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LIRIC
LIRIC



The Lapidus
International **R**esearch and
Innovation **C**ommunity
Journal

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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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Kim Etherington



Editor's Foreword

Tim Buescher

Senior Lecturer in Mental Health Nursing
Nottingham Trent University

Correspondence address: liriceditor@lapidus.org.uk

Hello and welcome to *LIRIC Journal*!

The papers on offer this issue speak to the range of interpretations of practice as research, moving between creative and therapeutic spaces but always demonstrating the ability to bring these together in work which seeks and celebrates connection, strength, and healing through creative practice.

Emma Decent's **Full Circle: Heuristic Inquiry into the Experience and Therapeutic Value of Revisiting and Exploring Personal Historic Diary Material Using Writing and Performance** provides us with a self-rediscovery and reimagining through her active dialogue with her adolescent diaries.

Janet Kuhnke explores the process of academic promotions through poetic and artistic reflection on the experience in **Lessons from the Raspberry Patch: Poetry and Art Come Alive**.

Lucy and Shaamil Windridge-Floris show us, through their dialogic practice of duoethnography in **Unpicking Horrifying Moments of Uneasy Silence: Writing Responses to Gestures of Islamophobia in the UK**, how Islamophobia affects their public and private lives together, illustrating how the personal is the political.

In her essay **Insight into the Process of Writing the Same Memoir in Two Languages: Different Languages, Different Personalities?** Jasna Levinger-Goy narrates and explores the experience of working with her own words in two languages and the effect this has on her relationship to that experience and to language itself.

Kim Etherington provides us with a book review that is also dialogical in nature, as she finds echoes of her own experience in Laurel Richardson's autoethnographic account of living with and caring for a partner with a dementia.

There is so much news to report at *LIRIC* at present:

Our editor, Aathira Nair, stepped down from editorial duties due to illness and has taken the decision to focus on her professional role. I volunteered my services as editor and was voted in by the editorial board, moving over from my previous role as assistant editor. The whole Board thank Aathira for her service and leadership, and wish her well in her career.

This issue marks our third volume, and the diversity and quality of work included shows how we continue to attract high-quality writing and scholarship, and how the field of writing for wellbeing and CWTP (creative writing for therapeutic purposes) is growing.

My presence as a new editor reflects this expansion. My background is in mental health practice: I have a nursing registration and worked in early intervention before moving into academia, where I have worked in healthcare education for seven years. I feel more at home working with words, and as a result, am taking my MA in creative writing. Having spent a couple of years as assistant editor for *LIRIC Journal*, I am familiar with the people and processes, but there is much to learn, particularly about the contemporary writing for wellbeing/CWTP field. I look forward to growing as the journal does.

I wonder where you see writing for wellbeing/CWTP in terms of practice? Is it a discrete practice of its own? Or perhaps it is a literary practice which aims to serve therapeutic ends? Or is it therapeutic practice which engages the literary? As far as I can make out so far in my role as wanderer in these rich lands, there appears to be a spectrum of practice, ranging from the more therapeutic to the more arts-based, with all of it incorporating both. I must admit to feeling more comfortable as an educational practitioner when I am using tools from creative writing. I learn more about my practitioner self through engaging with authors and board members at *LIRIC*, and that should not be too surprising, as much CWTP practice focuses on *becoming*.

Mel Perry has kindly stepped in to take over my former role as assistant editor, bringing an expert organisational skillset and a poet's soul to the role. Many of you will be familiar with Mel from her key role in organising *Creative Bridges*, frequent attendance and help at LLRC ([Lapidus Living Research Community](#)), where she has presented, and her published work in *LIRIC Journal*. Kim Etherington will act as deputy editor, for which we are extremely

grateful! Kim's experience and drive have been and continue to be the engine, heart, and soul of *LIRIC*.

Creative Bridges 2023 was a tremendous event which has received praise from attendees and presenters alike for the smoothness of the operation and for the rich variety of workshops and presentations on offer. Kim Etherington addressed the conference with an impassioned appeal for members of Lapidus to get involved with *LIRIC*. From this, several presenters have expressed an interest in submitting papers for review, and/or joining our editorial board and reviewing team to help with the running of the journal. We welcomed Elisabeth Winkler at our October board meeting as a result. Huge thanks to everyone for this wonderful response and to Kim for such a captivating appeal.

Speaking of which...the Editorial Board are exploring routes to make *LIRIC Journal* indexed through a recognised academic database. This process will take some time, and there is work to do here, but in the end it will mean that the work we publish can be found by students and staff at academic institutions for use in teaching, research, and assignments, as well as by practitioners to enhance their work. Early information has revealed that papers published in *LIRIC* have already made their way into reference lists around the world, but indexing will make them easier to find for everyone, and as an open access journal, that is what we are about—sharing knowledge.

Some of you will have attended the Practice as Research event with Nicole Brown on 29th August. Dr. Brown showed us how she sees the two things as one, really; how methods and ideas move between practice and research and bring the two together in many creative ways. One thing we'd like to achieve at *LIRIC* is to promote this idea of practice-as-research and to bring practitioner research to people's attention, showing how there are creative ways to do research other than large studies with big grant funds.

With all of these matters, if you would like to contact us, contribute, comment, or join the Board or reviewing team, please contact us at liriceditor@lapidus.org

Look forward to hearing from you,

Tim

Tim Buescher
Editor, *LIRIC Journal*



Full Circle: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experience and Therapeutic Value of Revisiting and Exploring Personal Historic Diary Material Using Writing and Performance

Emma Decent

writer, performer, poet, theatre-maker, facilitator

<https://emmadecent.co.uk/>

Abstract

In this study, I selected a sample of my own historic diary entries (ages 14–43) and wrote into them reflectively and creatively. This culminated in a script-in-hand performance shared with a closed audience in the landscape. My curiosity was how this process might be therapeutic to me and possibly others. I found therapeutic value in re-storying, becoming more reconciled to life events, improved self-image, confidence, and integration of parts of self. There were impacts on the audience, and findings relate to how sharing life story enables two-way connection, being heard, and seeing oneself in others. There are implications for ongoing work creatively and therapeutically engaging with diaries, especially regarding life review and end of life.

Keywords: diaries, journals, autobiographical performance, drama therapy

APA citation: Decent E. (2023). Full circle: A heuristic inquiry into the experience and therapeutic value of revisiting and exploring personal historic diary material using writing and performance. *LIRIC Journal*, 3(1), 1–27.

THE EAST

1982–2021

Stage 1: Initial engagement

Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem or question that represents a critical interest and area of search... The initial engagement invites self-dialogue, an inner search to discover the topic and question. During this process one encounters the self, one's autobiography, and significant relationships within a social context (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11).

Introduction

This study began 40 years ago when I was 14 and began writing a diary. Age 54 at the time of writing, my attic is weighed down by boxes of these 'insight-writ' journals (Decent, 2019). Despite the fact I have rarely looked at them since, they are precious to me—sacred, private, mine—me. I have always intended to return to them. The focus of my study here was to select samples, to write into them reflectively and creatively, and to create something from them involving writing and performance (something I do: Decent, 2022a; 2022b). My curiosity was how this might be therapeutic to me and possibly others (Hunt, 2000, pp. 12–13).

Haiku

I remember the
first books, silk bound, flower-edged
pages, insight-writ.
Decent, 2019

Returning to one's diaries might be considered a kind of midlife rite of passage or form of life review, part of a period of mid-life reassessment 'virtually all of us' go through (McAdams, 1993, p. 198). This is not without risks—the instinct to avoid revisiting painful episodes of the past, embarrassment, or mis-remembering drives many to never look at diaries again and/or destroy them (Decent, 2022c, Crowther, 2013, pp. 13–14). However, I find myself curious to look again. Perhaps a younger self calls to me—to my grown-up self of the then future—me, now? What would we make of each other? Is it time to find out? The sense of interaction between parts of self and stages of life the diary offers feels potentially rich from an emotional and psychological point of view.

My project was also to write again in response, bringing new reflective and creative possibilities. Imaginatively anything is possible—so my young self can talk to my older self—why not? And I can control how that conversation goes. As an autobiographical theatremaker, I have found creating a 40-page script, a 70-minute show out of complex life events has helped to make those events more manageable, circumscribed, and to find meaning in them (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 103). Here I employed reflexivity, creativity, and writing tools such as editing, imagination, story construction, poetry, and dialoguing to rewrite my relationship with the past. This does not rule out destroying some or all of my writings as part of the process.

This links to the sense of ceremony and eco-psychological work I have done for myself in the past which often includes ceremony and/or a sharing of one's story with a circle of others. As a performer, I have had therapeutic experiences, feeling witnessed by and connecting to others, especially in performances of life story. This goes both ways as we are heard—and hear each other—in one another's stories. In this study I sought to explore how these elements might weave into the growing field of creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) and my practice as writer, performer, and facilitator.

Methods and Methodology

Drawing on my life's search for self-understanding through journal writing, creative writing, eco-psychology, and autobiographical performance, I found my way instinctively toward this project. Heuristics felt a natural fit:

ETHICS: Control and agency

A key motivation for this project was to take control of my diaries, a fear being this might one day be taken from me by ageing, illness, or death. To take control is to take responsibility, as not to do so only hands the problem onto someone else. If I leave them adrift, I am handing ethical decisions over to someone else. Many diarists, (including Anne Frank (Frank, 1997) and Anne Lister (Whitbread, 1988), died without the privilege of control and agency over their words. Is it ethical to read or publish the diaries of others? This aside, it feels important that I take control of my personal archive and enjoy the agency I have, and not leave an ethical dilemma or burdensome task for another.

learning that proceeds heuristically has a path of its own. It is self-directed, self-motivated, and open to spontaneous shift. It defies the shackles of convention and tradition. . . . It pushes beyond the known, the expected, or the merely possible. Without the restraining leash of formal hypotheses, and free from external methodological structures that limit awareness or channel it, the one who searches heuristically may draw upon the perceptual powers afforded by direct experience. (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985, p. 44, qtd. in Moustakas, 1990, p. 3)

Heuristics is a qualitative autobiographic methodology that allows for flexibility of design, reflexivity, and creativity, and is built on constructionist assumptions about knowledge, which I share (Gilgun in McCullis, 2013, p. 85; McLeod, 2013, p. 248). In my study, I searched myself and my diaries as research subjects, while being present as researcher. Heuristics is also characterised by stages I can relate to and could comfortably overlay with the Four Shields, an eco-psychology model I have used for over 15 years. (Foster & Little, 1998). More of which below and as we go.

Four Shields	Chronology	Heuristic stages
EAST	1982–2021	1: Initial engagement ▪ Lifelong diary-writing ▪ Earlier thoughts and writings about re-visiting ▪ CWTP MSc studies
SOUTH	Jan–Mar 2022	2: Immersion ▪ Selection and reading of diary samples ▪ Writing into diary samples reflectively and creatively
	Spring Equinox 2022	3: Incubation ▪ A break
WEST	April–June 2022	4: Illumination ▪ Writing of performative piece ▪ Preparation for performance
NORTH	Summer Solstice 2022	5: Creative synthesis ▪ Performance and feedback
	June–Sept 2022	6: Explication ▪ Analysis of findings ▪ Writing up research manuscript
EAST	Autumn Equinox 2022	

Literature Review

As well as writing a diary when young, I also read, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1997) and the poetry and autobiographies of Maya Angelou. (And I was delighted to find references to these readings in my diaries!) In my 20s, coming out and doing an MA in women's studies, I discovered the diaries of Anne Lister, 'the Dead Sea Scrolls of lesbian history' (Donoghue in Whitbread, 1988). Since I began the CWTP Masters in 2019, I have been reading the literature of CWTP. For this study, I narrowed my reading to four areas:

- diaries
- the therapeutic value of writing
- life review
- autobiographical performance.

Diaries

Diaries have been the object of study within a range of fields including literature, history, social sciences, psychology, cultural studies, autobiographical studies, life writing, narrative theory, and CWTP:

Unfolding in the interface of life and literature, the diary challenges generic boundaries, as well as discursive constraints and limitations; it thus allows us to raise epistemological questions around knowledge and truth and enhances interdisciplinary thinking by revealing different layers of how we understand the web of human relations, our place within it and our relations to others. (Tamboukou, 2017, p. 2)

12 February

I just saw a programme – an evening with Maya Angelou. It was really good. She was talking about self-love, and did this poem about being plain proud of yourself. [*Phenomenal Woman*] I should be able to walk into a room of people, any people, with my head held high, and not worried of what they think of me. I do worry though. Seeing things like that refreshes me. I get dragged down by life—by thinking I need a boyfriend, wishing I was beautiful—when I see someone like her, it's like coming up for air. I'd like to be an intellectual—read books and poetry, go to the theatre, and concerts and stuff. When she said we shouldn't worry about trying to survive but to thrive, she put into words what I've been thinking lately. I think 'I've got my whole life ahead of me, and it's going to be great.' Why do I think 'It's going to be great', why don't I make it good for TODAY?

Thurs 12 February 1987 Age 19

Full Circle, Decent, 2022d, p. 15

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront in reclaiming the diary for the study of women's lives and as an activity particularly practiced by women (Wright & Ranby, 2009; Richardson, 2001; Huff, 1989; Rich, 1980; Woolf, 1953). These scholars particularly notice—and experience for themselves—how this practice can enable personal insight and movement between inner and outer life. 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it' (Richardson, 2001, p. 35). I echo this experience.

Of all the literature I was able to find, Kristine Haertl has conducted the most similar study, in which she revisited over 30 years of her poetry and journal writing to explore the role of personal writing in the development of self, also a heuristic study (Haertl, 2014). Her findings mirror very much what I would expect to find in mine:

Results indicated themes related to the (i) interpersonal and personal nature of writing, (ii) the spiritually transcendent nature of writing, (iii) the fact that writing facilitates perspective taking, (iv) the importance of challenge in personal growth, (v) the dynamic nature of writing, and (vi) the power of writing to influence personal identity. (p. 55)

The focus of her study is different from mine, but using her own diary writing as material, Haertl's discoveries fall into a body of literature that evidences the role of writing on the development of self and its therapeutic value as practice.

Therapeutic Value of Writing

'Writing as a means of processing one's life experience is not a recent practice' (Baker & Mazza, 2004, p. 141). Their essay provides a useful overview of the literature about and evidence for 'the healing power of writing' (as it is titled), citing Pennebaker (1990), whose research was amongst the first to offer empirical evidence, and Proffitt (1975), whose *At a Journal Workshop* was an early text in developing self-help literature about journal writing. As well as journal writing, creative writing (poetry, prose, and theatre) has also played a part in helping me achieve the psychological wellness I have (Rogers, 1961, pp. 350–351). Creative writing for therapeutic purposes further evidences the therapeutic value of writing (Williamson & Wright, 2018; Thompson, 2004; Baker & Mazza, 2004; Wright & Cheung Chung, 2001) and provides techniques for writing with this intention. Methods such as writing prompts, free writing, dialoguing, poetry, life story techniques (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006) are all tools I used for writing *Full Circle*.

Life Review

I relate returning to diaries to psychological life review as described by Keisari & Palgib (2017), Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and De Vries (1999) and McAdams (1993, 2001). As I 'review my life' through reading old diaries, as Lejeune says, 'a dialogue begins... From the bottom of my past I am listening to someone; and I feel something working its effects on us, him and me.' (Lejeune, 2009, pp. 325–326). Through this dialogue transformation may occur, particularly pertaining to sense of self and the composing of one's life story narrative (Keisari & Palgib, 2017, p. 1079). These studies by Keisari & Palgib (2017) and Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and De Vries (1999) are particularly relevant as they investigate the mix of life review with the performative (their fields within drama therapy and psychodrama).

Autobiographical Performance

As an autobiographical performer I am drawn to and inspired by the work of others who bring themselves and their lives to an audience including Bryony Kimmings (2022), Mem Morrison (Artsadmin, 2022), Ursula Martinez (2022), Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver (Split Britches, n. d.). Susanna Amato navigated a similar theme in her 2021 show *Landfill of Memories* in which she brought piles of personal mementoes to the stage (cards, letters, gig tickets, photos—not specifically diaries) and shredded them whilst telling the story of her (real) hoarding issue alongside the losses of her father and sister (Amato, 2022). 'Performance, can be a transformational act' (Heddon, 2008, p. 3). This project is informed by my interest in the therapeutic impacts there may be for myself and other performers of autobiography (Harari, 2015, p. 164).

