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LIRIC

The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community 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.

Editorial Team

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Contents

Editor's Foreword

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Hello and welcome to another rich and diverse volume of the *Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community (LIRIC) Journal*. This issue has been some time coming, and I hope that when you read it, you will agree that it has been worth the wait!

In This Issue

Much has changed in the few years since I first joined the *LIRIC* editorial board. In that time, we have weathered a global pandemic, seen political change of enormous and frightening degrees around the world, and learned that whilst we can connect more easily through new means than ever before, there are some incredibly deep disconnections between people, cultures, and nations. The papers gathered in Volume 5 of *LIRIC* offer some means to address these old and new divisions personally, professionally, interprofessionally, and institutionally.

Kate McBarron offers a novel take on the literature review, with a personal reflection on her work in producing the bibliography of writing for wellbeing. Her creative approach to this is refreshing and immersive, in keeping with the hopes of the team here to showcase new and accessible forms of research and representation that foreground subjectivity and experience. Of course, Kate's paper also shows the long legacy of research into writing and words for wellbeing, and the growing evidence base for our practice within a more traditional scientific milieu. The bibliography continues to grow and offers a repository of evidence for students, practitioners, teachers, and researchers alike.

Penny Simpson has written an engaging and enlightening account of the development and implementation of a community partnership creative

writing project, which offers readers insight into the many facets of interagency working to produce a creative and meaningful experience for families in South Essex. Weaving in her own methodological development with the expansive process of networking to show 'behind the scenes' as well as 'in the room', Penny offers a range of insights.

Bringing the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model to creative writing for therapeutic purposes, Elisabeth Winkler addresses how she bridged the gap between her teen and present selves to find a unity, self-compassion, and freedom of expression. To read this excellent autoethnography is not only to encounter deep ethical questions about the conduct of research, but also about the conduct of a life. The academic and creative elements harmonise to great effect here. Elisabeth's account of writing to artefacts using set prompts to elicit discovery and ultimately understanding, appreciation, and acceptance is brave and generous.

Following her Creative Bridges '25 session, and in relation to her *Lapidus Magazine* piece 'Glass', Dawn Garisch provides us with a spectacular essay that explores the power of writing to uncover hidden questions and buried truths. In asking why we are compelled to write a particular piece or react to a prompt in a particular way, she offers revelations about the healing power of words and the importance of the arts to medicine.

Lucy Windridge-Floris and Buki Akilapa give us their review of *Epistemic Justice and the Postcolonial University* (edited by Amrita Pande, Ruchi Chaturvedi, and Shari Daya) and in doing so, challenge us to stand by the stated aims of *LIRIC* to promote decentralised ways of knowing and inquiry. Whilst this book addresses academic institutions, it's impossible to miss the resounding relevance of these arguments for *LIRIC* and Lapidus International.

Developments at LIRIC

These boundary-pushing papers reflect the ethos of Lapidus and *LIRIC* in their quest to bring people together through creative knowledge-sharing. To this end, *LIRIC*'s transformation continues, as the next steps towards indexing in academic databases begin, enabling authors, students, practitioners, researchers, and teachers to more easily discover and cite papers published in *LIRIC*. This will also mean receiving the credit for publication so necessary to academic careers, the published work being easier to share through recognised platforms. More than this, because of

the free-to-publish and free-to-read model *LIRIC* employs, it is possible for practitioners to publish their own research without the hurdles of paywalls and publishing fees.

To make this work bear its fruits for us all, as readers, authors, and users of research into writing and words for wellbeing, it is most important that as many people as possible sign up to membership of the journal through the hosting platform, Public Knowledge Project's Open Journal System. This is a non-profit site originating at Simon Fraser University that seeks to enable access to knowledge without paywalls or fees and is well-suited to protect the data you share in setting up your account. You can sign up from the landing page at https://liric.lapidus.org.uk/index.php/lirj/index

The next exciting development at *LIRIC* is the move to a rolling publication model. This means that when you submit a paper, it can be reviewed, revised, and published more quickly, as there is no requirement to wait for the volume to be complete. The paper can be available and publicised as soon as the necessary processing is complete. There will still be an annual volume, comprised of all the papers published in a given year, but they will be available as they are ready to read.

Moving On

Other people, better suited to such work, will carry this forward, along with the next steps of preparation for academic database indexing. It is time for me to step aside and let this work progress. The last few years have been, for many of us, a time of reappraisal—of values, of meaning, and of activity. I have decided to be more involved in what is on my doorstep, stepping away from academic work. *LIRIC* editor is the last of many academic roles I have released, and I do so gladly. Whilst I have enjoyed the counsel and companionship of the board members and the editorial team, my attention has turned to writing.

Being much influenced by the community at Lapidus, I questioned my own claims to creativity in writing and research. An email from a book editor in 2019 challenged my ideas about this, provoking me to enrol for an MA in 2022. This has proved to be a great awakening as well as the source of safety and growth during some turbulent years. I have not contemplated my own academic publishing prospects since beginning that course, and in 2024, left my substantive academic post to concentrate on writing, saving my energies for poetry and screenplay. The benefits of this for my own

wellbeing are enormous and reaffirm my belief that the work of practitioners in this field is of the highest value. I look forward to reading future publications from Lapidus and *LIRIC*, engaging local groups with writing, and sharing my own work with the world.

I must thank the editorial board members past and present, the editorial team members I have worked with as assistant editor and as editor, in particular Kim Etherington and Mel Perry, whose friendship, counsel, and passion for this work is truly inspirational.

Thank you, too, to the many authors and reviewers who have dedicated time and effort to the creation of some ground-breaking work that has crossed disciplinary boundaries and offered modes of representation and publication which engage, challenge, and include readers as we hoped. I look forward to seeing more of this in future.

In solidarity, respect, and love

Tim

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

Article

Exploring the Writing for Wellbeing Landscape: A Reflective Review of the Evidence

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Abstract

When Kate McBarron came across the concept of writing for wellbeing in 2012, the discovery felt like stepping into a new world—into a 'rich landscape'. Here, via an exploration of the field with the help of artificial intelligence, she has brought this landscape to life. The aim was to consolidate her knowledge as well as to illustrate the breadth and depth of the writing for wellbeing field. Embedded within her review are a host of natural-world metaphors, which provide a springboard for showcasing examples of the evidence that has shaped her view of the field. Evidence is explored across five key areas: physical health, mental health, self-development, community, and work. Areas for future research are also highlighted.

Keywords: writing for wellbeing, expressive writing, poetry therapy, journal therapy, reflective practice, evidence

APA citation: McBarron, K. (2026). Exploring the writing for wellbeing landscape: A reflective review of the evidence. *LIRIC Journal, 5*(1), 1–26.

Introduction

In 2012, I became captivated by the rich field of writing for wellbeing. At that time, I had been a writer in various capacities, personally and professionally, for many years. I also had a strong drive, for health reasons, to improve my wellbeing. As I learned more about writing for wellbeing, I

became fascinated by its power, versatility, and potential to enrich people's lives. I began to think of this field as a 'rich landscape'.

Delving into writing for wellbeing's evidence base over the years, I found it stretched in many directions, and it felt fragmented. So, in 2024, with more than a decade of experience as a writing for wellbeing practitioner under my belt, I began a reflective review of my journey so far through the evidence. The aim was to consolidate my knowledge and to illustrate the breadth and depth of the writing for wellbeing field.

To start with, I went back through my reflective journals, my Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes MSc course materials, my old Twitter feeds, research files, and projects files. I also revisited the entries in my *Writing for Wellbeing Research Database*, which at that point I had been compiling for over a decade. My goal was to gather the pieces of evidence that had most influenced me over the years, whether for personal or professional reasons.

Once this evidence was gathered, I collated it under five wellbeing headings: *physical health, mental health, self-development, community*, and *work*. I mapped my findings against natural-world metaphors. Then, to bring my landscape to life, I chose Adobe's Firefly generative artificial intelligence tool—which was praised at the time for its ability to generate photorealistic imagery (Griffiths, 2025). Using prompts featuring my chosen metaphors, I instructed Firefly to create a landscape. From the resulting selection, I chose the one that aligned, intuitively, with my own vision of wellbeing. Finally, I edited the image in line with my writing for wellbeing journey and overlaid my five wellbeing headings.

In this article, I share the results of this project, including the evidence that I gathered, the metaphors I chose, and the landscape I created.

Defining Writing for Wellbeing

For the purposes of this article, the term *writing for wellbeing* refers to the intentional use of the written word to support wellbeing aims, such as health, good functioning, and life satisfaction. The written word, in this context, can be either a tool to facilitate wellbeing in some way or the product of an intervention. I am not including writing that is done for another purpose where wellbeing outcomes are a by-product rather than the aim.

Examining the Evidence

There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence available on the wellbeing benefits of writing. In this article, I focus on evidence that is grounded in science, rigorous examination, and/or extensive experience. This includes empirical studies, descriptive and exploratory studies, project evaluations, case studies, and the experience of expert practitioners as documented in handbooks and textbooks.

We are often warned about relying on individual experience when making decisions for wider populations. However, borrowing a concept from Michael Wood (2024), while anecdotes or case studies might not tell us what is probable, they do point to what is *possible*. For the writing for wellbeing practitioner who seeks an innovative solution to a problem or the researcher who wishes to advance the field, these individual cases can provide useful starting points.

Where It All Began

I was thirty-two years old when I happened across the field of writing for wellbeing. I had been drawn to writing and to the concept of wellbeing from an early age. However, I had not realised that the two went so neatly hand-in-hand until I discovered James Pennebaker's expressive writing research.

It felt as though I had opened a door to an exciting new world. The image in Figure 1 is an interpretation of the landscape I had entered. In reality, you cannot separate physical health from mental health, from social support, from work and purpose or self-development. The landscape metaphor itself demonstrates just how interlinked everything really is. The groupings here are purely to help organise the evidence.

In the sections that follow, I will go through each area—physical health, mental health, self-development, community, and work—highlighting the evidence that has shaped my view of the field along the way.

Figure 1

An AI-generated visual metaphor.

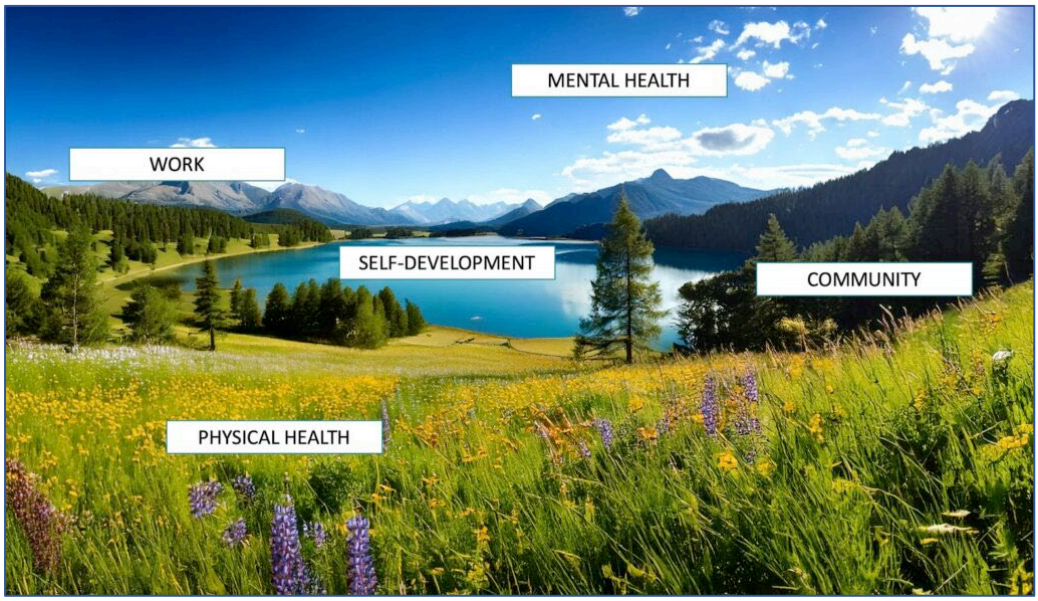

Image used with permission https://www.katemcbarron.co.uk/exploring-the-writing%20for%20wellbeing-landscape-figure-1/ © Kate McBarron 2025

Physical Health

We start in the wildflower meadow. Here, the earth is 'body'. For the meadow to reach its full potential, the soil must be healthy. Balanced weather conditions will provide the right levels of sunlight and rain. When these factors come together, the meadow is lush and blooming.

My writing for wellbeing journey began with the expressive writing research of Pennebaker and his colleagues. Learning that writing could improve not only mental health but also physical health was, for me, an incredible revelation. Suddenly, I became aware that writing—this activity I had been drawn to since childhood—was much more powerful than I realised.

The expressive writing research appealed to both my creative, intuitive mind and my scientific mind (I come from a family of NHS doctors and share similar ways of thinking). Plus, it tapped into my own fascination with the link between mind and body—a topic I went on to explore in my MSc dissertation. Taking all of this into account, physical health was a natural starting point for my journey through the evidence.

Expressive Writing Research

The first expressive writing study, published by Pennebaker and Beall (1986), demonstrates that expressive writing could improve the physical health of non-clinical participants. Later studies would go on to show that expressive writing could, among other things, enhance immune function, reduce symptoms for various clinical groups, and speed up wound healing (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

A meta-analysis by Smyth (1998, p. 174) found that in non-clinical participants, expressive writing 'enhanced' health 'across a number of areas, including reported physical health, physiological functioning, and general functioning'. This analysis sparked further research. Then, from 2003 to 2006 there was a flurry of activity among researchers wanting to analyse the evidence to date. Some of them found that expressive writing had a positive effect on health (Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004; Frattaroli, 2006). Some of them revealed mixed results or found no clear benefits (Meads, Lyons, & Carroll, 2003; Meads & Nouwen, 2005; Mogk, Otte, Reinhold-Hurley, & Kröner-Herwig, 2006; Harris, 2006).

A 2016 systematic review looks specifically at expressive writing for people with long-term conditions. It pulled together findings from studies that focused on a host of chronic conditions, including HIV, various types of cancers, Type 2 diabetes mellitus, cystic fibrosis, dementia, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, and more. The review itself found 'very little' evidence of benefit in some cases, 'no evidence' in others, and in others still the data were either 'unavailable', 'sparse' or 'inconsistent' (Nyssen et al., 2016, p. viii).

In 2018 came a literature review of the 'best possible self' intervention—which offers a positive twist on the original expressive writing approach. This highlights a number of studies where participants experienced improvements in their health. Overall, the researchers conclude that 'there is much to recommend the BPS [best possible self] intervention' (Loveday, Lovell, & Jones, 2018).

Gratitude Writing Research

In a white paper on the science of gratitude, Summer Allen (2018) dedicates a section to the topic of physical health and highlights a number of studies that feature writing. These cover a variety of participant groups including college students, middle school students, people with neuromuscular disease, and heart failure patients. Some of the experiments showed improvement in physical health or sleep quality

(Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Jackowska, Brown, Ronaldson, & Steptoe, 2016; Redwine et al., 2016) while others found no improvements (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).

Handbooks and Textbooks by Experts

I have focused so far on research papers published in academic journals. However, my own journey as a practitioner has been inspired by evidence from a variety of sources, including examples of practice found in handbooks and textbooks:

- In her first pioneering journal-writing book, Tristine Rainer (1978) offers multiple examples of how diary writing can support physical healing. There is the diarist who gives her bronchitis a voice and recognises a link with unresolved anger. And another diarist, after suffering a heart attack, discovers through list-writing some powerful reasons to look after his future health.
- Psychotherapist Stephanie Howlett (2004) describes her experiences using writing with clients. This includes helping people to notice the link between emotions and physical symptoms through journal keeping or by writing to particular body parts or symptoms.
- Writer and psychotherapist Sue Ashby (2011, p. 88) writes to her hip while experiencing hip pain. Through this process, she realises that she needs to give her hip 'some care and attention', and once she does the pain disappears.
- Counsellor and journal therapist Kate Thompson (2011) offers examples of the ways she and other practitioners use writing when working with people experiencing physical symptoms or chronic illness.
- Writer and dancer Cheryl Pallant (2018) gives examples of how her students use somatic writing to address physical health issues. One student realises that her migraines are caused by tension in her jaw. Another realises that he has been putting off getting treatment for a physical condition due to shame, and he seeks medical help as a result.

