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Writing as Myself: Autobiographical Vignette, Poem and Playlist as Tools of Self-Reflection in a Phenomenological Dissertation

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Abstract: This personal narrative explores the process of writing a phenomenological dissertation as myself, considering my layered identities as a meaningful hermeneutic approach to study design and data collection, analysis and discussion (van Manen, 2016). I examine the role of self-reflection in qualitative inqury and present three practical tools that are in line with the philosophical background of hermeneutic phenomenological research, considering the current scholarship that supports their use as devices for research, self-reflection and communication. Framed by theories of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2001, 2010) and nepantla (Anzaldúa, 2012, 2015), this piece asks the question: How can the use of tools such as personal vignettes, poetry and playlist curation support the self-reflection of authors engaged in writing a phenomenological dissertation?

Keywords: *bilingual education, science education, phenomenological research, poetic inquiry*

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Introduction

When preparing to write a dissertation, doctoral candidates must consider philosophical and practical implications of available methodologies. In qualitative studies, the researcher's reflexivity, or "self-awareness" is the process of making the subjectivity of the researcher and her processes visible (Creswell, 2013, p. 11). The phenomenological tradition asks the researcher to engage in self-reflection as part of the hermeneutic circle (van Manen, 2016). In the hermeneutic circle, the researcher revisits their reflexivity through self-reflection, turning inward to reevaluate their positionality vis-à-vis the phenomenon throughout the research process. Thus, in writing a phenomenological dissertation, the researcher constructs meaning out of the data through the hermeneutic circle, revisiting how personal experiences affect their relationship to the phenomenon, enriching the writing by a deepened understanding of self and the topic.

While there is agreement that reflexivity and self-reflection are important to qualitative and phenomenological research, there is a gap in the literature about concrete frameworks and strategies that scholars can employ in their studies (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Pool, 2018). The purpose of this article is to clarify what "self-reflection" means for phenomenological researchers and to explore theory and methodology of three tools that were meaningful to me in the writing of a phenomenological dissertation. First, I introduce autobiographical vignettes, which allowed me to contextualize research terms within my own life experience. Next, I consider how poetry illuminated the affective aspect of my writing, and invited me to consider how my experience of the phenomenon felt. Finally, I consider a playlist as a musical anchor to my lifeworld (Husserl, 1970), creating space for self-reflection and writing. The research question addressed in this piece is, "How can the use of tools such as personal vignettes, poetry and playlist curation support the self-reflection of authors engaged in writing a phenomenological dissertation?"

What is a phenomenological study?

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that asks participants to deeply consider and describe their own experience with the goal of understanding the essence of a phenomenon within their "lifeworld" (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). In this process, interpretive phenomenological analysis goes beyond description, asking participants to consider a particular experience within the context of their lives and to search for meaning (van Manen, 2016). A hallmark of phenomenological research is the emphasis on the researcher and writer as a subject. As the researcher is engaged in the data collection and analysis, it is essential to the task of research that she interrogates her own experience of the phenomenon (Smith & Nizza, 2022). While deeply rooted in phenomenological philosophy and its emphasis on meaning, experience and lifeworld, this method also has implications for the researcher who must revisit their own understanding of the phenomenon while gathering, interpreting and communicating data. In this way, phenomenological research explores the continuum of experience between researcher and research data. According to Max van Manen (2016), a phenomenological study must be born of engagement with a personally meaningful and situated subject (p. 154). It `must illuminate the question “what is it like?” for someone to have the particular experience that is being studied (p.42). Fundamentally, the study must be concerned with significance, and seek to gather evidence grounded in phenomenological experience and inquiry (p.12).

In a phenomenological dissertation project, it is necessary to connect any theorist to the phenomenological tradition, integrating the study into the lineage of phenomenological inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology (also known as interpretive phenomenology) follows Heidegger (1973) and assumes description of phenomena will include the interpretive lens of the researcher. The human sciences researcher using hermeneutic phenomenology must be very aware of their biases and personal understandings of the phenomenon at the outset and commit to revisiting the subjectivity which impacts their experience of the phenomenon at hand. This process of reflexive identification and reevaluation is known as the hermeneutic circle, and is central to phenomenological inquiry (Peoples, 2021, p. 33). The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) noted the importance of language in shaping relationships and experience (2013), and in shaping the relationship with “the other” through dialogue (Green et al., 2021, p.3). This relationship of dialogue is in line with van Manen’s (2016) understanding of phenomenological research involving an ethical imperative of responsibility to the other. The hermeneutic phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1973) emphasized that language itself has actancy (p.18), and requires an understanding of its own ‘situatedness’ within disciplinary discourse and the researcher’s own part within the hermeneutic circle as speaker, interpreter and communicator. Brady (2009) uses the image of a see-saw to describe the dialogic balance of language and research in hermeneutic phenomenology. The researcher in this analogy is no detached observer, rather she is a participant who is negotiating equilibrium. In the hermeneutic circle, the researcher turns inward, observing herself encountering the phenomenon. There cannot be a hard line between the theory and practice or observer and observed because of the interdependence of the ecosystem that is phenomenological research. This connectedness of the researcher to the subject matter through language brings with it an ethical imperative: the researcher has a heightened responsibility resulting from the relationship engendered by shared experience of the phenomenon conveyed through language.

