

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY & GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Story Makers' Dialogues

The benefits of creative writing

Goldsmiths' Issue

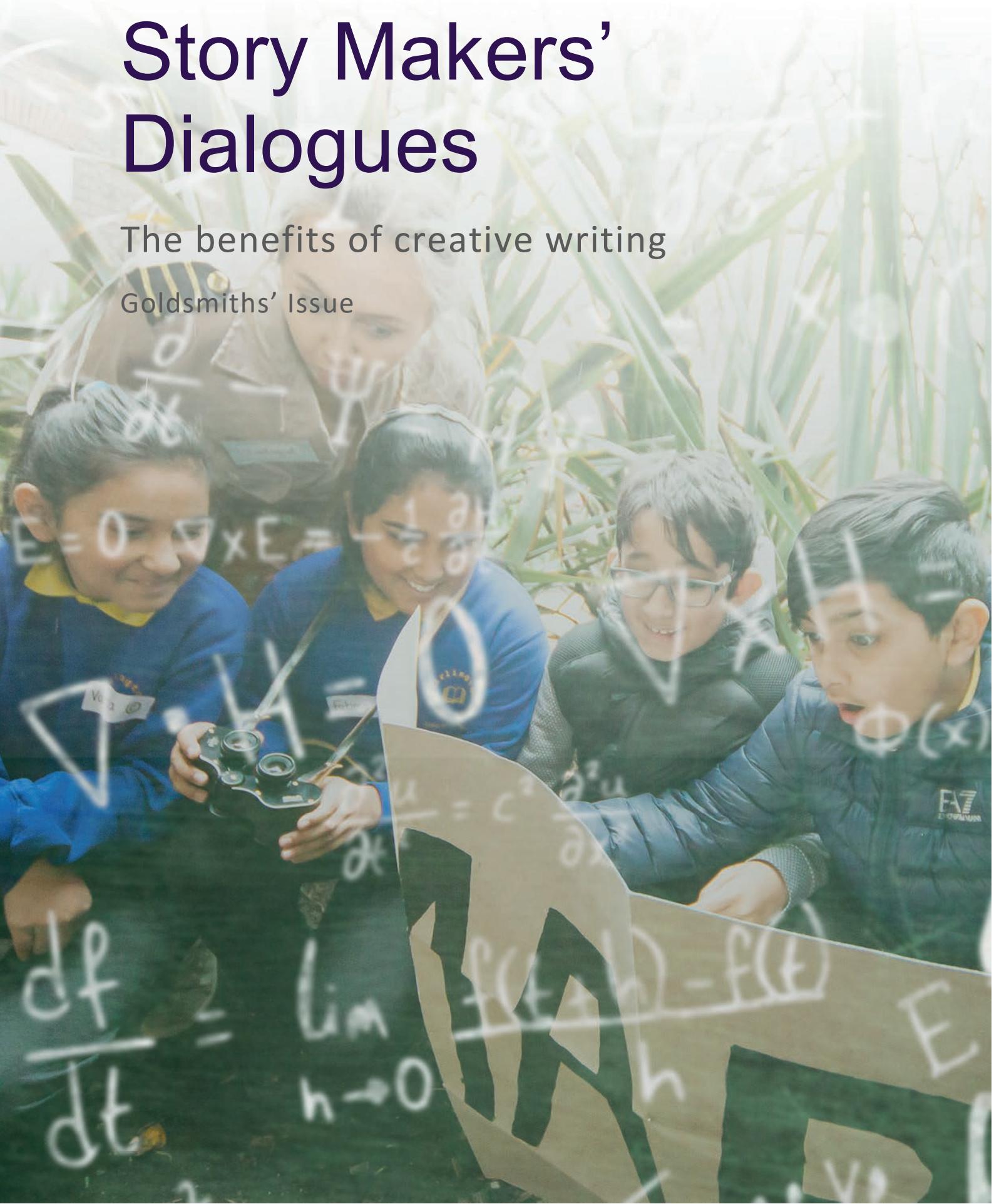


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Welcome to Story Makers Dialogues

In this special edition issue, we are delighted that author and MA course leader at Goldsmith University, Francis Gilbert, has collated papers on creating writing from MA students at Goldsmith University. Thank you to Francis and the wonderful authors of this edition for sharing your powerful and transformative writing and research.

About Story Makers

The Story Makers Company was established in 2017 at the Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, by academics, teachers and artist educators concerned with the marginalisation of creative opportunities for young people to make and share their stories through drama and creative writing. Our aim is to nurture the spaces for diverse children's voices in stories through our research-based work with schools, communities and artist educators. Our latest project, Story Makers Press, publishes stories which capture children's underrepresented narratives. We use drama and storytelling to allow children to explore stories, which we transform into engaging fiction books.

Story Makers Dialogues are intended to connect artistic practice, policy, education and research. They are written with a diverse audience in mind: artists, teachers, academics, students, children, members of grassroots and community organisations, advocates, influencers and policy makers at all levels. We are interested in all voices. We intend that the content and audience is national and international. The Story Makers Dialogues will enable a diverse range of multi-disciplinary informed voices to co-exist in each publication, to encourage scholarship, critical debate and legacy. We aim to lay bare the complexity of these processes, problematising professional practices and policy where appropriate and recognising tensions that exist between them.

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to introduce the Goldsmiths' edition of Story Makers' Dialogues. The pieces of research here, the stories and the poems all represent the wonderful hard work of the post-graduates who studied and currently study on Goldsmiths' MA in Creative Writing and Education. The main focus is the theme of the benefits of creative writing, examining this issue in many different ways.

Please read, reflect and respond to any of them. For more information about the authors, please email Francis Gilbert, Head of the MA in Creative Writing and Education, Goldsmiths. f.gilbert@gold.ac.uk

Editorial

The aim is for this edition to be non-hierarchical; the pieces are set out in alphabetical order for this purpose, with no one piece privileged over the other.

Our First author is **Maritsa Baksh**, who provides a 'found' poem about queer experience, which she wrote as a result of conducting research into creative writing and homosexuality. She explains the rationale and results of her research in the essay that follows. Her research shows fascinatingly how interviews can be shaped into poetry and how this framing of written, edited speech provides fresh perspectives and insights into gay lives.

Our Second piece is a poem by poet and educator **Curmiah Lisette**, who was a post-graduate student on the MA in Creative Writing and Education's Research into Creative Writing Practices module. The poem is an elliptical, teasing, sensual evocation of the author's 'take' on 'Why Write'.

In 'Writing Myself Better' **Anna Degenaar** shows how she found setting herself consistent free writing tasks about difficult topics such as shame, body image and memories helped her writing in many different and surprising ways. Her essay shows how other people could take the same approach, and what the benefits of doing this might be.

Our next author is **Eve Ellis** who has written a poem and provided an edited version of her assignment for the Research into Creative Writing Practices module. The poem, which is explored in the essay, is emotional in a surprising way and precisely structured; trademarks of Ellis's writing. The assignment is a moving and beautifully written exploration of how she found the archetype of being a 'trickster' – an adventurous, fickle protagonist in many myths – helpful when she was a mother who continued to pursue her creative writing.

This is followed by an edited transcript of a conference talk I gave at Goldsmiths in 2017 on the theme of reciprocity and creative writing, a consistent research interest of mine. The piece is heavily autobiographical and begins to tease out what can happen if teachers share their personal writing with their students in an open-hearted fashion.

In 'Beyond the Gates' **Sam Holdstock**, an English teacher in a London academy and a creative writer, explores how creative writing and creativity generally is taught in many

modern schools. He does this in an original way by offering both perceptive analysis, and a disturbing allegory which explores the tensions that creative teachers contend with in our contemporary educational establishments.

In 'Writing the Cards' Spoken Word artist and creative educator, alumni of the course, **Katherine McMahon** shows how she used Tarot cards to give LGBTQI people a chance to explore their own identities through the cards and creative writing exercises. The exercise is a brilliant one; Katherine now teaches on the MA, providing a very popular session which shows how and why nurturing creative writing in the LGBTQI community is important to do.

Steve Roberts, who comes from the Commonwealth of Dominica, has written a number of poems which explore vital issues connected with expression, identity and contemporary politics. The poems are hard-hitting but also full of his generous spirit; a wonderful mixture.

Jasmine Simms, who is a poet and creative educator, has written some funny, touching flash fictions, together with a commentary, about her experiences as a Teaching Assistant to five-six year olds in a London primary school. Her work is full of the immediate voices of her pupils; their joy, energy and curiosity rush up at you as you read her work. Her commentary contextualises the flash fictions, explaining why she wrote them and the benefits of doing this.

'Why I write' by **Ioney Smallhorne** is a moving, sometimes harrowing auto-ethnography which opens in a very dramatic fashion with her escaping an abusive relationship. Her essay then shows how she found a creative voice in a world beset by social and economic injustice. The assignment is full of implicit and explicit suggestions about how a more inclusive pedagogy might be developed by the teaching profession, citing Paulo Freire's important work among others as a way forward.

The issue closes with a brilliant creative narrative: 'Rong' is a wonderful short story by **Shaohong Zhi** who is studying on the MA in Creative Writing. The story is marvellously direct, evocative and concise; a poignant, exciting account of a young girl escaping from a forced marriage. It beautifully suggests the main protagonist's innocence and intuitive wisdom. The accompanying commentary explains the rationale behind the story, showing that the author has given voice to a lost character from her childhood.

To cite working papers from this issue please use the following format: Author surname, author initial (2019), Paper title, pages x-xx, Story Makers Dialogues [Goldsmiths' edition], Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University.

Can Creative Nonfiction be used to understand the experience of queer women? by Maritsa Baksh

Can creative writing be used to educate people, who are not a part of the queer community, on the pressures the queer community face?

Abstract

I took intimate interviews with two queer women, studied what I learned from these women and used their words to produce two ‘found poems’. The works aim to be emotive works of creative nonfiction that makes use of the poetry in natural speech. Subjects such as the effects of familial rejection and the importance of a queer community are discussed. The context of the disproportionately high levels of mental health issues, drug abuse and suicide seen in the queer community is heavily considered. As a creative writer, I consider how this externally-informed and inspired approach to creative writing can be utilised to benefit people that would not usually interact with members of the queer community.

1. Introduction

I was mostly driven to explore the factors that could cause young queer teens out of their family home and into the streets, where they are incredibly vulnerable. Recent studies have found that homeless queer youth are even alienated from the centres established to support them (Abramovich, 2016). Members of the queer community have disproportionately high rates of mental health issues (D'Augelli et al. 2006), drug abuse, suicidal behaviour (Annor et al. 2018), social isolation (Button et al. 2012) and poorer academic performance (Button, 2016) when compared to the rest of the population.

My choice to focus exclusively on female sexuality was done with deliberate consideration. “While there is much more evidence available on male sexuality, female sexuality tends to remain far more hidden” (Dunne, 1997). Despite Dunne’s observation being over 10 years old, a glance at the “Gay and Lesbian”

bookshelf of a typical bookstore will, in my experience, prove this is still the case. But the general public still need access to this information. This train of thought led me to explore ways of sharing research about queer women, in ways that would reach the general public, outside of formal academia.

Throughout this report, I use the term ‘queer’ as an “umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications” (Jagose, 1996). In other words, for anyone not identifying within the heterosexual, hetero-romantic, cis-gendered expectation of love.

2 Methods

I used a participatory approach to build a safe space for my interviews to take place. I focused on letting the conversation flow naturally, and did not prompt the interviewees unless the conversation lulled. I used a mobile recording device to record the interview, then transcribed the interviews onto my laptop. I then read through the transcription, using choice phrases to construct the ‘found’ poems; ‘What Else Could I Call It’ and ‘The Realist Thing’.

