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*LIRIC*



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## About the Journal

The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community (LIRIC) Journal is an international, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal. It aims to provide a forum for contemporary critical debate on the relationship between the written (and spoken) word and (mental) health and wellbeing. This includes writing as a social practice.

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*A sincere thank you is  
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## **Editor's Foreword**

*Aathira Nair*

Founder & Expressive Arts Based Therapy Practitioner –  
Innerroute Therapy, India  
Educational Blogger – Edutess, India

*Kim Etherington, PhD*

Professor Emerita of Narrative and Life Story Research, University of Bristol, UK

Correspondence address: [liriceditor@lapidus.org.uk](mailto:liriceditor@lapidus.org.uk)

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When I think of my past year at *LIRIC*, I am reminded of Simba from *The Lion King*. If you have watched the 1994 movie, you must be well acquainted with the glorious scene where a little lion cub is born and lifted to the emerging morning sun. The scene looks a little different in my case, where I have a *pride* of lions (our editorial board) supporting me as I stare in awe towards the world of writing for wellbeing. For a movie that was released before I was even born, that scene has stayed well with me!

*LIRIC* came into my life as a means to channel my mental energies that were quite all over the place, somewhere around the time a spooky, nasty virus placed its hands on the world. I had just begun working as an Expressive Arts Based Therapist in Mumbai, India, when it seemed like someone yelled 'Freeze!' to the entire world, and it took months and months for us to collectively learn how to de-freeze. For me as a new working professional, pretty much how it was for everyone else, that command was difficult to digest. When I joined the *LIRIC* board, I wanted action, I wanted flow. And that is just what it offered me. Flow of conversations, of ideas, of enthusiasm vibrating from people across the globe. It offered orientation to my awe-struck brain.

Most might say I am inexperienced to be an editor of a journal, which is, in fact, true. The way I approached my editorial role might be quite unusual. Editors usually have many ideas of how the journal must run, what image of us must be set out in the field. I am here, merely but

importantly, as an explorer and an observer, with minimal indulgence on preconceived notions of how things *must* be. I ask questions more than I can give answers; I ask for suggestions more than I can offer them; I imbibe much more than I can direct. My co-editor Kim Etherington and I pedal well together. Having her with me helps me put things in place while I wander about in search for more of what the writing for wellbeing world has to offer.

My intention here at *LIRIC* is to learn more than anything else. My contributions are borne out of the mind of an expressive writing enthusiast belonging to the TikTok generation. I can sit with my diary and pen for hours mindfully as well as scroll mindlessly through 30-second videos (which I have done multiple times already while drafting this note). So, you can imagine how writing this Editor's Foreword is quite the task for me and largely contains a loosely knitted fabric of words to represent a beautiful collage in my heart.

The pieces of literature in this issue have lived, grown, and been woven in the minds of authors, have been singed to perfection by the minds of peer reviewers, and have been finely curated to create the beautiful tapestry that is our Volume 2, Issue 1! I honor the process of this magic coming together as a whole as much as I relish the individuality of each person's contribution here. Each article is an amalgamation of keen observation, ample self-reflection, creative thought, and efficient storytelling. Each story sets an example and offers guidance on how to use arts-based practices for self-reflection. Each person's work is pioneering and paves way for more inquiry in the field of expressive arts in wellbeing.

Narrative inquiries outnumber the other research designs in this issue of our journal. Bertrand (2022) writes about her own experience of self-reflective cognitive processing and changing narratives about childhood abuse and consequent traumas. Chavis (2022) presents working professionals with a platter of expressive writing tools in the form of poetry selection and prompts for when loneliness is a concern in clinical contexts. Godfrey (2022) presents the unique idea of using artwork and reflective creative writing to map our dreams. Kuhnke (2022) elaborates on how diary writing can be instrumental as a means for people recovering from eating disorders to understand their spiritual selves. Moores (2022) explores a part of his identity as a person with autism by using poetry as a medium to move away from the deficit-based medical model and closer to the social model of disability, thereby shining a beam of light in the conversations about and around neurodiversity. Taylor (2022) tells us

about difficult life encounters as a black woman and how writing can be a powerful medium for personal liberation and collective freedom-making through the race lens.

We have an *Innovations* section this year, which is fascinating to me! The innovative piece by Clarke (2022) shares his therapeutic aid titled *Sam the Tram's Dance Club*. This is a book which has its roots in his doctoral study based on the ideas of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.

Our very dear board member, Reinekke Lengelle, wrote a beautiful book *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss and Resilience*, which was published early 2021. Katrin Del Elzen has reviewed this labour of love, appetizing the hearts of scholars, writers, and grieverers.

What I have stated here are my briefest takeaways from these pieces that have moved me, educated me, and inspired me. Now, I invite you to approach the articles with curiosity and see how you process these writings.

I believe the collage in my heart has just begun creation. This editorial note is a faint call compared to the reverberating enthusiasm with which I welcome you to this feast of words and creativity. I hope you will stay until the final flip of this journal, then tell us what you think. Cheers! Here's wishing you all a wonderful 2022. We hope we will hear from you very soon with *your* offerings for the next issue of *LIRIC*.

*Aathira*



# The Spiral of Increasing Self-Awareness: Creative Writing for Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse

*Jennifer Bertrand, MA, CAE*

## Abstract

A growing number of studies on the effects of expressive writing demonstrate an improvement in the long-term physical health of participating writers. However, the findings for psychological and emotional health benefits are not as robust or consistent. With reference to the transformation-through-writing model, I take an autoethnographic approach to explore how creative writing supported an increasing level of self-awareness about my own experience of childhood sexual abuse. I attribute the positive effect writing had on my psychological and emotional health to a combination of concepts discussed in the literature on expressive writing, namely emotional catharsis and cognitive processing. From this analysis, I suggest that creative writing may be an effective healing model for adult survivors of childhood trauma if the expressive writing paradigm is adjusted to align with individual stages of healing, recognize the individual's culture and coping style, and provide sufficient time for the individual to heal through writing.

**Keywords:** trauma, writing, poetry, identity, wellbeing

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## Acknowledgement

I sincerely thank Dr. Kim Etherington for her guidance and support.

## Introduction

Imagine the nautilus  
Vulnerable core encased in shell  
    A fragment  
Yet already expanding  
With mathematical precision  
One chamber after another  
Filling and overflowing  
Unable to contain the drive to push, to grow  
To be something different than before  
    This is why I write

I was a victim of childhood abuse. As a young woman this label defined me: I blamed it for everything dissatisfying in my life and for ongoing challenges related to my mental health. Without creative writing, I would still retain this victim mentality. Using an autoethnographic approach to analyze the poetry and fiction I wrote as a teenager and young adult, I examine the healing process that resulted from these early writing efforts. While I did not perform this writing under the supervision of a healthcare professional, my poetry and fiction nevertheless followed the transformation-through-writing model (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009), which describes the shifts in perspective and ‘ever-widening spiral’ of self-awareness that may occur when we write about our most challenging life experiences (Lengelle, 2005, p. 8).

A growing number of studies on the effects of expressive writing demonstrate an improvement in the long-term physical health of participating writers, but the findings related to writing and psychological and emotional health are not as ‘robust or consistent’ (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, p. 339). I attribute the positive effect writing had on my own health to emotional catharsis and cognitive processing, and I suggest that creative writing may be an effective healing model for adult survivors of childhood trauma if the expressive writing paradigm is adjusted to align with individual stages of healing, recognize the individual’s culture and coping style, and provide sufficient time for the individual to heal through writing.

## The Self as Research Subject

One of the first courses I enrolled in as part of my graduate studies program was about writing for personal development. I had not heard of this field of practice, and the idea of using writing to heal and transform

intrigued me, especially as I had written poetry for decades as a way to explore and understand my life experiences. Hunt and Sampson (1998) describe creative writing for personal development as a broad area of practice in which writing is used to gain insights about the self, cope with challenging emotional or psychological issues, and address difficult life experiences such as trauma, illness, ageing, and death. A new world opened up for me on this graduate course as I reviewed studies and theories about using writing in a therapeutic context. I wondered if my poetry had played a role in my own healing journey from childhood sexual abuse, and I set out to study myself.

Autoethnography, a form of narrative inquiry, is an approach to research used to 'describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experiences (*auto*), with the purpose of understanding cultural experiences (*ethno*)' (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018, p. 56). What differentiates autoethnography from autobiographical writing is this emphasis on cultural context and how reflexive analysis of the highly personal may extend our understanding of various sociological phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011; Etherington, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Sparkes, 2002; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography can take us in new directions of inquiry by inviting interrogation 'at the intersection of lived experience and the net in which we use to catch the world—theory' (Silverman & Rowe, 2020, p. 91). By analyzing my own writing in relation to childhood abuse, I aimed to examine how writing impacted my healing journey and, more broadly, whether this analysis might offer insights about the process and benefits of writing for adult survivors of childhood trauma.

Using my self as research subject and sharing writing about my experience of childhood sexual abuse raises questions about the ethics of this process and my own positionality within the research. Childhood abuse is, by nature, relational: victim(s) and perpetrator(s) are at the centre of the experience; family members, friends, communities, healthcare professionals/systems, and the wider cultural context are but a few examples of the complex relationships and dynamics at work when considering abuse and its effects. Relational ethics in the context of autoethnography (Ellis, 2007; Edwards, 2021) might include obtaining consent from those individuals directly referenced (or implied) in the research, but in the case of autoethnography on the topic of childhood abuse, this consent may be difficult or impossible to obtain. In addition, studying the self can have ethical implications for the self: delving into my

own history of childhood sexual abuse, for example, could be emotionally or psychologically harmful to my own wellbeing.

To address these issues in the current paper, I first considered my readiness to share my trauma experience with a wider audience, and I determined that I was sufficiently comfortable at this stage of my healing journey with disclosing my writing and reflections on childhood abuse. This is in part because of my own work on processing trauma over the last two decades, but it is also a reflection of the contemporary social and cultural climate in North America with respect to disclosure. The #MeToo movement, in particular, which emerged in 2017 as Hollywood celebrities shared their stories of sexual harassment and assault, coincided with my first attempts to analyze my writing in relation to trauma and likely contributed to my comfort level with disclosure. I am, in fact, consistently surprised by my willingness to share what had seemed so private as a teenager and young adult. My family culture at that time encouraged a repressive coping style: childhood abuse, alcoholism, domestic abuse—these and other dysfunctions were not things to acknowledge or discuss in polite company, whether happening within the family, to other family or friends, or within the wider community.

In addition, while awareness and support services for victims of abuse were growing in the 1990s and 2000s (the period in which I began to write about my trauma), there was still stigma and shame attached to childhood sexual abuse, which would have contributed to my initial reluctance to share or seek help (Bolton, 1999; Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Wright & Thiara, 2019). I was drawn to writing not only because I had always demonstrated an affinity for poetry, but because these social and cultural factors made it difficult for me to be open with others about my emotions and experiences. Baikié (2008) notes that individuals with repressive coping styles, which ‘refers to the tendency to routinely avoid and deny one’s affective responses, without apparent conscious intent or recognition,’ have not been shown to benefit as much from expressive writing exercises (p. 62). In my case, it appears that the growing acceptance of disclosure in the larger culture, combined with my view of writing as a safe space for exploration, overcame my individual repressive coping style.

To address the ethical implications of how others are represented within or might receive my writing on childhood abuse, I took into consideration that my immediate family is aware of the history of abuse and other family members who might be emotionally impacted by sharing this writing are now deceased. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, I

have also elected to omit writing or make minor edits to the writing excerpts included in this paper to anonymize any direct or implied references to perpetrators. Instead, I focus on my personal experience of trauma and how writing supported my healing journey as a way of testing the application of the transformation-through-writing model to a self-directed writing practice, which I carried out with no prior knowledge of the theory or methodology of writing for personal development. My hope is that this analysis will contribute to discussions on the emotional and psychological benefits of writing for adult survivors of childhood abuse, while also acknowledging that my experience is unique and influenced by social and cultural factors that may not be relevant for all sufferers.

### **Writing for Personal Development**

In their 1986 study on expressive writing, Pennebaker and Beall concluded that writing about past traumas resulted in 'short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems' (p. 280). Subsequent studies confirm these results and demonstrate the positive impact of expressive writing on overall physical health (Greenberg et al., 1996; King & Miner, 2000; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth, 1998). However, the results of studies exploring expressive writing and mental wellbeing are not as 'robust or consistent' (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, p. 339).

While some research has demonstrated the positive impacts of expressive writing on mental health, such as moderating the stress response (Lepore et al., 2002), improving mood and the emotional experience of remembering past trauma (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988), and lessening symptoms of anxiety or depression (Lepore, 1997; Gortner et al., 2006), other studies have identified limited or no benefits in relation to severe mental health triggers or conditions (Gidron et al., 1996; Kovac & Range, 2002) or overall health (Mogk et al., 2006). In addition, while studies continue to emerge that demonstrate the physiological and psychological benefits of writing and written disclosure for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Antal & Range, 2009; Meston, Lorenz & Stephenson, 2013), at least one study found that writing alone was not sufficient to support healing for survivors of significant trauma (Batten et al., 2002).

Further research must therefore be carried out to understand the mechanisms at work in the expressive writing paradigm and under what

conditions writing may support improvements in emotional and psychological health for adult survivors of childhood abuse. Autoethnography plays an important role in this process by offering insights directly from survivors and incorporating survivor stories into studies of the broader social and cultural context of trauma (Etherington 2003, 2020a). As a result of studying my own writing in relation to childhood abuse, I identify a possible reason for the discrepancy in results in expressive writing studies with respect to physical versus mental health outcomes: both catharsis (the venting negative feelings) and cognitive processing—specifically, shifting perspective of the traumatic event through the re-creation of a cohesive narrative—are necessary to support improvements in psychological and emotional health, and this process must take into account individual differences with respect to healing stages, culture and coping style, and the length of time required to heal. Venting without reflection can have a negative immediate effect on emotional health (Smyth, 1998), but venting accompanied by reflection helped me to acknowledge childhood trauma and to subsequently engage in increasingly insightful writing about its impacts, which in turn supported a longer-term healing process.

### **Emotional Catharsis: Feelings Without Reflection**

Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) note that there is little support to suggest emotional catharsis is the key mechanism at work in expressive writing. However, written disclosure, in my case, served as the first step in a longer-term psychological and emotional healing process. In 1996, at the age of 17, I turned to writing as a means of emotional release from childhood trauma. The poems I wrote over the next two years were unsophisticated; I find them difficult to read through as an adult. They are often like long journal entries unburdening heavy feelings and thoughts onto paper:

I don't know who I am.  
I don't know what I want.  
I don't know if I ever did.  
...  
I feel like my life is for nothing.  
I don't know why I'm here!  
I don't know why I'm crying!  
...

I need help.  
I need a friend.  
I need to be understood.  
I need someone to make it better.  
(April 1997, age 18)

At this point in my healing journey, I realized that something was causing me great distress, but I was not yet ready to confront or explore it further. When I moved away from home to begin university, my poems became more structured—often poorly mimicking the poetic forms I was studying at the time—but continued to display pain and confusion with little self-reflection. I remained stuck in a pattern of venting without much progress towards understanding the underlying problem:

Perhaps I hoped that it could change,  
that running far could make the woe  
and misery fade and brightness grow,  
but I could not get out of range  
of all the things that make me cry,  
and all the friends who let me down  
and all the thoughts that make me drown  
...  
and still I wish that I was dead.  
(September 1997, age 18)

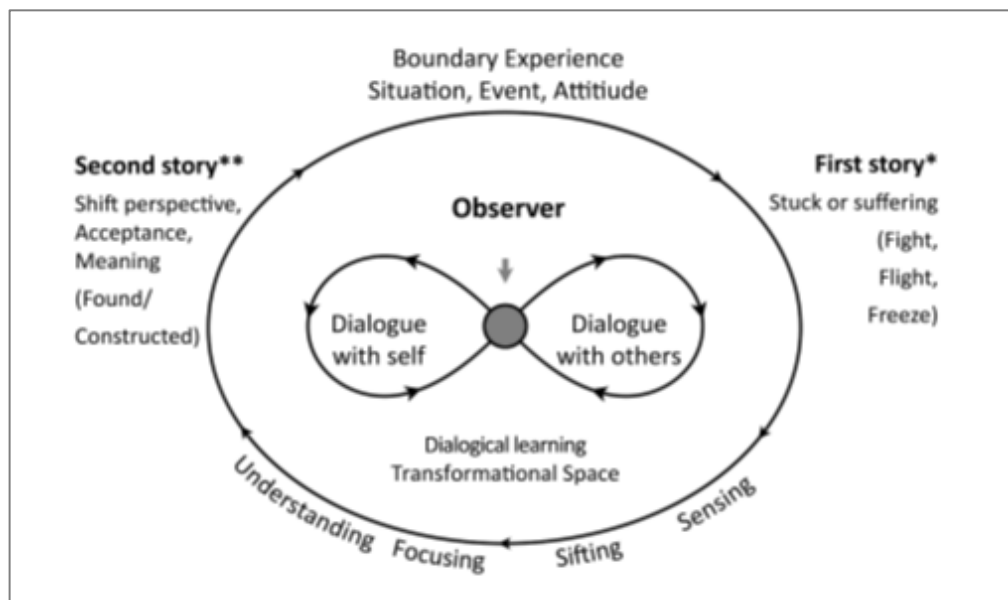
Venting my negative feelings through poetry helped me to acknowledge my pain, but I also needed to process these feelings to promote true healing. As Etherington (2020a) notes, ‘creating a coherent story of our childhood trauma can be difficult because trauma often disrupts our sense of a continuous existence’ (p. 68). This shows in my early writing efforts, which are characterized by confusion, emotional overwhelm, and disassociation from the traumatic experiences. Additional writing over the course of about 10 years ultimately helped me to construct a coherent narrative—what Neimeyer (2001) and others call meaning reconstruction—which in turn allowed me to gain some agency and mastery over the trauma (Etherington, 2020a).

## Cognitive Processing: Transformation Through Writing

Trauma blocks the normal processing of memories and shatters our personal assumptions about the world and self (Etherington, 2020a; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). While my initial writing helped to release some of the emotions associated with childhood abuse, I still had not told the story of my trauma, and this would be necessary to process my experiences and reconstruct my identity as a survivor. The transformation-through-writing model (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009) is a useful framework to understand how I processed the trauma of childhood abuse through writing (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Transformation-Through-Writing Model (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009)  
Reproduced with permission from Dr. Reinekke Lengelle.



In this model, we use writing to process a 'boundary experience'—a significant challenge to our self-concept (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009, p. 59). As we explore our 'first story' about this boundary experience (i.e., the narrative in which we are 'stuck or suffering') we can begin to analyze and view our first story from different perspectives. The resulting 'second story' (p. 59), or revised narrative, emerges from our writing efforts as we observe and analyze our lived experience through four non-linear cognitive learning stages: exploring and describing our emotions (sensing); comparing our circumstances with those of others to develop analogies, constructs, and concepts (sifting); attempting to connect our feelings and ideas about the boundary experience (focusing); and ultimately

formulating a different narrative based on these insights (understanding) (Bertrand, 2021).

The second story is the revised narrative we create as we shift perspective, come to acceptance, or find/construct new meaning in relation to the boundary experience—in my case, childhood sexual abuse. This movement from a first to second story can occur many times, even over a period of years, as we continue writing and expanding our self-awareness. Although the transformation-through-writing model employs different terminology, other studies also identify emotional exposure and/or cognitive processing as possible mechanisms at work in the expressive writing paradigm (Sloan & Marx, 2004; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). In line with the narrative transformation posited in the Lengelle and Meijers (2009) model, Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) suggest ‘it is likely that the development of a coherent narrative helps to reorganize and structure traumatic memories, resulting in more adaptive internal schemas’ (p. 341).

Through cognitive processing, specifically the cyclical exploration of a boundary experience as described in the transformation-through-writing model, adult survivors of childhood abuse may come to better understand and heal from their experience. I liken this process to the growth cycle of the chambered nautilus, the inspiration for the poem that introduces this paper. As this cephalopod grows, its shell expands, chamber by chamber, to accommodate the ever-growing soft inner body. Writing allowed me to engage in a similar personal growth process as I gradually acknowledged and explored my trauma story over time and gained a greater understanding of my experience.

### **The Spiral of Increasing Self-Awareness**

My personal journey from first to second story can be organized into six cycles (Table 1) in which I became increasingly self-aware through my creative writing efforts. In my poems from April and September of 1997 (age 18), I remained stuck at the first level. When my thoughts were drawn to the sexual abuse, denial prevented me from exploring the issue further. Something was wrong, clearly shown in my writing, but I was not ready or willing to attribute this distress to the abuse, likely because of dissociation, shame, fear, or a combination of these responses.

**Table 1 – My Personal Stages of Cognitive Processing**

| Level | Cognitive Process/<br>Emotion | Description                                                                                              |
|-------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Denial                        | I was not abused; it was an accident. Nothing is wrong.                                                  |
| 2     | Shame, self-blame             | I was abused. I caused it to happen. I will never be the same. I am not normal.                          |
| 3     | Anger                         | I am not to blame; I was just a child. I shared what happened, and nothing changed. Others are to blame. |
| 4     | Acceptance                    | Sometimes those around us do not know how to help. They are not to blame.                                |
| 5     | Feeling empowered             | I am ok. I am normal. I can choose who I want to be and how to live my life.                             |
| 6     | Self-compassion               | This does not define me. I am safe, loved, and happy. I survived.                                        |

My writing gradually changed over the next decade, however, beginning with a short story in which I explored the shame associated with abuse:

On the third night Rhea noticed the pattern on the pillow sham. Despite having slept on the same sheets for as long as she could remember, she had never really looked at the pattern. The sham was mostly white with a sprawling design of pale green vines....

‘This is your fault.’ [A] whispering in her ear, [the] same [as] the first two nights, and unable to account for her mistake, Rhea nevertheless felt shame burning in her cheeks. Her fault, this pain. Her fault, this degradation.

The pillow sham felt cool against the heat of her face, and she found herself staring at the delicate blue flowers again, hidden from her all these years and finally revealed, on this night, amidst the confusion of green vines.

(May 1998, age 19)

Using a fictional character and creating a scene of abuse different than my own allowed me to confront the experience without reliving the trauma. This was a safe way for me to acknowledge the trauma and marks a significant shift from the cathartic poems written the year prior, which made no mention of abuse. This particular excerpt also suggests recognition, perhaps not yet fully acknowledged, that I am awakening, noticing patterns that were previously

ignored or overlooked. The 'sprawling design' and 'confusion of green vines' reflect ongoing emotional overwhelm, but noticing them for the first time also offers hope for further self-awareness. I cannot recall a specific social or cultural change that occurred at the time my writing began to shift; the more explicit exploration of abuse may have been a natural progression following the release of pent-up emotion in my earlier poems, may have coincided with the opportunity to live away from home and expand my awareness of related issues such as sexual assault on university campus, and/or may simply reflect my growing maturity and knowledge.

Over the following decade, ages 19 through 28, my poetry began to express a mixture of anger and sadness as I moved towards acceptance and, eventually, empowerment and self-compassion. In many of these poems, I assumed a character or a double of myself and used vivid imagery to describe the associated pain. I wrote about tattoos that 'never heal completely' and the 'searching fingers' that carve them into bloody skin (1999, age 20); the 'black, gelatinous' mass of dark emotion 'creeping ever-outward' (2005, age 26); and the 'sticky hands' and 'breathing, wet and harsh' that haunt my dreams (2006, age 27). Yet, I also wrote about rising on 'wings of flame,' getting over the 'fear of touch,' the possibility of 'cleansing, restoring, protecting,' (2006, age 27) and becoming 'the unmaker, the undoer' of my own experience (2007, age 28). In one of the most poignant poems from this period, I wrote about myself like a childhood friend, with tenderness and empathy:

I wonder what she's doing now  
Thirteen was a good age  
just before confusion and insecurity  
when even eating cherries could be funny

We laughed with our mouths uncovered  
and walked home in the middle of the street  
and talked for hours about nothing  
Sometimes we were jealous  
but it was not enough to come between us

At fourteen we changed  
We held our hands over our mouths when we laughed  
and stayed on the sidewalks  
and only talked about serious things

I wonder if she remembers the time before  
I wonder if she wishes we could go there again  
(November 2002, age 23)

The transition to acceptance, empowerment, and self-compassion (my second story in relation to childhood trauma) was not a smooth or consistent process by any means. I would become stuck in a series of angry poems, step backward into shame once again, or flash forward to gentle observation and humanity. Yet with each piece of writing, I would learn something new about myself and move closer to reframing my experience, to shifting from victim to survivor and taking control of my own narrative. Etherington (2020a) writes that sufferers of childhood trauma must construct their story gradually to reclaim the memory and associated emotions, but that 'this approach to healing takes time and is never final or complete' (p. 69).

I see the gradual construction of my trauma story in the poetry and fiction I wrote in my teens and twenties, but I also see the ongoing healing journey in my later writing. In fact, I did not write specifically about my experience of abuse for another decade. The story emerged unexpectedly when I prepared a creative non-fiction piece for a class in my graduate program. My willingness to share the story at this time likely relates to the timing of the #MeToo movement as noted earlier in this paper, the progress I had made over the last decade in relation to my healing from trauma, and the safe space created within the course to share writing with the instructor:

I remember when you invaded for the first time. I was twelve with everything opened up before me. Night, dark, pale blue glow from the moon...There was a time I would have found that beautiful...It felt like a dream and when I realized I was awake there was so much shame, so much anger at my treacherous body. How disgusting you were, I was, it was. I couldn't breathe. (2017, age 37)

Even reading these lines again now I feel breathless, my chest is tight, my stomach roils. The cognitive and somatic processing of my trauma is ongoing. Nevertheless, I have no doubt my writing kept me alive after the abuse. Without this outlet for my feelings and the time and space necessary to explore them, I could not have gradually transformed my first story to a second story or shifted my perspective from victim to survivor. I would not have reached a point where I could write about the abuse in an assignment that would be read by an instructor. I would not be writing about the abuse in a journal article that may be read by others around the world. My writing and the unexpected insights generated from the creative process helped me to recognize that I had been abused, safely explore my emotions

about this experience, and eventually seek therapeutic support to address related mental health concerns.

Herman (2002) suggests that recovery from trauma must take place in the context of relationships: by renewing our connections with others, we rebuild the ‘trust, autonomy, initiative, competency, identity, and intimacy’ lost or damaged as a result of the trauma (p. S98). In my own experience, however, I needed to rebuild a relationship with myself first. I told others about the abuse at the time when it happened, and nothing changed. In this context, I had no faith that sharing my story with anyone, even a therapist, would help. I felt truly alone, and writing was the only option that felt safe to me at that time.

### Closing Reflections

In an online exchange, Lengelle noted that my shifts in perspective over time (Table 1) demonstrate ‘a kind of “complete picture”—a way of organizing narrative thread for a sense of completion’ (personal communication, 2017). My writing between the ages of 17 and 28 certainly progresses from denial to self-compassion, which suggests, given sufficient time to experience catharsis and work towards a cohesive narrative, creative writing can play an important role in the healing process for adult survivors of childhood abuse.

A remaining question that arises from my analysis, however, is the role of therapy in this process. While writing was the outlet I chose to process my experience of trauma—likely due to my family culture, repressive coping style, and the stigma and shame associated with sexual abuse as discussed earlier—the initial stage of my healing journey extended over a decade, with numerous ups and downs: Would I have recovered faster, with less risk of relapse, with the benefit of a structured expressive writing process and the supervision of a healthcare professional? Studies such as Batten et al. (2002) suggest writing alone is not sufficient for healing from significant trauma, while survivor accounts like Bolton’s ‘Around the Slices of Herself’ (2003), indicate that individuals may seek the privacy of writing instead of guided therapeutic support from a helping professional.

My creative writing about childhood abuse demonstrates many of the features in the transformation-through-writing model (Figure 1): *sensing* recurs in my poetry as I explore the images and emotions associated with the abuse; *sifting* occurs as I establish different narratives; *focusing* appears in the various first-person and third-person viewpoints adopted in

my work; and finally, *understanding* emerges as I fully acknowledge my trauma story, recognize my power as a survivor, and learn to love myself once again. However, as noted in the previous section, while I certainly engaged in dialogue with myself through writing, I did not engage in dialogue about the trauma with others, and this may have impacted the effectiveness of my healing process. Structured writing supported by a healthcare professional (where structure means a framework to follow but still allows for creative writing) may have offered that opportunity and thereby reduced my recovery time and the potential to become stuck in a particular first story about the abuse. This, in turn, may have helped to reduce my anxiety, increase my resilience, and improve my social relationships.

The challenge for survivors like myself, who told and were not believed or were not removed from the situation, is having sufficient trust in a helping professional to take the first step. I suspect if I had known of a trauma therapist using writing in their practice, I still would not have sought help when I first started writing, although I also believe I would have benefited from that additional therapeutic support. How to reconcile an individual's desire to pursue private writing with the benefits of therapeutic support, especially in cases where the sufferer has a repressive coping style or other social and cultural factors discourage disclosure, is a research question I would need to explore further.

Nevertheless, I offer two key findings based on my analysis: 1) creative writing allowed me to release pent-up emotion so that I could move toward a more reflective mindset (catharsis); and 2) creative writing allowed me to transform my first story (I am a victim defined by childhood abuse) to a second story (I am a woman with many sides, only one of which involves an experience with childhood abuse) through a spiral of increasing self-awareness (cognitive processing). The inconsistent findings identified to date in relation to the impact of expressive writing on psychological and emotional health may simply mean the writing paradigm must be adjusted to take into account individual differences. A one-size-fits all approach, as is sometimes applied in expressive writing studies, does not recognize the uniqueness of each individual's personal experience with trauma, the length of time required to heal, or the impact of culture and coping style on the ability to confront/disclose trauma.

In closing, I would like to reflect upon my research with reference to the narrative inquiry quality criteria outlined in Etherington (2020b), which include transparency, trustworthiness, aesthetic merit, reflexivity,

accountability, contribution, and impact. In sharing and reflecting upon my writing on childhood abuse in this paper, I have attempted to situate myself socially and culturally within the research while also offering a personal account that speaks to the importance of considering individual differences when applying the expressive writing paradigm in the context of childhood abuse. With the exception of adjustments necessary to protect privacy and confidentiality, my writing excerpts are presented exactly as they were written as a teenager and young adult, and in my reflections on this writing I aim to capture the thoughts and emotions that I experienced at that time.

