

# A Schizo-Poetic Inquiry of a First-Year Doctoral Experience

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Article abstract

Undertaking a doctoral program is a significant commitment involving sustained effort as an individual engages in academic work and scholarly identity formation. As a graduate student with a psychiatric disability, I face an added layer of challenge: dealing with symptoms as I navigate an academic system that is not designed for bodyminds like mine. This poetry and visual art collection offers a glimpse into my experience as a first-year doctoral student with schizoaffective disorder<sup>1</sup> as I navigated Zoom classrooms, considered academic timelines and campus mental health awareness week, and wrestled with symptoms during the summer session. Through a schizo-poetic and visual inquiry informed by disability poetry and schizo-poetics, I present an embodied, multi-sensory exploration to highlight similarities and differences in the experiences of doctoral students with mental illness and their neurotypical peers, as well as to expand the conversation around disability and academia.

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## A SCHIZO-POETIC INQUIRY OF A FIRST-YEAR DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

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**Artist Statement:** Undertaking a doctoral program is a significant commitment involving sustained effort as an individual engages in academic work and scholarly identity formation. As a graduate student with a psychiatric disability, I face an added layer of challenge: dealing with symptoms as I navigate an academic system that is not designed for bodyminds like mine. This poetry and visual art collection offers a glimpse into my experience as a first-year doctoral student with schizoaffective disorder<sup>1</sup> as I navigated Zoom classrooms, considered academic timelines and campus mental health awareness week, and wrestled with symptoms during the summer session. Through a schizo-poetic and visual inquiry informed by disability poetry and schizo-poetics, I present an embodied, multi-sensory exploration to highlight similarities and differences in the experiences of doctoral students with mental illness and their neurotypical peers, as well as to expand the conversation around disability and academia.

**Note on Terminology:** Drawing on the work of scholars and authors working in disability studies and schizo-poetics, and my own identity as an individual with schizoaffective disorder, I use the term *schizo* as a form of reclamation of a word historically used to marginalize individuals with a diagnosis on the schizophrenia spectrum.

**Keywords:** schizo-poetics; disability poetics; poetic inquiry; visual art-based research; doctoral students

Undertaking a doctoral program is a significant commitment involving sustained effort as an individual engages in academic work and scholarly identity formation. As a graduate student with schizoaffective disorder, I face an added layer of challenge as compared to my neurotypical peers: dealing with symptoms as I navigate an academic system that is not designed for bodyminds like mine (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011). Poetic inquiry offers the opportunity to investigate and convey this experience in an embodied manner that "disavow[s] the mind-body split still present in much academic work" (Faulkner, 2018, p. 5). As I hold the ontological belief that humans are aesthetic beings who find value and knowledge in art-making (Conrad & Beck, 2015), and view artistic practice and aesthetic experience as key components of the ability to ascribe meaning to life and experience, I see the embodied encounters provided by poetic inquiry as positive disruptions that raise awareness and create the potential for social change and justice.

Operating from a disability and schizo-poetry informed stance, I embarked on a schizo-poetic and visual art inquiry of my experience of engaging with academia during the first year of my doctoral program. Rather than separate the experience of mental illness from my progress as a scholar-in-training, I leaned into that aspect of my identity to poetically consider the ways in which it intersects with the expectations and events of academia. As one aspect of my experience with schizoaffective disorder is a heightened emotional and physical response to visual stimuli, I produced a piece of visual art in tandem and in conversation with each poem, to engage additional senses both in the inquiry process and for the reader-viewer.

## **Lived Experience of Schizoaffective Disorder**

Schizoaffective disorder, broadly speaking, features characteristics of both schizophrenia and a mood disorder, such as bipolar disorder or major depressive disorder (Cleveland Clinic, n.d.; NAMI, n.d.). Symptoms may include hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech, disorganized thinking, paranoia, depression, and mania, among others (Cleveland Clinic, n.d.; NAMI, n.d.). Not every individual diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder will experience the same configuration of symptoms.