My 2023 dissertation study was situated within the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenological research. The study sought insights into the experience of teachers who incorporate arts-based pedagogies into science instruction in a Dual Language Immersion (DLI) elementary school in Georgia, USA. I was interested in the spaces between the curricular boundaries of science and arts, the linguistic borders of English and Spanish, the ontological distinctions between human and non-human and the entanglements along the continuum between research data and researcher. The study asked the phenomenological question: what is it like to be a DLI teacher using arts-based pedagogies to teach science? To answer this question, I interviewed teachers, observed classrooms, and engaged in poetry workshop activities with study participants. While engaged in these research activities, I was also reflecting on my own experiences with science, bilingualism and teaching, seeking to be more aware of my positionality in the Spanish science classroom and to clarify my purpose as a researcher. This conscious self-reflection helped me make sense of what words, feelings and identity I was bringing to my dissertation work.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework grounding my study was informed by two main ideas: the "*nepantla*" understanding of "in-between" identities as described by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) and the vibrant materialism of Jane Bennett (2001). Bennett and Anzaldúa share a monist ontology, rejecting dualisms and assuming an interconnectedness between nature, humans and things (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 150, Bennett, 2010, p. 122, Keating, 2015, p. xxx-xxxi). As researchers, Bennett and Anzaldúa were willing to experiment with epistemological limits, seeking to know with and as things (Shaeffer, 2015, Zaytoun, 2015, Bennett, 2010), and experimenting with forms of communicating research (Anzaldúa, 2012, Anzaldúa, 2015, Bennett, 2020). Finally, both Anzaldúa and Bennett emphasize the aesthetic aspects of language, particularly poetry, and consider art and creativity to be integral to the development of a "reservoir" of ethical understanding, imagination and healing (Bennett, 2001, p.128, Anzaldúa 2015, p. 66). This theoretical grounding, with its emphasis on ambiguity, personal experience, and evocative language invited the incorporation of poetic inquiry, narrative autobiographical vignettes, and playlist as tools for self-reflection into my phenomenological study.

Methods

In a phenomenological dissertation, the researcher's reflexivity is important to the research process, and begins with the selection of a topic that is personally relevant (van Manen, 2016). In the case of my study, I was personally invested in the experience of bilingual educators teaching science using arts-based pedagogies. As I conducted interviews, reviewed data and engaged with findings, it was essential that I continually consider my own experience of the phenomenon of bilingual science education as part of the hermeneutic circle, self-reflecting on my own positionality.

During my dissertation process, I had the goal of writing for two hours a day during the work week, and four hours on the weekend. While I was writing up field notes, summarizing literature and building arguments about my research, I was also writing about my own experiences. The purpose of this personal writing was to clarify my thoughts and experiences and separate them from what the teacher participants were describing in our interviews. Three tools supported my personal, self-reflective writing: autobiographical vignettes, poetry and the curation of a playlist. Each subsection below describes one tool and provides a discussion of how it was used in my dissertation process.

Vignette

The phenomenological anecdote or vignette is an explanatory description which communicates the singularity of personal experience with the goal of making its universality available (van Manen, 1989; van Manen & van Manen, 2021). The vignette is a vivid, poetic description of the experience of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Personal, autobiographical vignettes allow researchers to provide definitions and explanations of their understanding of terms, illustrating their personal connection to the phenemenon (Barter & Renold, 2000).

The use of autobiographical vignettes in a phenomenological research project is in line with the need for self-reflection as part of the hermeneutic circle. This process of writing personal narratives may feel “unscholarly” to the novice researcher (Pool, p. 24), but it is valuable as a means of articulating a researcher’s experience of the phenomena as well as surfacing biases or perceptions. This written self-reflection is variously theorized as “*epoche”* or “reduction” (Husserl, 1970), bracketing (Moustsakas, 1994; Fischer, 2009), or bridling (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Following Sohn and colleagues, I considered that the purpose of this self-reflective writing is to “help phenomenological researchers become more aware of their assumptions and intentionality” rather than to “achieve objectivity” (Sohn et al., 2017, p.130).

These vignettes were written as I reviewed literature about bilingual teachers, science education and arts-based pedagogies, interviewed teachers and spent time in Dual Language Immersion Spanish Science classes. I sought to understand why science teaching in the United States in 2023 was so different from my own experience of science and teaching and learning. While I knew that the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) had been adopted by our school district, many of the teacher participants expressed frustration with the teaching and learning expectations. I wondered how my own experience of learning science might illuminate some of the differences between teaching and learning approaches within the DLI context. Narrative autobiographical writing became a part of my self-reflection process.

As I gathered and analyzed data for my dissertation study, it was important for me to consider and acknowledge my own experience of bilingual education, and to recognize that my experience might be different from or overlap with that of my study participants. Creating time to explore and write about important concepts helped to organize my thoughts, interpret my personal experience in light of the theories that grounded my work and to make visible my perceptions and judgements. The vignettes below have the goal of illuminating and complicating two terms which were central to my study: “science” and “teacher.” Each vignette describes the term as it appeared in my lifeworld, and ends with an interpretive section, in which I connect my experience of the phenomenon with the subject of my study

I kept several word processing notes documents that explored terms that were important in my research: entitled “Science Notes”, “Teacher Notes”, “Bilingual Notes”, etc. These documents served a variety of purposes. They were deposits for notes for ideas, memories, observations and questions. To these notes, I added thick descriptions of particular moments, and listed names, dates, photos, sketches and words that were important to my memory of those experiences. The documents also served as a storage area for my more academic writing, what my advisor called “the bone yard” of ideas: phrases, stories and narrative passages that were cut during editing, but which I did not want to lose. From those larger deposit documents, themes emerged. In some cases several stories, memories or events overlapped, and I created a new vignette that incorporated notes from various source documents into more complete vignettes that illustrated specific encounters with a phenomenon. Originally a device to focus my writing, two of these vignettes became part of the introduction to my dissertation, as a way to invite the reader into my lifeworld and as an illustration of a technique of phenomenological research.

Vignette Examples

Vignette 1: My Science Life.