THE SOUTH

January–March 2022

Stage 2: Immersion



Initially engaged, the **Immersion** stage began in New Year 2022 when I began to organise my journals. After sorting and removing letters, cards, and other material, I put all the journals and dates diaries/Filofax pages into chronological order in phases of my life, beginning when I started writing in 1982, aged 14.

Dates	Age	Where	
1982–1987	14–18	Hitchin, Herts	School years
1987–1990	18–22	Aberystwyth	Student years
1990–2002	22–34	Manchester	Beginning of working / adult life – 20s+
2002–date	34–	Calderdale	Continuing working / adult life – 30s, 40s, 50s+

I decided to narrow my focus to the diaries of February, as a simple way of selecting the sample. February was coming with the nature festival of **Imbolc** marking earth's reawakening after winter. It felt 'live' to connect this February with those of my past. I decided to start when my diary began in 1982 and finish 30 years later in 2011, age 43, leaving an 11-year gap between then and now.

In January I had skimmed the diaries; in February and March I read in earnest. The dates diaries/Filofax pages were incredibly useful in quickly locating myself in time, place, and events. Throughout I wrote in my *Dissertation Journal* and wrote a few poems. As I read, I identified key parts of it, significant events or parts of my process. Another idea came to me—to

select one entry of each date of February (1st, 2nd, 3rd . . .) from each year of the period. This became a bit of a logarithm I set myself but was a useful and creative container to work with when I went into the **Illumination** stage.

Findings

1. *I experienced difficult emotions*

It was overwhelming, uncomfortable, painful, hard work, sometimes unbearable. I risked and dared the opening of wounds! (Moustakas, 1990, p. 6). I noticed a desire to close the book—edit—re-write—and began to give myself permission to do so (developed in the **Illumination** stage). I also noticed I responded differently to past events—with more maturity, experience, and distance.

2. *I discovered an archive*

It was all there!—my life as I lived and remembered it. Journals, dates, diaries, letters, photos all linked up. I have this with which to do more autobiography or reminisce if I want to. The process helped me form a more accurate chronology of my life than I had previously, which made me feel clearer about my life events.

3. *I experienced lighter emotions and positive connection to past*

It was exciting, thrilling, fun! Rediscovery of past, hilarity of youth, fond memories, remembering others.

ETHICS: Self-care

I learnt in the **Initial engagement** stage (finding references to my Mum's drinking in childhood (Decent, 2021) that returning to diaries could be unsettling. I decided to bring loving kindness to myself from the start.

- Professional support – therapy and academic research advisor
- Made time for the project and took breaks especially in Immersion stage.
- Maintained ongoing self-care routines – yoga, meditation, time outside, spiritual, and journalling practices, Zen group, Journey group, Writing group.

ETHICS: Finding others in diaries

Reading diaries raised the unexpected issue of remembering people no longer in my life. I was at liberty to search for them. I had no intention of making contact with anyone and didn't. This curiosity felt a natural response to diary reading. All the information was out there in the public domain of the Internet. But there are ethical issues in terms of self-care and privacy of others, especially if one is unreconciled to a story of the past. Something to be careful of and not get distracted by.

4. *Change of perspective on self and others*

I saw myself differently than I did at the time of writing. Found myself liking my former self/selves, admiring what I had done and achieved. Positive self-esteem and re-appraisal of my life—saw success and creativity where I had seen failure. Humour, especially in my adolescent self. Compassion for my earnest/sad/struggling younger selves. Seeing my ‘story-writing’ of others—as only mine, one-sided, imperfect.

I also noticed multiple selves—a ‘now’ adult self, a child-playing-at-grown-up self, and a lost adolescent self (explored deeper in the **Illumination** stage).

Contemporary journal

It is interesting, revisiting this. I am noticing—amongst other things—how little I have changed, despite these years—how similar I am—to who or how I am now and have been throughout my life. I like myself too though, which is nice. I like myself when I write.

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 10

Spring Equinox, March 2022

Stage 3: Incubation

The **immersion** stage had been intense. At **Spring Equinox** I went to Kintyre, Scotland, for a week’s break and wrote some haikus while dipping my feet in the sea.

I sit here, woman,
old enough to know not all
the stories find words.

Gigha

Decent, 2022e

THE WEST

April–June 2022

Stage 4: Illumination

Having immersed myself in the material and incubated the process, I entered the **Illumination** stage. For the next three months, I worked on creating a script. Though I was enjoying remembering my life, I never wanted to create straight autobiography. Instead I found myself more interested in emotional responses and shifts in perspective I was having and the rediscovery of younger selves, all still unfolding.

Parts of Self

The Four Shields (Foster & Little, 1998) is an eco-psychology system that understands human nature as connected to and mirrored by the natural world—the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth). My notion of psychological selves is based on this model, plus the shamanic concept of soul parts (Ingerman, 1991), and the Internal Family Systems (IFS Institute, 2022). In the Four Shields:

- the South represents the Child (the emotional, instinctive, the body).
- the West represents the Adolescent (inward looking, reflective, the psyche).
- the North represents the Adult (the rational, responsibility, the mind).
- the East represents the Spirit (regenerative, new perspective, birth, death, rebirth).
- Psychological wellness is found through all four shields being healthy and in balance with each other (Foster & Little, 1998, p. 4).

The shamanic concept of soul parts is an ancient way of understanding psychology in which trauma is described as the loss (or theft) of a soul part and recovery as *soul retrieval* (Ingerman, 1991, p. 4). This concept has always resonated with me and I have worked with it for a number of years. I was also working with a therapist who uses the Internal Family Systems—a model that also considers human psychology in terms of parts congruent with my understanding of self/selves/soul parts (IFS Institute, 2022).

The Adolescent

As I read the diaries, I re-encountered younger parts of myself. 7 February 1984 (age 16) was particularly impactful. Reading it made me laugh hugely, vividly taking me back to the vibrant teenager I used to be, wildly fooling around with friends. However, this was quickly followed by a wave of sadness as I recognised somewhere along the way I had lost her and been quite a serious adult for most of my life.

7 February

Today me, Sam & Toni juggled stools in the science room amongst other things. Basically we pratted around like anything. In the end everyone got mightily fed-up with us. Sam realised and went to clean up her locker. I was told I was in danger of becoming another Sam (AH!) so I cleared up the stools (all of which I had turned upside-down.) I'm going to try belt-up a bit at school. I'll try again tomorrow.

Tues 7 Feb 1984, Age 16

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 9

The Child

In May I went out to the hills near where I live to mark **Beltane**, the nature festival of life and manifestation. For the previous year I had been suffering from planter fasciitis, making it painful to walk. As I burnt sage near the ground, I noticed the smoke blowing over my feet. I got a sudden insight about a child part of me who has been trying to be ‘the grown-up’ all my adult life—and is now very tired by this job. Reading my diaries had brought a sense of this child–adult self back to me and the life story that had created her. I explored this in therapy and in my journal.

Contemporary journal

When I was 16 another part took over—a child part that I call my child–adult or pseudo-adult self—what A. [my therapist] called ‘the parentified child’. She was a child–me who was trying to be very grown up and support Mum but who is only about 12, maybe younger. She has kept me going all these years—being sensible, dragging me forward—getting us to live a ‘useful, active, positive life’—and done a pretty good job. But she is only a child. I recognised too in therapy, that she is exhausted! She’s 12 years old and been working so hard for me all my life—dragging me around, taking responsibility. No wonder my feet hurt.

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 33

The Adult

While journalling I began experimenting with self-dialoguing. I wanted to talk to my ‘child–adult’ self. Through these conversations I also discovered the stronger voice of a more ‘true adult self’— who I had not been so conscious of before—who really was a mature, reliable Adult—not the child pretending. Smudging my feet on the hill with sage smoke took me into a shamanic journey into which all three of these soul parts came.

I go on a journey to the sound of the wind, the trees and the trickle of the stream. **My child self** appears—she tells me she needs to be a child, playful, relieved of adult responsibilities, expressive, joyful and looked after. **My true adult self** is there too—she is ready to take proper care of my child self—and my **lost adolescent self** too—her inner exploration, sadness, whatever is there. **My adult self** can hold her too. **My East** is here too—a sense of new beginning—that I can be different, change—be a different kind of adult.

Shamanic Journal, May 2022

Decent, 2022f

This was a very healing and insightful moment brought about by the heuristic process of reading my diaries, writing, therapy, and nature-based practices.

Partners and Others

Another theme was how I was seeing past relationships. With partners, in the diaries I was processing each relationship in the moment, often struggling and repeating a narrative. As I went round these circles again, I could see this pattern more clearly—and my narrative-writing—myself as the heroine, my exs as villains—a way of avoiding responsibility for unsatisfying scenarios, masking my difficulties asserting myself and my needs. I saw how muddled I was and my exs more kindly. I began to reimagine my relationship past, rewriting it though a poem *Words I Never Said* (Decent, 2022d, p. 20). I felt lighter afterwards, freed of a stuck story.

Metta Meditation

May they be filled with loving-kindness. May they be well.
May they be peaceful and at ease. May they be truly happy.
Thorp, 2016

I also noticed friends, especially those no longer in my life. Faded into the past, I am long reconciled to those endings, in some cases virtually forgotten. As I began to see my own storytelling here, I wondered what story these others might have about me? Had I hurt people and left them with a poor story of me, as I had 'written' that of others? I wrote about this and brought these lost and forgotten friends and exs into my daily meditation practice for a time. This inspired also a poem *Forget Me Not*.

Forget Me Not

Forget me—or no, not yet
Only remember a little longer
Remember how we played and loved
Gave each other a little something
Everything we've since forgotten.
Time is a trickster
Memory, patchy. There's
Enough to remember and forget.
Now is all we have, the
Only time we have left to dance
Tomorrow, we forget.

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 27

These processes—the recovery and integration of soul parts and my shifting perspectives on myself and others—sparked in the **Immersion** stage, were deepening in the **Illumination** stage. This experience felt like the story I wanted to tell. I began to construct a script drawing on the diaries, poems, and current journalling as content.

ETHICS: Mention of others in diaries

I considered how to protect the privacy, identification, or self-identification of others—friends, family, exs—mentioned in my diaries.

- Parents – both have died. I have written about them in previous work (Decent 2022a & 2022b) and consulted with family members about this.
- Siblings – I decided to avoid much inclusion of them as they could easily be identified. Possibly a topic for other life story work but I would need more time to consider and consult.
- Ex-partners – the commonalities in the way I related to them was a key discovery—so ‘merging’ them was what I wanted to do. Where necessary I used initials (not their own). I had a little concern about dates as I mention these in the diary entries. Someone who knew me very well—or the ex themselves—might be able to identify from the date. As this was a private showing (and no one knew me to that degree) it felt okay. To consider for wider public performance.
- Friends – as above-mentioned generally / changed names / used initials where necessary. With more time and considering a larger public audience, a process of consultation with relevant people would be appropriate. As this was a private showing I hoped the measures I took would keep others safe.

Script Content

Historic Diary Material

In the **Immersion** stage I was drawn to the parts of the diaries that made me laugh, insightful bits, or bits I remembered that said something about my relationship with writing. Putting these centre stage felt like a recovery and celebration of parts of me that had been lost or ignored.

I found myself editing these entries—finding a better word, taking out repetition, reordering phrases. It had never occurred to me before that I could edit or rewrite my journal, which felt very liberating. Editing enabled me to refine things in the diary I could now clarify that gave more satisfaction as self-expression. It also became part of a re-storying process. For example, on 24th February 1984, age 16 I found this:

Fri 24 February 1984

I really love Mum. I'm proud of her when we're with people and she's sober. She's a really great person, and I'm glad she's my Mum. That's why her drinking is so tragic.

Decent, 1984

My adolescence was clouded by my Mum's drinking, my early diaries peppered with somewhat stark entries about it. However, this entry touched me as it was also evidence of a counter-narrative I have always known, that despite everything I have always loved my Mum and was proud of her. The last sentence brings it down—but now I wanted to hold that first feeling—and remind myself (and perhaps others) that nothing is completely clear-cut. So for the script I edited it out.

Fri 24 February 1984

I really love Mum. I'm proud of her when we're with people and she's sober. She's a really great person, and I'm glad she's my Mum.

Full Circle

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This more positive finish, located later in the script, enabled me to re-story, suggesting reconciliation with those events and my mother within the larger story arc of my life—which is the case. This felt healing as well as narratively effective.

Poems

I had created poems throughout the process, including *Haiku* (p. 1), *Gigha* (p. 9), *The Strength in My Back* (p. 20). Poetic inquiry was not my methodology, but the principles relate. 'The potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way' (Prendergast, 2009, pp. xxi–xxii). Poetry also told these experiences in a different voice from that of the diaries.

Contemporary Journal

Through all this I was journalling. Key moments of my journey were documented in my journal, and in some cases brought about by it. There was an interesting loop to this as I both read—and wrote—a journal (Thompson, 2004, p. 74). I gathered bits across dates, recomposed, and created more coherent and concise sections for the script.

Script Structure

Selecting and organising material is a way of working with life story that for me replicates the selective, partial, and fragmentary nature of life, experience, and memory. However, as a story it needed shape. This was coalescing around the four directions and my journey that could be said to have gone through four stages:

1. **Seeing what was there** (first opening and reading the diaries)
2. **Noticing what was there** (responses, feelings, comments, shifts)
3. **Re-storying** (creatively supporting and encouraging positive shifts)
4. **Reconciliation/ending** (creating positive ending, healing, peace)

Onto this structure I wove selected poems, the edited historic diary extracts, and contemporary journal entries, examples of which are scattered throughout this paper. The structure embodied the Four Shields aspects of the seasons, the directions, and the recurring lunar month of 28/29 days. All this was my attempt to show the concentric circles of living and dying of which my life is a part.

Contemporary journal

Throughout my life I have often felt stuck or wanted it to be different—a sense of never having had the capacity to just be myself boldly and live that. Or sort of waiting for the life that would really fit me to start to happen. But in the middle of it all I can see I have been listening to myself too. Always wanting and changing things.

Full Circle

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THE NORTH

Summer Solstice – 21 June 2022

Stage 5: Creative Synthesis



Photo courtesy [Christian Lissemann](#) ©2022.

Now it was time to take the **Creative Synthesis** of this work to others. The performance took place on **Midsummer Solstice**—the festival of light, sun’s brightest day. I invited a small audience known to me (this was a research experiment, not a professional performance). Though I collected feedback, this was not measured as such, but was there so I could assess the effect of the performative experience on me. I created a circle in the landscape orientated to the four directions and all the elements were present—air, a fire at centre, water in the stream, and the earth on which we sat. I began by burning sage as I do for nature ceremony and read from my script, for which I had made covers from handmade paper, a creative experiment using blank journal pages as part of the pulp. I began in the East and moved to the next direction for each section, to South, West, North, back to East—much as this paper.

Findings

The performance was a healing experience for me. I felt empowered, encouraged, and heard (Emunah, 2015, p. 72). One of the most powerful aspects was a profound sense of my **True Adult** self embodying me and taking charge almost at that very moment. **She** looked after the audience, guided and held them; **she** held the space and gave them a meaningful experience. This is what a truly healthy Adult does—steps up, take care of themselves and others. The performance felt like a ceremonial threshold I went through that completed the work of recovering my **True Adult** self.

ETHICS: Care of audience

The audience participants needed taking care of, including physical safety, psychological safety, and data protection.

- Planning and preparation – reconnaissance of site, risk assessment, fire safety, first aid and emergency plans
- Previous experience of outdoor performing (Decent, 2022g)
- Communication and information – what to expect, bring
- Facilitation skills – making welcome, creating group
- Time for talking and grounding at end
- Insurance in place
- Signposting to professional support
- **Approval of Metanoia Institute & Middlesex University Research Ethics Board** including Research Ethics, Participant Information and Data Protection, Consent Forms guidance and protocols

I have put myself and my life on stage before but never my journal itself. Sharing my diaries past and current felt like a new exercise in self-revelation—one I was ready for. I shared with others a voice and words that had previously just been for me. Doing this gave me a profound sense of getting closer to people within new boundaries I had set. I felt more deeply seen—and honoured for doing this.