I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type, in my late teens. Though my relationship to my symptoms has changed over time—for example, I rarely experience the same level of distress at the presence of hallucinations as I did in my younger years—I deal with hallucinations, intrusive and disorganized thoughts, and mood instability on a regular basis. The majority of my hallucinations are auditory, which I experience with a fair degree of frequency, especially during times of stress or

insomnia; I occasionally still experience visual hallucinations. My mind tends to leap around, sometimes drawing from intrusive thoughts. I typically can follow my own associations and find my way to explaining how I jumped from one idea to another; however, during times of stress, I am prone to losing track of what I hope to convey and may come across as nonsensical or illogical, particularly to those unfamiliar with my usual associative jumps in conversation. At times, I struggle with auditory processing due to sensory overload. Over the years, I have developed strategies for addressing moments when I struggle to express my thoughts; for example, when teaching (for which I prepare extensive notes), if my thoughts get derailed or I begin stringing a few strange words together, I pause, smile, and tell my students, “Let me start over, this time using words.” The touch of humour diffuses most awkwardness and helps me reorient my speech.

The affective aspect of my schizoaffective disorder includes severe depressions, manias with pressured speech and sleeplessness, and mixed states where depression and mania coincide—feeling, at times, like I am being torn apart as two competing entities grasp at different parts of my body to claim me as their own. Particularly when I am in the midst of a mixed state, I feel an all-body agitation, one that roils my mind and body and reminds me that the two are entangled rather than separate components of self. I am more prone to mania in the summer, with a mixed state following in the autumn, while depression more frequently populates my winter months. That said, I do not cycle through affective states predictably, which has impacted my engagement with academia and the process of attaining academic accommodations in graduate school.

As I have written previously, “after more than two decades of living with and learning to recognize and manage symptoms, I largely am able to pass as neurotypical. I am rarely visibly disabled” (Bucca, 2022, p. 5). While this passing, or performance, of expected behaviour and appearance situated in the social conventions (Brune & Wilson, 2013; Cox, 2012) of academia’s particular context has some benefits, it also has led to difficult situations in university, such as my (successful) fight to obtain accommodations as a graduate student. For example, because I did not appear disabled in one of my courses, a professor argued against the need for academic accommodations.

Additionally, though I usually manage to rally for classes, presenting as neurotypical can be exhausting; I often am left without the energy required to participate in the other, less formal components of academia that represent places where connections are made. Price (2011) calls such settings *kairotic spaces*, defined as academic interactions that pair “*spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact*” (p. 61, emphasis in original). Kairotic spaces are “characterized by all or most of these criteria: 1. Real-time unfolding of events, 2. Impromptu communication that is required or encouraged, 3. In-person contact, 4. A strong social element, 5. High stakes”

(Price, 2011, p. 61). These spaces make up the informal interactions prized by academia—off-the-clock networking that adheres to temporal expectations of ability to engage for extended hours (Carter et al., 2017). Such spontaneous interactions, emphasizing in-person and real-time connection as means of academic networking, present a particular challenge for me; others also have noted similar challenges with respect to kairotic spaces for individuals whose bodies and minds do not operate in an assumed typical way (Carter et al., 2017; Pryal, 2017).

## Disability Poetry and Schizo-Poetics

Reflecting the experience of disabled people, disability poetry varies widely in its form and aims. Yet, as Ferris (2007) argues, “Disability poetry can be characterized by several characteristics: a challenge to stereotypes and an insistence on self-definition; foregrounding of the perspective of people with disabilities; an emphasis on embodiment, especially atypical embodiment; and alternative techniques and poetics” (para. 7). This embodied poetics draws on Cixous’ (1976) call to write the body and self as a refusal of censorship, an act of reclamation. Faulkner (2019) notes that “a poem becomes *embodied experience* when audiences feel *with*, rather than *about*, a poem” (p. 226, emphasis in original), and that such a poem uses poetic language to “[ground] ourselves in physicality and the connection between mind and body, matter and spirit” (p. 226). An embodied poem invites readers into experiences they may or may not have shared, opening space for conversation and understanding.

Disability poetry offers one way to “[challenge] social and institutional spaces that have refused to respond to the needs and desires of people with disabilities” (Scheuer, 2011, p. 162). Drawing on lived experience—attending to that experience from within the body—and acknowledging the complexity of emotion, including negative and painful ones, lyric disability poetry complicates conversations about disability, its social context, and accessibility (Scheuer, 2011). Disability poetry calls attention to the way identity is negotiated and renegotiated in both the body and in society, and provides a more complex, fuller picture of the varied and nuanced experiences of individuals who often are portrayed as a monolith (Scheuer, 2011).