I find it difficult to assert the aesthetic merit of my work, but I hope that readers might get a sense of the vulnerability in my early writing and feel engaged with the content. I also hope that my research may contribute to the existing body of knowledge about writing and childhood trauma, in particular why sufferers might be drawn to a self-directed creative writing process to support healing, how the transformation-through-writing model may be applied to enhance our understanding of the healing process at work when writing about childhood trauma, and why the expressive writing paradigm may lead to mixed results with respect to mental health benefits.

Finally, this research has impacted me personally and professionally: sharing my trauma story with a wider audience feels like a natural next step in my healing journey—what I thought might be a final step, the culmination of years of writing and reflecting—but like the chambered nautilus, my growth as a researcher and survivor does not end here. I have new questions to explore, and more poetry to write, in my quest ‘to push, to grow/ to be something different than before.’

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**Jennifer Bertrand, MA, CAE** is the Executive Director and Registrar of the Alberta College and Association of Opticians. She studied writing for personal development during her graduate program at Athabasca University and recently published research on the use of writing to reconstruct identity following a chronic illness diagnosis. In her leisure time, she enjoys writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

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## Poetry Therapy: A Doorway to Understanding and Alleviating Loneliness

*Geri Giebel Chavis, PhD, CPT, LP*

Professor Emerita, St Catherine University

### Abstract

After presenting several theories and dimensions of loneliness, this article sets forth specific ways in which the practice of poetry therapy, which involves facilitating expressive writing and sharing of personal responses to select poems, can not only offer relief to those experiencing loneliness, but also foster empathy toward individuals suffering from a sense of isolation. Addressed to professionals engaged in helping individuals in clinical and non-clinical settings, this article draws from the author's experiences as a certified poetry therapist and psychologist working in clinical and community-based educational settings and also from the author's workshop presented at the *2019 Creative Bridges Conference*. Poetic materials, along with creative writing and group discussion prompts, are referenced as apt choices for addressing loneliness arising from life transitions involving loss, lack of belonging due to social discrimination, communication breakdown, and chronic dysfunctional patterns. A final section of this article briefly addresses the way in which poetic expression can enhance appreciation for solitude as a healthful state differing from loneliness.

**Keywords:** poetry therapy, loneliness alleviation, loneliness theories, situational vs. chronic loneliness, life-enhancing solitude

## Introduction: Poetry Therapy in the Service of Loneliness

Loneliness is a multifaceted and pervasive phenomenon that until recent years has not been a widespread topic of conversation or professional inquiry. I was first inspired to look more closely at this subject when I read a comprehensive report titled *A Connected Society: A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness*, published in the UK (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DDCMS], 2018), which identified various causes and effects of loneliness and set forth plans to address this personal and social issue across all levels of British society. After reading this report and subsequently viewing the results of Cigna's 2018 national survey exploring the impact of loneliness in the US as well as the Kaiser Family Foundation's international study of loneliness in the US, UK, and Japan (DiJulio et al., 2018), I was motivated to learn more about various theories pertaining to loneliness and to reflect upon what I, as a certified poetry therapist, mentor/supervisor, counseling psychologist, and educator could contribute to the understanding and alleviation of loneliness.

This article is designed to introduce poetry therapy techniques and materials to a variety of professionals who wish to grow in their understanding of the loneliness experience and who are engaged in helping individuals experiencing loneliness due to a wide range of factors. These professionals include both those with licenses in mental health fields who work in clinical settings and those—wellness coaches, writing for wellness specialists, spiritual directors, and educators—who work with nonclinical populations in community settings where the goal is enhanced personal development. The dual level of professionals addressed in this article corresponds to the poetry therapist and the applied poetry facilitator levels of certification specified on the website of the International Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy (<https://ifbpt.org/>).

The practice of poetry therapy involves creating expressive writing prompts and selecting poems and at times other literary forms, based on the features and needs of the population served. The second salient feature of poetry therapy practice involves skilled facilitation of personalized reactions to the chosen readings and the written pieces that are generated. While practitioners in this field may work one-on-one with individuals, a group setting is particularly therapeutic, especially for those seeking relief from loneliness. A supportive, nonjudgmental group provides a community in which participants can share their reactions to the readings and voice

what they have written or discovered through their writing. Sharing similar views fosters a sense of belonging while expressing dissimilar responses creates opportunities for new learnings and a sense of give and take.

Over the years, I and my colleagues in this field have repeatedly experienced and witnessed the ways in which images appealing to the senses, metaphorical language, symbols, compelling narrative, and the striking juxtaposition of the ordinary with the extraordinary combine to evoke spontaneous, heartfelt responses that foster growth and healing. We have seen how a well-chosen poem is likely to resonate with individuals who identify with its speaker whose moods, feelings, or life situation resemble their own in some obvious or subtle way. This identification process helps alleviate the sense of being alone with what one may view as unusual or peculiar feelings and thoughts. We have also observed how immediate reactions to short lyric poems, when reflected and elaborated upon, lead to new insights regarding oneself and one's relationships.

Three books that are required reading for trainees in the poetry therapy field, one by Arleen Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry, the second by Nicholas Mazza, and the third by Geri Giebel Chavis. All provide information on the criteria to be used in determining which poems are likely to be the most therapeutic for the people being served. It is a major ethical responsibility to select poems that are honest yet leave some room for hope and to also recognize and be ready to skillfully deal with the fact that any poem chosen may elicit unexpected reactions. The same caution is true for the various writing invitations that poetry therapists and applied poetry facilitators introduce into their sessions.

## **Theories of Loneliness**

Clark Moustakas's classic book titled *Loneliness* (1961) focuses chiefly on loneliness as a human experience that fosters creativity, depth, and wisdom; however, he does differentiate between a healthy and a pathological form of loneliness. He refers to 'existential loneliness' as an inevitable feature of 'human experience, in contrast to the loneliness of self-alienation and self-rejection which is not loneliness at all but a vague and disturbing anxiety' (p. 24). According to Moustakas, existential loneliness is an enormously positive vehicle to wholeness and wellbeing. When individuals courageously accept their own 'essential loneliness openly and honestly' (p. 34), they can 'experience a fundamental continuity

with nature' (p. 49), gain a profound knowledge of their own identity and relate 'significantly and openly with others and with the universe' (p. 50).

Unlike the self-actualized individual who can gain from their solitary human state, the 'person suffering from loneliness anxiety', in Moustakas's view, has 'feelings of inferiority' (p. 30), is hurt by 'the slightest criticism' (p. 30), and not only focuses on gaining 'praise and approval' (p. 31) from others, but also 'employs devices and strategies which constantly alienate him from others' (p. 31). Experiencing an 'inner feeling of separation, anxiety, and despair', the person suffering from loneliness anxiety lacks the resilience or inner resources 'to attach himself to new persons and find value in new experiences' (p. 31).

Tony Lake's *Loneliness* (1983) focuses on this phenomenon as 'an illness that attacks the ability of people to communicate and to take part in mutual behaviours' (p. 29) and involves both 'circumstances' and 'personality' as contributing factors (p. 6). Like Moustakas, Lake indicates that this illness is characterized by low self-esteem and self-defeating behaviors that keep others at bay. According to Lake, individuals suffering from it 'find themselves expecting to be rejected' and 'save others the trouble' by 'behav[ing] in such a way' that they 'are bound to . . . lose a potential friend' (p. 4). Lake's suggested cure for this dysfunctional form of loneliness involves 'recogniz[ing]' the 'need to change inside as well as outside'; 'end[ing] self-rejection by getting to understand it and replacing the rejection with acceptance'; and 'relearn[ing] how to communicate, how to give and to receive mutual rewards' (p. 5).

In his study of loneliness, Charles Burke (2004) focuses on how we as humans have a 'deep-seated need for relationship while maintaining our individuality' (p. 8). Like Moustakas, Burke asserts how essential it is for us 'to learn the positive values of loneliness' (p. 8). He points out that '[o]ur strength as individuals can often be measured by how we respond to being alone', and if we find it very challenging to be alone, we may 'fear that inner self we have so skillfully silenced over the years' (p. 48). He also defines loneliness as 'a paradoxical thing that can either force us to withdraw from those around us and turn in upon ourselves, or it can be the stimulus for re-evaluation and greater sharing' (p. 95). Burke extends the range of his study, particularly in a chapter titled 'Lonely and Misunderstood', in which he notes that 'The loneliness that haunts homeless derelicts is beyond the imagination of most of us' (p. 68). Burke essentially functions as a poetry/bibliotherapist by inserting Alan Sillitoe's 'Uncle Earnest' into his book (pp. 72–89) and describing it as a story that 'can bring out a bit more

understanding and compassion in us toward the lonely streetwalkers of our impersonal cities' (p. 68).

The UK strategy report (DDCMS, 2018) mentioned above presents an assortment of 'life events that can make us more likely to feel lonely' (p. 8). These include suffering trauma, such as being bullied, experiencing discrimination, living in an abusive environment, becoming a victim of crime, or being a refugee awaiting asylum. The list also encompasses various challenging life transitions, such as job and location changes, children leaving home, teenage pressures, leaving care, becoming a caregiver, retirement, and moving into care facilities. Loneliness triggers include overt experiences of loss, such as divorce or relationship breakdown, death of a loved one, being fired from a job, entering a period of poor health, or becoming disabled.

The findings of the Cigna study (2018), based on a survey of more than 20,000 adults ages 18 and older, correspond to my own discoveries as a clinician with clients suffering from loneliness. These findings highlight loneliness as a communication breakdown issue—a perceived lack of being understood or a paucity of meaningful conversations or interactions with others.

### ***Creative Bridges Conference Workshop on Poetry Therapy and Loneliness***

The opportunity to link my poetry therapy background to the experience of loneliness came when I prepared and presented a workshop for participants of the *Creative Bridges Conference*, which took place in July, 2019 and was co-sponsored by Lapidus International and the Metanoia Institute. In this workshop, I addressed various factors related to loneliness and focused in my examples primarily on this phenomenon as a temporary state of being due to a significant loss or as an ongoing experience arising from external factors such as being a member of a minority ethnic, racial, or gender identity group. The primary goal of this workshop was to expand awareness of how the two major features of poetry therapy—facilitated, personalized discussion of selected poems and the sharing of spontaneous creative written pieces—function to alleviate loneliness and increase empathy toward those suffering from a demoralizing sense of isolation.

At the beginning of this workshop, I invited each participant to generate a mind map or word tree centered on the term *loneliness*. I encouraged everyone to jot down whatever comes to mind when they hear this word. This warmup not only readied us to focus on the topic but also helped to bring group members together through a shared task. I then asked participants to reflect on what human situations typically cause loneliness and added ones I thought were important, such as moving to a new city, getting divorced, being widowed, experiencing relationship dysfunction, being locked into feelings of shame, living as an immigrant with illegal status, caretaking an ill family member on your own, or feeling different from others because of a disability, major illness, racial identity, religious background, or sexual orientation.

To convey how a sense of community that alleviates loneliness can be fostered by poetry therapy, I next provided a getting acquainted opportunity. After introducing Imelda Maguire's poem 'Origins' (2004, p. 11) as a model, I invited group members to write their own 'Origins' poem, using the following template based on this poem's structure:

Your Own 'Origins' Poem:

I come from a . . . place

I come from a . . . city

From a father who . . .

From a mother who . . .

I come from someplace

Between . . .

And . . .

Somewhere between . . .

And . . .

I come from times that . . .

Because the group was large, I asked each person to share what they had generated with one other individual seated at the same table. If the group had consisted of fewer than ten participants, I would have invited sharing within the group as a whole.

During the next segment of the workshop, I introduced eleven poems, each of which addresses a specific life situation that often causes or intensifies feelings of loneliness. I facilitated a full group discussion of one

of these poems, during which I encouraged an interchange of heartfelt, personalized responses. I then referred to features of the other poems that help to make them powerful catalysts for therapeutic discussions. Each poem was accompanied by a sampling of facilitating questions designed to foster participants' connection with the poem's content or to encourage elaboration of initial responses that would deepen awareness and build upon useful discoveries. I also included some questions designed to encourage group interaction by juxtaposing the similar or differing responses of participants. While most of my questions were meant for individuals seeking relief from loneliness, some questions were geared more specifically to the goal of enhancing empathy towards those struggling with loneliness.

Three poems in the first part of the packet captured feelings of hollowness resulting from the loss of a key relationship: Margaret Hoskins's 'Empty Nest Syndrome' (n. d.) about a mother restless now 'in the spaces/emptied of life'; Ann Wilson's 'Unresolved' (2002, p. 90) about a woman grappling with divorce who drives 'past/ lighted windows/ of other people's houses,/ remembering/ what it was like/ to belong'; and Susan MacDonald's 'Head of Household' (1977, p. 36) depicting 'an old man/ adrift in widowhood/ with a small appetite/ and too many rooms'.

The next set of three poems involved serious medical situations that are often met with silence and lack of understanding from those who have not lived through the same experience. The first of these, Pam Wynn's 'Miscarriage' (2004, pp. 92–93), presented, in a powerfully understated manner, the loss of an unborn child and all the dreams associated with this un-lived life. It depicted a couple entering their empty house without their baby, a house filled with objects that signify what they have lost. In the throes of profound grief, the couple never speak, but we hear words uttered by others that fail to even touch upon the loss involved. While the doctor says, 'one in five ends like this,' the message from friends is: 'You're young. There will be others.' In ironic contrast to these remarks is the final image of the bereaved mother 'plac[ing] the white/ Crocheted blanket, the yellow/ Booties, the tiny knitted sweater/ In a clear plastic bag'.

The second poem in this set, Anita Skeen's 'The Woman Whose Body is Not Her Own' (1989, pp. 115–116) conveyed the main character's inner experience of sorrow over her mastectomy and the resentment and disconnection she feels in relation to the well-wishers who utter glib clichés of reassurance. The last of the three poems, Perie Longo's 'Chores' (2001, p. 75), captured the lonely life of woman caretaking her fatally ill

spouse on a full-time basis. The fatigued and grieving speaker, overwhelmed with her enormous responsibility, asks herself this poignant question, 'How can I hold our lives alone like this?'.

The next grouping of four poems focused on individuals who suffer a profound sense of social isolation. The first poem in this set, Nazand Begikhani's 'Exile' (2006/2008, p. 81), vividly encapsulated the immigrant experience with its attendant loss of home, culture, and identity. After 'a solitary voyage' the displaced person arrives in a place 'where the voices [have] a sharp music/ and colour a different meaning'; experiences a season described as silent and blue; and grieves for 'the self that was left behind/ on a fresh silvery hill'.

The following questions for facilitators provide an example of the discussion prompts that were included for each poem in the workshop packet. The first five questions were designed to encourage immigrants' sharing and exploration of their responses to 'Exile':

1. What parts of this poem reflect your personal experience in some way?
2. What feelings emerge for you in relation to this poem?
3. What has your journey from one homeland to another been like?
4. This poem's speaker repeatedly refers to one's sense of self. What is your reaction to the speaker's mention of a 'false self' or 'real one'? Or a 'self that was left behind'? Or a self that 'no longer belongs to me/ but always breathes inside me'?
5. What do you think the speaker of this poem means when he says in the final lines: 'I was in search of a magic mirror/ That could reflect my whole being'?

For helpers who have little familiarity with the immigrant experience, the next two questions were designed to foster empathy toward immigrants and increase awareness of the profound dislocation and lack of belonging that immigrants face:

6. What words or images in this poem help you better understand the immigrant's experience?
7. In what ways does this poem capture features of your own relocations to new neighborhoods, regions, or countries?

Appropriate for either immigrants or their helpers, this last question can help stimulate sharing of ways to alleviate the kind of loneliness experience conveyed in 'Exile':

8. What do you feel drawn to say to this poem's speaker that might offer some comfort?

The three other poems in this section focused on individuals facing the specter of social stigma. The opening two stanzas of Frank Bidart's 'Queer' (1973) captured the isolating experience of being gay, living a lie, and fearing the familial and societal consequences of coming out. Audre Lorde's 'Hanging Fire' (1997, pp. 96–97) reflected an adolescent's angst over being misunderstood, feeling like a misfit, and coping on her own with a wide range of fears. She speaks of living with skin that has 'betrayed' her and a room that feels 'too small'. Her reference to her skin can be read as either dismay over hormonal changes or over incidents of racial prejudice. The feeling of being alone amidst a sea of troubles is amplified by this poem's thrice-repeated refrain, 'momma's in the bedroom/ with the door closed'.

Cheryl Marie Wade's 'Listen' (1991, p. 179) captured the profoundly isolating silence that covers inner pain, rage, and shame surrounding sexual abuse. Referring to a girl's 'last day of innocence' and the 'father's whisper of love', the poem's speaker tells us that this young person 'learned to hold/ the breath and thunder of syllables/ in her throat'. However, despite her enforced silence, we are left with the assumption that she awaits the day when someone will finally 'listen to the storm in [her] throat'. While this poem is appropriate for fostering empathy within therapists working with incest survivors, I recommend that it be used only in clinical settings with survivors who are ready and able to directly address this past trauma in their life.

The two concluding poems presented in the *Creative Bridges* workshop illustrated ways to help individuals address their loneliness. The first of these, Judith Viorst's 'All Alone Inside My Very Own Skin' (2016, p. 4), is a child's rhyming poem, yet it invites individuals of all ages, to generate specific ideas on how to reach out to others while also better understanding what may be keeping them from doing so. Here are the facilitating questions that accompanied this poem:

1. How do you reach out to someone when you are feeling lonely?
2. What might, at times, prevent you from inviting someone to keep you company?
3. How would you like to reach out to others when you feel lonely?

The final poem, Miroslav Holub's 'Door' (1967/2015, pp. 132–133), with its theme of openness to new experiences, was introduced in conjunction with an energetic activity designed foster camaraderie. Small groups of three to five individuals cooperated to discover ways to enact or physicalize the poem's images and theme. Each small group was then invited to perform their enactment for the rest of us, while one person from that group slowly read the poem aloud.

For the workshop's closing activity, we created a collaborative list poem, using a sentence completion prompt that incorporates Holub's central door image. All participants were invited to contribute a word or phrase to follow the sentence stem, *Today, I open my door to . . .* I chose this prompt because it conveys an implicit invitation to cultivate new behaviors and relationships that can alleviate loneliness. As participants contributed their words, I performed the role of scribe, and when we agreed that our poetic creation was finished, I read it aloud and promised to send everyone this remembrance of our cooperative effort.

### **Poetic Interventions in the Clinical Treatment of Loneliness**

As a follow-up to the *Creative Bridges* workshop, I expanded my exploration to include poetic interventions for the clinical treatment of loneliness as a chronic mental health issue, described by Moustaskas (1961, pp. 30–31) as 'loneliness anxiety' and by Lake (1983, pp. 4, 29) as an 'illness' characterized by damaged self-esteem and self-defeating actions. When I have counselled clients whose longstanding cognitive and behavioral patterns have diminished their ability to sustain trusting and satisfying relationships, I have introduced the following five poems: Linda Pastan's 'Marks', Derek Walcott's 'Love After Love', Susan Coolidge's 'New Every Morning', Clarissa Scott Delany's 'The Mask', and Natasha Josefowitz's 'Not Halloween'. I also include in this list Paul Simon's lyrics to the famous song 'I Am a Rock'.

As its title suggests, Pastan's 'Marks' (1978/1982, p. 69) uses a grading metaphor, as its speaker recounts how her family members issue various grades for her activities as mother and wife. After releasing her exasperation over being constantly judged, she ends with a surprising and freeing line, 'Wait 'til I tell them I am dropping out'. While this poem normalizes the universal experience of being graded by others, it also functions as a vehicle to a cathartic and fruitful discussion for individuals

whose extreme sensitivity to others' criticisms makes them defensive, fearful, and perhaps overly judgmental in their relationships. During a discussion of 'Marks', it is also particularly useful to explore how one might drop out of 'graded' situations and how this newfound freedom can generate healthier ways to interact with others.

Walcott's 'Love After Love' (1976/1986, p. 328) extends an invitation to experience deep caring and even reverence for one's self, and I can still recall how it powerfully affected a client who had consistently discounted her own needs and had sought therapy to better understand her failure to sustain meaningful love relationships. The lines that evoked an immediate visceral response from this client and made her acutely aware of how much she had neglected herself were: 'You will love again the stranger who was your self./ . . . the stranger who has loved you/ all your life, whom you ignored/ for another'.

The speaker of Coolidge's 'New Every Morning' (2015, p. 145) gently invites herself to 'take heart' and begin anew, and what makes this seven-line poem relevant to individuals whose fears and past behaviors have kept them isolated is the encouragement to move forward 'in spite of old sorrows/And older sinning' and the 'troubles' that are so readily 'forecasted'. With its straightforward language, this poem acts as a catalyst for exploring entrenched negative messages that diminish self-esteem and create emotional barriers against connecting with others.

Delany's 'The Mask' (1926) tells the story of a person who hides 'the secret life within her soul' behind a 'cool and detached' demeanor and masks her 'tears and sighs' by appearing to 'look upon the world/ With cold ironic eyes'. This powerful poem is useful for beginning a therapeutic discussion of the way in which covering up our anguish in order to protect ourselves can keep others at a distance, thus leaving us feeling very much alone. People with a broad range of backgrounds are likely to identify with this poem if their unapproachable behavior is exacerbating their isolation. However, when this poem is read with the knowledge that its author is African American, the mask of the main character is likely to be viewed as a survival strategy necessitated by external dangers in settings where systemic racism abounds.

Akin to 'The Mask,' Josefowitz's 'Not Halloween' (1992, p. 71) also employs a mask image while adding a shell image to explore the ways in which we all hide and protect our 'hopes, fears, and hang-ups' as well as our 'prides and prejudices, irrationalities and cry buttons'. By

universalizing the experience of creating roadblocks that separate us from others, 'Not Halloween' encourages non-defensive responses and more honest elaboration upon chronic dysfunctional behaviors that perpetuate loneliness and unsatisfying relationships. This poem's final stanza also prompts discussion of what can be done to establish more meaningful connections with others: 'So I will take off my mask/ if you come out of your shell./ The question is / Who goes first?'

Simon's evocative song 'I Am a Rock' (1965) captures the life of a lonely person who has built up strong 'walls' and even 'a fortress' against being hurt by relationships and any form of human touch. Even though Simon's speaker seems to be convincing himself that he is now safe in his identity as 'a rock' and 'an island', the reader senses that beneath the surface of his self-imposed 'armor' is a silent yet palpable craving for the connection, 'laughter' and 'loving' that has been so systematically 'disdain[ed]'. This work provides an excellent springboard for exploration of the various ways in which protecting yourself from others and hiding from the world can result in a debilitating state of extreme isolation.

### **Poetry for Exploring Loneliness Resulting from Communication Breakdown**

As a poetry therapist addressing the prevailing lack of deeply meaningful and authentic communication with others that was identified in the Cigna study, I recommend introducing poems that present vivid examples of communication breakdown or suggest the possibility of carving out more time in our lives for savoring relationships that enhance our wellbeing. Since miscommunication and communication gaps can occur within the lives of individuals functioning at various levels of mental distress or wellbeing, these poems can be useful for practitioners who work with both clinical and nonclinical populations.

'People Time' (1994, p. 36) by Lowell Bolstad is an apt choice because it vividly conveys how overly busy schedules and controlling behaviors can keep us from cultivating and enjoying fulfilling experiences with others. From 'Clock time' that 'become[s] a taskmaster,' this poem's speaker moves on to 'People time' that 'now determines [his] cadence'. Given these new priorities, 'Conversations flow/with their/own rhythms' and life has gone from a 'march' to a 'dance'. This poem's contrasting images provide a gateway into fruitful discussion of what heartfelt, unhurried conversations look like when we take time to truly relish another person's

companionship rather than charging full speed ahead, consumed with daily tasks and projects.

Stephen Dunn's 'The Unsaid' (2004/2006, p. 185) presents a vignette centered on a wife and husband who crave basically the same assurance of being understood by their partner, yet never utter the words that provide what they both need. In this relationship, the unspoken crowds out the possibility of caring conversation, leaving both spouses in limbo. With its poignant negative role model of what could make a viable union, this poem is quite useful for couples who feel a disconnection within their marriage as they struggle to recognize what enhances rather than detracts from intimacy.

Like 'The Unsaid,' Patricia Quinn Franchi's 'Bridge' (1978, p. 88) conveys the pain of unsatisfying communication patterns within a relationship. In this poem, the speaker wants to 'show the reality of [her] true being' but expects her 'actions' to be judged with 'cold rigidity'. However, the speaker does conclude with the hope that somehow the couple's 'heart thoughts' will bridge the gap. There is fertile material here for a substantive discussion on the causes and effects of flawed communication patterns that result in feelings of isolation.

Natasha Josefowitz's poem 'One Moment' (1992, p. 121) is particularly useful for facilitating a discussion on the various levels of communication that a couple experiences as they go from being 'two strangers' to engaging in small talk and ultimately to sharing of confidences that 'touch/ the other's life'.

Lowell Bolstad's 'Authenticity' (1994, p. 35) provides a model of what genuine, mutually satisfying communication can look like between two people. Celebrating a 'soul friendship' in his life, this poem's speaker refers to a pattern of 'give and receive' and paints a picture of two individuals who listen to one another carefully and are truly heard. Not only do these friends feel safe to self-disclose, but they also can challenge one another and feel affirmed.

### **Loneliness, Healing Poetry, and the Pandemic**

When the COVID-19 pandemic descended upon us in early 2020, the topic of loneliness in relation to distress and wellbeing moved even further to the forefront of people's attention. At that time, I gathered a sizable set of poems with writing prompts designed to help people cope with their increasingly isolated lifestyle but also to affirm a new form of solitude that

allowed for previously unrealized possibilities. Imelda Maguire's poem, 'Lost and Found' (2004, p. 13) with its accompanying creative writing prompt has elicited many positive responses from the friends and colleagues that received my *Poetry as Healer in the Time of Pandemic* packet. Maguire's list of items lost and found provides a straightforward two-stanza framework for others to use in their own personal creations:

I lost . . .

And found . . .

This writing activity not only encourages us to express the disappointments and stark absences in our present lives, but also prompts us to recognize our own resourcefulness by declaring the discoveries and surprising gifts that have emerged during this challenging time.

Pat Schneider's 'The Patience of Ordinary Things' (2003/2005, p. 111) has also been like a welcoming companion to so many during times of restriction and lockdown. It invites us to deeply sense simple objects in our households such as cups that hold our tea, the soap and towels in our bathroom, the chairs we sit in, the floor we firmly feel beneath our feet, the staircases we climb, and the windows that let in the outer world. Its last line, 'And what is more generous than a window?' provides a particularly evocative question that inspires us to write our own 'window' poems of gratitude and devotional attention.

### **Poetic Expression and Life-Enhancing Solitude**

Creating the pandemic poetry packet and registering others' reactions to it have led me to reflect more broadly upon the power of poetry to enhance explorations of solitude as the edifying and rejuvenating human experience that Moustakas (1961) describes. An abundance of soothing, inspirational poems written throughout the centuries has invited readers to experience the harmony and transcendence of solitary communion with Nature. Striking poems that come to mind are William Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (1804/1992) along with Mary Oliver's 'Wild Geese' (1986/1992) and 'When I Am Among the Trees' (2006); Anne Wilson's 'Seeking Silence' (1999); and Wendell Berry's 'The Peace of Wild Things' (1968). In addition to providing mental pictures we can savor, these poems are effective for stimulating our own creative rendering of moments when and places where we were awakened, in our solitary state, to the wonder of nature's beauty and emerged with renewed energy to engage in the communities we need for our wellbeing.

## Conclusion

Poetry therapy has broad applications in the alleviation of loneliness. Sharing personal responses to poems and creating heartfelt written pieces in a supportive atmosphere can help a broad range of individuals address and experience relief from debilitating chronic or temporary loneliness. It can also stimulate readers to explore the distinction between painful isolation and enriching solitude. However, as helpers, we need to recognize that this creative arts modality is not for everyone. There are those who simply do not connect with figurative language of any kind or whose prejudices or fears regarding literary materials or writing are deeply entrenched. We need to be particularly attuned to poetic works that have the potential to trigger past traumatic experiences and choose the works we introduce with great care.

Given the pervasiveness of loneliness and the multitude of factors pertinent to loneliness, this is clearly a subject begging for further research studies of many types such as descriptive, ethnographic, empirical, and longitudinal. While there is an abundance of case study articles that attest to the benefit of poems and creative writing for individuals from varying age groups and backgrounds within diverse clinical, educational, and medical settings, we still need an assortment of viable measurements that assess the short-term and long-term effects of poetic interventions on individuals' emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, relational satisfaction, and sense of communal belonging.

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**Geri Giebel Chavis**

*As a leader in the poetry/bibliotherapy field, psychologist, certified poetry therapist, mentor-supervisor, and humanities professor at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, Geri Giebel Chavis has been fostering growth and healing through poetry, story, and creative writing since 1979. Dr. Chavis has served as president and long-term board member of the National Association for Poetry Therapy and has presented keynote addresses and a wide range of courses and workshops in the US, UK, and Republic of Ireland. Besides authoring numerous articles and reviews, Dr. Chavis is the author of Poetry and Story Therapy: The Healing Power of Creative Expression and co-edited, along with Lila Weisberger, The Healing Fountain: Poetry Therapy for Life's Journey, both of which are required readings for those training to be poetry therapists or applied poetry facilitators.*





# **Crossing the Distance: Can mapping dreams using reflective writing techniques facilitate the integration of the self?**

## **An Account of a Heuristic Inquiry**

*Rachel Godfrey, MSc*

Writing for Wellbeing Facilitator

### **Abstract**

This paper is an account of a self-heuristic enquiry into the experience of using artwork and reflective creative writing to map fragments of my dreams over a ten-week period in early 2020. During this time, I generated a series of dream maps and associated reflective creative writing, from which emerged themes of *orientation, perspective, journey, beasts, and body*. As a cross-art exercise in transforming ephemeral dream fragments into concrete maps, poems, dialogues, and other written forms, it was an extended journaling of personal metaphor that was both playful and deeply informative. I argue that the novel techniques I used in this project contributed to integration of my self and could similarly benefit others. My intention for this paper is to share personal discoveries I made through the work, and to offer practical guidance—in the form of a nine-step procedure—to other practitioners who would like to try this approach.