Reviewing This Part of the Landscape

Here, in the wildflower meadow there is some fertile ground to grow on. Perhaps there are not as many flowers as I had imagined there would be when I first stepped into the landscape all those years ago. By offering the soil further care and attention and sowing more seeds, we may help the meadow to bloom.

With expressive writing for physical health, the findings are mixed. When it works, the intervention can yield impressive results. However, it is difficult to replicate results reliably. More answers are needed relating to the mechanisms, moderators, and mediators. Meanwhile, somatic writing is worthy of further attention.

Mental Health

Now we come to the sky, with its shifting weather patterns. A grey sky can colour the rest of the landscape, throwing it into gloom. Storms can make the world a dangerous place. Rain can cause floods, but in the right amount it causes growth. Sunlight can brighten and revive the landscape again.

Mental health was always going to be a core area of focus for me, given my personal experiences with anxiety and depression going back to childhood. Here, there is a solid base of evidence to build on.

Writing Therapy Literature

For counsellors and therapists, writing can be used as part of the therapy itself or it can be an accompaniment. Practitioner Jeannie Wright's PhD was about using expressive and reflective writing in counselling and psychotherapy; it turned into a co-edited book on the topic. In it, Wright (2004) offers an overview of 'writing therapy' at the time, providing examples of who might benefit from writing therapy and the evidence available to support this.

Wright also mentions the work of Kim Etherington (2000) who, in her role as a counsellor, worked with and wrote alongside two brothers who were sexually abused. Their story of recovery is documented in her book on the subject.

Thompson (2011) in her own book offers numerous examples of therapeutic writing in action. She includes sections on 'people with chronic illness', 'survivors of childhood sexual abuse' and 'writing about therapy [or] treatment' more generally, among other categories.

Poetry Therapy Literature

When considering writing and mental health, poetry therapy is a natural area of focus. The US National Association of Poetry Therapy has been in existence since 1969. Nicholas Mazza, a pioneer of poetry therapy, comments that the literature on poetry therapy 'affirms its place among other expressive arts therapies' (Mazza, 2022, p. 127).

Meanwhile, in their paper exploring the mechanisms and effects of poetry therapy, Alfrey, Field, Xenophontes, and Holttum (2021) report that

> Although studies have generally been small-scale and idiographic in nature, positive associations between poetry therapy and outcomes have been reported for people with the following diagnoses and difficulties: aphasia, addictions, dementia, eating disorders, grief and/or bereavement, homelessness, psychosis, sexual dysfunction, and survivors of intimate partner violence.

Expressive Writing Research

Numerous expressive writing studies focus on mental health. An analysis of the expressive writing research in psychology identifies 1429 articles spanning 40 years (Gao, 2022).

Early studies on expressive writing's impact on mental health reported promising results. Subsequently, findings have been mixed. For example, in a meta-analysis on the effects of expressive writing on depressive symptoms, Reinhold, Bürkner, & Holling (2018) state that 'expressive writing is not associated with any long-term effects on depressive symptoms in samples of physically healthy adults without a PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] diagnosis'. However, referencing a meta-analysis by van Emmerik, Reijntjes, & Kamphuis (2013), the researchers highlight that 'expressive writing is a helpful component in PTSD treatment but is more effective when combined with other components, like professional therapeutic feedback'.

Government and Health Organisations Reports

As a practitioner, I am interested when notable health organisations and groups publish reports on creative health. Between 2012 and 2024, four of these came to my attention. Within them, a small number of mental health-related writing projects are mentioned.

The 2017 *Creative Health* review by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Arts, Health and Wellbeing in the UK offers two examples of

writing for mental health: firstly, the Beyond Words project, a creative writing project with Caleb Parkin that has been shown to support wellbeing and mental health among vulnerable young people unable to access mainstream education; secondly, a case study of a young person who used poetry and song lyrics to help recover from depression.

A 2019 World Health Organisation (WHO) report on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing highlights four studies showing the positive psychological impact of writing (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). There is a randomised controlled trial on writing and depressive symptoms in older adults (Chippendale & Bear-Lehman, 2012); also, two studies focusing on women with breast cancer—one about expressive writing (Gripsrud et al., 2016) and one on blog writing (Vargens & Berterö, 2017). Finally, there is a study on creative writing groups for adults with chronic mental health conditions (Williams, Dingle, Jetten, & Rowan, 2019).

The 2022 *CultureForHealth Report* (Zbranca et al. , 2022), which offers a review of European culture, wellbeing, and health interventions, mentions one study about writing and mental health. This relates to the positive impact of creative writing for healthy adults and people with mental health conditions (Dingle, Williams, Jetten, & Welch, 2017).

A follow-up *Creative Health* review report by the APPG on Arts, Health and Wellbeing was published in 2023. It includes one case study relating to writing and mental health. This is Kiz Manley's organisation Hip Hop HEALS, which helps to tackle mental health issues for marginalised groups through creative therapeutic writing.

Meanwhile, Allen (2018) includes several mentions of gratitude writing's impact on mental health. One paper spotlights the '3 good things' gratitude writing intervention and demonstrates the benefits of writing and sharing gratitude letters (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Two further studies found that writing gratitude letters is beneficial for mental health (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012; Wong et al., 2016). And another study found that keeping a gratitude journal is beneficial (Kerr, O'Donovan, & Pepping, 2014).

Case Studies

The expressive writing systematic review by Nyssen et al. (2016) highlights a selection of case studies that relate to the theme of mental health. It showcases the work of Carol Ross, who has used therapeutic writing with mental health inpatients. It also highlights Victoria Field's

poetry therapy group for people with mild mental health problems. In addition, it highlights Sheila Hayman's Write to Life sessions at Freedom from Torture.

I have also been influenced by the work of writer and healing arts practitioner Monica Suswin (2017). In her book *A Fox Crossed My Path*, Suswin offers insights into her own experiences with creative writing and depressive illness.

Project Evaluations

The following project evaluations are ones I have become particularly familiar with through my work and connections with the Lapidus International community.

There is Claire Williamson's Creativity for Confidence project, which took place at a general practice surgery. Post-course questionnaires reveal that participants' life concerns had diminished in severity, and general feelings of wellbeing also improved (Williamson, 2013).

Next is Pauline Cooper's Using Writing as Therapy course. Cooper (2013) ran a pilot study in an adult mental health setting and gained very encouraging results, with participants needing to use the service far less over the following six months compared with controls.

Also, there is Charmaine Pollard's Writing for Resilience Coaching Programme for women survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence. I was fortunate enough to be involved in the 2024 evaluation of this 20-week programme. Resilience levels increased across the board and depression and anxiety levels reduced significantly (McBarron & Pollard, 2024).

Reviewing This Part of the Landscape

I know from experience what it is like to have the whole world go grey because of mental health issues—and what a huge relief it is when the sun comes out again. For this landscape, I would say the outlook is bright. I am optimistic about there being climatologists in this region who can provide knowledge and support. With their help, the landscape can remain resilient in the face of changing weather conditions.

Reflecting on the evidence that I have come across relating to writing and mental health, there is a strong case to be made for facilitated writing for wellbeing, where individuals are guided through the process by an experienced practitioner (whether a therapist or trained writing-for-

wellbeing facilitator). Writing can be used as a standalone tool to help individuals manage or overcome various mental health issues. It can also be used in conjunction with other therapeutic approaches to deepen the experience and enhance outcomes.

Self-development

Now we come to the lake. Its depths are often obscured—sometimes by its mirror-like surface and at other times by ripples caused by the wind or disturbances from beneath. Below the surface is another world, with strange features, plants, and creatures. The lake can seem intimidating, but with the right equipment it can be explored and become familiar.

I first discovered Pennebaker's work was because I was on a journey of self-development that started in my early twenties. Facing mental health struggles and sensing that I did not know my place in the world, I was seeking much-needed relief. Discovering that writing could be used in a more intentional way for self-development instead of the haphazard way I had been using it before put me on the path to meaningful change.

The evidence in this area feels vast, particularly when considering the practice of journaling. There is a huge amount of anecdotal evidence, especially online. However, for this part of the landscape, I will focus on sources that, for me, have stood the test of time.

Famous Diarists as Case Studies

I was first introduced to the work of therapist Marion Milner during my MSc course. Her book *A Life of One's Own*, published in 1934 (Milner & Bowlby, 1934/2024) is a case study of diary writing for self-development in action. I mention her specifically since self-development is not a by-product here; Milner very intentionally uses her diary as a vehicle for self-discovery. For me, her book has provided a useful method of exploration, and her personal discoveries have been illuminating.

Handbooks and Textbooks by Experts

From the 1970s onwards, a number of influential books on journal writing were published that set the stage for journaling as we know it today. While these were 'how to' books in nature, for me they have proved compelling sources of evidence in themselves—ones that I find myself returning to time and again. The authors are all practitioners who were early pioneers with extensive experience in the field.

- In 1977, after years developing and honing his method, Ira Progoff published *At a Journal Workshop*, his first book based on his intensive journal method. He went on to train others to deliver this method and since then many thousands of people have taken the programme.
- Also in 1977, Christina Baldwin published her *book One to One: Self-Understanding Through Journal Writing*, based on her personal journal-keeping and her experiences conducting journal workshops.
- In 1978, Tristine Rainer published *The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-guidance*. Rainer had spent eight years researching diaries. She also taught journal writing at UCLA alongside influential diarist Anäis Nin. Together, they offered diary writing to individuals as a way for them to find themselves and shape their own lives. In *The New Diary*, Rainer offers her accumulated knowledge, including examples from over 100 different diaries which she had analysed. In addition, she cites plenty of sources of knowledge and inspiration, including Julia Cameron's book *The Artist's Way*.
- In 1979, Lucia Capacchione published her book *The Creative Journal: The Art of Finding Yourself*. She was inspired to keep a journal by the writings of Anäis Nin, and her book is based on her personal journey and her experiences using journaling in her work as an art therapist and workshop facilitator.
- Finally for the purposes of this list, in 1988 Kathleen Adams founded the Centre for Journal Therapy, and her experiences with this helped to inform her first book *Journal to the Self: Twenty-two Paths to Personal Growth*, published in 1990. In 2008, she founded the Therapeutic Writing Institute to train the many professionals who were interested in her approach.

A more recent book, worthy of mention here due to its extensive selection of journaling approaches, is *The Great Book of Journaling*. It features insights from 40 different journaling practitioners, offering numerous examples of evidence-through-practice. There is, for example, the reflective journal, creative journal, storytelling journal, healing journal, legacy journal, digital journal, becoming unstuck journal, forest journal, audio journal, conflict resolution journal, compassionate journal, mindfulness journal, transitions journal, and more (Monks & Maisel, 2022).

Moving away from journaling in the traditional sense, after I began Metanoia Institute's MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes I soon became aware of a course which had come before it—the Creative

Writing for Personal Development course, which ran the University of Sussex from 1996 to 2010. It was a diploma course initially and then became an MA. The course content included approaches such as Cheryl Moskowitz's *Self as Source*, Graham Hartill's *Web of Words*, and Celia Hunt's *Imagining the Reader* (Dale, 2023). Hunt (2013) went on to publish a book about the course, which includes case studies of student experiences demonstrating the transformation that took place as a result of the creative life writing they were engaged in.

PhD Research

PhD research by writing for wellbeing practitioners has proved another compelling source of evidence for me.

- A thesis by Pallant (2021) on somatic writing aims to 'bridge the gap between writing and moving' and show how this combination can increase 'embodiment and self knowing' (p. 124).
- Stephanie Dale (2023) in her own PhD research notes that all the participants on her wellbeing-through-writing programme were driven by a sense of longing—longing for, as she puts it, 'self-aligned expressions of self in the world' (p. 179). She documents a variety of wellbeing outcomes, including those relating to confidence, the courage to change, and finding joy.

Reviewing This Part of the Landscape

My own writing for self-development journey began in earnest when I started my MSc course. Many mysteries lay beneath the surface of my 'lake'. My pen and notepad became my boat. The writing prompts and activities I was introduced to became my equipment—fishing rods, snorkel, and fins and scuba gear for when I was feeling particularly brave. They helped me to explore, they kept me safe, and I am still benefiting from them today.

Journaling as we know today is founded on the knowledge and experience of a host of renowned experts in the field. Meanwhile, creative writing has been shown to be a valuable tool as part of writing for self-development. Within the literature, there are numerous tried-and-tested approaches that individuals can tailor according to their own self-help aims.

Community

Trees can grow and cluster together in many different environments. They can support abundant life, individually and as a collective. What is visible above ground is just part of the picture. Below ground is a web of roots, fungi, and bacteria that links the trees together, helping them to communicate and share resources.

This part of the landscape is about people interacting with each other and being together. It includes social function and the factors that affect how individuals come together in groups and manage relationships—whether within families, groups of friends, or the wider community. Linked with all of this are the places where people gather, such as schools, social care settings, healthcare settings, community spaces, and our own homes.

Government and Health Organisations Reports

The 2017 *Creative Health* report includes a focus on 'older adulthood' and offers a range of related projects. There is TimeSlips, a group storytelling programme for people with dementia, also, the Storybox Project, where creative story-making supports people living with dementia and their carers. Plus, there is the work of John Killick, who has pioneered a method of co-writing poetry with people who are living with dementia. Killick has worked with nursing homes, hospitals, libraries, and arts centres. In books such as *Poetry and Dementia: A Practical Guide* he shares examples of writing-in-action and its impact (Killick, 2017).

When it comes to end-of-life care settings, the *Creative Health* report references the work of Fiona Sampson and Gillie Bolton. In her paper 'Writing Is a Way of Saying Things I Can't Say', Bolton (2008) details a project that studied the therapeutic writing experiences of cancer patients receiving palliative care.

Finally, on the topic of bereavement, the report mentions the work of Jane Moss, author of *Writing for Bereavement*, which includes extracts from Moss's own journal as she details experiences running a writing group for a Macmillan Family Bereavement Service (Moss, 2012).

While on this topic, the work of grief educator and poet Ted Bowman has greatly influenced me. Through his talks, workshops, and writing, Bowman demonstrates the value of literary resources for therapeutic professionals as way to help clients story or re-story their bereavement experiences (https://bowmanted.com/).

I have also been inspired by the work of writing for wellbeing practitioner and researcher Reinekke Lengelle. Her book, *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss and Resilience*, which recounts Lengelle's personal experience and research, shows that 'writing can be a companion in bereavement' (Lengelle, 2021, p. v).

The WHO report mentions two writing studies that I have linked with community here. One looks at how writing can help to address the social stigma of a dementia diagnosis (Bienvenu & Hanna, 2017), and the other explores how poetry writing can support family caregivers of elders with dementia (Kidd, Zauszniewski, & Morris, 2011).

The *CultureForHealth Report* also highlights two papers relating to community. The first explores how participating in a poetry workshop can promote 'social bonding and inclusion' for people with a history of mental health problems (Hilse, Griffiths, & Corr, 2007). In the second paper, creative writing activities contribute to a sense of empowerment in students from disadvantaged groups (Mazza, 2012).

The *Creative Health* review report highlights a 2020 narrative review of the literature relating to poetry and palliative and end-of-life care. It states that 'poetry therapy can enable a person-centred culture by promoting feelings of well being' and that it 'is also beneficial for health care professionals and family members' (Gilmour, Riccobono, & Haraldsdottir, 2020, p. 6).

In addition, Allen (2018) references the pro-social effects of gratitude writing. In one study, the participants who wrote gratitude letters put in more effort when they were asked to perform kind acts (Layous, Nelson, Kurtz, & Lyubomirsky, 2017). In a study of divorced or separated individuals, those who kept a gratitude journal were more likely to show forgiveness (Rye et al., 2012). Finally, in a study where schoolchildren undertook gratitude writing, the participants reported feeling more grateful and experiencing a greater sense of belonging at school (Diebel, Woodcock, Cooper, & Brignell, 2016).

Project Evaluation

On the subject of schools, I was fortunate enough to be involved in the evaluation of Cheryl Moskowitz's poetry residency in a North London Primary School. There, poetry was integrated into the school community. It became a shared language that connected students and teachers with each other (McBarron, 2015).