Writing within the overarching field of disability poetry, poets Jake Bailey and J. David foreground living with serious mental illness, weaving embodied experience throughout their work. Bailey (2018) refers to himself as a “schizotypal confessionalist” (para. 7), while David teaches courses on *schizo-poetics*, or “poems from people living with the schizophrenias” (2021, para. 3). The use of the term “schizo-poetics,” in particular, appeals to me as a form of reclamation, much as Mad studies reclaim *madness*. To me, schizo-poetics disrupts stereotypes not only through the content and

form of the poems, which highlight a lived experience often silenced, but through the very use of *schizo* in the practice's name, complicating the pervasive portrayal of schizophrenia in popular media (e.g., a violent perpetrator on police dramas). Poet Jake Bailey (2018) defined his approach to schizo-poetics, explaining that:

Identifying as a schizotypal confessionalist, to me, simply means that I try to provide a first-person, phenomenological account of my experiences with Schizoaffective Disorder. In my everyday life, there are features of the conscious mind that I encounter which differ from what one might term "normal," whether that be hallucinatory phenomena, dissociations, or wild mood swings. My hope is that my poetry will not only shed a light on these various facets of mind, but that it will also resonate with individuals having similar experiences. (para. 7)

This declared hope that his work will "shed light" and "resonate" aligns with evaluation criteria for arts-based research suggested by Leavy (2019): that the work be accessible and available publicly; that multiple meanings may emerge; that it offers sensitive portrayals of its subject(s); that the work has a distinct voice; and that "the artistic rendering must get to the heart of the issue" (p. 581).

Barone and Eisner (2012) similarly lay out general criteria for evaluating arts-based research, including incisiveness, or research that "gets to the heart of a social issue" (p. 148), and evocation and illumination, or work that provides those encountering the research with an aesthetic experience that helps them to draw meaning and see an issue anew. Coherence—cited as a component of the artistic rendering (Leavy, 2019)—takes on a different meaning in schizo-poetry, as the form strives to highlight what may be a seemingly incoherent experience. Instead, I suggest that coherence in schizo-poetic work derives from a piece creating a feeling of *rightness*—of form to feeling that arises—even if conveying nontypical or nonsensical convergences of ideas and words (much as Carroll's (1983) "Jabberwocky" achieves). This understanding of coherence aligns more closely with Barone and Eisner's (2012) view of coherence in arts-based research as work "whose features hang together as a strong form" (p. 151).

## Schizo-Poetic Inquiry

Bringing a schizo-poetic approach into educational spaces offers the opportunity to investigate and shed a light on the experience of mental illness within academia, "[allowing] communities to negotiate the tension between expressions of unity and recognitions of difference" (Scheuer, 2011, p. 163). That tension between unity and difference represents a key aim of my schizo-poetic inquiry—to illustrate not only the

ways in which my experience differs from many other graduate students (e.g., dealing with hallucinations during class or mood swings during the semester), but also the overlaps (e.g., wrestling with timelines, pressure to produce). Poetry invites interpretation, multiple meanings, and the chance for readers to locate themselves within a piece, even if they have not shared the experience under examination.

Poetic inquiry as research method offers researchers a "process-oriented craft to explore reality, create something new, disrupt usual ways of thinking, and create embodied experience" (Faulkner, 2019, p. 214). The method is particularly well-suited to explorations in which emotion, associative logic, and ambiguity would add a dimension to the research or capture an important component of the topic under investigation, rather than simply provide an alternative format (Faulkner, 2019). Given that my lived experience of schizoaffective disorder in educational spaces includes emotion, associative logic, and ambiguity, schizo-poetic inquiry is a methodological fit for investigation into that experience. Lyric poetry serves such inquiry well, due to its use of sound, imagery, emotion, and rhythm. Lyric poetry "refers to a short poem in which the poet, the poet's persona, or another speaker expresses personal feelings" (Poetry Foundation, n.d.c, para. 1). Faulkner (2019) notes that "lyric poetry represents experience in such a way that the distance between self and other blurs" (p. 218), creating an impression for the reader that is as much, if not more, about aesthetic encountering and poetic truth as concrete understanding.

