

WITHIN, OUTSIDE, AND BEYOND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION:

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING IN SHAPING SCHOLAR-TEACHER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This poetic autoethnography explores the transformative experience of being a religious convert as a central force in shaping the author's identity as a reflexive scholar-teacher. Reflexivity, as a disciplinary practice within the author's field of composition studies, requires an academic professional to situate themselves concurrently as a firsthand co-participant/observer within a particular human experience while remaining critically cognizant of their role as the study's architect and interpreter of collected data. By exploring her understanding and performance of religious Jewish practices, Jewish community, and Jewish ethnicity as an adult convert, the author navigates sociocultural norms within, outside, and beyond traditional contexts while exploring how the integration of these contexts shapes her sense of and quest for belonging. She further relates how this simultaneous existence, both as "one of the tribe" and "one forever outside the shared history of the tribe," is impacted by and continues to influence her understanding of reflexivity as a humanity-inspired heuristic for conducting research and shaping academic paradigms.

This study employed a transformative writing approach using freewriting, poetry, peer review, and reflection writing/journaling to document how conversion—whether ideological, intellectual, spiritual, or disciplinary—complicates and enriches professional identity formation by impacting one's sense of community belonging. Drawing on lived experience, the author combines poetic expression with personal narratives to illuminate the tensions between belonging and alienation, convention and adaptability, and liability and vulnerability that exist for a Jewish convert. Along the way, she points out how these tensions impact the idea that scholarly identity and teaching pedagogy are fixed constructs dependent on academic experiences alone. Ultimately, this work demonstrates the inextricability of transformational life experiences in shaping one's ontology and paradigmatic practices as a researcher.

Keywords

poetic autobiography, identity, belonging, narrative inquiry, religious conversion, Judaism