It had been my hope the audience would see themselves in my stories, and I was delighted to find they did (Decent, 2022c). I experience this as two-way empathy—as the audience see themselves in me, so I as writer-performer feel seen and recognised and less alone in my (apparently not so unique) struggles and experiences.

The feedback reflected that specific intentions I had for the piece had been noticed and were shared—rewriting life story, the value of journal writing, the work of my soul retrieval and integration. ‘It seems to me that this creative act is about making those selves one.’ (Decent, 2022c) This type of feedback felt like an act of witness that embedded the psychological work I had done more deeply.

ETHICS: Self-revelation

As well as the privacy of others there is also the issue of self-care required in taking of one's private life into the public domain, whether as writing, performance, or part of an academic paper. I have navigated this before in previous performative autobiographical work (Decent 2022a, 2022b) and feel I have experience at finding the boundary between what to share and what remains private to me. It is important to be clear about one's expectations of an audience—that they may be treated as witness and fellow-traveller but never therapist. Though this is an area I am familiar with, it is an issue of self-care that all creatives and researchers doing autobiographic work should consider carefully.

THE EAST

June–Sept 2022

Stage 6. Explication

Having completed almost all stages of the heuristic process—and moved through all four directions (p. 3) it only remains to return to the East—the place of rebirth—to explicate the implications of this work for myself and for others, and its limitations.

Implications for Self

I have articulated much of what I gained, the entirety of which worked a 'personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey.' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 6). I let go of old stories, found greater liking and admiration for myself throughout my life. I re-storied experiences and felt more reconciled to myself and others. A key growth was being kinder to myself when I look back and now. Altogether this makes me feel different—more joyful about the future and more peaceful when I think about the end of my life.

The project gave me as a writer–performer great encouragement to take the work forward, to develop *Full Circle* into a piece of theatre for others. I am curious, too, to further examine how creating and sharing such works can provide therapeutic experiences/reflective opportunities to those who listen and watch—another area for CWTP and drama therapy to investigate.

Implications for Others

The project I hope adds to the literature about the therapeutic value of journal writing. For some of the audience, *Full Circle* was a homage to it, and I cannot overestimate its value to me throughout my life. On 5 February 1994, I returned to diary writing after a few years' gap. I remember writing this entry—the very moment I gave myself permission to write 'just for me'—a practice I have never stopped since.

This project also examines the less explored territory of returning to diaries. Anecdotally, a common fear would be that many sense they write mostly when they're down, angry, or in other negative emotional states. The journal was a process—a place to vent—but these are not places people want to return to, be read or remembered (Decent, 2022c). When I found rejection, loneliness, or a sense of failure in my diaries in the **Immersion** stage, I cringed, mourned, wanted to close the book. But as I stuck with it into the **Illumination** stage, I was able to see how the diary had helped me cope with these times—and from the distance of time could see that these experiences were unlikely to be unique to me. In the **Creative Synthesis** stage, I therefore brought a little of them into the limelight in *Full Circle*, and sharing them created a sense of 'we've all been there'—breaking down my isolation and creating connection with and for others.

As a facilitator, I continue to explore how a similar managed, supported, and creative engagement with diary material for others, which could be as psychologically fruitful as it was for me, including

- re-evaluation of oneself and life events,
- celebration of oneself and life events,

5 February

Writing is a strange process. I have tomes of crap from adolescence onwards, and I'm not sure I've always found it helpful. But I write this now for myself, to try to come to terms with things and to be more honest with myself. An exercise in self-knowledge. Not as some great work, or feeling I have to perfectly capture and express the full truth of something. When I write it will be because I am just trying to express something that is going on in my head. I am struggling to avoid that self-conscious feeling of some unknown reader hovering over my head, trying to make some kind of sense out of this. This is just for me.

Sat 5 February 1994, Age 26

Full Circle

Decent, 2022d, p. 13

- life re-storying,
- reconciliation with life story—less regret, self-blame,
- developing a more positive relationship/making peace with self and others,
- a response to midlife and/or preparation for end of life,
- positive remembering and reminiscence.

Limitations

There was not scope to explore every creative possibility. For example, I would like to do more paper-making—making a new journal entirely from paper pulped from diaries. There are cut-up or found poetry techniques as per Brion Gysin and David Bowie (Brion Gysin, 2022; marslife01, 2013). And blacking out words on the diary to create new text. There could be many ways to select which diary to look at—choosing a particular year or topic.

I was disappointed not to have done more with the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth), which might come into developing more ceremony or performance as I go forward—tearing, burning, pulping, burying the diaries. I am still left with the practical dilemma of what to do with my diaries—sadly I did not get to the point of getting rid of any. Am I more ready now to get rid of them, maybe even unseen? Certainly closer.

I have not said much about the eco-psychological elements and performing in nature, which were significant. Much yet to explore, imagine and develop—for myself, other journal keepers, creatives, and researchers.

Finally, this was not a participant-based project nor an ethnographic one. On both counts more could be learnt about diaries, how we relate to them once written, and how people are processing, preserving, or getting rid of them. This study is a personal one and does not set out to demonstrate anything about diaries in general; my findings might well be particular to my age, gender, class, and sexuality, which may or may not limit its relevance to others (Sue et al., 2007; McIntosh, 1990). From an ethnographic point of view, there may be much to be learnt from my diaries about the lives, opportunities, and experiences of a 50+ educated, queer, white woman born in the mid 20th century—but that has not been my focus here. It is my hope this exploration offers something about reflective and reflexive relationships with writing, constructing self-stories, midlife and ageing, and other findings and therapeutic possibilities.

The Strength in My Back

The bluest sky
hangs over my head
every day

Seeing it now,
the many days
reaching forwards and back – every day –
nothing is new.
Growth comes again
the bulbs pop up
High above the crows, clattering, chattering.

I am alive and
now

my back is strong
youth and age gathered up in my arms. I

bend backwards to look up
arch myself to see the day blue sky and the stars.
Count them all
Know my luck.

THE END

Full Circle

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Emma Decent *Member of Lapidus, Equity MSc Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes, Metanoia Institute, Bristol.*

I am a writer, poet, performer, and facilitator based in the north of England. I have been engaged in a process of personal development throughout my life through a combination of journalling, shamanism, eco-therapy and my creative and performative autobiographical work.

I have delivered workshops for over 10 years, working with women's groups, elders, those in recovery from drugs and alcohol, those experiencing mental health problems and others. My workshops (live and online) increasingly incorporate a relationship with nature as part of the creative and personal process.

As a poet and performer, I have created two solo autobiographical shows. In 2020 I created an outdoor performance of poetry in the landscape. I am currently developing a new piece of outdoor theatre arising from my MSc research project in CWTP as described in this paper.

<https://emmadecent.co.uk>

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Lessons from the Raspberry Patch: Poetry and Art Come Alive

Janet L. Kuhnke

Associate Professor, School of Nursing, Cape Breton University

Abstract

This qualitative inquiry is the account of one academic who used poetry and art as reflective mediums while applying for tenure and promotion in a university environment. The autobiographical framework guiding this work adds a rich layer of understanding to the lived experience of applying for tenure as an academic in a tenure-track role. This paper suggests that using arts-based mediums as reflective tools can ease the journey to tenure. Through thematic analysis of the poetry and art created, three findings emerged: first, the importance of considering the creation of poetry and art as mediums to express and explore the reflective practitioner's role in the academy; second, the importance of creating writing spaces and protecting time needed to engage and critically analyze our works; finally, for each of us as practitioners to engage in self-care activities while inquiring into tensions within our work practices.

Keywords: reflective practice, creation of poetry and art

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Introduction

This inquiry explores one academic's experience of creating and analyzing poetry and art. Greene (1995) states art can be on the margins of our life, or we can live within art and allow it to 'fill the intimations of freedom and presence' (p. 134). I yearned to live within art to find voice and joy while on the journey to apply for tenure and promotion in a Canadian university (Larson et al., 2019; Phinney, 2009; Tremblay, 2017). This reflexive inquiry (Etherington, 2004) shares a story (Coles, 2004) through the creation of poetry and art. Poetry can be a creative form of writing that reflects a narrative, tale, or a situation from which one seeks to share and learn (Ely, 2007; Finley, 2011), and may be used to communicate and display outcomes of research inquiries (Ndlovu, 2018). Art created is a form of responsive expression using photography, objects, and painting (Dewey, 1934). In this work, art is used as an expression of 'reflexivity and the active negotiation of one's multiple biases and perspectives in meaning-making endeavors' (Rollings, 2013, p. 495).

In the university setting, reflexive practitioners can make important contributions as they seek to learn and gain insight from a self-review of activities in which they engage (Etherington, 2004; Schon, 1983). As a practitioner who values reflexive practice, I leaned into this knowledge to attend to tensions experienced while developing the documents for the tenure and promotion package. I knew from past experiences that a reflexive practice was of benefit as it often moves me to engage in self-care and to pay attention to how I think, feel, and behave when teaching and researching (Kuhnke, 2021, 2022; Kuhnke & Jack-Malik, 2021, 2022).

In relation to reflexive practice, Etherington (2004) reminds us that participating in this practice can be difficult and challenging, yet upon engagement, it can lead one to wonder and envision new possibilities, helping to identify potential changes in life. This work is important, as it promotes a growing understanding and perspective on activities within the university. However, when sharing one's reflexive process, verbally, artistically, or in writing, one may need to attend to feelings of uncertainty; in contrast, it may bring accusations of self-indulgence from readers and other researchers (Etherington, 2004). In my lived experience as a registered nurse, being a reflexive practitioner takes energy and time. As it is required as part of my professional development, I have grown in my understanding and sharing of this practice (Schon, 1983).

Frameworks Guiding This Study

The role of poetry as a narrative form of creative writing guided this work. Margot Ely's (2007) work, *In-forming Re-presentations* and descriptions of the use of poetry in research inspired my engagement. Ely (p. 569) reminds us that when we create poetry, we should respect and attend to the 'energy, commitment, courage, stick-to-itiveness, and a deep acceptance' required to attend to the processes in which we engage. Ely describes poetry as providing a space and a place to be uncertain and allow for the presentation of research findings:

Poetry allows for maximum input in and between the lines. Poems streamline, encapsulate, and define, usually with brevity but always with the intent to plumb the heart of the matter; to bring the reader to live the emotions, the tone, the physicality, the voiced and not-voiced moments. Poems spotlight particular events in ways that lift them out of the often overwhelming flood of life so that they can be understood as part of that. Complex business. (p. 575)

Duduzile Ndlovu (2018) eloquently states that the creation of poetry aids in dissemination of research outcomes:

Poetry is one way that researchers, myself included, have tried to involve participants in making sense of research outcomes; it is also seen by some as a way to foster more humane interactions between a research subject and researcher. The potential benefit of using poetry as part of research is something I continue to ponder. There are different ways poetry can humanise research: it helps to infuse otherwise technical or verbose research reports with emotion. (para. 2)

Finally, poetry may provide a creative outlet for a situation to be shared (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). Poetry in this study was created in a safe writing place and space where tensions associated with life as an academic could be explored and eased. These reflective activities are purposeful creative acts that result in a growing understanding of self and of one's role in the academy. Poetry creation can be diverse—written online, hand-written, texted, and/or sent in an email to oneself. Poetry once analyzed can bring forth new understandings of artistic mediums and of the reflexive practice (Etherington, 2004). When one ponders how to embed new learning into one's life, more doors open, and change may occur (Greene, 1987). Ely (2007) states that poetry places an 'emphasis on transparency...that is, we are to write not as unknown, all-knowing forces but as people who share our stances, methods, feelings, biases, reasoning, successes, and failures' (p. 578).

The creation of art may include photographs, use of multiple mediums and found objects (Iverson, 2014). This was important as I sought to engage in creation of art in response to the tensions I was experiencing (Dewey, 1934; Greene, 1995; Rollings, 2013). Art can become ‘a mediator...a go-between of artist and perceiver’ (p. 207). Creating art and taking photographs afforded me travel across the land, developing living documents and art from which I could read, reflect, and analyze (Dewey, 1934). These efforts provided opportunities to view my practice as an educator and researcher in new ways (Greene, 1995). The arts engage us from the ‘purely instinctual and unconscious, to the fully cognitive’ (Rollings, 2013, p. 133). Arts-based methods can be a ‘performative turn’ (Finley, 2011, p. 442) supporting us to nudge back against the dominant written and text-based academic world.

Creating art was an important part of this reflective inquiry. Photographs and art from found objects provided a much-needed tension release. Planning a photograph, filing the image, and writing reflective notes alongside was part of the study process. My art workshop provided a place and space where time pauses, and reflection could occur alongside the tenure track journey. Significantly, I was gifted a paddle—the physical motions of painting it the colour blue brought forth tension release and emotional joy (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962).

Finally, the role of a first-hand story (Coles, 1989, 2004) is threaded throughout this inquiry. Stories, sometimes in poetic format, are our way of weaving a sense of coherence in our life (Crites, 1971). Crites states that stories are part of our personal inner identity and shape how we dance, create, sing, and portray ourselves and our lives. Coles (2004) further states that the writers of stories (texts)

send words our way meant to ask or answer, to declare or refute, to push a matter further or second-guess it, all in the name of communication, exploration, discussion...giving us the food for thought we so often ache to have available. (p. xii)

Research Aim

Using a biographical (Roberts, 1982) approach, I inquired into the role of telling a story alongside creation of poetry and art while applying for and completing the mandatory processes associated with university tenure and promotion. I researched self as subject and therefore use ‘I’ throughout this work (Roberts, 1982). This approach was appropriate due to the nature of the inquiry and the inclusion of lived events and experiences. In this

inquiry, the auto-account is systematically analyzed and examined within the sociocultural context (Schwartz, 2007). Study findings are presented in poetic and visual format, each analyzed in relation to a life lived in an academic setting.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data in this inquiry were poems and art created over 15 months (April 2021 – August 2022). Creations included hand-written poetry (n=20), photographs (n=53), and a singular wooden paddle recovered from the ocean, dried, sanded, and hand painted. Each piece was created in response to and alongside tensions experienced. Poems were filed, dated, and timed. During the 15 months, I read, reread, and edited the works. I added colours and various symbols to replace hand-drawn doodles and sketches embedded throughout and to add emphasis to the content. Photographs were also dated, timed, and filed. Each image had a text file with reflexive notes on my internal experiences when taking the photo (tensions, thoughts, feelings). The image location was noted as well (raspberry patch, art workshop, and/or in the bush—see Figure 1).

Data Analysis

Findings were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and visually presented in a poetic format as used by Ndlovu (2018). Rollings (2013) discusses the importance of making sense of visual tools of inquiry. In this case, I sought to interact with the created works to describe my ‘understandings of human perception’ (p. 502) while feeling vulnerable—open to criticism and critics. First-person stories run the risk of being self-centred (Ely, 2007), yet they are also rich data from which learnings can emerge. I sought to unknow the known, predictable process that seemed evasive.

Data was analyzed after each creation and during the development and critique of the manuscript. I reflected on each creation, making field notes and asking critical questions of myself about the process of creating (Braun & Clarke, 2013) while immersed within the academy. This parallel and intertwined questioning and writing were an important part of my analysis. At times the contrast between creating and living academic rules seemed salient and tension filled. To understand potential critics of this analysis and to learn from examples of how to fashion a presentation of this study, I leaned into

Denzin's (2015) discussions on the challenges of publishing experimental works. Original poems, art created, and photographs were edited several times, and it was important to realize that time elapsed is another layer of performance that enriched the study findings.

Findings

Poem 1: Emerging, Expanding, Moving and Growing Forward

I need to move away from the *tensions*  *associated* with
Writing a tenure and promotion application package—
The academic rules are clear...though I really did
Not know what documents to include....

