about how growing up in childhood poverty shaped my higher education experiences until this research. I wonder how these silences shape poverty-class students as they are composing lives in higher education. I wonder about silences regarding poverty on familial landscapes. I wonder how Mildred experiences these silences.

“Let's be realistic here and see why I am the way I am right now in my life. I have not really had a chance to talk about it with anybody, not even my parents, because we don't really talk about things like that.” Mildred's words belie the gentleness with which she begins to share her experience. There is no outward anger or resentment. She radiates peacefulness that is not couched in pragmatism. She is sensitive and wakeful, ever attentive that her parents were born into poverty. Mildred is innately reflexive, a reflexivity that is like a whisper carried on the wind. You must listen carefully. Do not read between the lines. She does not disguise meanings. These are not hide-and-seek conversations. These silent conversations between her and her parents have no stillness. Their stories are swathed in the dominant insufficiency narratives of those who live in poverty. They do not speak about poverty at home; Mildred tells me might be because, “they may think, ‘Oh, she's beginning to realize where she comes from’.” Her parents learned to survive a life of want and lack from their parents. Poverty echoes throughout generations.

Suspended

surreal

silence

Pride becomes a mechanism for distancing from inequalities. “It’s like pride: you have a pride that you can do everything by yourself and with all that you have, but you don’t have much by yourself. You have much with people. You have much working with others. You have much with accepting yourself and seeing yourself as not really capable, but also capable ...” These are bountiful silent and competing poverty narrative tensions. Mildred expresses a compelling argument for community. Yet, she tells a story about higher education communities that exclude poverty-class students unless they have a pride that silences their unique experiences. She wonders if her “parents may feel like, ‘She doesn’t have the strength and the courage to accommodate what she may have.’” This is the first time she has broken the silence.

“You’re making me think of silences.”

“Right!”

“Lots of silences with lots of tension.”

“I have been very silent, too, in line with this [*abrupt switch*] I have a twin sister, by the way! .... [My sister] knows I am a person who likes justice and I’m interested in helping others, encouraging other people because of my experience, because—she and I are very, very close; we know every detail of each other’s life, not like.... We like to really encourage each other because we know each other very well. She was telling me that, ‘You, Mildred, I know that you’re going to go into nursing and also go higher from there.’ She was telling me about how I could impact other people’s life in sociology; she knows that in nursing ... there are different fields of nursing—whatever, I don’t know, but she said, ‘Whatever you’re saying makes sense to me,’ because she knows me well. I get my encouragement and support from her.” Without warning, again the conversation shifts. I allow myself to be moved along with the ebb and flow of Mildred’s retelling and reliving.

Mildred also learned about silence on early education and community landscapes from her parents also. She tells me, “When we were growing up—where we lived and you’re hyperactive—I was—my sister and I were very hyperactive, we were very outspoken. Always we asked them questions: ‘So why did you do that?’ and ‘Why, why, why, why.’ Sometimes my parents got a bit embarrassed that we were

both kids who were not normal like other kids, average kids, so they thought we were bad kids, and so we need to be silenced” in order to be silent and invisible. Her parents did not see Mildred as a bad kid in a bad-child way. Rather, their children being invisible made them safe through conformity in their underclass communities. I wonder about inquisitiveness, play and wonder in homes under distress from poverty. I wonder how this may diverge from homes where this type of distress is not present. I wonder how the distress of everyday survival silences children and shapes educational experiences.

Once Mildred’s parents immigrated to Canada, leaving their young children behind in western Africa with family members, Mildred learned to silence *why*-Mildred because she had “nobody to talk to.” Silence became a way she protected herself from harm in a relative’s home in western Africa. Out of necessity, *why*-Mildred became a worker in this house. There was no room to ask lofty *why, why, why* questions; yet, these questions only lay dormant in Mildred. *why*-Mildred poked her head up after an experience in a sociology class.

A graduate student came to share with the class how growing up in poverty shaped his education experiences. Mildred recalls, “At the moment when he was talking, I was getting relieved. I was beginning to feel welcomed into the university system. There was something in me that’ll come out. There was something that I have to try to find about myself to work on, because this man has made it to that level. And I think it was the time I had seen him in the library. I wanted to go and talk to him. I was, like, ‘I’m not going to talk to him. He may not even remember me.’” As Mildred retold and relived this experience, I realized I knew who she was talking about. Gerry would have sat with Mildred and talked. He would have followed up and offered to mentor her. Because of Gerry’s own experiences, he is supportive of students. Gerry was my mentor in the last year of my after-degree to help me transition to graduate school. Mildred did the unexpected: “I sent him an email and told him everything about how I felt and how he’s been helpful and all of that.” Gerry emailed her back. This was an experience from two years ago that is alive in her today. “I was so excited just being able to email him and say thank you that he came to present in class on that day. It was very, very, *very* helpful getting to know that somebody else

understands, somebody else who has gotten there has also been through challenges or failing—even though he may have felt that he didn't belong there too, he never gave up. That's what I'm looking forward to—to never give up." This experience sustains her. Gerry had the courage to share a story that is silent on the higher education landscape. I wonder how this type of experience and conversation can shape experience. I wonder how these conversations can sustain students?

### **Playing with Building Blocks**

Growing up in poverty, and for a large portion of her life separated from her parents, Mildred "didn't have the things you would play with" to learn. Like Legos. This shapes her higher education experiences in troubling ways. It is on the higher education landscape that Mildred seeks to put together a learning puzzle. She tirelessly works to weave pieces of knowledge into larger connections. I ask, "What's been your biggest challenge in university in how you think and study because of growing up in poverty?"

"How I learn, how I receive the material, and how I go about explaining things to myself." She wonders, "How do I teach myself this?" We share this experience. I too struggle with how to study and how to learn. I have learned *tricks* along the way but do not know if any of my strategies are *the* right or best way to learn. Mildred says, "When you come from a place or an environment that is enriched with learning tools or, people who have been in school, or maybe are aware of education and skills you would need as you go higher in school, you find it easier to learn, I think, because you have been in an environment, you have adapted to it, and it's easier to adapt to other higher levels of learning." For both of us, parental figures taught us to cook, clean, earn money, and survive. Our parental figures grew up in poverty and did not have access to formal education. As such, these learning tools and styles are foreign. Mildred says, "I didn't have [an environment to learn academically]. I didn't have the things you would play with." Play was work in Mildred's world. "I never had Legos.... Like some simple things that would help you to have a higher level of cognition. I don't know if that makes sense, but to assimilate things. You know, assimilate concepts and connecting things, that was a bit—very challenging." Yes, it makes sense to me. Play was work for me as well when I was a child.

Mildred continues: “I didn’t know, like I said, Lego, you put things together. So I didn’t have that foundation, so it is a bit challenging when I go to class and receive the material. I was trying to see the subject matter abstractly; I was not able to connect” ideas. When teachers say, “Okay, this topic is related to the next topic, I would be left wondering how this is related to that.” Lately, however, Mildred has started making connections and finds it “makes it fun when you begin to ask yourself these questions and go through that and really answer them.” She brightens and says, “You feel like, ‘I’m learning here. I’m contributing to my knowledge. I’m throwing myself at something that is real.’ I feel more confident about it. So it has been a journey.” While she still struggles to tell a teacher she does not understand something, she more clearly sees how her undergraduate experiences were shaped on early education and familial landscapes.

English is not her first language and also shapes Mildred’s undergraduate experiences. She is not always able to capture the nuances of English-based class lectures, in-class group conversations, note taking, Canadian metaphorical references, and assigned readings. I recall Mildred retelling an experience and being in awe of her oral storytelling ability. She is adept at navigating and articulating the complexities of social structures to intergenerational kinship reverberations to postmodern theory— orally; pen to paper is a challenge. I have watched as her pen confidently hovers above the page, the tip never quite making contact. Although *why*-Mildred rarely speaks out and says, “Hey, Lady Elaine, please explain what you mean,” I became wakeful for barely visible tell-tale (that I can hardly articulate) signs that I was communicating in ways that silenced and excluded Mildred. I wonder about the complexity of experiences and understandings that shape Mildred’s signature research conversation opening: “I have to tell you a story ...”

### **Dreaming a Way Forward**

“I had a dream this week,” Mildred says at the beginning of a conversation. A few years ago, I might have missed (or dismissed) dreams we have in sleep as important in research. I shift my understanding to the potential of subjective data to take many forms. Mildred tells me that her twin sister has “dreams about

me—and we—take dreams very seriously, both she and I.” Mildred has been waiting for days to share this dream. Unlike her twin, Mildred does not journal. “My sister *loves* her journaling. My sister *loves* to journal.... I know I’ll get there. I know I’ll get there. I have a book for journaling—barely written it, barely. Well, maybe seven pages so far.” As if an expert, I say, “It’s probably like exercise. It takes three months for it to become a habit.” Mildred had a dream about her early childhood education experiences (the dream is in italics; her reflection is not italicized):

*It was probably one of my junior high school in western Africa. I think it was one of the public schools I started into. In the dream I was telling the teacher, sometimes there are some things that are self-conscious, maybe it’s because of some of the things I have talked about” in our conversations. “Things you cannot think about along the way, during the week or sometime. In the dream, I saw the teacher. I was a grown woman. I was telling her—A teacher, like a teacher in a classroom. She probably wasn’t my teacher. Maybe she was a new teacher in the school. But it’s a school I know I had been to. It was a familiar environment. So I walked into the classroom and told this teacher I need to get her to sign something for me or prove something for me because I’m going to write a book or present something to kids, who are coming from impoverished places, who do not talk in class.*

[Kids from poverty] are looked down as timid. I was the kind of kid people looked at as timid. When I talk and ask questions it’s normal kinds of questions that normal kids wouldn’t ask.

*I had this teacher and I was telling her she has to sign for these kids who are impoverished. They need to be told they are good and can do it. They are smart, not timid. We need to inspire them. I wanted to empower them.*

I think I felt I was a bit surprised that it was in that school I had gone to. I wasn’t expecting it to be that school. That school is in the other town I was born in. I was expecting it to be in the city where I spent most of my higher education in western Africa.

When I woke up and I was thinking about it, it could never be that school. I would never want to go back to that school. Because the teachers there were—I don’t know. They didn’t really have hope in me. They felt more like [*long pause*] I feel [*long pause*] I feel I have the shameful parts of going there in terms of how people viewed me: she’s lazy, she doesn’t listen, she doesn’t talk much in class but also in class she talks too much, she’s trying to act like an Elder of the students, trying to act like an Elder. It makes me feel that people there, they were more common for sure, going to school there was not the best place to be discussing who wasn’t that strong academically. Who would be like, “Oh, another day of school. I have to go and they will give me some knocks on the head or something for not getting some mental questions correct or anything. Ya.

This school could be one of many of the schools that Mildred attended in western Africa or Canada as a child. Perhaps this school is the university she is currently attending. I wonder who Mildred is in her dream? Is she the child- or adult-Mildred? I wonder who these children are Mildred is speaking to the teacher about in her dream? Over the months we are alongside one another, Mildred speaks about

the importance of helping others. She dreams of returning to western Africa as a healthcare practitioner to support others.

Mildred's twin has "had a couple of dreams that really have been empowering." Her twin shared with her a recurring dream: "I had this dream, and you and I were nurses, and you and I were doing this for people, and people were excited and happy to see us, happy to have us on their team." This gives Mildred hope: "It makes me feel like there is hope for me. You know, I'm not really done because I'm going to an academic warning, academic challenge. That's not the end of it. Things will get better."

Mildred and her twin sister "take dreams very seriously."

"And dreams are important," I say. "In the Aboriginal culture, dreams are incredibly powerful and important sources of information and knowledge."

"I will definitely incorporate [that] into writing. Because [my twin] told me that when you have things that are burning in your heart and you have dreams about it, write about it, because when they come to pass, then you'll know."

Dreams are a way to learn, grow—and, wonder—in a safe space.

### **A Malnourished Frame: Embodied Experiences**

Mildred tells me, "The past really has an effect on you. I will tell you a little bit about my family." Mildred comes from intergenerational poverty. How far back the generations go we do not discuss. Many lives were old before their time; many lives perished prematurely from poverty. Mildred and her twin sister are first-generation university students who immigrated from western Africa as high school-aged children. Mildred says they have "had quite a bit of experiences of life." The entire family is here together but they did not arrive together. Lives were broken apart and lived separately in the journey to the Canadian *hopeland*. Mildred lives in the fringes: home is western Africa; western Africa is no longer her home; Canada is still a home in the making. Mildred shifts to early educational experiences back *home*.

Mildred's early education experiences are embedded in her parents' education experiences.

"Growing up in [western Africa] was very challenging, because you come from an impoverished home,

and mostly, people in [the area we lived] who are rich are the ones who go to school, because [in Western Africa] you don't get student loans, grants, or other stuff that other students get here.... So you get the support here, but back home, you don't get the support." I often wonder how someone so young can "world'-travel" with such boundless worldliness (Lugones, 1987). With *loving perception*, she unexpectedly teaches me to push the boundaries of the normative (economic) definition of poverty (Lugones, 1987). She exposes the inherent inequalities embedded in education and how these inequities reverberate across lives and generations. Mildred storied her parents with *loving perception* for most of her life; I storied my mother with *arrogant perception* for most of my life (Lugones, 1987). Mildred sees hope through a delicate lens; I see hope through a coarse lens.

Her parents, "they really, really, *really* have had challenges in life because of a lack of knowledge or education, credentials, working in places that other people who have much higher levels in life have been privileged to." Mildred does not tell me this from a place of pity nor does she re-victimize her parents. "So, they come from an impoverished place, really, really impoverished." Mildred's *really, really* and *really*, and *really, really* are more powerful than any adjectives that I can salt-and-pepper her narrative account with. "It's been a struggle for them to get to where they are right now, and right now, it's not even the easiest." Mildred does not embellish. Like her visual depiction of her education journey, her retelling of experiences often has a scientific precision. The meagreness of description is potent and sustains me as I try to travel to her parents' world. "Because when you come from an impoverished place, you also lack knowledge, and that kind of knowledge actually prevents you from digging further into things—from reflecting into things." Mildred makes me wonder about not having the breathing room to question—to ask *why, why, why*—and, how we accept our lot in life and the stories we hear about ourselves from those with the power to tell our stories. Mildred supports her thoughts with experiences.

"When you're told, for example, you believe in—excuse me to say—interested, but I believe in God. So if people who believe in God ..." A thorny, drawn out, uncertain pause ensues. Mildred is battling rivalling beliefs, lived experiences, folklore, parental respect, and Christian ideologies. Dare she speak her

next words? I understand her fear: she was taught on early education, community, and familial landscapes to silence her wonders. “Take—how am I going to say this—there’s some people who believe in God and [who] do not really have a certain level of knowledge or certain level of, I don’t want to say intelligence, because they are [*long pause*] intelligent, but a certain level of—aspiration to [reflect upon] what you’ve been told. They have belief in God, but also they have this idea [about what] Christians do not do, and that and that .... Especially in my religion—like, I’m a Christian, but also they say—my dad has this idea that when a woman menstruates, she doesn’t have to touch things in the house ...”

She picks up steam. “So unrealistic kind of theology and beliefs—you know, things that do not really help you to improve in life, those are the things that they have sometimes held onto, because from their perspective, God has been protecting them.” She is losing steam. She respects how their lives and beliefs have been shaped. She says, “I can see why they hang onto” these beliefs. Yes, Mildred and her parents “believe God” protects them. However, she is quick to make clear to me that an unquestioning belief in any ideology is not enough for her. She worries because her parents cannot see outside their Christian and traditional beliefs. It is distressing to her that “they can’t see beyond” this and worries that “they’re enclosed in that” cement box. Early on in her life, many kept trying to shoo, and at times forcibly push, Mildred back into the cement box. She was supposed to know and keep her place. She really tried to adhere to this type of obedience, with more and less success. Mildred picks up steam again.

I say, “They haven’t had the opportunity to learn to critically think or challenge,” I respond. I am thinking about my own family. I am wondering about what beliefs they could *afford*.

Mildred responds: “Exactly. That’s it—that’s it! That’s what I’m looking for. That’s why I say intelligence, not that they’re not intelligent, but they can’t really critically analyze things. So me coming to university, that has been a bit of a challenge, because coming from an environment where you don’t really have the opportunity to critically think, because children, they’ve been [isolated] at home” with isolated understandings. “So, if you begin to be a critically thinking [person] about things.... So I didn’t have that, and [this lack] has been a struggle.” The struggle continues in her undergraduate studies where she rarely

has the opportunity to critically think and write. These opportunities might be so impactful to her inquiring mind and fragile self on the higher education landscape. Her early malnourished education is not a result of parental failing. It is a result of education inequity and social inequity. I, too, understand this. I was born into a world where inquisitiveness did not put food on the table; curiosity made you noticeable; therefore, visibility was not a welcome attribute. Mildred was taught to dim the brightness of her inquiring mind, to accept that her birth was the beginning and the end. Mildred's struggle (to push back against childhood education experiences) and to learn to illuminate her wonders has made her higher education journey strewn with punishing dangers. "As I'm talking to you right now, I have an academic appeal." A faceless, form-letter arrived in the mail informing Mildred she is on academic probation. The higher education landscape becomes more treacherous.

As Mildred shares her experiences, and her current situation, I feel my hot, bitter breath hissing out from stressed-worn, jagged teeth tat-tat-tatting against one another. To rein in my impulsive need to race onto the academic battlefield to be her gladiator, I clench my jaw until my body vibrates with a shivering cold. My temples throb with a blinding, screaming force. I embrace my physical pain; I wrap it around my heart. For a whisper of a moment, I can elevate myself from my own discomfiting, lonely, and confusing undergraduate experiences. Mildred is a serene body of water where I see the reflection of my own undergraduate self. I struggle to maintain my gaze. The image begins to ripple.

I want to rail against the injustice Mildred experiences. Does anyone stop long enough to wonder how this affects students? Does anyone stop long enough to ask what is shaping a student's grades before sending out the form letter? Yet, the letter is personalized: it includes the student's name and identification number. It does not say that the student from here on in will be branded with infamy (Adair, 2001). Yet, I do not go on a rant. I know that I do not have the courage to confront institutional injustice for myself. I, too, am forever branded by my transcript infamy.

(From my field notes, October 10, 2016)

"I've had quite a bit of a battle with my emotions and my health.... I am underweight right now as you can see." Mildred laughs her hushed, self-deprecating laugh.

"No, I just thought you were tiny!"

“That’s a nice way to put it!” she says with a gentle, sardonic irony and appreciation. “My family doctor, I have talked to him, he’s a bit concerned about my weight.” The stress she lugs from trying to compose a life on this landscape while navigating her home landscape seems exhausting. “I find it really hard to eat sometimes because I feel like I’m tired. I’m always fatigued. I don’t know. I don’t sleep well, especially after the last two semesters. I have [not been] myself, not eating well, not sleeping well. It’s a bit of a hassle.” I think Mildred just nailed the art of understatement. What I will learn later on is that this is a miniscule part of the story. Mildred and her family are financially distressed. If she forgets her food at home, she has two options: (1) Go hungry, or (2) Take the bus home, pick up her food, and try to make it back to class on time. Most often she chooses option one. If she forgets her water bottle, she makes do with sips of water from fountains.

She tells me that once a semester she treats herself at her favourite sandwich shop. I marvel at this in order to distance myself from my own lingering, fretful experiences with food.

I feel that people who have good health are privileged  
You eat well  
You take the right things at the right time  
The body's functioning well  
You can think properly  
    Mentally  
    Academically  
These things really have an effect on your academics  
    If you're not eating well  
    Not sleeping well  
Those things promote your well-being  
Your body functions like a machine  
Taking care of this machine  
    The better you're going to be with whatever function  
    It has to do  
I didn't understand that  
I sat through first-year psychology  
    Learning all these things  
It just went *whew whew*  
With experience—  
    It added a lot of value to what I learned  
    Without experience  
    I would probably not understand it  
    There would be no value

## The Student ID

*Let me tell you Mildred's story.* Mildred is reduced to a student identification number. Ever blackening thunderclouds are forming overhead. She constantly worries when some anonymous force will strike her, driving her off this educational landscape where she tirelessly works to create a home. She had no safe place to run for cover, until we met. I say causally, as if she had not received the RTW-letter prior to our first research conversation, "So, what's happening with the academic appeal?"

"I submitted a letter last Friday." The last two semesters have ravaged her like scalding water.

I tell Mildred, "I perfected the double F! You can't tell me anything that's going to surprise me!" I surprise myself with the ease of which I share this. "I got kicked out of university in 1994. I committed an academic crime to which there is no pardon. I struggle to be on this landscape. In my second semester, I received an anonymous, no potential reprieve, *Required-to-Withdraw* letter."

"You know what, I think this is a very good experience." No, Mildred is not being facetious. I fail to see any learning lesson. Mildred is hopeful and sensible. She tells me that this experience will make me "more well constructed by [my] experiences.... In the future, you wouldn't have that much of a choice, because you see yourself doing better. You don't let experience set you back, because you've been through it."

*Let me tell you a story:* I am the same age as Mildred's mother. I chuckle about this.

"Cause they're just numbers on a piece of paper. They don't have to define you," I say with pint-sized conviction.

With an academic storm whipping around Mildred, she still feels excited by possibilities. She does not see herself as a research participant who will divest herself of a few experiences; Mildred is invested in this narrative inquiry. Mildred says, "I'm really excited for you; I'm really, really excited for you. And knowing that you're working with people in that way you can relate to it, it's so ..."

Mildred continues: "I think you could fall apart, because you need people to support you, you need people to encourage you."

I say, “Some of these are tough, hard conversations, they’re hard stories, they’re hard experiences.”

Mildred responds, “Definitely. That’s why I said it’s a good thing for me, because I’m going through like a therapy is how I see this right now, because I’ve not really had a chance to talk to anybody.” How our experiences intertwine! Our conversations give us forward-looking stories.

### **An Academic Stay**

Who says I shouldn’t be here because I failed a class  
I failed three classes  
I failed whatever  
Nobody’s a bum  
What’s keeping them at this place?  
Don’t pull my hair  
No, you need to understand  
Answering for me  
Missing quite a bit  
Hunger in my eyes  
Not at peace  
Give me the opportunity to say something

In order to receive a stay, an illegible scrawl at the bottom of the official university *required-to-withdraw* letter gave Mildred a last chance to explain her academic predicament. “They’re trying to give me an option to explain why I have those low GPAs.... I had a couple of academic warning[s] in my first year, second year, and I came through them very successfully. But I think at this point, I’m at a point of finishing in school and I’m making decisions of what I want to do with my life.” Mildred is seeing a life beyond academic probation and protracted undergraduate studies. To maintain her seat, without protection, she must expose herself to the institution’s frigid elements. Who will judge her experiences? She *imagines* writing to her department’s dean to explain why she is struggling: “I had a bit of a challenge reflecting on my capabilities and believing in myself that I could do [this and] what I couldn’t do.” I am drawn to the stories I told as a child to mitigate real or imagined punishment on education and familial landscapes. Simultaneously, I think about the letters I have written for low-income student funding. I am brought back to explaining why I needed this or that to survive. I carry shame; Mildred carries a

pragmatic hope. I wonder, how shall she foreground her academic experiences to the associate dean while protecting herself?

poverty behind your mind

At the time, I did not ask Mildred for the letter she sent. I felt it would be too invasive. Perhaps I was avoiding the issue to keep myself at a distance from my own experiences. Rather, I imagined a page being torn out of a colouring book filled with uniform shapes. She starts from a pseudo-blank canvas. Mildred has a box bursting with supplies to create a life-in-the-making justification for her continuing existence on this higher education landscape. The ambiguity of what “they” want to see, and what reason/s are valid, makes her hand quiver as she reaches out to the mosaic of silenced personal experiences, dominant institutional narratives, and how her department and the registrar story her. Shall she colour within, or outside of, the lines? With a fine hand, I imagine Mildred sketching, within the margins, her “unsatisfactory” GPA story with a 0.3mm lead mechanical precision. Her account is coloured with the finest of easily erased grey lines. With a barely discernable whoosh of her hand, and a painstaking remoteness, Mildred illustrates how her undergraduate experiences have been shaped by childhood poverty.

“I think I’ve had a very challenging experience believing in myself, having faith in myself that I can also be somebody who would be impactful in society, somebody who can make a difference in other people’s lives. Maybe I haven’t really seen that [*long pause*] my—well, I have parents who have impacted me in other ways, but I’m seeing that.... I didn’t really see myself [here or] there, because I think, well, I don’t belong [here or] there.” Like tangled yarn, Mildred seeks to unravel her intertwined identities. “I’m not—someone told me that there are places that if people are well educated, people who are well off, then naturally, people will respect it in society. I’m told it matters. So it’s been quite a bit of a challenge to see myself going higher.” It is a challenge to move beyond the cement boxes that have shaped Mildred’s life. Yet, she has an acute sense of hearing. She can hear beyond the everyday chaotic and turbulent sounds of

bodies crammed into childhood places of survival. Mildred says, “I’m sitting back [and thinking about] experiences and other encouraging messages. A couple of other women that I’ve been really into on YouTube watching TEDTalks and other things that have empowered me to feel like you are also capable of going somewhere in your life, you are also capable of ...”

At the moment of writing this section of Mildred’s narrative account, I reach out to her via text message: “Would you be comfortable sending me the letter you wrote?”

Mildred texts me immediately: “Ok, I will forward it to you. Is that fine?”

“That will be so helpful and appreciated,” I respond with trepidation. A few minutes later Mildred sends me a text, “Hello Elaine. I just sent you the letter [via email] ☺.” In the letter to the associate dean, Mildred explains that her GPA has suffered from her physical health, left unattended for too long, and how it has caused “feeling[s] of loneliness and a sense of shame about my medical condition, and my mental state ... therefore, I ask to be allowed back into the program and that the requirement of withdraw be reconsidered under the condition of academic warning as I am seeking treatment and help for my mental and health conditions which I did not seek for in the previous semesters.” I weep as I write. My tears disfigure the transcript pages. The word *loneliness* resonates for me in painful ways and draws me to many experiences of exclusion and aloneness. While we have talked about her physical health, Mildred did not mention how this echoes throughout her undergraduate experiences. *Loneliness*. It is a word populated with multiple meanings and deeply felt feeling. I ask Mildred if this was hard to write. “Hmm, not [to] worry.” In a research conversation, I said to Mildred, “Our stories aren’t finished.” Like a long-married couple, she finishes my thought, “As long as we’re living, as long as we’re going to be trying to survive to make life better, our stories are going to be continuing until we are—no more.” I smile an “I want to be a *hugely brave*—Mildred” smile. Mildred does not look away from the water’s ripples. She skips another stone.