When I was an elementary school student in Montevideo, Uruguay in the early 1980s, science class was where I learned facts while seated indoors. The mandatory national curriculum was a half-day program; private schools were free to add anything to the other half day. At St. Agnes, my bilingual elementary school, each grade level had two teachers: the Spanish teacher taught the *“programa uruguayo*” (national curriculum) during the morning, and a second teacher taught the same subjects again, in English, in the afternoon. Though my classmates and I had science class twice, in English and Spanish, we did not have science textbooks, lab experiments or field experiences in either language. Teachers would dictate or write out information about gravity, photosynthesis or microbes, and the class would copy what was said into our notebooks in an ink pen (never pencil or ballpoint!). The teacher, and her knowledge, was the center of the science experience in both English and Spanish.

Food was central to our lives, and getting and preparing it took a lot of time, effort and money. Animal bodies were on display at the *feria* and in butcher shops. I helped clean fish every week, and make soup every week. My mother let me cut up and compare chicken and cow hearts, kidneys and livers before she cooked them. My sister was a baker, and taught me to measure for accuracy and multiply recipes to make enough for large groups. *Tía* Gloria and I dried *yuyos* (medicinal plants) for teas, and cooked together *al ojo* (measuring with the eye). Her husband, *Tío* Felipe showed me how to graft fruit trees and identify birdsong, the Spica radio playing *tangos* in the background. In addition to flora and fauna, living and dead, I had access to tools in Felipe's shed, my brother's darkroom, my sister's recipes, and expert opinions about all manner of things from neighbors, tradespeople, vendors, relatives and friends. While shopping and cooking, I was also tinkering, building, growing, gathering, testing, evaluating, communicating and investigating.

My parents managed a camp, and our family spent December-March (summer in the Southern Hemisphere) at the beach. I wandered the ocean shore and the marsh with summer friends, following *arroyitos* (little creeks) inland, and prying mussels off of rocks. As I got older, I spent less time in the tide pools and more time lying on the sand in the shade of the orange fishing boats, reading Argentine celebrity gossip magazines and translating English radio songs into Spanish for cash. Nights were incredibly dark, ideal for identifying constellations, fishing by lantern, and dreaming of the sophistication of cities like Chicago, where I hoped to move one day.

When I moved to the United States for college, I went from feeling very right to very wrong. In Chicago I felt cold, out of place, homesick, lonely, and profoundly un-American. Translating Roxette songs into Spanish had not adequately prepared me to talk to American teenagers. I was totally unfamiliar with cafeteria food that was served at the dining commons; I had no experience of breakfast cereal, which was a staple for many Frosh. I was unsure of what professors expected in my college classes, and embarrassed to explain that I came from another country, a different kind of school system and another language. I only heard my deficits: I had no idea what the word syllabus meant, I did not have any science AP Exams, I couldn't sing an English song about the periodic table that everyone else seemed to know. No one ever asked me about penguin nesting grounds, Southern right whales, *butiá* palms, amethyst mines or anything else about Uruguay or life in South America. It never occurred to me to volunteer what I knew about *yuyos*, or that my birds flew north, not south, for the winter. I didn't realize that *arroyitos*, recipes for *noquis*, film developing and fruit tree grafting were valuable sources of science learning. The things that I knew about did not seem important at all in chilly, sand-free Chicago.

In my experience as a learner, there was a profound distinction between school and home science. One was ink-stained and static, and the other was sandy, bloody, smelly, dirty, loud, often delicious, and populated with characters. There was also an important separation between American science teaching and learning and Uruguayan (English and Spanish) science teaching and learning. For a long time, I believed that I was "bad at science," possibly because of a language deficit or intelligence failure. In my dissertation literature review, I learned that the perceived distinction between home and school science, and variations in science education between countries is not unique to my experience.

As a researcher and educator, I value creating opportunities for connections between home and school knowledge. It is also personally satisfying for me to help clarify American school norms and expectations for Spanish-speaking teachers and families. This study was part of my life project to understand teacher and student experiences of existing in-between languages and cultures.

Vignette 2: My Teacher Life.

In 1998, I returned home to Montevideo with my young child and American spouse and began teaching high school. My personal "in-between" identity was reinforced professionally in my first job, teaching Theory of Knowledge (TOK), the foundational course of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. In this seminar class, students study epistemology and culture, and learn how different academic disciplines are interconnected. Teachers work with students to apply different disciplinary techniques to their existing assignments in Math, Science, History and Literature, playing across subjects. Teachers consider TOK a positive professional experience that heightens their own interdisciplinary understanding (Bergeron & Rogers, 2019). Working in TOK meant that I began my teaching career with a philosophical and practical understanding of interdisciplinarity in schools. Teaching "in-between" and across school subjects was a joyful and exciting experience. A significantly less delightful development was the revelation that the financial director of the school, St. Carmen, had stolen the teachers' pension fund under the guise of transferring it from the government social security system to the new privatized AFAP (similar to a 501k). This was one example of the precarity that undergirded life in Uruguay in the early 2000s.

In 2001, I joined the staff of Uruguay International School (UIS; all names of schools are pseudonyms), a school catering to expatriates. With a B.A. and M.A. from an American university, I was a valuable, "American" asset to the school. My responsibilities included managing the SAT and ACT tests and supporting students in their college applications. However, as a Uruguayan "local hire," I was not eligible for payment in U.S. dollars like my "foreign hire" American colleagues. At work, I found myself "in-between" my American and Uruguayan identities. When there was a major devaluation of the Uruguayan peso in 2002, the "foreign hires" on the dollar scale did not see a wage difference, but local Uruguayan employees saw our paychecks lose ⅔ of their value. I loved living at home in Uruguay, and was happy to have a secure job at a school for expats. However, these were lean and uncertain years.

