

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 29:
Hospitality & Tourism
July 2025

Reflective Piece

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1029016>

THE FIGHT WITHIN:
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POETRY AS
DEFIANCE IN ACADEMIA

Stefanie Benjamin

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors.

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

THE FIGHT WITHIN: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POETRY AS DEFIANCE IN ACADEMIA

Stefanie Benjamin

I've become disillusioned with both the hollow promises of higher education and the insatiable greed of corporate interests (Benjamin et al., 2024; Lee & Benjamin, 2023). Some might classify me as a critical tourism scholar, while others may prefer to label me a “pain in the ass.” It's not just my *tone*—it's the questions I ask. These questions tend to uncover the cracks, shining light on what others would rather ignore. I've always viewed the world through this lens, and now, as a tenured Associate Professor, my privilege and power to resist and challenge have never been stronger. *Cue evil laugh.*

Over the past decade, I've witnessed what some might bluntly call a “dumpster fire” within my department, university, and the broader landscape of higher education. This metaphor barely captures the depth of turmoil—from political unrest destabilizing academic freedoms (Hals, 2025) to the relentless waves of the COVID-19 pandemic (American Association of University Professors, 2021) that exposed and deepened existing inequalities. Beyond these immediate crises, there is the insidious, ongoing erasure of counter-histories and marginalized narratives—systematically whitewashed from official U.S. government websites and even sacred sites like National Parks (Jingnan & Lawrence, 2025; National Parks Conservation Association, 2025). These forces are not simply external events; they infiltrate every corner of the academic environment, shaping curricula, scholarship, and the very spaces where knowledge is produced and shared.

Living within this context means navigating the exhausting reality of a capitalistic, white-washed society that perpetually demands conformity and compliance (Benjamin & Laughter, 2022). It is not merely tiring to endure these systems—it is utterly draining to constantly push back against them. Academia, which ideally should be a place of critical thought and liberation, often mirrors the oppressive structures of the wider world, privileging certain voices while silencing others (Benjamin et al., 2024). The emotional labor required to resist this status quo—challenging ingrained biases, fighting for representation, reclaiming erased histories—is relentless and exhausting. It is a struggle that depletes not only intellectual energy but also emotional and spiritual reserves.

It is from this place of weariness and defiance that I felt compelled to write this piece—an ethnographic collection of poems that serves both as an act of resistance and a means of reclaiming my intellectual and creative autonomy (Leach, 2021). Poetry becomes more than an artistic outlet; it is a sanctuary where I can name and bear witness to these struggles, reclaim the narratives erased by systemic oppression, and assert my presence and voice in spaces that often seek to render me invisible. This work embodies the tension between fatigue and resilience—a testament to the ongoing fight to carve out meaning and justice within systems that persistently seek to undermine them.

I encourage you, dear reader, to read this at your leisure. Perhaps some portion of it resonates with you. Perhaps it does not. In either case, let this space encourage creative and critical push-back in a system that tries so hard to keep us down. A homogenizing, basic system.

Why even bother?

A paradox, perhaps, or cruel irony,
to teach service, yet serve so little in return,
in a system that grinds us,
to wither, to falter, to question:
Why bother?

We toil in classrooms, usually the dilapidated buildings on campus,
building futures on fragile, broken lies.
No applause, no recognition, no care—
Just the silence of a system that deems us unseen.

Least hospitable building on campus—even though we teach hospitality.
Least valued in our industry—low pay wages, low respect, low enrollment.
Everything seems like we've arrived at Doomsday Eve.

And how can we be seen when our narratives are erased?
And how can we be *heard* when our histories are illegal to tell?
And who will be left to *tell* our stories?
Doomsday feels near, a shadow on the door.

Who will remain
to fight off the shadows?
When the very institution we've committed our time,
our energy, our health to—
welcomes Doomsday with an honorary doctorate.

Dr. D is here.
Centering neo-liberalism as their theoretical framework.

This generation

They said, *this generation is lazy.*

Without empathetically listening to their concerns ...

They said, *these students are entitled.*

Without valuing their resistance against corporate greed.

They said, *we need good workers.*

Without compensating for their humanness.

Our industry and academy view *students* as numbers.

As pawns. As faceless and nameless workers.

This is nothing new. It's happening generation after generation:
institutional hypocrisy at its finest.

Meritocracy is a myth.

And *this generation* is jumping ship.

Who will they trap now?