I was confused—that's it  
I was just confused with my undergrad  
I'm still an undergrad  
I wasn't treading water  
I don't know what I was doing  
You can define it

*You name it*

## Who Am I?

I am a person who sees myself to be defined by so many factors and conditions. This is not because I am not sure of who I am as it was in the past. However we humans live in societies that are rounded around "DYNAMISM" (changes) therefore we are prone to change.

I grew in an environment where people were made to believe that they have to accept whatever comes their way in life; there was no challenging circumstances in this sense: For example people were not allowed push to go out of their comfort zones or their limits to excel in life. What I am trying to say is that I learned helplessness at a very young age. ~~that~~

You see when you develop this attitude everything that life challenges you with becomes a stumbling block which you feel it is insurmountable, but from my experience in this world for 27 years it is not so. (The challenges are for just a short while have are many happy days ahead.)

We (humans) are made for a purpose and we can do everything we purposed for and this purpose is connected to our desires and passions in life.

"Dynamism"

A part of Mildred's education chronicle. She continued to explore, throughout our research relationship, how her life is shaped by childhood poverty and shifts in her understanding of who she is and can become

## Good Girls

Mildred takes me back to her early childhood experiences, to a time when she was vivacious. I squint my eyes to try to see this vision of Mildred, which is cleverly hidden in an image that obscures. I think I can see it in her playfulness, in our conversations, in her simmering curiosity, and in her barely restrained passion. In a subdued manner, she tells me, “When I was growing up, I was this kind of very hyper kid, so very, *very* hyperactive. Very outspoken, not shy. I always demanded some sort of justice, and I always told people, [even who did not respect me]... I respect you. But somehow, people back home thought I was [bad], because they [thought], “That kid is very wild. She’s not toned down. She’s on top of the world. Kid’s don’t do that.’.”

“What does a good kid look like?”

“Back home, a good kid is somebody who doesn’t talk when an adult talks. A good kid is someone who always uses the word *please*, who respects people and respects ...” Mildred laughs ironically; there is a struggle going on inside Mildred. “And also a good kid is somebody who does not really ask a lot of questions.” In our time together, I learn that these beliefs deeply shape Mildred’s higher education experiences—and, GPA. Her desire to vocally question and wonder vibrates like the ground around a volcano on the cusp of erupting. She does not let loose her inquisitiveness.

“What does a good *girl* look like?”

“A good girl—okay, so we’re talking about girls—it depends on the age. So a good girl as a teenager would be somebody who is not really hyperactive, not sexually active, not somebody who exposes her body.... Very quiet, gentle, does not question that much, doesn’t scream at the top of her voice—which ladies normally don’t do—ladies are not [*long pause*] screaming out their voice when they’re angry and all of that,” she says with well-heeled emotionlessness.

“Maybe we should,” I sarcastically say, supported by a sister-like, well-endowed smirk.

Mildred laughs delightedly but cautions, “You can do that in your home!”

Good girls can marry up—or, out. Mildred and I both learned this from familial female elders. Mildred says she “feels a little bit angry towards” her mother. As a child—and adult—Mildred wanted to rail at her mother: “Why did [you] get married so young? [You] were not ready for it!” Mildred reflects on her mother’s life: “Her mom had died so she didn’t have any real model as a mother to mentor her and be a mother.... I think it was poverty. She needed someone to feed her. She needed to get out of the” overcrowded, malnourished childhood home. My mother and great aunty faced similar situations. Higher education was not something they could have imagined. They had to marry out of poverty; but, like Mildred’s mom, they were only able to make a lateral move.

I chose Mildred as my pseudonym  
A character in a senior high school drama  
She was the kind anyone could pick on  
She never retaliated when she was shoved around  
I thought she was a good girl

## Learning through the Radio Waves

I am drawn to *how* Mildred tells and retells her experiences. To distance herself from hard stories, intermittently she says, “They experienced ... they were poor ... the poor kids ...” Mildred relates her experiences through and alongside the stories of others: teachers, family, community members, media personalities and *imagined Others*. This is a way to relate her experiences safely from afar. At times, she speaks directly of her own experiences. At times, Mildred and other people’s stories become intertwined. I must be still and listen.

Young Mildred, perhaps five or six years old, sat mesmerized as a journalist-turned-television host entered into her life through the radio waves. Mildred says she has *known* Abal, the female host of a western African daytime talk show, for twenty years now. “She has made a huge victory, from my perspective. She used to present news, and now, she is talking about people’s life experiences ... mostly her theme is empowering women—and, she’s been talking about issues that society doesn’t really address, like talking about sex with young girls, which we don’t talk about back home; parents are shy to do that.” Through the airwaves, Mildred formed a bond with Abal. She found a person who has the power to talk about experiences young Mildred could not. Abal has a platform to talk about difficult subjects; young Mildred did not have a platform to speak of her experiences. “She has really, really helped me a lot; very, very much—a lot.” Abal “has had a bit of a challenge; people really, really give her [a hard time]. It took a lot of time before she got to this point of marrying.... I’ll tell you about that story later on. But now to focus on [her husband].” We do not come back to Abal’s story. Rather, Mildred weaves her own experiences with her understandings of Abal’s husband. Through him, Mildred gives me a morsel of her understanding of the young and contemporary Mildred.

Mildred is drawn to Abal’s husband, James’ experiences: “Coming with having that kind of challenge, growing up was really, really hectic. People looked down at him—all the time, his grades are, like, F—nobody took the time to really, really study him.” With a with a bruise-stained hurt, Mildred moans, “Nobody took the time to get to know him better and to help him. He couldn’t talk about it with

anybody, not even with his parents, because people would say” he could do better. “I really, really broke down when I heard his experience.”

I do not try to distinguish between the tender young and tender adult Mildred. Early childhood experiences shape her adult experiences. Mildred returns to early childhood experiences. “I just remember myself [*long pause*] back home, having academic challenges. I know I’m a person who would like to talk a lot, a person who is very, very [*long pause*] I don’t know how to say it, but maybe a bit prideful. I don’t know if it’s [*long pause*] prideful, but back home, [I was labelled as prideful], because I like to question a lot of things. I’m curious—that’s the right word! I’m curious. I like to question a lot of things and ask you why this is this way, and I’ll ask you, ‘So what if you don’t do that?’ and all of those things.” There are muddled tensions as Mildred weaves her story with Abal and Abal’s husband. Mildred sees herself as both learning to silence her inquisitiveness—and, being storied as prideful. *Prideful* means she is curious. She tells me, “So I think it was hard for me to [be] with normal kids, because I wasn’t a normal kid back home.” Mildred defines *normal* in the context of social relations and place. *Normal* children are those who are in a position to ask *why*. “*Why, why, why* were going within me, not with people. I didn’t have people to interact [with], because people saw me as disrespectful, so I couldn’t really ...” I have listened to Mildred outside of our research conversations. Sitting beside her and a professor, she does not say she does not understand something. She does not ask *why* outloud; Mildred silently asks questions—she *imagines* asking *why*. *Why*-Mildred lives in tension with silencing narratives planted early in her: *Why do you ask “why” when “why” does not put food on the table? “Why” does not alleviate poverty!* Yet, through Abal and her husband James, Mildred sees the potential emergence of the silenced *why*-Mildred—and, the potential of *why*-Mildred’s life.

Mildred stories Abal’s husband as “succeeding” because “although he wasn’t doing well academically, he was very outspoken. He was an extrovert—and, that really, really helped him not to be shuttered in life. Because imagine him being an introvert and having academic challenges [*long pause*]—he would have really sunk deep below it, and so that would have been a bit challenging.” Imagine the

extrovert Mildred trapped inside a prescribed introvert self. Mildred sees herself today as shifting. The *why*-Mildred, not meeting the four-year undergraduate expectation timeframe, is reaching towards the surface. She embraces the warmth of hope and possibilities that caresses her embodied being. *why*-Mildred is awakening; *why*-Mildred has not been in complete slumber; she does not need a prince.

### **Familial Education Tensions**

I ask Mildred about early education teachers. Did she interact with them? Did she form bonds with them? Did they encourage her? She says, some “teachers were close to me, but I felt like because I had really bad grades, and back home, growing up in such an impoverished home, I didn’t have that much to spend on school.” Mildred’s parent’s hopes for her future are also muddled with tensions. “There wasn’t that much put into my education.” Her family lived (and lives) hand-to-mouth. Mildred’s experiences bump up against a dominant narrative that stories poverty-class parents as not supporting their children’s education. “I know my dad was really, really being helpful. He taught us simple, basic mathematics. He was really interested in our education, very, very, *very* ...” Mildred’s family lived in abject poverty; Mildred’s parents cared about her future. Formal education sat in tension with the belief in marriage as a way out and (perhaps) up.

“So he wanted to—so both your mom and dad, did they—what kind of conversations were happening about education in the home?”

“Education, really, we didn’t talk about it, but it was more like, ‘You’ve got to do your homework. We’ve got to help you.’ They really put a lot of effort into helping us, but to openly talk about it as to this is what it could help you to be, and this is why you need to take your school seriously and your homework seriously, that wasn’t explained. But you have to do it because we see other people doing it and it’s helping them; but, ‘This is the benefit of it,’ wasn’t really opened.” Like a proverbial moth-to-a-flame, I am drawn to a different familial experience of education than what I have experienced. Unknowingly, *why*-Mildred is pushing up against a single, damaging story I unintentionally perpetuate (and look for) when thinking about poverty-class families and their children’s education: that poverty-class families do not encourage

formal higher education. I wonder, what shaped her parents' understandings of education? I ask Mildred, "So in terms of university, was it just a given that you would go?"

"It was, kind of, it was, kind of. That's why it's been quite of a—I don't know—you know. People come to university trying to define themselves. I think most people do come here, find themselves, know who they are and begin to appreciate others in life better. I didn't really know that, that that's what I'm here to do!" Mildred says with burgeoning wonder.

Mildred adds: "I don't think most of us have a clue when we get here, honestly!" We both have a hearty chuckle. I shrug my shoulders and say, going to school just "seemed like a good idea at the time." While we both laugh, we also know that this is not true. Higher education, although the meaning is illusive, was somehow an unspoken certainty within us.

"You come here, and you think, 'Okay, I made the grade. I'm here.'" *Making the grade* to be able to enter onto this landscape is such a small part of the story. Maintaining *the grade*, beyond numbers, is a story that we will continue to unravel over the months we are together.

Was a bit of an extrovert  
Wasn't the kind to be quiet  
Cry when you beat me  
A lot of sacrifices for us  
Beat some kinds of people  
    Poor  
Don't beat that kind of people  
    Privileged  
Feeling inferior over the years  
Don't have my parents around  
Living with somebody else  
Don't have my mom to cry to  
Put us in the hands of the privileged  
    To push us through school  
Backlash  
Cinderella con job  
    If you want to survive  
    If you want a place to sleep  
    Something to eat  
    Just have to do it           be silent  
If you're a woman           bit too loud  
    You may be gone  
    Keep calm  
    Go by the rules  
Introvert now  
Waiting for our sponsorship

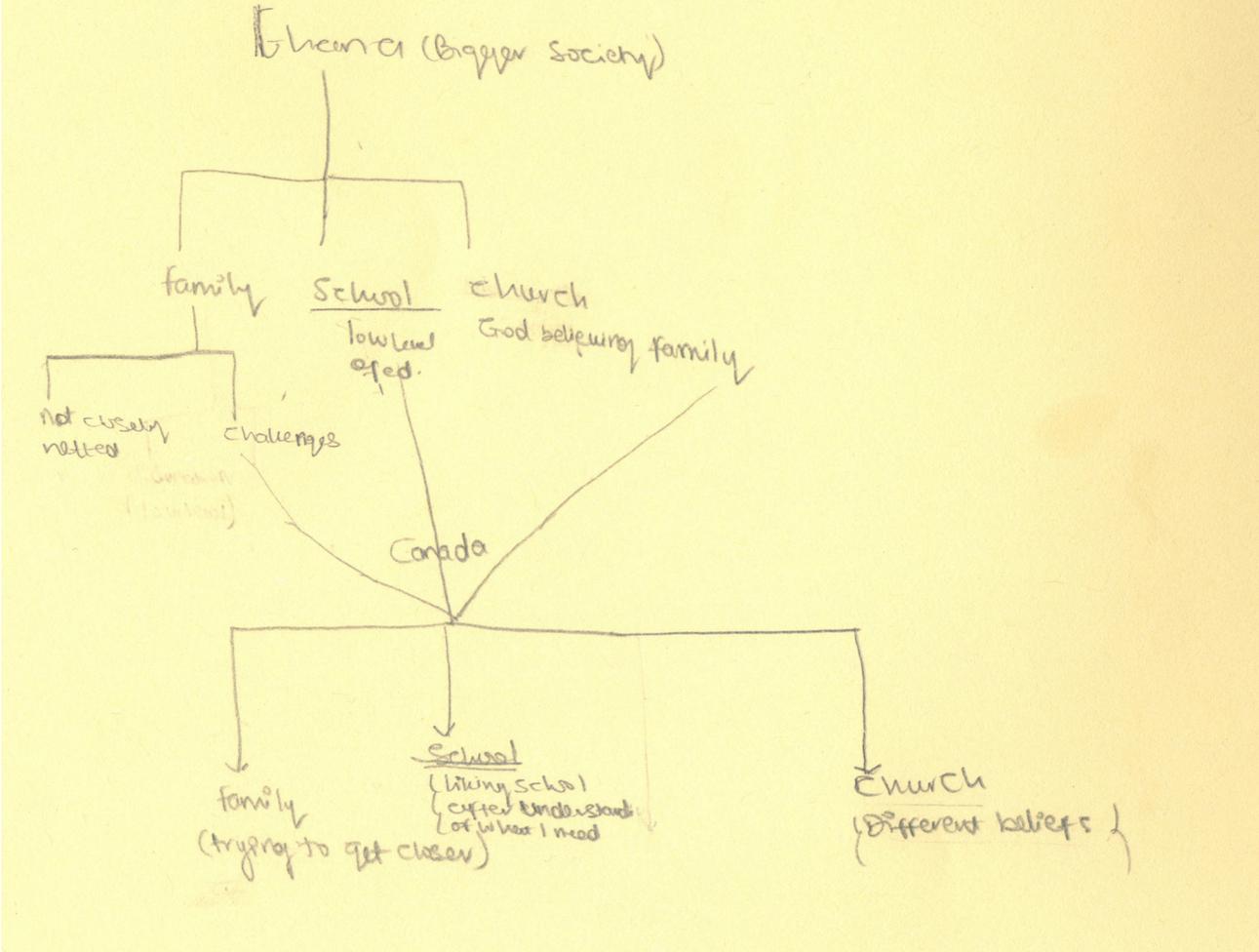
## **Coming to Canada—the Promise Land**

We traverse boundless geographic and temporal distances in our conversations. “So when you came to Canada, you—what brought your family to Canada?”

“So my parents came here because they wanted a better life for us. So they wanted to come here and probably establish themselves better. You know, have a place to live and more money to feed us ... what they could do ‘cause they’re not really—they don’t have high school diplomas and all of that, so they didn’t excel in education.” Mildred’s parents do the non-living wage labouring for those who her parents imagine her being one day. “So, yeah, they just wanted to come here and establish themselves so that basic life needs—food, water, and clothing, shelter—and then—help us pursue our education [so we can] go higher.” This is the first time I have been close to non-academicized or non-governmental narratives of first-generation, poverty-class, immigrant students’ experiences. I try to imagine the extraordinary sacrifices Mildred’s parents made to provide the basic necessities of life for their children in Canada. I try to image the hope they carried with them for their children’s future. Her parents left everything behind to create a better future for Mildred and her siblings. Mildred and her siblings were separated for ten years from their parents. There are so many wonders I carry with me about this family’s experiences and how these experiences shape Mildred’s undergraduate experiences.

①

17th June, 2016



**"Precision"**

Mildred's Education Chronicle (Page 1 of 3)

Mildred created her chronicle outside of our research conversations. She was provided with a sketchbook and an assortment of pens and coloured markers. She chose to use a mechanical pencil.

## Places: (1991-2000)

Kumasi (youngest) (9 years)

• Church days were

my best days not school days

I got to be a kid who was not acknowledged because of my academic status in school, but because we all we kids were

similar we had secrets (the dots),

what was something we all had

in common and this simple <sup>we</sup> thing made me feel a sense of belongingness.

2000 - 2008  
Accra (older) (8 years)

Church was not really the same because as I grew older I became aware of what it means to be treated differently because of your financial status of your family.

Although, my aunt and uncle (guardians) treated us well as people, we were not well treated as kids

we were not loved, respected, cared for, appreciated. I think my guardians did a lot of help for

me by attending to my home where there is a work in significant

in the house, this was mostly their kids, we who come from other families were not accepted as kids, we were

the blur.

2008 - 2016  
Edmonton (8 years)

I started high school on Sept 16 2008.

I can finish in 2010 with a high school diploma.

I then started university year 2010 to 2011.

My university experience was not as bad as I thought it would be. I was with a lot of

challenges, a decade of studying and health issues.

But I was not alone. I had my guardians and family members of 5000

because they support me. I feel I cannot be talked to because

of my experience. I think I will

experience or understand the loops and

twisted ropes of emotional insecurity.

## Childhood

As a kid, I was not encouraged to believe in myself thus I feel very honoured and appreciated when someone who barely knows me gives me comments like: 'you can make because you are destined for a purpose. and it makes me wonder if anyone you see I doubt it because that I can live a meaningful and an impactful life because I have low self-esteem and low confidence. which blinds me from seeing my future and from being myself.'

## Recent experiences with dealing with my emotions

- You see I have been going to church from childhood, but I have never known what it means to have a relationship with God until I recently had great opportunities to listen to observe the lives of people in my society and other places who I really admire and aspire to be because of their unconditional love and acceptance for others.

### *Chew and Pow*

There are early childhood education experiences that help Mildred re-story herself. There are fragments of experiences she retells that help her imagine herself beyond the way she has been storied as a child from poverty. Although food has always been scarce, Mildred has a delicious sense of humour. Mildred tells me about a high school teacher in her Canadian school. “My chemistry teacher was so supportive. He really, really spent a lot of time helping me. And he knows that—well, he knew that I would get it. And I was very meticulous. And the first time he used that word, I was so excited about myself!” Our conversation paused as we joyfully laughed. “He said, ‘Mildred, you’re very meticulous.’” Mildred was filled with a spontaneous, child-like glee. Yes, Mildred is meticulous. Her depiction of her education journey bears witness to painstaking thoughtfulness. Her handwriting is uniform and precise; my handwriting is variable and slipshod. She contains her writing in boxes; mine fills random nooks and crannies. She prints; I scribble. She is orderly; I am disorderly. Yet, similarity exists in our dissimilarity. We contain our mischievous selves. “When I started the chemistry class, I think it was balancing of equations, I would just write every single thing down systematically, because I was trying to teach myself. Even though he had taught me, I was trying to teach myself.”

“Learn, not memorize,” I say with a healthy dose of disdain for current pragmatic education mandates.

“Right, right! And back home [you] *chew and pow* and—you don’t understand it very well, but just kind of get the spellings and all of those” definitions. *Chew and pow* is a western African phrase that refers to memorizing information and spitting it out—no different than in Canadian education.

I interrupt and say, “I know. I’ve had too many classes like that.” Mildred keeps me on topic.

“Anyway, I was talking about my mentors in high school here. [He] really, really, *really* encouraged me about—actually, at that point, I thought what if I can become a teacher, because this man is really putting a lot of effort into me, and I *need that effort!*” Mildred does not say this as a plea or cry for help. She asks for recognition of a life in the making. “Maybe somebody else will need that, and I want to

be there to help them.” She provides a teasing glimpse of the student-teacher type of relationship where *why*-Mildred becomes visible. “Canadian parents might say this is [easy], you should understand it. But he came to my [long pause] level, used the simplest language, and really, really, *really* put the effort into making sure that I understood what he was saying [long pause]. And, I asked a lot of questions.”

Mildred experienced critical explicit and implicit education encouragement on multiple landscapes. “I had another teacher—she also did the same thing for me. So these teachers were really, really mentors in my education—they made me feel like I can do it, I can get into university. ‘Cause they wanted me to get into university.”

“Did you guys have those conversations?”

“We really didn’t have conversations about my life and my challenges, but we had more—well, I think with [one teacher], we had quite a bit—she’s a [long pause] friend, so we’ve had conversations about where we’re coming from and the challenges, and she really, really encouraged [my twin and me] to feel like” you can do it. Their conversations went beyond pep-talks. Mildred was able to share enough of how growing up in childhood poverty affected her as a high school student. Her teacher understood what it is like to believe that “you don’t deserve to be somewhere or you feel like you can’t do it.” This teacher paid attention. “For her, it was easy to sense something when we didn’t really, like, get something. Like, the frustration. She couldn’t just easily pick up on it and know that you’re not getting it. And sometimes I really lied to her that we get it; she’s like, ‘No, you don’t really. I know when you get something. It’s a different [expression] when you don’t get something.”

“But she was paying attention.”

“She was paying attention, that’s the thing. I think I really didn’t pay attention to myself, so I didn’t really know myself, how other people were seeing me, and not defining myself. But I was, like, maybe the vocabulary for knowing myself wasn’t there, so I had to read myself through other people.”

“So the support of these two teachers and belief in you, how do you think that shaped—“

“—My university experience?”

“Yes ...”

“For them, they have a limited way of helping students, because they’re not counsellors, they’re teachers. So they did their best to help me academically, they did their best to make sure that I was okay in school.” Being *okay in school* transcends academic transcripts. Mildred’s childhood poverty continues into adulthood on the Canadian landscape. “Financially, when I was getting to my high school graduation, [my teacher] played a very key role in it, because my family couldn’t afford to help us get grad dresses.” Mildred and her twin’s teacher, along with the principal, raised the funds to buy graduation dresses. Personally, charity is a troublesome experience. At first blush, I felt too close to a Cinderella yarn. However, Mildred stories this support through a charitable lens. Mildred was not only a student to this teacher. This teacher played “multiple roles” in the shaping of her experiences. Yet, there remains a void that plagues Mildred as she winds her way through her undergraduate studies.

Even though Mildred and her twin visited their teacher’s home “and all of that,” she “couldn’t really be open about ...” The ineffability to express her anxiety about poverty still echoes. “I didn’t probably have the words to talk about certain things because I probably didn’t understand what I was going through. So I didn’t really, at the time, have the opportunity to say, ‘These are the issues I am going through. How can we address it? I need help here.’” The same is true today. I have experienced this with Mildred as we have come alongside one another in this narrative inquiry. Mildred says, “You know, when you don’t know what you’re going through, you can’t really define what the problem is. You don’t ask for help, you just go—you feel like your head itches, you know.”

### **A Montage of Financial Wonders**

I jump forward several months into our research conversations. Mildred risks not finishing her last semester because of money.

One could not ask for a more idyllic fall day as I accompanied Mildred to seek emergency funding through the university. Early in the spring, out of desperation, Mildred took out a short-term, emergency bank loan to cover spring, summer, and fall tuition fees and living expenses. After paying her fall tuition

fees, she was left with \$75 to survive on for the term. Somehow, she also needed to keep making the bank payments as interest compounded and accrued daily. Until the fall semester, she worked two part-time jobs at a convenience store; the shifts were sporadic; the pay was minimal.

Mildred tells me that she struggles because “you have to have specific questions to ask for specific help, and I [don’t] know this.” I know this well. I did a little research and encouraged Mildred to seek university financial support. As Mildred and I sit down with the financial advisor, Mildred’s citizenship is questioned: “Are you a Canadian citizen?”

With a whisper, Mildred says, “Yes.” Mildred’s face contorts in distress as if facing the inquisition. Her eyes are like a cistern full of water on the verge of overflowing. Her hand quivers as she reaches into her bag to show her identity. She cannot find her passport. Mildred produces her student identification card, student loan records, and bank statements. I silently wonder, what else can she possibly need to supply?

“How long have you been in Canada?” Fear grips Mildred. Shakily she says, “Eight years.” Shock grips me. I say nothing. I am in the grip of a rage about to burst.

I want to shout, “What does it matter how long she has been a Canadian citizen!” I do not want to run over Mildred and jump to her rescue. I am there as moral support. The financial advisor tells Mildred that she can apply for an emergency student loan. Mildred has gone from quiet to deathly silent and still. I feel her body on the verge of rising from the chair. Gently, I lay my hand on Mildred’s arm to stay her. Scarcely suppressing my fury I say, “It has to be paid back in three months. Where will she get the money?”

“She has three months,” the advisor replies.

“How will she make enough money working a casual, minimum wage job?”

“She has three months.” The advisor turns to Mildred and jokingly says, “You can get up to \$75,000 in student loans.”

I silently concede this is futile. I look painfully at Mildred; she graciously thanks them. We wordlessly slip out the door. We go to Mildred’s department to ask about emergency funding. I had found

information that this was potentially available. Mildred walks up to the counter; I stand to the side. Students turn their curious glimpses at Mildred. The advisor deafeningly says that there is no funding available through the department. She tells Mildred to go the registrar's office. Mildred accepts this, picks up her bag, and turns to leave. I step forward and explain that we had just been there. I say that the department's website says there is emergency funding. A second office personnel steps forward, and in an even louder voice, tells us to go to the registrar. Forcefully, they declare that no funding is available in the department. Mildred and I leave wordlessly.