2.1 What Methodological Approach Did I Take?

The nature of my inquiry follows, for the most part, the objectivist conception of social reality, as described by Cohen et al. (2007).

I do not follow the objectivist approach in regards to the assumptions of humans and their environment. The objectivist should fall under the determinist view; humans are products of their environment. The counter argument to determinism is voluntarism; humans are initiators of their own actions, producing their own environments. I would argue humans are products of their environment only up to a point. Once a level of awareness has been achieved,

through exposure to different social environments, humans can become creators of their own environment. This is reflected in the interviewees both expressing that they had to learn same-sex attraction existed. At this point, their realities changed, and they began to seek out a new reality, in which their feelings toward other women were allowed.

The rest of my approach, however, follows the traditional objectivist approach. The ontological assumptions - the ‘what’ there is - I work with fall under the realist argument; there is a social reality external to the individual. Because of this, I have analysed the participants interviews to create poetry, and believe this will give insight into the current state of our society.

The epistemological approach I follow is the positivist; knowledge is tangible, and the role of the researcher is to seek, observe and record this knowledge. Because of this, I sought to remove myself from the participants narrative, letting them guide the discussion as much as possible. It could be said that by choosing to communicate my findings via a creative nonfiction approach, I am placing myself into the research. However, by aiming to create work that embodies the participants experience, I attempt to stay true to the positivist philosophy.

The experimental design approach I use is nomothetic; my experimental procedure seeks to discover general laws that influence society as a whole. To fulfil this, the interviews I recorded are analysed to find common themes, and discussed according to the similarities and differences. This was done by transcribing the recording into a script. I then organised the text into general topics, and highlighted parts I felt would be useful as lines in my poem.

2.2 The Interviewees

I spoke with two cis-gender women for this study. The first - referred to here on as 'Jay' - was a twenty-seven year old that identified as a heterosexual woman, but still existing within the queer community, with one poignant homo-romantic experience. The interview took forty-five minutes.

The second interviewee, 'Rose', was a twenty-two year old cis-gender woman that identified as a homosexual and homo-romantic woman. Rose came out as a lesbian to her school friends at the age of fourteen. The interview took fifty minutes.

A consent form was signed after both the interviews took place

2.3 The Interviewer

I am a queer cis-gender woman, currently studying on the MA Creative Writing and Education course at Goldsmiths University of London.

3. Results

I knew that the "bad poet can't leave it alone, can't trust the readers intelligence" (Sansom, 1994). This mindfulness also helped to make the poems more memorable, as powerful lines can be lost if a poem is overcrowded. "If it doesn't look easy, you aren't working hard enough" (Fred Astaire, in Williams, 2000), and I wanted the poems to be effortless to read. If "there is more, not less, intensity in plainness, because simple stuff operates without the safety net of the poetical" (Williams, 2000), I wanted to write a simple poem, as I felt it to be the most powerful way to convey the complex emotions I felt in the interviews.

3.1 The Found Poems:

Jay's Poem: what else could I call it?

my father built my house
and my mother made it my home
and my church gave me faith
and faith gave me shame
and they all called it tradition
and they don't know about the girl, the whole new world, radiating, taboo
don't share it with them
it's too important
to let them
throw it on the floor

they don't know the girl gave me friendship, but, never just friendship, they don't know that it was something much more powerful, they don't know about the emotional connections on different levels, open eyes admiring all, very awakened, very conscious, very appreciative, very curious for the world

they say I talk about someone I am in love with

fuck, maybe I am, I had never thought about it, but maybe actually I am



Rose's poem : the realist thing

so I was at school and these girls were talking about boys, and how they felt about whatever boy they were into, and it was recently after I had kissed a girl for the first time, and I was sat there thinking like, I feel that way about this girl

and then mum found out

if you do this, she said, we can't have a relationship as mother and daughter.



like my mum didn't even wanna know me
like I had done something, no, like I am
something wrong
like I could physically go and get a man, but I
wouldn't feel like I was alive I would probably
just kill myself

I wish she knew that it's not just me, now,
that's some weirdo that feels this way,
there is a whole culture around it of people
who are proud of who they are
I am proud of who I am

and there is nothing to be scared of

but she can't handle the truth about me, so I don't tell her a lot of things

4. Discussion

Key themes quickly became apparent in the interview transcripts. I focused on these powerful sections of speech, moments when my interviewees spoke with particular passion, and used this as the focal point for poems.

4.1 The Importance of Visibility

Both women I spoke to describe feelings of confusion when they first had feelings for a person of the same sex. The presence of a queer community was pivotal in Jay recognising the extent of her feelings toward her “friend”. This is seen in her poem, ‘What Else Could I Call It’, in the lines:

“they say I talk about someone I am in love with

fuck, maybe I am, I had never thought about it, but maybe actually I am”

This told me that it’s still easy for women to underestimate the power of their feelings towards a non-male partner. Without that vocal queer community to validate Jay’s budding romantic feelings, she would have “never thought about it”, and the thought of that makes me feel disappointed. But, it also stresses that visibility could help anyone.

3.2 Implications of Familial Alienation

Both Rose and Jay reported distance between themselves and their family following their queer romantic feelings. Considering this showed me that non-acceptance or a lack of understanding from parents does not stop children from being gay, but rather causes them to keep their intimate life separate from their family.

This can be seen in the lines:

“but she can’t handle the truth about me, so I don’t tell her a lot of things” (in Rose’s poem ‘The Realist Thing’)

“and they don’t know about the girl, the whole new world, radiating, taboo
don’t share it with them
it’s too important” (in Jay’s poem ‘What Else Could I Call It?’)

However, alienation from the family results in more than just emotional distance. Research in my literature review showed me that feeling unwanted and a disappointment is a key cause in the “higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation among queer youth” (Baams et al. 2015). I felt like these poems held some answers to understanding why the queer community reports such high figures of mental health problems and suicidal behaviours (Annor et al. 2018).

3.3 The Importance of ‘Pride’

Both Jay and Rose were comfortable and at ease with talking about their experiences. They had come to a place of acceptance, and I wanted to explore their feelings of pride in my creative response.

This is seen quite powerfully in Rose’s poem in the line:

“there is a whole culture around it of people who are proud of who they are
I am proud of who I am”

A study done by Craig et al. (2015) recorded similar sentiments from a group of queer youth, explaining “media empowered them to feel stronger through positive

story lines or visibility of resilient characters". This is especially significant for queer youth, like Rose, who are growing up in areas where there is not a strong queer culture already existing. They may only see other queer people on television, and making sure they receive positive exposure is important. Morgan (cited by Boboltz, 2017) explains this wonderfully, "When you don't see people like yourself, the message is: You're invisible. The message is: You don't count. And the message is: 'There's something wrong with me.'"

4. Conclusions

Working with these two women has given me more insight into my own community than I ever imagined. This process has undoubtedly made me a better writer. The words I had to work with weren't really mine. While forming the found poems, I felt such reverence for its creation precisely because it was someone else's story in my hands.

Hamid (2014) explains this desire beautifully, saying "I want to transcend my experiences. I want to go beyond myself. Writing isn't just my mirror, it's my astral projection device". In giving me access to their stories, Jay and Rose allowed me to just that. This emotional response between myself and the interviewee's pushed me to create a poem I could never have written on my own. I found I was not alone in this experience, that I was "forced...to work harder, to immerse myself...to probe and question the accounts more fully" (Dunne, 1997).

The similarity between the two experiences pressed upon me the importance of sharing this work. Jay's family may never read "What Else Could I Call It", and Rose's mother may never truly know how close she came to losing her daughter. But how many other people would, upon reading this, think twice about how they conduct

themselves around a queer person that they know, and how many lives could that awareness enrich and save?

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Why Write: a poem by Curmiah Lisette

Nobody wants to live in a congested house.

Untouched cabinets, dust-smothered

disused china, Havisham antiques...

Mama's eyes seeing only collectibles

while yours see clutter

and displaced worship

You seek to shatter and scatter

to demolish praise of false gods long passed,

to unfix louvres, renew energy and sage narrow

halls of woven webs: this entangled clutter,

debris of salty airs left to fester in plywood and

catch in the wind, buried in your front yard

as seeds that grow weeds;

the nearby ocean's seaweed rusting

your galvanised roof, your steel,

while unkempt grass strands

imprison your home.

You wish freedom from mama's fortress

Not to mention the desire to escape from

extra bodies that visit without calling -

uncles
cousins
somebody's step children.
Spirits accosting yours

You wish to cut the rosary, the crucifix

above the bedroom door
and have its beads spill
like pearls of healing
and possibility –
a truer blessing.

You want to tear down these hollow drapes

shrouding the kitchen door
that simply
get.
in.
your.
way.

You want to clear the fridge of half empty containers

manjé dékouché- the remnants
of Sunday lunch twice eaten,
take plates, smash against

floorboards, forget manners
and provoke renovation.

You want a room with a view

so you don't feel claustrophobic
or paralyse your body in sleepy fear
of tales of *jan gajé* and *ladjablès*
whispers of ancestors directing
you toward documenting your story
with parables and not possessions
instructing you to claim your space

to empty this house
and re-wire it
into a home.

Glossary

louvres— a set of angled slates of glass hung at intervals in a shutter to allow light to pass through (a window)

manjé dékouché— leftover food (often food consumed the second consecutive day after initially being cooked and eaten)

jan gajé— a seer, witch or practitioner of obeah/black magic*

ladjablès— a female bewitching spirit that may cause someone to lose their way*

*Elders or outcasts of the village are often labelled as these during hearsay or as horror stories told to children.

Writing Myself Better by Anna Degenaar

How Can Focused Freewriting Unlock the Female Character?

For many people, writing is a safe way to engage with and explore the challenges we face in our everyday lives. Whether we do it autobiographically, or through fiction, it allows us space to order our thoughts. As Riordan puts it, ‘writing helps in the acquisition and retention of new insights and encourages problem solving’ (1996, p.266). It follows that having a robust understanding of a set of events would allow for a better representation, or reconstruction of these events in fiction.

Even before I was old enough to read, I’ve found solace in the stories of others. I sat on the carpet of my grandmother’s house, listening to her recount tales of her past. When I was older, my education came from the pages of my favourite novels. I fell in love with, felt disappointed by and experienced grief for people I didn’t know. One of the most important things I learnt was that I wasn’t alone in my experience navigating the world. It is for this reason that I would like to investigate what it means to capture my own experience in my fiction.

Hugo Williams talks about the ‘secret majority’ (2000, p.231) of shared experience. The small moments that we believe are unique to us are often more common than we think. The realisation that others share these seemingly insignificant feelings is what makes literature so powerful.

Women are constantly under or misrepresented in literature and as Rebecca Solnit importantly points out, ‘you read enough books in which people like you are disposable, or are dirt, or are silent, absent, or worthless, and it makes an impact on you’ (2015, para.23). This highlights the importance of building convincing, complex and realistic female characters in fiction and I would like to examine how I can use my own experience as a woman to do that.

The short story, ‘Cat Person’ by Kristen Roupenian (2017) was a driving force behind this research. Roupenian captures Margot’s internal world and conveys so much of the complex subtleties of navigating relationships as a woman in Western society. The viral success of the story is testament to the necessity of having protagonists like Margot exist in literature. ‘Fiction is supposed to identify what makes us human’ (Tsai 2017, p.1), and while the moments that transgress our differences are important, having access to those differences, and being able to deal with characters that don’t look like us with empathy is equally important, if not more so.