My colleagues and research peers guided me...
The daily writing tensions mounted, revisions, and re-writing were tiring.
My neck and shoulders ached deeply—my eyes sore—
I **urgently** need to physically move from the laptop.

My body and brain **exhausted**
The words and images taunt me as they do not yet read or appear as I
envision

And
I feel small.
I worry...
Fear of failure...and I
Feel very small, and
Of the **critical eyes** that will read my work... -
These feelings prevail...

In response, I head out to my summer- bearing, raspberry patch

Standing in the patch I view the emerging
crop—
I stretch my arms high above my head -
to the heavens.
I photograph their beauty
My neck pain recedes.
Bright red and golden berries beckon
across the rows.

Figure 1

Raspberries standing tall.



Joy rises inside and I smile broadly

The bright berries glow in sharp contrast
To the gently moving dark green foliage
The stalks grow tall, WELL above my head

Dry and cool breezes embrace me—

My cheeks warmed by the rising sun—bringing
Forth a calming effect...

My fingers become quickly red and stained with juice as I
Gently and deftly pick the harvest

I hear the sound of berries dropping into the metal bowl
Winter food

I regularly bend deeply to find berries hiding under the leaves
The juicy flavors sweeten my tongue.

As I harvest the ripened berries I know
The next batch rests in the morning sun...

Green, yellow, and lightly ripened
They will be ready tomorrow...

**Yet
I
must
go
back
to
writing
at
the
desk...**

Back to the unknown...

What is a
tenure
and
promotion
track
package?

...I search for samples online

...eager to complete the application successfully!!!

Tensions prevail

Tensions rose inside me

And peers remained loyal

My shoulders and neck ache

The angst in my gut returns.

Analysis of Poem 1: Visual and Poetic Lessons

At the time I was writing my tenure and promotion application, I began to engage in reflexive writing and creation of art (Etherington, 2004). As I was not fully sure what documents were required by the university application, I read literature and sought support from my dean. As well, I joined a group of peers engaged in a similar application process. We met online weekly for several hours, due to the coronavirus pandemic. Over five months we developed our applications, and we sought to clarify the process (Strunk, 2020). In response, I created art, took photographs, and wrote poetry about the insecurities and tensions I experienced. Berg and Seeber (2016) reminded me of the ‘changes in the university climate [which] have increased the expectations of research “output” while at the same time increasing overall workloads, make it more difficult than ever to set aside time in the face of the more immediate...demands’ (p. 86).

In the poems, I used different font types, sizes (bold and italics) to add emphasis to the emotions reflected (Ely, 2007). Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) phenomenology of perceptions guided my sense experiences and knowledge. Embedding shapes and colours aided in creating a palate of beauty outside the typical black font. The variation in sentence length and movement of the text across the page reflect the multiple emotions and movement of feelings experienced. It thereby adds a layer of description and adds voice to the poems. These elements aided in describing tensions experienced and demonstrated a way to express bodily movement as the poetic text moves to the left and right sides of the page. Dewey (1981) states in his reflections on the psychology of physical efforts that our response to tension (spiritual or intellectual) may present as a ‘strain...knitting of the brows and forehead...at the same time there is general contraction of the system as a whole’ (p. 150). Further, the use of symbols and hyphens aids in the flow when reading about these life events without distortion. The use of colours in the poem (e.g., red, yellow, blue, and green type) expresses heightened emotions.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) emphasizes the importance of colour in our art and life. Throughout the analysis, I regularly returned to his descriptions of varied art mediums and use of colours in relation to bodily sense experiences. He states, ‘the colour of the visual field affects the accuracy of the subject’s reactions, whether it is a question of performing a movement of a given extent or measuring with a finer a definite length’ (pp. 242–243). The relationship of colour, text, and font size is an attempt to holistically present one’s felt experience of ‘being brought into relation

with an external being, whether it be in order to open my self to it [the reality of academia] or to shut myself off from it' (p. 248). Furthermore, the act of re-presenting the poetry (editing, reading, rereading aloud) is a performative act; it is my performative act and my expression of voice (Fels, 1998).

I also leaned into the writings of Maxine Greene. Greene (1995) states that the elements in the poetic text are in fact an artistic expression of an educative moment in an educator's life. Greene (1987) reminds us of the role of painting, music, dance, and performance acts in aesthetic education. As teachers and educators, we have a responsibility to break down barriers that exclude one from expressing experience. Personally, I believe and understand myself to be greater than grey-scale text in a document. Therefore, I wanted to capture the diversity of my mind and ways of expressing experience. Yes, I am fascinated by words, yet the presentation or re-presentation (Ely, 2007) is an additional responsibility. Greene (1987) encourages us to take up that effort and to keep in mind when doing so, that

we can never exhaust or use up any work of art—that every time you see a Monet or hear a Mozart quartet or watch a Balanchine dance performance, there is always more than could have been predicted, more to explore. (p. 78)

Poem 2: The Application is Submitted and The System Will Not Take My Application

The tension builds as I prepare the application package.
Precious moments drain away....
Time dominates...



The 24-hour clock moves quickly
My peers remain loyal.
Daily, I read and re-write as the pending application date looms
I carefully plan and
consider art created
for
an appendix.

Finally
I am ready—
Ready to submit—
I am early—
No,
I am a week early!
That is me and
It pleases me, reassures me...
Yet,
the technology system
will not upload my application.
I called the support line.
'Yes, it is a "giant" pdf file' I say
I try again, and again, and again.
I cried in response.
Five days left.
I went outside to the bush to walk taking deep breaths.
It will be okay I tell myself.
I tried again to no avail.
I drove to the university
the technology access better, I hoped...
Four days left.
The submission will still not upload.
I download emotionally...
Three days left.
Finally, the technician explains steps to be taken.
Two days left.
Later
in
the
 Same
 day,
the
application
uploads!
I am grateful for the technicians.
I am emotionally drained...
Exhausted.
Relieved.
I cried a different cry—
One of relief
One of questioning myself,
'It is now uploaded.'

Now,
I wait for the review team to
respond.
My mind whirls
response
responsive
re
resps
respiratory
breathe
breath
breathing
 This process
 is
 too
 great
 a
 task.

Analysis of Poem 2: Identifying and Protecting a Writing Space and Place

Greene (1994), states that understanding the role of creative, aesthetic practices in our lives helps educators to ‘communicate to those you teach the wonder, the challenge, the surprises waiting for them in the domain of the arts’ (p. 141). In the seven days leading up to the application deadline, I regularly read and rewrote sections of the application. I readied the evidence, articles, and letters of support. My peers and I debated as to whether artistic creations were permitted to be embedded in the application package. We asked and ‘yes’ was the answer. I was relieved as I had included my art (oil paintings, photographs) throughout many of my education and academic publications. Samples of each were carefully chosen and added to the appendices of the tenure track and promotion package. I was fearful I would be told to remove them due to the size of the submission: they were part of me.

During this time, the days seemed insufficient to manage my sense of pressure and timelessness (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Sixty-hour weeks were the norm. Each moment nudging up against time with my family, friends, and my creative space. I kept tissue by my desk. I asked myself, 'What were the tears about?' (Figure 2). The application process seemed to be a far cry from my ambition of being a skilled nursing educator, instructor, researcher, and one who enjoys working alongside learners and patients as they grow in their skills and knowledge (Brookfield, 2015; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014).

Figure 2

A different kind of cry.



I had envisioned moving through the tenure track application process with some grace—it was lacking. In time, I came to know the university review team's timelines. After submitting my application, I then awaited the response letters from the review team: approved—or not approved. Berg and Seeber (2016) state 'academic work is by its nature never done; while flexibility of hours is one of the privileges of our work, it can easily translate into working all the time or feeling that one should' (p. 17). This was my experience while engaged in the process of preparing my application. What I was not prepared for was the five- to six-month waiting period after the submission was complete.

During these months of waiting, I often returned to Berg and Seeber's (2016) study of the academy. They reminded me to continue to engage in self-care activities and that it was highly necessary as part of pushing back against the dominant university narrative and of my questioning whether I was doing enough. Was I publishing enough? Did I have enough grants, research students, and projects? In response, I continued to journal poetry, create art, and distract myself. I purposefully tried to not hover in negative thinking and instead focused on teaching and research activities. In time, I began to receive decision letters. I was successful. During these times of reflection Greene (1994), reminds us to

Look back again on your experiences...even the casual and unfinished ones, and you may recognize what Arendt had in mind. Think of the dance movements in which you participated, the myths you have enacted, the scripts you have written, the texts and subtexts you have explored, the visual shapes you have made, the perspectives you have looked through (even when examining a cut-out of your own silhouette upon the floor), the boxes you have emptied and filled and foraged in, the voices that have taken you by surprise. As a teacher, I want to find out more and more about creating occasions for such experiences—and, I must say, not in the arts alone. (p. 142)

Heeding Greene's recommendation, I reflected in a poem:

What I Came to Respect: Time

Time and place,
this is what I came
to respect.
I came to **respect**
the time it takes me to
think,
write, re-write,
read aloud, to
read books and
articles, and to
draft, re-write,
share with a
trusted
peer.

Of these writing and creative efforts, within the university environment, Berg and Seeber (2016) state 'these self-expectations are escalated by the additional external pressures of the changing academic culture' (p. 3). One of my protective factors, self-care activities, was to clearly identify a safe and comfortable physical space in which to write and create using colour, multiple mediums (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962), and to heed the emotions while creating. Again, a reflective poem emerged:

Protecting My Writing Time

It takes thoughtful
preparation and time
to write and
create...
I often hand-write

while
outside
in the fresh air and in
the bush where I have
benches and chairs
positioned at the ready.
It also takes me concerted
effort to protect the time I
need to write,
create responsive art,
read, and reflect.
I now prebook, writing blocks in my calendar.

Berg and Seeber (2016) remind us ‘writing is a complex activity, and quite a lot happens along the way, including discovering what we really think’ (p. ix). Greene (1995) says ‘the arts in particular can bring to curriculum inquiry visions of perspectives and untapped possibilities’ and ‘the languages of imaginative literature disclosed alternative ways of being in and thinking about the world’ (p. 90). My coming to name and describe the need to respect and protect my writing time was a significant learning. Writing is part of our becoming, and this ‘emergence never happens all at once. It is a slow stepping into the expanded capacity of your next self’ (Turner, 2017, p. 174). I also experienced a sense of agency. Moore (2016) states this agency is a ‘feeling of control over actions and their consequences...of being in the driving seat’ (p. 1). Greene (1995), also describes the following:

To have a feeling of agency is to recognize that the living being—the perceiver, the reader, the listener—has an active part in achieving a work of art as meaningful. When school reformers talk, as they do, of active learning and of people telling their stories and of the sense of agency, I want to remind them of the ways in which the experiences we have here, the kind we want to make possible in our classrooms, may well be paradigmatic for the new schools we want to build. (p. 144)

I shared these learnings in our co-learning, research meetings. New academics often wonder how to schedule their time throughout a week. Managing time, respecting the time to read, create, and write is often foremost in my verbal and aesthetic sharing with others, including the angst and tension-filled times. This is especially important as my peers prepare their application packages for the university review team in the future.

Poem 3: Paddling a Year Later

I am paddling,
metaphorically,
a
year
later.
Moving quietly
with
less tension
and
a
sense of
agency,
and with
reduced stress.
Colour, art, and
creativity envelopes me.
My friend gifted
me, an old paddle.
Yet, I wonder,
what
I am continuing along to.
Along what, I ask?
What
is
this
new
path
I
am paddling?
I am
grateful
for the
review
team
letters.
My peers say
'You are through! '
Through what,
I ask?
I continue to
plod along
the academic

Figure 3

Paddling along a year
later.



journey.
In response
The pandemic
is easing, I
wonder, can
Research
continue,
and
restart?
Yet, the world has changed.
I breathe
a bit more
confidently,
just a bit,
not too much.
In the
process,
I think
create...and think more...and
I wonder,
What are the next steps of the
tenured and promoted person?

Analysis of Poem 3: Next Steps in the Academic Community

In this final poem, I am reminded that engaging in self-care is not an indulgence; it is a necessity while practicing within the university community (Berg & Seeber, 2016). I was slowly and persistently able to carve out time in a place and space in which I could create, write, and reflect, and for that I am truly grateful. The last two years of practicing nursing immersed within the coronavirus pandemic demands was daunting. In applying for tenure and promotion, I doubted that any multitasking was possible, and now I know it is a myth. Yet, through arts-based inquiry we have opportunity to share our creative poems, first-hand stories, and art in efforts to recognize other ways of being that are not prescribed, but ways that are new and growing (Greene, 1995).

This was evident as I began the task of reclaiming the old paddle. I slowly began to clean and sand an old boat paddle gifted to me by a friend (Figure 3). The efforts of physically hand-sanding the paddle released tension from long hours at the computer. The wood recovered easily, and the beautiful grain emerged, clear, the growth lines close together—its

enduring strength evident. I too felt resilient, quiet, and renewed. With a coat of white primer and bright blue paint, the paddle appeared refreshed from the harsh elements of the ocean.

A year later, I again returned to stand in the raspberry patch, harvesting fruit for the winter just as I had done the year before. As I stood among the raspberries, I was reminded of the Earth's seasons and cycles of life. It sounded like a cliché, yet it was a season. A season of applying for tenure and promotion and awaiting the university team's decisions. It was part of a cycle within the university community of which I am part, and which needs more exploration and supports (Berg & Seeber, 2016). As I looked to the moist earth past the tall raspberries, I saw a plethora of self-seeded violas around my rubber boots. Each mauve and purple face, brilliant, resilient, and refreshing in the sunlight, propagated from a seed pollinated by insects (Figure 4). Again, I was reminded of cycles and of more academics coming along side. I wondered,

- Who will guide them into and through the tenure and promotion process?
- Who will provide a shoulder to rest on when the days seem short?
- Who will help them when loneliness prevails?
- What literature will be available to offer guidance and support?

Communication and peer collegiality for me were fundamental in writing a successful tenure and promotion application. Of this Berg and Seeber (2016) state that within the university there is self-responsibility to increase collegiality and mutual kindness during these times. It is important to encourage academics to come to recognize that wellbeing and the health of a unit or team or organization is 'an ongoing social accomplishment...rather than something fixed and final' (p. 81).

In this inquiry, I was grateful for the commitment to purposefully journal and develop creative poetry over the last year. These efforts were in

Figure 4

Violas bring joy in colour and in their presence beside my feet.



response to my personal goal to creatively live out and engage in self-care as an academic. I reflected on those before me, those who inspired me to grow. I was often reminded of my grade three to six public school teacher, M. Jack, whose words still bring great joy. I remember when she reviewed a short poetry assignment. As I was nervously stood by her desk, she said, 'This is a pretty good poem, Janet, I hope you continue to try.' Her simple, kind words were with me years later when nudging back against the dominant narrative of success in academia.

I regularly returned to the words of Berg and Seeber (2016) in the *Slow Professor*. They remind us 'self-care is not an indulgence, it is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout, and impairment. It should not be...something "extra" or "nice to do if you have time" but as an essential part of our professional identities' (p. 71). And I know going into my sixth year at the university, this care requirement will prevail. Rockquemore (2017) discusses next steps for academics successful in the tenure process. She emphasizes ongoing engagement in the team and actively writing about future career options such as: seeking out administrative roles, working toward full professorship, engaging in advocacy activities, and/or specializing in teaching or research interests (list not inclusive). I am at the beginning stages of this process.