**Keywords:** dreams, map, metaphor, landscape, reflective creative writing

## Introduction

In 2020, I undertook a heuristic enquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Etherington, 2004; Kenny, 2012; Haertl, 2014; Sultan, 2019) into the experience of visual and verbal dream-mapping as the research dissertation component of an MSc in creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP).

For 10 weeks, I jotted recalled fragments of dreams into prepared templates of conceptual categories and sub-categories. At the end of each week during dedicated 3-hour sessions, I selected fragments to work with, and in combination with reflective writing techniques organised them into spatial arrangements from which I drew and painted maps. I then wrote further into these artworks.

I formed my research question in autumn 2019 and conducted my enquiry in the first six months of 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was fortunate that my physical health and that of my family and friends was not affected during this period, but the overall circumstances of the pandemic undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on my emotional and psychological wellbeing, and it is impossible to assess their influence on this study.

The scope of my dissertation limited examination of different cultural and historical views on the vast topics of dreams (beyond the rational), maps (with their associations of territories and land rights), and self (as essence or a social construct) brought together by my research question, and I was aware that I viewed them all through a Western white lens. It therefore felt particularly important to take a reflexive approach to the study (Etherington, 2004; Cousins, 2013; Sultan, 2019, p. 18), making myself present in it to reflect the view that 'research is always a work of interpretation and the researcher is always in the thick of the research process rather than distanced from it' (Cousins, 2013, p. 3).

### Who am I, the researcher?

I had come to CWTP not as a therapist but as a teacher, teacher trainer, and educational author in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Six years previously, I had discovered the benefits of CWTP after joining a safely held creative writing group. I enjoyed writing poetry and fiction, journalled regularly, and ran a small local community writing group.

I chose to do a piece of research that would be a creative experience for me, a dream-mapping project that would call my unconscious and conscious creativity into partnership. It would be part of a long therapeutic journey to explore and heal anxiety and feelings of detachment and dis-integration. A recurring pattern for me in relationships with others was to shift rapidly from a calm, relaxed, and happy state to one of extreme anxiety and insecurity. This happened both in groups of friends and in one-to-one relationships. I would feel panic—dry mouth, racing heart, a churning feeling in my gut—often accompanied by incomprehensible anger and a desire to be alone. This would be followed by feelings of shame, sometimes for not being assertive enough, other times for being too harsh and rigid. This led to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and low self-esteem, and I would often struggle with sleep.

I had had a recurring dream for years, in which I was lost in cities I had once known well. In my dreams, they had become fearful and overwhelming places, with no recognisable landmarks. I wondered how I might use creative writing to help me explore, map, and gain some control over these troubling dreamlands.

### **Integration of the Self**

Not having a background in psychotherapy, I came to this research with a basic understanding of *self* as a fluid entity made up ‘parts of self’ (Rowan, 1993). In the poem below, a rudimentary map of self inspired by Perry’s exquisitely ornate and humorous *Map of Days* (2013), I identify social, cultural, and professional aspects of myself (white woman, mother, ELT facilitator, etc.) in relation to less visible parts of self. These archetypal figures (Myss, 2002) (Explorer, Saboteur, Artist, etc.) are accompanied by an inaccessible fortified building (Walled castle).

I was aware that when I was emotionally activated, parts of self would scatter into painful isolation, creating feelings of dis-integration. Field’s assertion that therapeutic writing ‘encourage[s] better integration of the personae ... that all of us wear during daily life’ and helps us ‘embrace and celebrate our complex and multiple selves whilst still feeling authentic, integrated and real’ (2010, p. 158) chimed with me. I wanted to invite my Dreaming Self, depicted by Bolton as ‘wiser, [with] a breathtaking sense of humour and [lacking] the inhibition of our socialised daily selves’ (1999, p. 81), to have an active role in the therapeutic writing process.

| Apparent Parts of My Self | Less Apparent Parts of My Self | Unknown Parts of My Self |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| White woman               | Wild Woman                     |                          |
| Mother                    | Lonely Child                   |                          |
| British                   | Explorer                       |                          |
| Middle-aged               | Saboteur                       |                          |
| ELT author                | Warrior Princess               |                          |
| Middle-class              | Artist                         |                          |
| Educator                  | Anxious Friend                 |                          |
| CWTP facilitator          | Poet                           |                          |
|                           | Walled Castle                  |                          |
|                           | Curious Child                  |                          |
|                           | Dreaming Self                  |                          |

My conviction that Dreaming Self had something important to contribute was supported by Perls's view of dreams as the source of metaphors for alienated parts of self that need to be re-integrated (Biophily2, 2016; O'Mahoney, 1993). As a linguist, I am aware of the central role played by metaphor in everyday life: 'as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious' (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 239); as a poet I am grateful for how it helps me 'grasp the ungraspable' (Bolton, 2014, p. 105), serves as 'a container for feelings which are too overwhelming to be tolerated' (Cox & Theilgaard, 1997, p. 99), offers an 'oblique angle' on self (Hunt, 2000, p. 93), and is a means of access to deeply painful and problematic memories that are otherwise deeply hidden (Bolton et al., 2006, p. 15). It followed, then, that a cross-art form that combined artwork and reflective creative writing (RCW) would be a two-pronged approach to 'making manifest' and re-integrating alienated parts of myself that my Dreaming Self offered me as metaphors.

## **Dreams as Spaces and Places**

Neuroscience shows that dreaming allows the brain to process vast quantities of information, make creative associations, solve problems, generate new knowledge, and nurse our mental and emotional health by processing emotions in a safe, anxiety-free state (Walker, 2017). While appreciating this, I was also drawn to Jungian views of dreams as spaces—‘portals, entrances ... for the next step in consciousness’ (Estés, 2003, Track 1), ‘openings’ that provide ‘momentary glimpses of the dreamer’s total imaginative fabric’ (Rycroft in Alexander, 2014, p. 84), and also places—the ‘wild dreamland ... a fabled lost continent [which] rises out of our sleeping bodies ... to create a sheltering motherland ... the continent of our knowing ... the land of our Self’ (Estés, 1992, p. 458). Metzger argues that, along with ‘the private, particular, peculiar, the perspective of the feminine, ethnic, elderly, the child ... and the mysterious,’ dreams connect us to ‘wild territory of the self [,] a vast, unexplored, and prohibited geography’ (p. 42), from which we are separated by a culture that overvalues the ‘commercial and mainstream’. With appropriate methodology and ethical considerations in place, and a carefully devised approach to my explorations, I would find out what wild territories my dreamwork could open up for me.

## **Dream Elaborations, Verbal and Visual**

My project would fall into a long tradition of ‘dream elaboration’ (Ihanus in Bolton et al., 2010, p. 36), a re-telling of my dreams by my waking mind, which Hedges (2005, p. 10) believes can be as healing as the dreams themselves. The RCW would be a re-telling, the maps a re-showing, ‘symbolic representation[s] of selected characteristics of a place ... drawn on a flat surface’ (National Geographic, 2019), where the characteristics were symbols from my dreams. They would draw on conventions of grid maps, the authoritative and dominant voice in mapping for the last several hundred years, but be more akin to traditional ‘story maps’ or ‘felt maps’ which represent places

as perceived by [individuals] or [cultures] moving through [them] ... are self-made [and] sensuous .... register the past, and acknowledge the way memory and landscape layer and interweave [,] are alert to a landscape’s changeability as well as its fixtures [and that] tell of the inches and tints of things. (Macfarlane, 2018, pp. 96–97)

Dream-mapping is not without precedent. Susan Hiller's 1974 dream-mapping experiment involved seven people sleeping in a meadow overnight, then mapping their dream experiences the next morning and collating them into a composite dream map (Hiller, 2012, pp. 52–59). Bulkeley's Dream Mapping Project (2019) used dream journalling and mapping amongst immigrants to explore themes of identity, borders, language, and nationality. Hiller describes dream maps as 'cognitive frameworks that help us to organise and interpret dream experiences' (2012, p. 33). She sees these 'two-dimensional attempts to convey three or more dimensions simultaneously,' which often resemble diagrams or architectural plans rather than maps and often disregard context and scale, as complex and as having a universal provenance. She refers to dream maps created by shamans and yogis, for example, and Australian Aboriginal painted maps of their dreamtime (Hiller, 2012, pp. 33–35)—felt maps that show perceptions of different states of consciousness or experiences outside the normal concept of time.

For my investigation into the ephemeral and personal, I needed a research methodology both robust and fluid. Heuristic methodology offered this, with its partnership of form and flexibility geared at conducting research 'on behalf of [a] phenomenon' (Dahlberg et al. in Sultan, 2019, p. 80).

### Heuristic Enquiry

Heuristic enquiry values 'images, hunches, dreams, ideas that come between sleeping and waking, synchronicity, out-of-body and other exceptional experiences,' so the methodology aligned with my research question (Braud & Andersen in Etherington, 2004, p. 111). Its mutually supporting phases and processes (Moustakas, 1990) offered:

- a systematic framework (the phases) that could systematically contain a fluid and creative investigation into dreams, and
- a toolkit of discovery-oriented, experiential, imaginative, serendipitous, intuitive, creative, nonlinear, flexible, and potentially transformative techniques (the processes) (Sultan, 2019) that would balance the more precise and analytical aspects of my research.

As a *self*-heuristic enquiry, my study would lack the 'deeply collaborative spirit' and multidimensionality identified by Sultan (2019, p. 237) as core qualities of the methodology. I hoped, though, that it would

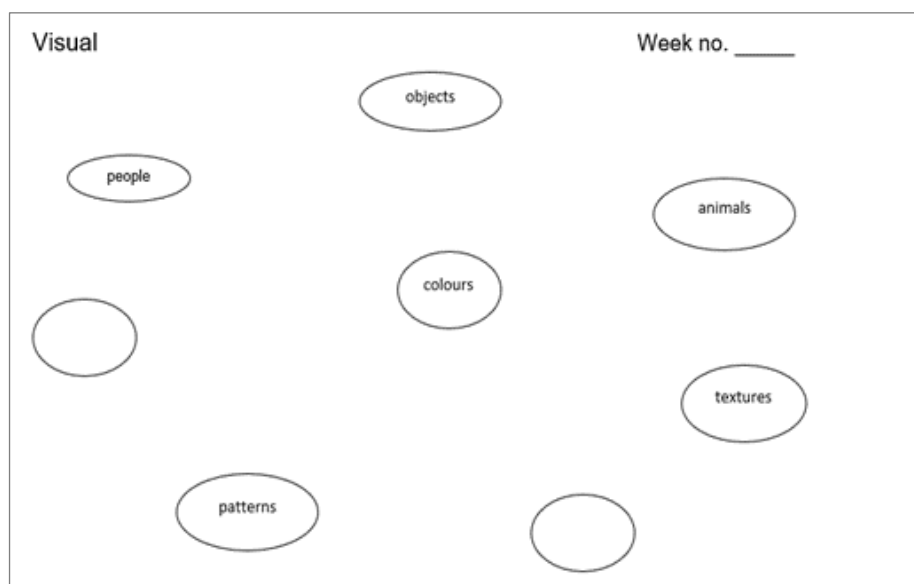
not 'lean toward the arrogant' (27), but instead be an exploration of the essential meaning of a living experience which might resonate with others. Heuristic enquiry has been criticised for lacking attention to culture, gender, and history (Etherington, 2004), so, again, it felt important to take a reflexive approach to the project (Etherington, 2004; Cousins, 2013).

### The Dreamscape Templates

There is a long history of dream journalling, which usually involves writing narrative accounts of dreams (Rosiere in Hiller, 2012; Metzger, 1992; Brown, 2004; Alexander, 2014; Bolton, 2013; Pirjo, 2017). My dream journalling objective was not to capture whole individual dream narratives but to gather images and motifs—including 'narrative motifs' such as falling, flying, and being chased (Jung, 1974/2002)—from multiple dreams over multiple nights. To do this, I devised a series of dreamscape templates. These were A4 printed sheets, each with a topic heading, such as Spatial or Feelings, and a space for the week number. Some were tables (seven or eight rows and two to six columns), and others mind maps (eight to ten lozenges). All had conceptual or thematic subcategories marked in the table headings or lozenges, e. g., sky/space, bodies of water, forests, tunnels, caves, joy, disgust, anxiety, with space for me to annotate. Sometimes I left some sub-categories blank so I could add new ones as the week went on. Figure 1 below gives two examples:

**Figure 1**

Sample dreamscape templates.



**Animals**

Week no. \_\_\_\_\_

| Type | Archetype / archetypal associations? | Objects or people associated with them in the dream? | Feelings associated with them in the dream? |
|------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |
|      |                                      |                                                      |                                             |

I kept several different templates near my bed each week, with a pen, so that I could fill them in soon after waking. At the beginning of each week, I had made a new selection, reusing some, adapting others.

### **The Weekly Mapping and Writing Sessions**

Each three-hour Friday morning mapping session followed broadly the same plan:

1. An opening round of reflective journal writing (5 min).
2. A short focusing (Gendlin, 1978/2003; Sultan, 2019, p. 93) session followed by further reflective writing (20 min).
3. Copying the dream fragments from that week's templates onto slips of paper and organising some or all of them into an arrangement that felt pleasing (10 min).
4. Creating a dream map (drawing, painting, and/or collage) (75 min).
5. Coffee break and tidying up (10 min).
6. Reflective creative writing in response to the dream map (free-writing, poetry, dialogic writing, narrative, instructions for guided walks through the maps) (25 min).
7. A feedback statement (Thompson, 2011, pp. 34–39) on my RCW (e.g., When I read my RCW, I notice/feel/realise...) (5 min).
8. A closing round of reflective journal writing (10 min).

To create my elaborations, I reviewed the week's completed dreamscape sheets and sifted them for dream fragments to map. I used these fragments to create dream elaborations in the form of visual artworks (Maps 1–10) and RCW. For the maps, I took inspiration from the literary maps in *The Writer's Map* (Lewis-Jones, 2018), *Talking Maps*—an exhibition of maps ('grid' and 'felt') I visited at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford in February 2020, and Metzger (1992) and Alexander's (2014) suggestions of dream collages. For the RCW, I had a predetermined pool of ideas from which I selected one or more each week. Some were my own, others were inspired by other CWTP practitioners' work, for example:

- Writing poetic-imaginary prose (Ihanus in Bolton et al., 2010)
- Writing about items from dreams as metaphors for anything that feels personally significant or therapeutic (Hunt, 2000; Bolton 2013)
- Developing dream narratives (Bolton, 1999)
- Distilling dreams into poems (Alexander, 2014)
- Writing and developing stories about characters from dreams (Metzger, 1992)
- Dialoguing with objects from dreams (Stoner in Bolton et al., 2010; Bolton, 2013) and symbols from dreams (Alexander, 2014)

## **Ethics**

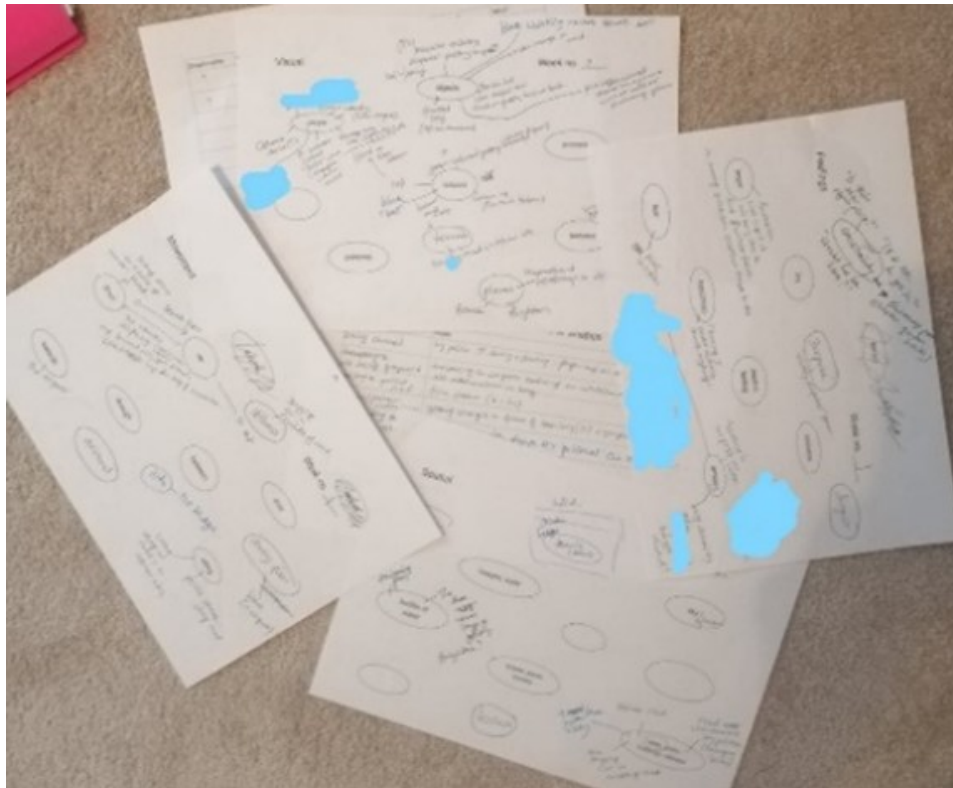
My two main ethical concerns centred around privacy and self-care. I allowed myself to map and write freely about anything and anyone as part of my dream elaborations, but I was careful not to share any information that might reveal the identity of anyone referenced in my work (ACA, 2014, p. 6), and to protect 'vulnerability to the self' (Tolich, 2010). Knowing that heuristic enquiry is 'an extremely demanding process' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 36), and suspecting that paying prolonged intense attention to messages from my unconscious mind might be destabilising, I ensured I had good self-care measures in place. I also took steps to treat myself well as the sole participant of my enquiry. I created a set of self-care guidelines for the mapping sessions and the whole research project. I always had a clear plan for each mapping session, which I adhered to with some flexibility, making sure I had a coffee break, allowing time for tidying up, and finishing the sessions on time. Finally, I informed my therapist and supervisor about the project, and they both offered their support.

## Findings

As a solo endeavour, which drew on internally generated imagery and motifs for art and creative writing, the dream-mapping work was an extended and expanded cross-art form of journalling. Completing the dreamscape templates each morning over each of the 10 weeks was a quick and easy way to capture significant images, motifs, and feelings (Figure 2). Even if I did not recall any fragments on some nights, I always had enough to work with at the mapping sessions.

**Figure 2**

Completed dreamscape templates from Week 4.



During the 10-week period, I dreamt, mapped, and wrote of bodies of water and land (seas, rivers, waterfalls, tundra, desert, islands, sandbanks, skerries, cliffs, sand, parkland, a crater), cities, buildings (house, library, castle, cinema, pancake house, jetty, ancient buildings, church, churchlike building, hut, glass-walled house, tunnel), vegetation (forest, grass, flowers) as well as people (Pan, Iris, dancer, warrior, teacher, peacemaker, sage, wise woman), animals (wading birds, otters, cat, dragon, peacocks, snake, bear) and objects (model boat, map by my bed, kitchen table, game).

For the maps, I used a variety of media and supports, including collage, ink, acrylic paint, pen, plain paper, graph paper and primed card, and became deeply absorbed in their creation. Some examples follow (Figures 3–6):

**Figure 3**

Map 3: Map of a fairy tale.



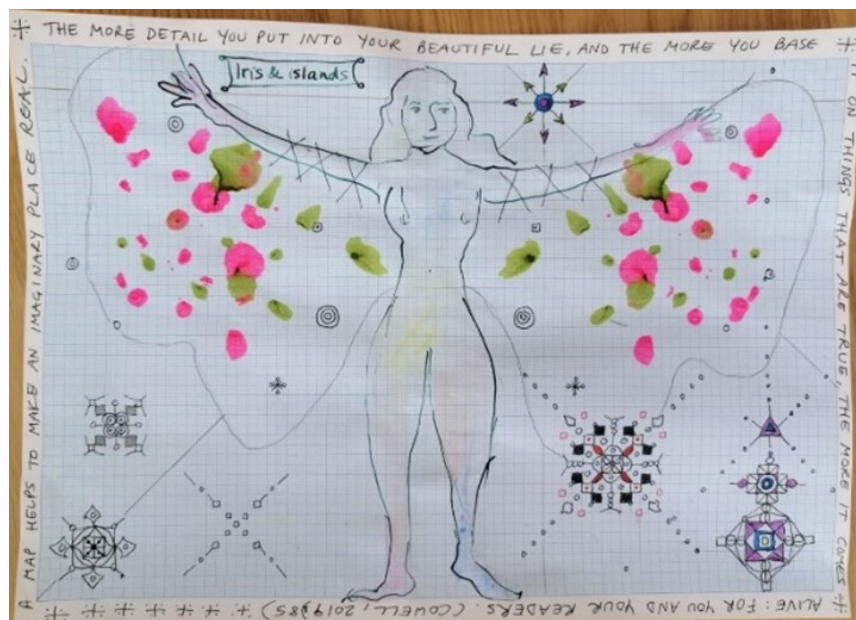
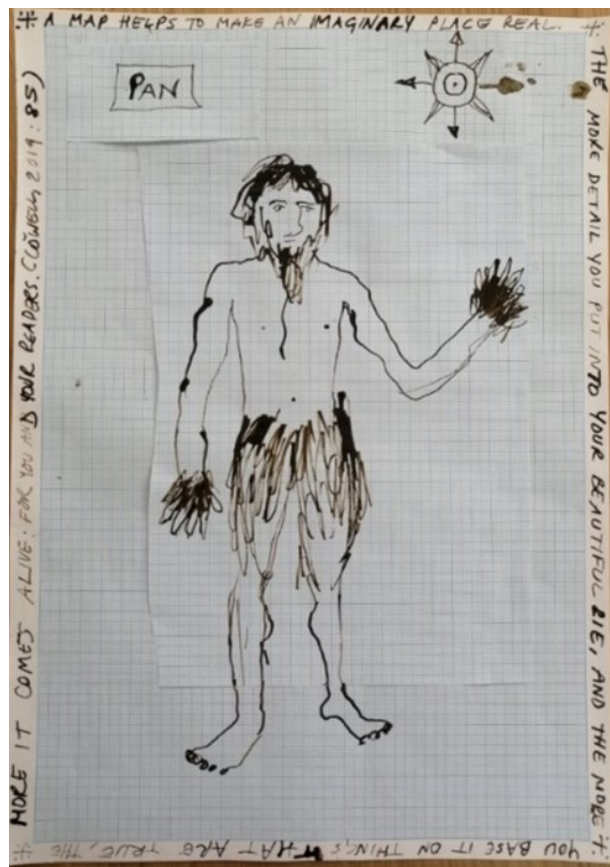
**Figure 4**

Map 5: Map of Adventures for Girls.



**Figure 5**

Maps 6a and 6b: Pan, Iris and islands.



**Figure 6**

Map 7: Circles.



The RCW each week was as follows:

1. Free-writing about journeys I would like to make around the map; a poem from the free-write.
2. A dialogue between me and the map.
3. A fairy tale.
4. Nine dream fragments speak to me; I reply to each with one line.

5. Poem about locations on the map using key words from the map's border.
6. Free-writing about journeys I would like to make around the map; two poems from the free-write.
7. Four guided walks around the map.
8. A narrative of a journey through the map.
9. Free-writing about what map: a pantoum from the free-write.
10. Letters between me and the map.

The most powerful pieces of RCW were those in which the writing interacted directly with the map instead of being about it. These activities involved dialoguing with the map, letting features on the map speak, or roving over and into the map so deeply that the journeys took in features like the compass rose, rhumb lines, and border as well as the land and water. The work led to profound discoveries about my inner selves, especially Playful Child, Wounded and Fearful Child, and a new Maternal Archetype.

Below, I focus on

- Five themes that emerged from the data and their personal significance.
- How dream-mapping contributed to integration of my self.
- Other discoveries I made.
- The potential applications of this journalling process.
- Practical guidance on dream-mapping.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

I made my last map on the Friday before the UK went into its first COVID-19 lockdown, at which point I entered a three-month period of heuristic 'incubation' (Moustakas, 1990). During that time, I was preoccupied with my physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing and that of my family (my children were now homeschooling, while my husband and I both continued to work from home), as well as the broader social implications of the pandemic.

Emerging from incubation and lockdown, it then took me from May until November to process the experience of my investigation, analyse and gain insights from my data, and reflect on my discoveries. I used the heuristic phases and processes to connect with, reflect on, organise, and

gain insight into my findings. I wrote poems, doodled, journaled, and self-dialogued about them to clarify my holistic, macro, intuitive, and embodied responses to them, while on a micro level, I conducted a rigorous and systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Sultan, 2019) of the RCW. I coded 678 nouns, motifs, and concepts, organised them into thematic groups, and created Table 1 below to their source within the data.

**Table 1. Five Themes**

| Theme          | Where the Five Themes Appear |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |
|----------------|------------------------------|---|------------|---|--------|---|---|---|---|----|
|                | = Map only                   |   | = RCW only |   | = Both |   |   |   |   |    |
|                | 1                            | 2 | 3          | 4 | 5      | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| i Perspective  |                              |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |
| ii Orientation |                              |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |
| iii Journeys   |                              |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |
| iv Beasts      |                              |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |
| v Body         |                              |   |            |   |        |   |   |   |   |    |

Liberating dream fragments from their original dream contexts and organising them into new juxtapositions gave me a fresh perspective on some of my life stories. Mapping involved ‘zooming out’ and seeing personal motifs presented as bodies of land and water. Unexpected connections were revealed in these fresh spatial arrangements, generating feelings of joy and hope in my writing: ‘Here is the bird’s eye view ..., swooping, exciting’ (RCW 1).

*Orientation* came from references to mapping conventions in my artwork and RCW, which served as prompts for exploration into security and insecurity in relationships. Compass roses represented guiding figures. Some are confusing: ‘I am in the middle. / Caught between two compasses.’ (RCW2), while others ‘show true north’ (RCW6). The decorative borders were boundaries that contained my creative work and formed part of my written explorations. In mapping session (MS)5, I took words from the Macfarlane quote about maps in the map’s border (knowledge, supposition, astonishment, love, memory, fear) as prompts for RCW5. In MS7, I wrote instructions for four Guided Walks around Map 7, some of which took the reader/walker into the border. In RCW10, the triple borders of Map 10 had a different role, offering security: ‘I ... love your multiple borders, Map 10. They swaddle me, and make me feel safe.’ (RCW10)

*Journeys* was a prominent theme in the data. They were imagined, offered, thwarted, regretted, and encouraged: 'I will journey up/... and over that water, through wild virgin forest/... and cross the snowy tundra/ towards the city of colour' (RCW1); 'I would sail around him' (RCW6); 'the thicket [trapped] her back in the grounds of the Castle' (RCW 3); 'Walk 2 The Corners: Start at the reeded glass' (RCW 6); 'The barbed wire stopped us' (RCW8); 'I am the sunken city. ... There is more than one way to my centre. You can choose the path you take.' (RCW4); 'Why do not you take the tide and the wind and ... make a journey through your map?' (RCW10)

In MS2, I engaged in a dialogue with the map, complaining about the unfinished journeys from my dreams I had marked on her. It was at this point that Map formed as a maternal archetype. She surprised me by responding, 'Where would you like to go?' When I replied she gave this invitation: 'You can draw Journeys 1–6 on me if you want.' As a result, I took a blue pencil and added lines to show 'Journeys I'd like to make' on her. I felt that Mother Map gave me 'security and freedom' which allowed me to take 'baby steps' and make 'little journeys.' (RJ, 17.01.20).

In MS5, about half-way through the 10 weeks, I marked several routes on the map, but wrote of no journeys through it. Labelled 'A Map of Adventures for Girls,' this was a map of stuckness. It was during this session, along with the two before and after it, that I met Beasts, my fourth theme.

*Beasts* (Alexander, 2014, pp. 66–81) were painful themes that emerged in the middle five weeks of the dream mapping. They appeared in my writing as entrapment, injury, not being seen, a fearful preoccupation with death, deception, and betrayal; a fear of inability to protect myself; and fear and uncertainty in relation to the male body: 'the thicket snaked around her and smashed down in front of her' (RCW3); 'I fear not being able to get away' (RCW5); 'And she ran back to the Castle, terrified and with her forearms and face all slashed and bleeding' (RCW3); 'I fear invasion' (RCW5); "'Mama! Mama! ... I need you to wake up .... I need your attention. I need you to look at me. Mama! Mama! Wake up!'" (RCW4); 'the hanged man' (RCW 4 and 7); 'the burial pit'; 'the obituary' (RCW4); 'the corpses in the garage' (RCW5); 'the orphan' (RCW7); 'I do feel betrayed' (RCW5); 'two beautiful lies' (RCW6); 'I fear being passive' (RCW5); 'I fear those icy hands' (RCW5); 'I am nervous of his darker places. ... I do not know what his strength is.' (RCW6).

*Body* was an unexpected theme which emerged in the middle five weeks and penultimate dream-mapping session. In RCW3, a fairy tale, the narrative arc of the story is reflected in references to the princess's body: Beginning: 'She gazed and sighed ... and very occasionally tapped her foot a little impatiently'; Middle: 'her forearms and face all slashed and bleeding': End: 'And so we will finish this story, on the beach, sitting around the fire with her friends, the flames warming her face, a blanket around her shoulders, the sand beneath her and the stars twinkling above her head.'

In RCW4, 5, and 6, many of the body references relate to Beasts: 'these bags are sealed, so you cannot put your fingers inside us' (RCW4), 'icy hands' (RCW5), 'hairy hands' (RCW6). By RCW9, however, the body references were much more positive, relating to my experience of parenthood: 'Blue and yellow play on my skin. / Hand of a mother, hand of a daughter, ... Colours that make green for the heart.' Finally, in RCW10, I write to Map 10 as a spiritual body, recognising her chakra colours: 'I see spiritual energy – in the lilac border – and base energy in the red. Empowerment in the yellow.'

