VEILED BY SHADOWS:
A GRADUATE STUDENT'S TALE OF BECOMING
AND DISSENT IN QUEST OF THE IVORY TOWER

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PROLOGUE

This paper is a critical reflection on my academic journey as a doctoral student in hospitality and tourism management in the U.S., framed by post-qualitative inquiry and informed by Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth St. Pierre's (2005) concept of writing as a method of inquiry. As Richardson posits, writing is not just a tool for representing knowledge, it is an act of *becoming*. Through this process, we construct, question, and continuously reshape our identities as researchers. This form of inquiry resists formulaic structures, rejecting the assumption that knowledge can be neatly categorized and captured (Lee, 2025). I used this lens to explore how my own evolving academic identity has been shaped by rigid structures that not only demand, but award, conformity in the increasing neoliberalization of higher education (Lee & Benjamin, 2023). Embracing a narrative approach through a fictional storytelling of my journey allowed me to undertake a reflexive exploration of my experiences. My writing positions my own *becoming* as an ongoing personal negotiation of meaning within an institution that resists such fluidity.

My goals are twofold. First, I aim to critically examine my evolving identity as a researcher, considering how institutional constraints and broader structural forces shape my doctoral education experience. Second, I embrace a more reflexive, arts-based writing, challenging the positivist's rigidity that has falsely cemented itself as a norm of "good" academic writing (Lee, 2025). My narrative contributes to ongoing discussions on the instability and challenges of higher education. It aligns with scholars advocating for a more reflexive and self-critical academy, one that acknowledges experiences within institutions not as isolated struggles but as reflections of broader systemic issues (Benjamin & Dillette, 2022; Caton, 2014; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2010; Lee & Benjamin, 2023; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). These critical discussions are imperative to tourism and hospitality scholarship. If tourism and hospitality as a field critically examines power, space, and mobility, then we, as researchers, must also critically examine ourselves and the academic systems we belong to and participate in (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010).

VEILED BY SHADOWS

There stands what some call the Ivory Tower. Its spire rises into the clouds, wrapped in an illusion of grandeur, casting long shadows below. From the outside, it may seem like a monument to knowledge, home to scholars and the world's finest thinkers. They question, build on, and break down old assumptions, always interrogating the established theory. Some call it a sanctuary. Others say the Tower is an illusion. Few see inside; even fewer understand.

I never thought my path would lead me to the Ivory Tower. No one in my family had ever set foot in its halls. No mentors had whispered its secrets to me. It stood distant and abstract, a place for others, but not for me. Then I caught a glimpse. Through the rose-colored haze of a master's degree, I saw innovation and collaboration, a space where mentorship flourished, and ideas took flight. The vision was intoxicating. The hunger for knowledge was insatiable. So, I knocked at the gates, armed with the proper credentials, eager and determined to join its ranks. I pursued a doctoral degree. The Tower gate opened just enough. I stepped inside, believing I was entering a sanctuary of truth, of learning, of minds set alight with curiosity.

But the Tower was not what it seemed.

As I journeyed deeper into my doctoral degree, the Tower's walls closed in around me. What I once envisioned as a space for enlightenment revealed itself as rigid and oppressive. The grand hall, where I had hoped for the free exchange of ideas, was instead the arena for a game of thrones. Above us, suspended from the rafters, shimmered prized treasures of recognition, security, and power, an illusion always just out of reach. The closer someone came to grasping them, the farther they flitted away. Professors, locked in desperate struggle for this illusion, wore tattered robes, had hollow eyes, and bore the scars of their pursuit. Graduate students like me lingered at the margins, caught in the crossfire, expected to learn the rules of a game designed to abuse, break, and discard us.

I moved between warring academics and scholarly text, searching for wisdom in pages that no longer spoke to the realities I faced. The knowledge I carried, shaped by industry, by lived experience, and by the world beyond those walls, was dismissed outright. "You don't understand how things work," they told me. Instead, I was instructed to chase what was popular, what would earn recognition for me and my supervisor. Inside those walls, time stood still. Outside, the world spun forward, leaving the academy in its dust. Each day, the weight of expectation pressed down, demanding conformity, urging me to reshape myself to fit an institution that had become more game than pursuit of truth. I watched meaningful inquiries become overshadowed by the frantic pursuit of publication quotas. I no longer saw a space for thoughtful, impactful research and scholarship, only an assembly line of metrics. One day, I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror and did not recognize the person staring back. The hopeful student who had entered this space was gone, replaced by someone weary, frustrated, and lost.