In 2008 my family moved from Uruguay to Georgia. With two school-aged children, elderly parents and a graduate student spouse, finding a full-time job with benefits was an urgent priority. There were no local IB Diploma Programmes that would accept my teaching credentials. The state of Georgia required a year-long student teaching practicum as a prerequisite for obtaining a teaching certificate. At that time, taking a year off to study and work as an unpaid student teacher was not an option. Instead, I found a job as a Spanish teacher at a private school that offered tuition waivers for my kids and health insurance for my family. Once again, I was professionally "in-between." This time, I was learning how to be a Montessori teacher, a Spanish-language teacher and an early childhood educator, after ten years as a high school teacher. Nine years later, I left that post to work in my local public school system as part of the federal Migrant Education Program (MEP) in a classified (non-certified), paraprofessional role.

As a Migrant Education Specialist, my job was to push into classrooms and help migratory students access classroom content, making connections across disciplines and languages. These tutoring experiences were unique, and tailored to each child and classroom. With a fourth grader who was tired of looking at geometric shapes on the Chromebook screen, I folded paper shapes and counted the lines of symmetry in English and Spanish. A kindergartener and I made “sight words hopscotch” with sidewalk chalk. By then, I was also a graduate student at Southeastern University, learning about arts-based pedagogies and the scholars who understood these methods to be tools for critical, multicultural education and social change (Cahnmann-Taylor & Preston, 2008, Chappel & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013, Chappel & Faltis, 2013, Guyotte et al., 2014, Guyotte, 2020).

During my time as a MEP Specialist and Montessori Spanish teacher, I met others who had moved to the Southeastern United States and found themselves “in-between" certifications, qualifications, languages and cultures. My experience of personal, professional and financial “in-betweenness” was not unusual. In conversations with private school Spanish teachers and MEP classified employees who had emigrated as adults, I heard many stories that echoed my own experience. These educators arrived in the United States and needed jobs right away to support and provide health insurance for extended family, or they felt that they could not spare the time and expense associated with local certification. I became very interested in learning more about teachers who find themselves or consciously place themselves in “in-between” spaces. This led me to focus my research study on the experience of DLI teachers who are linguistically and culturally “in-between” at work, and who add another layer of in-betweenness by teaching across disciplines, using arts-based pedagogies in their science lessons.

My experience of “in-betweenness" has changed over time. The sense of being *“ni una cosa ni la otra”* in the United States (“neither one thing nor another”) has been profoundly impacted by the theoretical work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Jane Bennett. In recent years I have sought to follow Bennett (2001) and anchor my “in-between” identity with an affect of enchantment over a “cultural narrative of disenchantment” and resentment (p.4). For example, between 2019-2021 school years, I collected data about paraprofessional educators, immigrant educator qualifications and pay scale comparisons from a social justice hermeneutic, and felt frustrated and stuck with my “in-between” educator status. It was through an assemblage analysis assignment for a phenomenological research project as part of my Ph.D. studies that I realized that I was characterizing my experience and that of other parapros primarily in terms of economic injustice, which did not adequately sum up my full reality. The truth was that my time as an MEP parapro and a “local hire” teacher in Uruguay were defined by many things, including profound joy and freedom, in addition to financial worries. Anzaldúa’s (2015) call for critical reflection and dwelling within the “in-between " space combined with Bennett’s (2010) vibrant materialism has helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of my “in-betweenness,” as itself an actant thing.

In 2021, I began working as a Graduate Assistant at a Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion (DLI) school, Otis Elementary School (OES). In this position, I worked with teachers and paraprofessionals who are in a learning environment that is explicitly “in-between” languages and cultures, where classes are taught in English and Spanish. “Spanish DLI teachers” teach curricular subjects in Spanish; “English DLI teachers” teach curricular subjects in English. Once again, I found myself in-between: I was neither a teacher, nor a coach, nor an employee of the school. In this role, I was a researcher, paid by the University, with no supervisory task. I understood my work to be supportive of teachers and staff as they carry forward the DLI program at the CSD school district. I provided assistance to teachers in lesson planning, assessment, record keeping, instruction and communication with the community.

Being an educator has been a part of my identity for the last twenty-five years. Over time, the exact nature of my work has shifted along a continuum: homeroom teacher, Spanish teacher, history teacher, preschool teacher, Migrant Ed Tutor, Research Assistant. In each job, the professional and personal “in-between" of languages, qualifications and obligations have been an integral part of my self-understanding as an educator.

As I embarked on this study, I was aware of how much the term “teacher” had been a part of my lifeworld. There had been benefits and difficulties associated with my credentials, language skills and national identities; delightful and dreadful colleagues and work situations. It was vital that I remember the wideness of my lived reality as a teacher while allowing for the indeterminacy of others’ experiences. In this study, I hoped to encounter teacher participants in a way that was attentive to their unique experience of bilingual education.

Discussion

Vignettes in a Phenomenological Dissertation

Using personal vignettes in my own process allowed me to think carefully about ideas that were central to my study, specifically the words “science” and “teacher,” and to recognize how these words were tied up with my experiences. Examining how these words fit into my own lifeworld was part of the hermeneutic circle. Using the vignettes in the dissertation also made explicit the goals of phenomenological research: to make meaning of experience by deeply considering the phenomenon within the context of life-world. Choosing to include these vignettes in my dissertation was an effective way to introduce myself as a researcher and to communicate a research device.

For dissertation writers interested in exploring this device, I recommend a practice of autobiographical thematic writing as a form of *epoche*. I sought to write daily in narrative form, writing complete paragraphs that captured an experience. For example, the completed “My “Science” Life” vignette was made up of several smaller pieces: one about school at St. Agnes, another about after-school science pursuits at home, and a third about summer activities in nature. Knitting the original paragraphs together into a cohesive autobiographical vignette involved asking, “so what?” as I sought to derive significance from my experiences and prepared to approach the data from my dissertation study with a clearer understanding of my experience of the phenomenon.