In poetry, content cannot be separated from form, as the components associated with producing poetry—such as rhythm, syntax, and tone—contribute to the meaning of the piece (Eagleton, 2007). Eagleton (2007) asserts that "it is as though poetry grants us the actual experience of seeing meaning take shape as a practice, rather than handling it simply as a finished object" (p. 68). Building on this understanding of the reciprocity of content and form, and reflecting my own experience with schizoaffective disorder and heightened response to visual stimuli, I suggest that schizo-poetic inquiry may be further realized with the incorporation of visual elements. For example, Bailey's (2020; 2021) schizo-poetic work often includes visual components, such as diagrams or off-kilter text. As arts-based research is rooted in the epistemological belief that knowledge derives from more than thought, and is developed through embodied experience that draws on a variety of artistic media (Conrad & Beck, 2015), the incorporation of a visual component—from shape poetry to paintings—not only engages additional senses but creates additional meanings in the interplay between the text and image.

The four paired schizo-poetic and visual inquiries I offer here engage mental illness directly, as embodied parts of the poems and images. Wiebe (2015) argues that poetic inquiry ought to consider the degrees of emphasis each of three characteristics—

fierceness, tenderness, and mischievousness—receive in a poet-researcher's work, recognizing the infinite possibilities such arrangements offer. Following this suggestion, rather than use the same medium for all images, and the same style and voice of poetry for all four poems, I varied them according to the needs of the topic in each. For example, in "The Schizo Makes a Poster for Campus Mental Health Week," mischievousness (with a touch of fierceness) came to the fore, asserting itself in a satirical and cynical tone, while in "Self-Portrait of the Schizo in Summer Session, with Mixed State," tenderness took the reins.

## Ethical Considerations

Throughout the schizo-poetic inquiry process, I practiced concern for relational ethics, paying attention to the ways in which my individual story is situated in a wider social context (Ellis et al., 2011). To this end, as I considered which aspects of the PhD experience to explore, I focused on those that could be examined without implicating identifiable others in a negative light. Selecting such moments also pushed me to focus on inner moments that might not be apparent to others, such as professors and classmates; given that my disability is often invisible, I sought to make such moments visible. Arts-based research, generally, and poetic inquiry, specifically, hold as central aims building a more socially just world and encouraging audiences to shift perspectives (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Faulkner, 2019). To me, diving into my experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed represents an ethical obligation—this is research I can produce that invites others into experience and conversation.

Relational ethics extend beyond the individual(s) represented in the research and to the audience encountering the work. Sinding et al. (2008) observe that "the artful presentation of research findings does invoke particular ethical challenges. . . . art 'moves in,' rearranges our understandings of ourselves and the world, and goes home with us in ways that traditional social science representations rarely do" (p. 462). As an arts-based researcher, I cannot predict the full impact my work may or may not have on those who encounter it. For example, while I consider the use of the term "schizo-poetic" a reclamation, for others who have had the word schizo weaponized against them, the phrasing may evoke anger, sadness, and myriad other feelings and memories. By being upfront about my aims and incorporating a note on terminology, I attempt to offer potential readers a degree of forewarning about the contents, so that they might engage with the work with prior awareness of themes that may arise.

Additionally, recognizing that research ethics extends to the researcher, I carefully evaluated the potential negative impacts on me, as an individual, throughout the process of the schizo-poetic inquiry. Given the ongoing stigma associated with



serious mental illness, and the schizophrenias in particular, whether to disclose a psychiatric disability in the context of academic work is not a decision to be made lightly. Ultimately, as an individual who has published prior work—both creative and academic—on the subject, I arrived at the conclusion that increased visibility of disabled graduate students outweighed any personal risk I undertook in engaging in schizo-poetic inquiry.

## Ars Poetica

Faulkner (2007; 2019) suggests that poetic inquirers explicitly state their goals through an *ars poetica* to aid in evaluating the work. Traditionally delivered as a poem, an *ars poetica* is “a meditation on poetry using the form and techniques of a poem” (Poetry Foundation, n.d.a, para. 1). Similarly, Prendergast and Belliveau (2012) argue that “a researcher should be honest in expressing his or her [*sic*] background and experiences working with and through poetry” (p. 201) and that “a poetic inquirer should articulate a brief *ars poetica* that effectively locates his or her [*sic*] interest in and focus on poetry as methodology” (p. 202, emphasis in original). Harkening these calls, I offer an *ars* (schizo) *poetica* of sorts, in prose form, to contextualize the poetic and visual inquiry that follows.