Once outside, with the beautiful fall sunshine dancing around us, egged on by my rage, Mildred gently expressed her frustration. We had previously talked about privilege and how non-Whites, with "Canadian" accents, do not have their citizenship questioned. This is the first time I had personally witnessed it. Mildred was grateful that we had talked about it so she was not blindsided. We walked across campus and she sat with me until it was time for me to go to my research meeting. We spoke in hushed tones. I told Mildred about undergraduate funding I had received to conduct research. When I told her she was eligible, and could receive funding to do research, we were swathed in a heavy silence. We have never sat with such a burdened silence. With the slightest tilt of my head, I quietly looked at Mildred out of the corner of my eye; Mildred was soundlessly weeping. Great drops of rain fell unheeded onto her hands tightly coiled in her lap. I watched as the tears left quickly disappearing wet marks on her cheeks. She slightly turned her head to me and said, "Me?" She felt shaken from our experience; remnants of hope, shame and survival cling to her.

It was a beautiful fall day. A montage of fall wonders coloured the campus landscape. The grounds were strewn with hope and possibilities. Two days later, Mildred returned and met with a different person at the registrar's office. I do not know what transpired. A few months later, Mildred sent me a text. She received an emergency bursary. She paid off the bank loan. She paid her fall—and, winter tuition fees. She has food to eat. She will finish her undergraduate degree.

Since this experience, something has shifted for Mildred. In the early summer, Mildred told me, “Last year, I was really above [the required GPA], but when you are struggling through life, you probably sink to the bottom before you pick up to help yourself and do better.... I’ve been doing my very best to excel—I’ve got to excel and I have to take care of myself properly. With that strong demand and having challenges of not being tough, talking to people about what I’m going through, because I didn’t really have any time to talk to anybody. You get up, you do the same thing.” Mildred is not doing the same things. She is not working two jobs while going to school. She is seeking medical help. She is trying academic things she has not considered: doing class presentations, writing papers about topics important to her, seeking mentors, participating in this narrative inquiry—and, in her temperate way, refusing to be storied as a RTW-student. I see a glimpse of *why*-Mildred.

### **Twin Tales**

The one area of Mildred’s life where there is no fuzziness is her unmistakable bond with her twin. Mildred says, “She had an academic probation, and she had to realize that sciences were not working for her, so she switched into” the faculty of arts “and then it really, really worked out for her *very* well. [I was] going through this similar experience, [and my sister is] like, ‘I know you’ll come through out of it, because I’ve been there, and I know you don’t have to change your faculty because you’re close to finishing your program.’” I am thankful Mildred has her sister. Mildred and I bond over shared RTW-experiences. This bond is based on trust and respect. Like Mildred and her sister, Mildred and I talk about “the nitty-gritty things that we never talked about” before our research conversations. Familial ties sustain Mildred.

“Does your [twin] sister know that you’re doing this, participating in this research?”

“No, I want it to be a surprise, because I’m surprisingly a [*long pause*] more like, my journey has been a bit different from hers.... I’m the twin which people would say, ‘I’m a bit ignorant.’ She’s more like, she decides on things easily, and she does things like, you know, as she has planned for it to be, she’s more focused.” Mildred does not mean *ignorant* in the English vernacular or English dictionary-defined sense. Rather, she explains, “I’m the one who is—the funny, jovial one who doesn’t really take [things] seriously.

But no, I'm not the kind who doesn't take things seriously. I just like to laugh a lot. I laugh a lot and I cry a lot. Not [when] I'm sick. But I like to have fun."

Mildred shares many hard stories in our months together. She shares tears and laughter. We do not leave our research conversations disheartened. We both break out into fits of laughter over nothing. We both use laughter as a natural anti-depressant, as a way to gain perspective, to help ourselves breathe—and, as a way to distance ourselves from experiences that are too difficult to sit with. The following text message exchange demonstrates Mildred's wicked sense of humour:

*"Do you know your marks yet?"*

*"No. I will check when I get home. I'm at church right now."*

*"Tell JC I said hi."*

*"Ok, I will. He will love to hear you say hello to him."*

*"Don't tell him I'm agnostic and say swear words."*

"Do your mom and dad know you're participating" in this research?

"Nobody knows. And it doesn't really make any change [for them]. It's going to make a change [for me]. I think that they'd be more excited that I'm participating in this [research]. My [twin] sister will definitely be so excited, because she has really seen me being making a difference. And my little experience being helpful here would really make her excited. I think everybody in my family would be really excited about this." I do not ask Mildred to clarify if her parents know she is participating in this research. I sense tensions that she chooses not to share. I segue into wonders about the conversations Mildred and her twin have about growing up in poverty.

As I wonder about conversations about *poverty*, I am drawn to academic conversations. Mildred explains her experiences with everyday conversations about lives shaped by poverty—or, the "nitty-gritty" stories. "Actually, that is something that [my twin and I], we've not really talked about with respect to poverty. We've mostly talked about it like, 'Oh, we were the ones who are not capable,' 'We are the ones that come from ...' We really haven't titled it *poverty*, but we've talked about it around things that have

been as a result of poverty.” Mildred draws me to the complexity—and, challenges—in a single definition of poverty. “We’ve talked about Mom and Dad not really having enough to support us, and [*long pause*] maybe some basic needs not well met. Health wise, [my twin] and I have been challenged by weight; we don’t eat well. I don’t know why, but maybe because we don’t have certain nutrients or certain essential metabolic—*metabolites* would not be the right word—essential nutrients that helps to speed our metabolism ...—to help us metabolize faster. We don’t really—I’d personally be interested in pharmacy because it has something to do with my personal experience.” How effortlessly Mildred sways between the past, present, and future.

When I retell an early childhood experience, it is like a torrential downfall. I take a deep palpable breath and let forth a drenching story. Mildred inconspicuously straightens her torso. She inhales a hushed, stabilizing breath. She shares her experiences like a gentle summer rain. I learn forward and rest my elbows on my knees. I silence the world around me to hear her words.

When I was growing up, there was a nurse in our neighbourhood, and she had a pharmacy, a pharmacy shop that she would sell drugs to people, and she was a community pharmacist. So it was [in] her own house, and there was a little stall in her house that she would administer drugs to people in need of it. She was a nurse, she was not a licensed pharmacist. I didn’t know it at the time. I asked my dad about her because she was so nice to us where days my dad—when my mom—would take us in and we didn’t have money, but she would service us and give us what we needed. I remember the comfort of having the drug and the relief and the healing that I have after taking the drug when I needed it, it was so, so, so refreshing to have that.

I always enjoyed going to see her. Whenever I go to see her, I get some little treats, too. I just [*long pause*]. I just remember going to see her [*long pause*] it was so helpful.

*Mildred’s tears sit like dew on her eyelash petals.*

So I just thought, like, maybe in the future, God willing—maybe I’ll go home and do that—give them that comfort, especially young people [*long pause*]. Sorry, I’m getting a bit emotional.

“Don’t apologize—please don’t apologize, ever. This relationship [*long pause*] never apologize.”

My fingertips waver above the keyboard. My breathing is shaky. The screen is blurry from tears on the cusp of escaping. My heart burns for *young*-Mildred and *young*-Elaine. I purse my lips and let out a whoosh of air. “Take deep long breaths in and out, in and out,” I robotically remind myself. I need to hear this breath. The emotional rollercoaster of this fragment of experience leaves me exhausted yet restored. I

do not tell Mildred how grateful I am that she weaves hope and possibilities throughout those experiences that are deeply painful. Rather, I remain attentive and listen.

There is a woman in western Africa who shapes Mildred's understandings of struggle. Publicly, this woman has spoken about her physical health. This woman became infertile because of endometriosis. Her partner left her. Mildred says, "It was a bit hard when I heard all of this—after all my experiences with life and having this, that could make a person really, really, *really* bitter, especially if you've struggled to get to—I mean, she's a civil engineer; she must have put a lot of effort back home to get to that point as a woman." So, too, has Mildred.

### **Battles on the Canadian Landscapes**

Mildred moans with a bruise-stained hurt, "I was always happy to go and see [my little sister in the hospital] because I was, like, 'Maybe this is the last time I will see her'." Similarly, how I feared that each research conversation upon my approaching *our* place in the students' union building—the sofa neatly made with the ubiquitous tattered, patchwork, industrial covers—would be void of Mildred's beloved body. I feel a bruise-stained hurt when I wonder about the poverty-class students who may silently disappear from the higher education landscape. If their silent disappearance left scars on the landscape, I wonder, what might shift? I wonder, what possibilities would exist if their absence were felt, if collectively we could hear the hollowness in the hallowed halls because of their void? Mildred draws me close to poverty-class undergraduate students who have immigrated to Canada. "It's a battle that's out there," Mildred gently says. I feel my body begin to vibrate. I am scared to hear what she is going to share with me. She tells an all too familiar Canadian tale:

"It's, it's a battle that's out there. I know family friends, I know of people whose children have been here, and maybe their dad or mom had been [to] a student in university. But when they came here, they didn't have opportunities to follow their education, had to end up doing something lower than them, [lower than their] credentials. Eventually their kids come in here and drop out. The pain they go through as a parent, the pain the child is going through, trying to find themselves. But, at the same time they come from a home where they're impoverished. They come from a place where it's not so welcoming to them at that point in their life because they feel more like, 'They don't know me, they want me to be them, they want me to be what they couldn't be.' Trying to fit them into a box. They're not willing to fit in. Let them explore. Parents in that condition will

have limited amount of resources including time, money, and other things. You feel like you gotta do it and do it now, if not, 'I'm not spending my money on you. It's over!'"

*Mildred's parents are retiring to their native western Africa. Time is not her friend.*

"I insisted on this opportunity and I know why. Imagine my parents were the ones paying my school fees—"

"—They couldn't—"

"—Ya, I know they couldn't! But just imagine! For years and years ..." Mildred is wistful.

Mildred is struggling in university. I ask if her parents know. "I couldn't even tell my mom and dad when I got the probation and all of that. The process that I had to go through to tell them was really difficult."

"What did they say?" I struggle to imagine because I have lived a similar Canadian-born reality. "The stress. They can't afford you to just do and, 'Oh, I'm going to go take basket weaving.' 'No, you're not! You're going to go finish that science degree right now and get out and get a job!'"

"Right, right. That's what I'm saying. I feel like having a student loan, and I know eventually paying it will be hard, but I know God has a way for that too at the right time. If it would have been [*long pause*] I don't know. I would have ended up dropping out. I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be here."

"If you were here, you would be working 40 hours a week ..."

"That would be worse. I would be failing!" Mildred laughs with glee. Mildred nods towards my summer labour job appearance and playfully says, "I would turn into Elaine first!" Yet again, we meet after I am done my summer labour work.

"When we don't have the opportunities to be students first—then, I wonder if we can be in spaces that welcome us and cherish us ..."

"That's so important. I think that's it. The reality about it. It's not a fair treatment here on campus. Some people come here—"

"—Students who bring pride to the university [*long pause*] have a different experience," I say with skepticism.

Mildred switches pronouns to distance herself: “This is what is causing a lot of problems with students taking their own lives. Because they feel like, ‘Hey, I’ve got to this point and now I’m a disappointment to my organization. I’m a disappointment to this faculty. To this university. To this nation. To taxpayers. This family. Myself.’ I don’t have one friend and I have nobody to talk to. Nobody wants to welcome them.”

I rhetorically ask, “You’re here, so what’s the problem?” We laugh cynically.

### **Seeking Support**

“I will tell you an experience I had. I think I was probably in my third year and I was having issues academically. I went upstairs to talk to a [mental health] counsellor. [They were] like, ‘What is it? What are you struggling with? What can we do?’ [They said it] in a ‘*What’s your problem way?*’ It’s like [they’re] not really willing listen [*long pause*] I was even afraid to share my story where I’m coming from. I never told anybody cause I don’t think it’s friendly to share that kind of condition I have. [They implied], ‘Everybody here is trying to make As, so why are you *trying* to make Cs and Ds?’”

In this moment, Mildred thinks, “I don’t want to face this.”

The counsellors say to Mildred, “So, what do you think we can do?”

Mildred says, “I don’t know what you can do. That’s why I came here. To ask ...” Mildred tries to shake off this experience with laughter. She takes a deep breath to push away or back at the experience.

In frustration I say, “First of all could you care about me as a human being and let’s start there.”

“I don’t think they care about us the same,” Mildred says and laughs uncomfortably. “If I have to say it, they will kick me out.”

“Do they want that relationship?”

“No, probably not.”

Mildred and I meet in the middle of August in the student’s union building after I was done my summer job for the day. I did not know, but it would be the last time we would meet after my workday was over. After years of physical labour, my back is damaged. I cannot stand fully upright as I drag my

body to our usual meeting place. I try to keep this to myself but I wince each time my body shifts. Mildred is worried for me; I try to pretend everything is fine. I can feel the pain creasing my forehead and pinching the skin around my eyes and mouth. There is an unspoken understanding between us that I do not want to focus on my pain. If I do think about it, it hurts worse than the burning of my back. It makes me think of how poverty shapes my body. We have a marathon conversation. Mildred has to rush off to work. Mildred launches into where she is at now with school and what she imagines for her future.

“I have to do twelve credits on spring probation. Thank God my spring class went really well. So if I focus and not [be] distracted by things of life, I can do my very best and finish this fall.” Mildred does not finish in the fall; she finishes in the winter term; she applies for summer convocation.

“And I’m looking forward, God willing, to the winter being in [another province where there are] mostly Aboriginals so I have to be aware of their culture and some of the things that are very important to other people.... So I would do [the course] there. My [twin] sister took it online but I don’t think I’m that kind of online class taking person.”

We switch to discussing language. Mildred’s native language is a western African dialect. White, western academia-speak is foreign to her; Mildred is the most amazing storyteller I have been honoured to meet. She brings me back to her experiences as a student whose life has been shaped by childhood poverty—and, who *has tried* to seek help in higher education.

“I guess it’s not fair you could say. Maybe *they* [had] a chance, like I think of going to other places to see what it feels like to be lost. Cause sometimes you feel like you’re lost here,” she laughs to distance herself. “Need to go somewhere and be a foreigner.” “Foreigner” carries visible and hidden meanings. Mildred is a foreigner on the higher education landscape both as a student who grew up in poverty, a western African immigrant—and, a Canadian citizen.

I am drawn back to thinking about international undergraduate students. I overheard a student in distress: they failed their exams because their English was not up to par. They were unable to take notes in class or digest the massive amounts of material written in English. I say, “School’s scary enough ...”

“I know. I know. Especially if you have been through the downs and coming from a different place to a different place. You feel like, ‘I don’t want to be here anymore. I just have to do this and get away from it. It doesn’t have to be so ...’.”

“As my supervisor says, ‘How do we set up schools so everybody can realize their dreams?’.”

With a gentle laugh and sigh of wonder, Mildred says, “Wow, that’s beautifully said. But I don’t know if we’re getting there ...”

“No, we’re not there, yet.”

“No, I don’t think so. So I had a terrible experience. I went into [my] faculty [*long pause*]. There was a student in a similar situation as I was in. She was on probation. And she probably wasn’t from here. She is Asian. And she wants to register for classes. But I don’t know if she’s a first year or her third year or been here a longer time or not. And she’s wondering, ‘Oh, can somebody assist me in registering for the classes so I know I don’t do this or ...’ Cause when you’re on probation there’re certain conditions attached to classes you can take. And this student wanted to know—well not really wanted to know, but she wanted to sit down with somebody so they could pick the classes that would work for her. And she was told, ‘We don’t do that here!’.” Mildred says to herself, “And I was like, ‘What? So how does she get help?’ Imagine if she’s here alone or if she has some friends but she’s not comfortable talking to them. But she’s more comfortable coming to someone who’s an advisor. Somebody who’s seen a lot of undergrads. And just [has] basic questions.”

“Who was she talking to?”

“I think she was talking to one of the counsellors I think.”

“And they just sent her away...?”

“‘We don’t do that here.’ And I was behind [her] and even I have been here for a long time and I don’t know if she’s been here longer. But I said [to myself], ‘Oh, I better not ask the same question.’ So I walked up to him and I said, ‘Oh, I’m in a similar situation. I heard what you said to her. Thank you.’.”

Mildred laughs nervously. “And I just left.”

I felt my heart break listening to Mildred's experience. "You just left?" I was not angry. I was deeply saddened. Relisting to this experience on the digital-recording of our conversation brought a fresh wave of pain.

Laughing, Mildred said, "Well, I didn't want to embarrass myself."

"I appreciate that." I did not expect Mildred to stand up for herself or the other student. I imagine Mildred silently walking out with her regal aura and not revealing her inner turmoil.

"So where are you supposed to go for guidance?"

"When I'm done registering for classes, I can come and show it to them."

I am baffled; I am not surprised. I want to hear a different story about administrators caring. I draw out my words very slowly to contain my emotions, "But wouldn't it make more sense to get help in choosing the classes?"

"I thought so. But anyways, I guess these days, there's too many students on their hands and too many things... They want to make it not so [long pause] that they've been [long pause] the demand for them is really high and so they are *squinting on what they can do and what they can't do*. I feel that's it. Because when school opens you have a flash of students in there. So it's like, get it done now before two weeks time." Mildred takes the initiative to get ahead of things, to make *good* decisions, academically and yet ... "That's what I thought because it always seems like they're busy. Doing their things."

"So...?"

"It feels like there are some things we can do here these days and some things we can't do. I remember in my first year I would go there and they would help me find classes. It was that easy. That simple."

"Do you think because you're on probation they treat you differently?"

"Probably or maybe because of my fifth year they feel like, 'Oh, it took too long. Grow up!'"

Mildred laughs self-deprecatingly. "Maybe they feel like that. Maybe they look at my transcripts and

they're like, 'You're not a baby student. You're an adult student. Grow up!' Okay, I just walk out of there with my embarrassment. Anyways, you know ..."

"Not everyone makes it through their undergrad in four years."

"Ya, that's true," Mildred says without conviction. She says this with a disbelieving sigh.

Throughout our time together, there exists tension between *outlier*-Mildred and *why*-Mildred.

"Do you know how long it took me to finish my first undergrad?"

"No," says Mildred in a whisper. I wonder if she was scared I was going to say two years.

Without hesitation I say, "Started working on it [*long pause*] let's see I was [*long pause*] it took me well over fifteen fragmented years to finish my first undergrad." I do not share this to soothe Mildred.

"Wow. Wow. But I'm impressed you're here. You didn't give in. You didn't give up."

"Oh, there's many times I gave up—"

"—But you're still here," Mildred whispers in awe.

"There's many things, many times I did things to sabotage finishing. I would get close and then I would change my discipline, or my major, or I would just drop out. Because I guess I was terrified of getting, of finishing that degree. I didn't know what it meant and I was very, very scared. So one of the things I was against as an older undergrad student, I was treated, 'Why did you make bad life choices?' Not that anybody knows anything about my life."

"The general view is you're not good enough. You're being bad."

People would imply, "'You're older than *twenty*?' As soon as you become a mature student, it becomes even more problematic. Everybody has to do this journey in their own way," I say. I cannot muster enough strength to convince myself.

"That's so true. *In their own way*. You have to encourage yourself. That's something that I think you have learned to do. You don't have to look down at yourself because of how people see you and how you feel sometimes. You have to encourage yourself." As demonstrated in the following found poem, Mildred tries to soothe me:

Got to be something more than to push me higher  
Not to feel hopeless  
Don't need people to come and save us  
Everybody plays a role in something  
We're impoverished  
We're not weak

“How do you think this counsellor saw you?”

“I don't know. But once you're a student struggling through school, and you go to these offices many times, they know you. 'Here she comes again!'," Mildred laughingly says tongue-in-cheek. "So often they've seen you there, maybe a couple of times. You've cried in some of their offices, you know, you felt like shame as they look at your GPA and look at your transcript and some of them are like, 'You've got to pull this GPA up and all of that.' You talk to some of them and you feel like they look down at you. It makes you feel like you are not capable. *Before them*—you're not worthy to be here. You don't deserve the opportunity to be here. And it intimidates you. It's like you don't even want to ask for help anymore. Just like giving up." Mildred become very pensive. We sit with a sad silence.

I rhetorically ask, “None of them have ever seen you cry?”

“Oh, I think there's a young one. Fortunately, I had never seen that one before. He was probably maybe, maybe he was in an internship program, I don't know. But he was pretty young and he could connect and understood. He had said to me, 'This is not my first one [i.e., student]. I've seen people. I've seen people go through that. It's common. So don't be so hard on yourself.' I think he was very sympathetic. He was younger. He could sympathize with me more, I feel. He was saying to me, 'It's a common thing. Most people in undergrad, trying to finish their programme, make these kinds of mistakes, so don't be so hard on yourself.' So I really appreciate [it]. I'm not saying because he's young, but I appreciate him better than old people because he could sympathize with me." Mildred is not looking for sympathy. Rather, understanding that her life is more complex than numbers on a computer screen.

“And had some respect for—”

“—Right, right.” Like an old married couple, we finish each other's thoughts.

“When I was kicked out of university it was a horrific experience. I lived in mortal shame. I couldn't tell anybody—“

“—Me too!” Yet, Mildred reached out to her dad to try to explain.

“Well, for my dad, he understands much better because he can read and write much better than my mom. So he understands the challenges coming from western Africa [and from poverty] and coming to school here and not knowing the system in terms of like what would be better for me. Not having any mentors and all of that. He understands the process. But my mom, maybe for her, it would be like, ‘What is she going through?’ [and her] being more confused than I am!” Mildred cheerfully laughs at the situation.

Mildred waits as I struggle to respond. I try not to be disheartened. I am drawn to the lack of opportunities my mother and great aunty had because they were born into intergenerational poverty. In many nuanced ways, formal education was not encouraged. This is not from mean spiritedness. I wonder about what secret dreams they may have had. It is too late to have these wonders with my mother and great aunty. I wonder what dreams Mildred’s mother secretly had when she was Mildred’s age. There is nothing I can bear emotionally to say to Mildred. She gives me a refreshing reprieve.

“It is! It is. Looking at your background and coming to society where you feel like you know there are people from the same country as you but everybody has a different experience. You would expect that at least, well for me, I expect at least, the people who have been here, the western African society, the students who have been here who are older than us, they should have like a mentorship program for the undergrads. You have some similar things, which are cultural, language, and a lot of things. Similar childhood experiences. Maybe. Maybe not. But it would be so encouraging to have older people that you would call for like—older siblings, older mentors, older friends that bonds with them. Grow with them. Be encouraged with them. That’s part of sustainability. Sustaining African or the *junk* students who are Black in education because they’re aren’t many of us here. Some of us come and drop out because we are

intimidated by how great, by how big the university is. There are so many things. Our financial circumstances. So many things hold us back.”

“What do you think are the assumptions that people make?”

“You’re not so much motivated to succeed. It’s more like you’re—you like to talk too much because you don’t know so much. And which may be true. It may be true. Some people talk too much because they don’t know too much. If they know too much, maybe they wouldn’t be talking so much. They would be yelling to know a little bit more.”

I playfully say, “You know White people do that, too?”

I share with Mildred that I continue to live in fear that I will be found out and kicked out. I struggle to reach out for help with school. Mildred makes me wonder about these fears. Many poverty-class students I have met live with these worries. I wonder if these fears become embedded in and on ourselves. I wonder if these fears can subside. Mildred wonders, “Will it make a difference at all” to ask instructors for help. Mildred asks, “If you’re asking for help, would it even make a difference in terms of how people see you...? Sometimes when you ask for help people kind of make their own assumptions that, ‘Oh, she’s not capable. A lot of people are doing this. Why is she behind?’.” She chuckles and says, “It makes you not want to ever ask for help again, because you kind of feel like nobody cares; it’s just—it’s just a system. Better get used to it. The earlier the better. I guess if you get used to it, then you’d be able to go to the next level—if there is a next level.”

I ask her if any of her university professors know that her life has been shaped by childhood poverty. She laughs as if I am asking a silly question. “I can never tell them!” Nonetheless, she is able to articulate how poverty shapes her undergraduate experiences: “What if they ask me questions? It makes me feel like I’m a minority. I feel intimidated. I feel like I’m poor. I feel like I don’t belong here. Like I told you earlier, last week, I feel like sometimes I don’t belong to some places. You may feel like you are the poorest of the poorest, and so you don’t belong here.” She fears that professors and administrators will find out she grew up in poverty and say, “So, what are you doing here? If you’re sinking below, my friend, we

can't pull you out." She employs laughter to alleviate tension. Mildred has the courage to share her wonders with me. I am still trying to find the courage to do the same.

Mildred becomes philosophical and wonders, "Maybe it's something about humans, that when we're struggling and—we have a system that doesn't make us trust people, we can't trust, just ask for help, because maybe we believe we're not going to get it, so why bother. Just be—I don't know, just be quiet about it and ..." Neither of us expects the other to provide an earth-shattering answer.

Perhaps one-day *why*-Mildred will be yelling a whole lot more. For now, she draws me to her experiences of aloneness—and, possibilities for sharing experiences.

"I think the best thing to do is mingle with other African people, not just western African or Columbian or wherever. Mingle with people from other parts of the world. But we don't have that often. It's like, 'Oh, I'm down and I'm alone and nobody can hear me! Not even my African society! Not even anybody else.' You just withdraw yourself and that's not something that's healthy. Withdrawing yourself from the bigger society, from the bigger people. It makes you feel like you're worthless. You're just—nobody. And you just withdraw from school and your future's closed. If you're *not* fortunate enough to find the right people and encourage yourself when you experience other things—you just go away. I mean go away from here. You lose a lot."

I am reminded of the loneliness I experienced growing up. The *my heart is breaking*-type aloneness I experienced on education, familial and community landscapes. I did not fit in. I learned early on to withdraw from school, family and community for self-preservation and to protect my heart.

So very softly I say, "You remind me of so many of my experiences as a student, as a little child, and as an adult. How alone I always was. I didn't have friends. I didn't have friends in university or college. I didn't have anybody to talk to. So I just lived a very solitary life. So when I was struggling in school, I tended to just think I was stupid and this place isn't for me. And those rare moments when somebody tells you, 'Hey, we're glad you're here,' it becomes important ..."

"Very. Very significant." Mildred teaches me the power of the economy of language.

“But if it’s not often enough ...”