In my own writing, I often find it difficult to capture these subtle complexities that make up my experience. I battle with how to convey the contradictions of living in a patriarchal society where women can unknowingly be complicit in their own oppression (Haug 1987; Solnit 2014). Having discussions with my female friends has highlighted how we often feel at odds with the decisions we make. The system is so ingrained within us that even our attempts at empowerment can leave us feeling uncomfortable.

Intersectionality in feminism is essential for it to achieve its goals of stamping out sexism (hooks 2000). This intersectionality needs privileged women to constantly be questioning our position and our experience, in order to be mindful of how it effects and inhibits women of colour and queer bodies. This research will form part of my constant goal to keep re-examining my position in order to write female characters effectively.

When using the term ‘female character’, and talking about writing myself, I acknowledge my position as a cisgender, heterosexual, white person that identifies as female. This is the space I occupy in the world, and much of my fiction is derived from my experiences in this body. I acknowledge my privilege and strive to keep awareness of it in my writing.

Literature Review

This research is grounded in the theory of memory-work, a concept developed by Frigga Haug (1987). Haug (1987) worked with a number of women, guiding them through the process of memory analysis, and paid special attention to how their sexualization within society shaped their identities. I was drawn to this framework for it ‘opens the way to examine women’s complicitness in their oppression [...] through tracing the traditional patterns of thought and ideas of “normality”’ (Koutoulis 2001, p.189). By analysing and unpacking what we know to be ‘normal’ through our lived experiences, we can better identify specific problems areas within society’s treatment of women and how we incorporate these into the ideas that we hold about ourselves.

Memory is a controversial topic, with many studies bringing its validity into question but what is essential in this study is the fact that memories contain essential truths (Olio 1994). Whether or not we see memory as ‘fact’, it is still a useful tool to access the way we make sense of our experience. For the purpose of this research, we will define memory as the stories we tell ourselves in order to access the feelings and ideas experienced at the time the event took place, and work under the understanding that ‘everything we remember is relevant to our identity’ (Haug 1987, p.52).

Building Identity in an Oppressive Society

Haug outlines identity as a management of life’s inconsistencies and contradictions (Haug 1987; Koutoulis 2001). We make sense of our lives by including the information that aligns best with what we know to be true - i.e. what we’re taught, what we witness and what we learn to be the norms of society (Haug 1987). When we encounter something that is contradictory to this learnt understanding of the way things should be, we often push it aside instead of deconstructing why it might be uncomfortable. This is how women are able to support ideas that are inherently oppressive (Haug 1987; Koutoulis 2001).

I believe this need to find consistency within a contradictory landscape is what makes it difficult to capture the complexity of the female character. Identity is in a constant state of change and is continuously being influenced by our context (Hall 2007). The recent mainstream resurgence of popular feminism with the #MeToo and Time's Up movements has worked to bring the inconsistencies and conflicting realities about how women are and should be treated to the surface. While sexism has always been central to Western society's makeup, these new social movements have highlighted how rife and persistent it is today, with particular emphasis on the treatments of women's bodies.

Identity Built Through the Body

The way women are treated in the world is largely mediated by societies reactions and treatment of their bodies. Bodies, and therefore sexuality, have an enormous bearing on identities formation. 'Oppression is tied to the body' (Koutoulis 2001, p.188) and from an early age women are taught that their bodies are sources of shame. Women's bodies have been sexualised to the point where they cannot be viewed as neutral spaces, and to discuss women's identity without discussing sexuality is increasingly difficult (Haug, 1987). Haug found 'sexuality to be a crucial area of unhappiness (and of silence)' (1987, p. 29) in her research, and there was an undeniable connection between women's identities and the body. This silence is what feminism strives to combat, because to give a voice to what is silenced in society is one of the first steps to occupying more space and securing a permanent place in the mainstream narrative (hooks 2000; Solnit 2015). In order to comprehend the extent to which women's bodies are sexualised and oppressed, and how this affects their identity formation, it is necessary to look at the details of the mundane and the everyday - the real problems are woven into our daily life (Haug 1987).

The Power of Unexamined Behaviours

Memory-work recognises the ‘taken-for-grantedness of many of our observations’ (Haug 1987, p.36) and how when we examine them within the context of society, we can reevaluate the ways in which these behaviours and ideas impact who we are. ‘A memory encapsulates an aspect of life’ (Koutoulis 2001, p.188), and looking back on past events and deconstructing how they affected us, is a helpful tool in understanding our identity. Haug (1987) emphasizes the importance of scrutiny when it comes to memory-work. Each detail should be stretched out and turned over in order to overcome the default modes of interpretation, which have been created within a problematic system. One of the ways that I think we can overcome these default modes of interpretation is to change the way we engage with the memories we have.

Freewriting and Banishing the Internal Critic

Freewriting is the practice of writing nonstop for a set period of time without adhering to the confines of language like grammar, spelling and form (Elbow 1989; Krueger 2015). A reappropriation of the psychoanalysts automatic writing, freewriting was first used in a contemporary context by Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow in the 60s as a tool to combat writer's block and ignite creativity (Reynolds 1984). Since then, research into freewriting has shown how this writing practice has the potential to uncover aspects of the self that are often hidden for fear of judgement; in theory, a way to quieten the internal critic and access an unfiltered voice (Krueger 2015).

Freewriting is best understood as a means of 'unfocused exploring' (Elbow 1989, p.47), and can be thought of as a way to take the self by surprise, in that the writer might have access to thoughts and emotions that they would not necessarily have reached through a more conscious writing practice. Voice in writing is ‘a necessary tool of emancipation’ (Krueger 2015, p.108) and it follows that the practice

of freewriting has the potential to bring to the surface the contradictions that have been pushed aside in identity formation (Haug 1987).

This research looks at Krueger's assertion that 'we don't need to think before we write, that writing is a way of thinking' (2015, p.103), and whether this 'way of thinking' would allow me a glimpse into myself that I would otherwise not have had access to. The private, non-judgemental space of the page, when combined with time pressure that leaves little room for self-censorship, seems like a good environment to unpack unchallenged memories.

Freewriting will be used as a tool to access memory in the hope that this uninhibited writing method will help to uncover the inconsistencies and contradictions that are left unexamined in everyday life. As Haug so poignantly states, 'if we are going to advance down the path of liberation, we have to study the ways in which we have set traps for ourselves' (1987, p.44).

Research Approach

I conducted a small-scale autoethnography into the effect of daily focused freewriting on my writing practice, specifically my character creation. Autoethnography 'is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Boschner 2000, p.738). This approach worked well for me since it gave me the space to look at my cultural context, delve into how I reflected on and was affected by this environment, and assess how it affected my writing practice.

An autoethnographic approach was a way to access the 'unexamined assumptions' (Stevenson 2006, p. 204) that I hold about my own place in society, and how that impacts on how I construct characters. I write short stories where my main protagonists are women in a contemporary setting, so before I am

able to go about constructing the identities of my fictional characters, I need to have a better handle on my own.

Some of the questions I asked myself as I approached my research were as follows:

- Is it possible to reinterpret or learn something new about these events in my past by accessing them through an alternative writing method?
- How is this insight and new perspective important for my writing of female characters?

Research Methods

I set out to explore the effect daily focused freewriting had on my own identity perception, and whether that influenced the successful development of female characters in my own writing. I wanted to look at whether evaluating memories recorded without a critical filter would lead to a better understanding of how I came to be and feel in my body and whether that influenced my character development. The variables that I changed within the experiment were: duration of exercise, topic prompt and narration point of view. For two weeks, I set myself a focused free-writing exercise every day, and followed it with a reflection. The study took place on the 19th of November - 2nd December 2018. I missed two days because I was ill.

Freewrite Duration

I wrote for between 10 -20 minutes, depending on how much time I had each day, in order to see whether small time differences would have an effect on what was written.

Topic Selection

To guide or trigger my thoughts, I gave myself writing prompts, which veered the process away from more traditional unstructured freewriting, and opted for a practice of focused freewriting (Krueger 2015). I chose topics that were both intimate and everyday. I wanted to gage whether the topic affected

the level of engagement with my memories and whether more intimate topics correlated with more intimate writing, or whether everyday topics uncovered unforeseen vulnerabilities. I combined topics generated from my initial ideas around this project, ones I uncovered while reading around these subjects, ones that female friends suggested and ones that caught my attention along the way. I also included two randomly generated topics, and used one prescribed exercise from a writing workshop so that I could see whether having an influence over the topics made a difference to the writing process. The random topics were generated by opening a book and using the first phrase or word I saw.

The topic that sparked my initial interest was menstruation, and I was interested in my experience of it because it was an obvious, uncontested example of something that didn't happen to men. I thought about the culture and language around menstruation and how it is 'socially constructed in a complex interplay between biological and sociocultural factors' (Koutoulis 2001, p.188). Koutoulis (2001) refers to the 'secrecy' of menstruation and how the idea of it needing to be kept private correlated with the idea that it was dirty. This secrecy is what breeds shame and by sharing these experiences women are able to feel less embarrassed, more accepting or more open about their bodies. This was the starting point for my research and influenced the other topics I chose.

My list of topics was as follows:

1. First period
2. First sexual encounter
3. Discomfort
4. Body hair
5. Winter Counts
6. Heterosexuality
7. Shame
8. Initiating sex
9. One-night stand

10. Fashion

11. ‘the me you meet here isn’t the real me’ (Diamond, 1999)

12. White Guilt

First vs Third Person

I spent the first week writing in the first person, and the second week writing in the third person. Haug (1987) talks about the importance of using the third person when dealing with memory-work, and for this reason I incorporated both first, and third person constraints to my freewriting exercises. I wanted to test the notion that ‘by translating our own experiences into the third person, we were enabled to be more attentive to ourselves’ (Haug 1987, p.46).

Handwritten vs typing

I chose to hand-write my freewrites because I usually type my stories and I wanted to maintain a different mindset. I am prone to a lot of editing while I write, which isn’t allowed in freewriting. Since it’s harder to edit on the page without making a mess, this was another motivation.

Data Collection

My data comprised of my pieces of freewriting, field notes and daily reflections, and any periphery writing done during that time.

Ethics

It is important to take into consideration my position as a privileged white woman. In looking at my own practices I acknowledge that I am only able to access a very specific perspective. I hope that this study will allow me to examine my own outlook and deconstruct the ‘givens’ (Haug 1897, p.40) in my everyday life.

The literature shows that there is a distinctive difference in the freewriting process when there is a known audience and I am interested in how this known audience might affect the content and execution of the freewriting process (Krueger 2015). However, this is something that could be expanded on in further research, since for the purpose of this study I made a conscious choice not to include my freewrites in my appendix because they were written confidentially in order to fully explore raw and vulnerable emotions.

Context

Having just moved from Cape Town to London, I was experiencing my first English winter and struggling to settle into a new home. This context turned into a way to map the effect of freewriting on my mental health which wasn’t something I had anticipated.

Challenges

One of the main challenges was forcing myself to follow the initial thoughts that arrived in my head. Having to explore those thoughts was at times difficult. I found many of the freewrites challenging to analyse because I had to fight the urge to dismiss what I had written as not worthy of attention.

Data Analysis and Findings

In order to assess how this exploration impacted my writing process and my ability to understand myself better, I would like to focus my data analysis on four main sections.

1. Writing as Thinking
2. The Theme of Concealment
3. Shifting Perspective
4. Freewriting as a Tool for Learning

Writing as Thinking

After completing the two weeks of freewriting, I resonated strongly with Haug's assertion that 'writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory' (1987, p.36). Memories that I hadn't thought of in years were triggered and I gained new insight into how events in my past had occurred. It felt almost like I had access to a part of myself that I had forgotten about. It was like the character of myself was 'made visible and tangible through the act of writing' (Jones 2014, p.54).