Reviewing This Part of the Landscape

The trees, here, are spread across the natural environment. Many grow together in groups with access to the benefits of being in a community. They are nurtured and nourished—for their own sake and to support the wider ecosystem. Sometimes, the results are hidden from view, residing deep within the soil.

I have seen for myself how effective writing for wellbeing groups in community settings can be, and the evidence supports this. Writing for wellbeing is a cost-effective and flexible tool that can help to increase social connection, mutual understanding, and support. It can also help individuals to navigate and endure the challenges that come with relationships and being part of a human society.

Work

Now we come to the mountains, with their uphill paths and winding routes. There are plateaus and ledges. There are great heights and panoramic views. There is the danger of landslide and the chance for slow but sure reshaping over time. Perhaps the mountains, here, create a ring around this landscape; when work is working well, it offers a protective ring of purpose, meaning, self-esteem, and financial stability.

I am well aware that choosing the metaphor of a mountain range for work says more about me than it does about the nature of work itself. However, having come from a corporate background, the concept of striving, climbing, and reaching heights clings on within me.

I began my professional life working in marketing and communications. By 2014, I had reached a senior position within a London agency. At the time, I was also struggling with my mental health. I needed a change. I mention this because the concept of career has been charged for me for a while, and it has made me interested in how writing can support people with their work. Here, I will share some of the evidence that has shaped my view.

Gillie Bolton has done extensive work in the area of reflective practice and professional development. She places 'narrative, perspective and metaphor at the core of sound reflective practice' (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018, p. xvi). Examples of this approach in action and its impact can be found in her book on the subject. It includes real-world examples from individuals and teams across a range of contexts, including healthcare professionals, charity workers, therapists, and management teams.

Meanwhile, *career writing* is the term used in the work of Reinekke Lengelle and Frans Meijers to describe the narrative career-learning method that they developed. It uses creative, expressive, and reflective writing exercises to help people develop a career identity. Evidence supporting the approach includes a 2013 study with a group of university students (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013) and a 2014 case study focusing on career writing's potential in career transitions (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014).

Looking at specific work situations and contexts, healthcare has been a focus for researchers. The WHO report highlights three articles in this area. There is one on how creative writing, stories, and diary writing can support health professionals (Baruch, 2013). Another explores how photo-stories and fiction writing can address HIV stigma among health professions students (Teti et al., 2018). A third looks at how poetry therapy can help counsellors who have developed secondary post-traumatic stress disorder (Boone & Castillo, 2008). The *CultureForHealth Report* highlights a study which found that writing helped to increase empathy and ethical understanding among health practitioners (Milligan & Woodley, 2009). Meanwhile, the *Creative Health* review reports a study where a pilot creative writing programme reduced stress levels for healthcare workers recovering after the pandemic (Wakefield, McEvoy, Blackburn-Daniels, & Campbell, 2023).

Moving on to consider workplace counselling, Wright (2005, p. 117) explores the experience of using writing therapy during brief workplace counselling in a client case study. The client's experience was that 'the writing was an important part of the therapeutic work'.

On the topic of unemployment, one of the early expressive writing studies focuses on a group of unemployed professionals. The group who took part in expressive writing got new jobs more quickly than the control group (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994).

Reviewing This Part of the Landscape

From where I stand, the mountains have great potential to sustain and protect their inhabitants and visitors alike. There are natural springs, flora and fauna, and new pathways across and up the mountains waiting to be explored. With map and compass in hand, I am able to navigate these pathways and make more of the mountains and their rewards.

For me, it is clear that reflective practice has a lot to offer all of us in our working lives, through both traditional and creative approaches. Here, there is a firm foundation of evidence that we can draw from and build on.

Discussion: A Picture of Wellbeing

We have reached the end of our journey. Figure 2 shows my writing for wellbeing landscape as it stands. The meadows are waiting for more wildflowers when the conditions are right. The weather is stable, with the region's climatologists on hand to help. The lake is calm, with a well-equipped boat ready to go. The trees are being nurtured and nourished. The mountains offer hope and opportunity.

Figure 2

The end of our journey.

Image used with permission https://www.katemcbarron.co.uk/exploring-the-writing%20for%20wellbeing-landscape-figure-2/ © Kate McBarron 2025

This landscape is one person's view. In this article, I have outlined evidence that has resonated with me on my own journey. This has been shaped by a number of factors, including the projects I have worked on; my own mental and physical health; my life circumstances; the books, websites, and articles I have happened across; and the people I have spent time with. In gathering evidence for this project—which extended into early 2025, when I completed my data collection—I focused on sources that had for various reasons captured my attention and which, over time, had stayed front of mind.

The landscape I have presented here is a small part of a bigger picture. For example, more than 2000 papers have been published on the topic of expressive writing. I have offered a flavour of this research, based on my own exploration of the literature. My journey through the self-development evidence has been rooted in the work of the field's pioneers. However, a quick search of academic databases shows that the research community has been working hard recently, exploring journaling in different contexts. Experience tells me that there must be a wealth of other case studies out there relating to writing and mental health—ones that have not been on my radar. In addition, I understand there are many more examples of practitioners using the written word to achieve wellbeing aims in the community. These include schools, care homes, hospitals, hospices, prisons, libraries, community centres, online groups, and more. This work is vastly underrepresented here due to the trajectory of my own journey but also the elusive nature of project evaluations in this space.

This article reports on a personal journey, but my hope is that it offers readers a sense of the breadth and depth of the writing for wellbeing field and the evidence base that supports it.

There is plenty more evidence out there, and I will continue to gather as much of it as possible in the Writing for Wellbeing Research Database, available via the Lapidus International website. I invite readers to contribute their own findings and to continue exploring this place, the endlessly fascinating field of writing for wellbeing.

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Article

The Embedded Writer: A New Model of Creative Writing Programme for Delivery in Community Settings

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Abstract

This critical reflective paper discusses development of a health research methodology focused on creative writing in collaboration with Home-Start Essex, a charity supporting young families. It explores how a process of embedding a creative writer within an organisation over an extended period might progress a new model of practice built on a two-way exchange of skills and knowledge between practitioner and client group. A series of interconnecting creative writing workshops for Home-Start's Thriving Communities project in South Essex was created and delivered with the aim of improving family mental health and wellbeing. These House of Dreams and Memories workshops were inspired by Gaston Bachelard's work *The Poetics of Space*. Participants in the workshops were encouraged to build their own House of Dreams and Memories, an imaginary space of nurture and renewal inspired by Bachelard's theory of poetics. The creative writing sessions were bookended by wellbeing sessions delivered by the Wellbeing Co-ordinator for Home-Start Essex. This joint delivery model offers opportunities to enhance outcomes for both creative practitioner and the commissioning body, and provides an example of best practice with a potential for scaling up. The article reflects on the challenges faced in setting up such a collaboration and concludes with a discussion of ways to progress the model as both a creative arts opportunity and evaluation tool.

Keywords: Bachelard, memory, creative writing, wellbeing

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Introduction

Exploring the Approach Taken in Devising the Workshops

In June 2024, I attended an event, Public and Third Sector Speed Networking – Inequalities, organised by the Research Impact team at the University of Essex in the UK. An invitation to attend came from the Research Impact Officer for Health at the University of Essex where I am a Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The event was aimed at people working in the health and social care sector, and its purpose was to bring representatives from a range of public health and voluntary organisations into direct contact with academic researchers to initiate discussion and potentially launch new research projects. My reason for attending was primarily to widen my network of contacts and to develop these connections in a more engaged manner than is possible whilst working on short-term contracts in the creative health sector.

Arriving at the speed-networking event, I quickly realised I was the only creative–critical practitioner in the room; I am not a researcher with a background in the social sciences, and at first the project I had to discuss didn't feel translatable to a room full of people working at the frontline of service delivery during a cost-of-living crisis. What I had to share was The House of Dreams and Memories, a creative writing programme I originally devised and delivered for a group of NHS (National Health Service) patients living with long-term health problems and chronic pain. The workshops formed part of a wider programme of activities organised by the Wellness Improvement Service (WISE) run by Cwm Taf Morgannwg–University Health Board (CTM–UHB). WISE focuses on a lifestyle medicine approach to improving mental and physical wellbeing (https://ctmuhb.nhs.wales/wise-ctm/our-service/). The workshops ran in 2023 and were recommissioned in 2024, both programmes receiving funding from the NHS and Arts Council of Wales.

Whilst my workshops for WISE garnered positive feedback from participants, there was no opportunity for me to expand on what was achieved as it was devised as a short-term project with a fixed budget. This is a problem facing many practitioners as evidenced in a 2025 report from the Creative Industries Council Health and Wellbeing Forum. The report states, '[I]n the main, the sector is characterised by very small organisations and individual practitioners funded through grants' (Arts Council England, p. 10). The result is a lack of significant opportunities for

an individual to grow a sustainable practice and deliver long-term impact unless working inside (or with) large cultural and commercial organisations. Like many other practitioners, I must take a creative approach to developing partnerships and funding opportunities. Attending the speed-networking event is an example of my approach.

I was impressed by the range of service providers in attendance at the event, but it did feel a little daunting entering the room. As the networking got under way, I realised any reservations I had were unnecessary. There was interest in the workshops from some organisations who felt it would benefit their clients, but the key question was how they might be funded. Another consideration from my perspective was how I might adapt the workshops to align with a new organisation's objectives without losing sight of how I might progress my own creative research aims.

I left the event with three potential connections, and after follow-up meetings I chose to work with Home-Start Essex. A meeting was set up between me, Chris Jones, Area Lead Co-ordinator, South-Essex, and Lisa Pawlowski, Wellbeing Co-ordinator. Both felt my workshops had potential to support what their organisation is doing to improve mental health and wellbeing for families with young children. To ensure I was the 'right fit' for the wider organisation, Chris invited me to run a taster workshop for staff from across Essex to familiarise them with the content of the workshops and my way of facilitating sessions. It was also an opportunity for me to learn more about the kind of clients accessing Home-Start Essex's services and to discuss some of the challenges that might come up during delivery.

I found that taster session invaluable for understanding how I might adapt The House of Dreams and Memories for Home-Start Essex. Of equal importance, it demonstrated to me how essential these early exchanges and conversations are to ensure my proposed creative health activity is tailored to suit the specific needs of a client group and yet remains flexible and dynamic in structure to allow for creativity and enjoyment. The taster session acted as more than an introduction or a means by which to sell an idea—it set the tone for an ongoing working relationship that enables me as a practitioner and creative health researcher to experiment and explore my creative process in collaboration with members of staff and groups of participants whose insights and feedback were crucial in helping this project evolve and succeed.

I was given opportunities to generate new material and adapt my approach when required through building on participants' feedback gathered as each programme of workshops unfolded over a ten-month period. It was invaluable having mini debrief sessions after each workshop with the programme's co-facilitator Lisa Pawlowski. I will explore this approach more fully later, but at this point I would like to underline the importance of a model of practice that sees the creative practitioner involved at the very outset of a commission, enabling a relationship of trust to emerge, which helps inform successful delivery. It helped generate the feeling I was at the beating heart of a project, fully conversant with how an organisation works with its clients within a wider social context.

Gaston Bachelard: 'The Geography of Echoes'

My creative practice is rooted in experience and knowledge gained in my former roles as journalist and postdoctoral researcher. It is a process that has evolved over two decades, centred on the legacy of trauma, and it has informed the writing of three works of fiction, a series of academic research articles, and my current creative workshop practice. Whilst working as a journalist, I specialised in writing about the aftermath of violence in post-conflict settings. The transmission of trauma across generations is also the theme of the novel I wrote for my PhD in creative writing, which examined the exhumation of mass graves in post-Franco Spain. My PhD research spanned historical and legal texts, and some hybrid works that I felt were more responsive to the challenge of giving expression to complex legacies of trauma. And it was one of these hybrid books I turned to when I was awarded the commission by WISE: Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*.

Bachelard's text became integral to the development of my creative writing workshops for WISE and Home-Start Essex. In his book, Bachelard examines images he associates with memories of his childhood home, expanding his discussion through reference to key symbolic spaces, including attics and cellars. The poetic evocation of these spaces through word and image inspired my approach to constructing a flexible template for use in my workshops.

The Poetics of Space, first published in 1958, is a book of philosophy, but it's also a text that has been admired by many visual artists and writers including Turner Prize-winning artist Rachel Whiteread. Her acclaimed artwork *House* (1993) was created by taking a concrete cast of the interior of a three-story Victorian house in Bethnal Green, London. The temporary

public sculpture fascinated visitors and critics alike for its evocative realisation of the nooks and crannies of a building scheduled for demolition (https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/house/). Bachelard writes about the sensory images that we associate with our memories of our childhood home—the feel of a worn door latch in the hand, a forgotten corner where you used to hide away, the small sensory details which were also captured in Whiteread's *House*. What I find particularly compelling is Bachelard's discussion of image and memory filtered through the architecture and spaces of a house. This can be seen in the contents page, where chapter headings include 'The House. From Cellar to Garret', 'Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes', and 'Corners.' Bachelard also analyses spaces in nature that are home to birds and sea creatures such as nests and shells. His idea of home is of a protean, shape-shifting space, rich in potential for growing our powers of imagination:

> The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory. (Bachelard, 1958/2014, p. 74)

In other words, the house is a psychological diagram, read through the body, which does not forget the spaces of intimacy it has known. Bachelard again: 'Inhabited space transcends geometrical space' (p. 67). It is a 'geography of echoes.'

The 'Imaginative Assemblage'

Bachelard's discussion of body and spatial memory informed how I wrote about post-traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma in my PhD novel. My three principal characters are exiles and narrator–witnesses who turn self-archivist, their bodies transformed into a form of portable archive. Each character is created through a close interlacing of emotional and body memory and history—personal, imagined, and factual. In writing my novel, I came to regard the exilic body as a force field, a site of compressed time, in which the detail reveals the whole. To reflect this in a work of fiction I applied the visual art technique of montage to my writing process. The overarching image is the exhumation of a mass grave in post-Franco Spain. Whilst the site is imagined, the story it tells is rooted in the work of forensic scientists, forensic anthropologists, journalists, and family members who have been campaigning since the start of the 21st century for the exhumation of the mass graves.

In devising a framework to tell an intergenerational story of great complexity, I saw a parallel between writing montage and the forensic practice of 'imaginative assemblage'—the drawing together of biographical and verbal accounts of the past, ante-mortem data such as photographs and farewell letters written by victims before they were killed, along with objects—'objects of return'—removed from the grave (Renshaw, 2011, p. 35). My fictional characters are also created through an intricate assembly of image and movement, material object, and photograph. Recurring images and objects of return, such an earth-crusted pocket watch found in the grave, create patterns of knowledge that accumulate throughout the novel, tracing legacies and defying the silence that has surrounded the existence of the mass graves.

Further, I weave into my novel key images found in Picasso's anti-war painting *Guernica* to help deepen patterns of connection across three different lives. They include the ghostly flower seen at the bottom of the painting, the palm (and lifelines) of the fallen soldier, and the mother carrying her dead child. These pivotal images are scattered across the text and act like guides to the secret connections waiting to be uncovered. [1]

My creative research practice is also shaped by Carolyn Steedman's analysis of the archive. In her book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, she argues the archive is no longer a keeper of 'the original experience to which we may return' (2001, p. 7). Instead, it is a place 'where a whole world, a social order, may be imagined by the recurrence of a name in a register, through a scrap of paper, or some other little piece of flotsam' (p. 81). The archive is not a physical institution or locatable on a map; it is something which is imagined, contained, and carried within and on the body, shaped by the senses, by the transitory, the ephemeral. In my novel, for example, the names of the missing and the dead are embroidered by master tailor Félix Conesa into his signature shirts made of 'weeping' silk. It is how they are transported back into the lives of the living, like invisible–visible memorials. When I received the WISE commission, I knew I wanted to create a project that would develop these critical concepts further and in a context in which participants' imaginations could become an important element in the process of managing complex health

[1] Further discussion of my process of writing montage can be found in my article 'Writing the Image: An Analysis of the Labyrinth-Grave as "Denkbilder" and Framework for Re-imagining a Narrative About the Aftermath of Violence' (Simpson, 2018). I also explore the concept of the montage novel in '"Breaking the frame": The Role of Artmaking in Narratives of Migration and Diaspora' (2022).

conditions over an extended period. The overarching aim was to encourage participants to build their own House of Dreams and Memories —a form of self-archiving which drew on memory images, keepsakes, anecdote, and reflection. The idea was to travel through the house over the course of the workshops, from cellar to attic, from staircase to dusty corners, and to build spaces which would enable participants to move through time and space. They would build shapeshifting, chameleon spaces where the imagination could operate.