## Ars (Schizo) Poetica

Prior to embarking on a doctoral program in educational studies, I trained as a poet and fiction writer, earning a dual-genre Master of Fine Arts in writing. I spent years immersed in the study of poetry, reading across styles and eras and working out my own poetic voice through experimentation and practice. For me, “poetry allows a way out [of self-censorship in writing], coming as it so often does from spontaneous thought. An observed animal that moves in an odd dance, a snippet of line that seems written across a storm-filled sky” (Bucca, 2018, para. 7). The spontaneity and associative logic of poetry does not diminish for me as I engage in schizo-poetic inquiry; rather, its mimicking of the leaps my brain naturally makes enables me to capture more accurately the experience of schizoaffective disorder as I research it. As a poetic inquirer, I aim to use rhythm, enjambment, metaphor, playfulness, and spacing to evoke the emotion and disruption and discomfort and elation of the topic(s) I examine. In particular, I find myself drawn to playing with *enjambment*, or the “running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation” (Poetry Foundation, n.d.b, para. 1). Enjambment offers a way to demonstrate multiple meanings, with the break of the line arriving in such a way as to create one phrase where the line stops and another when carried over into the next. Varying where a phrase or sentence breaks also affects the pacing of the piece, pulling the reader along through the white space of the page.

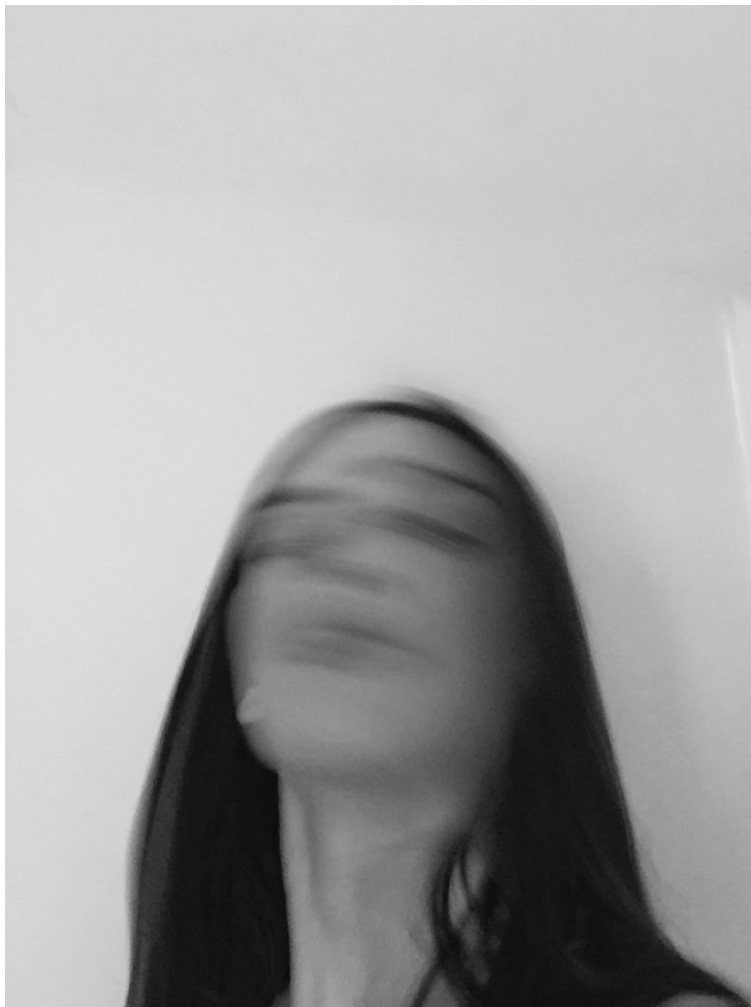
In my visual art (in which I largely am self-trained), I invite spontaneity, even in the context of intention. The visual pieces that follow draw primarily on imagination—i.e., considering how to capture the blurriness emerging in the poem about hallucination during Zoom class, ultimately landing on a blurred self-portrait; attempting to capture the rawness and overwhelmingness and winding-ness of timelines through the use of raw canvas and both paint and ink; and recalling stylized posters (without a sense of from where) for the poem about mental health awareness week. The final image below, “Self Portrait of the Schizo in Summer Session, with Mixed State,” echoes an experience of a mixed state about a decade ago, in which I embarked on a week’s-long obsession with painting. I had been painting large canvas, smudging and cutting through layers of paint with palette knives, when an artist friend suggested I watch *Gerhard Richter Painting* (Belz, 2011). Captivated by Richter’s process of using squeegees on his canvases, I set aside the palette knives and created a makeshift cardboard squeegee. Resurrecting this practice while conducting this poetic-visual inquiry into the experience of a mixed state seemed only fitting, as both a nod to the earlier affective state and a reflection of the smeared sense of agitation accompanying my mixed states.