I found through my data analysis that 'ideas do not always appear to precede the act of writing, rather they appear to be discovered through it' (Jones 2014, p.52). Many of my freewrites uncovered things I'd forgotten and offered me insight into my emotions and sensations at the time. Jones outlines the popular cognitive models of the writing process and how they have changed over the years (2014). She pays special attention to the work of Galbraith which has come to show that the act of writing itself is a form of idea generation, and the planning and writing phases are not as separate as we once thought (Galbraith 2009 cited in Jones 2014). This 'dual-processing model' (Jones 2014, p.54) supports my findings that freewriting is a successful way to generate new ideas, and essentially, has the ability to

take you to new places in your writing. Jones' research outlines how different learners approach writing - some needing to spend more time planning, while some tend to start writing straight away and spend more time revising (2014). It was interesting to compare my process to those of the students in the study and my research made it clear that I fall into the latter category. What's more, when I let my idea creation come through the process of writing, I found I was often better able to express myself.

I did ask myself before I began whether there was any merit to choosing freewriting over simply journalling. But I can say after completing the experiment that the time pressure constraint was useful in unlocking this idea of writing as thinking (Jones 2014; Krueger 2015). I can see on the exercises with the longer duration how I ended up in places I didn't expect. The time constraint worked both in the way that it kept me writing longer than I would have, and it forced me to stick with an idea once it popped into my head instead of searching for a different, more appropriate one. I've definitely pinpointed a useful strategy that I can use in the future to make my process more effective.

The Theme of Concealment

One of the themes that came up over and over again was concealment. There were many cases where I tried to hide parts of my body or face that, upon first reading, didn't seem like important details, but after several readings it became apparent how prevalent it was in my writing. They were details that hadn't come up in my stories before, which I found fascinating since it was so apparent in the freewrites. I have pulled some excerpts from the research to illustrate this point.

Excerpt from freewrite #3 on body hair

'I was in my racer back full piece with board shorts on. Trying to conceal as much of my skin as possible. [...] I remember trying to cover my legs in sand to hide the unsightly hair.'

Excerpt from freewrite #2 on discomfort

‘My smile wasn’t coming out right and I badly wanted to do the cooking so I could hide my face.’

Excerpt from freewrite #5 on heterosexuality

‘She presented so forcefully as straight that I hadn’t considered her anything else.’

Excerpt from freewrite #9 on fashion

‘She tries to rub the foundation across her face to hide the gaps. She tries to erase the scars and freckles, tries to fill in the grooves and wrinkles.’

I had seen myself as willing to write about anything in my fiction, but the analysis of the freewrites showed me that I held biases about myself that kept me from giving certain topics space on the page. It was interesting to see how the ‘secrecy’ that Koutoulis identifies around menstruation, which spills into all aspects of women’s lives, presented in my work (2001). Throughout the writing process, I had to consciously stop myself from dismissing my emotional responses as ‘too much’. It came much more naturally to bury these responses away.

My experience of freewriting also supported Haug’s assertion that the real truth of a context lies in the mundane details and feelings of the small moments (1989). Focusing on seemingly insignificant details uncovered a new insight into the event that passed. In the ‘Body Hair’ freewrite, a small act of concealment like ‘trying to cover my legs in sand’ illustrates in one action how ashamed I was of my body. This image is something that seems quite innocuous on first reading, but on closer inspection the sadness and power really comes through.

Another example from the same freewrite is the moment where I'm plucking hairs out of my bikini line with a tweezer in my parents' bedroom.

Excerpts from freewrite #3 on body hair

'I remember my dad walking past and me wondering if he had seen me or not. And I think this may have been the first time that I thought that I should perhaps hide my body. When I look back on this memory I wonder why I was sitting on my parents bed plucking hair during the day, but then I realise before that it was probably something I didn't think about.'

Unpacking this moment told me so much about how I saw the world at the time. By age 10 I was already feeling pressure to remove the hair that was growing on my body. This instance is so interesting because it shows that I wasn't ashamed of my body in front of my family yet, or didn't recognise it as something to hide. From this freewrite I can actually track how my mindset changed after I asked myself whether my dad was someone I was supposed to conceal myself from too. Unlocking this first moment of identifiable shame is incredibly helpful for my writing process and how I understand a complex emotion like shame. I found this theme of concealment fascinating and to see it come up so often has forced me to pay closer attention to it in my fiction. I added the image of covering legs with sand on the beach to my latest short story and I think that it really helped develop the character.

Shifting Perspective

The unconscious nature of the freewriting had an interesting effect in that rereading the pieces was almost like reading them for the first time, as if they had been written by someone else. During the writing process I was making so few cognitive decisions that the end product was a piece that I didn't recognise. This allowed me to see myself as a character within my memories and made it easier to

unpack because it allowed some distance. I noticed a definite difference when writing in the first and third person and was glad I tested Haug's assertion that third person helps us be more 'attentive' to ourselves (Haug 1987, p.46). I generally write in the third person when writing so when given the first person narration constraint I often found myself dissolving into a more reflective tone. The first person perspective did shine light on the internal conflicts that were taking place at the time but were less helpful in contextualising the event in relation to the outside world. With the third person constraint I could definitely feel a distance between myself and the story I was telling.

The freewrite on discomfort was an example of how the freewriting process allowed me access to an alternative perspective that after all these years I hadn't considered. With a bit of space and a raw recollection I uncovered the reason for my anger and discomfort, as well as a perspective that humanized the antagonist in my memory. For example, I had never considered that the person in question could be intimidated by me, and that their actions could have been in reaction to feeling inferior. Whether this was the reality of the situation or not, these musings are still helpful in developing the complexity of the antagonist. The inner voice that I uncovered gave me the ability to separate myself from my experience and see myself as a character.

Freewriting as a Tool for Learning

This research has been a focused learning journey towards a more aware and realised writing process. It was an interesting glimpse into my inner dialogue and how the stories that come to the surface without too much thought get to the core of how I really feel. This raw emotion is what I would like to portray in my writing. Recognising that I have such direct access to this vulnerability was hugely helpful.

Jones discusses the prescriptive ideas within schools that planning is imperative, and from my own schooling experience I can attest that it is the same in South Africa (2014). As a creative writing educator, it got me thinking about the way writing is taught. From my study, it's apparent that planning

is important, which can be seen through the success of my topic prompts. The prompts were a valuable contribution to the research and I found that the more focused topics, ones that had been sought out for the purpose of the research, were more helpful than the randomly generated ones. In addition to this however, I believe the idea of planning should be adapted to incorporate a more creative and explorative method such as freewriting. This is definitely something I'm going to incorporate into my own writing process, and into my teaching practices as well.

Following the schools of thought that support writing as meaning making (Baumeister & Newman 1994), it follows that writing is a way of making sense of oneself. This was apparent during the freewrites in my constant attempts to find the meaning behind what had happened and the insights that followed upon analysis. When looking at this process through a pedagogical lens and how I learnt through the freewrites, I feel confident in freewriting's relevance as a teaching tool. Through the solitary process of individual sense making (Gilbert 2017), I encountered an intense side to my writing that isn't present when I write consciously or for an audience.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of daily freewriting Haug's words kept coming back to me - 'from a state of modest insignificance we enter a space in which we can take ourselves seriously' (1987, p36). Taking myself and my experience seriously was an essential step in understanding why I think the way that I do. My research allowed me to refine my writing process by teaching me about idea generation and the way I can access difficult memories. The freewriting and reflection allowed me access to rich emotions and complex feelings that in most cases I had pushed aside or had trouble engaging with in the past. In the process I was able to hold these experience at a distance, which made them easier to learn from. By studying myself in this way, I gained a better handle on my personal history, which enabled me to better communicate my experience as a woman navigating the world.

Through my fieldnotes, I was also able to track how the writing made me feel. On the days I was feeling anxious, more often than not I would report feeling calmer after the freewrite. There were two instances where the freewrites triggered stressful memories that resulted in a notable dip in mood. For the most part, the freewriting resulted in me feeling more in control of my narrative as various studies predicted (Baumeister & Newman 1999; Riordan 1996). Not only did I improve my ability to write characters that look like me, but I felt better after the practice of daily writing. This idea of freewriting having an effect on mood is something that might be interesting to take a look at in more depth at a later stage.

The constraints within freewriting make the margin for self-censorship smaller but do not remove it completely. I still found myself wrestling with ideas that I didn't think deserved the space. Analysing these difficulties and the silences they created is something that the scope of this research project does not allow for but something I'd like to explore in the future.

In conclusion, I believe that the self-reflection achieved through daily focused freewriting does aid in writing more complex and successful, in my case - female, characters. The process offers a unique lens through which to look at your past experiences and allows for a level of analysis that would not otherwise be possible. I definitely gained new insight into my own experiences, and was able to access and recognise the small details that can be used to add different layers of complexity to fictional characters. The freewriting did give me a different perspective, which I see now, will aid in building not only my female protagonists, but the other characters that function alongside them.

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Haint: a poem by Eve Ellis

Last night I heard the dogs again,
this side of the crick. This morning
another window's smudged

and her bitty footprint's in the skift.
Ma wipes her eyes and the glass,
takes the broom out to snow-sweep.

Pa's painting the fence blue like
a river she can't cross. Tonight
he'll throw salt on the coals.

They'll tuck me in while the sun's
stumbling down through the hollers,
tripping on all those new stones.

But I've been up early, when it's airish,
with no light yet over the balds,
and crept into the front room

and seen her playing by the stove,
her mite fingers dandling the red
embers. I know she sees me

with her black eyes
and her brickle hair
and her gap mouth

and her pocky skin.

I say, *baby sis, jasper-girl,*
where have you been?

Appalachian/ Standard English

haint/ ghost
creek/ creek, stream
skift/ thin layer of snow
holler/ a hollow, valley
airish/ chilly
bald/ treeless mountaintop
mite/ small
brickle/ brittle
jasper/ stranger, outsider

Holding Difficulty Lightly by Eve Ellis

*Reimagining the Mother/Writer as a Trickster Figure
an excerpt from a longer essay*

I wrote my first published poem, "Haint," when my daughter was five months old. In the four years since its writing, as I've juggled the demands of parenting alongside my drive to develop my writing, the creation of that poem has sometimes seemed nothing short of a miracle. Wrestling my now-preschool-aged child into her shoes in the morning (and feeling the glimmering phrases of unwritten poems sliding out of my brain), I've sometimes wondered, *How on earth did the sleep-deprived mother of a tiny infant find the time and the headspace to make that poem?* Yet, after my recent reading and research into creativity, motherhood, and archetypes, the creation of "Haint" seems less a miracle than a marker, hanging a flashing arrow over what seems to me a useful insight: that to be a mother who writes is to be a trickster.

Tricksterism as a metaphor for creative practice is not new. Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (1998) painstakingly connects a number of archetypal trickster traits and behaviors from myths and folktales around the world to the working processes of Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, John Cage, and other twentieth-century artists, musicians, and writers. Hyde positions the trickster—and, at times, the artists he features—as the transgressive, liminal "lords of inbetween" (p. 6) who move through countless spaces and yet call none of them home:

the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found-- sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms (pp.7-8).