To introduce the idea of what we would be doing in the workshops, I shared with the groups a poem by British Caribbean poet Roger Robinson. In 'A Portable Paradise', Robinson recalls his grandmother's advice for overcoming worries at times of stress or difficulty. The paradise in the poem evokes the images of the Caribbean island where Robinson was born, but it's also conceived as a portable entity, an island wrapped in a handkerchief, concealed in a pocket. In other words, it's an imagined, protean space which echoes Bachelard's evocation of his childhood home (2019, p. 81).

The WISE commission also spoke to me on a personal level. My mother had emphysema, and I knew how curtailed her life had become through chronic illness. I remembered how isolated she had become towards the end of her life because her condition left her housebound, and how that isolation had let to a deterioration in her mental health. She had a profound sense of loss that was more than simply the loss of physical movement. Her chronic health problems constituted a trauma.

What interested me when I came to work with Home-Start Essex was that participants shared similar experiences to those who attended the WISE creative writing workshops—shared feelings of isolation, of being overwhelmed, of needing support and opportunities to build confidence and resilience. They experienced a range of challenges in their daily lives, and when they talked about themselves it was often in the context of their role as a parent or carer; in their discussions with schoolteachers, council officials, and other key workers seeking advice, guidance, support. A recurring theme was a sense of a loss of self and of occasions when they might speak about who they felt themselves to be outside their parenting role. A key aim of the guided journey through The House of Dreams and Memories was to return that sense of self and to give participants the confidence to talk about who they are, the agency to share that story in their own words, drawing on the diversity of their experiences and memories.

Development and Delivery of Workshops

Overview

As stated earlier, The House of Dreams and Memories was originally designed for delivery online as part of WISE, a social prescribing project run by the NHS in the South Wales Valleys. The Thriving Communities project for Home-Start Essex resulted in some changes to the programme format, primarily the introduction of a joint facilitation model created by me and Home-Start Essex's Wellbeing Co-ordinator Lisa Pawlowski. Each programme ran for ten weeks and was made up of six creative writing sessions and four wellbeing sessions. In total, the Thriving Communities project delivered four programmes of workshops (including twenty-four creative writing sessions) to an estimated 30 parents and carers in Southend and Rochford between 2025 and 2026.

Ethics and Evaluation

The adoption of a joint facilitation model enabled me and Home-Start Essex to devise an ongoing process of evaluation for the Thriving Communities project and to ensure it met with the organisation's ethical guidelines. There were four components to the evaluation process:

- Debrief sessions of 20–30 minutes between co-facilitators Lisa Pawlowski and myself after each workshop to identify what was working and what might be expanded upon, and to hear in confidence any relevant information from Family Support Co-ordinators (FSCs) relating to issues affecting participants' attendance or engagement.
- I kept a workshop journal and made notes after each session to help me reflect on how I might adapt the template to better reflect each group's needs. I also noted where I changed exercises or improvised new tasks to guide me in developing future workshop programmes.
- At the end of each of the four programmes, participants were contacted by telephone by their designated FSC for feedback. The co-ordinator obtained permission from participants to use their feedback anonymously in reports and other external evaluation exercises, including this article. Lisa Pawlowski then shared participants' feedback with me.

- I conducted an interview via email with Lisa Pawlowski and Chris Jones at the end of the project. They were asked about the value of adding a structured creative writing activity to a wellbeing programme, specifically through the adoption of the joint-facilitator model. They were also asked how feedback from participants might help shape future strategy relating to the use of creative writing in new activities.

Workshop Delivery

The opportunity to anchor the creative writing workshops within a wider wellbeing programme brought a new dimension to The House of Dreams and Memories. Before coming to the first creative writing session, participants could meet with each other and build up confidence by taking part in three wellbeing sessions exploring themes such as resilience and self-care. I joined the group in the third session and participated alongside the parents in the discussions led by Lisa. My workshops started in the fourth week of the programme, and Lisa attended and took part. In an interview with Lisa conducted as part of my evaluation process, she explained

> By providing some wellbeing sessions with the wellbeing support specialist first, parents and carers have the opportunity to meet, share some of their experiences, and learn some valuable wellbeing techniques. Having created this solid foundation, the group finds it easier to trust, and to share their writing with each other.[2]

The joint facilitation model also enabled a rapport to build between the co-facilitators, aiding workshop delivery and encouraging open discussion of possible tweaks and improvements as the programme unfolded. Before each workshop, I met with Lisa to hear of any issues that might have arisen over the week. Many of the parents attending the programme had complicated lives, and attendance could vary. It was useful to have knowledge where appropriate of any potential problems affecting participants' engagement. We also held a debrief after each workshop to pick up anything of concern. For example, some participants preferred to stay off camera or to contribute to discussions via the chat on Teams. In an early debrief meeting, Lisa and I discussed ways to help participants see the value of turning on their cameras. I introduced some activities in which participants were requested to bring along certain items to sessions, for

[2] The interview took place on October 2025 between me, Lisa Pawlowski, and Chris Jones. Further quotations from Lisa and Chris in this article come from that interview.

example, an item of special clothing for the Wardrobes session. These activities did result in participants turning on their cameras to show their personal items, and in some cases parents and carers who had been reluctant to speak were happy to tell the story behind their possessions, and it was possible to see the confidence that brought.

The reason behind some participants' decision to turn off their camera was often just a question of space: some parents were parked up in their cars waiting to go into school or to work; others were occupied in feeding a little one, or they were poorly and joined us from their bed. What impresses me is the commitment they demonstrated in showing up when they could. It was evident they bonded as a group and enjoyed the opportunity to engage with other parents and carers in a similar situation. Their lives were busy and the concerns they spoke of linked to events at home; in the workshops, they made space for themselves, exploring memories of holidays, special gifts, and treasured emotions and encounters that they could include in their House of Dreams and Memories.

The final session in the programme was led by Lisa, a kind of 'wrap' session that provided an opportunity to encourage ongoing peer support. As Lisa explained in our interview, 'This is a very important part of the programme to ensure parents have made connections, built new relationships and will continue their wellbeing journey.'

Selection of Participants

The participants were all parents and carers who had been referred to Home-Start Essex. They chose to attend a wellbeing programme after a series of assessments and discussions with specialist staff, including their FSC. The co-ordinator explained the different kinds of support on offer to all newcomers such as home visiting, wellbeing sessions, or a behaviour support programme. If a parent or carer agrees to wellbeing support, an internal referral is also made to Lisa as the wellbeing support specialist, who then makes contact to discuss the content and structure of the group in more detail.

Whilst standalone creative writing and creative journalling sessions have been provided in some face-to-face support programmes in the past, this was the first time Home-Start Essex had delivered an interconnected series of online creative and wellbeing workshops. As Lisa explained in our interview,

> As an organisation Home-Start Essex is keen to help the families we support experience new things and build on their existing skills to help support self-esteem and confidence. This project has enabled us to trial new ways of working, which we can review and build on.

Choice of Environment

The choice of facilitating the online programme via Teams was partly to ensure greater reach for the programme. Many of the participants were isolated geographically as well as socially, so an online programme helped reduce stress over issues such as travel and childcare. A key aim of the workshops was to build self-esteem and confidence; making it easy to attend each session helped parents settle in quickly and make full use of the one-hour sessions.

The online environment allowed participants to come in and out of sessions without disrupting a speaker, which was helpful as many did have to deal with official telephone calls or home visits during sessions. The flexible format also meant attendees could pick up quickly on what they might have missed, slipping back into the writing without too much disruption for themselves or others. The chat function on Teams was also useful to clarify tasks set or to encourage participants to include their thoughts or notes on a topic if they weren't free to speak on camera.

The Structure of Individual Workshops

The creative writing workshops were themed around four different spaces and two key objects: Thresholds, Cellars, Attics, Stairways, and Wardrobes and Boxes. The choice of themes reflected Bachelard's chapter headings in *The Poetics of Space* as discussed earlier. The Home-Start Essex workshops were shorter than those delivered to WISE, primarily to accommodate the needs of parents and carers, some of whom attended with their babies and toddlers. Before each programme began, participants were sent a notebook and pen. The workshops were self-contained, but participants were encouraged to attend as many sessions as they could to get the full benefit of the programme. They featured a mix of short writing exercises focused on a set theme. Some of my prompts encouraged list-making and wish-making, as well as listicles and opportunities for creative doodling. Participants were asked to share their work either by reading out what they had written or by describing what had inspired them in a particular exercise.

The purpose of the first four workshops was to guide participants to build a scaffolding for their 'houses'—from cellar to attic. I compared the house they were building to a tree, starting in the roots (the cellar), ascending through the trunk (the stairs), and arriving at the branches (the attic). This was an important image to open with and helped guide the journey through the imagined house. For example, the cellar of the house became a place of anchorage, not somewhere sinister as in many horror movies. We discussed what being rooted means and what might make you feel rooted in a place. The exercises encouraged participants to imagine their house as a shape-shifting space, a fusion of remembered places from childhood and things that inspired them in their current surroundings. Examples of responses that featured in the feedback from participants included the reimagining of a cellar as a flourishing orchard; another imagined their cellar as a giant memory box filled with toys that they remembered their parent favouring when playing with their grandchildren.

The purpose of each session was to move away from the literal to imagine new possibilities. With the imagination let loose, progress was made. For example, participants were asked to transform their staircases into a portal or time-travelling machine; they imagined where they needed to be and how their stairs would transport them there. For some, the stairways were not a tangible entity but represented a feeling of being stuck, of being held back. As they described that feeling, they began to challenge it by coming up with new details of their stairs, encouraged by prompt words I suggested such as 'dolphin' or 'water.' One participant described the dolphin bannisters that would support them if they felt they were about to fall; another said the sound of water they could hear standing on the bottom stair would remind them of the spa they imagined waiting for them up ahead.

The final exercise in each workshop focused on the 'Word of the Week.' This new feature for the Home-Start Essex workshops was a device I used to weave in some of the themes from the wellbeing sessions. For example, words such as 'nurture,' 'hope,' and 'progress' were used as prompts for participants to set goals for themselves or think up small acts of self-care inspired by the experiences and things they had written and talked about during the session. In the first week, the word selected was 'hope.' I asked participants to write a wish for themselves in their notebooks. I then divided the group into pairs, so each person had an opportunity to make a

wish for another in the group. I found this was a simple but effective technique to encourage a group of comparative strangers to engage.

As the workshops progressed, the writing produced began to intuitively reflect what Gaston Bachelard achieves in *The Poetics of Space*. Writing the memory image became a work of 'excavation'. For many of the parents and carers taking part, a common concern was a feeling they were not doing enough for their families. They were multitasking to an extraordinary extent but sometimes lost sight of that fact because of the complexity their lives. The workshops were not therapy; the idea of their acting as a kind of excavation was about giving participants the space to let their imaginations go and to focus on their own needs and feelings. It was interesting to see how many of the spaces they created were for them alone. While that inspired feelings of guilt, it also encouraged them to acknowledge why they did need a place of sanctuary—for reflection, for chilling, for just being. They imagined coffee machines, snacks, flowing rivers, butterflies, books, reading chairs, lava lamps, and an array of luxurious soft furnishings.

For the final two workshops focused on Boxes and Wardrobes, I invited participants to bring with them a small box, an object, and an item of clothing that held personal memories for them. The items became our guide through the session. They also came to resemble the imaginative assemblages made of personal possessions discussed earlier. For example, in the Boxes workshop, participants were asked to fill the receptable they brought with their favourite songs, films, or box sets, along with one luxury item, so creating a mini-archive redolent of Steedman's analysis of the archive in her work *Dust*. We began with lists of titles, and then participants told the story behind their choices. There were many hardships in these participants' lives, and it was empowering to hear them speak about their choices and that they felt safe to share their stories. It was cathartic but essentially, it was an opportunity for participants to tell their story in their own way, drawing on memories, emotions, dreams, hopes, and sometimes precious items; an opportunity that was not always available to them when engaging with challenges inside and out of the home.

In devising the workshops, I was mindful of the fact that not all have good memories of childhood or the home where they grew up. To that end, I framed all activities so that they could incorporate someone's personal memories if they wished, or they could be completely made up, maybe a mashup of favourite places lived in or memories of cherished objects from

different phases of a life or relationship. The choice was entirely the participants', and exercises were introduced in a sensitive manner to ensure no one felt exposed or excluded. This approach was reinforced by discussion with Lisa in the debriefs that followed each workshop. If a participant seemed to be struggling or there were concerns, Lisa would ensure that individual spoke to their FSC. No one has been triggered by any of the activities in the workshops. What I observed was that any absence or a reluctance to talk in a session was linked to personal issues that lay outside the remit of the workshop for discussion, hence the value of having Lisa in attendance to direct that participant to appropriate forms of support offered by Home-Start.

Workshop Evaluation and Reflection

In developing The House of Dreams and Memories workshops, I felt it was important to choose an overarching theme that would enable all to contribute—whatever their previous writing experience—and which would simultaneously accommodate discussion and writing about complex emotional experiences including loss, grief, relationship breakdown, ill-health, and homelessness.

The House of Dreams and Memories workshop programme brings together memories of the past and present as well as hopes and dreams for the future; the purpose is to demonstrate how these dreams, memories, and hopes can be released through the imagination and shared. The joint facilitation model allowed for a continuous feedback process between me and Lisa. Our shared expertise enriched our approach to any challenges that arose. For example, some participants compared their writing or creative ideas negatively with those of others in the group; some had not used Teams before in addition to not knowing anyone when they first arrived in the workshops. Building trust in the group was important, and we led by example. I participated in Lisa's workshop before beginning the creative writing sessions to break down any barriers people might feel with a change in lead facilitator; likewise, Lisa attended my sessions. That set an example of rapport and trust which fed into the group. Following feedback from Lisa I devised a follow-up activity, 'A room of your own … to imagine, write and dream', consisting of six new writing exercises.

Lisa also saw value in the joint model. In the interview I conducted with her as part of the evaluation process, she explained,

> It's been enjoyable for me personally and I have gained deeper insights into me as a practitioner and as an individual. Whilst we do offer journalling, it has inspired me to include more creative elements to the sessions I run to enable parents to explore their imaginations at a deeper level and to help support their mental health and wellbeing.

Another important factor was the comparative longevity of the project (ten months) which meant a bigger picture of activities and impacts could be attained through observation in the workshops, the debriefs, and in feedback gathered from participants in one-to-one conversations held with their designated co-ordinator after the programme of workshops was completed. By these means, feedback and evaluation become a more immersive process, centred on a three-way exchange between me, Home-Start Essex staff members, and the participants themselves. A key objective for the Thriving Communities programme was to improve mental health and resilience. Feedback from participants gathered by FSCs following the workshop programme demonstrate the impact achieved in moving towards this goal.[3] One participant stated the workshops had helped her 'regain' her imagination:

> I wasn't sure what to expect. It's really surprised me and made me think a lot more about myself, how to prioritise myself and regain my imagination. It's been a massive help to me and helped me on my journey to heal and love myself again.

For other participants the idea of experiencing 'me' time in new ways was of importance. One participant explained: 'Learning another way of having "me" time, thinking imaginatively has helped and it's something I had never tried before or thought I would enjoy.' For a third participant, the workshops helped improve her mental health: 'I've really enjoyed [the workshops], and I looked forward to each session. It's really encouraged more creative writing for me, which has helped me gain more mental control.' Another participant commented on the structure of the workshops and how it facilitated the way they processed complex feelings in the sessions. They felt the format 'made it easy to talk about difficult periods in [their] life without feeling brought down by them.'