Yet, I resisted. For the first time, I rejected the relentless pace demanded of graduate students. I slowed down; I rested. In this stillness, I saw the Tower for what it was: a relic, its foundations crumbling under the weight of its own contradictions. Yet even there, I found those who fight, not for status, but for something real. I was energized by like-minded academics who gave me both permission and the tools to push back against structures that sought to mold me into something I am not. I do not wield the armor of rank or authority, but I refuse to accept illusion as truth. I realize now that my journey is not just about securing a place within the Tower but about reshaping it, imagining an academy that acknowledges its own instability and dares to change. Perhaps one day, its walls will be transparent, its gates open. Until then I question, I learn, and I write.

WRITING MY *BECOMING* THROUGH WRITING AS INQUIRY

In my narrative above, I referred to the current state of the hospitality and tourism academy as "the Ivory Tower." While this term carries multiple connotations, I use it here to describe an academic environment that upholds rigid traditions and resists critical, creative, and transformative approaches to scholarship. What follows is my attempt to unpack that tension through the lens of writing as inquiry.

My own engagement with the Ivory Tower, through the act of writing, became a way of making sense of this space. Like Benjamin and Dillette (2021), I turned to narrative not just to describe but to critique; not just to tell, but to inquire. They challenge the current academic norms that reproduce exclusion under the guise of objectivity and the way critical tourism scholarship is often dismissed as less rigorous or relevant. In this way, the Tower becomes a gatekeeping structure, demanding performance over purpose and conformity over critique. Writing became a

method of resistance, a way to challenge the hierarchies embedded in academic spaces and to reassert my voice within them. Benjamin and Dillette (2021) expose and justify the ways the Ivory Tower is more than symbolic. It is a lived reality, particularly for critical scholars navigating an academy structured by neoliberalism, colonialism, and defining academic value through quantification. The Ivory Tower not only privileges positivist values and publishing standards but also marginalizes work that foregrounds equity, emotion, and lived experience. Benjamin and Dillette confront the Tower through vulnerability and reflexivity in their narratives, which not only represent the Tower as a distant metaphor to be confronted and critiqued, but a site of personal tension and internalized struggle that carries deeper meaning.

Writing, as Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) stresses, is not simply a tool for passive reflection, but a deeper and active process of thinking, knowing, and *becoming*. Such processes disrupt the traditional notions of research which adheres to rigid and sterile methodological structures as legitimate (Lee, 2025). Writing allows us to document the process of *becoming* through a continuous, evolving negotiation of identity, knowledge, and power. By "writing to inquire," we can locate ourselves within larger disciplinary, institutional, and social frameworks (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Academic structures shape how knowledge is created and shared, influencing not just our research topics but also our identities as scholars. In this process, writing becomes a space of *struggle*, one where we constantly navigate the tensions between institutional expectations, disciplinary boundaries, and our own intellectual pursuits.

I felt this struggle first-hand while writing the narrative above. As an avid fantasy reader, crafting a fictionalized account allowed me to step outside my immediate reality and critically examine my experiences, much as I would analyze a character in my favorite novels. Writing forced me to engage with emotions I had not confronted, flipping between the satisfaction of expressing my experience and the deeper examination of how this had impacted and shaped me.

Graduate school often feels like a constant tension between personal intellectual examination and professional survival. I worry that being too critical in my writing might make me a less desirable job candidate, yet the more I talk to professors and other doctoral students, the more I realize how common this disillusionment with academia is. It seems almost like an expected rite of passage. But should it be? If writing is indeed a struggle, a form of knowledge-making and site of resistance (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), then instead of simply enduring the pressures of academia, we can use writing to challenge and reshape the very structures that make it exclusionary.