Novelist and memoirist Elizabeth Gilbert (2015) echoes Hyde when she encourages would-be writers to "embrace the way of the trickster" (pp. 220-221), whom she describes as "light,

sly, transgender, transgressive, animist, seditious, primal, and endlessly shapeshifting" (p. 221), as a figure who says, "I didn't come here to suffer" (p. 222). Given the frequency with which I find myself caught between the equally absorbing roles of mother and writer, and the internal and familial tensions that have sometimes resulted from my sense of in-betweenness, it seems likely that adopting the trickster's playful attitude of "trust" in one's self and the world (Gilbert, 2015, p. 223) would benefit my writing practice. At the very least, embracing the trickster's mindset might enable me to hold the difficulties of my situation more "lightly" (Gilbert, 2015. p. 228).

But how can I, the primary caregiver for a four- year-old, bring a trickster's mindset to writing? After all, the mother figure is an archetype in her own right, one almost diametrically opposed to the trickster because she is associated with selfless nurturing and "noble", "redemptive" suffering (Rose, 2018, p.12). And while the archetypal mother is undoubtedly powerful in her effect on others, particularly the child, she has little subjectivity or agency herself. For Jung (1959), she is "the form into which all experience is poured" (p. 35), and unlike the free-agent trickster, her responsibility to others is enormous: "she is the psychic as well as physical precondition of the child" (p. 36). Thus, for the static figure of the archetypal mother, motherhood is an all-encompassing destiny, a state of creative fulfillment in and of itself.

It's important to note that feminists have long questioned (and continued to question) this framing of motherhood as creative fulfillment, however. In Tamar Hager's (2015) autoethnographic account of attempting to finish a novel while parenting, she refers to Susan Suleiman's critique of psychoanalysis as a child-centered theory that silences the mother:

psychoanalytic theory argues that mothers do not create art as their aggressive creative impulses are expressed in the act of giving birth. Therefore, they do not need to write. Only after they have stopped giving birth and the children have left home can they begin to create art (Suleiman, 1979/2001, p. 118). This

is a theory of either/or: writing-art or motherhood, but not both (Hager, 2015, p. 370).

And yet, as if to confirm the incompatibility of motherhood with creative tricksterism, Hyde (1998) finds few examples of female tricksters in mythology—and he cites almost exclusively male examples of 20th-century trickster artists and writers.

So how is it even possible for me, a mother who writes, to see myself as a trickster? Reconsidering the circumstances in which I wrote "Haint" is one of the ways I begin to answer that question.

18 February, 2015. It's 8:45 am on a dreary winter Wednesday. My husband has just left for work. I'm home alone with my five-months-old daughter. She's in a particularly fussy phase where she'll only nap for a few minutes at a time—unless I hold her. So I settle into the IKEA glider and nestled her into the crook of my arm, knowing she'll sleep this way for an hour or more.

Between feedings and nappy changes this morning, I've been thinking about an assignment I'd been given in the online poetry course in which I recently enrolled myself. This week's task is to write a poem that engages with place-names or vocabulary arising from a specific region, and I keep thinking about my family's origins in the Appalachian mountain range of the Southern United States. A few words that were part of my childhood—"bald" as a term for mountaintop, for example—have come back to me, but I know there must be more. So while my daughter sleeps in the crook of my left arm, I balance an iPad on my right knee and begin to search online for language.

In a typical trickster tale, Hyde (1998) finds that the trickster engages in a transgressive quest to fulfill his own literal or metaphorical "hunger" (p. 22). Put another way, tricksters' "appetites drive their wanderings" (p. 8) into unsanctioned spaces. In Greek mythology, for

example, the infant Hermes slips out of his cradle to trespass on the god Apollo's land. Hermes then steals Apollo's divine cattle and sacrifices some of them to the other Olympians in an intricate ruse to win status and recognition amongst the gods (Hyde, 1998, pp. 49-51). As tricksters are wont to do, Hermes fulfills a self-centered desire by trespassing on a forbidden space and using another's resource.

In choosing to write a poem during my maternity leave, I demonstrated an appetite for creativity that had nothing to do with my child and everything to do with myself. I wanted to cross the boundary between the mother's world and the writer's world, or at the very least to blur that boundary and I would argue that I flouted conventions for mothers in order to do so. I ignored the mounting housework that can only be attended to when a baby is sleeping; I also ignored the age-old adage, offered to me by so many well-meaning people, that I should *sleep when the baby sleeps*. And, by holding my daughter for the duration of her nap, and thus coaxing her to sleep longer than she would on her own, I also ignored the commonly given parenting advice that I should place her in the cot to help her "learn" how "to sleep without [my] help" (Schmitt, 2014). I put my own creative needs first, and in doing so, I "deviate[d] from official prescriptions" (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p. 4) for parents.

By disregarding conventions for mothers, I created a window of time when my imagination could wander far from the armchair and my child, when I could engage fully with my identity as a writer. I was assisted in this process by the technology of the iPad, which functioned as a portal through which I could sign up for the writing course, do the research required for my poem, *and* draft the piece. This too reminds me of Hyde, the way he terms the trickster a "poreseeker" who always has an eye out for "a pore, a portal, a doorway, a gap in the screen, a looseness in the weave-- these are all opportunities in the ancient sense. Each being in the world must find the set of opportunities fitted to its nature" (p. 46) I had already discovered that balancing a heavy reference book or paper pad on one knee while holding my baby was too unwieldy, so the iPad became the opportunity that fitted my nature. With it, I

could cross, or blur, the otherwise fixed and unbreachable boundary between motherhood and writerhood.

I spend an hour reading online about Appalachian dialect and copy-pasting intriguing words into a Google Doc. The first word I add to my list is haint.

My daughter wakes an hour later; I put down the iPad and go back to the world of motherhood. But while she naps again that afternoon, again in my arms, I pick up the iPad and continue my search for language. Before she wakes, I open a new Google Doc on the iPad and, with one finger, I peck out the first three lines of a draft.

Paint your porch ceiling against her.
Muddle milk, lime and indigo
To uncross able blue.

I now know that I'm writing a poem about a ghost. Whose ghost? I want to find out. I keep writing.

As the trickster's quest continues, Hyde notes, he often encounters a "lucky find" or unexpected object that he creatively transforms (pp. 128-150). Hyde points to Hermes' fashioning of a lyre from a tortoise shell as an example of the trickster as working artist. Hermes' words upon finding the tortoise are, "An omen of great luck for me so soon! I do not slight it" (Hymn 4 to Hermes, 1914, line 30). Hermes' openness and optimism are telling here. The creative trickster treats "chance encounters" as opportunities to generate, to speculate—to *imagine* (Hyde, 1998, p. 130). Tricksters, like artists, recognize the possibility inherent in an unlikely object.

Once I crossed the threshold into an imaginative space via the iPad, I encountered my trickster's lucky find: the word *haint*. I had stumbled on very the resource I needed, and I was in just the sort of mental "betwixt-and-between" state where I could both recognize the value

of the resource and have the trickster's confidence (or perhaps the naivete) to manipulate it to my own ends (Hyde, 1998, p. 130).

Perhaps I was more able to manipulate the raw materials I found because so much of my own identity—as a new mother, as an emerging writer—was in flux. Describing motherhood, feminist psychoanalyst Suzanne Juhasz (2008) calls it "a process as much as it is a condition or state... maternal subjectivity demands the negotiation of multiple states of being" (p. 398). At the time I wrote the poem, I was in the first months of parenting; I had with little sense yet of what it might mean to be a mother who writes. I had heard of Cyril Connolly's statement about the dangers "the pram in the hall" poses to art-making, but I did not yet have any experience that would cause me to see myself as subject to these dangers (Merritt and Rodgers, 2015). Perhaps I was also able to renegotiate my process as writer (prior to this instance, I had always drafted my poems long-hand on paper) because I had not yet published anything. I did not yet regard myself as a poet with a set process or "way" for writing. I benefitted, as the trickster does, from having "no way, no instinctual knowledge" or set self-conception (Hyde, 1998, p. 44).

For the next three days, I continue to sign into my document on the iPad multiple times a day, typing with one finger while my daughter naps in my arms. I bring the poem through four rounds of drafting and editing this way, and by noon on Saturday, the poem is finished. I don't know yet that this poem will go on to be published, or that it will win the Winchester Poetry Prize in 2016. I only know that a strange, wild, nameless part of myself, a part that has nothing to do with parenting, feels both elated and –temporarily—sated.

Despite the interruption to my concentration each time my daughter awoke, I day after day returned to a state in which I was not unlike Jung's fundamentally unconscious trickster: "so unconscious that his body is not a unity, and his two hands fight each other" (Jung, 1959,

p. 143). While my daughter slept, I was hardly aware of her except as a weight on my left arm. And with my right arm, I satisfied my trickster's drive for self-gratification: my "hunger" to write.

It's important to note that many crucial aspects of the trickster tale sequence are missing from my story: most notably, the discovery of the trickster's transgression, usually by an authority figure, and a reckoning with the consequences of transgression. Hermes has to justify his desecration of the cattle to the Gods, and is ultimately rewarded; Prometheus cannot undo the consequences of his theft of fire, and therefore suffers eternal punishment. In my case, there was no immediate consequence to my 'quest', other than my own fulfillment. No one was present to see me setting aside conventions for new mothers, or to take me to task for indulging my child by holding her throughout her nap instead of settling her in the bassinet. Furthermore, since I stopped writing to attend to my daughter's needs as soon as she woke, I did nothing that challenged my own internalized beliefs about a mother's obligation to her child.

I suppose there has been a longer-term internal consequence to my transgressive quest. I have sometimes expected that I will be able to slip back into that productive creative state of unconsciousness just as easily as I did when I wrote 'Haint'. Or I've hoped that the magical gap in time—the opportunity to write—will appear as conveniently as it did on that occasion. But I'm learning that both the trickster and I, the writing mother of a young child, know better than to rely on previous experience or on expected outcomes. My daughter continues to grow and change, so I as parent and writer must continue to evolve, too. (My daughter's naptimes are now a thing of the past; I either write at 5 AM before work, or I do not get to write during the week.) For me, creative tricksterism means maintaining a mindset of flexibility, irreverence, and even joy in the face of constantly changing circumstances and many, many interruptions. It means seeing my "inherent multiplicity of selves" as a state of "richness and fullness" (Juhasz, 2008, p. 398). My tricksterism also means continuing to set aside social conventions and inherited beliefs about what mothers are supposed to do-- a fact

I remind myself of on Saturday mornings when I send my partner and child off to playgroup while I head to my desk to write. Watching them walk hand in hand down the pavement to the park, I take comfort in Jacqueline Rose's remark that "Mothers, we might say, are the original subversives, never-- as feminism has long insisted-- what they seem, or are meant to be" (2018, p. 18). Viewed from this perspective, mother and trickster may be more closely related than one might think.

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Reciprocity & creative writing by Francis Gilbert

*A conference talk given by Francis Gilbert at the John Beacham conference,
Goldsmiths, University of London 2017.*

Take a moment to be with yourself. Shut or lower your eyes, take a few breaths, and say to yourself: ‘Breathing in I am calming, breathing out I am smiling’, and think of a gift you can give to yourself.

Go on, give it a try!

Give yourself a pat on the back for something you’ve done, or not done, congratulate yourself for taking a break, for doing the washing up, for enjoying a cup of coffee; forgive yourself for something you feel guilty about.

Give yourself a little gift in your mind!

How did that feel?

I’m going to give you a gift now. The gift of a painful, but I hope, entertaining story. A true story.

I am eleven years old. I have just moved schools in the middle of term and everyone here is calling me by my surname, Wilkinson, and it’s weird because in all the other schools I’ve been to I’ve been called my first name, Francis, and it’s also even weirder because Wilkinson isn’t my real surname.