### **How Dream-Mapping Contributed to Integration of My Self**

I had set out to see if mapping dreams using reflective writing techniques could facilitate integration of the self and found that it could, in the following ways:

- A closer relationship developed between my Dreaming and Waking Selves. Dreaming Self felt heard and seen by Waking Self; Waking Self acknowledged and appreciated the metaphors offered up by Dreaming Self.
- Artist and Writer Selves worked collaboratively and productively, where I had previously held them quite separately.
- Parent/CWTP Facilitator Self offered an exciting and carefully devised programme of work and a wide selection of materials to work with, and firm but flexible boundaries, to which Cartographer, Artist, Poet, and Explorer responded with enthusiasm and appreciation.
- I found a Mother in Map who was robust and responsive in her interactions with me, held Wounded Child safely, and gave Curious Child the confidence and freedom to roam.
- Explorer, Author, and Poet travelled together, forging new connections between sites on the map and parts of myself.

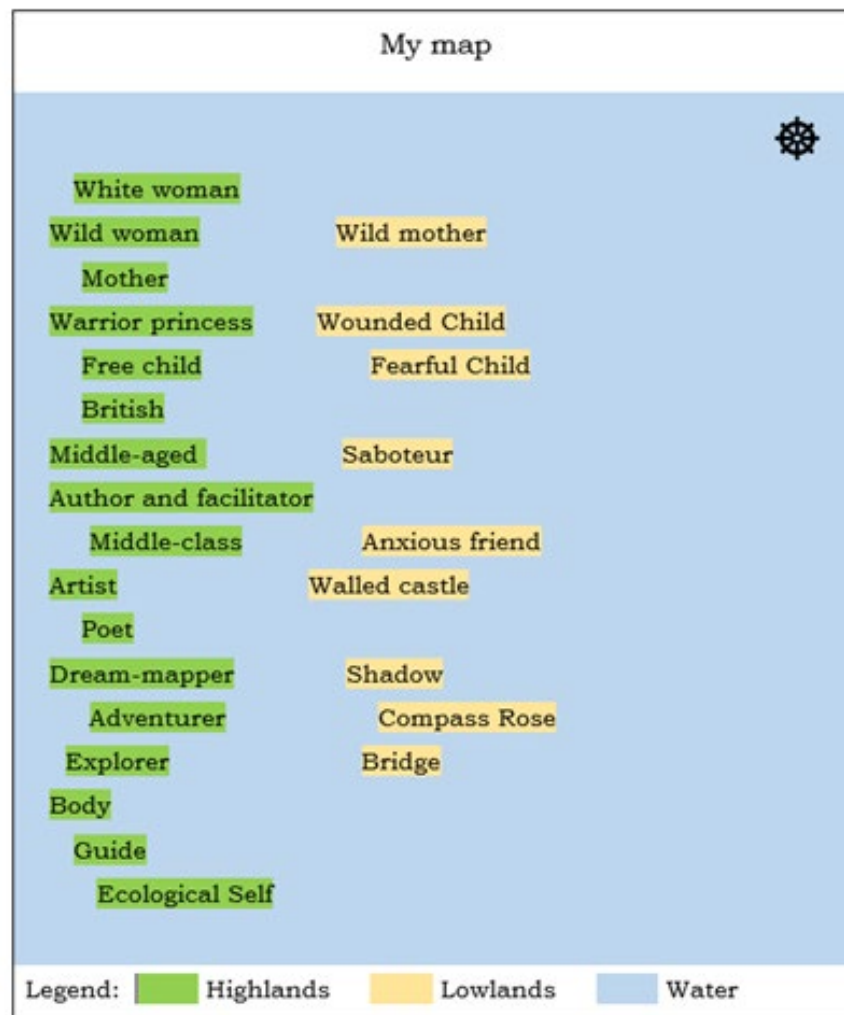
- Encountering 'Beasts' was uncomfortable, but not overwhelming, and contributed to integrating my previously alienated Wounded Child.
- Overall, although the work was internally focused, mapping dream images and parts of self as bodies of land and water strengthened my sense of my self as a physical body in a physical landscape. This facilitated the next stage of my therapeutic journey, working with a body therapist, work that has helped me develop better form and flexibility in my relationships with others.
- By the end of the project, I was able to update my earlier map of self. Parts of self are now landforms linked by water (Figure 7).

I conclude that the above outcomes stem from more than one factor. Firstly, each map was a composite map—a single contained unit made up of multiple images from multiple dreams from multiple nights. If dreams themselves have a dialogic, cooperative, and reorganising function (Metzger, 1992), and if maps of single dreams 'help us to organise and interpret dream experiences' (Hiller, 2012, p. 33), then it follows that maps of multiple dreams, or composite dream maps, have the potential to help us organise and understand dream experiences on a bigger scale, offering new perspectives and insights. In turn, consciously combining dream-mapping with RCW activities that encourage interaction with the maps can support and enhance the dialogic and cooperative nature of dreaming.

Secondly, the project benefited from being spread over a number of weeks, as this allowed time to gather an abundance of dream fragments. Similarly, the weekly 3-hour sessions felt unrushed. Although the whole dream-mapping process was demanding, it was an act of self-kindness; after MS1, I journalled of the experience as 'a three-hour creativity allowance [that was] precious & wonderful. I do not want this time to get taken away from me. This creative space & freedom ... is a gift!' Working with the 'colour, movement, magic ... possibilities ... layers of meaning, stories and secrets' of dreams (Alexander, 2014, p. 291) and '[playing] spontaneously with ideas, colors, shapes, relationships, [juggling] elements into impossible juxtapositions, [and expressing] the ridiculous' (Rogers, 1961/67, p. 355) was pleasurable, and I became immersed in the richness and fulfilment of creative living (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 93).

**Figure 7**

My map.



The containing elements of the work were also vital to its positive outcomes, enabling me to embark on explorations in freshly shaped and mapped inner landscapes without fear of getting lost, overwhelmed, or destabilised. Containing elements were as follows:

- Adhering broadly to the planned schedule in each mapping session,
- Repeating more or less the same format each week, and
- Regularly referring to my self-care guidelines.

The physical maps themselves offered a different kind of containment, as the edge of each one was a boundary that held the dream fragments I had selected to map that week. Containment allowed me to 'pay serious

attention to [my] inner [world] of dream ... and find significance in thoughts and images that would previously have been dismissed as absurd or illogical' (Storr in Hedges, 2005, p. 10). It was an intense and demanding process and required commitment and an openness to whatever my dreams presented, plus a degree of courage. Crucially, the work was supported by my ongoing one-to-one therapy. It also enhanced it.

Finally, the entire project was underpinned by a willingness to play extensively with metaphor, which increased as time went on. Items on the maps, and sometimes the maps themselves, represented other things, becoming 'containers for feelings ... too overwhelming to be tolerated' (Cox & Theilgaard, 1997, p. 99). Imagining journeys around the maps and their dream-sourced sites allowed me to layer metaphor upon metaphor, freeing me from 'sense [and] reason, to deliberately deconstruct the world of grammar and thoughtful orderliness, ... to destroy the world as we know it and allow something new to emerge' (Metzger, 1992, p. 25). This was a loosening process which allowed me to access some deeply hidden painful and problematic memories (Bolton et al., 2006, p. 15) and also find joy and delight.

### **Other Discoveries**

I was pleased to discover that I shared Ihanus (Bolton et al., 2010) and Alexander's (2014) experience of a symbiotic relationship between dreams and creativity. The content of my dreams evolved and became richer, which in turn fed my waking creativity.

I cannot claim that the work cured my insomnia, but my sleeping patterns improved when doing the dream-mapping and have largely stayed improved. It seems that bringing recalled dream images to mind when wakeful in the night can help me back to sleep.

The work increased my confidence as a CWTP facilitator, specifically my ability to devise and sequence effective materials and tasks, and to take care of myself as a participant with firm but flexible stages and timings. I learnt that there is value to be had in repeating techniques and processes in CWTP, as I used the same basic format for 10 weeks with highly varied outcomes. However, I did begin to tire of the dream-mapping process in the final two sessions, suggesting that 8 weeks would be enough.

Finally, I experienced 'wonder' (Wertz in Sultan, 2019, p. 5) as I got to know part of the vast inner territory of my wild dreamland (Estés, 1992, p. 458) and its 'prohibited geography' (Metzger, 1992, p. 42). I marvelled at

the healing power of sleep and dreams (Walker, 2017), at the wise, funny, creative, and uninhibited offerings of my Dreaming Self (Bolton, 1999, p. 81), and at the simple fact of my waking and sleeping body living in dynamic relationship with other people and the actual and beautiful world of land and water.

## **Evaluating the Project**

Taking Lincoln and Guba's evaluation criteria for 'rigour and trustworthiness' in qualitative research (Sultan, 2014, p. 180), I consider the four points below.

### **Credibility**

I have adequately described my research design, and I had a prolonged engagement with the study process and content. I have used a clear professional structure and voice to promote transparency about my inquiry and employed thick description and reflexivity.

### **Dependability**

My choice of heuristic enquiry as a methodology was informed by the nature of my study (Sultan, 2019, p. 181), and my data collection process and findings harmonized with it, being qualitative, phenomenologically aligned, autobiographical, exploratory, serendipitous, discovery-oriented, process- and content-focused, intuitive, introspective, reflexive, experiential, embodied, holistic, existential, humanistic, authentic, participatory, imaginative, creative, non-linear, fluid, flexible, and with a focus on living rather than lived experience (Sultan, 2019).

### **Confirmability**

I have been open about my role as primary researcher and have included reflexive excerpts from my research journal as evidence of how I made links between findings and the assertions I make about them.

I am aware that my investigation has remained very self-focussed, and I can identify the following biases:

- Pre-existing interest and belief in the value of things that are 'not commercial and mainstream ... the private, particular, peculiar, the perspective of the feminine, ethnic, elderly, the child, the dream world, ... and the mysterious' (Metzger, 1992, p. 42) to the

research, which may have predisposed me to find value in the work.

- Pre-existing awareness of some of my inner selves and their inter-relationships through previous and ongoing therapeutic work.
- An enthusiasm about heuristic methodology, which meant that I brought a heuristic mindset and techniques to the data collection phase itself (for example, by using focusing and self-dialoguing in my opening rounds), which may have enhanced the benefit I gained from the work.
- My privilege in being able to afford private one-to-one therapy before, during, and after the data collection phase, and having access to space, time, and good-quality art materials for the mapping work.

Other factors whose influence on the work I cannot judge objectively are

- How much my concerns about COVID-19 during the research period (January – March 2020) may have increased my preoccupation with physical health and the body when dream-mapping, and
- How the shock, sadness, anger, disorientation, and emotional flashbacks I experienced during March to May 2020—when the UK was in its first COVID-19 lockdown and I was in my main heuristic phase—may have affected how I perceived my data when I returned to it.

## **Transferability**

I am wary of attempts to generalize my findings to the point of suggesting that they represent a single truth that would apply for all others, but in the next section I suggest how dream-mapping could be used by others in the field (Guba in Sultan, 2014), along with suggestions for further research.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Others could benefit from creating composite dream maps and combining them with RCW techniques as an extended and expanded form of journalling, as the work has the potential to:

- Allow people to find personal meaning in and new insights from their dreams.
- Help people bring their inner selves into closer relationship.

- Enhance a longer therapeutic journey or deepen other therapeutic work.
- Fuel a condition of ‘wonder’ and ‘wondering’ at such an everyday (every night) phenomenon as dreaming.

In broader terms, it could also:

- Help people mine the deep reserves of their intuitive creativity (visual and verbal). As an extended wellbeing-focused creative project that can be done independently at home, the work has the potential to benefit people experiencing isolation and loneliness, whether due to COVID-19 or other reasons (Artswork, 2020; Evans, 2020; McMahon, 2020; Orr, 2020; Thompson, 2020).
- Encourage people to re-evaluate their relationship to sleep and thus improve health and wellbeing. Insomnia affects around one in six people in the UK. According to a study by Southampton University, during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown (March–June 2020) this figure rose from one in four, with mothers, key workers, and people from minority ethnic backgrounds the worst affected (Campbell, 2020). Having enough sleep is essential for mental and physical wellbeing (Mental Health Foundation, 2011), and dreams play a vital role in this (Walker, 2017).

### ***How can others use dream-mapping? Nine Steps***

The work could be used by anyone who

- Has an interest in dreamwork;
- Is interested in exploring a different way of journalling, whether they have worked with their dreams before or not;
- Wants to explore their inner selves; and/or
- Has an interest in connecting to a more spontaneous, playful, and intuitive part of self.

The visual techniques and materials I used can be simplified, and there is flexibility in how the work is approached and what timings are used, but I suggest this overall format:

1. Do an opening round of reflective journal writing:  
How am I feeling today? How am I feeling about dream-mapping today? Is there anything I want to leave in my journal before I begin?

2. Copy the dream fragments from that week's templates onto slips of paper and organise some or all of them into an arrangement that feels pleasing.
3. Close your eyes and take a few steady breaths. Tune in to any embodied feelings you have in response to the dream fragments before you. Write about what you notice. (You may like to formalise this as focusing activity (Gendlin, 1978/2003; Sultan, 2019, p. 93).)
4. Make any final changes to the arrangement of your dream map fragments.
5. Create a dream map on a support such as paper or card. This could be a simple drawing, or a more colourful piece of artwork. Possible techniques:
  - Drawing with pencil, biro, or pen and ink on plain or graph paper
  - Painting
  - Collage
  - Mixed mediaConsider including a compass rose, borders, a legend/key, rhumb lines, and a title.
6. Have a break and tidy up.
7. Set yourself time (e. g., between about 5 and 25 minutes) to do reflective creative writing in response to the dream map. Possible activities:
  - Free-write into the map
  - Write a poem about the map
  - Write a dialogue between yourself and the map
  - Allow locations, paths, or other features on your map to speak to you
  - Plan a journey (or journeys) around or across your map and write about it—as a narrative, a plan, or as instructions for a guided walk
  - Plan a journey that also takes in features of your map such as the compass rose, the borders, the title, and write about it.

8. A feedback statement (Thompson, 2011, pp. 34–39) on the RCW:  
When I read the RCW I did today, I notice/feel/realise...
9. A closing round of reflective journal writing:  
How am I feeling at the end of this session? What categories do I want on the next set of dreamscape templates? What do I need for myself right now, as I move away from this dreamwork?

As a caveat, the work has the potential to ‘go deep’; I strongly recommend preparing tailored self-care guidelines for yourself or your participants, to be referred to regularly. Additional therapeutic support might also be valuable for some people during dream-mapping; for those working in a group, this could be discussed with the facilitator. Given that the work did not noticeably ease mine, I would suggest that this work should be approached with caution by anyone suffering from anxiety. Finally, the dialogic RCW activities are not recommended for use by people who experience psychotic episodes.

## Summary and Conclusion

An interest in metaphors, visual art, the unconscious, and maps and an ongoing quest for self-integration led me to undertake this heuristic enquiry, which brought together my unconscious and conscious creativity and led to insights about some of my past and present experiences and relationships. It was an expanded and extended form of journalling, from which emerged themes of personal significance that allowed me to connect and engage productively with parts of self that had felt out of reach to me. By repeating the same approach to dream-mapping over a period of 10 weeks, making small adjustments to the stages and varying the visual and verbal actual activities I used each week, I was able to formulate a nine-step procedure that is transferable for others to use.

My 10 weeks of dream-mapping (see Figure 8) came to an end just as COVID-19 was escalating in the UK. At the end of 2020, the Mental Health Foundation reported a significant increase in the number of British adults experiencing loneliness. Given the growing awareness of the benefits of creative activity for social and emotional wellbeing, any research into activities that people can do independently and at home is extremely valuable, both during this global health crisis and beyond it.

Further research could be done into how dream-mapping might

- help improve people's sleep,
- support women during menopause,
- be used in groups—face-to-face and online,
- be used by people who do not dream visually,
- be used in conjunction with body psychotherapy,
- contribute to a wider use of reflective writing for mapping the self,
- be used in exploration of the intersection of culture, geography and psyche,
- be a gateway technique for writers wanting to glean personal metaphors from their unconscious.

As a final point, I acknowledge my good fortune in having had the time, materials, training, and access to private personal therapy to be able to undertake this creative experiment. I hope that the nine-step resource I have developed from it will be used to positive effect by others interested in mining the deep reserves of intuitive creativity held in the body to chart the landscapes of their own wild dreamlands.

**Figure 8**

Creative  
synthesis:  
Map of a heuristic  
adventure,  
Somerset, UK,  
2020.



Together,  
Waking Self and Curious Child  
print out nets and leave them by my bed.  
Dreaming Self, encouraged, fills them,  
night after night, with bounty.  
We heave the nets to the kitchen,  
spill the haul onto the table, and there  
create territories from the slippery catch, which,  
together, Cartographer and Artist map.  
In these landscapes, we find Compass Rose.  
Map becomes Mother Map.  
Explorer, Guide, and Writer  
plot routes and other stories through her,  
while her boundaries  
contain, inspire, and protect.  
Warrior Princess finds the courage to relax her guard  
and gives audience to the Beasts.  
Their hairy forms shift, revealing  
a narrow entrance to the Walled Castle.  
Poet enters, discovers a labyrinth,  
and follows her feet in meditation.  
This is the end, middle, and beginning of a heuristic adventure:  
In and out of the castle,  
I keep moving,  
paths twisting and turning  
through shadow and light.  
Mosaic, flint, and turf underfoot,  
mist and seashells in my hair,  
I find my content, edges, flexibility, and form  
alone, and with others.

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**Rachel Godfrey** is a *Writing for Wellbeing Facilitator*, working with groups face-to-face and online. She holds a BA in English Literature (Exeter), a Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults (UCLES), and an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (Metanoia/Middlesex University). Rachel has worked in TESOL since 1991 and has written

several books and other teaching materials for OUP, CUP, and Ladybird/Penguin. She writes poetry and short stories for pleasure, and she is particularly interested in how fiction and metaphor enable us to express the otherwise inexpressible. Rachel lives in Somerset with her husband and twin daughters. Details at [www.rachelgodfreywriting.com](http://www.rachelgodfreywriting.com).

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## Creating Space to Write and Grow Spiritually: A Qualitative Inquiry

*Janet Kuhnke*

Assistant Professor of Nursing, Cape Breton University

### Abstract

This paper explores the spiritual health of an individual living recovered from an eating disorder. The goal is to advance understanding of diary writing as a contribution to healing and wellbeing. Frameworks guiding this study include autobiographical/performative and document analysis approaches. Data focused on spirituality was collected from diaries, journals, and art created, each critically analyzed for leading themes. Themes emerging from the inquiry included individual courage and connectedness, the role of diary writing and gaining self-knowledge, and maintaining daily spirituality in recovery.

**Keywords:** diary-writing, spirituality, recovery, autobiographical inquiry

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### Introduction

In this paper, I inquire into diary writing, focusing on the spiritual aspects of my life while healing from an eating disorder. I critically analyzed data from personal diaries, journals, and art I created. I adhered to an autobiographical, first-person approach (Roberts, 2002, Finlay, 2011) informed by performative inquiry (Fels, 1998, 2012). To critique the diaries and journals, I leaned into document analysis processes (Bowen, 2009). Framing this work is the understanding that diary writing is a therapeutic tool to support recovery and living recovered from an eating disorder (Alexander et al., 2015, 2016; Alexander, 2017; McAllister et al., 2014).

### **Begin with a Story . . .**

Each morning, I begin my day with coffee and toast. I sit, find a hymn to ponder, quietly sing, and reflect upon the words. I browse through old song books and read the verses aloud as poetry. I write in my diary. Dad taught me to read each song as poetry, with the proviso – to not leave out any verses as it would disrupt the word flow and meaning. I then read a meditation, jot notes, and ponder my day. By then, my two blue heeler dogs are demanding their first hike and off we go into the bush for a vigorous walk through the birch and fir trees. (Research journal, September 2020)

Today, as I reflect and write in my diary, I recognize this was not always the way my mornings started. For years, I worked 12-hour night shifts; mornings began upon arriving home, and time was unkind and unrelenting. The dramatic quietness of my present life, living recovered<sup>1</sup> (Brown, 2017), is in stark contrast to living with the effects of adverse experiences<sup>2</sup> that triggered development an eating disorder<sup>3</sup> (van der Kolk, 2014).

### **Context of the Inquiry**

For the document analysis, I examined diary entries and art I created that focused on or reflected spirituality or spiritually based activities while I was in recovery from an eating disorder.<sup>4</sup> The goal was to increase understanding of the role of diary writing and spirituality in eating disorder recovery. Greene (1995) reminds us of the importance of diary writing as a way to tap into our own ‘narrative and storytelling as a way of knowing’ (p. 113). As well, van der Kolk (2014) suggest that while in recovery one may write about personal experiences in several ways. For example, one may write about what is presently occurring in life, write about distressing or traumatic event(s), or recall and document facts about a significant event in one’s life, including behaviours, feelings, and associated emotions. Finally, sharing the lived experiences of recovery through diary and journal writing can add a rich dialogue to the literature, an interchange rarely presented in a textbook (Etherington, 2020; McAllister et al., 2014).

As a qualitative health researcher and educator, I regularly explore the concept of spirituality<sup>5</sup> and interrelated concepts such as hope, faith, prayer, and sacraments (Carson, 2017) with undergraduate nursing students. This includes discussion about patient’s spiritual health<sup>6</sup> and learning how to inquire into existential questions about one’s purpose in

life. As a medium to express spirituality, therapeutic diary and journal writing lets patients explore and document their journey—spiritually, physically, emotionally, and socially (Brown, 2017).

Thus, from my academic teaching and life experience, I came to understand this research as an opportunity to inquire into personal writings and spirituality. With this focus in mind, join me to reflect on three stories that inquire into the role of diary writing about spirituality in healing and recovery.

### **Background: Spirituality, Writing, and Eating Disorders**

This paper explores spirituality broadly; it is portrayed as more inclusive than religion or faith alone (Carson, 2017; Cook-Cottone, 2020; Wright, 2005). Spirituality is understood by individuals and may be evidenced through one's faith-based practices, prayer, sacraments, ceremonies, music, meditation, diary writing, yoga, and mindfulness (Carson, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014). Attention to the role of spirituality in treatment and recovery from adverse events and an eating disorder is growing in the literature (Berrett et al., 2007; Grant, 2018; Richards et al., 2009).

Spirituality may be described by an individual as being linked to a higher power, a deity, a power greater than oneself, a spiritual being, or a god/God (Carson, 2017). Maintaining spiritual health is challenging if an eating disorder weakens one's spiritual connectedness and undermines its presence in a client's life (Berrett et al., 2007). Akrawi et al. (2017), remind us that paying attention to one's personal and spiritual beliefs may support success in recovery from an eating disorder. Grant (2018) further states that spirituality in recovery may include an 'experiential process which concerns the relationship with the inner self, with others and with that which is beyond the self—the transcendent or sacred...[it] is grounded in the lived experience and becomes an anchoring discipline' (p. 2). Finally, Grant argues that when spirituality is acknowledged in care and recovery by the healthcare team, it may result in nurturing 'spiritual qualities of hope, trust, acceptance, surrender, and courage... [when offered alongside] evidence-based therapeutic models of care' (p. 1).

Diaries and diary writing may be formal, informal, solicited by a healthcare provider, or privately initiated by an individual (Harvey, 2011). Alexander et al. (2015) remind us that 'diarizing and journaling are [terms] often used interchangeably for the same activity' (p. 2). They describe diary writing as playing a significant role in healing from an eating disorder. Alexander et al. (2016), embrace the role of diary writing as a

therapeutic tool supporting one to move from the chaos of an eating disorder to a life of health. As well, diary writing in mental healthcare ‘might help a person connect their feelings and actions and events, and assist in expressing, rather than internalizing, painful experiences’ (p. 24). Finally, in a recent interview Alexander (2017), richly describes the role of diary writing as an opportunity to build trust with one’s ‘true self’.

### ***Why Pauses Matter***

Recent life events, including death of a loved one, led me to diarize and attend to my spiritual health and wellbeing. As well, arrival of the COVID-19<sup>2</sup> pandemic in the early months of 2020 truly brought me to what Applebaum (1995) describes as a stop, or a pause in life; this is a time to pay attention to what one is experiencing. During this pause time, I experienced a sense of agency, resilience, and a finding of voice. I leaned into the work of van der Kolk (2014), who encourages us to write to ‘access your inner world of feelings’ (p. 240). Regarding writing about oneself, one’s agency, van der Kolk states the following:

Agency, is the technical term for the feeling of being in charge of your life, knowing where you stand, knowing that you have a say in what happens to you, knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances.... Agency starts with what scientists call ‘interoception’, our awareness of our subtle sensory, body-based feeling: the greater that awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives. Knowing what we feel is the first step to knowing why we feel that way.... resilience is the product of agency, knowing that what you do can make a difference. (pp. 97–98, 357)

While experiencing this pause, I wrote reflexively and developed my research question. I asked, ‘What was the role of spirituality during recovery?’ I mined a data set of personal diaries, journals, and art collected during my journey toward health and wellness. In preparation, I wrote the following reflection:

I am most comfortable staring at my boxes of eating disorder journals and diaries focused on recovery. I would prefer to not inquire into them as a research data set. I think I could just stay in my wondering place, not-engaged, and not immersed in their fullness. Yet, I regularly wonder if I wrote about spirituality and related issues in these diaries.

I also wonder if inquiring into the role of diary writing and spirituality is of interest to healthcare eating disorder professionals? I wonder, if I engage in this research inquiry, I would want the findings to be considered in a positive light, to encourage another, and to support a healthcare professional to include diary writing and spirituality as part of their assessment and treatment. In turn, I wonder how I will

respond, if I do not see spirituality reflected in my diaries. (Research journal, September 2020)

### **Aim of the Study**

This qualitative autobiographical and document analysis study aimed to understand how writing about spirituality is reflected in diaries, journals, and art as a person living recovered from an eating disorder.

## **Methodology**

### **Autobiographical and Performative Methodologies**

Autobiography is the writing of one's life story from a first-person approach. McAllister et al. (2014), state that inquiry into personal eating disorder testimonials and memoirs adds to our understanding of the complexity of the disorder. Autobiographical work may be expressed in writing (journals, diaries, artifacts), images, art, and poetry (Harvey, 2011). As well, autobiographical studies may be positioned to support a specific health or social grouping, such as persons with eating disorders, to find a voice or enable them to speak about an issue (Roberts, 2002).

I am aware the research process may include uncomfortable and dangerous conversations about life events (Le Fevre & Sawyer, 2012). I respect the notion that 'trauma is not stored as a narrative with an orderly beginning, middle, and end' (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 137); I am on a journey to maintain healing. I aim to offer hope, encouragement, and growth to others living in or moving toward recovery, while at the same time being aware of self-disclosure (Jolley, 2019; Roberts, 2002).

To engage in this work, I also leaned into performative inquiry as a research methodology (Fels, 1998, p. 28). In this approach one pauses, stops, and takes time to write and create. While doing this I am 'alert to those moments that call us to attention' (Fels, 2012, p. 55). Fels (1998), also stated that during this time, the goal is to nudge what I know to be familiar and comfortable, and to move into the uncomfortable. Fels proposes that this performance 'is a journey of knowing, doing, being, creating, and that it is through performative inquiry...I may come to an 'interstanding' of...my journey/landscape that is the imagining of our' world (p. 28). During this time, I also reflected on the 'pedagogical significance of such moments for our work [as academics, educators, and researchers], for our relationships with others, [and] for who we are in the world' (2012, p. 51).

## **Data Collection and Document Analysis**

I adhered to a document analysis methodology as a framework for this study (Bowen, 2009). The data set was analyzed for content related to spirituality; data were collated from my private journals, diaries, and arts-based activities (images, sketches, photographs, oil paintings) collected over a 12-year period. In addition, ten memoir books focused on eating disorders, collected during the same years, were analyzed for personal jots and margin notes focused on spirituality. Following Bowen's document analysis approach, I read and re-read diaries and books page by page seeking spirituality-focused documentation (writings, notes, jots, images). I noted my participation in spiritual activities such as prayer, poetry, meditation, faith-based activities, writing, and creation of art. I read, re-read, and hand coded over a 12-week period. Data were reviewed with a peer via phone, email, and by sharing online documents (due to COVID-19); this supported triangulation of data and served to reduce my personal bias (Bowen, 2009).

I used a thematic analysis approach to analyze the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2020). Themes that emerged through peer discussion and from the data included 1) courage and connectedness in early days of treatment; 2) diary writing, reading, and playing a game; and 3) spiritual writing and becoming whole. Data are presented here in a narrative storytelling format. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I engaged in reflexive diary writing. Finlay (2017) emphasizes the importance of conducting reflexivity activities. She describes reflexivity as

the use of a critical, self-awareness lens to interrogate both the research process and our interpretation or representation of participants' lives in our social world. It's a vehicle that acknowledges the complexity and messiness of our qualitative project...[where] researchers examine and deconstruct the way their research knowledge is created. (p. 120)

As a qualitative researcher, I have a growing appreciation for the role of reflexivity and am seeking to be a reflexive researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2020; Creswell, 2014; Finlay, 2002, 2011, 2014; Salmons, 2015).

## **Findings**

The three themes that emerged from the data are shared in the form of three stories. Each story was compared to the literature focused on diary writing, spirituality, and eating disorder recovery.

### Story One: Courage and Connectedness in Early Days

I was awarded a 'Certificate of Distinction' for being genuinely courageous. The award was an 8- by 11-inch piece of paper with a hand-drawn 'red-seal-of approval' in the bottom right-hand corner. The award was given for agreeing to accept treatment in an in-patient environment (publicly funded, non faith based). 'I did not feel courageous. I was exhausted, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I did not want an award, or to have attention drawn to me' (Diary note, September 2020).

As part of the admission process to the eating disorder unit, I wrote an account of my life and answered a list of 44 questions. In the analysis, it is noted, there were no specific questions about spirituality or faith. Yet, I tried to explain my faith, family, and faith-based community to the healthcare team. I was not sure they wanted to know, and I was too tired to press the issue. I knew spirituality as part of my being. In my journal, I wrote and drew my vision of comforting angels and spirits around me, *My Spiritual Being*<sup>8</sup> (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*My Spiritual Being* (pencil on lightly toned paper).