“You need a lot of those reminders once you’ve gone through the very downs. You need a lot of reminders about who you are.”

### **The Burdened Immigrant**

Nobody would take you in  
“Be quiet and stay there”  
Your teachers are not willing to take you in  
There’s nobody to help you  
Just be quiet  
Stay like you know  
They have no where to take us  
Just stay there  
No option  
    extra burden  
    not mine  
    beast of burden  
Either that or nothing  
And I didn’t want nothing  
I wanted a place to sleep at night  
Somewhere I could say, “I’m going home”

My understanding of immigrant undergraduate students is painfully lacking. I wonder about who these students are. I wonder what shapes their higher education experiences? Sitting in classrooms, with hundreds of students, their experiences do not become visible. Immigrant students and I have sat silently beside each other in these lecture halls—without knowing each other’s origins or biographies. The physical space between our respective hard worn plastic seats seems an impersonal and insurmountable gulf.

Mildred and her siblings were left with immediate family members in western Africa when Mildred was five years old. Her parents came to Canada *sans*-children to make—and save—enough money to bring their children. A family fractured for twelve years in the hopes of a *better* life. These were difficult years for the family—and, for Mildred and her twin sister. Their aunt had struggles; she was burdened with her sister’s children. Mildred learned early on not to trust authority. She sought help outside of her aunt’s home when things became too difficult. The consequences were swift and punishing.

*why*-Mildred became more quiet and subservient. She learned to survive. No prince or singing mice made the days more bearable; there was no one to save *why*-Mildred and her twin sister. My fingertips tread carefully on the keyboard.

“You know, I come back and think about your experiences living with your aunt and no opportunities to study. And how does that shape trying to be a student coming into university?”

Mildred chuckles knowingly at my careful hesitation, “That’s a very significant stage in life when a child’s trying to maybe realize their potential, realize what they’re capable of knowing themselves. Not being able to do that with other people [*long pause*] once you go to school and you’re seen as the dumb student, you are shunned, you don’t mingle with other students easily. You become more like [a] moody student, you like to be isolated, not mingle with other people and that prevents you from developing—that prevents you from even knowing who you are. Because once you are with other people, you begin to have challenges: let’s play this game, let’s do this, let’s go here. And that’s where you come to feel who you are, you begin to realize and identify yourself. Because you can connect to this, you cannot connect to this, begin to put dots and dots together.”

“It’s so difficult to hear how—you and this other student were treated in the department.”

“It is. But it’s not something that I would say is strange. Because you know [*long pause*] it happens to most people in situations like that. Older mature students, students who are struggling, it’s common. You go to places and it’s like, ‘What do you want?’” Although Mildred laughs, this is a phrase she learned on childhood education, institutional, and community landscapes.

My anger escapes me: “For you to do your job and help me!”

“I know. I know. But you can’t really confront them that way.”

“We don’t really have the power. Who holds the power?” I make a nice rhetorical sidestep.

“Right?”

“That’s something I’ve always wondered about as a student. Why I haven’t had the courage to say, ‘No, your job is to be the advisor and advise and council and help me.’ But I don’t ever say that. I just take whatever judgment they have against me.”

Mildred is gentle and understanding to my harshness. “I know. That’s the hard part. That’s the hard part. I don’t think they’re trying to do that. I think honestly they can’t really relate because they haven’t got the experience. Not that they should be going through everything that we’re going through. It’s more like they haven’t had the experience or the training. It’s more like, ‘You have been in the university for this degree. Okay you can deal with this.’ But, you haven’t had the field experience to work with people from different places. Take their time, read about people with these situations, take their time, maybe they read about academic challenges researchers and all of that. And maybe they haven’t had experience with people one-on-one. And which is a good thing to do right now in their positions they’re in. They should be more welcoming to the students so they can learn with that. Gain the experience of, ‘Oh, this student came from this background.’ Be more open to what she’s going to say in terms of understanding, not just assuming everything. Hearing her background. Not being so inquisitive but knowing the person. Where she’s coming from, why she’s struggling with childhood experiences and all that. That would help them.”

I stumble and fumble. “Do you think when you speak—you have a really soft accent, it’s really hard to hear that you have an accent—do you think that shapes when people look at your GPA, it shapes how they’re perceiving you? Even when you moved to Canada?” She draws me back to the power the *nice-nice* man in western Africa has because of privilege.

“I think it’s common. One sociology class that I took, it was social problems, there is always like a wall, barrier, between people who are from different places. It maybe colour, language, other things, status, economic status, other positions you have in the society. They all shape how people perceive you in terms of when you need help. Imagine if my dad were to be a medical doctor and my mom may be not so, even if she was to be doing a civil service job not like a medical doctor but an apprenticeship in some field,

to have academic challenges. There would be more [long pause] more openness in terms of who is to help me. Maybe my dad would write a letter and send it to this person, and then it would be like, 'Oh, she has this situation. Yes, but other students have this situation.' But mine will be handled differently because it's coming from maybe a person has so much impact on society as a doctor. So it would be like, 'Oh, let's put her on this. She will have this kind of help when she's writing exams. She will be treated differently from people who come from say, a housekeeper's daughter, with mom and dad as housekeepers and she's coming from that poor background.' It would be still like, 'Oh, ya, you gotta try harder cause you're down there and you're struggling and you gotta pull hard to come up here.'” Through direct observation and experience, Mildred learned early on the power of position: she is the housekeeper's—not the doctor's—daughter.

“You say to navigate these educational places [long pause] it certainly wouldn't have been my mother or my great aunty. They were terrified of the power.”

“I think my parents are, 'Look at where they're coming from. What impact are you making on society? So you shouldn't have a say in here.'” Mildred calmly weeps a flash rainstorm of tears. Her tears flow from her wounded brown eyes and careen down her cheeks onto her hands and lap. Her upper pant legs are slashed with teardrops. I sit and pretend a calm.

Mildred helps me navigate how her higher education experiences are shaped by her parents' poverty—and, inexperience with education landscapes:

I think for me I felt, I felt like I wanted to be like somebody, somebody who was in a better situation and I wanted to be more the rich or middle class people. Because I think, when I look back and reflect on the people that were in my class, most of the poor kids, especially in the classroom had, I wouldn't say they weren't the best of all kids but mostly the boys were notorious. I fear to get into that condition. I fear to get into trouble in school especially knowing I come from a poor background. Coming home to meet my dad and my mom and knowing that at least they don't know any high authority and they didn't go that far in school so they don't know anybody who could rescue me when I get in trouble at school. Nobody would come and talk on my behalf. Somebody would not listen to my parents especially the headmistress who might not listen to my dad because they may think that, 'Oh, he's not that educated. Like daughter like mom.' You know. So I, I was more cautious about the people that I associated with but also there were poor kids in the school who were very nice and well behaved and took their studies seriously. But I also felt like every challenge [long pause] because those kids that were serious in academic they sometimes didn't like the kids who were looked down on in terms of academic in the school by the teacher. And in

Western Africa when you're very *weak* in academics, everybody knows it in the classroom. Because you're the one who carries [struggles to] the class, gets mentioned in front of the entire class ...

My last junior high school, that was in [western Africa], and in that school there were a lot of people there with different backgrounds, there were people who came from really, really rich homes. People come from middle class homes. People of teachers' children. People came from very, very poor homes. You could see the reality of it as you know the semester passes by, those that are stuck to go pay for their school fees, those who were fighting over food with other people, those who were misbehaving and getting into trouble, kids who were stealing from other people because they need money to do something, or their mom is not there and they are alone [*long pause*] you could always see the rich sons, the rich children, or the rich daughters misbehaving in school because they're fighting over a boy or something. You're not even thinking because you are hungry.

Mildred's laugh is discomfoting. "If you're the rich man's son, they don't touch you, they don't beat you. But then, if you're the poor man's son, you *really* get it from the teacher." I wonder as to the possibilities for literal and metaphorical beatings and how these possibilities may shift understandings of how early childhood experiences shape undergraduate students' experiences who come from poverty. Mildred says, "If you know somebody maybe—the punishment will be a little bit less."

We are drawn to how our parents and extended family never had the opportunity to go to any form of higher education. I wonder how being a "first-generation" student shapes poverty-class students' undergraduate experiences.

### **Hope for the Future**

I am curious. I want to know about the conversations Mildred and her parents have for her future. I did not have these conversations with my mother or great aunty. Perhaps I still long for these conversations that I will never be able to have. Perhaps I want to have these conversations vicariously through Mildred and her parents.

"What are their hopes for you when you finish school? Do you guys talk about it at all?"

"We don't really talk about it but for them it's more like you have to chase something that you can get a job. Something you can get a high paying job with. Something that you can sustain yourself. Something that you wouldn't be struggling to be yourself."

I cheekily say, "Not the starving artist or the starving musician?"

Mildred laughs at me. “It’s more like you have to have something that you could keep going to live. Also something that you could *save* [money]. That’s something that’s very important for your future and your children. My dad tells me [*long pause*] I sometimes tell him I would love to be a medical doctor and not stay here but go back home but he feels like it’s not something that could happen for me. Maybe for my children because for me he feels like [I’m] struggling through school now and it’s like, take it at a time, it’s not your generation, it’s the next generation. But I feel like it could happen if I make a bit of sacrifice.”

This pushes up against the dominant, first-generation, working-class student narrative I have read about in the research literature. I am drawn to the lack of understanding of what poverty-class parents hope for their children.

I tell Mildred, “I’m 51 and I’m just starting in school. So anything is possible.”

“Thank you!,” she says.

“It’s interesting that it would be the next generation that will take that step up the social ladder.” Rather, much further up the social ladder than one rung.

“My dad understands that—but I don’t know if my mom thinks about it that way. I know she really loves for us to go to school but sometimes I feel because she doesn’t understand certain things, that maybe she doesn’t really dream about those things. Maybe I haven’t talked about it with her so I don’t really know what she thinks on that part.” I continue to wonder about Mildred’s mom’s dreams for herself and her children.

“Sometimes I used to have very unkind thoughts about my family. It’s taken me a long time to understand, and even for myself, how can you imagine any other way of life when your life has been shaped by poverty and survival. The idea that there can be these different alternate lives ...”

“It’s true. No they say the child doesn’t see that much; when you’re an adult you have so many experiences and you’ve seen a lot. Maybe you haven’t seen it all but you’ve seen a lot. It makes you think, ‘Oh, these are the options. These are what can happen.’ When you want to challenge power. So children

are fearless in a way but adults are like they've seen a lot and are restricted by those experiences that become psychological, becomes emotional, becomes a mental thing.”

“When I think about my family, if you were going to go to school you’re only going to go to college, you need to just get married, and it is about survival. That’s what it’s about. The concept of university was so foreign that—nobody could understand these different possibilities and I didn’t either. And that’s part of what took me so long to finish my first undergrad. It was go to college and do something practical so you can get a job and then get married and have babies—”

“—have babies.” Mildred laughs delightedly.

“Ya, and live the—”

“—Same thing—”

“—Just keep it going intergenerationally. Maybe I would have been a little bit better off.”

“I think that’s probably the concept back home for some people. For most people back home. We don't have so many resources to develop ... for the better in terms of skills. Only so many jobs being created because of limited financial whatever and other things. Okay, ‘Let’s find you, once you’re a girl, let’s find you someone who can train you to sew, train to cook, train you to be a housekeeper, train you to be like little, little things—maybe a 0.5% of people who are rich in the society can make use of you.’” This is a story that was planted in Mildred. However, she pushes up against this belief each day she walks onto the higher education landscape. We both see possibilities for ourselves individually and for community. Mildred says in western Africa that things are slowly shifting. People are thinking beyond survival. “They want things on a large scale, saving more, not just for eating, not money for eating, not only money for survival, now it’s bigger.” She sees something bigger for herself. Something that is beyond the dreams her father has for her. Mildred’s dreams transcend basic survival. She dreams of a life that sustains her spirit. Mildred’s father wants his daughter to be okay. *why*-Mildred needs more than okay. Mildred makes me think of how poverty-class students can realize their dreams.

Mildred says, “The future is there but it’s—it’s not something that you can do it alone. You have to have other people around you to encourage you, other people around you to build you up, to be there for you when you need them to be there for you, you have to be the same for them. You have to encourage them, be there for them when they need you. And learn together and grow together. Because I feel like that is becoming so for every part of the world not even only here in Canada. People are like, ‘It’s me, me, me.’ It’s not like, ‘Let me share my experience.’ Which TedTalk does so much these days, sharing their experiences. But what about within the school system? Within the church? Within the social governance? The workplace?” Mildred does not expect some inspirational answer. I have no solutions. I am drawn however, to a recurring theme in research conversations.

“You make me wonder about *community* and what would it would it all look like if we had more *community*?”

“Right. Right. I don’t think we really understand what community is these days. We just think of community soccer, community party ... but are we really talking about real life experiences? I don’t know.”

“Who gets to go to those communities?”

“Mm—there now restrictions on certain communities who can leave and who can live there.” I wonder which communities we are talking about.

I ask Mildred, “Who can afford to be there?” Throughout research conversations, *afford* moves beyond an economic understanding. Like *poverty*, *afford* has complex meanings. As we near the end of our research conversation, and the lovely soft ice cream treats I provided, our conversation briefly shifts to colonialism and volunteering in Canada and “third-world” countries. There is a hurriedness now to our conversation. Mildred cannot miss her bus and be late for her casual status, convenience store job. I begin to rant. I am frustrated with the importance of *privileged* volunteer activities on university and scholarship applications. “Who actually gets to volunteer cause who has—sits in a position to be able to afford to volunteer?”

“That’s true.”

“You have to run off to work. I am behind [in my research] because I’m working a summer job, trying to—so volunteering becomes—this is my pet peeve [*long pause*] volunteering becomes a privileged thing instead of—”

“—I think you’re so right on that. So right.”

“And what volunteering matters. Does helping the elderly lady in your apartment building, does that matter? Or is the organized, I go dig wells in Africa and save all the Africans ...”

Mildred laughs at my frustration.

“You know that goes on all the time, right?”

Mildred continues to good-naturedly chuckle at me. “I know. We’re going to build a school for this community in Africa. We’re going to do this, we’re going to do that, we’re—”

“—And, teach them western education!”

“That’s right. It’s a good thing that they do that, send their part of their world to them. But I feel it should be—”

“Maybe they shouldn’t have gone and colonized Africa!”

“We wouldn’t get to know each other, would we!” Unintentionally, Mildred stops my frustrated rant and leaves me with joy, hope and wonders.

We see someone has spilled a drink on the floor. We clean it up. Mildred heads off to work. I head off home to wash away the stains of the day.

### **Let Them Eat Cake**

There is something satisfying talking to Mildred about food. Hunger, too, has been (and is) her constant companion. I am not comfortable talking about food outside of our conversations. Our childhood experiences with food shape our experiences on the higher education landscape. I ask Mildred, “Were there other students from poverty in [your elementary] school?”

“Oh, quite a bit, actually.”

“Was it visible who was from poverty?” I wonder, what do poverty-class children look like? Do *we* have a look? I have these wonders beyond my own experiences of being labelled on early education and community landscapes as *that* girl from *that* family.

Mildred distances her child self from other kids in poverty. I do this as well. “You could say, because sometimes you would see kids and the way they dressed up for school. If they had food to eat. Are they buying the textbooks? Are they neat? Are they washing their clothes? Are they wearing socks? You know, like, some basic things, basic things. You could see it. Definitely, it’s easy to see.”

“Did teachers treat students from poverty differently?”

“Sometimes these kids have a bit of behaviour problems, honestly. The kids—they may be the kids who will feel like, ‘We are not respected here because of our class in society.’ Especially the boys, they were rebellious. The ones I grew up [with] were rebellious. Some of them would do bad things to teachers’ cars—you know, go and puncture the car tires. I had quite a bit of experience with those!” Mildred always finds a way back to humour. “It’s funny. You know, you would think that these kids are making me laugh, but really, it was behaviour problems. And I didn’t really understand that at all.”

“Of course; you were a child.”

“I didn’t understand that they were having problems with behaviour, and this could lead to a lot of issues in the society as they grew up if it’s not controlled, if they’re not helped. And these are the kind of boys that, I don’t know, they were joking around, you always laugh with them, and you probably would be doing the same thing ... with them. You know; you know. One of them had done something really silly: somebody brought our teacher a cake—a cake—and left it on the teacher’s table. And when there was no teacher in the room, this guy sneaked into that room and ate the cake. You can imagine, the teacher—”

“—The whole cake?”

“The whole cake!”

“Oh, he must have been sick!”

“No, it’s not a big cake. It’s like one of those usual, not decorated, like, simple cake. Maybe brought it down to show his friends and—*enjoyed* it!”

We both think this is deliciously funny. Mildred launches into a palate-cleansing laugh.

“And knowing who exactly ate it. The teachers knew who were impoverished and who needed something.”

“How wonderful would it be to get to understand why the student ate the cake. Is it because they were hungry, or they never had access to a sweet like that before? Different ways—these are just different ways—we can tell stories.”

“I would imagine they had no [food] ...” Mildred is consumed with so much laughter her eyes are watering like I imagine the little boy when he first eyed the cake. “They just ...! Because it’s, like, ‘Oh, a cake! I’ve got to eat that cake.’ I don’t even know how they got to know how it was in the office because we were all there, we did not know, so how did this particular student know there was a cake, and run for the cake when the teachers were not there. This kid might have been hungry, too, you know.”

“Well, I know I would have looked at the cake with longing, because those are things I never had. And I wouldn’t have had the courage to touch it, but I—”

“—I don’t think I would have had the courage—”

“—But I would have looked at it and my stomach would have hurt and my heart would have hurt—”

Mildred is holding her stomach as she laughs with abandon.

“—But I wouldn’t have touched it!” I would not touch the cake at school, but I would have drooled longingly at it.

Our bad-kid humour is dashed. Along with the cake conspiracy comes the knowledge of *bad* poverty child behaviour and punishment. The cake saga is no longer pleasurable.

“You know, these kids are really rebellious, really, really rebellious. There were days that they did a lot of things that they were punished for. In [school], when you do something, you’re punished, and you’re punished in front of the whole public with a cane—like, viewing, the whole public. And that was—”

“—Public, as in the public square?”

“Oh, no, public as in the whole school. Every grade level gets to see, the whole school, especially it’s something really, really bad. I remember the first time I had seen someone was really, really, *really* whipped was when they went to watch pornography; they were really, really, *really* whipped. There were three teachers would give each of them about eight lashes—like, eight times three. Severe. And their parents were there to see that. One of the parents just fainted, and, like, okay, this was horrible.” Mildred laughs frightfully. It is the kind of laugh that releases fearful tension and an acknowledgement that she is no longer in danger on *that* particular landscape. These teachers cannot physically reach her here; metaphorically however, they are still close. Mildred distances herself: “But at the same time, these students had to sometimes learn things the hard way. The kids, these people coming into society, have an impact on society; it could be a negative impact; it could be a positive impact. So they have to be channelled in the right direction. But it didn’t have to be that severe. Maybe talking to them didn’t help, so maybe they had to take the alternative—that punishment.” I wonder how these experiences shape her undergraduate experiences. I wonder how the idea of being a *bad* student echoes through Mildred’s undergraduate experiences.

“Our schools here used to allow teachers and principals to give students the strap.” I remember a principle who would stand on the desk so he could gain greater momentum and force as he brought the dense, greying and frayed strap down upon children’s hands outstretched hands. For some children, punishment was exacted on bodies much worse at home—to reinforce the lesson and remind children not to misbehave on the education landscape—a prevalent belief at the time. I lived in terror of teachers being mad at me and punishing me in any manner. I wonder how these early education experiences shape my

experiences on the higher education landscape. Mildred, too, lives in fear of many undergraduate professors and public punishment.

“Um-hm. Sometimes they need it. Sometimes. I can tell you that, because sometimes people just don’t get it by hearing, like I said. Action—you need to add that. But not so much. Don’t do it out of hate. I think sometimes the teachers were doing it out of hate. When you punish somebody, don’t do it out of hate, do it because you really want to help them, and it’s out of love. It’s hard to get [to a place of caring] when you’re angry, but take some time off before you punish the kid. [Don’t do it] ... right away; [otherwise,] you pick something and you hit the kid. That’s anger; that’s not love. Take some time off, debrief yourself, and then help the kid with the right [and] appropriate punishment.” Mildred makes a plea for kindness. She makes a plea for the silenced young *why*-Mildred.

I say, “And often if we take the time to listen to find out what’s driving the behaviour.”

“Um-hmm. That really helps.”

“Because kids—”

“—Kids don’t like to be punished.”

“But sometimes kids act out in ways because they’re hurting and they have no way to talk about it, no space to talk about it, no way to understand it.”

“Right, right, that’s so true, that’s so true. As for me, when I was a kid, I don’t think I liked to be punished, I liked to be talked to in a sweet manner. I always tell my sister, when she’s angry, ‘Please don’t talk to me in an angry way; please talk to me in a sweet way. I don’t like to be shouted at; I don’t like that.’ It just rips me apart, makes me feel inferior. So when you come to me, and you talk to me in a very nice way, it helps me not to feel like I’m prideful; it helps me to feel more calm and to understand you better. But when you talk to me in a harsh way, I undermine myself, I break down with that kind of tone.” I wonder how these experiences silence Mildred in university classrooms—and, in administrators’ and advisors’ offices? We need a respite. Our conversation flows back to food, presented as a found poem:

Mildred metaphorically asks her mom, "Mom, why did you get married so early?"  
You know, when you come from an impoverished home  
Your basic needs are not met  
You just want something to eat  
Somebody comes along  
You just go with them

Mildred often talks of sweets. There were special days in western Africa where she relished in the childhood delights of sweet treats. "Back home, [my dad took] ginger, peeled it off, and put it in sugar—like, granulated sugar, not the cubes. They're the ones that you can dip things into it—like, not powder, but the granules itself. Then he would dip the gingers in the granules; that would be a treat, and we would have a little cup of Sprite—a little bit of that with that. So you'd get your Sprite, you'd get your ginger, you'd dip your ginger in your sugar, and that was your sweet, that's your dessert. And that happened probably three times or maybe two times in month on Fridays." But, she says, "The ginger was so hot" that it made their throats burn, which they alleviated "the tingle with teeny sips of Sprite." Mildred speaks fondly of these early experiences she shared with her family.

"For us, dessert was—the treat was—we would go into the bush to pick berries: blueberries, strawberries, and Saskatoon berries. There was nothing fun about it, because it was just work.... And you had to work—you had to come back with buckets of them. But you got to eat some; like, wild strawberries, have you ever had them?"

"No, I never had those."

"They're *so* sweet—*sweet* and *juicy*. And so that would be the treat. But really, it was just labour, it was child labour. But it was—"

"—That's how they classify it now, but back then, it doesn't seem like that, because you could get something to eat anyways, like your sweet strawberries."

Mildred is right. I learned to labour early on. I hated the massive garden as a child: never-ending planting, weeding and harvesting. The work required to fill stomachs was endless. Yet, I was always hungry. The smallest bodies were fed last. On the farm, we could sustain ourselves because of my

ingenious great aunty. When my mother moved my sisters and I to the village, cupboards were often bare. I thought I hated the garden on the farm. I wanted to play and roam. Yet, this summer, I planted basil, mint, chives, tomatoes, cucumbers and pumpkins on my university campus. They were available for any students who visited the campus water features. I wonder if this was in resistance to all the hungry tummies that are not heard on my campus. I shared this story with Mildred. She was delighted. She expresses much subtext that needs to be unearthed:

We dig for it  
We scramble to get there

Mildred tells me a food story about an area she lived in western Africa: “Normally the rich won’t allow the poor kids to come into their house.” However, one mother from the USA, who was living in Mildred’s neighbourhood, “was so nice” and cooked and let the poor kids come into her “fancy house.” This, too, is a nourishing memory.

“I think she came from an impoverished home and she was nice to kids in that condition. But going to their house and comparing where I lived, I saw a big difference and I was like, ‘Oh, wow. They are rich. I would love to go to their house!’ And their mom would make good meals.’” However, not everyone was happy when *why*-Mildred went to this American mother’s home. “I always liked to go there; my mom didn’t like us to go there.” Her mom would say, “You guys are going there to finish all their food!” Mildred would respond, “But she said we should come...!” Mildred fondly remembers this time in her life: “We loved to go there because their mom, even if she’s not there, we like to go there and eat all their food.” Like the experience with *nice*-man, Mildred says, “This was another point where I got to learn the difference between rich and poor in terms of what they eat and what they have.” With tender happiness Mildred recalls, “I didn’t learn it the bad way. I got to enjoy some of it with the friends I had who were fortunate to have, you know, good food and all of that.”

## Winding Up

Each unfolding of Mildred's experiences is like the unraveling of her *dhuku*: it reveals how childhood poverty reverberates through her undergraduate experiences on the university landscape.

Outwardly, there is no sign of the tensions she experiences. Mildred is a dichotomy: restrained and playful; serious and joyful. She often says, "Oh, Lady Elaine, you're so bad!," followed by a conspirator, "You're so funny!" comment. Her child-like glee is fleeting. It bumps up against stories planted in her that say, "Rein in your passions! Quiet your wonders!" After our narrative inquiry research journey together, I imagine the beginnings of a theatrical production:

A weary traveller arrives at the village gates. She seeks entrance and hospitality. The villagers sound the alert that a bedraggled stranger has arrived. No one is prepared for this guest. Word swiftly spreads of their arrival. Curious noses peek from behind closed curtains. An excited buzz carries on the wind, touching the doors of each dwelling ...