Poetry

The second tool that I used to self-reflect on my own experience of Spanish science teaching and learning was poetry. While a graduate student, I joined a poetry workshop, and met weekly for three years with fellow graduate students. These activities were personally meaningful, as I enjoyed the creative process and learning about poetry. As I worked to design a study for teachers, poetic inquiry became part of the methodology of my study, with participants responding to poetic prompts as part of the data collection, triangulation and analysis. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on my personal poetry writing, and on the use of poetry as a tool for self-reflection as I wrote my dissertation.

Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry centers on language and in so doing, establishes itself as a "poetizing activity" (van Manen, 2016, p. 13). Because description and interpretation relies on language which is culture-bound and limited, it is the task of the researcher to illuminate the experience through evocative speech that captures the imagination of the listener. Poetry has always had a place in hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger, the primary proponent of interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, believed that experiencing art transforms humans. Standing in front of a painting, for example, changes a person's way of being by "deconcealing" something about Truth (Heidegger, 1971, p.39): the artwork reveals something to the viewer. Being open to the possibility of that revelation is ascribing indeterminacy to the other (in this case, the painting). Heidegger links phenomenology to poetic inquiry: phenomenologists/poets are interested in what is known and in being truthful about what is not known. In the essay, "What Are Poets For?" Heidegger asserts that poets "learn what is unspoken," even though this form of scholarship may not be taken seriously, and is considered an "unscientific violation," as Heidegger puts it; the poet persists because the "long way leading to the poetry is itself one that inquires poetically." (p. 96). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986), following Heidegger in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, points to the importance of poetic language to reveal truth about experience.

Poetic inquiry has been integrated with hermeneutic phenomenological research in a variety of research contexts (Todres & Galvin, 2008, Bacon 2018, Howard, 2012). Green, Solomon and Spence (2021) argue that using poetry as a means of gathering, organizing and expressing data (p. 4) within a phenomenological study is a natural fit. The hermeneutic disposition shines through poetic inquiry: in the willingness to hear the voice of the other, in the acknowledgment of indeterminacy and in an attitude of curiosity and willingness to be changed (p.4). Freeman (2016) approaches poetic inquiry epistemologically, arguing that knowledge about experience can be accessed in a different way through poetry. Van Manen and van Manen (2021) cite the extensive tradition of incorporating poetry in phenomenological research, and the use of aesthetic language to communicate the essence of singular experiences.

Poetry is a central epistemological and methodological feature of Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) (Anzaldúa, 2012, Keating & González-López, 2011). CFE was relevant to my study because of orientation toward cultural, linguistic and disciplinary "in-between"' identities of female Spanish teachers in a DLI context. CFE considers *Coyolhuaxqui*, Anzaldúa's Nahuatl term for "healing through words"—narrative, poetry, use of multiple languages—to be an integral component of how Chicana Feminists make sense of and express their experience (Anzaldúa, 2015; Calderón et al., 2012). CFE rejects the distinctions between the university and the community (Córdova, 2002), and disrupting hierarchical, positivist, colonialist research structures is a key objective (Córdova, 2005). The community-based epistemologies that develop out of CFE include researchers prioritizing the well-being of communities (Córdova, 2005, 2017), Latina academics and researchers "joyfully" embracing "agency" and the "urgency and usefulness" of their work as change-makers (Córdova 2005, p. 229), the use of bilingual and translanguaged data and voices to reflect educational reality (Delgado Bernal, 1998), and valuing "cultural intuition" (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 515). CFE scholarship validates the potential of poetry as a tool of self-reflection and data collection within bilingual educational settings (Ochoa, 2022; Chaparro, 2020b; Jiménez, 2005).

While I was a graduate student, I participated in poetry workshops with other language educators and researchers who met weekly online. In between meetings, we read and annotated mentor poems, studied poetry styles and wrote and shared poems with my workshop group.

Workshop participants were expected to share 1-3 poems per week for critique, and I challenged myself to write one poem a week that was related to my research. These poems varied in style and theme as my interests refined: a villanelle about teaching fractions, a pantoum about a newcomer student experiencing Halloween at an American elementary school, a free verse poem about a transnational teacher watching her potluck contribution go untouched.

The practice of writing poetry supported my work as a researcher. In addition to providing a creative routine, these poetry workshops taught me to pay attention to details of experience and language, which served me well as I read interview transcripts, attuned to vibrant imagery and musical phrasing. Weekly peer editing sessions built my capacity for critique, providing a space where I could practice making and receiving feedback and suggestions. Most importantly for this piece, writing poems supported my self-reflection, inviting me to engage with my experience through thematic and stylistic prompts and exercises. In my own creative writing, my "teacher" identity was often visible (Dubberly, 2025a; Dubberly, 2025c). However, when I drafted poems about science, the workshop feedback indicated that they veered toward the pedantic,"telling" about science, rather than "showing" the experience. After attempts to write poems about science that fell flat, I responded to a poetry workshop prompt to "write about a magical moment" in the spring of 2023. In one of my "Science Notes" word processing documents, I had written a description of my childhood fascination with chemistry, and the ingredients that I collected in jars and mixed together. In writing this poem, I recalled the feeling that science and magic had seemed interchangeable to me as a child. I vividly remember an incident where I become a minor celebrity in my neighborhood after mixing up a concoction that burned off my warts when I was eight years old. I was "playing" scientist, not engaged in record-keeping or systematic observation. When my potion worked by healing my warts, it felt miraculous. My experience of this magical/scientific moment was individual and also communal, and features the cast of neighborhood characters that populated my childhood. This poem does not explain anything about science, but did freeze and frame a moment of "science" in a way that allowed me to peer at it more closely.