In my journal I wrote:

I know my spiritual strength as always beside and above me. The Being has ever-reaching arms wrapped around me, present, quiet, and enduring. The Being is often visualized resting in the clouds, high above. These arms are comforting, reaching down to protect me from harm. (Research journal, September 1988)

An expression of my spirituality and related hope was embedded in the diaries analyzed. The team asked, what would you like to be doing in five years?

I want to have a day job so I can have Saturdays and Sundays to myself, mostly the weekends. I want to be able to attend church and become involved in youth and outreach activities. I miss the connections and the fun associated with youth group. I work, 12-hour shifts...I used to have fun in youth group. (Research journal, September 1988)

Upon analysis, the diaries further reflected hope and dreams for a future. The future was described as including graduate school and healthy relationships with family and friends (Courtois & Ford, 2015). In time, family and friends came alongside and gifted to me hand-written letters and books; I was often harsh and not accepting of their caring gestures. I drafted replies in the form of letters never mailed. For example, I received the following letter from a well-meaning friend:

You need to learn to eat God's way.<sup>9</sup> You need to study the scriptures asking for direction. Please listen to God's voice and then do what he directs you. Individually, you should be committed to this area in your life, you need to obey God, he will work in you; if you ask him at first, about how much you weigh, and on a daily basis ask God how many calories you should eat. We come to God, moment by moment, to make the right choices regarding food.

All of this because we are reminded that in the scriptures that we are to love our body, a temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwells in you and that if you destroy the temple of God, God will destroy you too. In closing, I would like to give you two more verses that have special meaning to me...please read the scriptures. I pray for you daily.  
(Research journal, October 1988)

### ***Reflecting on Story One***

Upon analysis, my efforts to express spirituality was evident in diary entries and in art I created. Brown (2017) states spirituality is 'recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion' (p. 45). Spirituality is described as a 'a complex and abstract concept' (Weathers et al., 2016, p. 80). Newman (2004) states that the terms *faith*, *spirituality*, and *religion* may be used interchangeably by healthcare clinicians, and each brings a slightly different understanding by the patient. As well, in healthcare settings spirituality may not be taken seriously as part of one's life

experiences and may in fact be neglected by the provider (Carson, 2017; Dolan, 1991; Wright, 2005).

In the critique, my Spiritual Being is often reflected in an image of nature. I consistently sketched using shades of blue and pale pink. Of the colour blue, Merleau-Ponty (1945/62) states the colour blue 'yields to my gaze' (p. 244) and draws attention. For me, there is a calmness in the choice of these colours. It is also noted family members consistently sent letters expressing the need for prayer, intervention, and prayers for healing. Diary notes reflect my appreciation of their kindness, yet their letters were not replied to. I saw myself as a strong, educated, independent daughter of a first-generation farmer and businessman; I was not. My analysis of the well-meaning letter was difficult. The letter was from an adult in a community-based weight-loss program. In my diary notes, and on the back of the letter, is a heated reply, quickly jotted upon receiving it. 'You do not understand what is going on, you have no idea what life is like!' (Research journal, October 1988). Thankfully, I did not mail the letter.

In this inquiry, spiritual supports were not forthcoming or discussed on admission. Marsden et al. (2007) state that not all persons in recovery expect to discuss their spirituality. In contrast, Hardman et al. (2003) suggest that 'for women who believe in God, deep spiritual struggles are often a major impediment in their ability to recover' (p. 67); they recommend 'attending to the spiritual issues of clients with eating disorders [as this] often facilitates successful treatment' (p. 68). Berrett et al. (2007) remind us that individuals with an eating disorder and adverse events need support to navigate 'what belongs to them as a recipient and what belongs to the person who perpetuated the abuse or trauma' (p. 383). Furthermore, Richards et al. (2009) state some persons have spirituality issues, such as rejection, alienation, shame, guilt, and family distress. These clients may benefit if they have a forum to discuss these issues with members of the interdisciplinary eating disorder team.

Sandy (2002), explores the spiritual lives of women in recovery, stating women understand spirituality in a unique way. When they connect to a higher power, spiritual being, god, or deity they build self-trust. Sandy also stated that women found eating disorder services inadequate:

Perhaps the traditional medical approach that focuses on the emotions and cognitive functions is not enough. The use of spirituality, whether through meditation, dance, yoga, visualization exercises or simply learning to connect and trust one's inner intuition may prove to be particularly valuable tools. A closer look at the spiritual and emotional

worlds of those who have transcended their eating problems reveals many similarities. All the women seemed to learn that connecting to their true selves is the real answer. To them, this meant seeing, accepting, and loving themselves for who they were and ceasing to starve themselves of their self. (p. 11)

In this analysis, it was evident my spiritual wellbeing was not to be understood as an afterthought; it was part of me, predictable, and it offered me solace when in pain (Slife et al., 2010). As well, it is evident that the act of diary writing provided a place and space in which I could write to myself, my God, and engage in spiritual reflection (Alexander et al., 2015). Finally, I agree with Burkhardt (1989), who states writing about spirituality can be a 'unifying force or vital principle...that integrates all other aspects' of a person's life (p. 70).

### **Story Two: Reading and Diary Writing and *The Game***

In this story, I reflect on reading books on eating disorders and spirituality which were a consistent part of my healing journey. I regularly wrote in diaries and often made highlights and notes, comments, and jots in the margins of books focused on eating disorders. Reading and diary writing helped me gain perspective on the role of adverse events and how they contributed to the complexity of my eating disorder (Akrawi et al., 2017). I used to think the adverse events and the eating disorder were separate and unlinked entities, and I learned they were not (van der Kolk, 2014). Madowitz et al. (2015) state the prevalence rate of disordered eating is related to sexual trauma; as a result, the individual may experience changes to body perception and shame. As well, psychological challenges may ensue and contribute to control issues and the need for order.

In the data collated, several articles reflecting on the journeys of Karen Carpenter, Princess Diana and Caroline of Monaco, and Kathleen Kemper were critiqued, each of their stories sensationalized by the media. Luczak (1990) details the pressures experienced by women to be extremely thin or at least slender. Specifically, she discusses multiple role expectations, working full time, looking beautiful, wearing trendy clothing, being polite and gentle. The magazine article is heavily highlighted in pink marker. I have written in the margins 'these dramatic, glossy photographs drew me in...thinness at all cost is the message. I think these are pressures I have experienced' (Research journal, May 1993).

In the eating disorder books, there were many notations related to spirituality. The findings reflect my growing understanding of the power of

spirituality to support healing (Seamands, 1988). I noted increased research links between adverse events and eating disorders (Hemfelt et al., 1989). I also wrote that I learn from reading first-person narratives (Orbach, 1986; Palmer, 1986). I wrote that I find comfort in stories about the peaks and valleys, and tipping points, where an individual awakens to the possibility of feeling stronger, with growing self-efficacy, identity and self-worth. I relate to stories where individuals *choose* to change. Therefore, I noted 'I can envision living a life with an identity separate from the adverse events and eating disorder' (January 1990). I knew I could move away from needing to be the thinnest person in the room; each book taught me some element that could be threaded forward (Hemfelt et al., 1989; Vredevelt & Rodriguez, 1987).

Yet, in my arrogance, I used my growing knowledge to create an impregnable wall, to keep me separate from supports offered. In my diary the following is noted: 'This is a game with no rules; if there are rules I make them' (Research journal, October 2020). I thought I knew more than anyone!

### ***Reflecting on Story Two***

In the analysis, reading and diary writing were powerful therapeutic tools in which to express spirituality and move toward health (Alexander et al., 2015, 2016; Alexander, 2017; McAllister et al., 2014). Through writing, I recognized the need for control and order to be slowly ebbing away. My demand to play a game of chess with the eating disorder became less intense and ritualistic; I moved toward being more kind and self-compassionate (Brown, 2007). I found less internal demand to use my knowledge of the eating disorder to reinforce feelings of isolation and disconnection (Brown, 2007).

During my journey, I was an avid reader of books related to eating disorders. In this inquiry, I wrote that I wondered if this caused me additional harm. Did I internalize the messages in these eating disorder books? In the literature, researchers explore whether reading personal diaries and memoirs on eating disorders is harmful. Thomas et al. (2006) asked 50 undergraduate students about their experiences reading such memoirs; students reported reading eating disorder memoirs had negligible effect on their attitude or behaviour toward food. Seaber (2016) argues reading books and memoirs about eating disorders may cause harm to the consumer, or the potential client. In contrast, McAllister et al. (2014) explore the role of eating disorder books as a resource to develop coping and problem-solving skills, creativity, confidence and self-esteem.

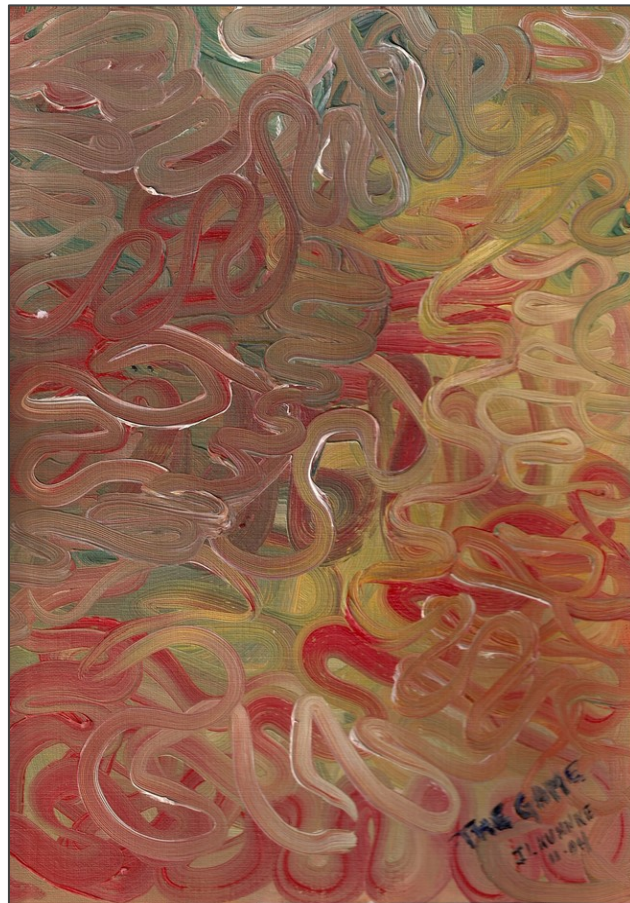
### ***Learning Alongside Reflective Art***

Of benefit in this study was leaning into a performative arts approach (Fels, 1998, 2012). This approach reminds us to stop, explore varied art mediums, and to create. Therefore, in response to the data analysis process, I reflectively created *The Game*

(Figure 2). This oil painting emerged with yellow, red, green, orange, and beige colours. As I created, I was aware of the softness of the oils gently moving over the canvas and under the cool pads of my now healthy fingers. The resulting colours, though, are messy, muted, dull, with no beginning and no end. The colours reflect past chaos and the distress of trying to hide behind books in my arrogance. Merleau-Ponty (1945/62) in his discussion on sense experiences, states that 'red and yellow have a stinging effect...and red and yellow [contribute to the]...experience of being torn away, of a movement away from the centre' (p. 244).

**Figure 2**

*The Game* (finger-painting; oil on canvas).



Spirituality is

'generally used to refer both to the practice, and lived experience, by which humans encounter a spiritual dimension of reality' (McIntosh & McIntosh, 2011, para 1). My reading and journaling added a rich dimension that I believe supported the journey to health.

### **Story Three: Spirituality and Becoming Whole**

In this story, I open with one of many letters written in my recovery journey. The letters were composed to my Spiritual Being or God. One of the entries reads, 'is it not a dichotomy to claim to trust and to have a faith

in God? It is interesting that I think I can magically negotiate a healthy weight without God?' (Research journal, October 1992; cf. Hsu et al., 1992). Letters reflect the dance of gaining weight and maintaining weight:

Dear God, the hardest part of recovery is moving from 90 to 110 pounds, to 130 or so; I think I should be able to negotiate this with the doctor. I know you are there to guide me, I know your arms of love are around me. I hate that weight is the constant focus of conversation in this admission. Yet, I wonder if I hate it enough to continue to recover? (Research journal, August 1991).

In the diary entries, I reflect that I yearn for health: 'I am and must not remain unwell'. I pretended I did not feel emotions, yet the following reflects internal pain: 'Please give me reason to change God. I am trying to, but the struggle is so great some days' (Research journal, December 1992).

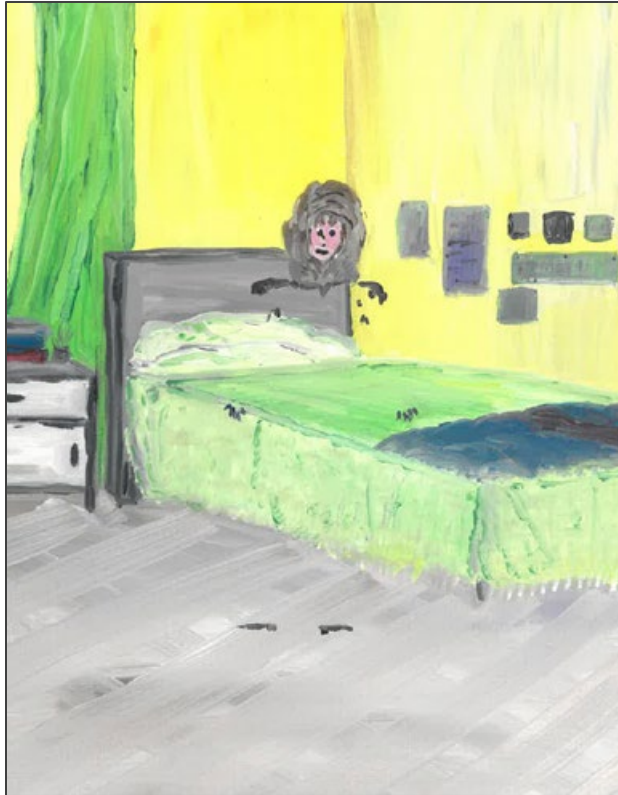
Fortunately, on my admission to an eating disorder unit, the physician referred me to the program spiritual advisor, with whom I met regularly. We prayed and talked about beliefs and how shame, guilt, and poor sense of self contributed to ill health. We spoke of the role of sport in high school and the pressures to be lean and successful. As well, we read meditations and scriptures of my choice. This was incredibly supportive, as I needed to navigate conversations with God about the adverse events disclosed and the feelings that followed (Courtois & Ford, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). The spiritual advisor directed me to regular prayer sessions filled with reassuring music that offered hope and a quiet place to rest, journal, and pray. This support was unique, timely, and professional. I benefited deeply from this support—it was rich, truthful, and respectful of my beliefs.

Diary writings reflect my belief that extreme slenderness would solve all my problems. This slowly faded, and in turn my self-esteem and identity developed (Berrett et al., 2007; Grant, 2018; Hardman et al., 2003; Marsden et al., 2007). The image *Parts Need Union* (Figure 3) emerged in

yellow, grey, and green oil colours. The lack of unity of the body parts reflects my feeling as separate from self.

**Figure 3**

*Parts Need Union* (oil on canvas).



Courtois and Ford (2015) remind us that when adverse events contribute to ill-health,

Addressing these challenges often leads to discussion of existential issues, spirituality, religious beliefs, and personal meaning making. Clients question core beliefs about themselves, other people, the world, the meaning and purpose of life . . . and the existence of God. There are existential/spiritual questions for which there are no simple universal answers, and therapists should not attempt to provide (or press clients to accept) any particular 'answer'. Although it is possible, and generally desirable, for clients to achieve a sense of resolution and closure with regard to the existential/spiritual conflicts that trauma engenders, this outcome is a spontaneous form of posttraumatic growth that should not—and, indeed, cannot—either be forced or prescribed. Each client must come to his or her own conclusion about the deeper meaning—if any—of the events they have experienced and of their own spiritual and existential beliefs. (p. 186)

Yet, in contrast to this image, I knew myself to be a work in progress, making efforts to feel congruent and whole. Through meditation, prayer, journaling, and art, I knew it was possible to become physically, emotionally, and spiritually whole (van der Kolk, 2014).

### ***Reflecting on Story Three***

In efforts to understand the role of reading and writing in recovery, Berrett et al. (2007) state the world appears unkind and harsh to those who have experienced adverse events:

Part of the healing process is to learn to honor and appreciate what they did to cope with the trauma early on and to approach the situation with more understanding and with an awareness of having more safety and more choices available to the present. Consequently, they are able to make new coping choices. (p. 384)

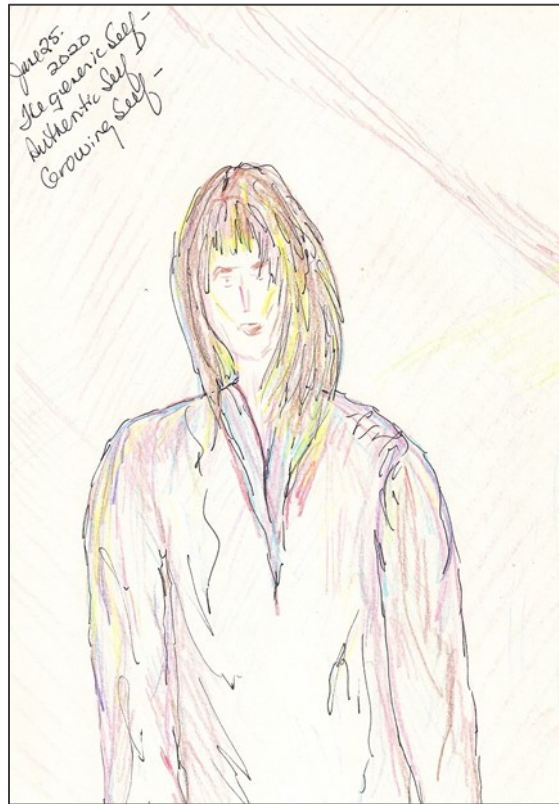
As an adult healing, I knew I could enact new choices. Previous patterns of seeking extreme thinness faded as my voice, agency, and identity grew. Berrett et al. (2007) state individuals turn to ‘their creativity to find new choices to avoid abusing situations and to avoid the old patterns for dealing with pain’ (p. 384). Coming to an understanding that adverse events may contribute to an eating disorder was daunting; knowing they were intertwined felt like an added burden (van der Kolk, 2014). In this case, spirituality was the thread that, in time, contributed to weaving of new beginnings.

The analysis reveals a consistent use of sketching and drawing of images (Fels, 1998). In response to the analysis process, I reflected and sketched an image of my authentic self, where adverse events no longer speak for me (Figure 4). This image is a portrait of health, a body in union, and in contrast to photographs of extreme ill health. In authentic living, one is connected to self, with agency and voice (Berrett et al., 2007; Courtois & Ford, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). Spirituality was integral to the process of healing (Grant, 2018). Writing, talking, and praying with my Spiritual Being was beneficial to me, knowing I could freely discuss this element of my life in recovery with the healthcare team. In my life today, nature, art, music, and hikes in the bush to smell and listen to earthly wonders contribute threads to a woven blanket of health in which I am enveloped. Today, I know my Spiritual Being is still in the skies, with long arms of care wrapped around me, resilient and present in my adult knowing.

Finally, Berrett et al. (2007) remind us of the importance of ‘figuring out what spirituality means to ... [the client, including] attending church, reading scriptures, praying, and so on’ (p. 377) and to embed this as part of a treatment plan.

**Figure 4**

*The Authentic Self* (coloured pencil on white paper).



### **Summary: Spirituality, Writing, Courage, and Resilience**

In this inquiry, autobiographical, document analysis, and performative arts-based inquiry methodologies guided me as the researcher. Through a detailed document analysis, it was possible to identify and appreciate the role of writing about one's spirituality when threaded through and alongside eating disorder treatment and recovery. Through this critical inquiry, I have come to a deeper understanding of my spirituality as embedded in my landscape, in moving toward and living recovered (Fels, 1998, 2012).

A performative arts-based approach (Fels, 1998, 2012), supported this autobiographical inquiry. First, it guided a critical review of art (Finley, 2011) created when living with an eating disorder (Figures 1 and 3). Second, it supported engagement in reflexivity activities (Finlay, 2011) as a medium to express my reflective practice conducted while researching (Figures 2, 4, and 5). Through images, the unspoken and difficult conversations become tangible, enriched with colour in varied mediums. Spirituality, when expressed in this manner, may be life-giving to individuals in treatment and recovery (Akrawi et al., 2017; Barrett et al., 2009).

### **Training Healthcare Professionals in Spiritual Care**

Schafer et al. (2011) reflect on changes recommended in the American Psychiatric Association 2000 practice guidelines. They discuss inconsistent training of healthcare professionals in issues related to spirituality. They reported wide variation in the quality of education and training for healthcare professionals in mental health. Carson (2017) also argues that healthcare professionals may not feel knowledgeable or comfortable talking about spiritual issues due to lack of education and integration of spiritual care principles into their training and education. Finally, researchers have noted that healthcare professionals responsible to assess and support the individual's spiritual issues in fact may not be receiving clear guidance from eating disorder treatment standards and guidelines (Birmingham et al., 2004; Canadian Eating Disorder Alliance, n.d.; Heruc et al., 2020; National Institute for Health & Care Excellence, 2020).

In summary, through the analysis it is evident that courage is an 'essential element in seeking recovery, it requires discipline and determination to yield results' (Grant, 2018, p. 6). The following oil-painting *Energy* in brilliant orange and yellow was reflexively created with painting knives to reflect agency, energy, and hope (Figure 5). Agency and resulting resilience are motivators to move toward understanding the complexities of eating disorders (van der Kolk, 2014). When spirituality is explored with the individual, they may gain an opportunity to grow, flourish, and find agency alongside healing (Carson, 2017; Grant, 2018; Hardman et al., 2003).

**Figure 5**

*Energy (oil on board).*



Today, I wonder if healthcare professionals encourage health through diary writing and reading. Would a therapist recommend diary writing and then discuss elements of the text and art created with a client? I wonder if writing about spirituality and the links to adverse events would aid an individual seeking health. Would the intertwining of diary writing and reading on spirituality offer a benefit in navigating one's health?

Recovery from an eating disorder is not an overnight venture. Brown (2007) states that 'we don't derive strength from our rugged individualism, but rather from our collective ability to plan, communicate, and work together' (p. 53). Thank you for quietly coming alongside and listening to this journey. Recovery is a lifelong event, and richer when the spirituality of individuals is considered.

## Notes

1. Recovery from anorexia includes affective domains, embodiment experiences, intrapersonal growth, relational and sociocultural dimensions (Beyer & Launeanu, 2019).
2. Adverse childhood experiences are complex and affect individuals as they heal and grow (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020 April 3). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

3. The National Initiative for Eating Disorders (n. d.) stated that over one million Canadians have a diagnosis of an eating disorder. Eating disorders are not always well understood; they are complex, daunting, and at times deadly (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
4. Means 'living a healthy, productive, and honest life' (Dupont, 1997, p. xxv).
5. Spirituality is a broad concept that I teach in an undergraduate nursing program.
6. Patient may also be a client or resident, depending on the care setting.
7. Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a viral infection that can cause mild to severe symptoms and death (Infection Prevention and Control Canada, 2020).  
<https://ipac-canada.org/coronavirus-resources.php>  
<https://ipac-canada.org/coronavirus-resources.php>
8. In this paper, my Spiritual Being is in deference to my God, as I understand Him.
9. Griffith (1997) wrote about the "promised land of weight loss" and the shallowness of ignoring the "pain and spiritual struggle behind them" (p. 3).  
<https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-promised-land-of-weight-loss/>

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**Janet L. Kuhnke** is a tenure-track assistant professor in the baccalaureate nursing program, School of Professional Studies at Cape Breton University. She is an Affiliate Scientist with Nova Scotia Health. Before coming to the academy, Janet lived and worked as a clinical nurse leader and educator in rural communities and hospitals in British Columbia and Ontario. Janet is active in Wounds Canada as a nurse specialist in wound, ostomy and continence care, and advocates for prevention of diabetes-related foot ulcers and amputations. Janet continues to coach and mentor students in baccalaureate and masters qualitative research projects and presentations.

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## The Autism Sonnets: Explaining Myself to Myself

Sean Erin Moores

Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, Athabasca University

### Abstract

In this paper, I explore my autistic identity through poetry. I briefly explain the medical model of autism, diagnosed as a disorder through the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, highlighting the amygdala as a brain structure that is particularly affected by autism. I outline my writing process for this project and offer suggestions for practitioners or other autistic writers. I then present a collection of sonnets where I problematize the deficit-based pathologizing of autism in the *DSM-5*, contrasting it with the social model of disability. I conclude with my ambivalence toward getting a medical diagnosis.

**Keywords:** autistic, autism spectrum disorder, neurodiversity, social model of disability, therapeutic writing

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### Introduction

Over the past 15 years, I have slowly come to understand myself as autistic.<sup>1</sup> The more I work as a special education teacher and the more I socialize with autistic people, the more comfortable I am with this conclusion. This project explores my autistic identity, my rejection of the medical pathologizing of autism, and my ambivalence toward pursuing a medical diagnosis.

Autism is considered a pervasive developmental disability, causing ‘significant social, communication and behavioural challenges’ (CDC, 2020a). It is perhaps most seen to impact the ability to develop relationships with other people because of a perceived lack of social skills, antisocial or aggressive behaviours, and fixated interests. Once thought to be relatively rare, autism is now diagnosed in roughly one in 54 people (CDC, 2020b), although this varies by jurisdiction. The primary vehicle for diagnosis of autism is the American Psychiatric Association (APA) 2013 publication, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. The criteria for autism spectrum disorder in the *DSM-5* were revised from its predecessor to encompass ‘classic’ autism, as well as other related developmental disorders, such as Asperger’s syndrome. This revision has not been without criticism, particularly in that its criteria may lead to under- or overdiagnosis (Wing et al., 2011; Singer, 2012; Sweet & Decoteau, 2018).

Autism is a complex condition, affecting all domains, and it would take a lifetime to discuss all relevant aspects. I want to highlight, however, one particular brain area: the amygdala. This organ, which functions as a site of ‘translation’ among the sensorimotor, affective, and cognitive domains, consistently shows unusual patterns of activity in autistic people (Berger, 2012, p. 3). We often have difficulty making sense of emotions or sensations, conflating the two, and showing a heightened rate of synaesthesia (van Leeuwen et al., 2020, p. 10), a condition in which sensory information is processed with a sense other than the one typically engaged (e.g., tasting colours).

Allman et al. (2005) posit a difficulty with intuition in autistic people, particularly in social situations (p. 372). Although I know I am unaware of much of the subtle nonverbal communication around me, I realize that as I retune in to my body and my writing, if I write about my body sensations, my ‘Spidey senses’ are activated: I can feel my stomach start to knot, my sternum begin to tighten, the soles of my feet tingle as though they were on a roller coaster, or my heartbeat begin to elevate. Probing the connection between these sensations and the life circumstances I am writing about, I can understand when a situation is or is not good for me—a relationship, a job, a plan. Making these specific connections in my daily writing has allowed me to understand my sensations as intuition, another function for which the amygdala seems to be at least partly responsible (Lieberman et al., 2004, p. 424).

My daily writing practice has allowed me to be more fully aware of the sensations of my body, to disentangle sensation from emotion, and emotion from cognition, and to process the three domains in a more coherent manner. In this way, writing has taken over the job that my amygdala is not capable of doing. To untangle the domains, I use Metcalf's (2008) proprioceptive writing technique. Using her proprioceptive question (What do I mean by....?), I interrogate my thoughts, labelling them as accurately as possible and thereby differentiate between my sensations, emotions, and thoughts, simultaneously differentiating my memories from my current situation. After this analysis work is done, writing poetry allows me to reintegrate the domains again, but without the chaos of the original thought patterns.

I often begin with K. Jane Watt's contemplative practice of writing, a method that includes a timed portion of making meaningless doodles on the page, engaging the brain with the sensorimotor act of writing before beginning to write. When my initial draft is complete, I examine what I've written to see where I am (Fox, 1997, p. 134) and how I can revise it to express myself more completely, and, importantly, within an organizing schema that allows my thought patterns to be calm and truthful. I begin with form: If, for example, there is a change worthy of a volta, I may turn the free verse into a sonnet. If there is a line that repeats or is worthy of repetition, I might instead choose a villanelle. I then look at devices: The delineation between an emotion and a sensation often brings out a metaphor. If it does, I will use it, refine it, extend it. If I can hear a rhythm in the words that expresses an emotion, that will become my meter.

### **Ethical and Practical Considerations for Practitioners**

It is important to note that autistic people are not a monolith—autism is a cluster of behavioural descriptors, each of which can be present in varying degrees. This is an important consideration for practitioners: It is common to assume that nearly everyone is neurotypical and to accommodate autistic people on a case-by-case basis. This is not truly inclusive practice; in any group, there is a high likelihood that there will be at least one autistic person (diagnosed or not), and with such varying needs, universal access points are necessary. These can be beneficial to all participants, not only those with autism. As our understanding of autism evolves, practitioners should keep current with new strategies for inclusion.

Many autistic people find it comforting to know what to expect. An agenda of a course or seminar is very helpful for us, even if the agenda is not precise. I do not necessarily need to know what time everything will happen, but it is great to know what the order will be. The agenda can be changed if necessary, but a little warning in order to get used to the idea is appreciated. Having a clear idea of the expectations of either the process or the product is equally helpful.

This also applies to the structure of writing. I've been reading sonnets for thirty years, and it was partially for that reason—familiarity and structure—that I chose to write sonnets for this project. I am familiar with other poetic forms, but using them would feel more risky. In a therapeutic writing setting, a universal access point might be to remind participants of some more common forms and allow them free choice. For me, and for many autistic people, having the structure of a sonnet to rely on is much less scary than the vagueness of free verse.