[*why-Mildred takes centre stage*]

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## CHAPTER SIX

### SEEKING, WONDERING, DREAMING

#### Discovering Resonant Threads

Clandinin (2013) notes that with narrative inquiry, we move through several “level[s]” of analysis (p. 132). First, I co-composed research texts from field texts (data). That is, narrative accounts are “a representation of the unfolding lives of both participants and ... [the researcher], at least as they became visible in those times and places where our stories intersected and were shared” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132). These “drafted narrative accounts” were negotiated with participants, a process unique to each research-participant relationship (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132). Second, after reading across all three “narrative accounts to inquire into [discernable] resonant threads or patterns” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132), I was able to identify areas that echo across the participants’ undergraduate experiences. Although only I had direct contact with participants, I agree with Clandinin (2013) that others “engaged in this process as a collaborative research team ... with an overall intention to open up new wonders and questions” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132) as to how systemic childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students’ experiences.<sup>45</sup> This process entailed metaphorically bringing the three narrative accounts alongside one another, searching for “what we, as a team, saw as resonances or echoes that reverberated across accounts” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132). Throughout, I remained attentive to each participant’s whole life in the making. Clandinin (2013) explains that in “looking across the narrative accounts co-composed between researcher and participant ... [we] hold onto storied lives and not ... reduce them to themes or categories” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 137). Third, two main narrative threads are foregrounded for discussion in this chapter: *belief in* and *poverty is not a box*, which show aspects of each participant’s life making in relation to larger social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives.

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<sup>45</sup> Discerning resonant threads is undertaken with the support of community so that patterns became visible that I may not have been able to see. This was important in this inquiry as my higher education experiences are also shaped by experiencing systemic childhood poverty. Community (i.e., supervisory committee members, works-in-progress partner), were instrumental in ensuring that my own experiences did not silence participants’ experiences.

Within each narrative thread, there are sub-threads. Each sub-thread is not necessarily demonstrated within the lived experiences of all participants; I did not search for ways to *force* lived experiences to fit neatly into each of these sub-threads. The narrative threads and sub-threads are not an exhaustive portrayal of the participants' lived experiences and unique biographies. Nor, are all private stories being made public; there are many silent stories that participants are still discovering or chose not to make visible (Neumann, 1997).

### **Starting in and Staying with Experience**

A distinguishing feature of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry methodology is "the place of theory ... differs from the place of theory in formalistic inquiries" (p. 128). They write "that formalists begin [the] inquiry in theory, whereas narrative inquirers tend to begin with experience as lived and told in stories" (p. 28). Hence, "for narrative inquiry, it is more productive to begin with explorations of the phenomena of experience rather than in comparative analysis of various theoretical methodological frameworks" (p. 128). As a result of this methodological philosophy, I did not ground this inquiry in what would normally be expected with this topic: Bourdieu's (1999) forms of capital theory (i.e., social, cultural, symbolic, economic). My starting place was—and, remained, with lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Nonetheless, the work of poverty-class scholars such as Adair (2003, 2001) deeply informed this research. Adair's theory that systemic childhood poverty shapes an entire life is a cornerstone to the premise of this thesis. As Adair (2003) writes, our identities and lived experiences of systemic childhood poverty "cannot be forgotten or erased" (p. 30). Sayer (2005) advocates for "greater consideration of the *experience* of class, and the concerns that people have regarding their class position and how others view them" (p. 947; italics added). Like Young (2005), who brings forth her intergenerational narrative reverberations theory (in relation to Canadian residential schools), Sayer (2005), too, asks us to consider that "the lottery of the market of birth and the intergenerational transmission of capitals [that] can produce (and have widely produced) class inequalities even in the absence of these forms of discrimination" (p. 948).

As a first-year, narrative inquiry apprentice, this paradigm shift held many tensions. It has been engrained in me to start with theory—a canonized theory—and look for *proof* to support this existing theory. A narrative inquiry paradigmatic shift allowed for the potential to discover—and be curious about—emerging wonders as I came alongside participants. Research conversations, using the narrative inquiry method, allowed for engaging in a long-term, in-depth exploration of the many layers of how childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students’ experiences. I remained grounded in, and, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “focused on trying to understand [students’] ... experiences narratively, which meant thinking about their experiences in terms of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space; that is, along temporal dimensions, personal-social dimensions, and within place” (pp. 128-129).

### **Coming to a Theoretical Framework: Belief in and Poverty is not a Box**

Across the narrative accounts, I saw that moving backwards and forwards across time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was integral to understanding how *belief in* and *poverty is not a box* shaped Margaret Rose’s, Mildred’s and Sarah’s undergraduate experiences. Lessard (2017) drew attention to ways that *belief in* a student, from those in positions of authority, community, and family, shape experiences: “belief is a game changer: if we can’t imagine otherwise, it’s difficult to see possibilities beyond our world that we inhabit” (S. Lessard, personal communication, February 4, 2017). Lessard draws on Greene (1995) who writes: “To call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise ... each person’s reality must be understood to be interpreted experience—and that the mode of interpretation depends on [their] situation and location in the world” (p. 19). Greene draws me to Elbow’s (2008) *believing game* theory to unpack these narrative threads:<sup>46</sup> Elbow (2008)<sup>1</sup> also speaks to seeing things *as they could be otherwise* and shifting understandings based on situated experiences (see note 1 for an detailed explanation of Elbow’s (2008) theory).

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<sup>46</sup> Dr. Vera Caine (nursing) and Dr. Janice Huber (education) from the University of Alberta brought forth Elbow’s (2008) theory as the theoretical framework to unpack the narrative threads.

Elbow's (2008) conceptualization of the *believing game* and *doubting game* serves as the theoretical framework for exploring these resonant threads. Rather than layering Elbow's theory onto the participants' experiences, bringing his ideas alongside the two resonant threads supports demonstrating the complex life that each participant is composing on the higher education landscape. I see Elbow's (2008) *believing game* and *doubting game* theory as a way to move from the centre to the margins to understand how systemic childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences.

**Philosophical entanglements: Unravelling Elbow's theory.** The following discussion, situated in relation to Elbow's philosophy, draws on the theory that we can begin to see *belief in* as Lessard's *game changer*—if, we get close to lived experiences as a primary source of knowledge (Adair 2003; Brown & Strega, 2005, Greene, 1995; Hill Collins, 1998; hooks, 2000). Further, the following discussion will make visible dominant higher education assumptions (narratives) of what constitutes the mythical “top student” and how this may marginalize poverty-class students.

Although I present *belief in* and *poverty is not a box* resonant threads, there is not an equal balance in the discussion. This is not due to a lack of lived experiences to demonstrate these threads; rather, *belief in* and *poverty is not a box* provide a way forward in considering how higher education must shift their inclusivity efforts. Juxtaposing *belief in* and *poverty is not a box* makes visible the importance of practicing Elbow's *believing game* to create sustainable “widening access” to higher education and EDI initiatives. The *doubting game* makes visible the damage that can be inflicted upon poverty-class students' lives in the making—and, how it does not advance knowledge and understanding, nor interrupt dominant institutional, cultural, familial, educational, and institutional narratives. Further, placing the *believing game* and *doubting game* in relation to each other sheds light on how privilege continues to be perpetuated in higher education (Adair, 2003; Brady et al., 2016). Finally, some lived experiences are experienced across the threads; a lived experience, for example, may show both *belief in* and *poverty is not a box*.

## “Belief in” Threads

**Beginning in ways forward.** *Belief in* was experienced directly and vicariously across the participants’ diverse lives—and, across time, place, and social relations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The participants brought this thread forward; they made visible how *belief in* is a game changer. The following discussion is not exhaustive of all participants’ *belief in* experiences. Rather, what follows are threads that resonate in profound ways: support for building communities, it only takes one teacher, brownies and graduation dresses, unsettling the normalized academic trajectory, dreaming in a safe space, and belief in self.

**Support for building communities.** Caine (2010) writes, “Traveling to and within unfamiliar landscapes” can be daunting (p. 1304). Entering onto an unfamiliar university landscape, without guidance or a map, can leave the poverty-class student traveller disoriented and lost. Support for building communities was crucial for Margaret Rose. She “jumped through all the hoops just to even be within this space”; however, without Clover, Margaret Rose may have left before she began.

Clover, Margaret Rose’s academic advisor from the college-sized university where she was completing her academic upgrading, practised *belief in* by bringing Margaret Rose to the university. Clover took her directly to the Aboriginal Student Services Centre and introduced her to Sage, the Aboriginal Students Services coordinator. Margaret Rose found out about the transitional year program (TYP). Through the support of these two individuals, from the first day of her transitioning into university, *belief in* played a critical role in Margaret Rose becoming part of a supportive—and, responsive—community. Margaret Rose, in turn, contributes to building and sustaining this community. For example, she reaches out to Indigenous youth who are considering attending higher education.

Sage brings in Indigenous university alumni to practice *belief in*: “Hey, you can do it!” You can do it on a landscape that was not, as Margaret Rose says, “historically ... meant for ‘Indians’ or even women.” The power of *belief in* is articulated by Sage’s understanding that many Indigenous students arrive without an understanding of how to navigate the landscape: policies, procedures, the hoops—and, the space itself. Clover and Sage practised *belief in* by storying Margaret Rose as a student with unlimited

potential. Sage practiced *belief in* when she brought Indigenous alumni in to talk to students; she practiced *belief in* Margaret Rose when she took her to Indigenous events on campus. These *belief in* practices are, as Margaret Rose says, “Why I’m still here today.” Margaret Rose shares that she knows other Indigenous students, who did not have the same *belief in* experiences, “are not here today. Because—community within a community is so integral to survive this institution.”

Margaret Rose captures why community on the higher education landscape is Lessard’s (2017) *game changer*:

That moment when you’re not alone  
That silence  
Broken

As I think about Sarah’s experience with the very public “privilege walk,” I draw on Elbow’s (2008) “rhetoric of experience” in relation to *belief in* (p. 8). I ask Sarah what difference having community on campus makes: “It’s *huge!*” she says. There is solidarity in the Indigenous community to which she belongs. This solidarity is driven home because, as Sarah says of the privilege walk, “We [Natives] all took steps back for the most part.” The Native students could not take any more steps back; their backs were pushed up against the wall. Students in front could not see their fellow students who stood behind them. *Belief in* was experienced within the Indigenous student group in this class. It is a *belief in* of shared experiences. Yet, community may also result in exclusion and isolation. As Sarah explains, if she had been in a class with mostly Caucasian students, she “probably would have felt very uncomfortable. But because [she] was in a community of Indigenous people, [they] were there together in solidarity.”

***It only takes one teacher.*** When teachers say, in a multitude of ways, “Let me enter into your experiences and understandings so I can ‘get a better perspective on my thinking’ and see if there’s something important that you can see that I can’t see” (Elbow 2008, p. 6), lives can be shaped in meaningful ways.

Mildred's high school teacher created a safe space for Mildred to engage in conversations that were respectful of her lived experiences. In sharing how her life on western African and Canadian landscapes was shaped by childhood poverty, Mildred's isolation on the high school education landscape began to lessen. Mildred's teacher practiced *belief in* by opening up a space where she could get close to what was shaping Mildred's challenges without storying Mildred as "deficit." Her teacher could appreciate what it is like to believe that, as Mildred says, "You don't deserve to be somewhere or you feel like you can't do it." *Belief in* by this teacher was demonstrated to Mildred by the way her teacher knew when Mildred did not really understand the course material. She picked up on the minutiae of Mildred's facial expressions when they signalled a lack of understanding even when, as Mildred says, I "lied to her that [I] got it."

*why*-Mildred emerged because a teacher had *belief in* her. Mildred holds close her Canadian high school chemistry teacher's *belief in* that she would eventually understand the material—with support. Mildred still felt a sense of wonder when she retold an experience with this teacher. Mildred is very, very, *very* meticulous. For Mildred, a profound *belief in* moment was, as Mildred says, "the first time he used [the] word [meticulous], I was so excited about myself." Mildred remained excited when she retold this experience in a research conversation; her education chronicle reflects a pride in being meticulous. It is a way that she communicates her identity, without making herself visible. I wonder, had this teacher not praised her for her meticulousness, would Mildred have drawn her education chronicle differently, or would she have drawn it at all?

Sarah experienced *belief in* vicariously through her mother. This opened up possibilities and wonders regarding teaching-learning relationships. The woman in the shelter had *belief in* Sarah's mother to go to higher education not solely for pragmatic reasons. She opened up the possibilities of education as an avenue of exploration. In this sanctuary for "lives on the edge" (Polakow1994, cover), Sarah's mom's life shifted from oppressive survival to extraordinary potential—and, so too did Sarah's. I remain drawn to how the woman at the shelter opened up understandings of higher education beyond utilitarian purposes. I am drawn to how a single moment in time, when a single person is wakeful and attentive, can

profoundly shift a life in the making. Sarah's undergraduate friend has shared this kind of *belief in* with Sarah. Sarah now sees education as a way to enrich a whole person and life in the making. I wonder how this shelter-experience will echo through the rest of Sarah's undergraduate journey.

margaret rose's Indigenous first-year, English teacher wanted to get close to the "rhetoric of *experience*" by encouraging students to explore their lived experiences as a primary source of knowledge (Elbow 2008, p. 8). This *belief in* experience echoes through margaret rose's undergraduate experiences. margaret rose says, "She taught me that everyone has a story. Everyone has a story. It doesn't matter where you come from. Treaty, non-Treaty, Indigenous, non-Indigenous—it doesn't matter. We all have a story to tell. And that's something I've always, always, *always*, kept with me." The opportunity to explore experiences and knowledge inside of academia profoundly shapes her. It is reshaping the way she understands how she can be a part of opening up spaces to have different conversations that push up against institutional privilege—even when she feels she is "too deep into this institution."

This first-year English teacher practiced *belief in* by being willing to "dwell in" the lived experiences of students in order to "get a better perspective on [their] thinking" (Elbow, 2008, pp. 6-8) and assumptions; *belief in* results in understanding something of how students' lives have been shaped.

***Brownies and graduation dresses.*** margaret rose shared her experience, of *belief in*, with an undergraduate research funding program coordinator, Jewel, and how she "was right beside her" the day the application was due. margaret rose camped out in Jewel's office from 8:00 am until she pressed SEND that day. Jewel told margaret rose, "I believe in you. [The] research you're doing ... [is] needed." For margaret rose, Jewel's *belief in* allowed her, for the first time, to experience being a student first. Both margaret rose and myself have experienced Jewel's *belief in* that encompasses her endless support of our applying for undergraduate research funding, doing the research, and dropping in for chats where we knew Jewel will have made a pan of brownies to nourish our spirits.

Mildred and her twin sister might have graduated from high school without teachers' support; however, they would not have attended convocation—or, at least without feeling highly exposed as

coming from an impoverished family. Mildred's teacher, along with the principal, raised funds so Mildred and her twin sister could buy graduation dresses. Mildred and her twin walked across the high school convocation stage not marked as poverty-class students. Their teachers practiced *belief in* Mildred and the power of this symbolic moment to shape her future education journey; *belief in* that Mildred, too, should be able to publicly celebrate this milestone in her young life.

***Unsettling the normalized academic trajectory.*** I shared with participants that it took me over fifteen disjointed years to complete my first undergraduate degree as a way to demonstrate *belief in* to Margaret Rose, Sarah, and Mildred. This is a counter-narrative to the dominant linear four-year undergraduate academic trajectory narrative. For me, this is what a relational methodology looks like; this is what coming alongside participants looks like in practice.

I did not try to hide that my higher education trajectory and experiences were shaped by intergenerational poverty. I could not pretend, nor, could I try to distance myself from vulnerability. I owed this to participants as a sign of respect and honour for their sharing their lived experiences and all they were willing to sacrifice in coming out of the shadows and margins to share these experiences. In this way, we were able to *out* ourselves to each other without the fear of being *ousted*. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) illustrate: I (hopefully) “composed ... research text[s] that illustrated how” larger education, familial, social, and institutional narratives of poverty-class students are shaped by the “higher education landscape “and gave form to” students’ “cover stories.” My motivation was to write “about penetrating cover stories because of the relationships ... [I] created and into which spaces the ... [students] told and lived their stories.” (p. 132)

To demonstrate the unsettling of the normalized academic trajectory, Margaret Rose arrived at our first research conversation exhilarated to be able to “afford” to participate. She also arrived exhausted from the six-year academic struggle she has been engaged in. Stories were planted in her that the Canadian undergraduate experience has a certain look: finish in four years with at least a satisfactory academic standing—and, *sans*-RTWs, emergency loans, and homelessness. When I told Margaret Rose

that “I would change majors, I would quit, I would screw it up ...” there was a visceral sense of relief that she was not an anomaly—at least within the invisible and silenced poverty-class student community.

*Belief in* with this thread is rooted in Elbow’s (2008) rhetoric of experiences and interrupts dominant assumptions about education journeys. Tensions with these dominant institutional narratives are seen in Sarah’s education chronicle: Sarah is a “mature” student (as defined by Canadian higher education institutions) in her second year of undergraduate studies. How early familial, institutional, and education experiences will manifest as she continues seeking in her undergraduate exploration is yet to be known. She remains wakeful to the academic linear fallacy.

*Dreaming in a safe space.* Dreams were a crucial source of knowledge to Mildred and her twin sister. Mildred’s sleeping and awake dreams helped her imagine forward-looking stories. Second, as Mildred says, through her dreams, “It makes me feel like there is hope for me. You know, I’m not really done because I’m going to an academic warning, academic challenge. That’s not the end of it. Things will get better.” Mildred and her twin sister “take dreams very seriously.” Dreams are also a safe space in which to imagine a life beyond systemic childhood poverty—and, education for utilitarian purposes.

*Belief in self.* Joy, hope, and a desire to create social change, figure prominently in Sarah’s life. Living without a high school diploma, working at a retail job, and not being able to be part of conversations about how lives and policies are shaped was not a sustainable life for Sarah. *Belief in* self is the “healing path becoming more clearer” and things becoming “more flowy” with less “scribbles and squiggles”; yet, squiggly lines extending forever. *Belief in* self is shaped by “sense making”: the question mark pieces fitting, the circles and squares no longer at odds, and coming full circle back to creativity in her current creative writing course. Sarah aspires to be like her Indigenous creative writing teacher: powerful, confident, caring, and working towards social justice through storytelling. *Belief in* herself is shifting her understanding of higher education beyond utilitarian purposes: she seeks education that intrinsically shapes the whole of her life in the making.

From the outset of our research relationship, Margaret Rose had a tenuous *belief in* herself both in her desire to have the doctorate title and the privilege it comes with—that is, to have a voice at the table where she is “taken seriously when [she has] this conversation.” What *this* conversation is, is still unfolding; however, as she says, it includes accepting that “Not many of my *relatives* can ‘survive’ within these spaces.... I can. I can walk both worlds, encouraging understanding.” *Belief in* is symbolized in her struggling to understand how she can honour her ancestors, Elders, Indigenous youth, her partner, and her son in her quest for the privileged academic paper. *Belief in* is manifested by the deep responsibility an Elder taught her: “We have a responsibility to share our knowledge. Can’t keep all this goodness to ourselves! Let’s share!”

Margaret Rose also sustains *belief in* of herself by forward-looking stories. One day she hopes she may be taught the knowledge and wisdom of her ancestors and relatives in order to become an Elder. She is reflexive: “I can be an Elder and have a PhD. I’m learning that I can’t romanticize my culture and traditions. These are ‘new’ traditions. We are adapting as Indigenous peoples, utilizing ‘new’ gifts for oral traditions. Wow. Those readings you shared, plus this ‘new’ book I’m reading is changing me. I’m learning that I can change, and that I can grow. That the way I think today could be different tomorrow. How else am I going to evoke change, unless I accept it as well?”

Mildred’s *belief in* self is shaped by stories planted in her. She says, “I think I’ve had a very challenging experience believing in myself, having faith in myself that I can also be somebody who would be impactful in society, somebody who can make a difference in other people’s lives.” Along the way, a philosophy was planted in her: “As long as we’re living, as long as we’re going to be trying to survive to make life better, our stories are going to be continuing until we are—no more.” Mildred speaks about the importance of supporting and coming alongside others; she dreams of returning to western Africa as a healthcare practitioner to give back. Lately, she is learning vicariously through others that she too is “capable of going somewhere in [her] life, [she is] also capable of ...” Indeed, our stories are not finished, nor are they to be prescriptively defined because of coming from systemic childhood poverty.

## Resonant Reflexivity

I preface the next narrative threads with the following prose. It reflects the many tensions I felt as I transitioned from the hopeful to the more difficult participants' experiences. At moments, I thought I would not be able to once again sit with these experiences. This prose provided a way forward that helped me to continue to have *belief in* this research and myself as a poverty-class student who is composing a life on the higher education landscape.

Blood-soaked and pain stricken, the ravaged fingertips of her red worn hands could not reach the keys for many weeks.

Generally accepted academic principles contort her aged-fingers with childhood poverty and academic rigour. She habitually hears, "It's just poverty; it's *just* a master's.... Just hammer out the analysis—and, move on."

With an auctioneer's voice, these beliefs boom through, slice and shred her emerging scholarly confidence like a newly sharpened butcher's knife. Dominant assumptions about lives shaped by systemic childhood poverty hack away at her *belief in* this narrative inquiry. Her *ological*-stances feel shredded. She picks up the pieces; she will not discard them.

She does an analytical yo-yo like dance: she holds *lack of belief in* and *poverty is seen as a box/poverty is not a box* resonant threads close, then pushes them away, then draws them close again. She wants to hide out in the narrative accounts; the hard stuff feels like too much to bear; she worries she will not survive intact.

She remains focused on piecing together the research puzzle by making tensions and lived experiences visible. Yet, it is as excruciatingly painful as her higher education-torn fingernails.

So many layers of her fingernails have been torn off, the blood has risen to the surface; the middle finger of her left hand looks as if a hammer beat it.

Educators, community, and family assumed she would travel the same path as generations before her. No one expected her to succeed in education. She could hardly imagine anything else for herself: to imagine a life beyond the wrong side of the social tracks was too much of a stretch. She knew this was never going to be *just* a masters. It is her life; it is not her life's work.

She is gifted with a healing salve: she learns that her master's is a starting point on a longer journey. She will get voices to ring loud, true, and strong—in other places and spaces; she need not die on the thesis-hill.<sup>47</sup> Her friend, Mary Lee Bird,<sup>48</sup> practices *belief in* when she says, "Spit your truths! I'm nobody to silence that."

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<sup>47</sup> This understanding is shaped from a conversation with Dr. Susan Strega (Professor), School of Social Work, University of Victoria. I am deeply grateful for her support in helping me to understand the tensions I was experiencing.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Lee Bird is not a pseudonym; I use her actual name with her permission.

## Doubting Threads

**Bumping up against the doubting game.** As with the above *belief* in resonant thread, *doubt* (*lack of belief in*) was experienced directly and vicariously across the participants' diverse lives—and, across time, place, and social relations. The *doubt* threads are as follows: no support for building community, transcribing poverty-class students, and (un)acknowledged institutional stereotypes.

**No support for building community.** Unlike Sarah and Margaret Rose, Mildred does not have community on the higher education landscape. A lack of support for building community translates into the silencing of Mildred and her lived experiences. She becomes increasingly aware that this creates generalizations and homogenizes Black students. While she does not seek to be put into a Black box, she longs to be alongside western African students who can mentor her. She wants to learn from them and share with them “similar things, which are cultural, language, and a lot of things. Similar childhood experiences. Maybe. Maybe not.” What is missing in higher education for Mildred is a *belief in* through community. Mildred said, “It would be so encouraging to have older people that you would call for like—older siblings, older mentors, older friends that bonds with them. Grow with them. Be encouraged with them. That’s part of sustainability.” Like Lugones (1987), Mildred wants to be able to “world’-travel” with students from other racial, social class, and cultural backgrounds. She sees community beyond a narrow lens that fails to see the multiplicity of students’ lives. She has a Lugones-type (1987) philosophy in that she feels that we all “need to [metaphorically] go somewhere and be a foreigner.”

Mildred and Margaret Rose have a shared understanding, which Mildred eloquently expresses: “They’re aren’t many of us here. Some of us come and drop out because we are intimidated by how great, by how big the university is. There are so many things. Our financial circumstances. So many things hold us back.” Regardless of any social characteristics, Mildred says, “everybody has a different experience” and she longs to learn of—and, from—stories of silence.

**Transcribing poverty-class students.** Throughout our time together, there exists tension between *outlier*-Mildred and *why*-Mildred. When Mildred started university, academic advisors helped her choose

her classes and navigate her program. Five years later, after two academic probations, they have no time for Mildred—or, students like her. Mildred witnessed this first-hand as she waited in line to speak with an academic advisor in her department.<sup>49</sup> Another student on probation was sent away when she requested support in choosing her classes so she could meet her academic probation conditions. Mildred practiced *belief in* when she thought, “Imagine if she’s here alone or if she has some friends but she’s not comfortable talking to them; [yet, she might be] more comfortable coming to someone who’s an advisor. Somebody who’s seen a lot of undergrads” and lived experiences. The advisor had a *lack of belief in* this student; they storied this student based on her academic transcript and trajectory. Mildred was afraid to be sent away as well so she nervously told the academic advisor, “Oh, I’m in a similar situation. I heard what you said to her. Thank you.” Mildred silently left. This *lack of belief in* chipped away at Mildred’s confidence and ability to understand and navigate higher education policies and the landscape. I wonder, if the advisor had taken the time to understand Mildred and this other student’s experiences, how might their assumptions shifted? I wonder how they may then have been able to attend to these students’ lives in the making in meaningful ways. I wonder if they would realize that Mildred vicariously experienced the *lack of belief in*? Although Mildred may not be able to name the dominant institutional “top student” narratives using academic lingo, she can articulate them using her lived experience lingo: “Maybe because of my fifth year they feel like, ‘Oh, it took too long! Grow up...! Maybe they look at my transcripts and they’re like, ‘You’re not a baby student. You’re an adult student. Grow up!’.” Mildred just walked “out of there with [her] embarrassment.” I wonder how many *outlier*-Mildreds permanently walk off the higher education landscape never to return? I wonder how many *why*-Mildreds are forever silenced.

margaret rose, after struggling to *fit* into higher education, succinctly explains how this can shape lives: “I’m just so used to the ‘withdrawal’ game.” It reduces risk; it causes harm. Mildred echoes margaret rose’s lived experience:

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<sup>49</sup> While I am aware of institutional issues (e.g., pressures to increase “bums in seats” while maintaining the same level of academic advisors; the reduction of tenure-track professors and corresponding increases in sessional instructors), I have wonders about this as a mitigating factor for practicing a *lack of belief in* students who are not identified by universities as “top students.”