When this *lazy generation* refuses to romanticize productivity,
no longer values the institutions from which they stand,
and pushes back ...

Pushes back—demanding liberation, not assimilation.

Pushes back—not to destroy, but to rebuild with care.

Got hope?

Nope.

How about a flicker of light?
Perhaps.

How much more time do you need for your progress?
As Baldwin once demanded—
how much more time?

Hopefully, the time for progress, is now,
not in some distant, foggy future.

So do I have hope?
Not the kind that waits.
Not the kind that begs.
But maybe the kind that fights.

Hope in a generation that may seem *lazy*
but questions the greedy systems
and heartless institutions
that shamelessly robbed them
of their wide-eyed innocence?

Sure. Fuck it.
I *might* be hopeful.

Note: The quotation is from the 1989 PBS documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (Thorsen, 1989).

This ethnographic collection of poems does more than describe fatigue within a broken system—it inhabits and gives voice to that very exhaustion. The poems function as a methodology in their own right, offering a fragmented, emotionally charged lens through which to understand institutional neglect. Poetry allows what prose alone cannot: the register of exhaustion, the rhythms of disillusionment, and the sudden jolts of rage or resignation. These are not polished narratives; they are ruptures. And that rupture *is* the point.

The field of hospitality is one that prides itself on care, empathy, and belonging—yet these poems reveal the bitter irony of working in an academic space that often withholds those very values from its faculty and students. The short lines and sharp tonal shifts resist the polished detachment of academic writing, mirroring the very conditions they critique: undervaluation, invisibility, erasure.

Yes, the themes—low wages, disrespect, institutional gaslighting—could be outlined in prose (as I have begun to do here), but it is the poems that make us *feel* them. The repetition, the clipped syntax, the use of rhetorical questions—all enact a method of knowing that is bodily and affective. The poetic form interrupts the reader's comfort. It slows us down, forces us to sit in the discomfort, to dwell in the tension between what is said and what is felt.

So, when the poem circles back to the question of hope, it's not just repetition, it's a method of unfolding. The question is no longer the same. The body has absorbed the ache, and the reader has, too. Hope is no longer naïve. It's cautious, cracked open, bruised—but not gone.

This isn't simply a reflection on institutional harm; it's a methodological choice to document that harm *poetically*. And the choice matters. It allows anger to breathe, contradiction to stand uncorrected, and silence to carry weight. In doing so, the poems assert that not all knowledge must be neatly argued. Some truths must be felt.

AI statement

I used ChatGPT to assist with my grammar and sentence structure.

Stefanie Benjamin (she/her) (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4653-6754>) is the Co-Founder of CODE, Co-Director of Tourism RESET, and Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee. Her research challenges traditional perspectives in tourism, amplifying counter-narratives through academic and popular outlets. Dr. B is committed to bridging academia and industry, advocating for inclusivity and sustainability.

REFERENCES

- American Association of University Professors. (2021, May). *Special report: COVID-19 and academic governance*. <https://www.aaup.org/report/special-report-covid-19-and-academic-governance>
- Anand, T., & Lawrence, Q. (2025, March 19). Trans people, women, people of color erased from federal sites. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/19/nx-s1-5317567/federal-websites-lgbtq-diversity-erased>
- Benjamin, S., & Laughter, J. (2022). Toward critical race tourism: Valuing counter-narratives and endarkened storywork. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(12), 2628–2644. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2093358>
- Benjamin, S., Lee, K. S., & Boluk, K. (2024). Shit has to change, right? A call for “good trouble” in tourism. *Journal of Travel Research*, 64(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875241276542>
- Hals, T. (2025, June 2). *Harvard seeks end to US funding cuts, says national security, public health research in peril*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/harvard-seeks-end-us-funding-cuts-says-national-security-public-health-research-2025-06-02/>
- Leach, E. (2021). The fractured “I”: An autoethnographic account of a part-time doctoral student's experience with scholarly identity formation. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(3–4), 381–384.
- Lee, K.-S., & Benjamin, S. (2023). Commentary: The death of tourism scholarship ... unless ... *Annals of Tourism Research*, 98, Article 103520. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103520>
- National Parks Conservation Association. (2025, March 19). Parks group condemns erasure of LGBTQ+ history from Park Service website. *National Parks Conservation Association*. <https://www.npca.org/articles/7142-parks-group-condemns-erasure-of-lgbtq-history-from-park-service-website>
- Thorsen, K. (Director). (1989). *James Baldwin: The price of the ticket*. PBS.