Within this "creative space," as Rydzik et al. (2013) describe, I found tools not just for research but for survival. Embracing my narrative allowed me to step outside normative structures of validation and instead inhabit a space of *becoming* where research was also healing. As tourism and hospitality researchers, we are in a "creative space" that invites us to move beyond conventional methodologies and embrace the transformative potential of arts-based inquiry (Rydzik et al., 2013). Rydzik and colleagues (2013) argue that this creative space is not simply about aesthetics or expression, but an ethical and epistemological site where knowledge can be co-created through reflexive and other arts-based methodologies. Such arts-based approaches challenge the dominance of positivist paradigms by amplifying silenced voices and engaging with embodied and experiential ways of knowing. This creative turn allows researchers to position themselves not merely as observers, but as co-participants in knowledge production navigating the messy, emotional, and often invisible dimensions of tourism work. By embracing these arts-based approaches we disrupt the rigid boundaries of "valid" scholarship and open up space for more inclusive and socially engaged research practices. Within this creative space, we are called to not only study the world, but to imagine it differently (Rydzik et al., 2013).

This imaginative, co-creative space still operates within the formal structures of academia. I find myself in a paradoxical position (one that I believe many conscious graduate students are in). I am engaging in arts-based inquiry to challenge dominant paradigms while still navigating the conventions of academic writing and publishing. As a PhD student, I feel I must demonstrate fluency in these dominant conventions, such as formal prose, to

earn the credibility to question them. Writing remains the primary mode through which research is evaluated and legitimized. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, traditional qualitative prose often mirrors quantitative accounts, suppressing voice, metaphor, and emotion in pursuit of credibility. In this context, writing has been academically privileged as the legitimate pathway to knowledge. Creative analytic practices resist this tradition while advocating for a more expressionist prose that embraces emotion, creativity, and self-reflexivity. I do not argue for abandoning formal prose but for cultivating a more inclusive understanding of scholarship that recognizes embodied and creative forms such as dance, music, theater, performance, and other artistic expressions. Scholars such as Johnny Saldaña and Paolo Mura remind us that knowledge does not only live on the page (Mura, 2020; Mura et al., 2021; Saldaña, 2005). Knowledge is also performed, felt, and lived. Writing a fictionalized narrative was not simply a stylistic choice, it was the form of expression I prefer. Fantasy has long been a space where I can escape to reflect, imagine, and find clarity. In this context, storytelling became a method of inquiry, an entry point beyond the constraints of the Ivory Tower and into new intellectual and emotional terrain.

As I reflect on how to close this inquiry, I turn to Kellee Caton (2014) who invites us to question everything, our hospitality and tourism curricula, our research methods, and especially where we have lost sight of our humanity. This resonates with my experience as a graduate student, where I have previously felt reduced to just another body moving through the system, valued more for advancing others' publication goals than for my own learning and wellbeing. Caton recognized the neoliberal academic structures that have separated technical business practices from social sciences in our discipline and calls for the inclusion of arts and philosophy in our research and teaching. She illustrated this through her own experience of how a simple short story opened pedagogical opportunities for connecting with real-world tourism experiences. Caton advocates for weaving arts and humanities into our hospitality and tourism curricula, an approach that speaks to me as someone who finds solace in fantasy literature in my own sense making. When we look beyond our narrow disciplinary boundaries to embrace other forms of learning, literature, and ways of knowing, we better understand the world around us, which is fundamental to our field.

Caton reminds us that at the heart of our hospitality and tourism discipline are humans. That core human traits such as inquisitiveness, questioning, critiquing, and imagining are essential not just to scholarship but to life itself. When we carry this ethical stance beyond academic walls, it shapes how we move through the world, how we build community, how we create space for care in our work, and how we find courage to speak up even when it's risky. These acts may seem small, but they represent resistance against systems that seek to constrain who we're allowed to be. When we strip away the human element from education, from our interactions, from our understanding of how we participate in larger systems, we may produce more work, but we lose ourselves. We stop questioning. And without such questioning, what hope do we have of ever reimagining the Tower at all?

In writing my *becoming*, I found more than reflection, I found resistance. The Ivory Tower may demand conformity, but within the cracks, narrative offers light. By embracing post-qualitative, arts-based inquiry, I hope more of us can refuse the reduction of knowledge to metrics. Instead, we write to *critique*; we write to *resist*; we write to *become*.

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