Who says I shouldn't be here because I failed a class  
I failed three classes  
I failed whatever  
Nobody's a bum  
What's keeping them at this place?  
Don't pull my hair  
No, you need to understand  
Answering for me  
Missing quite a bit  
Hunger in my eyes  
Not at peace  
Give me the opportunity to say something

*(Un)acknowledged institutional stereotypes.* I had thought it would be an excellent opportunity to attend the Canadian federal government's roundtable EDI discussion. It would be the first time I would be privy to this type of discussion by policy makers, administrators, and faculty. On the higher education landscape, outside of my own experiences and the experiences participants shared with me during our research conversations, I only got close to institutional stereotypes through the literature I reviewed for this inquiry—I had never heard these dominant institutional narratives reinforced publicly. I invited Margaret Rose. I thought it would be a way to make poverty-class students' voices heard. For me, it was an experience that made visible institutional stereotypes that perpetuate a *lack of belief in* students who are Other.

A dean commented that their department "saves seats for Indigenous students," but they are ill-qualified for the program. The holders of academic authority made Indigenous and "disabled" students the object of discussion rather than part of the discussion (Adair, 2003). The idea of *saving* seats has resonances of charity and deficit-based thinking; "ill-qualified" does not unpack issues of, for example, formal school readiness, and the inherent inequalities at all levels of Canadian education. Without practicing Elbow's (2008) *belief in*, those in positions of authority did not have to "find flaws in their thinking" (pp. 5-6), nor did they have to "believe an alien idea [that could] make [them] fear being changed or polluted" (p. 7). That is, those in positions of power may be complicit in perpetuating stereotypes of non-privileged students and institutional inequality.

I was born in Canada. I am a Canadian citizen. I am white. I do not carry my birth certificate or passport with me. Mildred was not born in Canada. She is a Canadian citizen. She is Black. As Mildred and I sat down with a financial advisor at the university's registrar's office, seeking an emergency bursary for Mildred, her citizenship was questioned: "Are you a Canadian citizen?" Mildred's distress was plainly visible. Her hand quivered as she reached into her bag to pull out her passport. She could not find it. She panicked. All she had was her student identification card, the same thing I carry with me. The advisor again asked, "How long have you been in Canada?"

"Eight years," Mildred meekly answered. Mildred was silenced.

Mildred and I still carry many wonders about this experience and institutional assumptions that may have shaped this experience. We try to practice Elbow's *believing game*; it is hard.

*Visibility as Other.* As Sarah and I temporally travelled to an experience on her early childhood education landscape, a *lack of belief in* students from poverty becomes painfully clear. The teacher (perhaps the institutional administrative culture as well) *assumed* that the little boy was a thief *because* he was marked by poverty: his clothes were not neat and tidy, his hair bore the markings of a homemade cut, his behaviour was problematic, and his parents were not around. Therefore, a twisted logic followed, "How could *he*, the poverty-class child, possibly own a set of coloured markers?" A *lack of belief in* was practiced by the teacher, enabled, because as Sarah says, "There was an assumption that was going to be made and there was the assumption that there was nothing [his mom] could do." Neither the children or the little boy's family would ever be able to interrupt this stereotype or damage the institutional poverty narrative. The public shaming, marginalizing—and, bullying—of this little boy echoes through Sarah today. I wonder how this shaped her experiences in the public "privilege walk" she had to do on campus as part of a course exercise?

*Student's lack of belief in themselves.* Margaret Rose tells a familiar tale. It is a struggle to have *belief in* yourself, that you are good enough to be in university, and that you are meant to be here. This struggle is expressed through a found poem from her narrative account:

Six years  
I still struggle  
I'm not good enough  
Still question if I'm meant to be here

For Margaret Rose and Mildred, their *lack of belief in* themselves is shaped, in part, by experiences on early childhood education landscapes. This *lack of belief in* shapes our higher education experiences. This *lack of belief in* manifests itself in different ways. I share with Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah that it took me over fifteen years to complete my first undergraduate degree. I learned that Margaret Rose and myself have such a profound *lack of belief in* ourselves in higher education that we sabotaged school in many ways: didn't finish assignments, wrote papers the night before, dropped out, changed majors, peaced out, took "time off," accepted damaging institutional, social, and cultural narratives, self-harmed, feared completion and what completion of higher education may mean ...

Switching pronouns to distance—and protect—herself, Mildred articulates her lived experiences and understandings how *lack of belief in* shaped her life: "This is what is causing a lot of problems with students taking their own lives. Because they feel like, 'Hey, I've got to this point and now I'm a disappointment to my organization. I'm a disappointment to this faculty. To this university. To this nation. To taxpayers. This family. Myself.' I don't have one friend and I have nobody to talk to. Nobody wants to welcome them."

### **Poverty Dichotomies**

Even students whose lives have been shaped by systemic childhood poverty struggle with the *poverty is not a box* versus the *poverty is seen as a box* dichotomy. Many early and current experiences shape these tensions. Participants *experience* poor-bashing and individualistic explanations for the struggles they face in relation to the "bootstrap" and "top student" narratives. Ubiquitous noun-based assessments question not only our right to be in higher education, but our moral worth and academic aptitude. To illustrate, "top students" persevere; they are strong, resilient, and hardworking. They *just* "suck it up," and make it through like *everybody* else. These words convey profoundly silencing and marginalizing connotations.

What does perseverance, strength, and resilience look like? I wonder if these noun-based narratives are dominant stories that create mythical poster students of success—and, perpetuate the illusion of higher education being situated on a level-playing field? I wonder if these narratives diminish the experiences and experiential knowledge of students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty? Are narratives foisted upon us stories that are not our own?

Larger familial, education, social, cultural, and institutional narratives blame the individual while ignoring structural reasons for poverty (Adair, 2003; Brady et al. 2016). As such, poverty-class students are pushed further into the shadows and margins of the higher education landscape. Consequently, there is the perpetuation of silencing their experiences and knowledge (Ghosh & Adbi, 2013). Participants have all experienced being the object of discussion instead of part of the discussion (Adair, 2003). Participants have experienced students, staff, administrators, and professors' shock when it is suggested that poverty-class students are on the higher education landscape beyond the bodies doing the labouring. Participants, too, have experienced, the silencing judgements that if you are struggling you are not meant to be here.

The thesis of this research is built upon the premise that systemic childhood poverty shapes an entire life. In particular, my thesis pushes against the dominant belief that as soon as a poverty-class student crosses the higher education landscape threshold, childhood poverty miraculously vanishes like dandelion fluff carried off by a strong breeze (CITE). Thus, I assert, that childhood poverty echoes across time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This thesis seeks to make visible that we cannot, and should not, silence the poverty-class student by thinking poverty exists in a box in order to contain it to any specific temporal moment.

**“Poverty is seen as a box” thread.** I wonder if seeing poverty in a box is a result of, as Elbow (2008) says, a fear of “trying to believe an alien idea [that] can make us fear being changed or polluted” (p. 7)? That is, that poverty shapes an entire life in the making. Poverty-class students can therefore be contained; their problematic selves then do not threaten or outwardly contaminate the privileged higher education institution; as the dangerous Other, they are enclosed in the margins (Polakow, 1993). The

following are the *poverty is seen as a box* threads: get back on the reserve, erasing identities, Othering assimilation narratives, keeping the centre sacred, invisibility of social class, and it's your own damn fault.

Practicing the *doubting game* holds constant damaging and marginalizing dominant poverty-class student (and poverty) narratives. The *doubting game* offers an ideological reprieve: we do not have to “try to believe things we don't believe—especially things we don't want to believe” (Elbow, 2008, p. 4). For example, by holding close cherished ideologies situated at the centre—that is, seeing *poverty as a box*, we can keep counter-narratives and experiential knowledge and experiences of Others at a safe distance—in other words, in the margins. We do not have to acknowledge, or challenge, higher education landscapes as sites of uncontested privilege. We need not “find flaws in our thinking” or get close to the “rhetoric of *experience*” (Elbow, 2008, pp. 7-8) that would interrupt dominant narratives that preserve “fake it till you make it” and other silencing assimilation dogmas—beliefs that are enacted and held firmly in the grasp of those who occupy the centre. In this way, the doubting game allows us to see *poverty as a box* in order to blame the individual and story SES “disadvantaged” students as less-than. This keeps us from even imagining how systemic childhood poverty shapes poverty-class students in profound and complex ways; their unique biographies remain silenced and invisible.

The doubting game also allows us to skip the history book chapters on historical understandings of how social class in Canada and Canadian higher education institutions have been informed and shaped by British notions and structures (Burtch, 2006). As long as we are diligent in playing the doubting game, and keeping *poverty in a box*, poverty-class students do not become the higher education institution's “problem.” Utilizing the doubting game within the *poverty is seen as a box* context, results in a *lack* of Greene's (1995) “call for imaginative capacity ... to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). In other words, our imagination is as boxed in as our understandings of how systemic childhood poverty shapes an entire life. Practicing the *doubting game* reinforces the idea that once a student crosses the academic threshold, the experiences of childhood poverty magically vanish from embodied selves; one just needs a good scrub brush and bar of soap, and the stain of poverty disappears.

Historically, we know these institutions were built for those who could access them (Burtch, 2006); however, as Margaret Rose says, “Historically speaking. Historically this, Oh, fuck! Historically, that shit ain’t working!” By way of example, the following demonstrates how participants experienced *poverty is seen as a box*, and, which I hope shows, that this too, can be Lessard’s (2017) *game changer*; yet, not in the *belief in* way. I saw throughout this inquiry how *belief in* was often shattered by *poverty is seen as a box*.

***Get back on the reserve.*** As an Indigenous person, Margaret Rose, her family, and ancestors have had turbulent experiences with social workers and colonial social service institutions. Margaret Rose had to put herself at risk in seeking social service assistance last summer. She had no choice. She was in a precarious position both with housing, finances, and her university education. Her identity as a university student, who had been raised in an urban inner city, was erased by social workers; they did not try to see her as a life in the making. I wonder if this was too much of a stretch, too much of “an alien idea” for the social services personnel to imagine a counter story to the damaging Canadian Indigenous stereotypes (Elbow 2008, p. 7).

Margaret Rose was “treated inhumanely.” They turned their backs on her. They practiced the *doubling game* and saw her in an Aboriginal *poverty box*; they turned their backs on her and from “the rhetoric of *experience*” (Elbow 2008, p. 8):

“Oh, but you’re First Nations. Can’t you just go back to your reserve?”

“Oh, you’re First Nations. Doesn’t your band give you money for welfare?”

“Oh, no! That’s not our responsibility. You’re gonna have to go ...”

***Erasing identities.*** Within her university’s native studies program, Sarah can do the privilege walk alongside her Aboriginal classmates. She takes steps back until her back is up against the wall. Situate her in a predominantly White class however, Sarah says, “I probably would have felt very uncomfortable. But because I was in a community of Indigenous people, we were there together in solidarity, so it was different, right.” In a “privilege walk” education lesson, conducted in a primarily White class, Sarah would

have to erase her identity in order to decrease her visibility. I continue to wonder about homogenizing Native students in this *privilege walk*. I wonder how others story them? Were they storied in a similar manner as Margaret Rose when she tried to access social assistance?

Erasing identity manifests itself in a multitude of ways for Mildred. She tells me, “Oh, I’m down and I’m alone and nobody can hear me. Not even my African society. Not even anybody else.” Black students have been homogenized on her higher education landscape; they become a silenced, highly visible, fragmented minority. Perhaps, if she could erase her beautiful soft accent, her citizenship would not be so readily questioned. This aloneness causes Mildred to withdraw herself “from the bigger society ... it makes [her] feel worthless.” She says, “You’re just—nobody. And you just withdraw from school and your future’s closed.” If she has to erase her identity in order to connect with others, she says, “You just go away. I mean go away from here. You lose a lot.” Mildred says that as a child from systemic poverty she learned that “curiosity made us noticeable” and that was a dangerous risk; safer to erase *why*-Mildred. For example, Mildred still relives the painful experiences of early education landscapes where children from poverty were seen as problematic because of their origins of birth: the public beatings on the school landscape, having no where to run while her parents’ were creating a home in Canada, and having to make survival on familial landscapes a priority over learning and curiosity.

I bring forward a found poem from Margaret Rose’s narrative account as it aptly describes the *experience* of having to erase her identity in order to assimilate into the middle-class, higher education landscape:

Wearing masks  
A white mask  
Masks to fake it  
Killing my soul

Margaret Rose defines a *white mask* as, “I have to speak a certain way. I have to dress a certain way. I have to, I’m expected to act a certain way now” that I’m “so deep inside the institution.” She also says that she has survived and that she “didn’t have to fake it.” She juggles theatrical counter-cover stories that

show the tensions of trying to move from the margins to the centre, while simultaneously erasing—and, resisting erasing, her identity. Margaret Rose tries to erase the deeply embedded lived experiences in her embodied self. She has tried out for the higher education “top student” role. She has not been able to master this character, or to learn her lines well enough to *go off-book*.

Mildred learned on early familial, education, and community landscapes to silence *why*-Mildred. Poverty was visible in Mildred’s world; she recalls how poverty publicly marked children: “You could say, because sometimes you would see kids and the way they dressed up for school. If they had food to eat. Are they buying the textbooks? Are they neat, are they washing their clothes, are they wearing socks? You know, like, some basic things, basic things. You could see it. Definitely, it’s easy to see.” She was taught that invisibility kept her safe on the many landscapes she inhabited; invisibility came from conformity to social class expectations. *Why* was reserved for the privileged; on early education landscapes, children in poverty were labelled “bad” and subject to public beatings. On the familial landscape, *why* did not bring in money, put food on the table, or clean the home. Being born into a homogenous cement box community, *why*-Mildred did not have much opportunity to “world’-travel” (Lugones, 1987). Today, as she is composing a life on a higher education landscape, *why*-Mildred is wrapped in a “be still!” stillness.

Mildred and Margaret Rose have been reduced to a RTW-identity. Neither Sarah, Mildred nor Margaret Rose can scrub their skin white; regardless of how much I scrub my skin, it remains “not quite white” (Wray, 2006). None of us can, or should have to, erase how our identities are shaped by systemic childhood poverty. Yet, because our experiential knowledge remains situated in the margins, our identities must be, at least, hidden. That is, unless, like Margaret Rose (and myself through this research and public presentations) publicly choose to come out of the “poverty closet” and interrupt the highly valued “erasing of your identity” and “fake it till you make it” dominant narratives.

***Othering assimilation narratives.*** The participants make me wonder about identity on their higher education landscapes, what constitutes the *right* student, and how to live where our experiences and identities are valued. I wonder how we do not cave into the pressure of faking it till you make it or

assimilating middle-class university culture, especially in light of how this belief is so highly valued, normalized, and seen as “transformative?” How often I have heard and read in literature, “Fake it till you make it builds character!,” (Ivana, 2017; Lehmann, 2013). I wonder, what character are poverty-class students supposed to build?

margaret rose captures these tensions: margaret rose’s *Two-spirit Cree woman versus assimilation* identities sits in binary opposition; her life on this colonized university landscape is fraught with great tensions. She desperately wants to live an authentic way of life, on and off the higher education landscape—a way of life that honours her ancestors, non-Indigenous people, and the youth who will follow in her footsteps. But she gets so exhausted wearing a mask that reduces her life to a single story: “I get so lost in this [colonial, capitalist] mask that I’m forced to wear for my government rations”: university paycheque rations, student loan rations, academic transcript rations. I wonder what happens to poverty-class students who are unable to make it till they fake it? I wonder why this dogma is seen in research as something to be commended (e.g., see Lehmann, 2013).

***Keeping the centre sacred.*** Sarah, margaret rose, Mildred, and myself are storytellers. Mildred first and foremost knows how to convey knowledge orally. margaret rose articulates this: “I know that dialogue and storytelling is integral to who I am as a Cree person.” Sarah imagines a life where she is creating social change through storytelling. Mildred demonstrates her understanding of the importance of making storytelling a critical part of education by the way she glides into narrative research and oral explanations of complex theories. Yet, this knowledge is kept close and within the safe confines of a small circle.

Most seek to apply experiential knowledge to understand canonized theories. Most seek opportunities to learn theories, philosophies, methodologies, and the potential of education beyond what is mandated (and often standardized) course readings. But, knowledge from the margins rarely finds its way to the centre. Consequently, we often do not find, outside of very select classes, footsteps in which we can safely tread. I wonder if shifting our embodied knowledge and poverty-class bodies from the margins to the centre is too much of an “alien idea [that] can make ... [institutional power] fear being changed or

polluted” (Elbow 2008, p. 7)? Often, participants can only vicariously travel to the centre. Mildred is drawn to Abal and her husband James—and, TedTalks. Sarah and Margaret Rose draw close to, and retell, the personal stories professors share of themselves in class.

***Invisibility of social class.*** Unless I brought it up in our research conversations (e.g., myth of the classless society), participants did not have access in formal education to explore how social class shapes their experiences on the higher education landscape. Canadian culture and institutions are deeply embroiled in the myth of the classless society. Poverty-class students are deeply embattled by the myth of the classless society. This myth requires the *doubling game* to continue to see *poverty in a box* where the individual is blamed while the structural is ignored. Retelling a childhood experience, Mildred makes visible the power of social class.

In western Africa there is no universal health care. Even if there had been, the adults in Mildred’s family worked relentlessly to feed their family. The family had no nanny to care for the children. There was no money for transportation. The *nice-man noticed* Mildred’s little sister’s condition and took her to the hospital. As little Mildred watched the *nice-man* navigate the hospital, she witnessed her sister being attended to “because of his status.” She says, “When you get people like that to go with you to places, it really makes a difference than to go by yourself.”

While it was “really, really, *really* nice” of the *nice-man*, he could travel and successfully navigate places and systems that Mildred and her family could not—because of his social position. The *nice-man* did not have to stay fixed in this moment or in the cement box underclass community where bodies and limbs were intertwined during rest and work.

***It’s your own damn fault.*** Through institutional policies, there is the perception of universities treating all students in an equitable manner via their policies. Regulations, enacted through prescriptive policies developed, shaped, and amended by and for the elite, include course withdrawal deadlines, GPA requirements, and navigating the entirety of the higher education landscape. Yet, students do not *experience* these policies in an equitable manner. Further, these policies reinforce the belief that it’s your

own damn fault if you are not meeting a university's expectations. Mildred has experienced this in painfully silencing ways. She has become terrified and confused as to how to understand the enormity of the legalese of institutional policies and her departmental regulations. I wonder how these policies protect higher education institutions from legal challenges while simultaneously ignoring the unique biographies of poverty-class students. I wonder how institutional policies keep individuals who grew up in poverty from entering into and successfully transitioning through higher education.

When Mildred sought support from academic advisors, she was met with indifference and frustration. As she said, "Once you're a student struggling through school and you go to these offices many times, they "know" you. 'Here she comes again!'" She tells me that she felt shame when they looked at her GPA. She sensed they "looked down at" her. She says, "It makes you feel like you are not capable. *Before them*, you're not worthy to be here. You don't deserve the opportunity to be here. And it intimidates you. It's like you don't even want to ask for help anymore. Just like giving up." There is a lack of understanding that her life is more complex than numbers on a computer screen. She just walks out of their offices with her "embarrassment" and damning assessments. Neither her department chair or academic advisors nor the registrar know the complexity of what shapes her undergraduate experiences. Mildred keeps her experiences and how she experienced this moment safely hidden.

Remaining immovable to the idea that higher education policies are equitable for all students ensures that what is invisible in our thinking does not become visible in terms of larger social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Elbow 2008, p. 5; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For Mildred and Margaret Rose, living higher education RTW- and probationary-lives is like a crushing defeat. As they precariously compose lives in higher education, they strive for "imaginative capacity" in order "to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene 1995, p. 19). As Mildred and Margaret Rose retold and relived their experiences, it became evident that higher education institutions are in no mood for Greene or Elbow; they are not ready "to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 19) and practice the *believing game*. The believing game could make visible the *poverty behind the minds* of poverty-class students.

**'Poverty is not a box' thread.** Participants' unknowingly practiced Elbow's believing game. The act of participating in this narrative inquiry meant that they are giving myself as the researcher and readers the opportunity to get close to different ways of understanding how childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences. Participants "help [us] see what [they] see because [we] cannot see it" (p. 8). Participants made visible how Young's (2005) intergenerational narrative reverberations ripple across their lives; that is, how childhood poverty is not a box and shapes an entire life. Participants hope their *belief in* us (administrators, advisors, professors, researchers) will shape shifts to create "widening access" and EDI higher education landscapes. The following are the *poverty is not a box* thread: survival not learning, lives fraught with fear (fear of authority, fear of eviction, no where to go back to, doing without affects pace), and a poverty-class student visits the classroom.

***Survival not learning.*** "Just" surviving their undergraduate degree became Mildred's and Margaret Rose's end goal. Mildred says, "If you have been through the downs and coming from a different place to a different place. You feel like, I don't want to be here anymore. I just have to do this and get away from it. It doesn't have to be so ..." There are no words she can grasp onto to complete her thought; there are no words that I can bring forth either. Both Mildred and Margaret Rose started university with Greene's (1995) "imaginative capacity" that higher education held untold possibilities to learn things they could never imagine. They had *belief in* being able to "world'-travel" (Lugones, 1987) to places and experiences that would be so powerful in shaping their becoming agents of social change for themselves, their families, and communities. However, throughout our research relationship, survival, not learning, became what they strove for. Mildred's stories give us a sense of this:

I was confused—that's it  
I was just confused with my undergrad  
I'm still an undergrad  
I wasn't treading water  
I don't know what I was doing  
You can define it

*You name it*

Lurking homelessness and looming authority blanketed Margaret Rose as she tried to compose a life on the higher education landscape. Wearing masks, receiving RTW-letters, trying to find her stolen Indigenous culture, heritage, and ancestral knowledge “triggered” by ...

Survival  
Survival in the higher education institution  
A colonial rite of passage

I wonder how many poverty-class students walk away from their undergraduate without the piece of paper in their hands. I wonder how “just” surviving shapes the lives of poverty-class students. I wonder how surviving—not surviving—echoes across their lives.

***Lives fraught with fear.***

*Fear of authority.* Some participants experienced systemic, debilitating fear of authority on the higher education landscape. This shapes their university studies and experiences. We hear, “It’s a student’s responsibility to ask for help,” or “I’m a nice, approachable professor, why don’t struggling students just come to my office hours?” The assumptions are that: (1) we know how to navigate policies; (2) that we know we have student rights; (3) we are comfortable using our voices to assert these rights.

Margaret Rose explains the danger of authority:

I didn’t even feel comfortable accessing a “social worker” because of my experiences growing up, my brother being taken out of our home, put into child welfare system, ... because of my personal interactions growing up, you know a social worker has that status—I’m scared! I’m scared and I don’t trust. I don’t trust. I’m sorry if I don’t trust a lot because of my history with these different systems. And people in positions of authority. Right. Like, can I trust you? Can I not? Are you gonna, like you know ...

I tell Margaret Rose, “The fear of the social worker coming to the door is terrifying.” She concedes, “The police too, right. Even campus security. My heart just palpitates.” Holding up her hands mockingly, she proclaims, “I’m not a criminal! I’m sorry!” We laugh, but it is not in jest.

Mildred lives in fear that when she seeks support from her department they will find her out and punish her. She was taught on early education landscapes not to trust education authority. For Mildred, a

misstep could result in a beating on the education landscape. Letting *why*-Mildred out could result in damaging assessments. Mildred says, “You know, when you don’t know what you’re going through, you can’t really define what the problem is. You don’t ask for help, you just go—you feel like your head itches.”

Why are we so afraid of authority on the higher education landscape? In part, the fear of eviction.

*Fear of eviction. Belief in* goes a long way towards understanding justified fear of eviction from university; regardless, if one thinks it is unwarranted. If you get close to Mildred’s and Margaret Rose’s lived experiences, one can see that the fear of eviction is shaped by childhood poverty. The fear of eviction echoes across their undergraduate experiences that affect pace, health, and learning. Mildred says, “I don’t think they care about us the same.... If I have to say it they will kick me out.” “It” is how her life on the higher education landscape has been shaped by systemic poverty. “It” refers to her malnourished body, the constant stress of how she will pay for school and support her impoverished family, and how profoundly silenced *why*-Mildred remains in the classroom and in the face of authority.

One of the ways Margaret Rose’s fear of eviction is shaped is by her storage container learning experience. This experience has left gashes in Margaret Rose. As a child, Margaret Rose was evicted and torn from the education landscape because she was a *bad* child. She excelled in the storage box where she was isolated from other students. She learned that she “didn’t fit the traditional mould of students.” She lived in fear of being put into foster care where generations of Indigenous children suffered horrific atrocities against their vulnerable selves. Being ejected into anything that conjures up residential schools echoed throughout young Margaret Rose’s self.

As I sit writing this thesis, I, too, continue to face the fear of eviction from university; this fear never seems to leave me. Part of what shapes this fear is that we have no where to go back to if we are evicted from the higher education landscape. It is as Daisy said, “publish or perish”; graduate or live the way we grew up yet, with the taste of potential forever lingering in our souls.

*No where to go back to.* When Margaret Rose has been on the cusp of quitting, when she has no more strength to fight to survive the institution or her precarious life, she wants to run to her dad's reserve—and, just “peace out.” In these fragile moments, her partner, Tanis, gently draws her back from the precipice. Margaret Rose says, “Just being a caregiver.... I've never—well, first of all I've never had anywhere to go back because of my dad's [illness]—and living on the reserve and stuff like that. I guess if I really, really, *really* had to, I could go stay on a trailer somewhere on the backroads—if I *really* had to. But growing up I never had that *Plan B* [long pause]. I've had phenomenal friends that have taken me in that are probably more family than my entire family.” Her family has been fragmented from intergenerational poverty and residential schools. There simply is no community to go back to that can sustain Margaret Rose and her “imagined capacity” (Greene, 1995, p. 19).