What has really impacted on me is the way in which the wider team at Home-Start Essex have embraced the creative writing workshops and, in many ways, have shared ownership. On occasions, Lisa was unable to co-facilitate owing to other work commitments, and Chris Jones her line

[3] Home-Start Essex obtained permission from participants to use their feedback anonymously in reports and other external evaluation exercises including this article.

manager stepped in. For Chris, it was not just a practical issue, but a means by which she could assess for herself the workshops' value by actively taking part. In an interview I conducted with Chris following the programmes' completion, she stated:

> We were unsure at the start as to how families would respond to the creative writing elements, but the response has been so positive. I think the approach to the creative writing, with everyone being encouraged to share and their contributions being accepted and valued, has helped reinforce one of our core values of offering non-judgemental support; and has helped parents/carers feel seen and heard, which we know is a key step in building self-esteem and self-confidence.

Other staff members asked to come to individual sessions to experience what was going on, including the fundraising manager and several of the FSCs. Through attending the sessions, the co-ordinators were able to talk to participants about what to expect if they signed up for the creative and wellbeing programme. These requests made me realise how important it is for this feeling of ownership to be established within the wider organisation; it's not only pragmatic but also gives staff members an opportunity to find some creative space in their busy working schedules. The priority of the project was to secure key outputs, of course, but I also valued the way it delivered outcomes for learning and interaction between myself as a researcher–practitioner and an organisation with a strong commitment to supporting families and children. Good practice emerged through intentional design, but also through a process of adaptation and openness as a project unfolded. This is a key takeaway for me personally from my collaboration with Home-Start Essex.

Future Plans and Conclusion

The House of Dreams and Memories workshops developed in close collaboration with Home-Start Essex provide a potential model of practice for adoption within the wider creative health sector. As discussed in the Introduction section, the challenge facing many creative health practitioners is lack of opportunity to develop their professional expertise through sustained engagement with health service providers. The Creative Industries Council Health & Wellbeing Forum report calls for opportunities for creative practitioners to help find 'new solutions to persistent problems for our health service' (Arts Council England, p. 4). Further, it argues for a more joined-up approach to be established amongst industry, government, and other partners in universities and across the health sector, with emphasis on identifying successful programmes that might be scaled up.

The House of Dreams and Memories and its new iteration within a wellbeing programme aimed at improving mental health is arguably one such programme. The starting point was the in-person event hosted by the University of Essex bringing third sector and voluntary organisations—part of the wider health sector—into a room to meet and discuss potential collaborations with academic researchers. I met Chris Jones from Home-Start Essex and began a conversation which led to the commissioning of my creative writing workshops as part of the Thriving Communities project. It was helpful to have been involved in project from its inception, with the workshops forming part of the bid to the funding body. By that point, the organisation had met me and was familiar with what I could offer. The joint facilitation model enabled me to expand my workshops in close collaboration with wellbeing specialists working with families with young children.

This was new territory for me to explore and a further opportunity to evaluate the suitability of my workshops for the wider creative health sector. It is a model that builds from the ground up, a model of good practice. I felt embedded in the wider organisation and established a close affinity with the key personnel involved with delivering Thriving Communities. The joint facilitation model was also helpful for Home-Start Essex in their ambition to introduce new support activities into their programme and to ensure that new activity met key needs as well as funders' objectives. Ongoing dialogue, weekly debrief sessions during the running of each programme, informal feedback from participants in the workshops, as well as data gathered by FSCs and my interview with key staff members resulted in rich qualitative evidence. Another outcome for me was to realise the potential of this embedded approach to access new sources of funding and professional development support, which are not often open to me working as an individual creative practitioner.

What has developed from that initial networking event has gone beyond my expectations. Home-Start Essex has invited me to be part of future funding bids to expand the Thriving Communities project into new regions. The expansion of the project would provide an opportunity to evaluate progress over a longer period and assess still further the impact of creative writing to improve family mental health and wellbeing. It will also be an opportunity to develop further the model of embedded writer, offering a potential new pathway for other creatives working outside large-scale institutions to make their impact in the development of effective creative health programmes.

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Article

Subtle and Significant Shifts—The Transformational Effects of Therapeutic Writing

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Abstract

This paper looks at the transformational effects of therapeutic creative writing by re-examining aspects of previous research titled *The Great Unreality – An Autoethnographic Exploration of Depersonalisation in Adolescent Journals Using Therapeutic Writing*. The original research identified both a past psychiatric disorder of depersonalisation–derealisation and a lifelong recovery process. Therapeutic insights brought about significant shifts of perspective using creative writing coupled with compassion and underpinned with psychological understanding informed by the MSc course Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes. This paper revisits some of these key moments of the research. Whilst acknowledging the risks of self-research, I suggest therapeutic writing may enhance self-discovery and self-compassion, generating a fresh narrative for a troubled past.

Keywords: autoethnography, therapeutic writing, depersonalisation, derealisation, narrative therapy, Internal Family Systems, creative writing, self-discovery

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Introduction

Figure 1

The Great Unreality

This feeling … of this person INSIDE me peering out of a window and seeing everything but of course not the window … This person inside me is me but my body has just become an accessory to what is happening behind it.

[T]he Great Unreality … has been a chronic, integral, interfering part of my life for the last 6 months or so. It has now come to a point where it (it. Well, 'it' being part of my brain) has become v. persistent. Today's feelings: I feel as if I have been blind all my life (I know I haven't) and I have been gifted with the gift of sight. I do not see everything more clearly – I am just more conscious that I see. But the thing is, all I see is the outside of me. I am only looking at it, out of my brain. And all that I see passes like a film in front of my eyes, looking therefore somewhat unreal and distant (Personal journal, 1971).

In my adolescence I was possessed by what I called the *Great Unreality*—great because of its pervasiveness, a fog descending, making the world look flat and meaningless, and myself feel false and distant. I have denigrated this past-me, which led to dropping out of higher education and career. Thanks to autoethnographic research exploring my journals from adolescence with therapeutic writing (drawing in Figure 1 with journal

excerpts above), I turned a story of failure into a positive one of mental health recovery. My research identified the Great Unreality as depersonalisation–derealisation (NHS, 2023), a trauma-related dissociative disorder which is prevalent, under-researched, and often misdiagnosed (Michal et al., 2013; Murphy, 2023). I made a retrospective self-diagnosis according to the self-rating questionnaire, the Cambridge Depersonalization Scale (Sierra & Berrios, 1996). Self-diagnosis is common. 'Most sufferers end up discovering the condition themselves … and "pitching" it to the experts' (Perkins, 2021), while unpublished research found 52% of respondents with self-identified symptoms of depersonalisation–derealisation did not have a clinical diagnosis (Foglia, 2023). A psychiatric disorder validated the extreme nature of my experience. Thanks to therapeutic writing, I made meaningful interpretations leading to increased self-compassion (Winkler, 2024). This paper examines how writing to artefacts—a photograph of myself and a journal entry (aged 16)—brought about shifts of perspective.

Autoethnography as a research method was in itself transformative. I zoomed 'from the personal to the cultural … backward and forward, inward and outward' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), between the inner world (*auto*) of my private adolescent journals to the outer society (*ethno*) that shaped me—and wrote about it (*graphy*). My outer societies included the lived experience aged 18 to 21 of being in a therapeutic community based on R. D. Laing's approach to mental illness: rather than suppressing symptoms with sedation and surgery, it engaged with the subjective experience of sufferers. Although the community was experimental and flawed, I gained a psychological education and came to see the Great Unreality as a psychic defence originating in early childhood. This experiential learning helped foster a 'pathway to emotional resilience and wellbeing' (Ndayiragije, 2021). Depersonalisation symptoms abated, as the autoethnographic research showed. I was not suddenly cured, and underlying issues remained; however, I now had tools to address them.

Autoethnography served the study in other ways. Thanks to the value this methodology places on subjectivity, it authenticated my lived experience of a disorder, my lifelong efforts to feel more grounded and real, and it delineated how recovery occurred outside a medical model. Whilst a diagnosis can be crucial, a sufferer's experience is beyond a label: it is unique and multilayered (Etherington, 2003).

Additionally, poetic autoethnography provided a framework for reflecting on both historic poems and contemporary poems written in

response to therapeutic writing prompts. Space constraints preclude exposition, which suggests future research. In the meantime, I commend the reader to Hanauer's work, in particular his 14-video academic course on life writing and poetic autoethnography (Hanauer, 2025).

Following this introduction, the paper discusses ethics: how self-research may impact others and the researcher, emphasising the potential negative impact of using autoethnography and thus the importance of self-care. The first section also touches on the ethics of editing one's own words. The middle section zeroes in on the effects of using five writing prompts to show how writing to a photograph and a journal entry (1971) deepened self-understanding. Finally, I include the poems that produced these insights.

Ethics

I initially thought self-research would simplify the process of consent as I had only mine to seek. However, a self-focused autoethnographic inquiry exists within a 'contested and messy terrain', a far cry from an 'ethics free zone' (Sparkes 2024, p. 111, p. 107). Researching personal experience brings ethical complexities because it compromises the privacy of 'intimate others' and may cause suffering (Ellis, 2007, p. 5). The research landscape included childhood trauma, so I defined my own as 'little trauma'. Research suggests depersonalisation is linked to moderate childhood maltreatment (Simeon et al., 2001, p. 1032) capable of producing 'the vulnerability that evokes or provokes the dissociative response': studies show that 'hurtful words' can produce 'profound neural changes' (Itzkowitz et al., 2015, p. 43). Compared to physical and sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment in childhood is relatively neglected in the psychiatric literature and 'merits more attention' (Simeon et al., 2001, p. 1032). I wanted to stand for 'moderate' emotional abuse, as this experience can be minimised when compared with more severe trauma. Table 1 below is a graph that Simeon, a pioneer in depersonalisation research, used to grade childhood emotional abuse (Simeon et al., 2001, p. 1028).

Any discussion of abuse put my late parents in the spotlight. It was important to clarify my ethic: I take full responsibility as an adult for my own psyche. There is no blame. There was no conscious intention to harm, and caregivers (including myself as a mother) were likely 'transmitting unresolved trauma from their own histories' (Howell, 2005, p. 153).

Table 1.
Ratings of Emotional Abuse Severity from the Childhood Trauma Interview

Emotional Abuse Severity Rating	Description	Example
1 = Mild	Yelling, inattentiveness, mild control, slight criticism	'I can't believe you broke that!'
2 = Low	Frightening yelling, insults to child's behavior, criticism of friends or interests, rejection, some control or intrusion	'Your friends are bums!'
3 = Moderate	Very frightening yelling, insults to child's character, derogatory rejection, disrespectful control, blame, silent treatment, favoring of other children	'Leave me alone. I'm sick of you!'
4 = Severe	Extremely derogatory characterizations, humiliating punishment or rejection, threats to hurt child, severe blame, clear favoring of other children	'I'll make you wish you were never born!'
5 = Extremely Severe	Threats to kill, injure, or abandon child, hateful characterizations, severe sadistic blaming or taunting, total control or intrusion	'Just wait and I'll slit your throat!'
6 = Emotional Torture	Vivid threats to child's life, forcing of child to abuse others or torture or condemn self	Leaving suicide note blaming child

My parents are deceased, but this does not grant ethical amnesty because 'dead people can't give you permission' (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 150). However, I believe got dispensation from my mother a year before she died. Discussing my wish to write about a (resolved) event that would show her in a bad light, she said, 'Write until it hurts', passionately emphasising the final sibilant. This reminded me of Ellis's mother saying, 'You can write anything you want. Anything.' (Ellis, 2007, p. 19). I did not have such conversations with my late father and, knowing he was a private man, I left him out of the picture. However, I am also aware that like Chatham-Carpenter (2010), I probably would not have written the dissertation if he were alive (p. 8).

The dissertation included named people of public record, several unnamed people, and a therapeutic community that never had a name. Continuous self-interrogation of quandaries is 'part and parcel of autoethnographic vulnerability' (Bochner, 2017, p. 77). Bochner and Ellis

(2016) suggest autoethnography cannot offer ethical 'magic bullets' (p. 152) but instead only 'dilemmas' involving 'struggle and uncertainty' (p. 153). However, the methodology requires discussion of these dilemmas, which is in itself 'a contribution' (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 153).

Finally, there was myself to consider. It is a paradox that confidentiality is a crucial ethic for therapeutic work with others (BACP, 2025, para. 1) but no such protection exists for an autoethnographic researcher writing about a past disorder. In my dissertation, I 'outed' myself as someone with mental health struggles. Although my lifelong efforts to grapple with my psyche were not hidden from intimate friends and family, I realised I had masked any such vulnerability from my public persona. My livelihood relied on presenting myself as confident, and I believed any weaknesses had to be hidden. Now that I relied less on this income, for the first time I could be publicly open about my mental health and write an 'anti-CV' (Horton, 2019, p. 1976). It felt liberating and has led to interesting conversations.

Delving into a past disorder is mined with emotional hazards. We investigate ourselves at our peril, as Chatham-Carpenter (2010) found when exploring her earlier experiences of anorexia. The self-researcher risks re-experiencing the very symptoms under investigation, yet discussion on how researchers protect themselves is rare (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 3). During my research, I triggered two transient episodes of depersonalisation. The depersonalised person may feel so detached from daily familiarity that 'panic might set in' because, as Sartre wrote, 'nothing looks true' (Chavatel, 2022, p. 4, citing Sartre, 2000, p. 77). However, the experience brought opportunity on several fronts. Firstly, it was an embodied reminder of the power of the Great Unreality: my past experience became real in the present. This was validating, as if an inner voice said, 'I'm not making it up'. As a result, I contacted Unreal, the UK charity for depersonalisation and derealisation, which led to rich encounters including writing a blog for its website (Unreal, n. d.).

Another opportunity was being able to take my depersonalised self to therapy. I sat crying: nothing could be trusted, not even reality. My therapist believed me; he affirmed how scary it must be and showed concern for my distress. This was the response my adolescent self had needed. As Spring (2021) argues, triggers can provide valuable learning on the therapeutic journey. Rather than being intrusive or shameful, these 'psychic explosions' can hold 'precious insights', becoming part of the recovery process (p. 18). They offer a new perspective into the past from

the safety of the present. An ethic which considers triggers as illuminating rather than unwelcome stood me in good stead.

The risks of therapeutic creative writing are better known. Therapeutic writing has the ability to 'quickly peel off defences', an impact that can lead to significant self-learning even if it involves stepping into 'uncomfortable liminality' (Bolton, 2010, p. 11). However, the very act of writing provides an inbuilt safeguard. Writing is slower than talking so hopefully does not present more than the writer can manage, and insights usually arrive in the form of images and metaphors, which can be understood 'when the writer is ready' (Bolton, 1999, p. 24).

DeSalvo (1999) urges paying attention to self-care so writing may be to 'heal rather than to retraumatize' (p. 94). I felt equipped on this journey, the most stable I had ever been in my life. I have a supportive partner, intimate friends and family, as well as an established wellness routine including mindfulness, yoga, and gym. I practice self-regulation, eat for health, have regular sleep patterns, and, of course, my trusty journal. Being in therapy during the research period also proved both useful and rich, helping to contain and process my experience. Additionally, I was supported by an ethos of self-compassion, which includes an acceptance of painful feelings and the belief that suppression intensifies suffering (Neff, n. d., para. 2). Kahlil Gibran's (1923) poem conveys pain's illuminating aspect, 'the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.' I would rather face an uncomfortable feeling than deny it because repressing emotional truths takes energy that is better served supporting physical health (Pennebaker, 2016, pp. 19–21).

Ethics of Editing Past Records

I considered editing my adolescent journals and poems; however, even minor edits felt wrong. In editing a historic poem, I lost its rawness and punch. I also became less attuned to the 16-year-old me who had written it. I decided to apply the creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) practice of valuing self-expression above grammar and writing craft. Additionally, I did not want to interfere with the adolescent's authentic voice. In the preface to *A Young Girl's Diary* (1919, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/752/752-h/752-h.htm), the editor made a similar choice. I did, however, edit the poem 'Photopoem', adding lines from the original writing sessions and removing words for clarity. Its original format is in the public domain (Winkler, 2024, p. 77) which

lessened my ethical concern. I also added a research poem, 'Cooking Broth,' as a postscript.