In the school yard, I am also called ‘newbie’, ‘burke’ and ‘Dougal’ because I have long red hair like the puppet Dougal in the children’s TV programme of the time, *the Magic Roundabout*. My throat feels dry.

Then a few weeks later, my name changes. My father has come back from the United States where he was working and has insisted I am called by his name, my legal name, Gilbert.

This confuses everyone at the school because the teacher offers no explanation and just starts reading out Gilbert in the register and I answer in the affirmative. Some children ask me what is going on but I don’t explain; it upsets me to talk about it.

My mother is furious at my father’s intervention and there are letters exchanged with solicitors, court actions threatened, and my name changes yet again to Gilbert-Wilkinson, and then after more battles, Wilkinson-Gilbert.

My fellow pupils get so confused that they end up calling me ‘Pilk’. I am sort of happy with Pilk; it makes me smile, it’s funny, and I seem to have settled into this minor private school, which is rather like something out of Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall*, by being the oddball with the ever-changing surname.

However, just when things have settled, disaster strikes! My sports' bag breaks and I am obliged to take my mother's handbag to school; she insists. We don't have money to pay for anything else. If the mockery of me had been bad before, now it increases exponentially. Children crowd around me at break times and chant: "Pilky and his handbag, Pilky and his handbag, tra-la-la-la!"

There's nothing to do but to grin and bear it. But one day, one of the chief chanters, J., who regularly kicks me as the crowd gathers around, snatches a tennis ball out of my hand. I am just about to bowl a ball in a friendly game of cricket with a couple of quiet pupils, who don't torment me. My reaction is immediate and unthinking. I punch him in the mouth, and in doing so, because my thumb is tucked under my fingers, I break it.

I have to go to hospital the next day to have it put in a splint. However, after that, quite disconcertingly, the chanting and the bullying stops...

Many years later, one of the chanters approaches me in a Tube train. We are in our late twenties. "Pilky," he shouts in his flash designer suit. "It's you!"

He pleased to see me, and we start to reminisce after sharing pleasantries. He says, "Do you ever wonder why everyone left you alone after you punched J. in the mouth?"

I shake my head. "It's because we all thought you were a complete psycho. It was the randomness of it. There you were all those years of abuse, and then suddenly over nothing, you snap."

Now I've given you a gift of this story. I would like you to give the person sitting next to you a gift. It could be just a hello if you don't know them, a reaction to my story, a nice comment about their appearance, about their work, a blessing, wish peace upon them, ask them a question. Go on, give them the gift of your attention!

How did you find that process? How did it compare with giving yourself a gift? A brief discussion.

You may wonder why I am telling you this anecdote at length for an august, theoretical talk about reciprocity. Well, I think I have a very good reason. You see, I wrote about this incident in a draft of the novel I submitted for my PhD in Creative Writing and Education, and decided working with Professors Blake Morrison and Rosalyn George to share it with my eleven-year-old students who I taught at a large comprehensive in outer London at the time, using it to inspire them to write their own autobiographical pieces.

The responses were fascinating. The students responded with warmth and sympathy to my story, and wrote their own imaginative reconstructions of childhood scenes, not necessarily about bullying, but about moments when they felt vulnerable, alone, misunderstood, the victim of forces out of their control. In trying to explain this success, my Education supervisor, Rosalyn George, guided me to the early work of Ann Oakley, who, in her early career, was a feminist researcher exploring women's experiences of giving birth. Oakley decided to lace her interview with appropriate accounts of her own experiences of giving birth (Oakley, 2013). She

found that this approach generated rich data, and argued that it generated reciprocity: when she 'gave' something of her own experiences, she received back enthusiastic accounts herself' (Oakley, 2005).

As with Oakley, I found my confession created rare and important conversations. bell hooks (2003) writes in a chapter called 'Democratic Education' in her book, *Pedagogy of Hope*:

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. (p. 44)

For me, sharing parts of my life with my students generated a conversation with them that happened both on the page and during discussions around school. My confession about 'Pilky and his handbag' produced numerous conversations about bullying, about school, and about the complex nature of morality. For example, a key question that was much discussed was: did I do the right thing in punching my persecutor? The learning that took place was varied and possibly not immediately obvious to teachers obsessed with getting top exam results: some pupils learnt teachers are like them; some thought deeply about violence and victimisation; others learnt about how to tell a good story; how to narrativize their own lives.

Indeed, you could argue that many powerful pedagogical movements are predicated around the idea of reciprocity. The Teachers as Writers initiative, which operates in many schools in the United States and in the UK, encourages teachers to write expressively with their pupils. The idea is simple but very effective: when a creative writing task is set in class, the teacher writes as well. Experts in this field, teachers, Jeni Smith and Simon Wrigley, encourage colleagues to set open-ended tasks such as asking students to do some free writing, to reflect upon their feelings, to describe a journey and so forth. The teacher then may well share with the students how they found the process of writing, or their own writing. The approach encourages teachers to not only intellectually grasp what it means to be a writer but also to feel it, and to share their feelings with their students. This open-hearted approach generates reciprocity with students more willing to share their own work and consider ways of improving it precisely because they've seen a teacher model these processes.

In their article *What has writing ever done for us? The power of teachers' writing groups* Wrigley and Smith (2012) discuss the importance of teachers writing both expressively and transactionally both in and outside the classroom:

if we are to engage seriously with young people as they write...we need to have the personal knowledge not only of the craft but also of its complex and uncertain personal processes (p. 80)

Cremin and Oliver (2016) found that when secondary school students on Arvon courses worked with professional writers and their English teachers on their writing, both teachers and students became more engaged with writing, produced much more original pieces than before, and felt part of a community of writers (p. 3). Students improved in confidence, motivation and were much more positive about writing generally (p. 4).

I would argue that reciprocity plays a vital role in the success of the Teachers as Writers movement: when the students perceive that their teachers are feeling just as nervous about writing, just as worried about drafting, are going through the same struggles as them, there are moments of commonality, a sense that ‘we’re in this altogether’ which leads to both a loosening up and expanding of their voices. As one student told me, ‘When we see you struggling to write something, when we realise that you find it really hard, then it makes us want to have a go.’

But what is reciprocity? The dictionary defines it as: “the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit”. For me though this does not ‘nail it’ because reciprocity involves someone giving something but not necessarily knowing what they will get back. It comprises a leap of faith upon the part of the giver, a risk which the giver doesn’t know whether it will pay off or not.

It’s perhaps because of this, it often produces much more surprising and creative results than a simple exchange. I have seen this most vividly while researching a teaching technique called ‘Reciprocal Teaching’ (RT): it is sometimes known as Reciprocal Reading because it is largely used when reading texts, although it can be used many other situations. Reciprocal Teaching has been shown to improve comprehension skills of children across the globe, particularly students with Special Educational Needs for whom it was first developed in the mid-1980s by two researchers, Palinscar and Brown (1984). Enthused by what I read about the technique and seeing the links between it and my own PhD research into reciprocity, I decided to trial it with my secondary school classes (11-18 year olds) a few years ago. After a bumpy start (it takes a little bit of explaining), I found it to be very successful and really improved students’ reading skills, in part, because it put the onus on the students to collectively work out the meanings of difficult texts rather than getting the teacher to tell them. My challenging Year 9 classes (14-year-olds) relished reading *Of Mice and Men* using the strategy, while my Year 12 class found that they could understand Sylvia Plath’s difficult poetry better by discussing it in groups.

In my role as Teacher-Educator at Goldsmiths which I started in September 2015, I have shown my PGCE English students how to use RT, with my beginning teachers using it successfully with their own classes. I have also conducted action research with two schools: Rodillians Academy in Wakefield, Yorkshire and Deptford Green, south London. Both schools serve many disadvantaged students who struggle with their reading. At Deptford during the summer of 2016, I wrote a script which modelled the strategy by explaining RT in the form of a play. Year 7 and 8 students read this didactic script in groups. I both taught the script to some classes and observed other teachers teaching the script; we all learnt a great deal about what worked and what didn’t from this experience. For some pupils, the experience was transformative. One pupil, a Y., a twelve-year-old with hearing problems and English as an Additional Language, initially was very reluctant to read in a group – he’d never read aloud in school before! – but when myself and the other teacher worked with the group, and modelled the process, which largely involves students listening carefully to each other and questioning in an open-ended way, he really got the knack of it, and by the end of the project was reading fluently; something he hadn’t done in six years of schooling until then.

The following academic year, 2016-2017, I wrote another teaching script, *The Time Devil*, in collaboration with the National Maritime Museum and Deptford Green students and teachers. Then two brilliant teachers at Deptford, both alumni of the Goldsmiths English PGCE course, Vikki Prescott and Tom Watts taught *The Time Devil* to their Year 7 and 8 classes, culminating in them visiting the museum, and us shooting a mock documentary based on the script in the museum. Again, it was very successful and showed the students the power of reciprocity. The basic aim of Reciprocal Teaching is to get students taking turns to be a teacher in a group; this teacher then invites everyone to read, and question each other to deepen their understanding of what they are reading. It works well because when pupils become teachers they begin to learn things like a teacher; they are not expected to be knowledgeable like a teacher, but rather are expected to model the processes that a teacher goes through to elicit understanding with their pupils. This is what makes it work so well; teachers are great learners and great facilitators of learning, once pupils learn how to facilitate the learning of other students, they learn more too. Evaluations of RT from the Year 7 and 8 pupils testified to this:

- ‘It’s a lot easier to keep up; you can go a bit more at your own pace, and get help if you don’t understand.’
- ‘Everyone gives their feedback and so you can get their ideas, and that helps you think differently.’
- ‘There is more time to think and that means you get more ideas.’
- ‘Everyone has a chance to contribute. I don’t really say anything in whole class discussions, but I talk a lot in my group.’

Several teachers involved in the project then used RT with other classes to good effect. What RT does when taught well is get students to internalise the processes of summarising, questioning, predicting and reflecting which they acquire through group discussions.

But my research has made me think that there is a larger role for the concept of reciprocity in society. When he was shadow Home Secretary and then subsequently Prime Minister, Tony Blair, talked about how we all need to be aware of our rights and responsibilities; seeded within this soundbite was a notion of reciprocity, but narrowly conceived. The concept of responsibility is invested with notions of moral goodness, of burdensome duty. The concept of reciprocity reprises that idea that if we take things, we should give something back, but in a much more flexible, open-ended way; you smile at me, I smile back spontaneously; you explain an idea to me, I share related ideas with you; you teach me a concept, I try my best to understand it; you tell me a story, I tell you one too.

Reciprocity is a rhizome, not a tree: it spreads its roots equally throughout a group, a community, the world, it is not hierarchical, tit-for-tat, but instead seeks to bring pleasure and joy to everyone through fruitful, surprising exchanges.

In these times when we are facing environmental catastrophe because we are releasing so much carbon into the atmosphere because of our over-consumption of stuff, I believe reciprocity has a huge role to play in lessening our carbon-footprint and improving the quality of our lives. If we were able to develop more reciprocal communities who spoke to each other,

shared stories and possessions, then possibly, we might be happier and help our poor ailing earth.

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Beyond The Gates by Sam Holdstock

How Can We Nurture Creativity in a Hostile Environment?

Abstract

By engaging critically with the metaphorical narrative *Beyond The Gates*, this paper argues that cultures of performativity in British secondary schools can marginalise subjectivity, resulting in a failure to nurture creativity. Through autoethnography and a comparison of two contrasting communities of practice, this paper seeks to establish creative writing pedagogies that can be used to nurture creativity in secondary school English classrooms and which remain open to further development and evaluation.