I believe that in sharing this journey, I could potentially offer hope to another. For me, the offering of hope is a brave statement, a statement of powerlessness explored (Greene, 1995). As well, as 'I prepare this work I have a deep sense urgency as more academics move into the institution, and I worry about being in support of their journey' (Research note, December 2021). Sharing the journey in kindness is important. Viktor Frankl (1946/1982) states that searching for meaning can be challenging in the modern world. This is especially relevant today:

today's society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy, and in particular, it adores the young. [And] it virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in doing so blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness. (p. 176)

Discussion

This qualitative inquiry is an account of one academic who used poetry and art as part of a reflexive practice (Etherington, 2004) while applying for tenure and promotion in a university environment. The biographical and self-inquiry approach was appropriate as it demonstrates the role of self-study and offers other writers' ideas of how to express and explore a similar situation. Living out the life of a reflexive practitioner can include poetry and art created as a medium to express, wonder, and organize inquiry findings (Ely, 2007; Finley, 2011). As I ponder the above poems and art, I see these as mediums that can be used to express or share an issue in which one is immersed (British Academy, 2020). These tools alongside reflexive frameworks can provide a venue where one can express how to 'paddle forward' in an academic career. I also believe sharing the experience of using poetry and art can support academics entering the university setting. This is especially important as the pressures of teaching, researching, and service work can be unspoken and challenging, and self-care is not regularly discussed (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Simecek and Rumbold (2016), want us to consider the multiple roles of poetry 'in different stages of lifelong learning by those working in different disciplines in order to provide clearer evidence about poetry's educational value, and its roles at different stages of personal development' (p. 310). They also emphasize poetry, and the action of writing and editing, can play a healing role in our lives. Alexander (2013), states that the act of creating poetry can offer encouragement and hope:

Poetry's task is to reconcile us to the world—not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives. (para. 1)

How I/you story our lives as academics will shift and change from the beginning to the middle and to the present (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Brookfield, 2015). Stories of this journey, especially first-hand (Ely, 2007), provide a glimpse into social issues related to university life that may benefit from inquiry. In an academic's story, some elements may be clearer, such as teaching classes, being in meetings, and planning and operationalizing research inquiries. Yet, in this story, the processes, including time to prepare a tenure and promotion package, were unclear. It was as though the story of applying for tenure was itself a 'private life' (Coles, 1989, p. 136), one not discussed. I felt like I was 'straddle[ing] different worlds' (p. 136), all the while learning about the public and

private elements of academia! I am truly grateful for my peers who came alongside in collegiality and supported each other (Berg & Seeber, 2016).

This inquiry was limited to the experiences of one academic. Yet I believe a first-hand account, analyzed and critiqued, can offer support to others in academia. Roberts (2002) reminds us that creating biographical texts is a social process, not separate from the person, but a way of providing a multi-perspectival account of life. I believe this work adds a richness and understanding to human experience. Therefore, I encourage others to develop, maintain, and grow their reflexivity practice (Etherington, 2004) alongside arts-based activities—journals, poetry, dance, music, and art (Finley, 2011). Each alone or together can bring forth meaning from social narratives within academia (Frankl, 1946/1982).

Janet L. Kuhnke *is an associate professor in the School of Nursing at Cape Breton University. She coaches and mentors students in baccalaureate and masters qualitative research projects and presentations. 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 an Affiliate Scientist with Nova Scotia Health and is active in Wounds Canada as a nurse specialist.*



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Unpicking Horrifying Moments of Uneasy Silence: Writing Responses to Gestures of Islamophobia in the UK: A Duo-autoethnography

Lucy Windridge-Floris

Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing, Cardiff Metropolitan
University

Shaamil Windridge-Floris

Clinical Dental Technologist, Chepstow

Abstract

This duo-autoethnography explores responses to a recurring hiatus in conversations when I, a white English woman, state that I am married to a man with an Arabic name. Together, my husband and I have used practices of creative writing for therapeutic purposes to examine our personal encounters with Islamophobia in the UK. This article evidences the power of co-inquiry, demonstrates the necessity of flexible responses to written expressions of trauma; and reveals *outrage* and *silence* as distinctive ways of coping with discrimination. It shows an incongruence in the binary which presupposes white non-Muslim men to be superior in their ability to respect women and highlights the need to dismantle white supremacy in trustworthy environments to avoid unhelpful fight-or-flight responses.

Personal responses have been written, acknowledging structures of wider political, social, and historical contexts shaping social conditions.

Keywords: creative writing for therapeutic purposes, co-inquiry, evocative autoethnography, intersectionality, Islamophobia, trauma.

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Beginning to Write

Coffee shop, oat milk lattes, hearts in the froth.

Friend: *Wow, Luce you're looking good. What are you doing?
Whatever it is, I want some.*

Me: *I've met a new man!*

Friend: *It shows, you're shining! What's his name, what's he like, have
you got a picture?*

She is excited.

Me: *He's called Shaamil, lives in ..., he's got two children ...*

*I feel my words dropping into a different space. Her delight shrinks,
she stiffens and leans back just a millimetre or two. Her facial
expression changes. The smile remains, but the sparkle has gone.
Awkwardness hangs in the air. I want to get back to the fun of the
meetup, so I mitigate the moment.*

Me: *He's about as Muslim as I am Christian.*

When I mention my husband's name, I notice an uncomfortable hiatus. This article explores this silence and why I was neutralising tension with a betrayal of his 'Muslimness'.

What We Did and Who We Are

Shaamil and I decided to use writing responses to examine this hiatus together. We planned four 1-hour long workshops between October 2021 and August 2022. We started this process formally but later agreed to allow ourselves a more dynamic and non-linear plan to produce responses.

We invite you to find yourself somewhere positioned in this story. It may not reveal definitive truths, but we hope you come to understand how we experience the phenomenon and are able to set this against wider political, social, and historical contexts which 'shape the conditions of our society' (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, p. 75).

We may all be racist because we are living within a global white supremacy, and this is our conditioning. Shaamil and I are both culturally bound by the socialization of racist notions and prejudice. Our marriage is not a badge of non-racism although we both acknowledge some enjoyment of the performative element at times. We recognise our relationship

represents attempts to make reparations but also acts as an indication of how colonialism still possesses our consciousness. In truth, it is at best an area of acceptance and willing conversation made easier by the presence of love.

Shaamil was born in 1957 and raised in Cape Town, South Africa. Apartheid was the system of governance for his formative years, where the notion of white supremacy was overt and universally recognised. The system worked on everybody, and everybody responded to it in some way. This regime could be viewed as a microcosm of the wider global phenomenon of white supremacy. In South Africa, apartheid is named, and segregation is apparent, but in post Brexit Britain, it is more covert, and some seek to render it unnamed. We know that covert expressions of abuse are no less damaging than those which are overt. From a perspective of therapeutic intent, we know that sometimes it is easier to heal where the abuse can be clearly distinguished. Unnamed, or more difficult to spot, discrimination can be insidious and 'without recognition of racial trauma, and racially embodied trauma, the space in which we make links between feelings, thoughts and context...is diminished' (Taylor, 2022, p.131).

I was born in the Southeast of England in 1964 and have lived in the UK all my life. The idea that I am fully aware of my privilege, collusion, and phobic responses would be false and inauthentic. Robin DiAngelo makes 'White Progressives' (such as me) her speciality (2018, p. 5).

She writes,

If...I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth...racism is unavoidable and...it is impossible to completely escape having developed problematic racial assumptions and behaviours (p.4).

I write,

Some Things About Me

I come from detached houses, mown lawns, and mothers with hobbies
Greengrocers and milk on the doorstep
Panama hats and brownie badges
I come from violins, half size, and orchestra
Black jacks, dib dabs and fruit salads
I come from navy blue knickers, netball and hockey
Walkie talkie dolls and secretly shared Jackie magazines
I come from sailing holidays in Bude, Selsey and Gweek
Paid for by naval Cdrs and army Captains

I come from Christian aid and summer birthdays
From cousins in the priesthood
Bringing Christianity to the grateful Africans and
Upholding middle England
I come from Victoria sponge and jumble sales
If I wanted, I could poke the tip of my tongue through the slits in
Mrs Boscombe's long earlobes weighed down with diamonds.

Shaamil writes,

Some Things About Me

I come from Auntie Beyra and Tietie
A two-bedroom plot, single storey in Athlone
I played in the shells of Morris minors
And cowboys and Indians in the bush
I won marbles and made kites with crinkle paper, flour and water
While my mother cooked sugar beans curry with lamb
I come from where the meat was bought with hamper stamps
In shops where she didn't need to ask for halal

I was taught by Mrs Van Wyk and Mrs Arendse

If I was lucky on Eid I collected 5 cents from Uncle's hands
Damaged with psoriasis and hard labour
And in my tailor-made suit (purchased on a lay-buy) I bought
Penny baloney, Wilson toffees and
Nigger balls
I could spend 15 minutes reading Spider-Man, Thor and X-men and
then return the comic to the Indian shopkeeper.
I come from a place where I built my own scooter with roller bearings
I laughed nervously watching people without the right papers running
for their lives
At 10 years old it was entertaining
But it taught me to not speak out.
I come from a time when Islam was a way life
Not a dress code (that came after segregation)
And in the evening, I attended Slamse Skool
I ran home crying because I witnessed Falaka.
The grey dust road was covered with yellow pompoms
Fallen from Portjackson trees.
I come from Dukum and crayfish tails
From downward thrust eyes and British fashion.
My cousin's highest goal was to be married

I come from a land where women married men
Who laboured in a country they couldn't call home.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia (literally meaning fear of Islam) is one of the most prevalent forms of discrimination in the world today. We hear that

over 1 million Muslims are in concentration camps in China's Xingang province, being burned alive in the streets of Delhi,...forced to leave their homes in Myanmar, drowning in boats off the coast of Greece and Italy, trekking...across the Sahara desert from Mali, Chad and Niger, fleeing drone strikes in Somalia, sitting in refugee camps in Syria, revolting for their lives to matter...in the USA, unable to access their natural resources in Palestine, and being policed, imprisoned, detained and monitored in the UK and across Europe. (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, p. 7)

Western news media continue unashamedly to represent Muslimness in derogatory, demeaning, and dangerous ways. Why, in the UK, do we see extraordinary generosity extended to Ukrainian evacuees while considering deportation on planes to detention centres in Rwanda for black and brown refugees from places such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran?

I ask Shaamil,

Why don't Muslim people come forward to take in these refugees as so many came forward to take in Ukrainians?

He replies

For fear of being further ostracised

Racism is so endemic in our society that we normalise war and strife for some but not for others. Discrimination regarding the ideology of Islam has 'historical and cultural specificity' (Foucault, 1997, p. 27) yet attempts to undermine or deny the concept of 'Islamophobia' are present in influential political spheres, and these in themselves, are efforts to silence and negate its presence in the UK. Media coverage continues to roll out all the stereotypes, women killed for wearing immodest clothing, girls being left uneducated, women not allowed out alone.

Despite apparent strides being made, it continues to appear that decades of misrepresentation and stereotyping outlined in Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* (1978/2019) have taken their toll in the collective unconscious, and many people still report horrifying and frequent incidences of ongoing Islamophobic discrimination.

Professor Salman Sayyid and Mr. Abdoolkarim Vakil describe Islamophobia as

ranging from everyday slow burning micro-aggressions to eruptions of violence and murder; its scope extends from classrooms and workplaces to neighbourhoods and state frontiers, from print and social media to the public square. Muslims find themselves framed by Islamophobia in the form of questions around national security, social cohesion, freedom of speech, gender inequality, and cultural belonging (Bhatti, 2021, p. 8).

Judith Butler says narratives use the capacity of discourse to construct outcomes through repetition and reiteration which produce further emotion (1997). The language of fear, used historically and extensively in western representations of Muslimness, has the power to affect emotion, leaving people unable to practice objectivity of feeling and neutrality of information. This fear and economy of truth can be used politically to contain people (Ahmed, 2010).

This is part of the backdrop of how we live.

I wonder, can I, as a white English woman, adequately address Islamophobia? Do I have something new to offer? My non-Muslim status renders me uncomfortable. Is it dangerous to enter this debate about religion and politics? Am I trying to distance or assuage myself from colonial intergenerational guilt? Am I guilty of appropriation? Perhaps I want to understand the cultural forces within my marriage better and integrate into Shaamil's life more deeply? To take on a project of this type is daunting, and I might be accused of pretending that I 'get it'; I don't. Ruthellen Jesselson says,

I would worry most if I stopped worrying, stopped suffering for the disjunction that occurs when we try to tell the other's story. To be uncomfortable with this work, I think, protects us from going too far. It is with our anxiety, dread, guilt, and shame that we honor the participants. To do this work we must contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress, or rationalize them. We must at least try to be fully aware of what we are doing. (1996, p. 70, cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 604).

Writing Together

The hiatus I experience engenders familiar feelings of anger and shame but also a new emotion—I feel hurt. These new feelings of hurt indicate that I have 'crossed a line, traversed a boundary between a perceived sense of self and other'. I feel a sense of 'in-between-ness' (Siddique, 2011, p. 310). As Kristeva says, 'living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply—

humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in their place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself’ (1991, p. 13). This crossing meant that,

When I saw the image of the dead ‘migrant’ child, washed up in the waves on a pebbly British beach on the southeast coast I saw my husband as a child. I saw his son, my stepson, I saw Shaamil’s nephews and cousins and all of my new family, and I wondered what would cause a tragedy like that.

bell hooks believed that writing and language can be transformative, and that ‘love is profoundly political...the...foundation of all meaningful social change’ (2001/2021, pp. 15–16), so,

*I ask Shaamil to write and roam this difficult territory with me,
To hold my hand,
Tell me where I cannot stray.
He talks of Muzammil. A state of preparation for an important revelation.
Enshrouded in one another’s garments
You wear me and I’ll wear you.*

Shaamil’s perspective, and perhaps even his protection, became vital for this project. Using the ‘process of writing...for the gaining of insights’ (Williamson & Wright, 2018) we hoped to break silences, work through pain, anger, and uncertainty in order to re/claim our voices in the communities within which we moved. Our dialogue is underpinned with love, and a focus on family and community.

*It is only skin between us
It breaks the same
I wish
I could crawl inside yours
Closer to your warm wise heart.*

Duo-autoethnography – A Way of Life

Insofar as cultural representation is concerned, Shaamil and I share a discomfort with positivist, observational research methods. Such methods have always left gaps because they presuppose and maintain a certain power balance. Melanie Baak says, ‘research is a dirty word for many of those who have been affected by colonialism and its legacies’ (2016, p. 29, cited in Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 16), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith states ‘the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and

colonialism' (2012, p. 1). Such methods felt inappropriate, reductive, and unable to give the depth, thickness, and richness that our subject matter deserves.

We made this epistemic shift from observational and hermeneutical data collection, choosing a practice-led 'form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed & Danahay, 1997, cited in Etherington, 2004, pp.139–140). Autoethnography is borne out of a post-structuralist desire to 'resist colonialist...impulses of authority entering a culture' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, citing Conquergood, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Reidman 1993). We felt that an even 'better solution to auto/ethnography that privileges the monologic voice of one person is a...cogenerative dialogue as method' (Stith & Roth, 2008, cited in Roth 2009). Working together democratises ownership of the data and creates a more level playing field, flattening some power imbalances (Fay Martin cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 613).

In this way, we can explore our experience of Islamophobia together, from the inside and the outside, and how it affects us as an interracial couple. Our lived experience and theoretical positioning are important (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 117) to enable this 'dangerous encounter' to be a 'source of learning', an opportunity to move from 'unknowing...to a position of understanding' (Siddique, 2011, p. 315).

We use writing in a rhizomatic sense to produce a transcultural dialogue which may transcend 'grand narratives' and use our personal experience for knowledge production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2001). By *rhizomatic* we mean work produced without a linear structure. Empirical research has much to do with categorising and finite conclusions, but 'how can we be listening for the unknown if we are constantly striving to make it fit into the categories of the known?' (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 83). Hence, we wish to remain open, to acknowledge that we may progress down many avenues, where connections are made, where our ideas assemble with others, but also where ideas break open, rupture, join-up, or lead to dead ends. We hope to map out some new territory on the subject (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). Bringing these Deleuzian concepts to the subject also means that we can surpass arboreal notions of power and hierarchy and question dogmatic thought (Deleuze, 1968/1994).

Co-enquiry is about a genuine dynamic dialogue (person to person, subject to subject) where human dignity is acknowledged in each other (Pohl, 1999; Panko, 1976). We are aware that place and relationship transform identity, so work with the idea that 'cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community' (Chang, 2008, p. 26). This means we can make an exploration of how our individual heritages of indoctrination meet as a response to the moments of a silent encounter. Martin Buber (cited in Panko, 1976) calls this the I-Thou relationship rather than the 'othering' encounter of I-It. We understand ourselves to be relational beings who do not individually represent separate cultures. However, our actions, interactions, and reactions only make sense because they are coming from certain cultural backgrounds. We are, as Gergen says,

carrying a history of relationships, manifesting them, expressing them...they are inhabited...as well by the relationships into which they are directed (1999, p. 133, cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 217).