I produced three of the following four paired pieces during a two-month-long mania that morphed into a mixed state. When I began the project as part of a directed study, prior to becoming symptomatic, I did not anticipate that I would be experiencing affective symptoms and psychosis during the research. I had identified, broadly, the experiences I wanted to research through poetic inquiry, but had not decided to incorporate a visual component—that emerged as I began the poems. The excavation that is the poetic process uncovered my sense that visuals were needed to express the experiences fully. And so, the process shifted to meet the research needs.

As a mad/neurodivergent artist and student, I am reluctant to attempt to parse the relationship between my schizoaffective disorder and my creativity, as both are integral components of who I am, and there is not a clean line demarcating when I produce art. I have experienced bouts of significant creative productivity during periods of intense symptoms, no symptoms, and somewhere in-between. At times, I feel a sort of internal pressure to create artwork that reflects my inner state; other times, I require a degree of distance between experience and creation to make room for additional reflection. With this schizo-poetic inquiry, I drew on my awareness of the symptoms I was experiencing in the moment, alongside the distance of reflection gained from working on research related to schizoaffective disorder and education for the past few years. That I happened to experience a significant affective episode during the inquiry, after having selected the focus and begun writing, added a degree of immediacy for me in the drafting that I hope ultimately comes through in the works that follow.

Finally, I conducted this schizo-poetic visual inquiry because to separate my creative self from my critical academic self in the context of educational research felt dishonest—to approach the topic of my first year of doctoral studies from only a traditionally academic lens would fail to capture the embodied reality of the experience. By pairing the schizo-poetry with visual images—each paired image and poem sharing a title—I sought to deepen engagement with the subject of each particular inquiry through activating multiple senses, placing the components in conversation with each other and their shared title. Most of all, I sought to highlight both the embodied particulars of my doctoral experience, informed by schizoaffective disorder, and the ways in which some of those sensations and emotions and considerations might be felt by others who do not share my diagnosis.

**Figure 1:**  
*Self-Portrait of the Schizo in Synchronous Zoom Class*



*Note:* A photograph of a pale face with blurred features and dark hair, head leaned back, set against a blank background.

*Self-Portrait of the Schizo in Synchronous Zoom Class*

Quick slip of shadow sets off  
the brain, now overcompensating  
to explain this presence—absence  
—in the room.

Flailing  
to see, to hear

inaccurate, the whisper  
at my ear says: *run*

but I hold  
rigor mortis of fear—  
and try to focus.

Mind-gasping for air, drowning  
in a synapse flood.

The glitch will end, vertigo  
abate—faltering  
lines synch up again. All I have

is wait.

**Figure 2**  
*The Schizo Considers Academic Timelines?*



*Note:* An abstract painting on raw canvas. Bright crimson originating in bottom right hand corner extends upward and sideways. Muddied spots of black ink, and grey, mustard, and teal paint overlay the crimson. A series of curved black lines extend horizontally across the centre of the painting, intersecting, and weaving. Smudged grey and black ink spots dot the canvas.

*The Schizo Considers Academic Timelines*

The myth claims all cells  
 in the human body regenerate

every 7 years. But the timeline  
 is not so clean—two days

for a stomach cell, ten years  
 for the bones—no neat progression

no consistent pattern, no 7-  
 year-itch the body scratches

with new growth. 7 deadly  
sins, 7 plagues at the end.