Something to note during the writing itself is that it can be difficult for autistic people to label emotions. This can also be true for people who've experienced trauma, people with ADHD or reactive attachment disorder, or people with intellectual disabilities, among others. They may need help to analyse what feeling words actually refer to. I am sometimes surprised to find in my own writing that when I write 'I'm sad,' for example, I may mean that I am actually happy but tired, or that I am happy but believe the happiness won't last. The proprioceptive question (Metcalf, 2008), What do I mean by ...? is a powerful tool for understanding my own emotions and can be a tool for practitioners to use with clients, as long as they first clearly explain the question's use—unexplained, it may seem too much like an interrogation or critique.

And finally, the therapeutic environment should be considered. Sensitivity to quick or unexpected movement, harsh lighting, or chaotic or loud noise is quite common for both autistic and neurotypical people, and can be accommodated quite easily in most settings. A variety of seating options can help with sensory processing difficulties, and the option to write using different media (pencils, crayons, computers) can be helpful as well. In a group setting, it is also very important for autistic people to have social demands lowered. Many people still insist on eye contact as a demonstration of manners; this can be a very unnerving formality for autistic people. Many seminars have unstructured time to get to know other participants, which can cause real panic in autistic people. A structured ice-breaker activity is much better and allows anyone to make connections.

## The Autism Sonnets

I wrote the original version of this paper, and these sonnets, over two months as my final project in an Athabasca University course, *MAIS 621 Narrative Possibilities: The Transformative Power of Writing, Story, and Poetry in Personal and Professional Development* (Lengelle, 2018), which featured topics such as the therapeutic potential of poetry and writing in health care settings. In this project, for each criterion of autism spectrum disorder listed in the *DSM-5*, I have written a poem and a reflection. I have chosen to use blank verse sonnets as a compromise between autistic and artistic sensibilities: the sonnet format gives me structure and routine, but the blank verse affords me flexibility.

### **Criterion A: Persistent Deficits in Social Communication and Social Interaction Across Multiple Contexts (APA, 2013)**

In this poem, I describe having realized that I broke an unwritten rule earlier in the day, too late to change my behaviour or apologize. I use repetition to demonstrate my rumination. I break the rhythm twice: in line nine, to emphasize the imperative and express frustration, and line fourteen, to draw attention to the missing repetition as I break out of the rumination.

#### Playing School

I wake up in the night with stomach cramps.  
 With stomach cramps and sweat and kicking legs.  
 I finally understand there was a rule.  
 A rule I didn't know about that day.  
 Unspoken rules for them to build a wall;  
 A wall that traps me outside and away.  
 Belonging is a role I try to play;  
 I play but don't succeed when I'm with them.

Tell me the rules, at least let me decide!  
 Let me decide to close my eyes or not.  
 But don't make me the one who doesn't know  
 Who doesn't know the punchline of the joke.  
 When we played school in my old neighbourhood,  
 I was the principal; the rules were mine.

Autistic people want relationships. We feel empathy. We are able to love and be loved (Muller et al., 2008, p.188; Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1438). The difficulty is that social rules neurotypical people take in

stride are unspoken and context dependent, causing anxiety in many autistic people: 'If I know what the rules are, I can belong, instead of just pretending to belong. Not knowing the rules is like when everyone knows a secret except for you—it's terrible' (Moores, 2020).

This criterion is clearly written through the lens of the medical model of disability: a deficit-based model, where disability is centred within an individual who needs to be cured in order to function in the social world without impairment (Goering, 2015). For autistic people, the cure is to change our behaviour.

The social model of disability posits that the differences in communication and interaction are deficits *only because barriers exist in the environment* (Inclusion London, 2021). A social model understanding of autism might address behavioural change in the person, but also looks at adapting the social environment. Muller et al. (2008) note that although the autistic participants in their study 'described deliberate efforts to improve personal relationships' (p. 181), they also advocated for social supports, such as structured social activities, explicit communication, instruction in the use of social cues, and opportunities for coping with social stress (pp. 181–184).

As more autistic people become involved in autism research (Kapp, 2019) and become active in the disability rights movement (Krcek, 2013, pp. 11–13), the tension between these two models continues to grow. The power, however, remains with neurotypical researchers and the historic inertia behind the medical model of disability that has pervaded our understanding of autism—and of disability in general (Areheart, 2008, pp. 180–181).

***Criterion A1: Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions (APA, 2013)***

In this poem, I describe a typical school staff room, complete with cliques, territories and bullies. I disrupt the meter, adding a 'damn' when I find I am out of sync with the group, and doubling the unstressed syllables 'if you' as I rush to catch up with the conversation.

### The Staff Room

If you sneak up on them from the side, you might –  
Damn. They're crowded chair to chair already close.  
Renee's tight smile and Paula's pale blue eyes  
There's nowhere you can sneak, you'll have to hover.  
If you hover quietly waiting for your turn –  
Damn. They're speaking over, rushing for attention.  
Andrea's laugh and Martin's raving tales.  
There's no turn-taking here, they don't need it.

If you signal with a look, a smile, a nod –  
Damn. They've all already chosen smiling partners  
They look toward the loudest or the funniest  
There are no looks left for you, I'm afraid.  
If you write an email, they will reply all.  
But they won't email you, or speak, or call.

As a special education teacher, I have written dozens of education plans for kids with autism, most involving conversation skills. The number of moving parts in a conversation is unbelievable: words, body language and tone of voice, relationship and relative status of the speakers, the environment they're in, the recent and non-recent pasts of each speaker, their individual levels of alertness. Each one influences the interaction (Muller et al., 2008, p. 179). It is true for a conversation between strangers at a checkout and between partners at the kitchen table.

The real problem is communication style. Dekker (n. d.) points out that autistic people tend to converse with a different rhythm, less nonverbal communication, and more direct and literal messaging than neurotypical people. Unfortunately, although the cross-communication is mutual, the consequences of the different communication styles are lopsided: autistic people are often seen as more egocentric, and neurotypical people believe themselves to be more helpful than they actually are in social interactions (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1445).

***Criterion A2: Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication (APA, 2013)***

This poem is based on a memory I have without context. I remember the physiological and emotional experience, but I have no idea where I was, or who looked me in the eyes. I use enjambment to demonstrate the racing thoughts that accompany the shock of unexpected eye contact. In the sestet, I move on to end-stopped lines, more clipped and matter-of-fact, and more confined to the rules I have taught myself.

#### The Best Defence

At times, when you are happy sitting at  
Your desk, and working, you don't notice  
The eyes heading your way, to catch you with  
Two laser beams, two sheets of lighting that  
Will burn the fingers of your brain. The pain  
Is as ethereal as the blank spot  
Beneath a fire, as complex as the cruelty  
Of people you had thought that you could trust.

I wish my left could look into your right,  
My right into your left at the same time.  
The laser beams should go straight eye to eye,  
Into our brains for perfect understanding.  
It's better if you start it before them;  
The trick is look them right between the eyes.

Eye contact is a peculiar phenomenon. It activates mirror neurons (neurons responding to another person's actions or emotions), facilitating social behaviour (Iacoboni, 2008, p. 654). However, eye contact can also be a threat signal (Harrod et al., 2020; Ellsworth & Carlsmith, 1973, p. 280). Avoidance of eye contact is common in hypervigilant states (Schneier et al., 2011, p. 85). Interestingly, autistic people who are experiencing eye contact show hyperarousal of the amygdala (Dalton et al., 2005, p. 519), the same process by which traumatic memories are created (MacCurdy, 2000, p. 163). Trevisan et al. (2017) did a qualitative study on the effect of eye contact on people with autism and found themes of fear, physical pain, violation, intimacy, and strategies to manufacture appropriate eye contact or response to eye contact from others.

I remember so clearly the process of teaching myself how to make eye contact in grade two. It was a puzzle, but I had to do it; according to TV, it was the only way people could know when I was telling the truth. I became so conscious of eye contact that it is still in my thoughts when I am having important conversations.

***Criterion A3: Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behaviour to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers (APA, 2013)***

I wrote this poem about mistaking reciprocal relationships as being transactional. It is a sequence of situations causing the least to the most anxiety.

#### What Everyone Else Knows

I love the clarity of Christmas giving –  
 Not buying—buying has its traps because  
 If you don't know them, then your gift will fail  
 And gift cards are just handing someone cash.  
 At work, we have a Sunshine Club, with rules:  
 No contribution, you won't get a gift  
 And big things happen by surprise, so it's  
 A bit less orderly than one-for-one.

But love—is love a present? I don't know –  
 You don't know when you'll need to take it back.  
 It hurts to give too much, to give too little,  
 And where's the line between the different types?  
 And when do you bring flowers to a dinner?  
 And when do you buy drinks for the whole group?

I have never met an autistic person who does not like people. We just have difficulty showing it. Sensory processing issues are a major component of autism; it is hard to converse if you have a lot of interesting things bombarding your senses (Kojovic et al., 2019, p. 10). Combined with the difficulty with social thinking and gaze avoidance, it can appear as though we are not interested in peers, but it just is not true.

I can, with difficulty, understand my feelings. Perspective-taking makes understanding relationships much harder. If I do, generally the terms of my understanding are simplistic and transactional—although recently, in my daily writing practice, I was able to say 'I am worthy of love. I mean that

even if I go on to nothing “more” in my life, I have done enough, accomplished enough, have intrinsic value’ (Moores, 2020). I proudly made this revelation to a person who is not autistic. His response was, ‘Yes, and?’

**Criterion B: Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour, Interests, or Activities, as Manifested by at Least Two of the Following, Currently or by History (APA, 2013)**

In this poem, I use the octave to describe the experience of learning about the bricklayer’s quotidian passion, and the world of his passion being opened to me. In the sestet, I use many quicker, sharper images of worlds I have not been invited into, but which I know are socially acceptable (if only on the fringes). I finish by inviting the reader into my world.

**Beauty in Brick**

When you and I, in love, hitchhiked to Dover  
The bricklayer picked us up (he called us sweet),  
He pointed at a perfect herringbone –  
Proud and shy at once that it was his.  
Since then, I’ve looked at bricks to spot the pattern  
(The blandest secret beauty there could be)  
I imagine no one knows that it exists  
In plain sight, just bricklayers, and you and I.

Craft beer, fedoras, adult colouring books,  
Slanty sharp hair, cartoon clothing, furies,  
Tattoos and unicycles, moustache wax,  
Are hipsters of us, or just mocking us?  
I have a special interest, a bland beauty:  
If I’m in charge, the schedule will be perfect.

Elite performers practice the same sport or instrument for hours each day. A chef creates and recreates the perfect dish fifty times in an evening. It would be dishonest to pretend that I do not understand that there is a difference between my special interest and theirs. Like most autistic people who navigate more or less successfully through society, I know what things I need to hide from the neurotypical people around me (Parish-Morris, 2019). If I were to talk about all the schedules and timetables I have made for work and pleasure, they would not praise the attention I put into my craft. They would call me weird. The definition eludes me.

***Criterion B1: Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases) (APA, 2013)***

In this poem, I describe two aspects of my childhood experiences of writing: the creative and the technical. In the octave, I use enjambment and run-ons to simulate the sensory excitement I felt at the time. The special attention to hands and feet, with their enormous number of nerve endings, gives precedence to the sensory aspect of autism.

**Hands and Feet**

Miss May sees through my weird into my gold;  
She takes me to the library to write  
A book! To celebrate, I scream and make  
The special feeling when I claw my hands  
My heart jumps and there's pleasure in my veins  
The big kids see the weird but it's so good  
So painful and so tiring I can't do it  
As often as I want to any more.

My feet are different, tingly on the bottom  
When I'm up high and nothing down below  
Like sitting on a cliff with a strong wind  
It climbs up to my stomach, small but big.  
And sometimes my feet move, and I will find  
My toes are tracing out

my name –

or

'help.'

Stereotypy is the classic autistic behaviour: lining toys up, playing with a fidget spinner, flapping arms (McConkey et al., 2009). I've done all those things, especially as a child, and most especially lining things up.

Baron-Cohen (2006) posits the idea of hyper-systemising: Autistic people seek to understand the world through fitting components into a system. According to Baron-Cohen, different systems have different degrees of predictability, which he characterized as percentages on the 'lawful' continuum. He uses the example of a light switch as being 100% lawful: when you flip it, the light turns on every time. Lining up toys is a systemizing behaviour. Social systems are much less lawful, and therefore less predictable.

My favourite toys as a child were Garfield figurines. I would line them up, trying to put them in order of most to least favourite. Most to least favourite of inanimate objects—and even concepts—was and remains a big deal for me. This type of anthropomorphism is more common in autistic people than neurotypicals (White & Remington, 2018, p. 2), and while it is generally a calming and pleasant experience (p. 7), it can cause stress (Negri et al., 2019, p. 293), as it does when I feel guilty for not liking every object the same amount.

As I am right-handed, the right side was my favourite for a while after I understood the difference between right and left. One day, though, I started to feel guilty, as though I were hurting the left side's feelings, so I changed favourites. I then felt guilty again, and also a bit resentful—the right side, after all, was my real favourite. I decided that the fairest way to handle it was to switch favourite sides every few months. One day Mom explained to me that Uncle Ron was her half-brother. When I asked what that meant, she joked, 'It means this side (pointing at Uncle Ron's left) is my brother and this side (pointing at his right) isn't.' I said, relieved, 'Good, that's the side that's my favourite right now.'

An anthropomorphised system becomes more social (therefore less lawful), and deciphering my own feelings is hard. In my line-ups, the toys in the middle of the line were trickier to place. I had to line them up over and over to get it right. I also felt guilty about not being fair to the ones that were not my favourites. I still collect and order things, but now I use Marie Kondo's (2014) question (Does it spark joy?) with everything I own and categorize by more objective criteria—my books are all my favourites and are organized by colour, for example.

Stereotypy helped me to understand unusual occurrences in my life. One day, my grade one teacher changed all of our desks around. From that day on, I would make desks out of paper and arrange the Garfield toys at them. Then I would say, 'We have to switch classrooms,' move to a different spot, and arrange everything again. As a teacher, I still love arranging desks, although planning it on paper is the fun part—carrying it out is not the point. The point is the ritual, its endless permutations, and the flow state it inspires (Milton, 2017).

Physical stereotypy is less about the ritual and more about the sensory experience. The claw hands are a way I figured out as a child to release (I think) adrenaline into my bloodstream. It feels like a jolt of intense pleasure and slight anxiety at the same time, and I can feel it course

through my body. I eventually learned to do it without clawing my hands, just by internally making a little release. This way, I can control whether it starts in my arms or in my torso. It leaves me feeling wiped out.

I used to lie on my bed making schedules and find my feet writing words on the wall. It was unconscious, just writing my name over and over. I wonder now if it was an unconscious use of language to integrate my identity with my body. One day when I was a teenager, I realized it was not my name I was writing, but *help*. Soon after, I moved away from the turbulent life of my mother and stepfather to live with my father and stepmother. I stopped writing *help* after that.

***Criterion B2: Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behaviour (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat the same food every day) (APA, 2013)***

Many of my early childhood memories are of terrible novel experiences: too many forks in a fancy restaurant, not knowing how to eat a lobster, freezing on the bus because I was not used to ringing a bell to signal that I wanted to get off; even now trying to figure out a new public transportation system is awful for me—not the subway maps and bus schedules (those are lovely), but figuring out how to pay my fare. In this poem, I write about these horrifying situations.

In the fourth line of the sestet, I break out from the blank verse to show the escalating anxiety of having to face something scary in order to avoid something scarier before returning to the comforting rhythm in the end.

I Don't Pretend that Travelling Alone Is Fun Anymore

I've learned that if there are too many forks  
To stop myself from crying, and to stay.  
The restaurant will often post a menu  
Outside, and if they don't, I'll look online.  
But it is hard and sometimes I'll just find  
The Keg, although the food is just all right.  
It's worth it for the rest of knowing what  
Is coming. Dinner should be comforting.

I've learned to watch the people on the platform  
To see the rules of paying fares and lines  
And if I have to, I can be so brave

If that's the only way to see you in New Jersey on New Year's Eve, even if  
the bus is empty and I am so afraid and empty and lost and you seem to  
be so far away so far away

What will I do when you're not there to show me  
How to eat and how to take the bus?

There is a particular binary in our culture that I find troubling. On one hand, adulthood is presented as achieving financial and housing independence (Hoolachan et al., 2017, p. 65); on the other hand, our media celebrates mavericks and dreamers who prioritize emotional success. Prioritizing a stable job and home is portrayed as a failure of self, leading to midlife crisis (Freund & Ritter, 2009; Hermans & Oles, 1999); maturity is presented as a function of disappointment and lack of energy to have adventures into the unknown every day.

Daily adventures in the unknown sound horrible to me. There is nothing better than knowing what I am going to be doing today. I pre-game restaurant menus, I mentally rehearse conversations, and I live in a beautiful rut. Not that I cannot break out of the rut with enjoyment; I just need a bit of mental rehearsal and a lot of warning.

***Criterion B3: Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest) (APA, 2013)***

If You Asked One Hundred Autistic People

'What is your special interest?', you would see  
One hundred soft and crooked secret smiles,  
Two hundred warm and sparkling wrinkled eyes,  
Some flapping arms, some jumping legs, some still.  
With sensitive equipment, you would find  
No more than six thousand peaceful happy beats  
Of hearts, in bodies soft with relaxed joy;  
Relaxed excitement cannot be contained.

You couldn't see the billions of lives made  
Utopian, poor neurotypical!  
Increasing boundless universes jumping  
The everything and nothing of perfection  
The joyful permutations of our search  
And easy grasp of wonder in our minds.

Perseverative interests and self-stimulatory activities often appear on autistic children's education plans as something to be extinguished. When I was entering the field of special education, there was a belief that if we could get rid of the behaviours, we could get rid of the autism—always taken for granted as the underlying goal. This belief persists, despite criticism from autistic and neurotypical researchers (Rosenblatt, 2018; Lacruz-Perez et al., 2021). In other circles, however, perseverative interests are now known as 'special interests' (Koenig & Williams, 2017, p. 2), and perspective on their functionality has shifted (p. 8).

We have recently become aware of girls being underdiagnosed for autism, in part because they 'often have more age-appropriate interests, such as dolls, horses or princesses' (Volkers, 2018). More normative special interest topics unintentionally assist in what is known as social camouflage, the masking of autistic traits in neurotypical environments (Milner et al., 2019). Camouflage can also be intentional, as in the case of teaching oneself to make eye contact. This 'appropriateness' of interests is not only a factor for identifying autistic girls and women: How many birdwatchers or train spotters may be exhibiting autistic special interests (Swift, 2013)?

***Criterion B4: Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement) (APA, 2013)***

In this poem, I contrast two anxiety responses, mine and my ex-husband's, as well as two of my sensory responses. I use short, lurching phrases in the octave, demonstrating the sensation of airplane turbulence, to which I respond with pleasure and excitement. At the same time, my ex has anxiety from lack of control over the environment. In the sestet, he asserts his control over his social environment, causing an anxiety reaction in the same part of my body where I felt elation earlier.

#### Turbulence

Without a warning, while they serve the meals –  
 I have my water, wine, tomato juice;  
 You have your diet coke, your magazines –  
 A roller coaster bump, my eyes light up.  
 I see your fear; my stomach feels such joy –  
 Another roller coaster bump, I laugh –  
 I try to hold on to three things at once.  
 Unfortunately, it's the wine that spills.

Without a warning, when you're feeling bored –  
You turn on your approval until we need it –  
You make my stomach scared, and then you soothe;  
It magnifies my gratitude for peace.  
I like my turbulence better, but I have learned  
To live with yours, a stranger kind of joy

I find it fascinating that sensory processing differences were excluded from the *DSM* until the fifth edition. For me, the sensorimotor aspects are fundamental to my autism.

Sensory behaviours are classified as *seeking* and *avoiding*, both of which can interfere with social interactions. Hilton et al. (2007, p. 170) note that autistic people often avoid interactions that are too overwhelming (too noisy, too much light), or are distracted from interactions by seeking sensory input (staring at a patterned shirt, smelling perfume). These seeking/avoiding behaviours also impact executive functioning skills, such as inhibition control and decision making (Pastor-Cerezuela et al., 2020, p. 20).

Autistic people tend to go into a state of physiological arousal easily, are diagnosed with anxiety disorders at a higher rate than the general population, and are more likely to have extreme reactions to anxiety, all connected with the amygdala (Theoharides et al., 2019, p. 1). One way that autistic people manage anxiety is by managing sensory input, through self-isolation or sensory breaks (Fricker, 2020, p. 19).

**Criterion C: Symptoms Must Be Present in the Early Developmental Period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities or may be masked by learned strategies in later life) (APA, 2013)**

In this poem, I use a third-person description of my younger self, creating distance between me and my past, and a closeness between my current self and the reader.

### My Living Room

That little boy is staring at the carpet  
 Not touching it, the weave is just too rough  
 But staring, at the shapes made by the pattern  
 The shapes are countries, continents, a world.  
 He doesn't understand that different countries  
 Have different ways of doing things from his.  
 Imagining is hard, so he can't see  
 Scenes in his mind, just reruns of his life.

Picturing that carpet in my mind  
 Is the nearest to heaven I think I can get  
 I feel at one with everything I've known  
 I feel no need to know anything else.  
 Love, when I leave the world for good, I hope  
 The room has ugly carpeting and you.

In my childhood, Barry Levinson's 1988 film *Rain Man* was really the only popular culture reference to autism. My father, a special education teacher, had some experience with autism, but not much—his specialty was intellectual disabilities. Both of my parents had suffered intense trauma, had had adverse interactions with the health and education systems, were of lower socioeconomic status—they lacked all factors more likely to result in a younger diagnosis of autism (Daniels & Mandell, 2014).

Many autistic children with comparatively good communication and adaptive skills are diagnosed either late or not at all (Cane, 2015 p. 22–23). Parents are able to coach children into camouflaging: I can remember (with knots in my stomach) the awful instances of my mother sitting me down and explaining 'the rules of our society' to me.

### **Criterion D: Symptoms Cause Clinically Significant Impairment in Social, Occupational, or Other Important Areas of Current Functioning (APA, 2013)**

After twelve years together, I discovered that my husband had been having affairs and siphoning off money since the very beginning. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon. In a 2020 qualitative analysis, Pearson et al. point out several themes that make this type of abuse more likely to occur in relationships with autistic people (p. 17): compliance, expectation of non-reciprocal relationships, gaslighting, being overly trusting, and missing out on social cues that might indicate manipulation, among others (pp. 14–15). The breakup of

this relationship, described in this poem, was a sad turning point, when I began to be more sensitive to cognitive dissonance.

### Burnout

It took me longer, in the end, as usual –  
I'm smart, but dumb, as Jordan used to say –  
But on the day that I found my first lie,  
And ran away from you, into the dirt,  
My chest a box of fire being crushed with panic,  
Something changed within me, finally.  
I'll never live with lies that make me sick;  
Not about love, and not about anything.

So, thanks, I guess, for this two-sided gift,  
It wasn't on my list, but now it is.  
I'd rather be alone in my apartment,  
My stomach warm and calm with honesty,  
Than out there where the world is living lies  
And angry at me for my silent truth.

There is a dark side to camouflage: autistic burnout, the depression-like syndrome that comes from expending an inordinate amount of emotional energy on camouflage (Mandy, 2019), minority stress (Botha & Frost, 2018) and life stressors (Raymaker et al., 2020).

For me, autistic burnout comes directly from the cognitive dissonance that is present when rules and behaviour do not make sense, and camouflaging becomes impossible. I understand rules like 'Don't shout fire in a crowded theatre,' and complying with them is completely reasonable to me (I did have to be explicitly taught, though—through a bizarre set of life circumstances, I once did shout fire in a crowded theatre, and I literally laugh now when remembering the stage manager's gentle reminder that this was probably an unwise practice).

Then there are the rules like 'Don't wear hats in school.' It is this kind of rule that keeps me awake at night ruminating. It is illogical, unfair, tramples on freedoms of expression and religion, and I am expected to enforce it with my students. It is stressful. Kapp (2016) points out that an enhanced sense of fairness and a difficulty in perspective-taking create difficulty in moral reasoning for autistic people (p. ii).

Finally, there are rules such as the current ones of the COVID-19 crisis: Social distancing and mask wearing will make us safer. I am happy to follow these rules, both for my own safety and as a pro-social gesture

toward more vulnerable people. They are the perfect rules to me: logical, low-cost, high-reward. It infuriates me that they are not followed, are not enforced, and are actively fought against. Fear of COVID-19 is not what gives me anxiety; it is the illogic of not following the rules (Senland & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2016, p. 3097).

**Criterion E: These Disturbances Are Not Better Explained by Intellectual Disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or Global Developmental Delay (APA, 2013)**

I structure this poem as a dialogue between me and my mother. In the final line, I break the rhythm to something less forced, as I find myself feeling at home with my autistic friend.

They're Jealous

'I don't think they like me too much, mom.'  
 'Remember you're alone because you're smart.  
 You'll be a writer or a scientist.'  
 'I don't feel alone, mom, I feel fine.  
 Why do they talk about things that don't matter?'  
 'Remember you're alone because you're smart.  
 You don't need sports, you'll get an A in math.'  
 'I don't feel alone, mom, I feel fine.'

'Why is it hard to find someone to love?'  
 'Remember you're alone because you're gay.  
 You'll find someone, you just have smaller chances.'  
 'It's not that I feel sad, I'm just alone.  
 Except when I'm at Bettie's house for coffee,  
 Watching TV, laughing in the soft light.'

I tested as gifted in grade three. It was not surprising; my mother was incredibly gifted, and my father moderately so. My brothers and I landed right about in the middle of them IQ-wise.

There is a prevailing myth that gifted people, especially gifted children, have poor social skills (Galloway & Porath, 1997, p. 118). It certainly relieved my parents—finally an explanation. Mom told me that the other kids would be jealous, thus satisfactorily explaining my friendlessness (though not my brothers' popularity), and that was that. I skipped grade five and assumed that my lack of friends was a combination of peer jealousy and being a year younger.

I lived under that assumption until my first educational psychology course, when the professor astonished me by explaining that gifted kids actually tend to have better social skills than typical kids (see Pontes de Franca Freitas et al., 2014; Galloway & Porath, 1997, for example). I was further astonished to discover that acceleration is nearly uniformly a socially positive experience for gifted kids (Assouline et al., 2015, p. 59).

As a lot of the bullying had been about my gender presentation and sexual orientation, after I came out, I shifted the explanation to my being gay; but I never really fit into the queer community, and I had similarly terrible social skills at clubs, when dating, when married.... And frankly, most of the gay people I know, intelligent or not, also find me peculiar.

### **Severity Level:**

#### **Level 3: Requiring Very Substantial Support**

#### **Level 2: Requiring Substantial Support**

#### **Level 1: Requiring Support (APA, 2013)**

##### **Choir**

This song is sung so strangely, in the dark.  
The singers are divided into rooms.  
How can we sing together without hearing  
The other voices making up the choir?  
I guess they find it easier recording  
Separately, then putting it together  
Unwanted noise is edited away  
It's just the voices they want to put in.

It's pale, this sound, it's not what it could be,  
Conducted by a person we don't know  
Our voiceless voices straining in our rooms  
More like an echo than a melody  
If the echo's the only song we're allowed,  
I don't want it; I don't want to sing.

If I had to narrow down my opposition to the medical model of autism diagnosis to one thing, it would be this chart. When we describe levels of severity, there is a judgement being made. Even when we talk about something not being severe, we are viewing it with a negative lens. No one talks about severe giftedness or says that someone is not severely gifted; giftedness is something that we want. To be a person with autism is to be diagnosed with a mental disorder. Following the diagnosis, the disordered

are split into levels of disorder. Autism is something that we hate, fear, are disgusted by, pity.

In my research for this paper, it was always the articles written by autistic people, with research that included autistic voices, that resonated for me. Neurotypical researchers divide us by levels of functioning, interpret our behaviour in terms of obtaining goals, describe us as having no empathy nor need for love. In this poem, I use the metaphor of a divided and silent choir, being conducted by someone from the outside. The conductor chooses whose voices matter and whose can be silenced for the good of the song. I call into question the validity of the song itself.

And there is my diagnosis dilemma. I believe my way of being and thinking and behaving and interacting in my world are described well by autism. It explains myself to myself in a way that makes me feel comfortable and satisfied. It brings me joy. Maybe an assessment would confirm it; maybe not. I want a diagnosis because I want an expert to confirm my feelings. I do not want a diagnosis because I do not want to have to rely on an expert to confirm my self-knowledge.

But mainly I do not want a diagnosis because I am not ill.

## Notes

1. Autism is what I would consider a core identity schema; it is not an aspect of the self that can be separated from the self and leave the identity intact. In this way, it is similar to gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural or racial identity. For that reason, I avoid using 'person first' terminology (i.e., person with autism) unless in direct quotation.

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**Sean Erin Moores** is a graduate student in *Interdisciplinary Studies at Athabasca University*. He received a bachelor's degree in *Elementary Education from the University of Alberta in Edmonton*. He is a teacher in *Surrey, British Columbia*. Prior to that, he was an instructor of *Human Development in the Counselling and Addictions Counselling programs at Rhodes Wellness College in Vancouver*. His academic interests include *death, trauma, joy and writing*.

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## OtherWise: Writing Unbearable Encounters Through the Register of Black Life

*Foluke Taylor*

Counsellor/Psychotherapist, Writer, Training Consultant

### **Abstract**

This paper explores themes of the liberatory in therapeutic writing. It includes a narrative account of a series of difficult encounters at a writing for wellbeing conference and then reflects on this through an 'otherwise' lens. By engaging Saidiya Hartman's term *otherwise*, the author highlights possibilities for practice in the field as it navigates the unbearable encounter of *race*. Terms such as *therapeutic writing*, *creative writing for therapeutic purposes* (CWTP), and *writing for wellbeing*, which do not explicitly reference the liberatory, or processes of 'getting free', do not account for the experience, knowledge, and possibilities of Black life. Writing OtherWise is proposed as a mode of practice that creates capacity for being with the difficult encounter and expanded possibilities for writing as personal and collective freedom-making.