This study focuses on being intentional and at the same time self-critical. We challenge 'cultural and hegemonic standards' and focus on 'differently valued knowledges'. This means we 'examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, pp. 6–9). Autoethnography and critical autoethnography aim to resist violence in practice and 'candor is key—being willing to say what no one else is willing to say' (Shields, 2011, p. 587).

Ethical Gathering

Shaamil and I acknowledge that our writing can only 'represent...an attempt to capture contextual truths that can be accepted as true to the extent that they were created at a certain time and in a certain relational context' (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 10).

Our dialogue has an organic, rhizomatic life of its own, recognising new questions and considerations as they arise. This 'intermediate knowledge of the data set guides...subsequent data collection' (Chang, 2008, p. 115). Interpreting our responses continuously as a method of inquiry makes it possible to follow the data, step by step, where each exercise informs the next unbound by initial plans borne out of preconceived impressions or expectations. We chose to let the material drive the research inquiry. This dynamic and non-linear planning became a vital ethical practice when the

project became overwhelming, calling for a rethink and new commitment. This way, we make sure all moments of the study are negotiated ethically.

Butler says discourse can reiterate and repeat (1997); therefore, all ethical considerations are subject to interrogation as they may be bound by rules borne out of colonial or patriarchal aims. Dutiful ethics such as informed consent, provision of information regarding processes and outcomes of study, ability to withdraw, and confidentiality may not be entirely sufficient to uphold the dignity and worth of each human being. Issues can arise as subtleties to inform later 'ethical-making practices' (Etherington, 2007, p. 599) depending on the 'demands of the context' (Denzin; Villa-Vicencio, 1994 cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 601). This post-structural concept of 'diffraction, entanglement, and difference has been vital' to create new knowledge and to examine 'how we view this knowledge' (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 83). Shaamil and I are changed by the project, and this change is ever continuing in process.

Working relationally means there is 'no leaving the field' (Adams, 2012, cited in Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 61). Aware of our vulnerabilities, and to mitigate any feelings that the project was taking over our lives, we decided to have in place a self-care framework. We set processing time aside and have access to couples counselling should it become necessary.

Our writing sessions were short and boundaried to protect our time away from the project. During writing session 2 we noticed the topic was taking an emotional toll and felt protective of one another. The subject matter was causing stress and was, 'too dismissive of the pain. After all it was not about an abstract political principle', it was real (Hirsch, 2018, p. 111).

The study may expose others, but dogmatic and inflexible ethical rules regarding confidentiality can shut down or silence the voices of the abused. Grant and Young calls this *epistemic violence* (2021, p. 3) which may reinforce stigmatization and be viewed as unethical. We were not willing to silence our own voices as this would leave us with an inauthentic set of responses to a real issue. We acknowledge there can be a fine line between research and venting legitimate personal fury or 'violent' textual practice which may lend itself to revenge (Bergin & Westwood, 2003). It could have been impossible to write this paper without exposing others, but I think we have achieved it.

Our 'descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive,...interval recordings' are thereby here recorded (Chang, 2008, pp.91,139–149).

Perceptions of Muslimness

You have to be careful, when you are free to think what you want, not to let in the thinking of others, in disguise, the false thinking of your father and mother, the spurious thinking of your grandfather, the masked thinking of your brother and sister, in other words, of your enemies (Diop, 2018, p. 43).

Colonialism is shameful in an ontological sense as well as ethically. In the UK we are so saturated with whiteness, white supremacy, and the impacts of colonialism that the task to dismantle conscious and unconscious belief systems is gargantuan. Timothy Bewes suggests that to 'free ourselves of [the] most intimate residue of the colonial enterprise it is necessary to overcome the models of thought and perception that made colonialism possible in the first place' (2010, pp.164–165). Even the concept of postcolonialism can be seen as a divisive western¹ construct as it presupposes that we live in times where colonialism is no longer a practice (Lucashenko, 2017). The 'ism' has the potential to erase the past and thus enable continued misunderstandings and silencing, perhaps encouraging further amnesia (Huggan, 2007, p.46) and hidden racism lodged in the discourse of postcolonialism.

Baroness Warsi states that Islamophobia is to be recognised as targeting anything which may be perceived as an identity marker, including a name (All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2018, p. 12). These incidents are described as expressions of racism 'targeting...Muslimness, or perceived Muslimness (p. 17). Shaamil can cite many incidences of friends and professionals who have used westernised names to prevent marginalisation and discrimination.

Western definitions of Muslimness are tied up with ethnic groups. 'The position 'that "race" is somehow more real than religious identity, or at least more legitimate basis for discrimination and oppression' is not acceptable or politically sustainable. It is important to be able to distinguish between faith/spiritual practice and racial origin (Denazin & Giardina, 2017, p. 5).

¹ The western world here means a number of regions, nations, and states, including most of Europe, North America, and Australasia.

From a western, Christian perspective, Muslimness or expressions of Muslimness may focus on ethnographic observations of behaviour, for example, praying five times a day, visiting the mosque, covering hair, wearing a certain type of beard, speaking Arabic, and so on. However, Shaamil makes the point that the word Muslim is derived from the root letters in Arabic (س ل م) that mean *safety* and *security*. The word Muslim is built on a paradigm that gives *مفعل* the role of the subject, i. e., a person who acts upon others.

Therefore, Islam may not neatly fit western categorisation as a religion or set of behaviours. Instead, it may be interpreted as the character and quality of a person. In the Qur'an, Muslim is not a person who belongs to a sect; to be Muslim is to be a peaceful person who cares for others and provides safety and a socio-economic system (*Salazar*) based on justice and human rights (*Haq*).

More Silences

We notice that when we discuss our research with our Muslim friends, it opens an outpouring of daily incidents of Islamophobia and racism. These moments were, up until this point, not spoken about in my presence and taken for granted as a part of the fabric of life. However, when we reveal in white British company the nature of our project, we are often met with uncomfortable silence, moments of interest infused with unease, stories of women who had married Islamic men and the fates that had befallen them (children abducted; women unable to go out during the day; the presence of an unacknowledged previous wife; even stories of murder) and, after this, a changing of the subject. I remain silent and wonder, how do these rumours develop? Where are the positive love stories?

What strikes me is the sense of danger and, what Bewes refers to as, the 'source of shame' (2010, p. 163). The white British reticence may be confusion about the subliminal messages about Muslimness that they encounter. Perhaps some feel caught in the headlights of uncomfortable truths, and to face the issues is an unbearable encounter. White people may redden up and/or begin a defence. DiAngelo says 'even a minimum of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive... behaviours...to reinstate white racial equilibrium' (Lee, C. C., in Charura & Lago, 2021, p. 57). The fear of exposure or being classed as racist can feel so messy and traumatic that avoidance may be a preferred option to maintain wellbeing. I wonder too, if white people are aware that change

means losing something, a threat to identity. If so, to flee and opt out might feel a safer option.

There are many silences on the subject matter. It seems that all of us, to some extent, are wearing masks of resistance, and silencing ourselves in one another's company, hostage to shame and injustice.

I write,

The elephant in the room rages and loves.

Hiding in grey shadows.

Racism has a profound effect on the wellbeing of all people.

a. The Lead Balloon Phenomenon

When we started writing, both of us reported feeling exposed and vulnerable, so we shared only that which we wish to share.

Our first workshop was to record how we felt about the hiatus. Shaamil explained that he experienced the 'moment of silence' all the time as his presence created it. He lived *in it* as opposed to encountering it.

He wrote,

I have not experienced this moment; my presence removes the momentary encounter.

My writing is, therefore, in response to brief moments of time, his is to a whole experience of what is unsaid around him.

Shaamil writes,

Comfortably Numb

My name

Resonates with all in earshot—silence

I am an alien – boogiemán/and mass murderer, possible terrorist

I have become numbed to it

Fend it off and somehow, I come up trumps

The sight of me is a shocker

Middle eastern would-be killer

Easily disputed

They have no knowledge but media jargon.

Sadly, for them—I am not from the middle east

They have no knowledge, just media jargon

They are belittled by enlightening facts/stats
I feel more comfortable. Accepted

I have become numbed to it—it's normal
It just goes over my head, I ignore insinuations
Which resonate within earshot
Silence.

I write,

Something Wrong

There must be something wrong
His name drops like an uneasy balloon
Into happy, sparkly, white wedding joy

His name drops like a water-filled balloon
Stupid, duped old woman
I don't want to be around for the mess

Silence needs filling
How are your children? Where did you meet him?
I don't want to be around for the mess
I can't help you.

I am floating away
Happy, sparkly, white wedding joy
You are alone, your bed, you lie in it
There must be something wrong.

Debrief

Shaamil and I were surprisingly tired after this exercise. We retreated to bed and slept for a couple of hours although it was still only midday. It seemed such a simple exercise and yet stirred up much. At first, we were unable to discuss the experience,

*All we wanted was timelessness
To twist a globe between sheets
To push away unease
So, we could hold love like a blown glass bowl.*

b. Ongoing Conversations and Unbearable Encounters

Settling into another exercise after this was difficult. We were both avoiding it and were silent on the subject for a while.

Then, after some time, we decided to focus on sexual politics and concerns about how Muslim men treat women.

We read the chapter ‘The Feminist and Queer-Friendly West? The Patriarchal Rest?’ (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, pp. 135-148) three times together and planned to write our responses.

In the first section of this chapter, Manzoor-Khan unpicks how, in the UK, images of women wearing hijab and niqab are used to illustrate their subjugation due to Islam. She cites how in western societies women are encouraged, required, requested, or forced to remove these to assimilate and prove their independence and to challenge the Muslim narrative. In the west, Muslim women’s choice of dress is viewed as an expression of submissiveness and shyness and the removal of these items liberating. The wearing of these is also aligned with Muslim stereotypes such as arranged/forced marriage, servitude to fathers and brothers, honour killings, genital mutilation, all of which represent Muslim patriarchy.

She continues to question the idea that presents Muslimness as a cultural distinction rife with patriarchy and violence set against the west in a binary sense. This binary then presupposes that the west is non-violent and does not express misogyny in its culture. The west is meant to be portrayed as liberal.

Manzoor-Khan then reminds the reader of the actual figures of all women in the UK who are subject to patriarchal domestic violence. She also informs the reader that for those who are Muslim, policies such as The Prevent Strategy serve to keep them quiet and unable to speak up for fear that they and other family members may be deported or ostracised from communities.

She states that the western press are always looking for story to corroborate anti-Muslim sentiment. This does not liberate Muslim women. Manzoor-Khan does not think that Muslim women living in western societies are safer as they are subject to racism, misogyny, and abuse from non-Muslim people. She does not think that non-Muslim women are any more safe or less likely to be subject to rape, violence, abuse, and other forms of misogyny at the hands of non-Muslims.

Manzoor-Khan goes on to remind the reader that the feminist view of removing hijab and niqab as a representation of emancipation is colluding with anti-Muslim sentiments seeing uncovering one’s body as a universal symbol or expression of freedom and the idea of making oneself available to the white male gaze as liberating.

Responses

We couldn't write, but I wanted to push the project forward so put forward an exercise

Write a letter to the chapter. To Manzoor-Khan

Write back an imagined letter

Perhaps a letter from our 'wise self' with solutions.

This felt ridiculous. After much talking, I gave up control of the project and listened to Shaamil. Listening moment by moment and not sticking to the plan was vital at this stage. As Fiona Hamilton says, 'plan less and trust more. Research is all about remaining open'. (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006, pp.141–142).

Eventually we wrote these responses.

Shaamil wrote,

Sure, I have summed up these experiences over the years. They have become a non-event and fade into oblivion. Most times when I am aware of it, not the silence, more the disdain of me being in the company or even a feeling of invading the company, I just smile to myself. Adopting the mindset, 'they really don't know me' or 'poor ignorant folks'. I then become judgemental thinking about the narrow unfulfilled life they are experiencing or how difficult it is to move away from the 'put me down' narratives of a terrorist/Muslim/heathen or lately child sex groomer. What a waste. Lost opportunity.

I remember a conversation with a German national who accused me of not integrating into the UK culture. Another narrow-minded conversation as his kids went to a German school and they attended a German church.

Being a non-drinker, I hardly frequent pubs which according to this German was the fabric of UK culture and the way for me to integrate.

I never had a problem or issue with integration.

When Lucy told me the first time of her experience of the silence, I felt hurt, sad, even responsible. Sadly, these are the normal negative narratives for someone of an Islamic cultural background and of colour.

I have rid myself of these horrible feelings, all the disdain, the silences, the judgements and constant prejudiced slurs levelled at me directly or indirectly. I have moved over, under, through and away. They do not bug

me at all. They have now surfaced again in the realm of my wife, this hurts me. Like I said I am indirectly responsible.

Apologies to my kind and loving life, wife. She does not deserve any harm.

I wrote,

I'm ashamed that I have mitigated silence with betrayal. Although Shaamil doesn't ritualistically pray 5 times a day, go to the mosque or fast any longer does not mean that he is not a Muslim. He will tell you that he embraces Islam. He questions religion, as a construct. So, I guess to say, he's as much a Muslim as I am a Christian, may be true. But this is not how I have meant it. I have said it to mellow things, to stop your fears and judgements, to ease the uncomfortable silence.

I will not do this anymore.

I feel guilty about the project altogether. I am rubbing his face in this subject matter.

Shaamil knows it is there and chooses something else. It's clear.

Now I too, have had enough, the phobias are, ridiculous, contemptible and not worth my time.

I have never been treated with so much respect by a man in my life. Given so much space to be myself.

That comment 'You know no white man will ever sleep with you again, he will feel inadequate' is so telling on so many levels.

Yes, I think you inelegant western men may be jealous because Muslim men know how to be with a woman.

It's sickening, horrifying.

Ask yourself

How do you respond to Muslim-ness?

Ask yourself about the political actions of the west in Muslim spaces.

I kick being British, I have crossed over to somewhere new.

And those silences. They insult me too.

Shaamil and I were saturated.

The project needed to be contained.

Shaamil chose to refuse more digging into the subject. And instead chose love.

I wrote,
I have felt a right to roam
Retraumatising
An abysmal hole of gawping ignorance
Ignore ~ ance

In her book, *How to Read Now*, Elaine Castillo writes of ignorance 'We're besieged on all sides by the comforting logic and pathos of ignorance. It's a logic that excuses people...from their actions...Most people are not, in fact all that ignorant' (2022, p.13).

c. Who is the project for?

I ask Shaamil what he had learned from the project.
He responds, 'nothing new'.
I feel frustrated. He is resigning himself to the problem, shutting it out. It's too painful. I am digging in, digging up.
I see the news on our screens again.
The SAS are being investigated for shooting Afghan men who have surrendered. It seems they were shot in cold blood, 54 of them. What if they had had white skin? If they were Russian. Just the presence of white skin and non-Muslim-ness would have it land differently in consciousness. Why are their lives mattering less?
Of course, nations are angry about brutalities, people are angry and want to retaliate, be heard in whatever way possible.
This is how it is.
Exposure of truth is congruence.
Congruence is healing.
The great white civilisation
is falling.

And then I wrote 'vulnerably at this crucial turning point' (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 9),

White Male Gaze

Look at me

Free

Body

See

Free

Me

Free me

Me

Running

Through trees, roads, streets

On the sand,

Blue sea-wind in my hair

Pink face, pink shells,

Breezy skin

Thin

Eyes observe

Flies' eyes

Compounds of eyes

Horny men's eyes

Frightened mother's eyes

Jealous woman eyes

Shaming eyes

Sexualise

My eyes

Free me eyes

All eyes

Probing

Fingering eyes

Colonise

Patronize.

Pull a cloth between me and those eyes

Enfold, embrace, protect

I have found respect within this relationship. My body, my privacy, my boundaries are cherished in a way I have not experienced previously.