Mildred lives under intense pressure. Her parents scrimp and save so they may retire to western Africa. If Mildred does not graduate, they worry she will continue the familial intergenerational poverty legacy. Her parents have seen many of their friends' children enter into Canadian higher education and drop out. Her parents want more for her than what they inherited. Yet, there is not the time or money for Mildred to explore all the wonders that are madly swirling around—*why*—Mildred's heart. If Mildred does not complete her undergraduate degree, and move onto further studies so she can seek a career, she will be forced to work non-living wage jobs. She can perhaps marry laterally.

*Doing without affects pace.* Although Mildred is physically strong, her ribs protrude in a way that is not the result of a naturally tiny frame. She says, “I am underweight right now as you can see.” However, that is an underrepresentation; her doctor is deeply concerned. She says, “I find it really hard to eat sometimes because I feel like I'm tired. I'm always fatigued. I don't know. I don't sleep well, especially after the last two semesters. I have [not been] myself, not eating well, not sleeping well. It's a bit of a hassle.” She reduces her situation to an annoyance. If she forgets

her lunch or water bottle at home she normally goes without food or water for the day. She cannot afford the luxury of buying food or beverages on campus.

margaret rose expends a great deal of energy on figuring out how she will pay rent and feed and clothe her ever sprouting son. This consumes the majority of her energy. Without the bus pass included in her tuition fees, most days she cannot afford to leave the house. margaret rose chases contract jobs that will allow her to continue with her studies; she cannot turn to family who are living impoverished lives.

Mildred and margaret rose are always exhausted: emotionally, mentally, and physically. At the end of the school and work days, they then try to study. I imagine dozing heads, made over heavy by the burdens they carry, falling down on top of their homework. Hard textbook covers become pillows as their bodies contort over tables that must bear the weight of their lives.

***A poverty-class student visits the classroom.*** It is rare that a professor is wakeful to understanding there are students who do not come from privilege in their classroom. Mildred's introductory sociology professor is an exception. Mildred's professor practiced *belief in* that childhood *poverty is not a box* and shapes an entire life in the making. The professor invited a doctoral student to discuss with the class how systemic childhood poverty shaped their higher education experiences. Mildred felt a sense of relief that she was not alone in her experiences. Unknowingly, Gerry (and the professor) made her feel, for the first time, "welcomed into the university system." Because Gerry was willing to make his lived experiences visible, Mildred felt a kindred-spirit with this poverty-class student. She found "somebody else [who] understands, somebody else who has gotten there [and] has also been through challenges or failing. Even though he may have felt that he didn't belong there too, he never gave up. That's what I'm looking forward to—to never give up." Although Mildred was too unsure to approach Gerry when she saw him in the library, she emailed him and shared how childhood poverty was shaping her undergraduate experiences. This was a "tortoise-type" leap for Mildred. After two years, this experience sustains her. This *belief in* raised many wonders for Mildred; *why*-Mildred poked her head up after this experience. Gerry

had the courage to use the “rhetoric of *experience*” (Elbow 2008, p. 8) to share experiences that are profoundly silenced on the higher education landscape. I wonder how this type of experience—and, conversation—can shape experiences. I wonder how these in-class conversations can sustain students.

### **Rethreading Plotlines**

Adair (2003) writes, “I am, and will probably always be, marked as a poor woman” (p. 29); Steedman (1987) writes of growing up in poverty: “The baggage will never lighten for me or my sister” (p. 19); in a newspaper opinion piece, I was described as “a person marked by generational poverty” (Turpin, 2015). I draw from my thesis introduction: “I scrub my skin raw, but I can’t wash away the stain of poverty. It’s deeply embedded in my self-identity. The shame was bearable until university—a place I believed was never meant for people like me. Now, I live in fear of being *outed* and *ousted*.” As Adair (2003) writes, our identities and lived experiences of systemic childhood poverty “cannot be forgotten or erased” (p. 30); however, *belief in* makes visible, as Caine et al. (2013) explain, “Embedded in the retellings of ... experiences is a notion that each story is always partial and contextual and offers new possibilities as the stories are retold (p. 577). Together with this, we see how experientially understanding the echoes of childhood poverty for this inquiry, does not silence lived experiences—and, the “extraordinary potential of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience” comes alive (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Stevens 2013, p. 212) as poverty-class students travel “to and within unfamiliar [higher education] landscapes” (Caine 2010, p. 1304).

In situating this analysis in relation to Elbow’s (2008) believing game theory, rather than looking for confirmation of deficit-based narratives about poverty-class students, I explored how systemic childhood poverty shapes an entire life (p. 1). This informs the understanding that childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students’ experiences in ways that transcend the material.

The instructor who first connected Margaret Rose with the TYP, the coordinator of the TYP, and the Cree professor; the high school teachers, and Gerry whose interactions with Mildred supported her to believe in herself; and the woman in the women’s shelter who planted a story of education as shaping new

possible intergenerational reverberations in Sarah's mother's life, Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah each lived and told stories of *belief in* experiences as nurturing in each of them desires to share and work forward from these as a way to be actively involved in shaping a higher education landscape that was ready for (open to, embracing of) the diverse lives of the students coming behind them.

Greene (1995) writes that shifting understandings opens a “number of vantage points a person is able or enabled to take” (p. 19). This is significant when considering how childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences as they compose lives on the higher education landscape. That is, as Greene suggests, *belief in students* allows us to “tap into imagination” so we can imagine ways in which to challenge the inherent structural inequalities of higher education to create EDI policies and pedagogies (p. 19). Thus, we can then “see beyond what the imaginer” (all those who shape students' lives and education policies and pedagogies), and are able to break with what is “called normal or ‘common-sensible’ and to carve out new orders in experience” (Greene 1995, p. 19). Finally, this resonant thread makes visible how *belief in* poverty-class students may bring them out of the shadows and margins of higher education landscapes so their lived experiences and knowledge are honoured.

This resonant thread also draws attention to the diverse lives of Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah. Attending to their experiences shows that while post secondary education is commonly shaped by plotlines that hold in mind students who completed high school and enter the landscape at 18 years of age this was not their experience. Interactions with diverse people who came into their lives in differing ways, sometimes in teaching-learning relationships but, too, people who taught as they shared with Sarah, Mildred, and Margaret Rose their experiences and insights, created openings for seeing themselves, their dreams, as plausible and possible. There is a sense that each of these *believing in* experiences interrupts their more common experiences with being doubted; the cumulative effect of these interruptions in the ongoing making of a life has been crucial. In essence, this is a type of moment-by-moment sustainability where larger social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives of deficit are interrupted. Throughout the resonant threads, I was attentive that I am asking the reader to try to believe an alien idea [that] can

make us fear being changed or polluted” (Elbow 2008, p. 7); as Lugones (1987) would say, “‘world’-travel” to the lives of the participants to begin to understand how childhood poverty shapes their undergraduate experiences (Lugones, 1987).

Participants and myself need to be the guiders and deciders of our own stories. Individually, and collectively, we work towards interrupting dominant narratives that silence our lived experiences and keep us in the higher education landscape margins. The late sociologist C. Wright Mills is credited with saying, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.” By making visible how systemic childhood poverty shaped their undergraduate experiences, participants demonstrated the importance of the individual in relation to higher education structures that perpetuate privilege and reinforce damaging and silencing narratives that position poverty-class students as Other.

#### **Epilogue: “World”-Travelling through *Belief In***

***Crow and Weasel.*** In order to further demonstrate how childhood poverty shapes an entire life, I draw on Lopez’s (1991) *Crow and Weasel*. Lopez’s story that honours intergenerational knowledge and experience. He shows that participants’ experiences, too, carry important knowledge:

The horses shivered off the night. Pintos and buckskins, sorrels and blue roans. They stood watering in the creek or continued to graze, their breath rising in the steam. A few watched two young men walking out towards them from the village. As the men drew near, the horses that were dozing began to stir.

The men walked softly among them, reassuring them with quiet words, slowly separating two horses out. They eased buffalo-hair bridles over their necks and started them back to the village. The one named Weasel led, trailing a pale mare with dark brown ears. The one called Crow followed behind with deliberate calmness, walking a bald-faced pinto colt. Crow’s eyes were fixed on the dark, silent doorways of the tipis ahead. Weasel stopped once, to finger blades of grass that had been cropped by an animal other than a horse in the night.

When the men had saddled their horses, they tied buckskin bags and parfleches to the saddle frames and small medicine bundles in the horses’ tails and manes. They threw elkskin robes over their frames and then went to their separate lodges to say goodbye to their families. Each young man’s family had opposed this trip. With the counsel of Mountain Lion, an Elder who had had a powerful dream about the two men, both families had relented. But the partings, now, were not warm. What these young men proposed, their fathers still felt, was dangerous.

Crow and Weasel went alone to Mountain Lion’s lodge.

“You two young men must not forget,” he said, “that you are runners. You are carrying our way of life with you, for everyone to see. Listen. Be strong. When you are tempted to give up, think of your relatives.” He looked over at Weasel, sitting on his horse, and back at Crow. “Watch out for each other,” he said.

Mountain Lion then gave Crow a pipe bag.

“You are not old enough, either of you,” he said, “to be pipe carriers. But my dream tells me to send this with you to share with those you meet.”

“Way-hey!” said Mountain Lion, standing back. “Travel like men. Remember your people” (pp. 7-8).

Crow and Weasel set off hesitantly—without the blessing of their family and community. But, they started out—and, remained together for the entire journey.

Along the way, they found themselves on landscapes they had never seen before. They did not recognize the plants; they could not see food they were accustomed to. At times they thought they would perish from hunger. They met people who terrified them; they thought the people called Inuit might kill them. Instead, there was a communal sharing of knowledge, experiences, and wisdom of both their people. Crow and Weasel honoured their people by sharing their way of life with the Inuit. They did not have to erase their identities; they celebrated intergenerational knowledge that was situated in the centre rather than the margins.

Many times, Crow and Weasel talked of turning back; many times they kept these thoughts to themselves. They did not story turning back as failure; what they learned, at any point in their journey, was new knowledge they could take back to their community. They had a community to go back to. Without each other’s support, they would have died.

Throughout the journey they *did* think of their relatives—and, the footsteps that would follow theirs. They became part of communities they met along the way.

They returned home to share new knowledge with those who would not be able to make such a journey. Their experiences echoed throughout the land.

## Notes

1. Elbow (2008) equates the doubting game to critical thinking: it is the “kind of thinking most widely honoured and taught in our culture” (p. 1). It is a “disciplined practice” of using our intellectual might to doubt—not reject—accepted theories, ideologies, and methodologies—to find limitations (pp. 1-2). In this way, we can “advance knowledge,” without disrupting what has been normalized.

As Elbow states, the challenge with the *doubting game* is that unless we are actively taught to critically think, we tend “to believe what looks obvious or what [we] hear from people in authority or from the culture” (p. 3). Alternatively, we become jaded and embrace an epistemological stance where we discount all other ways of knowing—and, those we may feel threaten knowledge and ideas that we have a vested interest in holding close (p. 3). Further, Elbow explains that the “success of science,” has developed “systematic doubt,” which has led to “systematic skepticism” (i.e., *doubting game* or “methodological doubting”) (p. 3). Consequently, “we want to know which view is most *worthy of trust*” or what is academically and socially deemed as “true” (p. 4; italics added). To illustrate, the “critical” in critical theory is a “word that still actively signals ... a critique of what is more generally accepted as ‘theory’.” (p. 2).

The doubting game has generated researchers, academics, and intellectuals who “can only doubt ideas they *don’t* like”—within the safe confines of dominant ideas that are often situated in the centre (p. 5). Elbow writes, “we are trying to find flaws we couldn’t see before and to see which ideas look best after this scrutiny of doubt” (p. 5).

Conversely, “the *believing game* is the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming and accepting as possible of every idea we encounter” (p. 1). That is, we are not *only* trying to be open-minded; Elbow writes of the believing game: “instead of scrutinizing fashionable or widely accepted ideas for hidden flaws ... [we] scrutinize unfashionable or even repellent ideas for hidden virtues” (p. 1). Underpinning the *believing game* is the belief that “when an idea goes against current assumptions and beliefs—or, if it seems alien, dangerous, or poorly formulated—we often cannot see any merit in it” (p. 1). Rather than doubting ideas that contemporary forms of critical-thinking demands (Elbow, 2008), practicing the *believing game* opens us up to Greene’s (1995) “imaginative capacity” (p. 19). The power of the *believing game* is that we “try to believe things we don’t believe—especially things we don’t want to believe” in order to advance knowledge without losing methodological or intellectual rigour, position, authority, or credibility (p. 4). Elbow is not suggesting we adopt a “Pollyanna”-type view of the world; he suggests that with the *believing game*, “we’re trying to find virtues we couldn’t see before and to see which ideas look best after this scrutiny of believing” (p. 5).

Elbow proposes that we use the “methodological or systematic believing as our tool” rather than the accepted-as-norm “methodological or systematic doubting” (p. 4). In this, Elbow advocates that we *assume* that believing and critical thinking cannot co-exist—and, are polar opposites (p. 4). That is, “we learned to separate the *process* of doubting from the *decision* to reject” (p. 4). This results in “the process of believing” being “tainted” by disbelief (p. 4); belief, as a consequence, carries the connotation of “commitment” (p. 4). As we cannot suggest certainties in research, the *believing game* may be disassociated with intellectual, theoretical, and methodological rigour (pp. 2-4). From a philosophical position, Elbow states, “neither tool can demonstrate that anything [in research] is actually true” (p. 5). Elbow lays out three arguments for the believing game:

- Elbow’s theory asks: “Let me enter into” your experiences and understandings so I can “get a better perspective on my thinking—and see if there’s something important that you can see that I can’t see” (p. 6). The *believing game* “helps us find flaws in our thinking” that are most often based on “assumptions that are part of the very structure of our thinking” (p. 5). Thus, what is invisible in our thinking becomes visible both in terms of larger social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives and beliefs (p. 5; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
- The *believing game* is underpinned by the belief that we “cannot validly *reject* an idea till we’ve succeeded in dwelling in it—in effect to believe it” (p. 6). This helps us, as Elbow says, to “choose among competing positions” rather than differing or competing ideologies.

- The *believing game* “develops a different kind of thinking ... and also a different way of interacting with others” (p. 7). Elbow states that with the *believing game*, we are “trying to believe an alien idea [that] can make us fear being changed or polluted” (p. 7). Where the *doubting game* uses “the rhetoric of proposition...”, the *believing game* is the rhetoric of *experience*” (p. 8). It asks, “Help me see what you see because I can’t see it” (p. 8); the *believing game* asks us to get close to different ways of understanding through lived experiences.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### WISDOM SITS ON AND IN POVERTY-CLASS BODIES<sup>50</sup>

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
(Woodsworth 2017, 1807)

#### Grounding the Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pose a significant question: “How do we know that our inquiry interest is anything more than personal?” (p. 121). As a participant in this research, I return to this question regularly. Often, I am asked, “Isn’t this just people telling stories?” Throughout the research journey, I too asked myself this question. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical” (p. 121). As a student whose higher education experiences are shaped by systemic childhood poverty, this resonates profoundly. As a result, I sought to ensure that my experiences do not overshadow those of participants, nor that I lost sight of the justifications and significance of this research.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I return to my narrative beginnings in relation to this research topic; I come full circle with a discussion of the three areas of justification that ground a narrative inquiry: personal, practical, and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). I draw closely to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) understanding that narrative inquiry research makes “larger connections of social significance” (p. 121). As stated in the thesis introduction, this research is not about participants and me telling stories around a campfire. *We tell, retell, live, and relive* “stories of [our] experiences” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 574; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that are in relation to larger social issues of exclusion on higher

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<sup>50</sup> This chapter title is shaped from Basso’s (1996) book, *Wisdom sits in place: landscapes and languages among the Western Apache*.

education landscapes and how childhood poverty shapes lives across time, social relations, and place. Within the metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, I make visible the personal and social/theoretical justifications for this research and end in the midst with practical justifications as potential ways forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Clandinin (2013) writes that “Narrative inquirers need to begin with these justifications, that is, by justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions, and personal inquiry puzzles” (p. 36). Clandinin (2013) explains the three reasons for situating personal justifications in a narrative inquiry:

- Inquiry into who we see ourselves as being, and becoming, within the inquiry;
- Without an understanding of what brings each of us to our research puzzles, we run the risk of entering into relationships without a sense of what stories we are living and telling in the research relationships;
- Without an understanding of who we are in the inquiry, we are not awake to the ways we attend to the experiences of research participants. (p. 36).

These personal justifications remained front and centre throughout the research conversations. I often revisited my narrative beginnings in relation to the research, and explored new emerging wonders, as I came alongside participants. I draw forward shifting understandings of how systemic childhood poverty shapes my higher education experiences and forward-looking stories that are becoming visible.

**Uprooted in community.** Caine (2010) reminds me that “in the midst of seeking a new story to live by, each story will always begin with my past” (p. 1304). Caine (2010) helps me recognize “that any path I walk in life will unavoidably begin where I am now, and always be in relation to where I have been” (p. 1305; see also Burgin, 1996). Prior to beginning this study, I spent over a year exploring my narrative beginnings. I continued to explore my narrative beginnings when in the field conducting this inquiry. Wonders about how my higher education experiences were shaped by growing up in childhood poverty

took me down unfamiliar twisting and turning paths. I did not long to return to early experiences in spaces and places where I felt rooted in an uprootedness. The sense of not belonging on education, community, and familial landscapes is as heavy as the straw bails I heaved on the farm with my child's slender frame:

As a child, Sunday mornings I would sneak off and go to church while the house was still silent. Going to church was very important for me. I would sit in the front pew, in my shabby dirty clothes, and be so excited to see who would sit next to me. Each Sunday morning, as I waited, and watched people file into the church, my child-like excitement would slowly diminish. No one would sit in the front pew with me. After some time, I noticed that people stared at me; to my child's mind it was because I could not participate in the public ritual of putting money in the collection plate as it passed from hand to hand. I came to believe that this was why I sat alone. The next Sunday, I stole a penny, from my mother's pant's pocket while she was asleep. The terror of being caught, and the swift punishment that would follow, was not a deterrent; I so deeply desired for someone to sit in the front pew with me. With my stolen money in my pocket, I entered the church and sat in my usual spot: it was always in the front right pew in the far corner. I remember trying to take up as little space as possible by jamming and cramming my body against the hard smooth surface of the pew's armrest. I proudly put my penny in the collection plate when it reached me. Still, no one sat with me. For weeks this went on, until inevitably, I was caught. The attention I received was painful. I wonder why no one would sit with me; perhaps it was because I did smell. After all, our bathing and washing water was pumped in from the dirty river, unfiltered, into a cistern in the basement of the "house" where many cats and rodents lost their lives.

(From my field notes, March 12, 2015)

How different this story could have been told if I had *not* entered the world into poverty; I was raised in a community that storied me by my family's poverty; I was storied by my mother's supposed failings and weakness because we lived in abject poverty. The mysterious disappearance of my father was not questioned. I came to learn the cover story that was foisted upon us: he had no choice other than to leave because...?

This experience also shapes my higher education experiences. As I wonder about feelings of aloneness and isolation on the higher educational landscape, I go back in time and realize that the rejection of people on rural community and education landscapes, and how they storied me, has far reaching implications. The public ritualization of giving money in church was very different from the ritual of these same community members dumping bags of castoff clothes, jammed into large black garbage bags, onto our decrepit doorstep—when, no one was watching. *Castoffs for outcasts.*

**Returning to the barnyard.** Being Othered shapes my experiences on these landscapes; I understood this from a very young age. This sits in tension with a soothing experience on the familial landscape:

I am drawn back to a summer day when the heat of the sun blistered my skin and cracked open the parched ground. Flies buzzing around manure piles broke the silence in the barnyard. Eventually, the sound turned into a comforting background din. It reminded me there was life on this hot barren day. The occasional bellow of a cow, in some mysterious far off pasture, was jarring. As their cries faded on the still air, motionlessness returned. I was alone that day in the barnyard. The barn cats must have wisely been lounging in the shade. My great aunty sat in the house ravenously devouring her romance novels; I was ravenously devouring the stillness. Only the two of us were on the farm this day. I do not know where anyone else was. It was peaceful; it felt safe.

My great aunty had two pigs. They had a large enclosure and a house to rest in at night. Their area was normally a wonderful smelly mess of mud and poo. I would watch the pigs blissfully frolic in the muck like I wished I could. Today, however, after days of relentless heat beating down on the ground, large dangerous grooves and cracks had formed. The ground seemed to be frozen in one last sigh. I felt sorry for the pigs. Their pink skin, with only cat like whiskers for protection, was exposed to the sun's punishing rays.

Their hooves sounded like high heel shoes on jagged cement. They dangerously wobbled on tiptoes as they tried to navigate this scared, unfamiliar landscape. Today, they were not equipped for this terrain. But, they had to lug their heavy bodies to access food and water. Their tummies sat so low to the ground, I feared they might scrape their underbellies against the unkind rock-hard surface. Their snorts sounded laborious as their glistening noises pointlessly pushed at the grey ground looking for bits of discarded food.

To my child's mind, they were unhappy. I fetched two metal milk buckets from the shed. For the next several hours, from the barnyard water trough, I filled and hauled half-filled buckets of water to the pigs' pen. Salty sweat obscured my vision as I climbed the greying, splintering, wooden fence to pour the water over the pigs. The water was ice cold; the pigs squealed in delight. I created the most amazing mud pit for them. My raw-boned arms trembled; my shoulders burned. My great aunty did not share our joy; she had just cleaned the pigs' house. Yet, she was only mildly frustrated. She sighed in exasperation; the pigs sighed in rapture. I made the pigs happy and that made me happy. I long for this day, the warming sensations of an aloneness that was not lonely. In this moment, I felt a deep sense of belonging in my aloneness. I felt no shame in this aloneness. I, too, was as happy as a pig in mud.

(From my field notes, February 14, 2017)

**The tumultuous worker to student journey.** *Shame* sits heavy on my heart; it silences me. How I experienced place and social relations shaped my feelings of shame. Being on the higher education landscape, exacerbates my feelings of shame and isolation. Off the university landscape, it is easy to slide into the role I was accustomed: worker.

Transplant her into a palace  
She gravitates to scrubbing toilets  
Eyeing food with envy  
Her grades as perfect as freshly pressed uniforms  
Nameless typefaces on transcripts  
Hardly ever handled by hands  
Grade letters and grade points  
Reinforcing she has assimilated?  
Pseudo-harmony reports

How she prided herself that she could adapt and excel. After all, she knew how to be alone and survive. To rely on herself; to scrounge in hidden areas for crumbs that were overlooked by most. She had been soothingly invisible. Each time she made it another day, it was like an elixir that is as refreshing as lemonade on a scorched day.

(From my field notes, May 16, 2016)

Early education experiences continue to shape my graduate experiences. I take a deep breath. I do not allow my fingertips to quiver above the keyboard. I do not pause or think my actions through. There is no room for self-doubt or pre-emptive self-reflection. I jump off the proverbial cliff. I recklessly risk falling onto perilous, jagged higher education rocks. I manically type an email message to a professor and press “send.” I do not pause to consider *the* potential *dire* consequence of making visible what I am experiencing: rejection of who I am:

I’m embarrassed. I applied for scholarships in my department. Got a form email months later. I feel like I did when I ran away from home and went to welfare asking for help. They dismissed me and told me to go back home. I ate less and picked up more shifts at the restaurant. I studied less; I fell asleep more in class; I became more disconnected from life. I became increasingly more silent about my struggles and fears. I know how to live in silence—and, work harder and live more frugally. I never have talked about finances the way I do now. It’s shaming.

I know how to be alone. I just feel so exposed and unhappy. I knew this research would be hard; I had not realized how much all of this would open up wounds that I was not ready for. Being in school is difficult enough, but trying to be a student first is a life that I just don’t have experience with. I just want to go back to being a worker-first. I don’t care about grades. I have all As; I’m so unhappy. It’s not about the academics. It’s about trying to be in this world that has not been all that kind. Why the hell did they continuously encourage me (privately and publicly) to apply for grad school? There’s no place for me here. I’m even finding it a struggle to go to the Tuesday Gatherings. I feel angry when I hear stories that exclude the struggles of those from and/or living in poverty.

I have to stand up for myself in school. I’ve never done this. It feels like a battle-ground where I’m being wounded. I fear these wounds will shape me in unhealthy ways. I continue to be fearful that profs, administrators, and advisors will think I’m not worthy to be here. I thought this might pass once I entered grad school. It hasn’t. I feel like I can’t breathe.

I learned very early on not to show fear, weakness, loneliness, pain, shame.... I learned to work hard and harder as a young body to mitigate the number and magnitude of beatings. I was defined, at a very tender age, as a worker, someone who can be relied upon to work hard. I received a gold coin in grade three for being a hard worker. It's how I learned to define myself. Yet, it makes me angry.

I'm so deeply worried about how much I don't know. All the theories, philosophies, and language that I know exist and don't know exist. I don't have enough time to learn what it is I need to know. I feel so inadequate and unprepared. Maybe this is why I want to take more classes. Maybe something miraculous will happen if I do. And yet, I am very conscious of needing to complete on time. I have no desire to draw out my master's any longer than necessary.

Why do I feel so ashamed? Is this not my research topic?

(From my field notes, May 16, 2016)

It was in grade six, that I learned that I was disposable on the education landscape. I became ill. I was sent home because my body was wracked with horrific stomach pain. No call was made to family members to come fetch me; there were no teachers fussing around me with concern. My body stooped as I struggled to make the long walk home. I remember waking up on the main street sidewalk in front of the grocery store my mother sporadically was able to obtain shifts at. I wonder how long I lay there. Eventually, I was taken to the hospital in the nearest town; it was discovered I had an ulcer.

In the village school, I was storied as the girl who was always sick: I missed most of grade one due to illness; I missed much of grade two for similar reasons; I arrived to school visibly malnourished; I was "branded with infamy" (Adair 2001, p. 451). I wonder if educators assumed that I did not care about school, or that my mother did not care about my education. I wonder if principals, teachers, administrators, and school boards storied me as not being worthy of an education, or deficit, because I was born into poverty.