7 habits, 7 wonders, 7 steps  
a newborn Buddha takes. 7

digits dialed into my childhood  
phone, a prime number. 7 years—

the longest a student  
may take to complete the work

of a doctoral program (though three  
is better). 7 requirements done

in linear fashion—my brain  
is not so linear, lines that cross

and coil themselves, tangled balls  
of holiday lights that must be undone

to shine. 7 is obsession, 7 is  
a tic-tic-tic to trick

me into thinking all will line up  
if I manage to corral

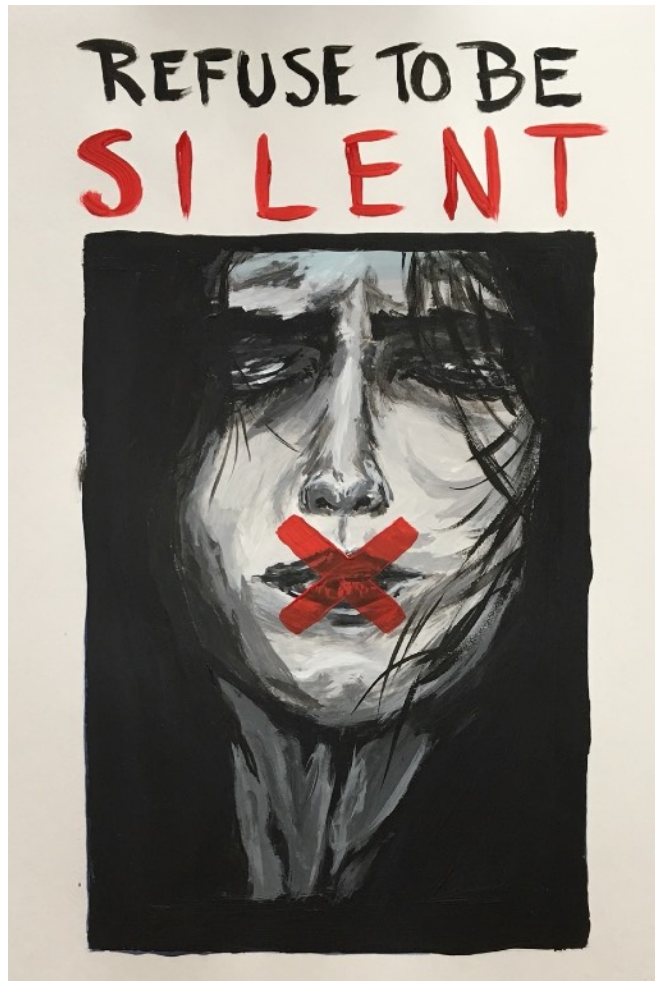
the chaotic bursts, the click  
and call of the winding (a)side

paths, the diverging interests  
into a singular focus. The brain

by the by, doesn't regenerate. Tooth  
enamel, either. Or lenses of the eyes.

**Figure 3:**

*The Schizo Makes a Poster for Campus Mental Health Week<sup>3</sup>*



*Note:* A black and white painting of a face with closed eyes and a red X over the mouth. Above the image are the words: refuse to be silent, with silent written in red letters.

*The Schizo Makes a Poster for Campus Mental Health Week*

Gather, consider, discuss / invoke in the name of / mental health awareness! / *Aware* carries multiple / meanings—first, possessing perception / knowledge; second, *watchful / wary*. Middle English / *war, ware*; step back / further, Old English *wær*. Even further / Germanic, Old Norse, perhaps / Greek. For a single week / pretend awareness means / positive, predictable, perfectly / acceptable year-

round. You may / have found yourself asking / where is my  
classroom accommodation? / You may have found yourself  
/ hiding a disability. But not this / week! Proclaim your  
presence / and participate in a curated conversation— /  
*how to stop stigma in 6 easy / steps*. I jest. But be aware /  
when the week ends the wariness / begins.

**Figure 4:**

*Self-Portrait of the Schizo in Summer Session, with Mixed State*<sup>4</sup>



*Note:* 36-inch by 36-inch canvas painted in vibrant colours including crimson, green, teal, yellow, white, and black. The paint is pulled down the canvas, creating streaking lines and melding colours together. Underlayers of paint show through in some spots, and the lines fracture and weave at times.



*Self-Portrait of the Schizo in Summer Session, with Mixed State*

1

Early rising, the sun schisms  
across the yard, threading shards

of vibrant shadows between the garden  
plants. Zucchini leaves and blossoms

overnight, green torpedo growing  
behind the burst of yellow. To petal

and flourish so quickly—my brain  
joins the frenzied race to bloom.

A time-lapse summer, growth  
condensed from season to weeks.

Exhausting, this yielding. But  
produce is the goal—sow enough

and reap all year. Hope the manic  
surge will last till harvest.

2

As a disaffected teen I sat  
in class, pushing  
the sharp end

of a safety pin  
through the thick  
of my thumb

numb to the discomfort  
and the teachers'  
glares. How that pin

got stuck in me—a slow

prick needling  
the calloused underside

of my moods. Unclasped  
agitator still lodged  
in the digit

of my mind, waiting.  
As the sun shifts, the safety  
pin returns to me, digging

edging under each moment  
of clarity, inciting  
an agitation that shakes

me back to earth. Withers me  
on the vine, a blight  
blackening the fruit.