Writing Led to Shifts of Perspective

This section looks at how I harnessed therapeutic writing for transformation. I used narrative therapy to demonstrate the value of saying 'hullo' to my adolescent self, to incorporate 'the lost relationship' and arrive at a 'new relationship' with myself (White, 1988, p. 28). Narration was the key to connect with a self I had dismissed as a lost soul. Usually 'we prune' to 'fit … the dominant story'; however, when people are 'reaching back into experience' to tell stories, they reclaim 'lost knowledges.' I returned to my journals through storytelling to 're-live' my adolescent experience of depersonalisation (p. 23). Through visceral emotions felt in the present, I arrived 'at a new relationship' with myself, including seeing myself as a 'lovable person' whom I treated with 'greater kindness and compassion' (p. 28).

This sense of connectedness between the past and present was further developed when I applied Internal Family Systems (IFS) in creative writing. My grasp of IFS was rudimentary but valuable. Insights led to 'healing shifts in perspective' producing 'deeper and more complex truths' which helped 'review and revise' my history (DeSalvo, 1999, p. 5, p.11). Several modalities showed how shifts of perspective resulted in therapeutic outcomes, including re-authoring a positive self from the past (White, 1988) as well as self-discovery (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 208) and finding this positive self through Schwartz's (2021) connectedness and compassion (p. 98). I supplemented the latter with Neff's work (2003, 2009, 2017) on self-compassion. Central to Buddhist tradition, self-compassion considers all humans—including crucially oneself—as worthy of compassion (Neff & Knox, 2017, p. 2). Neff (2009) defines self-compassion's threefold components as 'self-kindness versus self-judgement', 'common humanity versus isolation', and 'mindfulness versus overidentification'. The latter defines the sense of being aware of painful feelings yet not becoming engulfed by them.

Internal Family Systems

I had not envisaged using IFS in a writing exercise until it spontaneously occurred, as I will describe later. Van der Kolk (2014) credits IFS for clarifying how trauma disrupts the internal system so parts of the self get

'hijacked out of their naturally valuable state' (p. 281) and recommends IFS for working with dissociation (p. 369). IFS conceives the mind as an 'inner family' using techniques evolved from family therapy (Schwartz, 2021, pp. 14–17). Just as a child gets assigned a caring role in a dysfunctional family, so one part of the mind acts to protect the other parts (p. 16). These 'parts' are not 'afflictions' but protective devices (p. 36). This model invites curiosity and spaciousness to look at contradictory aspects of the self. This was useful when writing therapeutically about characteristics I identified in my journals, which still operate within me. It was especially helpful to acknowledge there were 'no bad parts', for even a destructive one has 'protective intentions' (p. 17). This alleviated stigma around traits I am not proud of, including the detachment of depersonalisation, describing myself in my adolescent journals as 'callous, insensitive, selfish', 'cold', or 'being a bitch'. IFS rescued me from such self-criticism, bringing instead an enduring sense of a wise self, which is always present 'beneath the surface … an undamaged essence' (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 283), 'the seat of consciousness' (Schwartz, 2021, p. 145). After over 20 years of working with clients, Schwartz distilled the qualities of the Self (with a capital S) into 'eight Cs': creativity, courage, curiosity, connectedness, compassion, clarity, calm, and confidence (Schwartz, n. d. a), all of which I sought and felt more aligned when experiencing them.

There is synergy between IFS and therapeutic writing. IFS questions the myth of the monoculture mind and instead conceptualises a multitudinous one; it also recommends dialoguing with parts to get to know this internal family. Therapeutic writing uses similar concepts; for example, Bolton (1999) suggests a dialogue in script form between the adult and child self, or 'from your everyday self to your spiritual self' (p. 58). Moskowitz (cited in Hunt & Sampson, 1998) offers a specific creative writing technique to look at 'disintegrated parts' in order to find 'new ways of managing them' (p. 37). I suggest that further research into the connections between IFS and therapeutic writing may be useful to the field, and, on a personal level, I have become interested in a dialogue between the depersonalised-me and the 'inner orphanage' (Schwartz, 2021, p. 37).

Writing Prompts

The main prompt was a black-and-white photograph of myself, aged 16 and a half, taken in Soho, London in 1971 (Figure 2). I chose the artefact quickly and without much thought, after finding it unexpectedly in my papers, because it was mounted on board and taken by a professional photographer. Using images is well documented in writing for wellbeing literature (Williamson, 2020, p. 129), (Wafula & Muthoni, 2022, p. 129). Looking at photographs can offer 'another way' into the self (Thompson, 2011, p. 83).

Figure 2

The author at 16.

The writing exercises were largely guided by therapeutic journal writing prompts for working specifically on photographs (Thompson, 2011, pp. 116–119). I wrote in poetic lines about 1000 words. I titled it 'Photopoem' after identifying it as *photopoetry*, 'an art form that involves the interaction between photography and poetry' (Wafula & Muthoni, 2022, p. 127). Another artefact was a historic journal entry written about the photographer. I responded to the following prompts over several writing sessions:

1. How do I feel towards the adolescent in the picture?
2. What wisdom/advice would I give her? (Thompson, 2011, p. 148).
3. Who is behind the camera? (p. 88).
4. What aspects of yourself are there? What do you understand now that you didn't then? (p. 88).
5. What does the adolescent think of me now?

Writing Sessions and Results

Prompt One

I underestimated the challenge of looking at a personal photograph. Williamson (2020) would only use it as a writing prompt once a group was established because 'photographs are deeply personal and evocative' (p. 131). As a self-researcher, I longed for a creative writing facilitator to contain my efforts. Writing now, I hear a voice: 'Go away. Too late', like a hurt child pushing someone away. Sometimes photographs 'don't say anything at first, they refuse to give up their secrets and have to be coaxed' (Thompson, 2011, p. 117). I protected myself by shutting down, and had I not been committed to following the writing prompts for my dissertation, I would have abandoned the exercise.

As I asked myself how I felt towards that younger me, I felt physically 'weighed down', a word describing how dissociation manifests (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 121, citing Lyons-Ruth, 2003). I was 'waiting … in the soupy darkness' (Black, 2019) for something to occur. This uncomfortable period included disbelief that anything fruitful would emerge; I was detached from any therapeutic value, listening instead to a familiar, defeated voice saying, 'What's the point?' I fed this state of mind with self-talk about only pretending to believe in the power of transformational writing, thereby being a fraud. I can see how this internal dialogue was a reflection of the girl in the picture. In hindsight, noticing the negative voice has been transformational because, rather than being 'blended' with it (Schwartz, 2013, p. 808), I was observing it and thus becoming less prone to heed it.

Prompt Two

The second prompt invited me to offer advice. I wanted to be a wise adult in order to rescue the adolescent in the picture from nihilism and give her the vibrant, purposeful life I knew she was capable of living. I tried to free her from my late father's directive for her to study to become a French teacher. I suggested instead exciting possibilities based on future interests. But none of these suggestions changed the deadening atmosphere. It was as if she was rejecting all my ideas. In hindsight, my use of the third person ('she rejected') shows I was achieving 'self-distancing'; rather than it being an instrument of detachment, it was a tool for self-regulation denoting transcendence from an 'egocentric viewpoint' (Kross et al., 2014, p. 305).

I then realised that this deadness was her fear of being trapped. She chose what she called 'freedom' in order to avoid commitment to either relationships or activities. I now interpreted this fear of entrapment with compassion, not as a weakness but connected to unresolved issues from childhood. So, I suggested that she might want to see a therapist, and specifically, an existential therapist to help her with her preoccupation with life's meaning and purpose. My creative writing produced a concrete possibility in the form of a real-life existential therapist, Emmy van Deurzen. It was a breakthrough moment that resulted in sudden and unexpected tears, bringing the past into the present.

I then researched van Deurzen, fascinated by the idea that our paths might have crossed in north London in the 1970s (van Deurzen, 2011). At first, I judged this as a distraction but in contrast it added richness: I felt envy and loss because van Deurzen had realised her potential from early adulthood, and I had not. Writing about other people connected me to my past, making it real. I was 'dramatically re-engaged' (White, 2005, p. 10). The story of someone 'relating positively and helpfully' (White, 1988, p. 25) was incorporated in the present, leading to a 'new relationship' with myself (p. 28). This effect was amplified by coming upon several references in my adolescent journals to wanting to see a 'psychiatrist ... gently discovering why (but not through brainwashing)' (Personal journal, 1970). This longing for understanding that 'lights up our limbic brain and creates an aha moment' (Kolk, 2014, p. 232) was innate and enduring, a realisation that united me with my past self.

Prompt Three

At the next writing session, the third prompt, Who is behind the camera?, invited me to again write about another. It was a relief not to be focused on the adolescent. His obituaries revealed he became the official photographer of the African National Congress (Jayawardane, 2020). I feared I was inflating myself with someone else's significance, as I had with van Deurzen. However, once again, it was fruitful. My connection with the photographer captured a time when London was a hub for anti-apartheid movements formed by black South Africans in exile. A white Jewish girl from a bourgeois home that felt controlling, I was drawn, like water to water, to liberation movements. Through writing about my then culture I was reuniting with my past, making it real. I was connecting 'with life and with history,' a way to 'more fully inhabit' the past (White, 2005, p. 10). I no longer felt weighed down; I was in a flow, that desirable, optimum state,

where ‘I know that I am alive, that I am somebody, that I matter’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 8).

Prompt Four

In another writing session, I worked with the prompts, What aspects of yourself are there? and What do you understand now that you didn’t then? and applied them to a journal excerpt written the day after I met the photographer:

> I feel I should warn him I would be no good for him: like I can give no such love and devotion in return, I forget people if they are not there, I never really care about people, I am callous, insensitive, selfish – BUT (and here are the very misleading attributes) I am a good listener: I am interested … I have an open face, a sympathetic manner BEWARE I am interested , but as a story, a film, an amusement – but not for the person itself … My callousness stems from a total lack of realisation of a person. (Personal journal, February 1971)

In my poem, I brought my ‘callousness’ into full spotlight, characterised by a slogan on Melania Trump’s jacket (*I really don’t care. Do U*). I could see the value of examining this unwelcome aspect because there is ‘no shortcut around our inner barbarians’ (Schwartz, n. d. b). In giving the destructive parts understanding, we allow them to be reintegrated as positive resources to ‘enrich your life’ (Schwartz, 2021, p. 38). Their intention is to protect the Self from extreme emotional wounds, buried so far in the unconscious they have become ‘exiles’ (Schwartz, 2023, p. 151); for instance, a small child who faced neglect might create an exiled part that is apparently unworthy of love. Depersonalisation was not bad, and I captured the moment as I realised this: ‘My callousness PROTECTED me!/Like protective PARTS!’. This was the first time I saw the Great Unreality as a positive force, which led to a greater sense of acceptance: ‘Dissociation deserves our reverence and respect … to be recognised for the life-saving coping mechanism that it is’ (Connop, 2025, para. 7).

The IFS lens was so useful that I applied it to another aspect described in the journal extract: the me who listens attentively but deceptively. I wrote how this trait connected with my mother’s need for total attention:

> Hello listening me,
> I can't believe you were there so early
> Am I surprised? You must have learned it at your mother's knee.
> She commanded: 'Look at me!'
> (Photopoem, 2024)

The writing prompt encouraged me to name traits from the past and recognise them in the present. This led to discerning a relationship between the detached and the listening parts: my so-called callousness brought respite from the relentless expectation of being caring, the 'parentified child' of my internal family (Schwartz, 2021, p. 37). I characterised the latter tendency as Virginia Woolf's Angel in the House, who suppresses her own needs so rigorously that, 'if there was a draught she sat in it' (Dintino, 2022, para. 6). I was helping these parts feel heard and witnessing how they relate to each other (Scott, 2023). Noticing and understanding sensations/thoughts as a 'part' gives a sense of separation from them, and once no longer 'blended' or identified with them, the part's potency can return to its 'naturally valuable' function (Schwartz, 2013, p. 808). My current self was dialoguing with my adolescent self, and in doing so, was coming to see her positive attributes, as I jubilantly expressed:

> I am having a crazy love affair with this young me
> I am just so happy for her.
> If only she knew how much her writing has helped me.
> I am falling in love with ME instead of 'projected identities'.
> (Photopoem, 2024)

A further insight occurred as I wrote the words 'crazy love affair' and a memory of a long-ago crush flashed in my mind. Like remembering a dream, I brought it into conscious focus. I began to see similarities between *rumination*, a symptom of depersonalisation disorder, and the obsessive thinking of *limerence*, a concept coined by Tennov to describe romantic sensations so intense they can cause 'major disruption' (1998, p. x). Another term is *maladaptive daydreaming*, an 'extensive and compulsive absorption in a vivid fantasized world' with 'dissociative properties' (Soffer-Dudek, Aquarone, & Somer, 2025). As the above lines from 'Photopoem' show, I realised this energy could be redirected towards my own unmet needs rather than diverted to the chimera of a projected identity (Lee, Marchiano, & Stewart, 2024).

Prompt Five

Another profound insight occurred when looking at the photograph for the fifth and final prompt: What does the adolescent think of me now? As in the first session, I felt weighed down and ineffectual, like an overeager adult trying to get approval from a teenager who viewed me with contempt. That word 'contempt' was an 'illuminative (aha) moment' (Bolton, 2010, p. 26). Suddenly, for the first time, I noticed what I called the teenager's 'veiled anger'. Furthermore, this perception connected me to something in the present: a sense of blankness in my current brain, a familiar, empty space, a void where depersonalisation happens. Gazing at the photograph with this new awareness, I suddenly recalled how I felt about the photograph before the writing exercises. I had the internal space to acknowledge I did not like the picture (which rarely saw the light of day). I disliked the shut down person with a vacant look in her eyes, which gave me a sense of nausea.

No wonder returning to a past disorder can be hard. It means confronting what is buried and sore to exhume. I did not want to connect to something 'cut off from known experience' (Thompson, 2011, p. 117). Through this therapeutic noticing, something shifted. I found 'the key to unlock the self in experience' (p. 117); photographs 'confront people with visual representations rich in possibility and hidden meaning' (p. 117). They can be 'a tool for processing experience' (Williamson, 2020, p. 128).

Focusing on the teenager's emptiness brought it into the present. I was finding something hidden, in this case unconscious anger. Anger, my denied emotion, my exiled part. Examining the external environment through autoethnography, I noted how my mother was the only person in the family allowed to express rage and recalled how this was presented by both parents as a non-negotiable fact:

> [My mother] had inherited her father's temper … She was entitled to her rage, saying: 'I am like a man who must have sex. If I bottle things up, I get ill.' (Winkler, 2024, p. 33)

Depersonalisation is a psychic defence against overwhelming emotion. In this case, both a small child's fear in the face of her caregiver's unpredictable fury and a suppression of the child's own anger because it would result in further rage and abandonment from the caregiver. This was an intolerable double bind, and I can see how disappearing into blankness was preferable. My relationship to the teenager in the

photograph shifted. I felt less intimidated by her and more accepting, bringing an increased sense of self-compassion.

Conclusion

> A jump of realisation:
> we are looking through the same eyes
> You and me
> The same mind then and now.
> (Winkler, 2024)

An unplanned poem, 'Cooking Broth' (excerpt above) demonstrates integration: I had the same mind in adolescence that led to this present inquiry. My mind was not fragmented or defective after all, but focused on self-understanding. This insight brought unity, 'a sense of oneness with all that has been' (White, 1988, p. 23, citing Myerhoff, 1986, p. 110). Instead of characterising adolescent-me as lost, cut off, dead, or callous, I saw depersonalisation as a wondrous survival mechanism, a 'manifestation of resilience' (Itzkowitz et al., 2015, p. 74), a window into how the mind works and myself as someone intact, with a lifetime focus on self-discovery.

I have reread my journals before but with amusement. This was the first time I had applied a compassionate lens. It made a crucial difference, producing therapeutic insights and enduring transformation, a form of self-therapy (Wright, 2009, p. 3). Describing this 'therapeutic process on paper', Wright (2010) invokes mindfulness by 'focusing in the moment, on purpose and non-judgementally' (p. 65). I created for myself 'a nurturing, empathic, non-judgemental presence' (p. 65), and fostering an internal Rogerian voice, I approached myself with empathy and positive regard so essential for therapeutic change (p. 65).