Beyond The Gates, an allegory, by S. Holdstock

Jen was a story lover and a storyteller, she always had been. When she was a child she had entertained her peers and parents with fantastical tales, and had always listened with hungry ears to the stories she was told. Whenever she felt hurt, alone or anxious, she would turn to stories and find solace in them. Stories were how she understood the world.

She lived on the mainland, so when she came of active age, as was mainland custom, she had to choose a path. She knew that all she wanted was to use her love of stories in some useful way, so when a neighbour spoke to Jen about the island of Academis, Jen listened attentively.

Academis was a coming-of-age complex situated several miles south of the mainland. Jen learned that it was a community seeking to help young people from the mainland to become outstanding citizens. Jen asked around; she heard that Academis was a strange place to live and a tough place to work, but that it had transformed many disengaged young mainlanders into effective workers and leaders. Jen wanted to help, and Academis seemed like the sort of place where she could do just that.

When she first entered through the Academis gates, Jen looked up in awe at the huge Academis emblem with its three concentric circles and its proud slogan: 'Abolishing The Average Voice For The New Millennium.' They gave Jen a professional-looking uniform, a badge, and spoke to her respectfully. The badge bore the letters H-B, standing for half-blind. Jen learned this from another half-blind who she met in the half-blind dorm room. This man

occupied the bed next to her and was happy to explain that most active adults working on Academis were called half-blinds because their intellects were deemed strong enough to render their power of sight almost unnecessary. Jen had very good vision, and the badge confused her. The man also explained that all the young people on the island were referred to as The Seeing, as their intellects were so underdeveloped that they had no choice other than to navigate the world using their own sense of sight. Academis aimed to free them of this crippling obligation.

Jen was also given a new name: J9. J9 the half-blind.

Run by the full-blinds TB1, MG1 and DC1, whose orders were passed on to the half-blinds via regular communiqués, life within Academis, J9 learned, was governed by targets, targets to which J9 was to sacrifice her mind and her body.

At the start of every month J9's targets were inked onto her skin. She had a target weight, a target height, a target blindness grade and a target knowledge score for her group of The Seeing - the adolescents for whom she became responsible. Failure to meet her targets would mean a reduction of both her shore leave time and her mealtime rations. Success on the other hand would bring J9 closer to full-blindness - the state of supreme intelligence that would allow her to function without the need to see. For a time J9 believed full-blindness was the path to truer tales.

For the good of Academis, half-blinds were also made to sacrifice their reproductive rights; only full-blinds could reproduce, for they alone were beyond sensory temptation. They alone could see reproduction in the Academis way - as a necessary means of producing vessels for the intellect. For J9, this sacrifice proved too much.

Jen had grown up surrounded by stories and a young family. Truly becoming J9 would mean abandoning these memories and turning her back on all that she held dear, and this Jen could not do.

So it was that one night, as the half-blinds rested their mind-vessels in their dormitory, J9 reached out a hand to feel the smooth skin of her neighbour's palm. In reaching out to him, she reached out to Jen, reached out to her senses, reached out to herself.

After a time her pregnancy became impossible to conceal, and J9 was forced to become Jen again, forced to leave the island and to live beyond the Academis gates.

They took Jen to the shore by boat, and left her on the shingle. Knowing she could not go home and admit her failure to her family, she moved along the shore, then north into the forests of the hinterlands.

Walking past wide tree trunks and under the forest's boughs, Jen felt alone. She had nowhere left to go, and the sun would soon go down. She rubbed her swollen belly, and started looking desperately around her for shelter.

To her surprise, Jen glimpsed a splash of colour; in a clearing to her left, she could see a truck. The truck's cabin was faded blue, but its body was chequered with brightly coloured squares. As Jen crept towards it, she heard a humming sound. Under the humming, from behind the truck, she heard voices.

The humming, Jen realised, was made by many bees; the chequered truck housed beehives, each coloured square homing a separate swarm. The voices, Jen discovered, were those of the Beekeepers.

Peering around the truck, Jen watched the Beekeepers. The father was sat by the campfire telling stories to the smallest children. Jen listened as he told them one:

'So the other larvae learned: although they love honey, there's no point chasing nectar. Best wait until they're grown, and concentrate on growing.'

Listening to this tale, Jen couldn't help but think of The Seeing - those children forced to sit, listen and consume their cubes of knowledge in dark colourless rooms.

Jen also saw the mother who was gathering kindling with the two eldest children, smiling and listening to their playful back-and-forth.

After several minutes, Jen stepped out from behind the truck's blue bonnet. The man saw Jen approaching and straightened himself up. His wife followed his gaze and looked over at her.

Jen stopped, and nothing stirred. All that could be heard was the hum of bees.

Then the woman waved and the man's expression opened.

'Would you like some tea?' He called over to her.

'We don't have any sugar, but we have honey to spare,' added his wife.

The Beekeepers were kind. They saw Jen's belly and her pale, inked skin and decided to help. If she would help to tend the bees and entertain the children, they would give her food, shelter and company until the baby came. They called her by her real name, and she learned each of theirs. The parents, Ball and Rose, took pity upon Jen and were pleased to offer her their kindness.

And day by day Jen's belly swelled as her child grew.

One morning, after rising with the dawn and sipping coffee with the Beekeepers, Jen felt the pains beginning; she knew it was her time.

The Beekeepers lay her down, brought clean cloths and boiled up some water. Ball mopped Jen's brow as Rose encouraged her, and Jen's cries of pain shook nearby trees down to their roots, but several hours later it was done.

Jen held her baby daughter, cradled in her arms, and the new arrival squirmed, cried, spluttered and was loved.

Jen lived with the Beekeepers for six months in all. She played with their children, listened to their stories, and shared with them her own, all the while watching as her daughter grew. She was grateful to the Beekeepers; they shared with her their knowledge and their skills and told her stories of the struggles they themselves had faced when bringing up their children.

The day came however, as Jen knew that it must, when the Beekeepers decided they must leave. They were nomadic, and were obliged to move their hives elsewhere. They asked Jen if she would join them, but Jen declined.

Everyone set about packing away the campsite and securing the bees in their hives. Finally, the Beekeepers embraced Jen and her daughter, wished them well, and gave them a supply of food and honey for the journey.

When the truck had disappeared entirely, Jen turned and started walking, her daughter strapped to her back.

At first, Jen did not know where her feet were carrying them. However, after several hours, Jen recognised the path and smelt salt in the breeze. Reaching that same shore where she had been abandoned some six months ago, Jen stared out to sea; she could make out the form of Academis looming in the distance. She winced involuntarily, but felt somewhere inside her a little pull. She thought of The Seeing and the half-blinds in their darkened rooms, and felt somehow their lure.

A Hostile Community

Robinson defines creativity as the ‘process of having original ideas that have value’ (Robinson, 2006). Therefore, for an organisation to nurture creativity it must enable members to form and share ideas. On the island of Academis in my story *Beyond The Gates*, subjectivity is marginalised. This is evident when Jen is asked to adopt a new name, ‘J9’, put on a ‘uniform’ and become a ‘half-blind’; she cannot assert her individuality and her vision of the world is devalued. She is obliged to renounce her ‘reproductive rights’, suggesting that Academis discourages creative interactions. Furthermore, ‘Seeing’ is rendered a pejorative term used to describe the ‘underdeveloped’, emphasising that subjectivity is considered valueless. Academis is hostile towards the formation and sharing of subjectively formed ideas, and thus cannot nurture creativity. Arguably, cultures of ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2003, p. 215) in British secondary schools can be similarly hostile.

Each year around ‘600,000 children enter state education’ (DfE, 2010). In so large a system a tension naturally exists between individual creativity and the knowledge that the curriculum requires students to gain. As Myhill & Wilson observe, ‘in Anglophone countries, there is both a premium placed on creativity at the same time as there is a tendency towards high-stakes accountability’ (2013). Governments place emphasis upon accountability (DfE, 2010) to hold schools accountable for their financial cost and to ensure they produce an educated workforce (Myhill & Wilson). However, such an emphasis can result in the meeting of externally defined targets via the acquisition of prescribed knowledge becoming the main priority (Dann, 2014), often at the expense of creativity. An emphasis on accountability can affect teachers and students; it can cause ‘physical and emotional damage’ to teachers (Ball, 2013, p.53) and can affect student conceptualisation of learning. Knowledge becomes a commodity (Ball, 2013) that students must acquire in order for them and their teachers to be deemed successful, and creativity thus becomes of secondary importance. As a teacher at an inner city secondary academy, I have witnessed the damage that teachers can undergo, and know teachers who

feel pressured to run extra sessions during their own free time to ensure they meet their targets, thus upsetting their work-life balance. This tendency is reflected in Academis' treatment of J9 and The Seeing. J9 is profoundly affected by her interactions with a culture of extreme accountability; targets are 'inked onto her skin' and failure to meet them results in 'a reduction of both her shore leave time and her mealtime rations'. Moreover, the way that The Seeing 'consume their cubes of knowledge' reflects the reduction in some students' autonomy; many see *their* learning as the *teacher's* responsibility, and the classroom becomes a locus where autonomy and subjectivity are devalued.

On Academis, J9's love of stories does not find a home, and her act of collaborative creation (reproduction) results in her ostracisation. Similarly, teachers and students who value creativity can be left feeling as Jen feels when she walks 'alone' and pregnant through the 'forests of the hinterlands', their love of creativity having found no home in the school environment. Viewing knowledge as a commodity results in a 'rethinking of education in economic terms' that 'bites deep into institutional practices and values' (Ball, 2013, p. 53); the 'policy overload' (Ball, p. 3) that schools have faced in recent years does not leave teachers the space to create personalised pedagogies for the students they teach, and does not encourage students to develop creative independence. This is particularly true in the English classroom because the English GCSE, which includes creative writing components, is "double-weighted" for league table purposes' (Gilbert, 2016), meaning that English departments can face increased surveillance by senior leaders who are not necessarily English teachers. When a government seeks to create an education system that has a 'complete intolerance of failure' (Cameron, 2011) and that is built upon high-stakes accountability, teachers may feel that they need to seek 'permission to be autonomous' practitioners (Cremin, Goouch and Lambirth, 2005, p. 4), and students may not feel comfortable to voice their own perspectives.

In *Beyond The Gates*, the 'regular communiqués' that the full-blinds send to the half-blinds reflect the UK education sector's 'policy overload' (Ball, 2013, p. 53). This overload has formed cultures of performativity that require teachers to 'produce measurable and "improving" outputs and performances', and that are constructed via 'the data-base, the appraisal meeting, the annual review, report writing, the regular publication of results and promotion applications, inspections and peer reviews' (Ball, 2003). Performativity cultures are necessarily 'surveillance cultures' (Dymoke, 2012, p. 395) in which performance is measured against externally imposed values (Perryman et al., 2011, Packwood & Messenheimer, 2003).

Resultant communities are implicitly encouraged to put ‘value’ before personal ‘values’ (Ball, 2003), and facilitate the development of ‘a technical workforce to be managed and controlled rather than a profession to be respected’ (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 36). This pressure results in teachers feeling inadequate and leaving the profession (Brown et al., 2002). Teaching English at a secondary academy in inner-city London brought me into contact with such a culture, and led me to feel alienated; as a writer and an educator, I deem creativity to be of the utmost importance, but the academy’s policies frustrated my creativity as both a teacher and a learner. For example, prescriptive marking policies led to me to write two poems expressing my own frustration at the rigidity of the framework within which I work.