Shaamil's respect is fundamental, a relief, a yearning fulfilled. I am, at last, free from the white male gaze. As a woman who grew up in the 1970s,

when Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris were lauded, I learned the nature of my culture.

Psychological Hijab

I crave to choose who I wish to be sexualised by.
Who I wish to arouse and who I wish to be aroused by

I realise my own trauma, the abuse and misogyny all my life in the UK.
I was not protected. I was not informed. These are old wounds for me. Here
I let them speak and hope for alchemy.

The fear of the Muslim man is incongruent for me. It just doesn't fit my
lived experience.

d. Nothing Is Something

So, what happens when two come together in dialogue, as counterpoints,
as couples do? We are probing issues and speaking from two different
vantage points. Can we two highlight 'the perpetual and impeding
undertone of violence manifested in a present day psyche?' (MOCAA, 2022)

Two together can amplify resistance, can resist gender and race,
history and time.

Driving

Me: (in the passenger seat) What do you think you have learned?

Shaamil: Nothing.

I am disappointed. I want more from him. How can I complete this
investigation without him.

Me: Really? Nothing?

Shaamil: Nothing new.

I wonder

Me: not even that there are other ways of doing research

Shaamil: I'm not sure any of it will make a difference.

He wants to remain silent

Nothing to add

He doesn't say I am in the category of people

From the Dutch East India trade

He says 'I'm in the category of people who no longer wish to discuss
this'

It is as if he has come to the end of the trip,
No relief in sight
But
Waves of something more than inconvenience.

Nothing is something
'I don't want to talk about it' is something
'Nothing new to be said' is something
'It's useless' is something
This horrifying moment of silence
is something.

From nothing and something all things can grow.

From 'I don't know' can come the right solution.

It is very hard to arrive at this point. To face it and write it down.

I find myself unable to breathe

The world is changing, and I can let it.

Conclusions – So Many Silences

Although, Shaamil and I acknowledge there is further room for deeper therapeutic probing beyond the remit of this project, this evocative autoethnography foregrounds experience and examines personal responses to gestures of Islamophobia revealing outrage as privilege and silence as strategy (Spry, 2011, p. 68). Trauma can be intergenerational, long term, continuous, and perpetuating. Words do not always dispel or ameliorate problems, sometimes silence is another option. Taylor states that writing can 'for some people...become an outlet for rumination and...can be potentially harmful' and 'perpetuate the experience' (2019, p. 18) noting that caution and sensitivity should be paid to an understanding of the actual trauma.

Racism and discrimination affect us all and will continue to replicate and damage futures. It is, at the same time, high on the agenda in collective consciousness in a new and potentially positive way since the George Floyd murder and Black Lives Matter campaign. Western cultures face challenges, and regardless of whether the matter is 'trending' or not, the issues remain urgent.

Van der Kolk says

our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring wellbeing (2014, p. 44).

With care, perhaps this is possible.

It is uncomfortable. We are all vulnerable.

This is what we are with.

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Dr Lucy Windridge-Floris is a Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Cardiff Metropolitan University teaching and supervising students across BA, MA, and PhD programmes. She successfully completed her PhD in Creative Writing and Critical Practice in 2015. She holds an MA in English and Creative Writing, an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes and a Diploma in Trauma Reduction Counselling. Lucy is also a trained and experienced Drama therapist completing her postgraduate diploma at The University of Hertfordshire. She has worked as a therapist for the NHS, Social services and privately in mental health, secondary treatment for addiction and primary education. She is married and lives in Gloucestershire.



Shaamil Windridge-Floris is a Clinical Dental Technologist registered with the GDC, practicing in Chepstow. He gained his expertise at the University of Kent in the UK and Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa. He owned a laboratory in the heart of Brackenfell, RSA for seventeen years through the restrictions of Apartheid. Since emigrating to the UK in 2005 he has continued his business in both England and Wales. Shaamil has belonged to a Ghalka (circle of religious learning) for many years exploring religion and Islam. He is married and lives in Gloucestershire.



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Insight into the Process of Writing the Same Memoir in Two Languages: Different Languages, Different Personalities?

Dr Jasna Levinger-Goy
Integral Psychotherapist

Abstract

The experience of a civil war is always traumatic, as is refugee status and settling down in a new environment. Writing about such traumatic events takes a great deal of processing and a lot of time. Almost 30 years after the events, I set out to write a memoir describing them. One surprising fact was that the language in which the book was first rendered was English. Although I have near native proficiency in English, it is not my mother tongue. It was only after the book was completed that the idea of translating/rewriting it in Serbo-Croat started to emerge.

The link between language and identity is well-known, but some aspects might seem rather strange. In this essay, I analyse various psychological processes that accompanied my writing. I note the differences in emotions and reactions, as well as something I would refer to as a change of personality traits, depending on the language I was writing in. Completing both versions of the memoir helped me process my trauma and bring together previously fragmented pieces of self.

Keywords: trauma, identity, psychological processing,
language/personality traits, civil war, refugee/immigrant

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Insight into the Process of Writing the Same Memoir in Two Languages: Different Languages, Different Personalities?

In 2019 at the time when Brexit rows culminated, I became very upset, and that puzzled me hugely. Brexit rows did not warrant that level of anxiety. I then began to recognise that it was the association with the 1990s divisions in former Yugoslavia that disturbed me so much. This association brought back my latent heavy trauma load.

I was born and lived in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the former Yugoslavia. Although I was born into a family of Jewish origin, neither my parents nor I accepted Jewishness as the ethnicity that defined us. After the horrors and killings among the ethnic groups within Yugoslavia during the Second World War,² my parents readily accepted Yugoslav identity³ as well as the idea of 'brotherhood and unity'. As a post-war child I happily followed suit. I would say we were a middle-class family⁴ of professionals that lived a rather well-organised life, minding our own business. I read English language and literature at university, and later, having acquired both MSc and PhD in linguistics, I became a lecturer at the English department at Sarajevo University. In the final year, still a student, I got married, but the marriage did not last very long. Otherwise life was quite uneventful.

I was in my mid-forties when the Bosnian civil war broke out. It genuinely took me by surprise. Given that my surprise was largely a consequence of persistent denial, when the conflict started, it hit me hard. Understandably, living under the horrendous circumstances of a civil war and its aftermath left a huge trauma wound. The most difficult to deal with during the war was the threat of the highest order: a very real and overwhelming threat to life itself. I had to fight for survival. At the same time, life was reduced to satisfying only basic needs: food, water, and shelter—a rather dehumanising state. A few months later, fleeing the war-

²According to Stephen Hart the total toll in Yugoslavia in the period between 1941 and 1945 was over 1.7 million dead. Out of the 1.7 million, about one million were 'caused by Yugoslav killing Yugoslav, whether it was Croat Ustase against Jews, Muslims, Serbs, Chetniks and Partisans; or Partisans against Chetniks and Ustase; or Chetniks against Ustase, Muslims, and Partisans.'

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/partisan_fighters_01.shtml

³ Along with the well-established identities of major ethnic groups, at one point the 'Yugoslav identity' was introduced, and some people (including my family) readily accepted it. However, the issue of Yugoslav identity is far too complicated to be discussed in this relatively short essay.

⁴ I have to mention here that the Yugoslav socialist society was officially classless.

torn country, I had to cope with the pain of being forced to leave behind my previous existence with all that it entailed. Alongside that, I had to face the issue of a loss of the identity that I believed defined me, i.e., the Yugoslav identity. That identity abruptly disappeared due to a sudden disintegration of the foundations upon which it had been built. The loss inadvertently initiated a search for some sort of backup identity, a ‘replacement’ identity. This resulted in the gradual awakening of the identity of my ancestors, i.e., the Jewish identity I had not acknowledged before. Like my original Yugoslav identity, my replacement Jewish identity was not a religious one. I started seeing myself as a secular Jew now trying to evoke from memory those elements of Jewish culture and tradition I could identify with (which I would have encountered mostly in my grandparents’ homes).

My Bosnian war trauma, along with my parents’ collective trauma as Holocaust survivors,⁵ which was less obvious to me, formed a heavy trauma load. The desire to write about my war experiences seemed to be guided by my unconscious need to process it all—a form of self-therapy, which, although not a conscious decision, turned out to be a welcome by-product. Overall, it had a calming and liberating effect.

The first step was to admit to myself the painful truth that ‘Yugoslav’ as an ethnic identity must have been an artificial construct. It could not withstand the test of time—it disappeared in less than 50 years. Also, I had to acknowledge the truth that as a consequence, I was left without identity and without much choice other than the urge to define myself somehow. No mean feat. Since both my parents were of Jewish extraction (although not religious), Judaism seemed to be the obvious answer. After some searching and struggling, I eventually accepted the dormant identity and decided to define myself as a traditional secular Jew. That about described me; it became my new, albeit incomplete, identity.⁶ With the new identity acknowledged, my inherited collective trauma became more relevant too. However, the more immediate trauma of living under shelling and starvation seemed to me more complicated, and I felt I had to deal with that first, in whichever way I could.

⁵ At that time, the presence of ‘second hand’ trauma from my parents did not seem relevant. Although they did not talk about it much, the dire destiny of the Jewish population in World War II, especially in the Balkans, a territory with a turbulent history and many a war, was among the worst in Europe. Yugoslavia, along with some other European countries, according to some sources lost over 70 percent of their Jewish population (other sources claim a higher number). It was impossible not to inherit that collective trauma.

⁶ Incomplete since it was a ‘non-domiciled’ version.

The next step was to face it fully, with open eyes. The core narrative of my war story was already in my head. In late 1990s I had actually written a short text in Serbo-Croat⁷ about my war memories that covered the most painful recollections. It was almost all rendered in direct speech with a kind of childlike perspective, strongly reflecting the sense of helplessness. The Serbo-Croat text was published first, and later my husband (who was English but fluent in Serbo-Croat) and I translated it into English. My husband was then trying to convince me to write a memoir, but I was not ready. The passage of time helped, so in 2019, instead of watching the disturbing current affairs programmes surrounding me, I set off to write about my past. This has definitely helped me define myself.

Spontaneously, I wrote the book in English (Levinger-Goy, 2022a). I am not sure when or how I began to embrace my English identity. My Jewish identity has always felt insufficient. The transition must have occurred parallel with the conscious attempts to define my identity. It was a subtle process, not even noticeable. Helped by the desire to integrate, it felt very natural and organic. The foundation of my identity was Yugoslav, while the English one was built upon that foundation.

The writing itself started without any preparation. I just sat in front of the computer and did not even think much about the structure of the book, least of all about the language. The first sentences simply came out in English, I guess pretty much the same way, over a decade earlier, the short text about war memories spontaneously came out in Serbo-Croat.

The biggest puzzle for me was what to do with the narrator. Initially I did not want the text to be very personal, so I started with the narrator in the third person. I believed it was safer for me; it gave me a chance to distance myself. I struggled with the third-person narrator at the beginning, but a friend's advice to try a few pages in the first person helped. So, eventually I accepted it as my memoir and wrote it in the first person.

After that the text started to flow. My fear that I needed the third-person voice to distance myself proved to have been unfounded. I suddenly realised that in my mind, I the writer perceived myself as English; I had

⁷ Serbo-Croat is a non-existent language, but I cannot claim to speak any of the languages it was split into in the post-civil war era. The previous variants, Eastern and Western, became Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian—differing from each other as much as UK, US, and Australian English. What was previously known as Serbo-Croat, a mixture of the two variants, was widely spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is the language I translated the book into.

fully embraced my new, by then officially confirmed, British identity. That was enough of a distance. Problem solved. I felt calm, content, and strangely fulfilled as the time went by and the pages accumulated. All in all, it was a pleasant and at the same time cathartic process. I noticed that I managed to explain to myself things that had initially seemed unexplainable. Things I thought I was unable to understand suddenly became clear. I was surprised to find myself at peace and that I felt so little distress. Writing about my husband's death was the only part that truly upset me. Naturally! That happened to the 'English me' in the present. Most other chapters dealt with me in the past.

Having heard about the book, some of my friends who did not read English suggested the book should be translated. At the beginning I was quite reluctant, maybe even apprehensive. The translator would have to be Yugoslav. But who? A professional translator? I did not like the idea. I just assumed it could only be me. Could I do it? I would need to be writing in my mother tongue Serbo-Croat. I would have to penetrate deeply and closely into my past self. How close would I get to the pain and trauma, I wondered. It felt unsettling. With time, I was slowly getting used to the idea that I would be writing again, i.e., translating the book (Levinger-Goy, 2022b). And then COVID and the lockdown came. Writing was a great way to occupy and distract myself! There were no contacts with people, at least none in person. The computer became my saviour; it became a means of connecting both with my present (mostly English) friends, and my past (mostly Yugoslav) friends. The process of writing in Serbo-Croat also turned out to be a connection between my present and my past selves. So I embarked on a process that felt like writing a new book. In a way, I was.⁸ Or at least it was a different *me* writing the book.

While engaging with the translation my feelings turned out to be equally different—it was a different process full of different emotions. I was not calm anymore. I recognised that writing in English meant some sort of acknowledging, identifying, and processing my trauma, although not always reliving it. The presence of trauma in the 'Serbo-Croat me' was certainly acute, and more often than not it was a case of reliving it. The collective intergenerational trauma, as well as my more immediate trauma

⁸ I managed to find a publisher in Serbia, and they approved of those changes in the text I found necessary since there were some explanatory elements redundant for Yugoslav readers and I also freshly remembered an odd detail that I wanted to add.

caused by the circumstances of a civil war⁹ with its aftermath, were both in the forefront, although maybe not in an equally powerful way. The collective intergenerational trauma felt almost like a backdrop for the more recent one.

I guess while writing the English version, I tried to explain to myself what had happened, how it had happened, and even *why*. In a way it turned out to be an exploration of my past experiences from a distance. It was as if I was watching myself from afar; I analysed my erstwhile actions and reactions while dealing with unimaginable war circumstances as well as coping with my experiences of having refugee status (which for me was greatly unpleasant). However, during the process of translation I became immersed in the time and place from which I had fled. Distance was now even less possible than I had imagined. The trauma was awakened; the pain became sharp. I grew angry, bitter, and resentful. I became very aware of all my negative emotions. There were so many reasons for such feelings, so many trauma-inducing experiences evoked. One among many realisations was that during the Bosnian war I had voluntarily chosen to be an outcast because I had had no other choice, as Bogdan Rakić, a reviewer of the translation, aptly noted on the book jacket of the Serbian edition of the memoir (Levinger-Goy, 2022b). And nobody likes to be an outcast. Rakić further remarked, 'Memories of a tragic yet confined historic conflict becomes a bitter drama of a modern person attempting to restore the sense of personal dignity and humanity' [my translation]. Again, not an easy task.

Even though neither writing the original nor the translation of it were meant to be a form of self-therapy, I could not help but notice the different psychological and emotional reactions between both tasks. Linguistically, there were no specific limitations in either language, since my ability to express myself is more or less equal in both. However, the differences I noticed, both in me and in the process itself, genuinely astonished me. Although I was originally a linguist by profession, and I only later qualified as a psychotherapist, I did not expect such an outcome. But those two professions helped me recognise the phenomenon. As a linguist I researched about the close connection of personality traits or 'self', culture,

⁹ Any form of war traumatises, but I feel a civil war is somehow more difficult in that there is no common enemy as such. Instead, former neighbours, friends, even family members become enemies. Also, the conflict erupts from within, unlike the case of invasion, where the enemy attacks from the outside; having an external enemy is less confusing. Survival, just as in every war, becomes the main, not easily attainable, goal, but in the case of a civil war, it is harder to identify where the threat is coming from.

and life events with language (or sometimes language variants). I had always known *theoretically* that identity/personality traits and language were closely connected, but *experiencing* the effect of the integration of my two identities/languages intrigued me. I now consider myself British of Yugoslav–Jewish origin. I am more or less bilingual in English and Serbo-Croat, yet I have not paid much attention to the deeper consequences of this development. The processes of both the writing and then translating of my memoir showed that the issue was much more complex than I had realised.