I now argue that therapeutic writing is an inventive, versatile tool for processing the past with compassion. It is more than a method of self-expression. My research demonstrates how it is a transformative practice enabling people to reshape their inner narratives and reclaim agency over their stories. Writing prompts provided structure as I explored my past through artefacts, enabling me to catch seemingly inconsequential moments that developed into significant insights, and gave voice to what was previously a weighed-down and silent space.

Nearly a year later after submission, I can report the insights gained were not, as I had feared, performative and 'only' for my dissertation but

real and increasingly consolidated with time. And continue to unfold. As Martinelli (2024, p. 7) found when writing a paper that interacted with her thesis, 'the story is never fully or exhaustively told.' Therapeutic writing is a testament to its creative ability to reshape self-identity. As Victoria Field expressed, writing 'reflects the present moment/Changes the past/ And creates the future' (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006, p. 235). I am grateful for this new future.

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The Photopoem

Photopoem

I show this picture to people, most say 'beautiful' but
I see the pain in her eyes.
She looks weighed down, older than I am now.
Where is her fun and lightness? I know it's there.

Draw to her. Sing to her. Say well done girl, hang on in there.
You had the right idea. Your instincts were good.
I am her adult, her wise adult.
Do I talk about my adult regrets? Validate her journey?
How would she like to be approached?
I am scared of being too gung-ho
She will close down.

Can I give her some advice?
Forget university. Why not go to art school, join a theatre group.
Work in a wholefood cafe or on a magazine.
I need to find something she would love.
She is scared of being trapped.
Find a therapist! What about an existential therapist like that lovely Emmy van Deurzen?
TEARS.

Could young me have met younger Emmy?
Emmy came to the UK in 1977 to work with Laing, she too was moved by his books.
She gave Laing the heave-ho because he turned out to be a jerk.
Emmy van Deurzen refused to sit at Ronnie's feet.
Ronnie did not offer training in existential therapy
(despite practising it) (even though Sartre wrote an intro to his book).
He only offered French psychoanalysis from which Emmy had escaped
Emmy wanted training in existential therapy
So she created her own.
Now she is president of the international existential movement.
Go Emmy!
(*She had agency. I did not*.)

An energy pressing down
Reducing, obscuring
Eyes closing, words falter, hard to finish.
The word 'veil' looks a lot nicer written down.

Later…What a handy device to be detached.
My superpower for evading/surviving controlling types.

Kate Thompson said: write about who took the photograph.
An exile from apartheid South Africa, he observed fellow exiles
their 'burdens and vulnerable states'.
Became the ANC's official photographer. (*Wow, I didn't know that). (Am I seizing his reputation to adorn mine?*).

The Angel in the House was so unselfish
'she never had a mind or a wish of her own'
She 'preferred to always sympathise' with those of others.
'If there was a draught she sat in it,' wrote Virginia Woolf.
Behind a mask of utter charm and sympathy
She hid her callous self
Its shadow materialised on the back of a jacket
worn by a president's wife visiting a children's detention centre
emblazoned with: 'I really don't care. Do U?'
No, I do not REALLY care. (Do I?).
Like PARTS (Schwartz)
This teenager is part of me.
Defended, cynical, sharp. I love her.
My callousness PROTECTED me!
Like protective PARTS.

Hello listening me,
I can't believe you were there so early
Am I surprised? You must have learned it at your mother's knee.
She commanded: 'Look at me!'
Listening was not her skill.
I pushed my words out through a waterfall
She caught my gist above her gush
And geyser-like exploded more about herself
Without a pause to let my sentence settle
She was off again, a force of nature engulfing me.
Her life force – always hers.
My life depends on it like water.

Love the adolescent-me, love me
I am validating her
bringing her out of the shadows.
Excited for her. Just so happy for her.
I feel potent. Exactly as I felt as a teen, overwhelmed by energy.
Like her, I can hardly contain my excitement.
Unlike her, I know how to breathe to regulate my system.
I am sorry no one taught you how to breathe.
Well done for finding yoga breathing for childbirth in 1977.

I am having a crazy love affair with this young me.
As I caught sight of 'crazy love affair'
the 1990s crush flashed into my mind
(a car-crash crush).
I am falling in love with ME.
If only she knew how much her writing has helped me.
I am falling in love with ME instead of 'projected identities'.

Holding the photograph in my hand
A precious artefact.
All art is for the future
Connecting across time.

As much as I dream of a field under stars
I stand before Soho's buildings in front of parked cars
Urbanised-me persists, I glory in poppies
growing through cracks in the concrete
Train tracks, telegraph poles and the roofs of human abodes.

Tell me, did I do OK?
Are you pleased with the me that you became?
Is there anything left undone?
Any song we have not sung?

Eyes like shields protect a void.
Looking at the blankness in your eyes
Connects me to the blankness behind my eyes.
I know its empty shape.
Together we can watch the emptiness
Prising open boxes to find what's true
All grist for our healthiness.
We have more work to do.

No longer exiled from my heart.
I am proud of you.
Your veiled eyes, a blankness I despised
was a fitting shield to protect you.
I salute you.
Breathing into a wound
I feel compassionate and tender towards her.
Towards me.

POSTSCRIPT: Cooking broth

Gazing into the pan
watching bubbles appear in the simmering broth
A jump of realisation:
we are looking through the same eyes
You and me
The same mind then and now.
Not lost or cut-off or any other labels
Me then is me now
Finding my mind
The same mind, observing life.
I can trust my mind.

End

Elisabeth Winkler *is a freelance journalist, editor, and charity communications specialist who has kept a journal since she was 12. She says, 'The MSc for Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes brought together two parts of myself: journalist (public) and journal writer (private). I am now focused on writing about mental health recovery and facilitating therapeutic writing courses.'*

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LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

Essay

Invisible Mending

Dawn Garisch
Life Righting Collective

Abstract

One aspect of creative writing not well understood or researched is how associations from the unconscious can bring spontaneous and unexpected insights and connections to the writer's awareness. This feature promotes wellbeing by providing motivation to alter harmful attitudes and behaviour. From linguistics comes the term *mirativity*, which expresses a speaker's surprise at the discovery of new information. Mirativity can also apply to the creative writing process, when unforeseen and beneficial material appears from idiosyncratic associations, and therefore cannot be reproduced by AI. Creative writing is a low-cost, inbuilt resource to help people manage their lives and circumstances, to bear witness to influence policy change, and to improve self-care.

Keywords: medical humanities, wellbeing, creative writing, trauma, mirativity

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Life can suddenly and radically alter course. An example from my life: one winter morning I received a phone call at work: *We're at the hospital, he's had a fall*. His toddler body lay on the gurney in the emergency unit, still breathing but otherwise unresponsive. The doctor called for an Ambu bag as the porter rushed my baby to the CT scanner. Then the ICU, where the neurosurgeon delivered the news, uncomfortable and frowning, not meeting my eye, on the other side of the bed.

Much of my work has been infused with this incident and its aftermath, from fictionalising aspects (*Accident*, 2017; *Breaking Milk*, 2024) to several poems, to a play (*To Get to the Moon*, 2018) to sections in two works of non-fiction (*Eloquent Body*, 2012; *Dance with Suitcase*, 2013). In committing these experiences to paper, I was aiming to address my anger and grief, but the creative act of writing has also repeatedly brought moments of unexpected transformation.

I discovered this benefit before I encountered the medical humanities movement, which promotes wellbeing through creative practice within the health sciences. As a medical doctor, I am curious as to how this innate mechanism influences healing, and how it can best be brought to the attention of health care systems.

Finding Out What You Don't Know

There is ample evidence that the rupture caused by trauma results in mental illness, and that writing about these key events facilitates integration and healing (Ruini & Mortara, 2022). However, two elements of the creative writing process remain elusive: where does the impulse to write a piece come from, and how does the subject matter unexpectedly transform during the writing process?

James Baldwin said in an interview,

> When you are standing in the pulpit, you must sound as though you know what you're talking about. When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway. (Baldwin, 1984)

I found this quote while trying to source who said: *Write what you know to find out what you don't know*. Baldwin's comment comes closest. However, it suggests that the knowledge or self-knowledge emerging during the writing process is unwelcome, or at least uncomfortable. I differ in that I've found the insights arising from creative engagement to be beneficial, even awe-inspiring. Nevertheless, Baldwin identified two elements that might have universal qualities: that of feeling 'forced' or compelled, and that of discovery.

The call to begin an inquiry through the written word can be as overt as the circumstances surrounding a severely injured child or can be oblique. My essay titled 'Glass' (to be published in *Lapidus Magazine*) is illustrative. The initial inspiration was my unexpectedly strong reaction to

a series of prints of small watercolour paintings, and I was drawn to find out why.

I could have refused the lure of the prints, turning away from this prompt, and distracted myself with other matters, as many of us do much of the time. In fact, I only started writing the piece a few years ago after first seeing the paintings. I was not in the presence of the prints when I opened my laptop and began. The images and my reaction had stayed with me, surfacing every now and then to beckon, a subtle awareness of a ripple in the pond of my imagination. Something was trying to catch my attention and stimulate my curiosity.

I suspect that the unconscious, like the body, is constantly trying to help me heal, repeatedly throwing up clues of how I might do this. These clues present as symbols or symptoms, which, if I pay attention, might release beneficial insights.

Writing about the paintings of the glass surprised me by leading to my mother. She is deceased, but our relationship difficulties disturbed me long after she had gone. The paintings showed me a way to approach her, and the subsequent revelation has altered my understanding of her, underscoring my propensity for judging others without being in possession of sufficient information. Writing 'Glass' has changed me profoundly by resolving a chronic disturbance and by stimulating an awareness that helps me with other relationships.

Unfinished business will show up in various guises that might initially appear unrelated. Prompts like the paintings, or a memory that won't let me go, or a recurrent habit or dream, or a relationship difficulty to name a few examples, could be described as cairns in the landscape of a life, indicating the way. The information they carry is obscure. Creative practice is the key that can help unlock their idiosyncratic meaning.

A deeply felt situation or memory can be a place to begin. I need to stay alert so as not to dismiss the obvious or the seemingly irrelevant, but to follow clues with the divining rod of my pen. I regard the prompt as a mechanism that will teleport me to a valuable discovery. Where have I felt this before? When was the first time I felt this? The beginning of a thread arrives in my writing hand; my task is to hold it loosely, using sensory awareness and peripheral vision to stay open and present, and to avoid going straight past additional clues.

When writing what I know with as much attentiveness and faithfulness as possible, pursuing an intriguing narrative on the page, insight arrives. The *Aha!* moment—a surprise liberated through creative attention.

Two Distinct Problem-solving Brain Processes

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. (Didion, 1976)

It is a curious fact that I do not know myself as well as I think I do, and that writing and other creative practices can bring hidden material and motivations to light. The psychiatrist Eric Kandel (2012), in *The Age of Insight*, describes two distinct brain processes that have evolved for the task of problem solving. One is logical, sequential, deductive, analytical, and interpretive and employs judgement. It breaks the problem down into parts to arrive at a solution and tries to eliminate paradox. This approach is valuable, but my education largely emphasised this paradigm at the expense of an alternative method—the creative process, which finds solutions by juxtaposing elements that make emotional sense, even when they appear contradictory. Creative engagement can perceive the overview, is process driven, has instantaneous insights (the Aha! or Eureka! moment) and draws on unconscious information.

Kandel says even when we think we are making a considered, rational decision, evidence of preceding neurological activity suggests unconscious influences. Where these influences consist of narrative and image, it is a worthy endeavour to become acquainted with these drivers of patterns of behaviour to assess potential harm to ourselves, others, or the rest of the natural world. There are creative methods to alter the narrative to one more helpful and supportive.

My parents encouraged both the arts and the sciences in our home; one of my sisters is a visual artist who ran her own business, and I became a medical doctor and an author. My early interest in art and story sometimes led me to query how we were taught about disease at medical school, categorising symptoms to diagnose and treat. This method of applying elegant and relevant evidence-based algorithms and protocols has saved many lives and ameliorated much suffering. However, it fails to engage core elements that could be crucial to recovery. Doctors mostly ask closed-ended questions that leave almost no room for a patient's subjective experience—their associations, dreams, fears, hopes, and ancestral and childhood traumas. Being evicted from your home, having an alcoholic

parent, or being falsely accused are examples of how early events can create assumptions that shape habitual ways of thinking and feeling, patterns of behaviour. These in turn can contribute to the development of chronic disease.

Medical science attempts to eliminate the patient's narrative in favour of empirical truths, yet the story I tell myself about almost any aspect of my life will shape how I act towards myself, others, and the Earth.

In my second year of medicine, I developed a visual condition that the ophthalmologist initially dismissed. When my symptoms not only persisted but intensified, he dilated my pupils and shone a painfully bright light into the back of my eyes. Through the aftershocks of purple blur, I saw his vague shape lean back, and heard him comment, 'You know, you may be right.' I was diagnosed with chronic uveitis, an autoimmune disorder sometimes associated with diseases like histoplasmosis, tuberculosis, or cat scratch disease, or with an inherited chromosomal abnormality. I tested negative for the illnesses, but the gene showed up.

Initially I accepted this allopathic explanation and treatment as the only way forward, but my distress had not been addressed. Our class was busy with a histopathology block where we spent afternoons bent over microscopes, learning to differentiate normal from diseased tissues. The thinly sliced samples were stained with vibrant colours to accentuate the structure of cells; many normal tissues were strikingly beautiful, not unlike cathedral windows. I was shocked to think that I might lose my ability to see such wonders and lose reading and writing. Would I fall into the wholly or partially sighted group, or into the group that recovered? What did it take to heal?

For the next seven years, my uveitis repeatedly flared and went into remission, sometimes necessitating horrible treatments like injections behind my eyeballs. I had learnt from my family not to complain and from many years in boarding school how to endure, so I kept my anxieties to myself.

After my first son was born, I joined a dance therapy group because I love dancing and the venue was close to home. It was a chance encounter with therapy, as I came from a family that dismissed psychology. When I told the dance therapist about another uveitis flareup, she gave me a book by Arnold Mindell (1982) on how he works with chronic conditions through image, story, and play. I emerged from reading as though I had been given a profound answer to a question I didn't know I'd asked.

The Poetry of the Body

In *Eloquent Body* (Garisch, 2012), I have written in depth about the succession of events set in motion by my eye disease, a process that changed my ideas about and experience of wellbeing. Suffice it to say I discovered radically alternative and additional approaches to my illness from Arnold Mindell and his team, who were invited to South Africa to teach process-oriented psychology, and Robert Bosnak, who later taught embodied imagination (Bosnak, 2007). Although their methods ran counter to my training, they appealed strongly to my artistic leanings. They emphasised the beginner's mind—to trust subjective, sensory experience; to relinquish the pursuit of goals in favour of subtle observation of process, idiosyncratic and imaginative associations. And they encouraged empathetic narrative. When I focussed on my physical symptoms so as to describe them subjectively, the eye damage caused by my chronic uveitis became a halo, then a burning bush; my metatarsalgia became the little mermaid walking on glass, my neck pain became a gannet drying her wings in the sun. As I enter the arena of metaphor and symbol, I think of these as the poetry of the adversities. Instead of analytically probing trauma or ill health, this inquiry can be reframed as a poetic project, switching fear and helplessness into curiosity and agency.

These surprising images were plot points from which I could write, making links in an evolving and novel narrative. As the interpretation of my illness changed from unfortunate malfunctions to include intriguing enigma, I relaxed, broadening and softening my inner experience. The reduction in my stress hormones when creatively reconfiguring the narrative into unforeseen images kindled a sense of calm. My fears shifted into a sense of curiosity, awe, and meaning. I could step out of old fixed and unhelpful assumptions about my health into new possibilities for self-care and acceptance. (Here I am in danger of reducing a long and ambiguous process to a quick fix, so it's important to stress that this is a very short summary.)

Medical science, analysis, and the rational have much of value to contribute towards alleviating suffering. I might have lost my sight were it not for the judicious use of anti-inflammatory agents. However, I have a little joke I tell the small cohort of medical students I teach each year in the Writing in Medicine study module. If you have a crushing chest pain that radiates down your left arm accompanied by sweating, nausea, and shortness of breath, don't sit down and write a poem. Go to the emergency unit to have your heart attack sorted out. But if you don't write the poem

(or story with related associations) when you get home, you have missed half the information.