Poem Example

What Happened After My Parents Said a Chemistry Set Was Too Expensive

The day I bought an eyedropper
at *Farmacia San Carlos* with my own saved eight *pesos*,
I became a chemist.

First, I filled jars with things that were free:
fruit from the *nispero* tree,
a sandy cigarette butt,
four rusty bottle caps.

Then, pipetted with precision:
water from
sea, creek, rain, ditch, bath.

Other liquids made their way into my garden-shed lab:

bleach,
iodine,
vinegar,
whole milk,
blue mimeograph fluid,
a sip of Coca-Cola from the bottom of a cup,
a dribble of dark *milanesa* oil stored under the sink,

The tiny rubber bulb of the eyedropper sucked
acetone and vanilla out of their glass containers,
kerosene out of the heater,
soap suds from the laundry bucket of delicates.

I swirled *agua oxigenada* in empty pill bottles,
noting the powdery bloom and settle;
added diluted Dettol to pencil shavings then
decanted it over shells steeped in black tea.

The day my mother threatened to throw it all out,
I decided to prove its worth,
mixing everything together in a pink bucket,
spreading the paste on my skin.

If these were my clinical trials,
Barrio Atahualpa claimed second author.

Neighbors demanded to see the lighter spots where
the warts burned clean off my knees and fingers, begging credit:

Didn't the *coquito* come from Doña Perla's eucalyptus?
Wasn't it yesterday she invited me in from the rain for cake?

Was it true that my mixture contained the *Piracalamina*
the pharmacist delivered last week?

El almacenero insisted *baba de caracol* did the trick,
probably from the snail he'd noticed on the *lechuga*.

The day I bought an eyedropper,
I became a chemist and
los vecinos became my research team.

Poetry in a Phenomenological Dissertation

Poetry as a tool supported my understanding of "science" and "teacher" by tapping into emotional connections that existed in my lifeworld regarding these terms. Poetry also illuminated aspects of data collection and interpretation by reminding me to consider teachers' affective responses to talking about and doing science in their classrooms. Finally, poetic inquiry interrogated the term "science" by surfacing missing science practices in my childhood experience of "chemistry."

The poem above reminded me of how exciting and mysterious science felt as a child, even when I did not understand that there were processes associated with doing science. The childhood thrill of science was echoed in dissertation interviews, when I asked teacher participants what "science class" meant to them. All three participants in my study described wonder and delight of teaching and learning science in our initial interviews, but did not mention scientific method or practices as part of what teaching science meant to them. The journey of writing this poem made visible to me the deep emotional components associated with teaching and learning science.

I chose to include this poem in my dissertation because it introduced a child's perspective, reminding me of the many ways in which I learned about science while at home. Through this poem, I reflected on my experience of science as a child investigator, finding purpose and joy in collecting and mixing ingredients and observing reactions. At the same time, the poem acknowledged the many community members in "teacher" roles: neighbors, the baker, pharmacist, butcher and grocer all had a hand in my learning.

Reflecting on the poem from the perspective of researcher made me consider my childhood perception of science; this experience FELT like "science" when I was a kid, but was it? This led me to incorporate the question, "What makes this activity a "science" activity?" into planning sessions with teachers, clarifying what practices and concepts are essential to engaging with phenomena as scientists. In this sense, poetry surfaced missing steps in my own experience of "doing science," and supported better planning for classroom instruction.

Playlist

A third tool that aided in my self-reflection while writing my dissertation was a playlist. At the time, I thought of booting up my computer and putting in my headphones as simply a step in the process of getting down to the work. There was nothing explicitly related to "teachers" or "science" in the mix of songs that I listened to each time I sat down to write. However, I have come to consider that the creation of the playlist and the practice of listening to it while writing was a self-reflective process crucial to anchoring my identity as I wrote my dissertation.

Several months after my dissertation defense, I participated in a workshop at the American Anthropological Association's annual conference. My dissertation advisor, Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor, was presenting a field guide for researchers, *The Creative Ethnographer´s Notebook,* with her co-editor, Kristina Jacobsen. In breakout sessions, participants engaged with exercises for creative data collection and analysis. One of the session leaders, Anthony Kwame Harrison, had written about "scoring ethnographic moments" (Harrison, 2024), and invited session participants to consider how music adds meaning to data. Working through Dr. Harrison´s prompt, I thought of my personal dissertation playlist, and wondered how it had impacted my writing process. While I had not curated a playlist with songs that were associated with "teacher" or "science," the mixtape soundtrack that accompanied my writing process was a powerful tool for self-reflection.

There has been abundant scholarly work on the affective power of sound, music and song in academic spaces and the implications on learning, with a recent increase in emphasis on personal music playlists. Notably, James Lamb describes the playlist as an ethnographic artifact, and argues for “playlist as method” (Lamb, 2022), based on his 2019 dissertation study, in which he employed playlist elicitation (Lamb, 2019) as a way of engaging students in discussion about their experience of university.

Other discussions of playlists that are relevant here are Bull´s (2005) analysis that playlist creation means that commuters can personalize their experience of time and space. iPod users’ description of their surroundings indicate a “respacialized” experience of landscape, where the emphasis on personal musical experience was more powerful than their environment (p.348). The act of curating a “soundworld” gives the listener a sense of control over their circumstances (p.353), and by entering into it, the listener is able to focus on herself (p.349). Marjorie Kibby writes about the materiality of digital music, engendered by the collection, curation and experience of the playlist (Kibby, 2009).