The first, and probably the biggest, surprise in writing was that English was the first language in which I chose to express my thoughts and feelings, not my mother tongue Serbo-Croat. The next was my deep reluctance to translate the book. It seemed as unreasonable, as was my later very strong desire to translate it. However, most amazing was that when both books came out, I was able to own both texts and everything that was in them. I realised with some pleasure that I had finally reached a kind of wholeness, which must have been a result of successful integration of two identities and two languages; I proudly owned the simultaneous presence of my English and my Serbo-Croat personalities, both modified by language as much as by the environment and circumstances.

I also recognised that even disregarding the trauma, in Serbo-Croat I was often unhappy and frustrated, that I often felt ‘othered’. It was due not only to my Jewish origin that placed me in a minority group among few minority groups, but also to the nature of the Yugoslav environment, where eccentricity was mostly looked down upon, and I am somewhat eccentric. There were other mostly social/cultural factors that made my life in Yugoslavia more difficult than it should have been, but here is not the place to go into that. I did feel that I could not realise my full potential there, but I certainly did not flee my country to feel more accepted or realise my potential—I fled to save my life. I chose to come to the country I was familiar with (my BA is in English language and literature) and had frequently visited. However, this time I came to the UK with a heavy trauma load.

While translating the book, I felt that I had begun to offload the trauma; it was transferred from within, from my mind onto the paper, so to speak. It was pulled out. Sometimes I even felt I managed to step out of the narrative, despite being deeply immersed in the events. The narrative began to take on a life of its own, and I could almost watch myself within it. In writing the English version, I felt a pressing need to interpret, to

understand, to make sense, as much as possible. I was involved with the *narrative*, not so much with events. At that point I felt no anger.

However, the translating took me back. The process created a bridge between the past and the present, in spite of my feeling somewhat torn at the beginning. I needed closure with the past, I needed to look at the bridge from afar. I think it was for that purpose, while translating from English into Serbo-Croat, that I eventually I managed to acknowledge my anger and own it. The result was that my life turned into a reinforced bridge, paved with the analyses of issues, both past and present, supported by understanding, interpreting, and eventually owning them. It was a way to integrate my past self with my present self, creating a whole self rather than being fragmented. And it seems to be working. In the book, I talk about the three separate lives I had lived. Now it genuinely feels like one life of various, more or less dramatic, parts or of more or less different personality traits and bilingual, yet whole and mine! My English and Serbo-Croat 'personalities' coexist, and each has its place in my life. I live mostly using English. Only occasionally I use Serbo-Croat, and the Serbo-Croat personality traits re-emerge 'unscathed'.

My 'English self' grew very gradually. With time I noticed that I was less frustrated and more confident and self-assured in English. After a while, I realised I was free from fear, be it of military or any other authority. I also realised that I did not feel judged—I felt included; I was one of a huge number of people of various foreign origins. Although the country I fled to was in a way a country of my choice, adapting to the new life was neither easy nor smooth. My previous visits had been temporary, with the knowledge that there was home to go back to. When I fled to England, I had the difficult task of making that my home. But that was a conscious decision and the solution I opted for, having experienced bewildering and hugely traumatic changes in my home country. Or at least that was the way I perceived the unfortunate circumstances in what was Yugoslavia in the 1990s and my life afterwards.

A significant element, if not the most important one, was that I found love 'in English' and that my husband selflessly provided support and understanding. I discovered that I could breathe freely; that there was no need to defend, protect, or hide. Maturity helped as well, as did the fact that I was self-employed and independent. My English self finally, about a decade after fleeing the war-torn area, chose to process my trauma in therapy (unfortunately including bereavement due to my husband's sudden death). That was the first step toward bringing together my

fragmented parts. The book was a way to complete the process. The end result is my much calmer, content, and confident English self, albeit 'spiced up' with my more 'temperamental' Serbo-Croat self. I am at peace with myself—I finally gave myself permission to be my unadulterated self, and I feel I now know who I am.



Jasna Levinger-Goy was born in Sarajevo, the former Yugoslavia. She received her BA in English language and literature from Sarajevo University, her MSc in linguistics from Georgetown University (Washington DC, USA) and her PhD in linguistics from Zagreb University. She worked as a university lecturer both at Sarajevo and Novi Sad universities, a lector for Serbo-Croat at SSEES, University College London, and a tutor in interpreting at Metropolitan University London.

She has published several articles, mostly in the field of linguistics and psychotherapy.

She came into the UK during the Bosnian civil war. She later married Cambridge University Slavist Edward Dennis Goy and worked on various translations with him, including two major Yugoslav novels. After his death, she qualified as an integral psychotherapist and now has a private practice in Cambridge.

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Book Review

A Story of a Marriage Through Dementia and Beyond: Love in a Whirlwind

By Laurel Richardson

2023, 104 pages (paperback)

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Reviewed by Kim Etherington, PhD

Professor Emerita, University of Bristol, UK

Laurel Richardson, Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Ohio State University, has been an inspiration to me since I came across her work in the first edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* whilst undertaking my PhD back in the early 1990s. In her chapter 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry' (available in later editions of that handbook), she wrote:

I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies... "Coming out" to colleagues and students about my secret displeasure with much of qualitative writing, I found a community of like-minded discontents ... [who also] ... found much of qualitative writing yes – boring. (2000, p. 924)

Since then, recognising myself as one of those discontents, I have become part of that community and continue to be inspired by Laurel's work, alongside others who share the belief that writing research from our selves is an enjoyable way of knowing, and learning, and passing knowledge on to others. As we explore our own processes, creating possibilities for new understandings, we also find opportunities for creative analysis, maybe through poetics, performance, song, or illustration. Through using different forms of re-presentation and writing,

we can discover new aspects of our topic and strengthen the community of individual voices within it: writing from our selves we can take risks, be open, honest and engaging, and fully present in our work.

Laurel's latest book, *A Story of a Marriage Through Dementia and Beyond: Love in a Whirlwind* (2023), was written in her late 80s, after forty years of marriage to Ernest, a fellow academic. Her story feels particularly poignant for me, resonating as it does with several areas of my own experience at this stage of my life and marriage of over 60 years.

I read this book quickly from cover to cover and, recognising its importance and value, I wanted to share my responses and encourage others to read it. Again, quickly, I began to write a version of this review and sent a draft to a critical friend, Carolyn Ellis, who has known Laurel very well over a long period of time. Her feedback brought me up sharply to the realisation that in reading Laurel's book and in my first attempt to write a review, I had stepped back too far, protecting myself from getting close to my own feeling responses, telling myself I needed to focus on Laurel's experience rather than my own. Yet in the very first paragraph, Laurel thanks Ernest for his willingness to allow her to write this book as *honestly* as she could—I needed to be honest too.

I reread the book, slowly, allowing myself to *notice* the parts that touched the sore spots in me, my own experiences of being a carer for my physically disabled husband, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia eight years ago and is now unable to stand or walk unaided. Like Laurel, I am also in my 80s, and like her, I am an academic and married to a man who has been successful and creative in his life and in his scientific work. Although we live on different continents and among different cultures, Laurel's journey and my own are paralleled and, in some ways, different, too. There are several types of dementia—all of them difficult to manage—but Lewy body dementia, which Ernest had, could be seen as the most difficult of all. As well as the usual symptoms of dementia, Lewy body often bring with it aggressive verbal, physical, and sexual behaviours.

Through this book, Laurel hopes she can show and tell others what Ernest has endured whilst also focussing on her own experiences, in the hope that other caregivers will find in this book someone who has walked in her shoes: 'A kindred spirit who gets your pain' (p. 4). That is indeed what I have found.

Arthur Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* tells us that,

Storytelling is **for** another just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as guide to the other's self-formation...The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story **for** the other. (1995, pp. 17–18)

As the reader, I have been the listener who has entered the space Laurel creates as teller in this book. In that space, I have connected with her and myself in ways that have changed and strengthened me, and I am grateful for that.

Laurel does not shy away, as I did, from sharing her thoughts and feelings, and the complex nuanced lives of a couple living with the worst effects of distressing disease who can still sometimes find hope, laughter, and loving connection. Her unflinching autoethnographic story shows how their personal struggles are shaped by the culture and context of the changing circumstances in which they found themselves year after year as the disease progresses, living in a hitherto unknown world of dementia that Laurel says is like living through 'a whirlwind' (p. 1).

Each chapter covers a dated period, tracking Ernest's descent into Lewy body dementia. She tells us that she writes as a way of relieving her stress: she writes about events as they occur; she writes to keep faith with herself to handle whatever she might be given, consciously challenging herself to use different formats. She tells us,

I did not write to tell a "story," a step-by-step narrative. Rather, I wrote to join my previous life with the one I was now living. I wrote in pieces: my life was in pieces. (p. 3)

In the introduction, Laurel seamlessly addresses the ethical issues that arise when writing personal stories, which inevitably involve writing about others. She shows how, in the early stages of her writing when Ernest was still alive, she performs her 'relational ethics of care' (Ellis, 2017) through their conversations, informing him about her intentions to write about him and his dementia journey, seeking his consent and asking for his help to check if the way she represents his truths and meanings feels true to him. In the beginning, Ernest, a novelist and Emeritus Professor of English, was able to suggest some changes, point out repetitions and potential distractions, just as he had done with her previous writings. As Laurel put it, '[him] the novelist helping me, the novice creative non-fiction writer' (p. 3).

She read to him the first three pieces of her collection:

"You're writing about me," he said. He looked pleased. "About my dementia?"

"Yes," I said. "Maybe a book. Is that alright?"

"As long as you tell the truth," he said." ...

"And let the readers know how brave I am." (p. 3)

Since returning to the rewriting of this review, I too have had conversations with my husband, telling him about the book, asking if he'd like to read it (which he declined) and telling him I would be including some of our shared stories in my review. He replied, 'That's okay with me'. Although he often reads my writing before submission, he declined to read this review. He is at the stage where he has lost interest in many things, even in his beautiful garden, which has been his creation and passion throughout our married life.

Laurel's book follows Ernest's progression from the earliest signs of cognitive deterioration and transient global amnesia (TGA) in November 2008, right through to just beyond his death from Lewy body dementia in November 2020. Laurel believes that the TGA marked the start of Ernest's 'descent into dementia... [when] his life and our lives changed' (p. 9). She shows, often through tender dialogue, the nuanced and complex changes in Ernest's thinking and behaviours after he had spent those three days in 'an altered state of confusion, memory loss and wordlessness' after which he became sleepy, 'cognitively present, but fearful...and easily emotionally bruised, unexpectedly fragile'. (p. 9). There was a similar point in my own relationship when I noticed a major shift in my husband Dave, but only with hindsight can we know this as the beginning of a major life transition, as if the pathways we have been travelling along together for many years have divided into two paths that each of us needs to travel, sometimes alone.

By 2010, Ernest, author of three novels and many academic papers, had lost interest in writing, international travel, and playing his saxophone. As his life changed, their shared lives changed too. Two years later they rescued two 'small and smart' Papillon dogs: brother and sister. The couple bonded deeply with these beautiful creatures, named Bashi and Lily, whose needs shaped the couple's new lives. The dogs provided a new purpose as they moved forward, and sometimes led to unexpected conversations. 'Ernest and I talk often about the dogs and death... we talk more about death and the dogs than we do about each other's deaths' (p. 11). For the

next six years the dogs, who by then have been trained as *certified* therapy dogs, accompany them wherever they go, even by plane.

This book is like a beautiful cabinet full of large and small drawers filled with large and small stories, like the Bashi and Lily story, which evoked a small story of my own: during COVID I decided that I needed an animal. Dave has always vetoed the idea, and I have always accepted his veto. This time, I refused to do that, and with the support of our son Peter, who lives locally, I now have little Rosie, my cat. Peter drove me four hours each way—during lockdown when we were not allowed to do that—to pick up this tiny kitten that has changed my life (and Dave’s—he’s also in love with her). So of course the Bashi and Lily stories caught my attention. There were other stories that caught me, but in less welcome ways ...

The nine long years of gradual deterioration pass by in one chapter until the story picks up in 2019 when Ernest is unable to read his watch. Laurel realizes this is a serious new stage, and after extensive testing Ernest is diagnosed with “mild cognitive impairment, probably Alzheimer’s – always fatal” (p. 18). I notice the difference between the way I am given this news in the UK and the way it was told in the US, even before a brain scan. The ‘always fatal’ was not added to Dave’s diagnosis after a brain scan. This is when the couple reached out to support groups, which they embraced with some relief, like us.

In January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the USA, leading to the closure of the support groups. Laurel feels ‘bat-shit crazy’ as she’s left to cope alone, and things get worse. She writes ‘I go to sleep wishing Ernest were dead ...I imagine him dead, me released from being care-partner, me free to be me, uninterrupted. Me free to travel, sleep, write, talk to friends, sons...I can’t stop myself’. (p. 41) My own thoughts and feelings are hard for me to see on the page, but the compassion I feel for Laurel helps ease my shame. The Lewy body aggression begins to show itself, and Laurel feels unsafe; Ernest is admitted to hospital where his medication is adjusted, and he returns home, unable to remember his hospital stay. Embedded in this story is concern about the costs of medical help in the US and the realisation for me that although the NHS is free to all citizens, it does not finance care for all dementia sufferers, which is viewed as ‘social’ care.

When Ernest’s aggressive behaviour returns, Laurel finds a memory care facility near their home. In September 2020, two months before he dies, he is admitted: they are COVID free. ‘He is locked in; I am locked out.

OMG! I am going to be alone forever. I have never lived alone' (p. 60). (As a response, I am thankful for the six months I chose to live alone in my 50s.) After a month, Laurel is allowed to visit, outside or on the porch. The separation creates a despondent place inside her: 'Wrung out. Shivery. Sweaty. ...I feel it's happening in a much deeper place inside me. ...a place of despondency? Desolation? Fear? Knowing?' (p. 70)

A few weeks later, Ernest is admitted to an intensive care unit, followed by discharges and admission to several other facilities. After not being allowed to touch him for eight weeks, Laurel massages his arms while having a loving conversation. She explains that 'just because Ernest is not living at home it does not mean I am not care-taking, decision-making, loving, grieving, worrying' (p. 82). When Dave is in intermittent respite care, when I can no longer cope without a break, I know this too.

Finally, Laurel fights to have Ernest admitted to hospice care. She describes eloquently the vast difference between the medical model of care and hospice care, 'I know he will be treated with comfort, care and dignity' (p. 89). Laurel marvels that there is, 'a doctor talking to me about spiritual matters!' (p. 9). I am saddened that the scarcity of hospice care in the UK is mirrored in the US. Hospice care in the UK must rely upon charitable donations; in the US Medicare covers the cost or Medicaid for those without insurance.

Laurel tells us that dementia is the third leading cause of death among older populations in the US and that ten million cases of dementia are diagnosed in the US each year. The burden of care falls on unpaid family members and friends, and three-quarters of those fear for their own health. The picture is similar here in the UK.

Weaving in autoethnographic and sociological methods and scholarship, as well as a list of reading and resources for caregivers, scholars, and others, this book will appeal to students and academics across a wide range of disciplines: health, communication, nursing, and allied health courses covering death and dying, end-of-life care, dementia care, and, of course, those pursuing writing as a method of inquiry, autoethnography, and creative non-fiction.

I believe the knowledge within this book will also be of value to caring professionals, whether medical or charitable, and for those of us involved in writing for wellbeing who support carers of any kind. It is equally important that this book is read by policymakers.

This beautifully written book offers emotional support to those in service as caregivers, like me. Connecting with Laurel's experience, even though painful at times, has allowed me to view my own unfinished journey through fresh eyes and recognise the need for self-compassion, especially for those of us who accompany partners while growing old ourselves, doing a job that would be excluded from on grounds of age if we were to apply!

Laurel has created a beautiful autoethnographic story that lives up to all that she has taught us over many years. Her story ends with her family celebrating Ernest's eighty-second birthday, thirteen days after his death, when they scatter his ashes in their chosen place, in peace at last.

She writes,

This is where Ernest will be and this is where I will be when my time comes. I feel here we will be fully present to each other in ways beyond my understanding, but, for now, perfectly comforting. "C'mon Bashi and Lily...That's settled...We can go home, now." (p. 97)

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