Mirativity

Richard Hugo, a lecturer at the University of Montana in the United States of America, said

> A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or causes the poem to be written, and the real and generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. That's not quite right, because it suggests that the poet recognizes the real subject. The poet might not be aware of what the real subject is, but only have some instinctive feeling that the poem is done. (Hugo, 2010)

This description of an Aha! moment, the switch between the original subject and the discovered subject, is the point at which the poet might have a novel insight. What's important is to regard the initiating subject as a means of consulting the oracle. When I write from sensory experience, using my body as the conduit, I am inviting new and valuable information to appear.

The first Aha! moment can arrive when identifying an unexpected association related to the disturbance, one that usually makes emotional rather than rational sense—in my examples, the burning bush, little mermaid, or gannet. These powerful, startling images arose spontaneously from my symptoms.

In a poem or flash piece, there might be one Aha! moment; in a longer piece there could be several. A remarkable consequence of setting forth on a piece is that circumstances appear to conspire to advance the project. Perhaps relevant material is readily available, yet I only notice it when I'm focussed; perhaps there is another force at play.

While preparing the keynote talk on invisible mending for the Lapidus conference in 2025, intrigued by how writing can be beneficial in unanticipated ways, I stumbled upon the 2024 Blaney Lecture given by the poet Jane Hirschfield (Poets.org, 2024). She quotes her friend Nicholas Evans, the linguist who introduced her to the term *mirativity*, which is a feeling of surprise on discovering the unanticipated, the Aha! or Eureka! moment for which we don't have an adequate word in English. Linguists use the term mirativity, which only occurs in a few languages, to describe a

grammatical expression of surprise at information that is new or counter to the speaker's expectations or knowledge.

Mirativity inhabits the cracks between feeling and knowing—the discovery of what you didn't know until just this second and now understand and recognise has a quality of feeling that alters perception.

It is difficult to change my ingrained behaviours because the backstory I habitually tell myself to justify unhelpful or even harmful actions can be very compelling and is often entrenched from an early age. James Hollis (1993) calls these 'anxiety management systems'—habits that self-soothe by bringing short-term relief, but in adulthood they can have long-term harmful consequences, for example, recreational drugs, comfort food, road rage, compulsive shopping, self-harm, or choosing to work long hours. Altering harmful behaviour requires changing the story I tell myself, a story that is mostly hidden from my awareness.

While researching *Eloquent Body*, I came across the book by the psychologist Louis Cozolino (2010), in which he says an individual's capacity for change is dependent on

a) recognising a trigger and the associated anxiety,

b) withholding habitual self-soothing but ultimately harmful behaviour, and

c) tolerating the consequent increase in anxiety for long enough for new neural pathways to grow in the brain.

This approach opens the gap between perception and reaction, allowing time to imagine alternative responses and to choose different, more helpful behaviour rather than falling into habit. The neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux (2004) calls this practice 'tinkering in the virtual workspace of the mind.' Imaginative tinkering is enhanced when I apply the tools of the artist—symbol, metaphor, image, and narrative. These aspects of creative practice avoid judgement, analysis, assumptions, premature resolutions, and control to preserve curiosity and idiosyncratic associations.

James Hollis (2000) proposes a radical question: 'What does the image want?' This moves the focus away from the demands of my ego or the expectations of society to a more profound, inner calling. When I explore links between an inciting incident and the strange continent of the unconscious, I need to remember that my ego prefers goals rather than process. My rational mind can become anxious when I don't know where I

am going and might attempt to shut down my inquiry. Creativity depends on forays into the unknown, accompanied by faithful observation and trust in what Eugene Gendlin (1996) calls a 'felt sense' or gut feeling. The project then seems to take on a life or direction of its own.

I might have good ideas about what to write, but the stories I tell myself will be too limited; I need the upwelling of associations from the vast reservoir of the unconscious to help form a poem or narrative. I consider the unconscious a self-organising principle that will feed and shape the piece as it pulls me along until there's a satisfying place to land. This relinquishing of control over process allows for further opportunities for mirativity—unexpected plot points or reversals.

The flow state of creative writing from which these insights emerge can be interrupted if I shape or edit the piece too early, since the discernment needed for editing is a different entity. While writing the first draft I must suspend my revising eye, ignoring grammar, spelling, syntax, and over- or under-writing. This keeps channels open for unforeseen material to surface on the page and in my consciousness.

Creativity As an Evolutionary Advantage

Evolution has provided our species with creativity for good reason. The neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (Panksepp & Biven, 2012) won the Nobel science prize for his work with mammals, where he studied neural pathways that need to be functional from birth. He described seven basic emotional circuits that increase the chance of survival, three of which relate to creativity. One is *seeking*, being able to search without a specific goal, a component of curiosity. Another is *care* or attachment—the bond the newborn forms with the mother. In creativity, we need to form an attachment to the writing project and enter a relationship that can nurture, requiring trust, immersion, a sense of belonging, holding, and non-verbal communication. Although words are the vehicle for our craft, we require a prior felt-sense connection that I think of as a guiding light.

Third, he describes *play* as essential to learning. Children play to try out options, to see what happens, to learn about themselves, others, and the world and to experiment with agency when acting out trauma. Play is not concerned with perfection or status, often makes a mess, and does not undermine or interrupt but stays observant, interested, and curious, releasing the unexpected from the known.

Regular creative practice is powerful medicine, giving me space to process problems through play. I can take a disturbance to a poem or a novel, exploring situations and feelings on the page without knowing what's going to happen next, staying curious and connected, calming myself down.

Are these benefits reproducible?

I had a good start—an excellent education; enough money, shelter, and food; I speak English; I'm white. These are huge advantages in our unequal world. It raises the question whether creative writing can help people born into poverty and prejudice. Through the writing courses we run under the auspices of the Life Righting Collective (liferighting.com), I'm aware that those who sign up and arrive for in-person courses or who own a device with data for online courses have sufficient inner and outer resources and reserves to attend. There are people in need of this low-cost, inbuilt intervention who cannot access this kind of help to due to very dire circumstances.

The Life Righting Collective and the University of Cape Town undertook qualitative research to assess whether the LRC tag line 'The healing power of writing' would hold if rigorously examined. Our paper 'Can "life writing" be therapeutic in response to trauma? An exploratory research project in Medical Humanities in South Africa' (Garisch, Giddy, Griffin, & Reid, 2024) was a landmark study undertaken in the Global South.

Learning effective methods to communicate, initially with oneself as a process of discovery and recovery and then with others through the written word, can foster confidence and courage, so that historically silenced individuals and communities become more visible. Witnessing is an essential aspect of activism.

Write what you know to find out what you don't know. The life-enhancing element of mirativity is one which has not been studied sufficiently, despite it being a core factor in the creative process, presumably ever since humans first expressed themselves without having a precise outcome in mind.

Changing the Ending

I write things down to put things down emotionally. The circumstances might not change, but I find, surprisingly, that I frequently write my way into a different relationship with what's bothering me.

Perhaps we all have core stories that shape and bind our lives, ones that challenge us to our limits; one of mine is my son's accident. There are many ways writing has helped me come to terms with what befell our family thirty-eight years ago, too many to recount here. I'll mention one that came to me unexpectedly while writing *Dance with Suitcase*. In the previous book, *Eloquent Body*, I was concerned with how writing has helped me heal; in *Dance with Suitcase*, I wanted to explore the benefit of regular movement practice. I was close to completing a first draft of the book when a friend commented with annoyance on my busy life after I declined an invitation. I felt irritated by his remark and turned to the page to express this. I realised that the real subject matter, the one underneath my stated aim, was to explore aspects of freedom and limitation. My childhood often felt restrictive, particularly the straight-jacketed years I spent in boarding school; dance felt like the freedom to breathe and be myself. In a moment of mirativity, I grasped that this was a false dichotomy; life is full of restrictions—those we are born into, like apartheid, those that are visited upon us like the disease of uveitis and my son's fall. The real question is how I might live with a feeling of liberation within a circumscribed life. I will need to care for my son financially for the rest of my life. This is a stringent limitation, yet I came to a new feeling that I am free to meet this fact with love and acceptance—two words that are full of complexities and nuance, easier said than done. Yet the unexpected invitation and realisation came through my pen.

A fundamental shortcoming of using artificial intelligence for creative writing is that it cannot emulate personal engagement with the material on the page. Algorithms do not have an unconscious from which spontaneous, idiosyncratic associations can give rise to unforeseen insights.

Devastating life events are intensely personal, yet they can also have a strangely mythological feel. As in any narrative, the story that lives through my body and relationships is not predicated on cure or restoration, but needs an integrated and ultimately satisfying arc. When I force the piece towards a predetermined conclusion, it feels fabricated rather than imagined. However, the resolution in creative storytelling is almost always different from my initial prediction. When I cease directing and allow a

larger influence to guide my pen, the outcome is surprising and more pertinent.

If a creative project usually finds an unexpected and convincing way to complete itself, perhaps that principle applies to my life. A story that lives through me needs my focus, co-operation, and imagination to deepen and develop. Perhaps I can withhold my human tendencies to manipulate and dominate, and trust that the ship of my life story will not only survive storms and monsters, but find a true direction to arrive at a new, unexpected, and authentic destination.

The life skill of regular creative practice is an underacknowledged and underutilised medium that can offer insight, change harmful behaviours and attitudes, build understanding and community, and foster wellbeing. Creative writing, as one of the arts, should be encouraged in education, including the health sciences, as a low-cost, inbuilt resource to help people manage their lives and circumstances, to bear witness to influence policy change, and to improve self-care.

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Review

Book Review

Epistemic Justice and the Postcolonial University

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> *Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonisation, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality* (Brown, 2019. p. 10).

Addressing Epistemic Injustice

Epistemic Justice and the Postcolonial University (2023) is an essential read for anyone who is interested in what it means to decolonise teaching, learning, and research. The text provides a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the ways in which the University of Cape Town (UCT) in post-apartheid South Africa is grappling with the deeply entrenched legacies of colonialism and seeking to create more just, inclusive, and transformative spaces for knowledge production in teaching and research.

The book's interdisciplinary approach, combined with its focus on both theory and lived experience, makes it a valuable resource for activists, scholars, educators, and therapists alike. Meaningful change requires not just curriculum reform but also a radical rethinking of what constitutes legitimate knowledge.

The book's discussion of Eurocentric knowledge systems also resonates deeply with Nigeria's historical experience. Having been shaped by British colonial rule, Nigeria's higher education system has long prioritised Western intellectual traditions, often at the expense of indigenous knowledge. The contributors advocate for a shift in this paradigm, calling for universities to embrace approaches that reflect and honour local realities. For readers in the West, the book critiques how Western academic traditions dominate global knowledge structures, encouraging institutions to rethink their complicity in perpetuating epistemic inequalities.

The authors advocate for *delinking* (Pande, Chaturvedi, & Daya, p. 10) imagination from Western knowledge systems and a focus on reciprocal, ethical knowledge exchanges that honour diverse epistemologies. This challenge to the status quo is particularly urgent in the face of neocolonial and economically controlled spaces within academic institutions. The book critiques Western-centric models of knowledge production and research paradigms, 'where dialogue too easily equals consensual conversations as opposed to critical deliberation' (Sitas, 2023a, p. 56). The authors argue for a paradigm shift that embraces an ethical framework which recognises hurt and hope in the search for an ethic of reciprocity and 'humanitude' (Sitas, 2023b, p. 226). A system that explores experience in an inter-disciplinary pedagogical space, prioritising human dignity central to the decolonisation process, paying attention to, what Shari Daya describes as 'fullness as human beings' (2023, p. 66).

Rethinking Teaching and Learning

A key theme of the book is the role educators play in addressing epistemic injustice. For African educators, this means integrating traditional approaches, such as oral storytelling and community-based learning, into modern academic practice. These methods can help bridge the gap between local knowledge systems and institutionalised education. Western institutions are criticised for tokenistic attempts to include perspectives from the Global South. The book underscores the importance of fostering

genuine partnerships rather than extracting knowledge from postcolonial contexts without offering meaningful reciprocity. By rethinking their teaching methods, Western educators can contribute to more equitable academic environments.

For those involved in creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) and the Lapidus Research Community (LRC), this book offers important insights into the role of storytelling, imagination, and creative expression in rethinking traditional Western models of knowledge, expression, and healing. The book's advocacy for non-hierarchical, collaborative, participatory, and reciprocal exchanges of knowledge mirrors the principles of CWTP. Practitioners and researchers are well placed to play a significant role in imagining new realities and 're-storying' colonised spaces. Creative writing engages with stories and histories in profound and transformative ways. As a discipline, we have some tools at our fingertips to address the task with honesty, self-reflection, love, and the isiXhosa concept, *ukuzilanda*, meaning 'to fetch oneself and connect to the past in the present moment' (Masola, 2023, p. 93).

It is no secret that Britain was/is at the forefront of the colonisation project and has significant histories to unpack.

This book, although particularly focused on UCT, offers broad implications for universities across the globe in the current political climate. Higher education in the UK is facing a significant financial crisis due to declining international student registrations. In *Development Education and Decolonising International Partnerships in Higher Education: Insights from the 'Cultures of Decolonisation at UCL' Research Project*, Simon Eten Angyagre observes that, 'while there are many innovations to decolonise teaching and research in universities in the UK, these are mostly the initiative of individual academics, without any structural efforts to embed decolonisation in an institutional ethos'. Whatever plans Western governments put in place to encourage registrations to rise, they would be advised to scrutinise the tendency to prioritise economic survival over genuine institutional transformation. This necessitates a need to 'interrogate historical inequalities and their persistence' in order to 'reshape our institutions of higher learning into spaces of justice' (Pande, Chaturvedi, & Daya, 2023, p. 3).

Building Global Solidarity

One of the book's most compelling arguments is its emphasis on solidarity across the Global South. There are connections between challenges faced in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, India, and Latin America, and the editors demonstrate how the struggle for epistemic justice is a shared global effort. For African academics, this perspective offers both a sense of unity and a broader context for their work. The book calls on Western institutions to engage meaningfully in this shared mission. By viewing epistemic justice as a collective responsibility, it encourages collaboration between Northern and Southern universities, moving beyond the gatekeeping role often played by Western academia.

Identity and Belonging

The book also examines the complex questions of identity and belonging for academics in both African and Western contexts. Non-Western scholars often face the challenge of balancing cultural authenticity with the demands of Western academic standards, particularly those who work or study abroad. This struggle is central to the book's exploration of the pressures faced by Global South academics. For their Western counterparts, the essays encourage a deeper examination of the privileges embedded within their positions in academia. Rather than treating diverse epistemologies as a checkbox exercise, the book calls on Western academics to approach them as opportunities for meaningful transformation.

Sources and Methodologies

The book examines a mix of qualitative methodologies well-suited for the subject matter, as it allows for a deep engagement with the lived experiences of those involved in decolonisation efforts at UCT. The use of some personal narratives, such as those of students and faculty members, adds an emotional and human dimension to the academic discussions, making the theoretical concepts accessible and relatable.

The sources used in the book draw on a wide range of scholarly traditions, including postcolonial theory, critical race theory, decolonial thought, and feminist epistemology. The editors and contributors engage with the work of prominent thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Achille Mbembe, and Frantz Fanon, as well as South African intellectuals

who have been central to the country's ongoing struggles with colonial legacies.

Conclusion

Epistemic Justice and the Postcolonial University is an essential contribution to discussions on decolonising higher education. It offers non-Western readers a pathway for reclaiming and validating indigenous knowledge systems while promoting inclusive teaching practices. For Western readers, it serves as both a critique of entrenched inequities and an invitation to collaborate in creating a more just academic landscape. The book reminds us that epistemic justice cannot be achieved through isolated efforts. Instead, it requires local action in the Global South, coupled with genuine partnership from the Global North. By valuing diverse ways of knowing and fostering equity, it underscores the moral imperative of decolonising academia—a collective endeavour that demands courage, commitment, and collaboration.

> *We need radical honesty – learning to speak from our root systems about how we feel and what we want. Speak our needs and listen to others' needs … The result of this kind of speech is that our lives begin to align with our longings, and our lives become a building block for authentic community and ultimately a society that is built around true need and real people, not fake news and bullshit norms.* (Brown, 2019, pp. 61–62)

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