Playlists have also been studied as social and cultural signifiers (Webster, 2020; Werner, 2020) and connections to national identity (Boswall & Akash, 2017). Writing about building joyful academic communities for women, Toledo and colleagues (Toledo et al., 2023) share a playlist that weaves research notes and published songs as part of their collective biography, an affective supplement to an academic presentation. In the following section, I consider a specific personal playlist, “Milonga de Disertación,” which began as a collection of several songs suggested by friends and grew to almost 4 hours of playtime. This playlist reinforced my work on my phenomenological dissertation because it was intersubjective and self-reflective.

Playlist Example

I wrote most of my dissertation at the dining room table, with family life happening around me. During this time, I was a Graduate Researcher seconded by my university to an elementary school and working my “regular” at the school district; my time was very limited. My spouse and I were primary caregivers for my elderly mother, and she was very ill during 2023-24. Our beloved, ancient Maltipoo slipped into dementia and had manic episodes of zooming around the table and trying to dig his way through the hardwood floor. I was experiencing fatigue and stress.

One day, while driving to a work event with Leo, an Argentine colleague, I listed all the things that were causing me stress. As I wrapped up my litany, I told him, *“Podría perfectamente ser una milonga,*” which translates as, “This could perfectly well be a *milonga*.” A milonga is a musical style, typical in Uruguay and Argentina, that combines an upbeat guitar rhythm with lyrics that reflect heartbreak or longing, often expressed in an informal, vernacular style. The juxtaposition of the lively music and gloomy words is an invitation to listen carefully, to find nuance and to experience “in-betweenness.” Together, my colleague and I improvised a few milonga stanzas, riffing on each other’s descriptions of our upcoming day-long meeting. Intrigued by this analogy, I went home and wrote a milonga about one frustration of the day: formatting my prospectus references. I sent the “Milonga de Tesis” file to a WhatsApp group of former school colleagues in Uruguay. Connecting milonga to educational work struck a chord on the text thread. Soon others wrote their own milonga stanzas about their days, added milonga videos, voice memos, and song title recommendations. These recommendations found their way into a playlist entitled “Milonga de Disertación,” which became the soundtrack to my dissertation writing. From the outset, my playlist was a group effort, a sonic reminder of my personal intersubjective relationships.

While I was adding to the playlist and working on my dissertation, I also sought to learn about the theory and practice of milonga. I watched videos that explained the more technical aspects and Uruguayan styles of music, and reading about the history of candombe, milonga and tango. I participated in milonga dance events in Georgia and Uruguay, learning and practicing songs, dance steps and dance etiquette. Most importantly, I sang and listened to milongas often, alone on walks, in the car with my spouse, as lullabies for my mother, over the phone with friends, in bars, or at the piano with my siblings.

As I wrote with my dissertation playlist sounding through my headphones, I was connected to my personal musical, cultural and social heritage. The milongas were a reminder of history: for a century, Uruguayan and Argentine artists had been singing about precarity, accompanied by a 2/4 rhythm. Songs were about the realities of urban life ("Milongon del Guruyu," by Roberto Darvin), joy and loneliness of the sparsely populated "interior" of Uruguay ("Isla Patrulla" by Santiago Chalar and "Chiquillada" by Jose "El Sabalero" Carbajal), the tumultuous *dictadura* years of my childhood ("Milonga de Pelo Largo," written by Dino and interpreted by Adriana Varela), and the songs that were reminiscent of my early adult life ("De la Canilla" by Jaime Roos and Raul Castro and "Un Caracol," by Susana Bosch). These historical reminders contextualized my difficulties: in my struggles with caregiving and formatting, I was part of the musical tradition of my homeland. I was also connecting to the current reality of Uruguay even as I was far away in Georgia, hearing new contemporary Uruguayan musicians reinterpreting the genre, such as La Vela Puerca, Milongas Extremas, or composers of new Milongas such as Ana Prada and the electronic music group Bajofondo Tango Club.

The language of the songs, with regionalisms, idioms, and sounds that are *rioplatense* was also significant in reinforcing my identity. This accent is typical of the Río de la Plata region, encompassing parts of Argentina and Uruguay, and is characterized by the *yeismo* sound associated with the "ll" and "y" and the *voseo* form of address, such as evident in the opening line of Zitarrosa's song, "Zamba por Vos." Hearing the typical pronunciation, tenses and phonemes of "my" Spanish brought my home language back to me, even as I worked with interview transcripts of teachers who spoke in Spanish dialects that were different from mine, and wrote my dissertation in English. The linguistic connection provided by the playlist was a comfort and an opportunity for self-reflection, reminding me that I shared language with my study participants and with my academic sources, and that my own *rioplatense* was a legitimate and meaningful form of expression in Spanish.

Playlist in a Phenomenological Dissertation

Writing a dissertation is very difficult. Music was helpful for me, both as a tool of self-reflection and as a means of designating a time for writing. I would recommend that scholars interested in creating a self-reflective playlist take into account their experience of the music in relation to the phenomenon as well as the practical aspect of how the music impacts their writing. The first step would be to ask what music connects to the researcher's lifeworld or to the phenomenon. The second step would be to consider what music or sound supports the task of writing. Both self-reflection and space and time for writing are essential to phenomenological study.