**Keywords:** Black life, therapeutic writing, race, wellbeing, otherwise

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### Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (1)

Let's start with D'Angelo and the story of the conference. You need to know that D'Angelo is singing through my earphones, playing on repeat. Play 'Cruisin'<sup>1</sup> now if you can. Or if not, imagine lush, languid beats; imagine a singing voice that is liquid precision; imagine bass, tenor, and falsetto in the intimate conversation that somehow calls your body to join. Now you know what it is that has me quietly rocking in the foyer when what I really want to do is run for the door. This is why you need to know about D'Angelo. Without D'Angelo there would be no conference, no workshop, and no story to tell. The opening scene takes place in the foyer, where the details of the workshop I will be facilitating later in the day are

pinned up alongside others. Delegates are moving between descriptions making selections and adding their names to lists. Some workshops, because they already have a full quota of names, have been closed. My workshop—open only to delegates identifying as black, brown, or of colour—is currently a blank sheet, an empty bar with a solitary name written and then crossed out, which somehow feels worse than empty. I watch as people squint to read and then blink back their surprise. One delegate tuts and shakes his head; remarks sharply to his companion, ‘Well this isn’t the way to solve the problem, is it!’ Though I’m not sure why I care, his disapproval lands hard, sets off a whole chain of negative thoughts. Hence the need for D’Angelo; for turning up the volume and cruisin’ away as a way to stay in the right conversation.

### **The Problem (...this isn’t the way to solve the problem is it?)**

The problem being what exactly? For me, the problem is that my workshop ‘Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination’ does not sit comfortably here. It raises uncomfortable questions, even while constituting part of an ‘equalities’ strand specifically set up to attend to diversity, inclusion, and difference. The words ‘diversity,’ ‘inclusion,’ and ‘difference’ each carry their own set of problem questions: Who is different, and from who are they different? Who is to be included and who is doing the including? How is it that we can achieve a certain diversity—as in be together in a space or institution with our various differences—and still remain in the problem? The delegate who took issue with my workshop did so on the grounds that it is the wrong way to deal with *the problem*. To which problem were they referring? They did not specify, but we would be justified in assuming they were referring to the problem of race and/or racism. What interests me is that a space for Black participants was formulated in that delegate’s mind *only* as a problem or an attempt to deal with a problem, which leads me back to the problem, and set of problem questions, that I am attempting to examine here: How do we recognise the *what else* of Black life; account for what is in excess of a problem; make space for Blackness as more than a problem of racism? How might we, in the midst of the undeniable problems of racism, formulate and describe a workshop intended as a space in which Black people might not (for a moment) be or attend to a problem, and instead attend to our being? Poet Dionne Brand (Graham Foundation, 2018), speaking of language and narrative, offers the context of the problem: ‘[O]ur lived todays are cluttered in frequencies of oppression and responses to oppression...in the presence of our bodies all narrative

utterances are full of attention to racism, bracketed by racism, animated by racism.'

I draw on Brand's work as one writer among many (e.g., Sharpe 2016; Hartman 2019; Quashie 2021) who observe and demonstrate in their writing, being/seeing/imagining otherwise within the inescapable problem; practices of freedom in unfreedom. Quashie writes of what is possible when antiblackness is displaced from the centre of our thinking—a move that does not make the encounter any less difficult but does create breathing space in which to consider that encounter. From here, I think with McKittrick and the frustration that she experiences when attempting to put algorithms into conversation with creative texts. She learns something about herself, concluding that her research questions 'emerge from difficult and often unbearable encounters' (McKittrick, 2021, p. 120). I do not propose an algorithm for the unbearable encounter but think instead about the ways that creative writing and its non-algorithmic processes<sup>2</sup> can be practices of freedom for unbearable times.

### ***Writing For Liberation: Other, Other-ness, OtherWise***

*Writing for wellbeing, therapeutic writing, creative writing for therapeutic purposes* (hereafter CWTP), are terms used to describe how creative writing practices can, in different ways, assist our living. These terms variously articulate the shared goal of wellbeing while also leaving the notion of wellbeing largely undefined. It becomes a space open to multiple interpretations. I add the term *liberatory writing* here since through the register of Black life, writing for wellbeing cannot be viewed separately from, or outside of, attention to the social conditions that threaten, disrupt, and deny wellbeing. Liberatory writing aligns with liberation psychology and its understanding of the dialectical, dialogical, relational, and co-created processes of transformation 'in which we are both liberated and liberate... [and where] no one person does the "liberating"' (Romero & Afuape, 2015). Where creative writing is praxis (action and reflection [Freire, 1972]) and offers space for the development of critical consciousnesses, it has liberatory—and therefore therapeutic—potential.

In 'Writing Against Othering' Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, (2012) note how processes of Othering<sup>3</sup> can be disguised by the language of diversity. They propose modes of writing that might resist othering (specifically narrative, dialogue, and reflexivity) but approach this from the perspective of the researcher who 'wishes to know the Other in order to give a voice to

people who were previously ignored' (p. 299). The aim is to resist othering, but the framing of *the Other* as being outside of or ignored by the field (or researcher) is problematic. The conference I described here also wishes, I believe, to resist processes of othering. It establishes an equalities strand to encourage diversity and inclusion. The problem lies in how to conceptualise and practice this inclusion without a) centring *here* as the place to be and b) creating an us (who are here) and them (who are not here and who therefore need to be included). Inclusion becomes an othering process, where the problem lies not in the registering of (real) absences, but in the binary formulations of inside/outside, us/other, that accept and recreate the very logics they attempt to disrupt. I propose OtherWise as another location from which to think and develop practice. The word OtherWise is taken from Hartman's layered description of 'wayward' which includes, 'the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies.' (2019, p. 227)

OtherWise evokes particular modes of experiencing, relating, and knowing as they emerge through *and* as Black life, as it survives a world predicated on antiblackness. I use upper and lower case here in a deliberate attempt to hold space for two separate words, 'other' and 'wise', as they compound to create something new. I want to emphasise the constellation of meaning held by the multiple registers of each component alongside their compound form. OtherWise is offered as a space from which we might better consider the relation of creative writing, therapeutics, and what is referred to variously as Black livingness,<sup>4</sup> Black aliveness,<sup>5</sup> Black Being,<sup>6</sup> and/or Black life.<sup>7</sup> Specifying Black life here is not to suggest an exploration of concern only to Black people. On the contrary, it is a specific invitation to reflect on all of our dis/interests in Black life and what they might tell us about need and possibility in this field. Black life is positioned here as a space of possibility—the edge of exclusion that is also threshold and gateway; an entry point to possibly the *only* space through which we might genuinely consider a world in which *all life matters*. The relevance of writing OtherWise (as liberatory practice), extends beyond Black life and—in its challenge to an anthropocentric, white supremacist framing of life—beyond the human (Gumbs 2020; Scott 2000). I suggest that practices and tools already existing within the writing-for-wellbeing field also lend themselves to writing OtherWise and attending differently to racialised experience and the difficult encounter of *race*.

Writing OtherWise means thinking beyond representational strategies and the crude categorisations of identity that they necessitate. A potential starting point, and the one from which I work here, is *the otherness of creative writing itself*. In illustration, I draw on the work of Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter—philosopher, dramatist, essayist, critic, and giant of afro-diasporic, *Black Atlantic*<sup>8</sup> thought. Wynter’s work has enabled me to put thought to the sense of the frustration I feel whenever I encounter attempts to explore othering by focusing on *difference*. Work on difference—which I am not suggesting is per se without value—tends to make its point by highlighting the ways in which we are all, in some way or another, different from each other and therefore potentially Other. Burnham’s concept of ‘social GRRRAACCEESS’<sup>9</sup> (Burnham, 2012) is an example of this approach. It is a model that is still widely used despite having been critiqued for treating social inequalities as mutually exclusive and therefore being limited by a failure to account for or speak to intersectional experience (Birdsey & Kustner, 2020). I include here its failure to account for the ways that otherness is located on, and clings to, *some bodies in particular*. We may all be different, but to live in a black, brown, queer, trans, or differently abled body, for example, is often to live a quotidian sense of otherness that unsettles the comparative framework that would attempt to normalise difference as a series rather than a hierarchical ordering and valorisation of human life.

Wynter (1976) avoids this by questioning the normative foundations of our understanding of the human, narrated as the story of Man and Man’s Others. The story she tells is that of a specific set of ideas that emerged through the period we know as the ‘enlightenment’. She invites us to consider the figure of Man (white, male, able-bodied, straight, cis-gendered, independent, property-owning, rational) as he narrated himself by defining himself *against* an Other (Black, female, queer, dependent, poor, assetless, irrational). Man narrates a hierarchy in which he constitutes the uppermost echelon and in which his *Others* (including the non-human) are, to varying classifiable degrees, lower and lesser. This narrative—with its biocentric basis and fundamental racism (McKittrick, 2021)—has fundamentally shaped our ideas of what it means to be human; ideas rooted in and inseparable from the racialised, gendered, and classed hierarchies through which they were born and through which this story is told and (constantly) reproduced. The desire to establish historical, political, and social distance from the white supremacist foundations of this narrative may be understandable but does not move us in the direction of

social justice. On the contrary, to believe or suggest that we have moved away (or progressed) from this racist science story is to turn away from how it lives on in, and as, the philosophical underpinnings of the very disciplines of study with which we are concerned, and which are viewed as primary sites of knowledge and knowledge production.<sup>10</sup> It is important to understand how the grappling we do with the lived realities of the hierarchical ordering of difference (or human life) takes place within a system of knowledge *based on Othering* and a refusal of the Other's knowledge. Wynter observes that Man, while literally penning up his Others (on reservations and plantations), pens along with them their ways of knowing—the *modes of cognition* (p. 83) that are heretical to his conceptualised orthodoxy. She highlights one exception:

THE MODE OF COGNITION THAT WAS PENNED UP WAS A MODE WHICH WESTERN MAN (ALL OF US, SINCE IT IS NO LONGER A RACIAL BUT A CULTURAL TERM) REMAINS AWARE OF ONLY THROUGH POETRY – AND POETRY AS THE GENERIC TERM FOR ART. (p. 83)

Poetry as a way of knowing is retained but reserved differently—not penned *outside* as Other but *inside*, in a defined disciplinary space called *art*. McKittrick draws from Wynter's work to critique this enclosure of art and the disciplinary processes that in their relentless categorisation 'stack and bifurcate seemingly disconnected categories and geographies [and] disciplines [that] differentiate, split, and create fictive distances between us' (2021, p. 36). She notes the particular bifurcation of creativity and science, and how this split reifies racial difference. In thinking, for example, about the way in which students are encouraged to take up STEM<sup>11</sup> subjects over humanities, we might consider how—as a way of *knowing*—future-oriented science is deemed more trustworthy than poetry. Poetry, though appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, is not generally considered scientific, and as such is not readily valued as knowledge or knowledge-producing. We who are Man's Others have been (and are) viewed similarly—as unscientific, irrational, and unproductive. In our Other-ness, Black life and poetry inhabit a devalued common ground, the meanings and possibilities of which are denied and reduced by the dominance of what we call whiteness. Whiteness is a racialised position that, in refusing to know itself, enacts coloniality by assuming itself (and its knowledges) universal. Hill (2017) offers poetry as 'capable of facilitating an engagement with the production of meaning...through insurgent interruptions of dominant narratives' (p. iv) and therefore has potential for decolonial projects. Black life is also insurgent, also an interruption to a dominant narrative of the

racialised hierarchy of Man and his Others. In the relation of poetry and Black life we find liberatory possibility.

### Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (2)

Nobody told me to do this—to attempt to squeeze Black life into a conference space that is overwhelmingly white and which I am attending for the first ever time. Even after I walk away and make the decision to avoid the lobby and any further trouble around the signup board—the difficult encounters keep themselves coming. At lunch for instance, when two people ask me at two different times what I am doing here. When I tell them, they look uncomfortable, as in two-second pauses before the next words come, as in faces desperately blanking themselves to avoid betraying what is behind them. We come from very different places—geographically, professionally, and culturally, but recognising this does nothing to mitigate what is unbearable and somehow unsayable. I myself am not exempt. I feel the awkwardness too. Here we are with our shared ground comprising writing practice and having chosen the same fish meal from the buffet. The proposal for a Black workshop space was distilled by my long experience of living while Black, examined and analysed through the even longer lens of the transdisciplinary field known as Black, diaspora, and/or Africana studies. This knowledge was alive and living in me, but not in the near vicinity of my lunch companions, not quite available for use in the heat of my evisceration. We are not able to orientate ourselves into proximity, and so we look at each other blankly and try to be cordial in our lostness. The OtherWise of Black life is long and deep—coeval to so-called ‘modernity’. We should not be surprised that it cannot be navigated or explained in fifteen minutes over a fish fillet.

Also,

I absolutely do not want to.

### **Knowledge and Knowing – Grounds for Inclusion**

Gary Younge once made the point that Black history month is where Black people get to teach white people their history—a humorous way to describe the problem of a certain burden with which Black life is achingly familiar. Education is important, but the labour of it (including emotional labour) is tiring and mostly unpaid. Black studies programmes exist, but outside of this, curricula are rarely constructed with an understanding of Black life as knowledge-producing and epistemically valuable.

Consequently, it is not unusual to inhabit a shared field of practice (e.g., therapeutic writing) yet be without a common language with which to meet. I would aver that even if the first delegate had been less opinionated

and more curious, and my lunch companions less embarrassed and more able to ask why the workshop had been set up in that way, we would still have struggled in conversation. We needed (and did not have) common terms of reference. Strategies for inclusion often miss this need, particularly when their focus is on having different faces in a room (institution, advertising campaign, etc.). A focus on appearing diverse—on what we look like in general—bypasses crucial questions about knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, what experiences, ways of knowing, cultural and social productions are present here? How are these recognised and valued as knowledge? Which of these knowledges are considered essential (core curriculum) and which end up in more marginal spaces of specialism, supplementary seminar, or elective—in the space of minoritised ‘difference’? Or, put differently, how many of you, having read this far, are still wondering what kinds of knowledge I am talking about?

### **A List (things I am talking about)**

List making is a writing practice that I use and return to frequently. I like the open-endedness of lists; the ways they serve to map (but not enclose) a territory; how they can be brief and also contain multiple starting points for longer, deeper explorations. Lists help us know what needs to be gathered to keep on being and/or to make things anew, the conceptual ingredients required to break out of the violent hold of hierarchical ordering. The following is the beginning of a list of terms and ideas that might have supported conversation in the difficult encounter:

#### ***Black(ness)***

Used to describe people with particular phenotypical features and levels of melanin—eumelanin and pheomelanin—that produce a range of skin colours (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021).

Outcome of the non-scientific, and non-evidence-based idea of race; a process of racialisation *turning certain human beings into ‘Black’ humans* (Kinouani, 2021); a socially constructed phenomenon; the West’s *most iconic creation* (Moten, 2003, p. 33).

An invention, coeval with the invention of whiteness.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

A word used to describe people of African descent.

A word used to describe, under the umbrella of political Blackness,<sup>[13](#)</sup> people of African and Asian descent, and from other non-white groups with a shared history of colonisation in one form or another. A term used to describe a commitment to liberatory politics (Andrews, 2018).

An interdisciplinary study; a field that has become less interested in the fictive construction (of race) itself than in what can be learned by observing and thinking about how this fiction is lived as reality (McKittrick, 2021).

### ***Diaspora***

‘[T]he scattering of people across spaces...’ is how McKittrick starts to define diaspora in a glossary of terms ‘for readers who don’t deal very well with unknown words or who want to understand everything’ (McKittrick, 2021, p. 171). The entry for diaspora, which spans two pages, is filled with ellipses—pauses that somehow signal acknowledgment the impossibility of comprehensive definition. Diaspora is defined as desire... relationship... sociocultural rupture... return... remittance... sites that map Holocaust memorials... songs that sample the music of Bob Marley played on local radio stations. The form that McKittrick uses on the page evokes diaspora as ‘processes of unsettling, recombination, hybridization, and cut-and-mix’ (Hall cited by Keguro, 2019, p. 21). The layering and juxtaposition of terms evokes Keguro’s *Frottage* (p. 28), a work that is interested in ‘tracking the black diaspora as dispersal and dissonant intimacy’ and as ‘a multiplicity of sense-apprehension.’ Diaspora is always in excess of the words with which we attempt to capture it and carries its own poetic force. Nayyirah Waheed (2013), in a poem titled ‘myriad/disconnect,’ offers diaspora as ‘breathtaking,’ ‘in stunning pain’ and ‘a great many things all at once.’ For those of us who want to understand everything, *a great many things* at once provides a place to pause...

### ***Black Atlantic***

A term proposed by Gilroy (Gilroy, 1993); identifying a culture that is not specifically Black African, American, Caribbean, or British but an *all-of-these-at-once-culture* transcending nationality and ethnicity and making something new.

### ***The Wake and the Weather***

Sharpe (2016) thinks about the afterlives of transatlantic slavery and deploys the term ‘wake’ and its multiple registers to describe the persistence of the past into the present. Sharpe describes how logics from the historical past, that required Black labour while simultaneously denying its value and the inherent value of Black life, continue and are reproduced in the present. She invites us to consider how we inhabit and are inhabited by the Wake; to consider terror as visited on Black life from the perspective of the ways we live in and

despite that terror. The terror of antiblackness—a total climate—is described as *the weather*.

### ***Black Aliveness/Livingness***

Black life as it moves through the wake/weather of antiblackness; the excess; the more than problem; that which survives; that which insists as in ‘—we, *Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake*’ (Sharpe, 2016, p. 11).

### ***Black Feminisms/OtherWise***

We cannot think OtherWise without referencing Black feminism, the scholarship and praxes that foreground Black women as *intellectual producers, creative agents and political subjects* (Nash, 2019, p. 5), and within which, thinking OtherWise is a major strand. Psychotherapist and Black feminist Gail Lewis’s<sup>14</sup> powerful evocation of OtherWise has stayed with me partly because her description of visualsonic resistance<sup>15</sup> touched, and therefore drew upon (and on) the archives of my own memory. Lewis remembers—as do I—a predigital age of unlicensed radio where the airwaves were tightly controlled and where Black music, the music we wanted to hear, was not deemed worthy of play time by legal stations. There were very few, if any, opportunities to enter the mainstream to broadcast for ourselves, and so-called ‘pirate’ radio stations became the lifeline, the line that answered life’s call for the music that could (and did) nourish and sustain. For this to happen, transmitters had to be positioned in elevated spaces across the city. The authorities forbid this, and set themselves the task of hunting, raiding, and confiscating this equipment. In a tense, ongoing dance, Black life wove its way across the blocks, the rooftops, tower to tower, flipping and moving and making its escape. As listeners, when the broadcasts cut to white noise, we sometimes let the dial sit to maintain the frequency, but even if we immediately switched to other stations, we knew to keep checking back. We knew that Black life was literally moving above our heads, in the process of making its (re)connections, and so we waited. Its movement was OtherWise: silent, unauthorised, and largely unseen but always alive; the transmission of life that was always on its way coming (again). In this telling, OtherWise is the life that is there to feel and know *if* we have the senses for it; when our aerials are set to it; when we are tuned to pick up its multiple, and moving, registers.

The omissions of this list are far more than the inclusions. It is offered as the briefest of orientations for these scenes of difficult encounter, so that

we might consider them OtherWise. OtherWise is wisdom available to all when we have the courage to set our antennae towards it; when we can receive it and in the process start to move away from Whiteness as a practice of hierarchical being. I draw on this wisdom here with specific attention to imagination and recognition, history and memory, and knowledge.

### Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (3)

*If we only view the margin as a sign marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then hopelessness and despair penetrate the very ground of our being. It is there, in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk. (hooks, 1989, p. 21)*

*As a writer reading, I came to realise the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. (Morrison, 1992, p. 17)*

*Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination.* This is the title of the workshop I will be facilitating. I have not been able to fit enough Toni Morrison and bell hooks into the 50-word synopsis for the conference brochure. It could be that I am the only person here who really knows what I mean. As we move between the first and second workshops we have chosen, I glance at the boards. Still no signups for my workshop. At this stage, it could be that even I do not know what I mean. I guess 50 words is not enough. One day I will write more. Today though, I listen to D'Angelo.

## Imagination and Recognition

When titling this workshop, I drew from bell hooks's and Toni Morrison's writings on margins, imagination, and Black life. I also read Brown (2017) on emergent strategy and was encouraged to propose a space in which the outcomes were not predefined. Brown describes imagination as 'the only known edge of existence'<sup>16</sup> and our current circumstances as an *imagination battle*: 'We are living in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fright, other' (p. 16).

The idea of an imagination battle echoes with another idea from psychoanalysis, specifically the concept of projection. Projection—a psychological defence mechanism that works by placing one's own (often

negative) traits in another (person/object)—is a concept familiar enough that it features in discussion both inside and outside the field of psychoanalysis. Less discussed, within and outside of the field, is how projection is shaped by, and within, *and is inseparable from*, the total weather of an antiblack climate. Racism is, as Brown alludes, the projection of a collective imaginary. Ancestral imagination as a formulation allows us to conceptualise—by naming—what we are living in at the same time as it also speaks to the ways we might also live beyond what we are in. Through imagination—by imagining *OtherWise*—new worlds become possible. Imagination, as both technology and method, is here a practice of freedom; a way to get free. Titling the workshop ‘Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination’ was an attempt to capture some of these ideas in words; an attempt to evoke the wide margins of poetry as spaces in which we might meet the marginalised experiences of Black life; an attempt to evade the capture of the white gaze and the limits of its Africanist persona; an attempt to imagine beyond the edges of (antiblack) existence; an attempt to live, and be, *OtherWise*; an attempt to show this is what we do.

Morrison’s dreamer, viewing Black life via the projected light of the white gaze and unable to clearly see, misses what, and more crucially *who*, is before them. This engenders, from the perspective of Black life, an ongoing struggle with being repeatedly mis-seen and unrecognised. Whilst opacity (Glissant & Wing, 1997) has value in Black life (what is not seen might also escape appropriation or attack), recognition is a psychic need. Failures of recognition have psychic consequences (Benjamin, 1990; McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007). Despite being fully visible and present, Black life finds itself relegated to the social periphery, hypervisible and invisible (Fanon, 2008), an experience also described (Greene & Stewart, 2015) as *living in the Blackground*. However we describe the experience, an absence of mutual recognition in relationships diminishes the quality of mental space that connects us—the third space that Benjamin refers to as *intersubjective relatedness*. Without the recognition of racial trauma, and racially embodied trauma (Menakem, 2021), the space in which we might make links between feelings, thoughts, and context is also diminished. Writing, as a practice that facilitates, opens, or expands these *third spaces* is liberatory (and therefore therapeutic). If our intention is to be therapeutic, our work must attend to the failures of recognition that mitigate against these spaces and their being available and open.

I conceived of ‘Space for Black Imagination’ as a move in this direction, albeit a move that another conference delegate objected to on the basis that it was *not the way to solve the problem*. To my mind, this objection emanates from multiple failures of both recognition and imagination. The delegate is unable to either recognise or imagine Black life as existing *outside of being a problem*. Let us not dismiss this as an individual failure, but rather understand that, in the context of a world thoroughly conditioned by antiblackness and standing in the space of an unnamed whiteness, this view *makes sense*. McKittrick (2021) describes this as the *commonsense of antiblackness*; the conditions of an antiblack world being such that Black is constituted as a problem, is always a problem, is always (only ever) in need of a solution. What if this person spoke aloud what others were thinking? Projection works to foreclose imagination and position Blackness such that it cannot be seen outside of a problem-solving rubric, where ‘*what is expected from black people is [only] blackness*’ (Quashie, 2021, p. 10). Quashie invites us to both recognise and imagine the aliveness possible in a black world<sup>17</sup>—a world in which ‘*what we expect and get from black people is beingness*.’ To write *Otherwise* is to accept this invitation: to welcome the opportunity to engage the poetic and the *capacious landscape* (Quinn-Hall, 2016) of poetry, as space where recognition and imagination are possible and where an appreciation for the aesthetic of wide margins can be extended into sociopolitical registers.

#### An Unbearable Encounter (4)

The conference is being held in Engineers House in Bristol—a two-storey, porticoed limestone building that, as it looks up to Clifton Down, seems very sure of itself, smug even. It has been here since the 1800s. There is no reason to think it will not be here for hundreds of years to come. The words ‘historic’ and ‘majestic’ whisper themselves up and down its halls and stairways. The students and tutors occupying its rooms spoke of its grandness. So when I entered for the first time as a student in 2016, and all of this was drowned out by the cry of blood—ancestral blood—I felt at odds. Another unbearable encounter.

#### History / Memory

I am deeply grateful to NourbeSe Philip (2018) for her description of time spent at the Gladstone Library in Wales, which offered me a way to conceptualise my trouble with Engineers House. As one of a party of tourists being led on a historical tour through the ruins of Hawarden Castle, Philip describes how, as they enter through what they are told is Leopold’s Gate, the name shocks her. The guide confirms that it is named

after Leopold, the late Belgian King, but is unclear on the details (he visited in 1819). Philip describes the shock of this sudden confrontation with a brutal history—Leopold, creator of the Belgian Congo whose system of extracting wealth involved extensive, population-decimating mutilation and murder of African people. She writes:

Here in the bucolic Welsh countryside the stench of blood is fresh. The past has reached out and touched me. And among these twenty or so people, I am the only one even aware of this man's history. We all troop through King Leo's gate to see the ruins of the castle. What ho! and Tally Ho! *Their history*. My memory. (Hunt & Lundy Martin, 2018, p. 316) [emphasis mine]

I felt at odds with Engineers House in a way that cast a shadow over my excitement to learn. The wariness that emerged in our interaction was compounded in my study group when (like Philips) I felt that *I was the only one*. Writing supported a navigation of these encounters, and a certain flexibility and creative approach within the programme itself also helped. Our learning environment stretched beyond the physical classroom and into the outdoors; we were able to commune with trees, wander down residential streets, and trek uphill to look out over Clifton gorge. The freedom to wander, practice journaling, read, write, and share allowed me to be with what was, even when it was unexpected, unmirrored, and unrecognised. Writing facilitated my *being*; was a reflexive practice through which it was more possible to be with entangled histories and presents, including the memory of slavery and colonialism, and the psychic wear of 'other(ed)-ness.' To write OtherWise is to be prepared to encounter the troubles and violence of the archive without looking away; to reckon with what is and is not considered historical or worthy of note; to account for omissions, erasures, and brutal extractions. OtherWise is writing antennae that track the excess; the outside and beyond of familiar, commonplace, or sanctioned narratives; that make room for the effects, and affects, of that excess—room capacious enough to hold stories of the grand and majestic alongside their difficulty and unbearableness. *Their history, my memory*.

#### An Unbearable Encounter (5)

I am asked to arrive early to be on hand to explain my workshop. I am the only workshop facilitator asked to do this. I am told that they do not feel qualified; that they are not clear about things. I am not clear about things. I am not clear about how I ended up here. I feel angry. I am not clear about why I am replaying D'Angelo over and again or why I have a desire to plug in to the PA system and rock this big bully of a house with some

bassline. Except maybe this is a way to be angry without being seen as the angry Black woman; or a way to drown it all out—the people, the people giving opinions, the people needing clarity, the people abandoning me by their ignorant ‘innocence,’ the people wanting to know and tell. I can feel how much I don’t know, and the much knowing that I need to unknow. I can feel that my body knows something but that what it knows cannot be expressed here. Something like not wanting to explain anything to anybody. After hovering for a minute or two, we quietly cruise away.

### Unknowing, Undiscipline, Making Anew

Unlike some other disciplines, the field of therapeutic writing does not valorise objectivity or insist on transparency and coherence. It can accommodate, but does not demand, positivist knowledge. If anything, research within our field leans toward post-structural approaches and the narrative turn. There is widespread acceptance that the *what we know* is inseparable from our positionalities—the *where we know from*. Programmes currently running<sup>18</sup> cannot (yet) claim a commitment to decolonial methodologies<sup>19</sup> but show some willingness to think creatively when it comes to what can be included and how learning can be evidenced. It is within this context, and buoyed by the ground-shifting work of Katherine McKittrick (2021), that I offer D’Angelo’s groove as *theoretical insight*, as the text with which—in a moment of difficult encounter—I could be with the questions arising. McKittrick offers Black music and cultural production as psychic and physiological experience. She acknowledges the song for helping us ‘think consciousness without being distracted by the demand for clarity’, containing the ‘something else going on’ that is not easily captured by certain other analytics, and performing (referencing Robin James, 2012) the ‘*what we cannot know but love to hear*’ (p. 67).

McKittrick also highlights reading outside ourselves to ‘actively unknow’ ourselves. Practices of therapeutic writing, which commonly draw from a wide range of texts, implicitly embrace ideas of ‘reading outside of’ and ‘actively unknowing.’ I frequently refer to Le Guin’s ideas on *unlearning* and *unteachers* (Le Guin, 1989) and link this to *wake work*, and Sharpe’s call for undiscipline. She observes that we are ‘disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation’ and suggests that there is a need for us to ‘become *undisciplined*’ (2016, p. 13, emphasis mine). As it is used here, undisciplined does not describe being sloppy or lazy, but rather, being *disobedient* (McKittrick, 2021). In stating that current disciplinary structures and methods reify rather than counter antiblackness, both Sharpe and McKittrick cite Wynter’s work on the

human. McKittrick (2015) highlights Wynter's call to undo the 'narratively condemned status' (Wynter, 1994, p. 7) ascribed to Black people within Man's description of the human as *homo sapiens* (the one who knows). She employs the description *homo narrans*—the storytellers, the ones who tell ourselves that we know—and explores how by doing this, we make ourselves. This process of making ourselves—*autopoiesis*—operates with a recursive logic which, by investing in our present normative modes, maintains them.

Writing OtherWise relies on autopoiesis—our capacity to *make ourselves anew* (Gumbs, 2020)—and engages undiscipline, unlearning, and unknowing ourselves as crucial freedom-making practices. These practices are crucial because we will not address the problems we find with the same mind that made them (Moray, 2020). Technology has huge potential, but algorithms can only calculate answers to problems that they already understand ('what we care about comes before the equation' [McKittrick, 2021, p. 109]); algorithms, when applied to nonuniform problems (e.g., the problems of being human), generate unpredictable and incalculable outputs. The poetic, as an alternative mode of cognition with the capacity for undiscipline and absent of the need to know everything, can respond OtherWise to problems. The poetic can cross and refuse disciplinary borders; can refuse hierarchies and disrupt practices of Othering; can assist our unknowing, unlearning, and making ourselves anew.