**Marked by childhood poverty.** Tracing experience on *people's skin* becomes salient for students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty. Adair (2003) retells how childhood poverty has shaped her embodied self:

As a child, poverty was written onto and into my being at the level of private and public thought and body. At an early age, my body bore witness to and emitted signs of the painful devaluation carved into my flesh; that same devaluation became integral to my being in the world. I came into being as a disciplined body and mind, while at the same time I was taught to read my abject body as the site of my own punishment and erasure. In this excess of meaning, the space between private body and public sign was collapsed. For many poor children, this double exposure results in a debilitating—albeit politically useful—shame and lack. (pp. 29-30)

As I struggled to write chapter six of this thesis, which was supposed to be a committee co-authored paper that would be submitted for publication, I lost confidence. I could not understand, until it was too late, that co-authoring was a sign of Elbow's (2008) *belief in*. Professors wanting to be committee members was a sign of *belief in*. I could not express what I was experiencing. Whereas previously I sent out update emails, I became silent and uncommunicative. I could not see past the idea of asking for help; I could not see I was seeking support. I came to understand that I carry an exhausting burden of not belonging on education, community, and familial landscapes.

While being *outed* as having grown up in poverty does not sit so heavy with me, being *ousted* from higher education still shapes my higher education experiences. Yet, there is a confidence I am gaining as I talk about this research. A shift in my understandings comes from the enormous *belief in* I experience; for the first time (March 31, 2017), I see a forward-looking story for myself. I, too, I see the power of engaging in conversations about how systemic childhood poverty shapes an entire life—and, a life in the making. A “new sense” of myself, as an emerging scholar, is surfacing (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 74).

I wonder if the shift from this thesis to a scholarly publication was too much of a stretch beyond the wrong side of the tracks. I wonder if perhaps I struggled with chapter six because it represented an end to this inquiry; I had been in a research relationship with participants for months. At times, I did not want to leave the narrative accounts: I returned to them often; I wanted to sit with them and relive them; at times I could not bear to live with participants' (or my own) lived experiences. Yet, I felt safe with Margaret Rose's, Mildred's, and Sarah's narrative accounts; I did not have to explain my lived experiences

as (and because) we share often silent understandings. The narrative accounts are where I would have happily ended this thesis; they are familiar landscapes.

**A deep breath and a leap forward.** I have feelings I am abandoning something; I cannot articulate this sense of abandonment (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 74). I see participants living “a new story of” higher education, making new connections, and taking tortoise- and hare-leaps forward (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, 75).

The inevitable end-of-this-inquiry feelings remind me of the last day of summer camp when I was a child: I connected with a girl and we became inseparable best friends for the entire last day. The next morning, as we went boarded our separate yellow school buses to go our separate ways, there was a burning ache in our hearts. Little bodies shook, lips trembled, teeth gnawed upper lips—tears wet eyelashes. Although we boarded similar looking school buses, they were destined for different places. We did not know if we would see each other again. She was from the city; I was from a rural village. I knew that more than geography separated us; however, in those twenty-four hours, we were inextricably attached. This moment in time lives in me. Participants’ experiences and understandings now live in me.

I understand that I have changed from this inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). To illustrate, it has provided insight into my white settler angst as I travelled to Indigenous participants’ worlds (Lugones, 1987). I have gained experience and understandings into being a researcher-participant whose life has been shaped by childhood poverty. Participants have taught me to live a life also shaped by forward-looking stories. Margaret Rose, Mildred, and Sarah are hopeful and committed to social justice; their hope lives in me. I “world’-travelled,” (Lugones, 1987) and gained invaluable insights into how childhood poverty shapes undergraduate experiences, beyond my own understandings. I experienced, alongside participants, how they *experienced* dominant, deficit-based narratives, even when they could not academically name them.

I think Sarah will be happy because I can laugh now. I will always be Mildred's *Lady Elaine*; I am now, and forever, Margaret Rose's narrative aunty. Throughout this research journey, I have taken hare- and tortoise-steps; Sarah, Margaret Rose, and Mildred have taught me there is no shame in that.

As Clandinin (2013) writes, I "attend to the importance of considering the possibility of shifting, or changing" (p. 36) higher education "widening access" and EDI policies and pedagogies for poverty-class students.

**A view from the institutional corner office.** I draw from The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada's (AUCC) (2011) discussion on *Trends In Higher Education: Volume 1 – Enrolment* in relation to this narrative inquiry. First, I make visible how they discuss "access" to higher education:

Demographic projections suggest Canada will not be able to rely on population growth to fuel our economy in the coming decade. By 2030, the population over the age of 65 will double, while the working age population (25-64 years of age) will grow by just eight percent. There will simply not be enough population growth to drive the kinds of increases in the overall size of our labour force that would be needed to support an increasingly dependent, aging population. Canadians are in for a major demographic shift.

To respond to the anticipated economic, social and labour market demands resulting from this demographic shift, universities will need to both expand *access* to higher education for *untapped* segments of the population and international students, and increase the quality of education students receive. (p. 5; italics added)

While it is not clear who the regional or national "untapped segments" are, there is a decided lack of focus on creating "widening access" and EDI policies that make room for poverty-class students (and low SES students, which normally relates to students from working-class backgrounds). Canadian universities and college universities lag far behind, for example, Australia, the UK, and the USA, in trying to tap into the SES "disadvantaged" student segment. Powerful voices, such as the AUCC, which could nationally guide "widening access" initiatives, seem to be silent. Although the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this narrative inquiry, there is a decided lack of awareness that poverty-class students are already in higher education and just as important, are an *untapped segment* of the Canadian population. To illustrate, Mildred says, (through a found poem created from her transcript), "Nobody's a bum/What's keeping them at this place?/Don't pull my hair./No, you need to understand ... Give me the opportunity

to say something.” While both Sarah and Margaret Rose have found community through their Native Studies department and Aboriginal Student Services Centre, Mildred has no community and does not have the chance to say anything about how the life she is composing on the higher education landscape is shaped by childhood poverty.

Places and spaces do not exist where Sarah, Margaret Rose, and Mildred can meet with other students to discuss how systemic childhood poverty shapes their undergraduate experiences; there is no student “poverty” club, or resources made available to create spaces and relationships that may be Lessard’s *game changer* for them. Although Sarah and Margaret Rose are part of a community on the higher education landscape, they too are homogenized. That is, there is the assumption that all Aboriginal students have the same experiences, academic trajectories (and dreams), and share *exactly* the same social characteristics.

**A journey to the margins.** What has become evident through this research (and public discussions I have given along the inquiry journey), is that there are individual professors and advisors who are deeply committed to creating socially just higher education landscapes and experiences for poverty-class students. However, as Sarah, Margaret Rose, Mildred, and myself have learned, it takes a community to create the kind of change that is sustainable and that allows poverty-class students to also realize their dreams. While individual professors and advisors can be Lessard’s (2017) *game changer*, and provide for Greene’s (1995) “imagined capacity,” (p. 19) this, too, is a Canadian issue: higher education institutions continue to perpetuate privilege at the expense of those who do not sit in the centre.

Second, I bring forward from AUCC’s (2011) report, and which directly relates with and to this research, is the AUCC’s description of the importance of students’ higher education experiences: “a *high quality learning experience* produces more engaged and productive students, who, upon graduation, become Canada’s future lawyers, doctors, teachers, thinkers, scientists, managers, leaders and innovators” (p. 40; italics added).

Throughout this research, I often have been asked how it can make any difference when I do not have saturation in order to generalize my findings. Repeatedly, I have been asked, “How will anyone take this seriously with *only* three participants?” Along the way, I realized that the goal of this research was not about fighting a methodological-fight. Using Elbow’s *believing game* theory, I, too, learned that I am *not* trying to shift ideologies. Rather, I am trying to shift positions—that is, to make visible counter stories to damaging poverty and institutional poverty-class student stereotypes, “top student” myths, and accommodation dogmas (Elbow 2008, pp. 6-8). I wonder how higher education institutions and organizations such as the AUCC imagine *quality learning experiences*? I wonder how this mandate is being enacted or is imagined.

**Shifting poverty-class students’ lived experiences to the centre.** If there is a true understanding that “a high quality learning” experience shapes students lives, and that this contributes to shaping Canadian society, then making visible how childhood poverty shapes undergraduate students’ experiences allows for Greene’s (1995) “imaginative capacity” so we may “look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 19). This research does not provide generalizations; it makes visible knowledge that can shape higher education in ways that can make shifts in EDI policies and pedagogies. What is visible through the participants’ experiences is that their “location in the world,” and on higher education landscapes, silences them (Greene 1995, p. 19). Going forward, the foundation upon which to create and enact “widening access” and EDI policies must include poverty-class students’ lived experiences and knowledge. In this way, critical shifts can happen:

- Their lived experiences can become valuable sources of knowledge for creating policy and understanding systemic and structural, class-based inequality. We can open up spaces for conversations where “students experiences and their historical, social, and cultural conditions ... [are] viewed as primary sources of knowledge (Ghosh and Adbi, 2013, p. 23);

- Poverty-class students can come out from the margins and shadows *without* fear that their origins may be visible to others; that is, how their lives have been shaped is respected rather than silenced and shamed (Adair, 2003);
- How childhood poverty can become included “in the research agenda” in ways that do not further stigmatize and alienate students (Marshall et al., 1996, p. 22);
- Lessen “the distance between [poverty-class students] ... world[s] and the world of the classroom” by valuing their lived experiences (Polakow 1993, p. 152);
- Interrupt dominant assimilation *fake it till you make it* higher education narratives that work towards devaluing poverty-class students lived experiences and “targeting them for reshaping” (Polakow 1993, p. 152);
- We can “hold back from generalizing and ... draw on many sources of knowledge, both academic and non-academic, to avoid imposing yet another top-down analytical structure” on students whose lives have been shaped by poverty (Rimstead 2001, p. 4);
- Poverty-class students can become part of the conversation rather than the object of discussion (Adair, 2003);
- Collectively, we can start methodologically practicing Elbow’s (2008) *believing game* so poverty-class students, too, can realize their dreams;
- Interrupt the accommodation narrative that positions poverty-class students as less than and “not-my-problem:” Poverty-class students are seeking support not help. This is articulated by Mildred, through a found poem created from research conversation transcripts:

Got to be something more than to push me higher  
 Not to feel hopeless  
 Don't need people to come and save us  
 Everybody plays a role in something  
 We're impoverished  
 We're not weak

**No simple drama.** Third, the AUCC's (2011) report says, "Research demonstrates that variables with the greatest impact on university participation rates are: household income, parental education and the student's high school grades." (p. 46) Statistically, this may be "true"; however, as this research demonstrates, this is only part of the story. Nor, I argue, do statistics make visible Young's (2005) intergenerational narrative reverberations of how poverty-class undergraduate students' experiences are shaped over time, social relations, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This research can open up conversations regarding, as Sayer (2005) says, "The lottery of the market and of birth and the *intergenerational* transmission of capital can produce (and have widely produced) class inequalities even in the absence of these forms of discrimination" (p. 948; italics added). Sayer (2005) advocates for trying to "further [the] understanding of class by emphasizing the moral dimensions of how it is *experienced*" (p. 959; italics added). The same holds true for this research.

Until we (the collective "we") acknowledge that the myth of the classless society is just that, and the quest for assimilating the middle-class higher education landscape keeps the riff-raff out, is itself *ousted* and *outed*, we do not have to acknowledge, or challenge, higher education landscapes as sites of uncontested privilege. We need not "find flaws in our thinking" or get close to the "rhetoric of *experience*" (Elbow 2008, pp. 7-8). Clandinin (2013) writes of the importance of making visible and interrupting "institutional stories" (p. 25) of higher education that keep poverty-class students in the margins, drive them off the university landscape, or keep them outside the higher education gates. The dominant narratives that Sarah, Margaret Rose, Mildred and myself have made visible in this thesis, are silencing and damaging dogmas that support, as Brady, Blome, and Kleider (2016) say, the "self-sustaining quality of institutions" where institutions "tend to continue to affect poverty and inequality without active maintenance" (p. 123). Higher education sites continue as landscapes where SES "disadvantaged" students are situated as "outcasts on the inside" (Bourdieu & Champagne 1999, p. 421).

Adair (2003), writing from a place of lived experiences, draws attention to damaging and deficit-based narratives of students whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty:

Trying to stabilize and make sense of unpalatably complex issues of poverty and oppression and attempting to obscure hegemonic states of representation, these narratives reduce and collapse the lives and experiences of poor [people] to deceptively simplistic dramas, which are then offered for public consumption. (p. 29)

Unless I brought it up in our research conversations (e.g., the myth of the classless society), participants have not had access in formal education to explore the “moral significance of class” (Sayer, 2005, 2002).

However, they have *experienced* the power of social class on—and, off—the higher education landscape.

Sayer (2005) writes:

Class, unlike, say, ethnicity, is not a social form or identity demanding recognition as legitimate (Coole, 1986; Fraser, 1999). Low income people are not disadvantaged primarily because others fail to value their identity and misrecognize and undervalue their cultural goods, or indeed because they are stigmatized, though all these things make their situation worse; rather they are disadvantaged primarily because they lack the means to live in ways which they, as well as others, value.” (pp. 947-948)

I come back to the introduction to this thesis: When community, institutions, and society embrace the idea of the classless society, Langston (1995) explains that the “denial of class divisions functions to reinforce ruling class-control and domination [where] ambition and intelligence alone are responsible for success” (p. 397). Regardless of research contrary to the myth of the classless society, Sayer (2002) notes that class “continues to figure centrally in people’s lives, especially for those who ... lack the privilege to be able to ignore it” (n.p.; see also Skeggs, 1997).

**Imagining ways forward.** I suggest that the desensitization to social class and poverty can change through non-prescriptive higher education policies and pedagogies. I am drawn again to Greene (1995) and the extraordinary potential of creating meaningful education spaces that can create social change at, and from, all levels.

Greene (1995) writes that “Like freedom, [community] has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make inter-subjective sense” (p. 39). She tells us that these places “ought to be space[s] infused by the kind of imaginative awareness that enables those involved to image alternative possibilities for their

own becoming and their group's becoming" (p. 39). This is hopeful. Poverty-class students have the potential to shape *game changer* and *belief in* policies that support them in "releasing their imagination" (Greene, 1995); that is, if their lived experiences become invaluable sources of policy and pedagogical knowledge. We all can begin to influence and shape higher education "widening access" and EDI policies in order to shape socially just higher education systems. We can make noise to drown out silencing neoliberal poverty-class higher education policies and pedagogies that caste these students in a box.

**Let us tackle the unexamined.** Higher education social class philosophies and practices that attend to lived experiences and alternate ways of knowing and being, may open up conversations and shift understandings of how growing up in poverty shapes experiences in higher education; to begin to tackle, as the late sociologist Elizabeth Cohen says, poverty—the "unexamined 600-pound gorilla" in the room—"that affects [North] American education today" (as cited in Berliner 2006, 951). Cohen's gorilla remains largely "in the shadows, where the light is not as bright" (Berliner 2006, p. 951). Becoming wakeful to this phenomenon means gazing into "the dark" and seeing how violent our history is, and continues to be, towards the poor (Berliner 2006, p. 951).

Polakow (1993) is willing to engage in these *hard* dialogues; she makes visible problematic conversations of problematic bodies on education landscapes and in societies. Polakow (1993) dares to talk about the 600-pound gorilla in our midst: this stubborn colonial hangover ensures that the "callous indifference that eroded [and erodes] countless [poor] children's lives" continues to this day (p. 17). As Polakow (1993) states, "'the noble savage' is far removed from the grim realities of a destitute childhood" and how this destitution makes them revolting, disgusting, illegitimate, and wasteful Others and outcasts on education landscapes (p. 17). The disdain of the poor is woven into "the very fabric of the [Canadian] culture and the corresponding lifestyles of the poor and destitute (Polakow 1993, p. 17; see also Tyler, 2013; Adair, 2003; Sayer, 2002). I suggest that the early Canadian-British immigration policies are also woven into education policies and pedagogies such as *class confessionals* and policies which refuse to make space for poverty-class students lives in the making (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013;

Huber, Caine, Huber, & Stevens 2013). I suggest, that as long as these histories are silenced, legacies of displacing the poor, capitalist and neoliberal tales of problematizing the individual, and patriarchal attitudes towards lives shaped by poverty will, continue to reverberate over time, place, space, and lives (Young, 2003; Sayer 2005). Developing responsive and inclusive classroom pedagogies that may influence institutional policies, I suggest, can shift these reverberations. These shifts however, require taking up conversations that bump up against popular social class narratives: the myths of the classless society and the American Dream that has been mythologized—and, that are pathological.

**Releasing their imagination.** The participants make visible the practical and social justifications for this research that transcend academic-speak. I close this thesis with their reflexive thoughts on their journey as we travelled alongside one another. Having a voice, as they say, has had a profound impact on shaping their lives in the making.

*margaret rose continues wondering.* “Anything I've ever shared with you, feel free to regift. I have trust issues; ah, you know the ‘struggle.’ I finally just accepted this morning that I won't see the changes that I've been working towards.... One day, someone will follow in our footsteps. Our steps might not be perfect, but they are there. And even though the years may pass—and, we think that nothing is happening, there are shifts. I can't change things, but what I can do is create shifts in thinking. This is what you're doing with your research: creating shifts ... The ripple effect that you've made will reverberate across generations. I know that I no longer feel shame because I am coming to understand through this process that it isn't my fault. It's not like my parents hooked up and thought, ‘Alright, let's raise our kids in poverty!’ None of this is our fault. We can come together, and continue to build community, in order to support one another. That's all I ask; I ask for support.”

*Mildred continues dreaming.* “The first time I read your poster, it felt like, ‘I *must* be a participant of this research!’ Over the course of this project, I have come to appreciate the meaning of education better as a student who comes from a less privileged home. Through this research, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my earlier academic years, which I never did reflect upon; I had not come to the

point of accepting myself for who I am (coming from a low-income family and what it means to be a university student in North America). Through this research opportunity, I have been able to better understand my background and myself. Before this research, I felt very lonely and rejected. But as Lady Elaine shared her experiences as an undergrad, I was motivated to pursue my degree, which at the time I was under an academic warning. Lady Elaine's experiences not only encouraged me, but they *dared* me to aspire to excel in school with the understanding that one's past circumstances do not determine who you will be in the future. But it plays a role in shaping one's choices in life, which can be good and bad choices. I have decided to let my past experiences in school shape me positively for there is a brighter future ahead of all who *dare* to have a little *hope*."

***Sarah continues seeking.*** "I am so grateful for the work that you're is doing. To share our stories is the only way that we are going to see change. I feel honoured to have been a part of this process. I hope that this work will help to shift the perspective and assumptions that we see in academia and start to acknowledge that peoples lived experiences are so different. We need to be able to see these differences so we can figure out ways that academia can be inclusive, safe and supportive for all people."

I return to Anzaldúa (1999): "Out of poverty, poetry; out of suffering, song" (p. 87); in this narrative inquiry, the participants made poetry and song to make visible how systemic childhood poverty shapes their undergraduate students' experiences on a Canadian higher education landscape. Together our poetry and song make visible how things might be otherwise.

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# echoes of poverty

composing lives  
in higher education

[the research  
project]

exploring how growing up in poverty  
shapes experiences in university

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**WANTED**  
participants for ongoing research conversations

**WHO**  
have grown up in poverty  
are undergraduates from any discipline  
are able to meet in-person six times over six months

**WHY**  
to make visible poverty-class students' university experiences  
to understand how universities may shape diversity policies

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

#### Research Supervisors

Dr. Vera Caine<sup>51</sup>, vera.caine@ualberta.ca, 780 248 1974

Dr. Herb Northcott, herb.northcott@ualberta.ca, 780 492 0479

#### Project Background: *Echoes of Poverty: Composing Lives in Higher Education*

You are being asked to be in this study because you have experiences in growing up in poverty and are an undergraduate student. This research seeks to explore how growing up in poverty shapes experiences in higher education.

Countries such as Australia, the United States, the UK, and to a lesser extent Canada, are *widening access* to higher education. This is reflected in some universities seeking to develop equitable, diverse, and inclusive (EDI), socially just educational initiatives. However, researchers, for the most part, continue to ignore the very poor; and predominantly focus on the experiences of students from working-class backgrounds. The limited research that does exist for students from poverty-class backgrounds assumes a *uniform* effect of poverty and *uniform* experiences in higher education. This lack of understanding the complex and unique biographies of students, whose lives have been shaped by childhood poverty, has the effect of silencing their experiences.

#### Purpose

This is a qualitative research study. Through *narratively* understanding the echoes of poverty for students who are composing lives in higher education, we can make visible the experiences that must influence equity, diversity, and inclusivity in higher educational policies and practices.

My research does not seek to develop a *better* definition of poverty or contribute to existing definitions of poverty. Economic definitions reduce lives to statistics; money is a single thread in the experiences of poverty. While living close to or below the poverty-line does shape the lives of children, it is not the only factor that needs to be considered.

The purpose of my research is *not* to make generalizations, but to study narratives in an inclusive manner with the focus on poverty. I will ask you to will self-identify with your own subjective definitions of poverty so as to respect your lived experiences.

#### Objectives

The objectives of this research are to i) better understand ways in which your life has been shaped by poverty, experience getting into and through university; ii) identify barriers to higher education attainment you have faced; iii) deepen understandings of the ways in which poverty shapes your experiences; and iv) contribute to responsive equity, diversity, and inclusivity in higher education policies.

#### Study Procedures

You and I will negotiate the dates and locations of the research conversations. Over a five- to eight month period, I will invite you to meet with me five to six times. Research conversations will take approximately one hour each. The research conversations may take place in a variety of location in the Edmonton, you and I will negotiate the best place for this.

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<sup>51</sup> Prior to the completion of this thesis, Dr. Caine had to remove herself from my committee for health reasons.

Research conversations will be audio-recorded and transcribed by an external transcriptionist/s (who will sign a confidentiality agreement). I will keep a field journal where I will write observational notes. I will generate additional field texts based upon our negotiations. These may include: photographs, journals, artefacts, poetry, drawings, image mapping, and artistic pieces. These pieces will be used to illicit research conversations, and will not be part of final public texts. You will keep these pieces.

I will attend to your wishes and hence some stories may not be told. You will have the opportunity to look at your narrative account. A narrative account reflects the conversations we have had. Anything that is public will be anonymized to protect you and your family members, friends, partners, communities, educators, employers, and any education institutions attended.

### Benefits

This research has the potential of shifting understandings how childhood poverty shapes poverty-class students' experiences in higher education. This research also has the potential to influence higher education policies for poverty-class students. It also has the potential to shift dominant understandings of poverty and how higher education spaces can exclude and marginalize based on students who are not from privileged social classes. While there is no direct benefit to you, you may value the opportunity to share your stories.

There are no costs involved in participating in this study. If we meet for coffee, lunch, or supper, I will pay for the meal at that time. Each time a formal tape-recorded conversation happens, you will be reimbursed \$20 to cover your expenses (e.g., travel, childcare). No personal information will be collected to reimburse you.

### Risk

While risk is minimal and there are no known foreseeable risks in this study, there may be instances where sharing experiences might be sensitive. I will not ask you to share stories that you are not comfortable with. I will provide you with contact information for mental, emotional, and physical agency support if you so desire.

There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If I learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, I will tell you right away.

### Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.

You can withdraw your data up until final narrative accounts are negotiated, which will happen no later than December 2016. Should you wish to withdraw your entire participation before this date, no part of your research texts (data) will be used. Should you wish only a part of your research text to be included in the research study then only this will be used.

You can withdraw from this study by informing me verbally or in writing.

### Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information that is shared in research conversations will be held in strict confidence.

All digital files are stored on a password-protected computer; paper files of transcripts are stored in a locked cabinet in a locked filing cabinet at the University of Alberta. I will store these in my supervisor's designated research area for five years.

The data collected will be used for a master's thesis and in the dissemination of this research via academic papers, conference presentations, creative works (e.g., plays), informal research discussions, online research forums, and funding proposals.

Upon request, the research will forward you copies of research texts developed from this study.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study (before, during, or after), please do not hesitate to contact me, Elaine Laberge or my supervisors Dr. Vera Caine and Dr. Herb Northcott.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and to have the research conversations digitally audio-recorded and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### RESEARCH CONVERSATION GUIDE

#### Research Supervisors

Dr. Vera Caine, vera.caine@ualberta.ca, 780 248 1974

Dr. Herb Northcott, herb.northcott@ualberta.ca, 780 492 0479

#### Project Study

This research seeks to explore how growing up in poverty shapes undergraduate students' experiences in higher education.

- Tell me about how you understand poverty. What has shaped this understanding?
- What kinds of things were said about education in your household?
- What kinds of stories of early education landscapes do you remember about you and your family?
- When you hear dominant ideas about what defines student 'success,' how do you understand these stories? (e.g., *fake it till you make it, experiences should be left in the past, you just have to work hard, you're here so what's the problem? you're privileged to be here! it's your own fault if you fail, and just assimilate/alter yourself to fit into the middle-class higher education culture*).
- How is poverty discussed in classroom? How have you experienced these conversations?
- When sitting in university classrooms, have you experienced conversations about poverty that made you feel excluded and silenced?
- What do you think the dominant narratives are about students from poverty and poverty in general?
- What kinds of language have you heard to describe people from poverty and poverty-classed students? How have you experienced this language?
- What kinds of conversations do you have about your own experiences of growing up in poverty and how this may shape your experiences in university?
- Do you ever wonder at the invisibility of my experiences in the research literature, in classrooms, in course material, and on university landscapes. Could you tell me about these wonders?
- When you arrived on the university campus you thought/felt...
- What kinds of experiences do you have on education landscapes where you were excluded and/or included?
- What kinds of situations or places and times have you chosen (or not) to share your experiences of growing up in poverty?

- What challenges do you face at university?
  - Belonging?
  - Confidence? Self worth?
  - What are your feelings about coming from poverty?
  - What do you think about people in poverty?
- Have you experienced overt or subtle discrimination:
  - When you were growing up?
  - In university?
  - If yes, can you please explain what happened?
  - What was it like to experience this? How did you react?
- What kind of family and social supports do you have?
  - How do they affect your sense of belonging?
  - What social supports have you sought out?