3

The compost bin is full  
of excavated squash and fruit  
rot and roots. Stems, clinging  
clumps of dirt. Discarded seeds.  
Jars line the shelves inside, stores  
for incoming snow. But all  
I comprehend is the empty bed,  
the barren earth depleted  
of nutrients, the exhaustion  
cramped inside a body  
overworked. Soon, I will till  
the soil—when the strength  
rebounds. Return seemingly lifeless  
matter to the ground, rake,  
ready to overwinter. But for now  
I contemplate the sudden frost,  
the air crystallizing in the dark, lacing  
its way along each blade  
of grass, announcing an end

I am never prepared for, no matter  
how many autumns arrive.

## Concluding Thoughts

I embarked on this schizo-poetic inquiry with the aim of exploring the lived experience of navigating a doctoral program while dealing with symptoms of schizoaffective disorder. My hope for the research was both to dig into my embodied understanding of the experience to produce artistic representations that invite others to consider their perceptions of what constitutes a *doctoral student*, and to create visibility for what is often an invisible disability in academia. Disability is neither a static nor universal experience (Brune & Wilson, 2013), and my experience with schizoaffective disorder and the structures and timelines of academia may not reflect the experience of other disabled students, including those with my same diagnosis. Yet, the specific events and feelings that make up the core of arts-based research products have the potential to invite others into that experience, where they may find threads of meaning that connect to their own perspective or prompt them to reconsider social phenomena (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

In the four works produced during this research, I notice moments that reflect what I imagine are familiar to some who are not neurodivergent. Who in academia has not become distracted and felt a bit blurry during a class or a meeting? What student has not felt the pressure of completing work and keeping up with (at times seemingly random) deadlines? Have not many of us felt annoyed or disenchanted by awareness days, weeks, or months that highlight an issue briefly only to fall short of implementing change? My hope is that these moments in the works offer points of connection that spark a willingness to dive into the less familiar components and sit with the feelings and meanings that emerge—feelings and meanings that may not reflect my own as the researcher-student.

Finally, I see this schizo-poetic inquiry as offering representation, of standing up and declaring that mad/neurodivergent graduate students do exist within academia, of providing an “I see you” to fellow disabled doctoral students. As Dolmage (2017) notes in an exploration of academic ableism, even the concept of inclusive education reinforces disability, as it implies the necessity of making space for difference from the assumed norm within a classroom, an effort that must be undertaken to address structural incompatibility. By shifting popular understanding of who it is that constitutes a graduate student, perhaps we might move beyond implementing inclusion to approaching education from a standpoint that assumes neurodiversity. Conducting this schizo-poetic inquiry helped me dive deep into and better understand my experience as

a doctoral student whose symptoms of schizoaffective disorder impact her academic journey. For other neurodivergent students encountering the works above, I hope the poems and images create a sense of recognition, not necessarily in the specific symptoms, but in the documenting of some challenges of navigating graduate school. For other members of the academic community, I hope the works help to open up understanding of the diversity of student experience.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Schizoaffective disorder is a psychotic disorder that meets the symptom criteria of both schizophrenia (e.g., hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech) and a mood disorder (e.g., bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder) ("Schizoaffective disorder," 2019). My own diagnosis is schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type, and involves psychotic features, disorganized/disrupted thought, and mood episodes.

<sup>2</sup> "The Schizo Considers Academic Timelines" references facts about cell regeneration found in an article by Gerardo Sison (2019) at Discovery.com.

<sup>3</sup> "The Schizo Makes a Poster for Campus Mental Health Week" references the definitions and etymologies of *aware* and *ware* as found at Merriam-Webster.com (n.d.a; n.d.b).

<sup>4</sup> A mixed state, in schizoaffective disorder and bipolar disorder, refers to the concurrent presence of symptoms from opposite ends of the mood spectrum during an affective episode—e.g., symptoms of both mania and depression (Munee, 2017). Since the beginning of my own experience with schizoaffective disorder, I have been prone to mixed states that often begin as mania and develop depressive features over the course of several weeks, leading to a feeling of internal agitation and discomfort. What begins as manic energy and the ability to complete a lot of work in a short amount of time rapidly becomes paralytic—the ideas and energy come too quickly, the agitation and depressive lack of motivation disrupt the ability to act/work effectively, and my thoughts grow easily derailed.