### An Unbearable Encounter (6)

Post-lunch, and the discomfort I am most concerned with is my own. My fiercest wish is to not be here—so fierce that I am not relieved when I see that there are now two people signed up to attend the workshop. In fact, by committing me to deliver what I have promised, these two names block my exit. Of the unbearable encounters played out here, not following through with the promised space would feel like the worst. I do not want to frustrate Black imagination. Hence, at 3 pm, I am in a small room at the back of Engineer's House, connecting D'Angelo to a speaker and grooving for real. I am happy to see the two names become bodies and other chairs get filled as extra, unsigned delegates arrive. There are smiles and nods but also something else; something tentative and watchful, that can't quite be said; a sense of discomfort that could just be mine but is probably not. Introductions are followed by writing and sharing and laughter and tears. As intimacy grows deeper, sharing becomes possible, including—perhaps only five minutes from the end of the workshop—a confession. The last person to enter the room admits that they themselves objected to the workshop; could not see the need

for this Black space. The reason they signed up they say, was because, as a person of colour, they could. Their intention was to find out what it was all about. They address me directly; ‘So if you don’t mind me asking, what exactly is the point of this?’ Potentially it is the most difficult encounter of the day.

### **OtherWise in a Difficult Encounter**

OtherWise is not an escape from the difficult encounter nor a way of avoiding the problem, which we can never really claim to be outside of. OtherWise here is a mode of practice that refuses the problematising of Blackness; that refuses to accept Black life as consumed by or subsumed within the difficult encounter that we call race.

OtherWise is transdisciplinary; a practice of undiscipline; shifting the grounds of knowledge (how we know and where we know from); shifting the story we tell ourselves about who we are; ‘processes of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing’; ‘sharing stories as creative, rigorous radical theory’ (McKittrick, 2021, p. 73). OtherWise is something like liberation; like escape; like not being able to escape and still trying; like *maroonage*, petit and grand.<sup>20</sup> OtherWise is the place you need to know that you already know; a possible world; the world you make that makes you possible. OtherWise is the re-wording that makes a re-worlding; is more than, open-ended, dynamic, and unpredictable; is the refusal to capture or be captured; is knowledge that resists being grasped, what will not be owned; and is alert to the alarming proximity of comprehend and apprehend; is a pas de deux of infinite generativity and the opacity that guards it; is the joy and mischief mocking the storyteller trying to shape it to beginning–middle–end. The storyteller does her best. She gathers scenes—scenes to think and feel with; scenes to recognise and be surprised by; scenes to write, wander, and wonder with. She writes in anticipation of scenes not yet written, scenes waiting at the edge of existence known as imagination.

#### **Encounter (\*)**

‘What exactly is the point of this?’

I have no ready answer but am at least breathing and being and back in my body from where an emergent response is possible. I invite everyone present to reflect on our time together—on what has been written and read and shared. ‘What of this would and would not have emerged in a different, not specifically Black space?’

There is silence. There are nods. The questioner nods too, says, ‘Yes. I see.’

I ask if that answers the question.

‘Yes,’ they say again, ‘it does.’

The question will come again of course. Unlike me, it is not exhausted. An unending supply of difficult encounters is no doubt ahead, but for today at least, we settle.

## Notes

1. ‘Cruisin’ (D’Angelo) from the 1995 album *Brown Sugar* (originally written, produced, and recorded by Smokey Robinson for Motown Records in 1979)
2. Or Sylvia Wynter’s *demonic ground* described by McKittrick (2006).
3. The writers adopt a specific sociological definition of ‘Othering,’ namely, as the attribution of inferiority to difference rather than a psychological definition which describes the process of differentiation of the Self from Others.
4. McKittrick (2021)
5. Quashie (2021)
6. Sharpe (2016)
7. As in the coalition Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and the political social movement #BLM, Black Lives Matter.
8. Further attention is given to these terms later in this paper.
9. Upper case GRRRAACCEESS following Burnham (2012).
10. For in-depth exploration of the self-sustaining dynamic of whiteness that exists in philosophy, see Mills, C. (1998).
11. Acronym for ‘science, technology, engineering, mathematics.’
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/20/the-invention-of-whiteness-long-history-dangerous-idea>
13. A term from British sociology, much discussed for its limits, frustrations, and possibilities (Sivanandan, 1990) (Swaby, 2014) (Andrews, 2016)
14. This conversation is available here: <https://www.nts.live/shows/revolution-is-not-a-one-time-event/episodes/the-masters-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-masters-house-3rd-august-2020>
15. Sharpe (2016, p. 21) describes Black visualsonic resistance to the imposition of non/being.
16. <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2015/10/28/there-is-an-edge-ode-to-radical-imagination/>
17. Quashie’s definition of a Black world is not one where the racial logics and harming predilections of antiblackness are inverted, but one without race prerogative ‘where every human question and possibility is of people who are black’ (2021, p. 2)
18. For example, the MSc and Practitioner Certificate at Metanoia Institute.

19. See Tuhiwai Smith (2012).
20. *Petit maroonage* or running away; a strategy of resistance in which individuals or small groups escaped their plantations for a short period of days or weeks and then returned. *Grand maroonage* refers to people who removed themselves from their plantations permanently.

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**Foluke Taylor** is a psychotherapist and writer. In her practices of teaching, learning, and living, she engages writing as a relational, creative, psycho-political, therapeutic. Black feminisms provide the ground and ethical steer for these practices. Foluke teaches CWTP at the Metanoia Institute and is involved in a range of transdisciplinary collaborations and experiments where therapeutics, poetics, and activism converge. Published work includes *How the Hiding Seek* (2018), *As Much Space*

as We Can Imagine: *Black Presence in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2019), *Black Paranormal: A Playlist* (in *What is Normal?* Confer Books 2020) and *Reimagining the Space for a Therapeutic Curriculum – a Sketch*, with Robert Downes (in *Black Identities and White Therapies: Race Respect and Diversity*. PCCS 2021). Her forthcoming book, *Unruly TherapeutiX: Making Living Room*, will be published by W.W. Norton.

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## **Empowerment Script – An Innovative and Emergent Aide in Practice**

*Lowen Clarke B.A. (Melb), B.D., Grad. Dip. Prof Writing,  
M. App. Sc. (Org. Dyn.)  
Doctor of Therapeutic Arts*

### **Abstract**

Lowen Clarke presents a new therapeutic aide based on a phenomenon that complements the basics of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing). The phenomenon has been made into a useful tool as a picture book. This combination has calming results for clients with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and dissociation. Lowen introduces the phenomenon, the book, and the lived experience that underlay its discovery and publication.

**Keywords:** empowerment, EMDR, PTSD, calming, autoethnography, lived experience

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### **Background and Discussion of Empowerment Script and *Sam the Tram's Dance Club***

I am happy and thankful to present the phenomenon of 'Empowerment Script' and the picture book *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* and give some of the background for how they came about.

### **More Than A Phenomenon To Me**

I feel I am meant to write an intellectual and dispassionate presentation and adduce evidence about Empowerment Script. However, it is my lived experience of using Empowerment Script myself that gave me the strength to persevere with trying to let the world know of the phenomenon I had discovered. My main 'proof' for Empowerment Script is that I am able to write this paper and have confidence that it will be treated with interest,

respect, and possible belief. It has been a long journey finding my place in any academic or professional arena. Although even when young I was recognised as having wisdom that helps others, that trust seemed never to be received in any public world—academic, professional, or media.

I discovered what I now call Empowerment Script in 1974. I studied classics at school and university, which led to my playing with boustrophedon and coming up with my specific variation. After some further toying, then, I put the phenomenon aside.

Next I studied for a Bachelor of Divinity and then a diploma in hypnotherapy. At this time, in 1988, I published *How Media and Advertising are Killing You* as I saw that people were replicating poor mental models from exposure to media. The method of this book was a form of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). After my first children's book *Sam the Tram* was published in 1990, I earned a graduate diploma in professional writing.

I seem to have rediscovered my 'forwards-backwards script' in 2003 when I finally confronted my deep post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and got help with Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. EMDR helped hugely but then within days, I was writing in forwards-backwards sentences—I had found what the phenomenon I first discovered in 1974 could do. Having studied hypnotherapy, I was able to observe that the script caused a change in my breathing and that it had potential. Use of Empowerment Script strengthened my hemispheric connections. My continuing use of Empowerment Script could break through the intense void between my overactive intellectualisation and the place where 'I' lived—a good world of art, creativity, and being human.

My first instinct was to use it as a form of CBT in visualisations and affirmations, and this meant I could build inner strength to eventually be able to face the source of my trauma head on. It was a difficult time in my life, and the script got me through.

Some years later, I began my doctoral research at the Miecat Institute with support from the National Institute for Organisation Dynamics Australia (NIODA). The combination of psychological and creative therapies was perfect for me and my creative work. My dissertation was examined and commended by a professor of creative writing and a professor of psychology. I successfully held and merged both fields.

As the starting point of the doctorate, I wrote, illustrated, and animated my story *Sam the Tram's Dance Club*. Adrian Masterman-Smith was the art

director, seeking to make illustrations that include the viewer and use quirky colouring.

During the doctoral research, I was encouraged in my work on Empowerment Script by Dr Sandra Hacker, Chair of the Victoria Department of Health HREC (Human Research Ethics Committee), of which I am a member. She is a psychiatrist who uses EMDR and liked my approach. I then published the *Sam the Tram* book I created in what I now called Empowerment Script. I took it to an International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD) conference and from there to Mary Sutton, an EMDR practitioner, who found that it helps her clients with PTSD and deep trauma.

I had created this strange book that seems to do in one reading all that I had hoped for in my long work with CBT, visualisations, and affirmations. Using 'Sam' generates more room within a session for work with clients in EMDR, CBT, visualisations, and affirmations.

Being on the HREC has given me insight into ethical issues. We differentiate between negligible and other risk levels, and I would warrant that *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* and Empowerment Script would both be negligible risk. It is just reading and beyond that, reading a very mild pleasant story with subtle dramatisation. In addition, the development of Empowerment Script was before modern standards and out of the academic arena.

### **Empowerment Script as a Phenomenon**

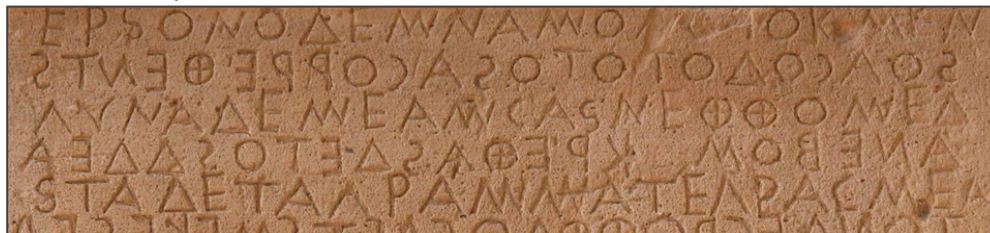
My work is based on a phenomenon that reading words in one line forward, as normally presented, and then reading alternate lines in which the words are presented backwards changes breathing, calms the mind, and in cases of PTSD, trauma, and dissociation, can help hemispheric linking by improving the switching mechanism. The phenomenon replicates EMDR. There is bilateral stimulation, connection, and reconnection. I speculate below as to how it works.

The term *Empowerment Script* describes my version of a forward and backward writing style known as *boustrophedon*—a style used by the ancient Greeks. Below is an example of boustrophedon written on the ancient walls of the city of Gortyn in Crete.

**Illustration 1**

Section of the ancient walls of Gortyn, Crete with an inscription in boustrophedon. *Code of Gortyn*, a city state.

Photo taken by Lowen Clarke.



The process is really quite simple. The first line of the paragraph reads from left to right, then the second line reads right to left and so on. An example this in English would be

A > rose > by > any > other > name  
 .teews < sa < llems < dluow <

This is very challenging and hard work for a reader and, importantly, it does not contain the powerful therapeutic element of the saccade eye movement.

Below is an example of Empowerment Script. As you read this section, you will note that the eye makes a relaxed saccadic eye movement as it scans back and forth recognising each word.

It > is > very > difficult > to > explain > to > someone,  
 .show < to < simple < very < is < it < fortunately < but <  
 The > eyes > make > complex > movements > as > you  
 .other < the < then < and < direction < one < in < read

That's how easy it is. Everyone relaxes into the rhythm within a couple of lines. Now try reading the following paragraph in Empowerment Script. You may be able to observe the beginnings of changes in your breathing.

My discovery of Empowerment Script started with a deeply embedded  
 The .university and school at Classics studying days my from memory  
 ancient Greeks read forwards and backwards. When the ancient Greeks  
 ploughed they how at looked they ,BC 1000 after sometime writing started  
 their fields with oxen and decided to write similarly. I recognised it as having  
 those of brains the of hemispheres two the connect help to potential  
 impacted by trauma and dissociation. Empowerment Script is a lot simpler  
 .approach image mirror full a was which ,boustrophedon ancient than read to

## The Phenomenon Made Useful

A picture book titled *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* in this format has been published by Unhooked Media in the US (links below). It is available for therapists and clients to assist in the treatment of PTSD, but anyone can enjoy it.

### **Illustration 2**

Cover of book published in the US.



## Clinical Experiences

I have material from Mary Sutton for a further paper on Empowerment Script, which she, Adrian, and I plan to submit to this journal. All I will write here is that Mary has used it extensively with deeply traumatised clients and found reductions in SUDS (Subjective Units of Distress Scale) levels. She was fascinated as to how it works and has created diagrams of the unique eye saccade it produces. Although Empowerment Script itself has an effect on a reader, the book *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* seems to have independent, deeper effects through the combination of Empowerment Script, colour values, words, and the pleasant story itself. My personal speculation on how Empowerment Script is effective follows.

## A Speculation as to How Empowerment Script Works

Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing is a therapy which has had considerable acceptance in the mental health field. It was discovered by accident by Francine Shapiro in 1987 (Shapiro, 1989a, 1989b). A client is asked to look at a distant spot to the left and then a distant spot to the

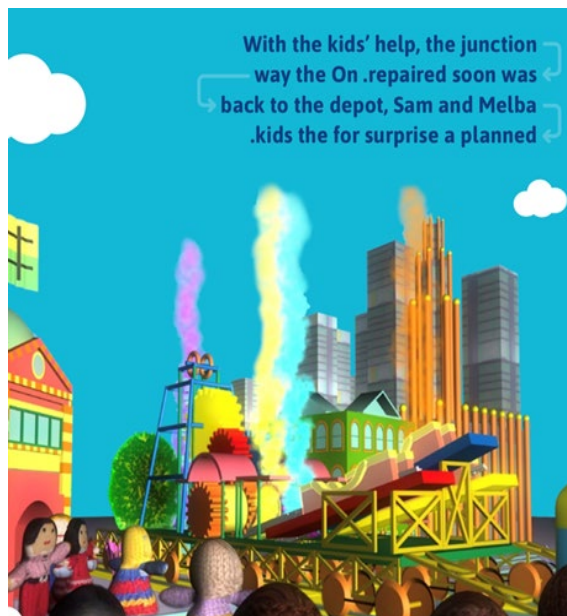
right. The eye movement engages both hemispheres of the brain. When the therapist draws the client back into the situation that is being reprocessed, the emotional memory is reduced in influence.

Just how EMDR works is still unclear. Empowerment Script seems to work both from the eye movement left to right and right to left, and the eye saccades created as each word is recognised. These many small ‘puzzles’ have a lot to do with it.

My speculation is that the efficacy of Empowerment Script has to do with interhemispheric switching. Theoretically, I refer to the work of Pettigrew and Stephen (1998). This was taken up by Mitchell (2011) and by Schmidt (2008). Recent work by MacInnes et al. (2016) on the ventral tegmental area also points to a possible source of what Empowerment Script affects. However, only brain imaging will show if this speculation is correct. It may also provide other answers to the quest for understanding what Empowerment Script is doing as it calms and helps people find ‘mental space’ and reconnection.

### ***Illustration 3***

*A page from Sam the Tram's Dance Club.*



## What Empowerment Script and the Book Do

The following is a list of observations from clinical practice with Empowerment Script:

- Changes breathing, relaxes, and reduces anxiety.
- Replicates EMDR in the processing of trauma, PTSD, dissociation and general mental exhaustion, with an experienced clinician.
- Activates or re-activates, and exercises, the interhemispheric switching mechanism in structurally traumatised people and non-traumatised people. This is at least a theoretical possibility.
- Assists in creative practice.
- Creates a unique eye movement saccade.
- Allows information such as visualisations and affirmations to go into the brain.
- Is not 'done' to a person. A person enjoys reading the book and can become immersed in the experience.
- Is client centred.
- Gives a client some autonomy in the process.
- Is of use to both traumatised and non-traumatised people.

## Sam the Tram's Dance Club Published in the US

As part of my doctorate, I was invited by the ISSTD to do a poster presentation in the US. I took my work to New York and a very brave US publisher Megan Hunter of Unhooked Media liked it enough to publish it there. Adrian and I were to launch it at the postponed 2020 ISSTD conference in San Francisco.

### Life and Story Combine

I have mentioned my own story of my studies because it shows how many different strands of thought and learning had to come together

### *Illustration 4*

Informal book launch in San Francisco.  
(Photo by Adrian Masterman-Smith.)



to create a dynamic where Empowerment Script could emerge. Diverse studies and experiences can be the basis for many insights. On their own, such a range of studies could have been seen as symptomatic of a life with PTSD, but as it has turned out, there was a traceable progression in all that muddle.

After I used Empowerment Script for my own visualisation and affirmations, I was strengthened to be able to work on my own art and learn the difficult skill of digital illustration and animation to create the book *Sam the Tram's Dance Club*. Further healing of my PTSD then allowed me to merge *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* and Empowerment Script. It is a union between my art and worldview and the intellectualisation of writing.

My doctorate paper details this journey, parts of which were described by one examiner as 'harrowing'. My doctorate was the culmination of a lifetime research inquiry into narrative therapy and trauma. My dissertation pushed at the norms of what such papers are meant to look like. It is a palimpsest of creative moments and realisations. It combines autoethnography, creative writing, and traumatology. I feel that I have made a new pathway for people who have suffered trauma and for whom it has resulted in PTSD and dissociation. My doctorate charts new territory in therapeutic practice by using a method I first tried to formulate in the 1980s—creative writing. (This will be the subject matter of a future paper.)

So, I have been on a long journey of gradually building up knowledge and the confidence to take rather daring steps. Persevering was difficult at times.

### **Prospects for the Use of Empowerment Script**

Right now, both because of the pandemic and because people consume too much media, the world needs anything that will help people relax and calm down, and *Sam the Tram's Dance Club* can be part of that now, while a second book *Missing Persons Bureau* to be published shortly will add extra scope for help.

The world needs calming at the moment. Reading in Empowerment Script can help with creativity and relaxation for everyone. We all seek a balance of awe, curiosity, connection to, and respect for the material world, and confidence in the goodness of humanity. This balance is easily upset, and Empowerment Script, by stimulating both hemispheres, can help with the rebalancing and be a counterweight to the mass of dogmatic,

argumentative, and upsetting input we receive in our normal reading. This can lead to the 'unperturbedness' or 'ataraxia' of the ancient Sceptics, and also allow for a dynamic creativity. That is therapeutic arts practice in action.

Because I fully believe that trauma can be overcome, I can be more relaxed about the steps-forward and steps-back nature of healing.

## Final Words

Finally, I studied hypnotherapy, divinity, and created an early CBT in the 1980s. None touched my trauma which was intellectually well defended. Because of what I had to unravel, I knew how powerful Empowerment Script is, and I persevered with trying to get attention for it.

What I stumbled upon in 1974 now has the potential for use with people suffering with trauma, people experiencing elevated anxiety, the creative community, and for further research.

## Next Moves

*Sam the Tram's Dance Club* is for children and adults. That it presents as a children's book works well for children and adults with trauma as they experience it as therapy and therefore do not set up defences. However, professionals have asked for an 'adult' book, and a second book, titled *Missing Persons Bureau* was launched in November 2021 at the ISSTD Asia-Pacific Virtual Conference. We also plan a series of relaxation and calming books for the general public. We have the ability to reformat out-of-copyright books.

## Where is the book available?

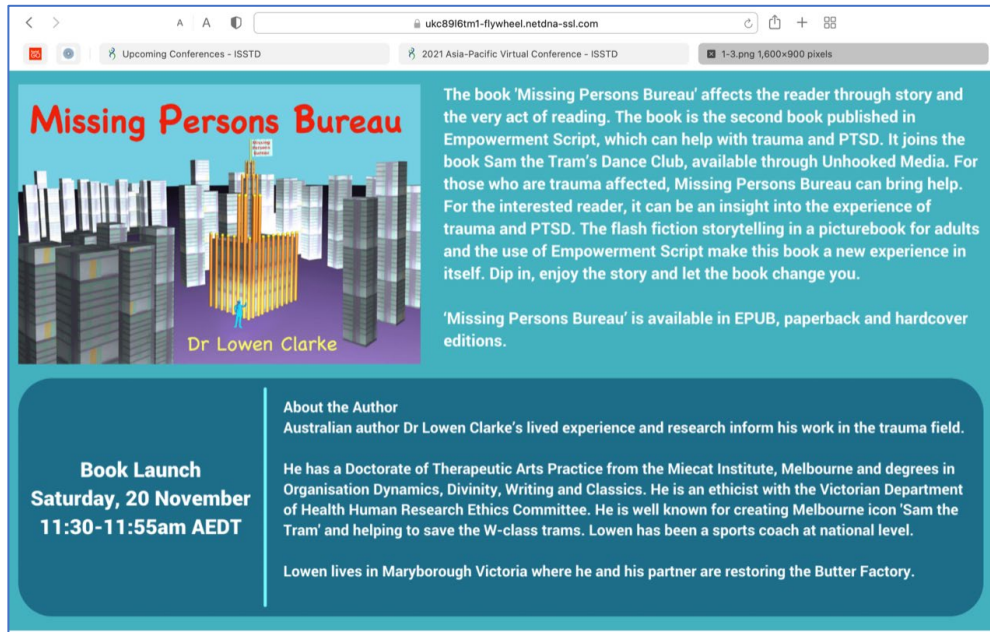
Unhooked Media are the publishers of *Sam the Tram's Dance Club*, which is available in print generally and as an ebook on Apple Books. A special imprint, Brain Bridge Books, has been created for Empowerment Script and further books are in production. Here are links to more information, their online store, and the ebook:

<https://www.unhookedmedia.com/stock/sam-the-tram>

[https://store.bookbaby.com/bookshop/book/index.aspx?b=p\\_ca-bu-gr&bookURL=Sam-the-Trams-Dance-Club](https://store.bookbaby.com/bookshop/book/index.aspx?b=p_ca-bu-gr&bookURL=Sam-the-Trams-Dance-Club)

### Illustration 5

Missing Persons Bureau virtual book launch.



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**Lowen Clarke** is a published author and a Doctor of Therapeutic Arts Practice. He is also an ethicist with the Victoria Department of Health HREC. Lowen's life work has been research into the effects of trauma and dissociation. He has diverse educational qualifications and life experience. He holds degrees in classics, divinity, professional writing, and group dynamics. He has been a national-level sports coach and was a member of the National Trust committee that saved the Melbourne W-class trams. He was vice-president of the Williamstown Literary Festival. He and his partner Adrian Masterman-Smith are restoring a heritage factory in regional Victoria as a community arts facility and a place of healing.

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## Book Review

### **Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience**

By Reinekke Lengelle

2020, 236 pages (paperback)

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*Reviewed by Katrin Den Elzen, PhD*

Curtin University, Perth, Australia

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Every once in a while, a remarkable book comes along that has the signature of a seminal text, works such as Arthur Frank's *Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Paul Eakin's *Living Autobiographically* (2008), or Thomas Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004). What makes such texts extraordinary is their noteworthy ability to explore new territory on important subjects and significantly adding new knowledge. I believe that *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience* is a text that bears this signature.

Reinekke Lengelle, a professor of writing for personal development, narrates her grief in the first one-and-a-half years following her partner Frans's diagnosis with cancer, his illness, and death. Early grief typically involves a narrowing of perspective, trapping the bereaved in a laser-like focus on all-encompassing loss. By contrast, *Writing the Self in Bereavement* offers the reader a kaleidoscope of rich, insightful, and novel perspectives on the lived experience of writing to integrate grief. This autoethnography seamlessly incorporates astute scholarship and wide-ranging research with poetry and dialogical and imaginative writing.

The thesis of the book is that writing is a companion for life 'because it does exactly the two things that the best companions do: it holds me close

enough to be vulnerable (and thus comforted) and far enough to be honest (and therefore clear-minded)' (p. 171). The chapters are organised thematically and address the complex issues surrounding spousal loss: early grief, unfinished business, the relationship history (including ongoing imagined dialogues with Frans), sexual desire after death, willingness to be present with all emotions, secondary losses, the ethics of writing a relational autoethnography, and lastly guidance on writing the self in bereavement.

In addressing these complex issues, Lengelle incorporates and interrogates various theories, including Dialogical Self Theory (DST), constructivist and contemporary bereavement theories, meaning-making and resilience, and psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches to investigate her experience of grief through the medium of writing. She also relates her personal experience to well-known literary accounts of spousal loss. These varied approaches explore territory that previous works on grief, whether scholarly or personal writing such as memoirs, have not, or scarcely ventured, to investigate.

*Writing the Self in Bereavement* breaks new ground in our understanding of spousal loss and bereavement by daring to address taboo subjects. Particularly noteworthy are the chapters on unfinished business and sexual desire after death. Lengelle laments that 'in the stack of over 20 books that I read on grief and loss... virtually nothing is said about ongoing sexual desire' (p. 56) and that ambivalence and unfinished business with a loved one is also hardly mentioned in the literature (p. 185). In writing openly about her sexual desire for Frans after his death, she addresses a topic that I believe has not been raised in memoirs before. While some widow memoirs, such as *Saturday Night Widows* (2013), narrate sexual desire, this is in relation to repartnering, not sexual desire for the deceased.

A central theme of the book is unfinished business with Frans and the need to honestly address this and to avoid idealisation of the dead, instead portraying the deceased as a real person with strengths and weaknesses. Lengelle's own unfinished business relates to boundary setting in the context of Frans's ex-wife and his self-acknowledged 'short fuse' (p. 4). In raising and researching the issue of unfinished business, Lengelle spearheads consciously avoiding idealisation of Frans, thus going against the entrenched cultural western concept of '*don't speak ill of the dead*' (p. 55, emphasis in original).

A primary theory employed in *Writing the Self in Bereavement* is DST, which posits that ‘we are not a singular, stable self, but a multi-voiced and somewhat integrated collection of selves’ (p. 192). Central to Lengelle’s approach is her in-depth engagement with the dialogical space, with Frans, herself, and others. She creatively engages DST methodologies used in clinical application by writing imagined dialogues with Frans, as well as multiple I-positions, or selves. A particularly creative approach is the multi-voiced dialogue in Chapter 2, ‘Unfinished Business’, between the I-positions inner counsellor, Rein-Who-Wants-To-Be-Heard, Frans, Grudge, and Goop. Lengelle credits these written healing dialogues with Frans as having allowed her to posthumously resolve at least some of her unfinished business with him (pp. 45–48).

Unexpectedly, Lengelle waits until the last chapter of her book before describing and theorising the role DST plays in writing-the-self in bereavement and in continuing bonds with Frans. In view of the prominent position afforded to DST and entering the dialogical space, it might have been more useful for the reader to have insights and reflections structurally integrated into the sections where the dialogical writing takes place, such as the remarkable multi-voiced dialogue just mentioned. The insights gained from this therapeutic dialogue appear much later, in the last chapter, ‘Writing the Self in Bereavement’, which discusses the ‘specific and essential benefits’ of writing (p. 165).

Turning to ethics, I have previously argued that an awareness of the complex, multilayered nature of ethical decision making is one of the most important aspects of undertaking personal writing about a deceased spouse: ‘given the intertwined nature of the self and the very otherness of a spouse, writing about a deceased husband is an ethical minefield’ (Den Elzen, 2019, p. 163). Lengelle shows herself to be acutely aware of the importance of ethics in writing a book about spousal loss and reveals her commitment to ethics throughout her book. In particular, she devotes Chapter 10, ‘Sharing the Work’, to the topic of ethics, and demonstrates a deep, ongoing engagement with the ethics of writing about a deceased spouse. She answers six ethical questions that had been posed to her by a colleague, including a question regarding the privacy of Frans and his ex-wife and living relatives. To ensure an ethical representation of Frans and his bond with his ex-wife, Lengelle does not simply rely on her own inner compass and highly-considered reflections on the topic but draws on discussions with colleagues and their feedback for guidance.

Central to Lengelle's process of grief is her practice of and commitment to being present in the now and with all her emotions. She provides the reader with insights on how to be present with grief: 'If anyone asked me for advice on grieving so far, I would say, *allow all the feelings to be there without inflating and inflaming these with additional thoughts*' (p. 104, emphasis in original). She frames the present moment as a place of solace in her grief, both during Frans's illness and after his death.

In viewing being present with grief in all its facets as a key factor in the integration of her loss, Lengelle echoes the well-established and researched concept of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2021). Surprisingly, however, she never refers to mindfulness itself. It would have contributed additional depth to Lengelle's foregrounding of being present with all her emotions if it had been theorised with research on mindfulness.

Lengelle successfully shows, practices, and theorises the power of writing-the-self in bereavement. With her distinctive personal voice that employs poignant self-disclosure and intensely honest self-reflection, Lengelle reveals herself to be a wise griever. By sharing her personal journey with unwavering honesty, interwoven with in-depth and broad-ranging, up-to-date interdisciplinary research, she allows the reader to gain wisdom and understanding as well. She achieves her goal of writing a hybrid autoethnographic text that appeals to 'normal people' and scholars alike to 'inspire awakenings that ripple out and offer comfort to others' (pp. 34–35) without being prescriptive (p. 6).

I highly recommend this book, whether to scholars, to practitioners of therapeutic arts, to instructors as a tertiary textbook, or to the bereaved and those supporting others in grief. One of the things that struck me most about *Writing the Self in Bereavement* is Lengelle's unflinching honesty—it has inspired me and stayed with me long after I put down the book.

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