In curating a playlist that reflects a lifeworld, the researcher evokes the cultural backdrop against which their life unfolds. The playlist becomes a tool of phenomenological self-reflection when the researcher seeks significance in it, examining how the songs, styles, themes, tempo, instruments, and lyrics have impacted their experience of the world. My playlist was centered on the theme of "milonga," a musical style and a disposition that reflected what I understood to be the in-betweenness of my life. It began with the discography of Alfredo Zitarrosa, which was very familiar to me, but expanded to include reinterpretations of traditional milongas, milonga versions of popular songs, or contemporary milongas. As I added milongas to the playlist, I was self-reflecting, exploring connections between the milonga, my identity, and my study. On the one hand, I was revisiting straightforward memories that centered on the musical experience, such as my habit of playing a CD of Zitarrosa's Greatest Hits on Saturday mornings when I would open all the windows and clean my house. The Zitarrosa songs were the background to my weekend as a young teacher, mixing in my memory with the smell of floor wax, the feeling of my hair blowing around my face as I hung laundry on the roof to dry, and the heft of exam papers I would need to grade when my house chores were done. Simultaneously, I was poking at the structures of my lifeworld by asking myself, "What about Zitarrosa's greatest hits resonated in my neighborhood in the early 2000s? How does this style of music convey the feeling of being a teacher in Uruguay during an economic crisis? How does the in-betweenness that I feel as I teach disciplinary content (science) and language (Spanish) connect to other in-between experiences? Are there elements of this music that speak to that in-betweenness?" These questions transformed the playlist from a material collection of songs into a self-reflective tool.

While the playlist was supporting my self-reflection, it was important to me that the music facilitate rather than distract from my principal task: writing my dissertation. I found that the consistent milonga rhythm provided continuity to the playlist, and the familiarity of the songs meant that the music was not competing for my attention as I wrote. The "Milonga de Disertación" playlist created a space for writing within the complexities of my life, and allowed me to focus on the specific task while blurring the contours of what was outside of the writing moment. When I sat down with my computer and heard Jorge Drexler and Sebastián Prada count down to the first bars of the first song on the playlist, "Milonga de Ojos Dorados," I was in the same physical space occupied by my family, but I was in the "writing zone." In this sense, I resonated deeply with Bull´s commuters (Bull, 2005), who described feeling in control of their circumstances when their playlist blocked out street activity.

The language and style of my dissertation playlist was profoundly particular, and spoke to my lifeword by collecting songs that had personal significance, used *rioplatense* Spanish language and evoked familiar cultural and historic iterations of daily life, suffering, endurance and art. Likewise, the curation process was an intersubjective dialogue about identity (Taylor, 1991; Scott, 2018). This dialogue began with my conversation with my Argentine colleague who understood my reference to "milonga," and moved to my WhatsApp group of teacher friends. The conversation became larger, connecting me with other educators and students who shared my experience of "milonga," both in Uruguay and in Georgia. In these ways, the playlist is an artifact of my dissertation process but also a material record of my identity, critical consciousness, affective state and relationships at that time. Though it was not an explicit part of my research study, it was nonetheless a powerful tool for phenomenological self-reflection while I wrote my dissertation.

Conclusion

In qualitative studies, researcher reflexivity clarifies the process of gathering, interpreting and sharing data. Within the interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, researchers are asked to take reflexivity a step further by engaging in the hermeneutic circle, whereby they continually reexamine and revise their positionality in the face of the phenomenon. The hermeneutic circle is guided by self-reflection. A challenge for dissertation writers can be the identification and effective employment of tools for self-reflection.

The use of tools such as personal vignettes, poetry and playlist curation can support the self-reflection by providing opportunities for researchers to surface prior knowledge and feelings about the phenomenon, and to critically explore what their identities bring to the research project. Insofar as they focus on the phenomenon, acknowledge the material subjectivity of the researcher and search for significance, these tools are consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology. Finally, the phenomenological emphasis on writing, language and art is visible in the work of creating and interpreting experience through narrative, poetry and playlist.

There are limitations to the tools that I used. One important limitation is their particularity to myself: poetry, prose writing and music are things that I like, and that support my self-reflection. Another limitation is the indeterminate nature of the tools, and the uncertainty that any of the "products" will be included in the dissertation. Finally, I would warn that these tools take a lot of time. While I understood the importance of self-reflection in a phenomenological study, I had specific and limited time on my calendar for "Dissertation Writing" each day, and pursuing these activities sometimes felt like creative self-indulgence: playing with words, images, ideas and sounds in contrast with the more straightforward work of transcribing interviews, tabulating data and writing up observation notes. Participation in poetry workshops is a long-term project, and requires dedicating hours per week to reading and annotating mentor poems, learning about poetic forms and styles and a commitment to spending time with the work of other workshop participants in addition to the work of writing and editing poems. Narrative autobiographical writing involves keeping track of descriptive notes and editing and interpreting stories from "bone yard" documents into meaningful vignettes. Likewise, collecting songs, curating a playlist and researching music and musicians is labor-intensive, and requires dedicated time. There were many times when I wondered if I should be engaged in more concrete and academic activities to speed up the process of my dissertation writing, rather than creating and sending song files to friends in Uruguay via WhatsApp. One possible re-framing would be for a researcher to include "self-reflection" time in their weekly dissertation writing schedule, and to specify the incorporation tools such as poetry or prose writing or playlist building into those hours.

While the tools that I used can be helpful for researchers seeking concrete practices that encourage self-reflection, they are not exhaustive or prescriptive. In a phenomenological study, self-reflection is vital (van Manen, 2016), but researchers have flexibility to determine the structure of their self-reflection processes. Though novice researchers may find this prospect daunting, it can be an opportunity to design a study structure that points to the phenomenon while also revealing and examining their lifeworld in relation to the phenomenon.

I am grateful to the generous and linguistically engaged theoretical approaches that Bennett (2002, 2010, 2020) and Anzaldúa (2012, 2015) provided, which honored the particularities of experience, language and materiality. Hermeneutic phenomenological research (van Manen, 2016) provided opportunities for self-reflection, aided by the use of personal vignettes, poems and a playlist that were part of my writing process. It is because of these theories, methods and tools in concert that I was able to write my dissertation as myself, in-between the continua of experiences and identities: English/Spanish, arts/science, sand/city, student/*maestra*, researcher/data, novice/expert, writer/listener, American/uruguaya.

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