Gorard and See argue that ‘we cannot safely identify any individual teacher who is differentially or consistently effective with equivalent students’ (2013, p. 79), indicating that cultures of performativity are built on shaky foundations; if no test can prove that one teacher is more effective at improving the performance of their students than another, the idea of evaluating teachers based upon the results of their students becomes nonsensical. However, the British government remains committed to its neoliberal agenda, creating schools and classrooms within which the ‘the axe of accountability’ (Cremin, Goouch and Lambirth, 2005, p. 178) casts ‘a rigid shadow over what teachers are expected to do’ (Dann, 2014). When league tables are used to determine the quality of schools, students are identified in terms of the data they represent, and teachers can neglect ‘the social literacies’ students possess ‘beyond the classroom’ (Dymoke, 2012). Gipps asserts that ‘individual learning is idiosyncratic’ (1994, p. 16), yet on Academis The Seeing are viewed as a homogenous mass. This reflects how cultures of performativity identify students as data vessels. Students’ personal ‘funds of knowledge’ (Thompson and Hall, 2008) are disregarded when what is valued is data. This can impact creativity; students are abler to form original ideas when they are encouraged to use all the knowledge they have at their disposal, including that which exists in their own ‘virtual school bags’ (Thompson and Hall). To nurture creativity, educators must understand that a student signifies more than grades, in the same way that a story or a poem carries more than a single potential meaning.

‘In recent years Government in England (but not Wales, Scotland, ...) has directed schools in an instruction-focused way, and reinforced a model of learning as being taught’ (Watkins, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, the ‘marketplace’ created by league tables, the commodification of knowledge and the emphasis placed on public examinations has had a ‘stultifying effect’ on students (Gipps, 1994, pp. 3-4). It has caused the ‘narrowing of curriculum and the neglect of

untested subjects' (Gipps, p. 51). For example, 'the shutting-down of the A Level (with the last assessments in 2017) means that Creative Writing has lost much of its visibility within schools' (Gilbert, 2016). Creative writing is tested at GCSE level, but it is often taught in a formulaic way (Gilbert). Unlike the Beekeeper in *Beyond The Gates*, who uses stories to entertain and educate two of his children when he tells them a story about 'larvae', educators now often teach a rather "schooled" model of creative language use' (Myhill and Wilson, 2013). Such a formulaic approach can educate 'people out of their creative capacities' (Robinson, 2006). As John Abbott argues, we are creating battery hens that, when liberated, cannot stand on their own two feet (2001), the battery hens here representing students who do not associate creative writing with the 'process of having original ideas' (Robinson, 2006).

'Practice is a response to design' (Wenger, 1999), and the learning experience that has been designed in some British secondary schools does not encourage students to be creative in the English classroom. A formulaic approach to creative writing pedagogy may cause test scores to rise without any increase in creative skill (Gipps, 1994). However, 'a performance [as opposed to *learning*] oriented school culture is linked with poorer motivation and greater disengagement predicting lower attainment' (Watkins, 2010, p. 5), suggesting that it may be in the interests of government, schools, teachers and students to focus on engaging individual subjectivity and creativity. If more teachers equated learning with 'joining a knowledge community' (Watkins, p. 2) rather than consuming what is referred to in *Beyond The Gates* as 'cubes of knowledge', we may be able to facilitate the development of autonomous learners, original creators and engaged citizens. If we can foster a 'no-blame' atmosphere in English classrooms, stressing 'the importance of saying something new or different' (Gilbert, 2016), we may enable students to develop a 'learning orientation' (Watkins, p. 3), resulting in improved outcomes, less stress and more engaged students.

This paper argues that cultures of performativity discourage students and teachers from behaving autonomously and creatively. This is because, as Watkins notes, when students 'view classrooms as having a performance orientation there is defensive coping and negative feeling' (2010, p. 10). Furthermore, when teachers are informed that 'schools should be accountable to parents for how well pupils do' (DfE, 2010), they become solely responsible for their students' achievement and more inclined to employ methods they understand to be safe.

Comparing Communities

In *Beyond The Gates*, Jen's love of individuality, her allegiance to her own senses and her physical creativity are evident; she cannot help but reach out to 'her senses' and 'herself', and

this results in her ‘pregnancy’. These qualities oblige her to leave Academis. When Jen watches the Beekeepers from behind their truck, she silently compares the Academis community with the Beekeepers’ community, recognising that an alternatively structured community of practice exists. The Beekeeper’s story, with its focus on development (‘growing’) rather than goals (‘nectar’ and ‘honey’), suggests that the education of young people does not have to be focused upon ‘a set of fixed goals and objectives’ (Dann, 2014). Like Jen, this paper compares two communities of practice to identify the differences that exist between them. I use Wenger’s three-part community of practice framework to structure my comparison (Wenger, 1999, pp. 173-4):

Engagement: active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation and meaning.

Imagination: creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience.

Alignment: coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises.

To compare two communities of practice, I conducted two interviews with influential practitioners. The first of these was a senior teacher at the school where I work (the Teacher), and the second was a writer and leading creative writing educator (the Facilitator). This section aims to discover how the Facilitator’s practice, being less influenced by any individual school’s culture of performativity, may differ from the Teacher’s, and to consider how this may influence learning.

Inspired by Hodges’ ‘Rivers of reading’ research methodology (2010), I devised my own semi-structured interview structure - The Honeycomb Challenge - and later summarised interviewee responses using Wenger’s three-part framework. Having sought each interviewee’s consent, we discussed how they would plan and deliver a creative writing lesson or workshop to a group of mixed ability KS4 students at an inner city secondary school, populating the honeycomb accordingly. What follows is a comparative analysis of the two discussions.

i) Engagement

The Facilitator placed greater emphasis on gauging and inspiring active involvement. By framing activities as games, they suggest that writing is not a 'chore' (Myhill and Watson, 2011, p. 58) and thus stimulates what Day terms the 'zone of curiosity' (1982 cited Dann, 2014). Furthermore, beginning the workshop by establishing student expectations suggests to students that the outcomes of the session are negotiable. The Facilitator emphasises that ideas for content are provided by the students: 'they provide the emotions'. Such practices allow space for both 'dominant and subordinate literacies' (Myhill and Watson, p. 61) and suggests that the Facilitator invites students 'into the learning experience as individuals' (Cremin, Goouch and Lambirth, 2005). The Facilitator's use of their own writing encourages students to see themselves as writers entering a 'community of practising writers' (Myhill and Wilson, 2013) that is 'based on trust' (Gilbert, 2016). Contrastingly, while the Teacher did acknowledge student subjectivity when noting that the way each person describes a 'man' can be 'different', their planning was based around a prescribed main task, thus potentially 'constraining the focus of learning' (Dann, 2014). By providing students with 'clear stepping stones', the Teacher is seeking to control the learning journey, potentially resulting in learners having 'little idea of what they are doing or why' (Dyson, 2000, p. 17). Moreover, each stepping stone has the potential to be too focused on a discrete skill, depriving learners of a 'meaningful context' for their language (Fleming and Stevens, 2010, p. 116).

ii) Imagination

The Teacher, whose understanding of the imagination has been influenced by secondary school cultures of performativity, appears to devalue the imaginations of inner city students; in the Teacher's eyes, imagination comes from being 'well read'. The Teacher displays an allegiance to what Myhill and Watson (2011) would term a dominant literacy, and excludes certain 'funds of knowledge' (Thompson and Hall, 2008). Furthermore, the imaginative activities the Teacher plans are heavily influenced by 'vocabularies of assessment' (Dann, 2014); the emphasis placed on language methods encourages students to associate creative writing with the correct usage of imagery and metaphor. Contrastingly, the Facilitator appears to value the individual voice and recognise the diversity of voices in the room. By seeking to celebrate the work of all the students who share, the Facilitator becomes a 'creative leader' who embraces diversity and the 'differences' that might make students 'uncomfortable', encouraging them to gain 'new understanding' (Maeda and Bermont, 2011, p. 52). The Facilitator further emphasises the value of the individual voice by subverting the 'long-standing culture of classrooms' (Watkins, 2010, p. 2); For them, teaching is not just telling, and learning

is about more than listening. This is evident in the Facilitator's desire to allow students to teach *them* something, and in their insistence that a student's 'original voice' has a quality that should be preserved.

iii) Alignment

The Teacher is teaching within a context of performativity resulting in her practice being influenced by an 'externally imposed agenda' (Perryman et al., 2011); 'Exam mark schemes' influence the Teacher's planning and teaching. The Teacher defines for her students what the 'ingredients for effective' writing are, thus 'defining, shaping and controlling the classroom by framing focused objectives that do not always recognise students' need for meaning and self-production' (Dann, 2014). In this context, learning is reduced to the acquisition of predetermined skills. The Teacher plans to use a model piece of writing in the lesson, but makes no reference to themselves being a writer, arguably rendering themselves less effective; Smith and Wrigley observe that teachers who write with their students are more effective (2012). By positing a pre-created model as something to be critiqued, the Teacher distances students from the writing process. Instead of modelling the 'craft & process' of writing, they encourage students to critique the outcomes of said process. This may prevent the Teacher from fostering 'a genuine sense of community based on trust' (Hooks, 2003, p. 109).

The Facilitator works outside of the "exam-obsessed" contexts' to which Gilbert refers (2016). Instead of basing his planning around objectives and success criteria, they adopt a more metacognitive approach, encouraging students to reflect upon what they have learned. Learning therefore becomes a journey of personal discovery, students developing 'a metacognitive awareness of writing' (Myhill and Watson, 2011). When offering students 'guidelines' to help them craft their writing into poems, the Facilitator does not allow guidelines to dominate the classroom discourse, emphasising that the 'truth and beauty' of the original thought is to be valued above all. Whereas the Teacher offers a model piece of writing for students to critique, the Facilitator positions themselves as a writer, using their poems as a way of 'introducing' themselves and suggesting that their poems are not models but provide an 'idea of what is possible'. The Facilitator thus creates a more trusting community of writers who do not associate effective creative writing with a set of externally determined skills. The Facilitator plans to allow his students to shape their own learning and allow 'learner identities'

to influence output (Dann 2014). They therefore appear to recognise that learning ‘involves the whole person’ and is not just a ‘cognitive exercise’ (Black et al., 2004, p. 18).

A New Arrival

In *Beyond The Gates*, Jen’s daughter is a product of the cultures that she and her mother are exposed to; her conception is a result of conflict between Jen’s individuality and Academis’ oppressive culture. Furthermore, her development is shaped by the Beekeepers. When Ball and Rose share their ‘knowledge and their skills,’ telling Jen ‘stories of the struggles they themselves had faced when bringing up their children,’ Jen’s parenting is influenced by the Beekeepers’ model. As Vygotsky notes, culture affects development (1978), and Jen’s daughter is no exception.

Similarly, my own creative writing pedagogy has developed in response to the communities that I have been exposed to. Working in an academy, I have experienced the teaching of creative writing within a culture of performativity. However, as a writer and an MA student I have developed a heightened awareness of the consequences of performativity and have explored approaches to creative writing that exist beyond its influences. These parallel experiences have shaped pedagogical practices; the practices that are outlined below have been utilised and developed with a range of year 7, 8, 9, and 10 English classes. Due to the fact that I have had no year 11 classes this year, these practices have not been used in the context of a year 11 English classroom - the place where the ‘axe of accountability’ is at its sharpest (Cremin, Goouch and Lambirth, 2005, p. 178).

i) Engagement

I have attempted to subvert the traditional classroom culture that sees students as consumers of knowledge and teachers as experts. I have instead attempted to become what Maeda and Bermont term a ‘Creative Leader’ (2011). To achieve this, I have modelled planning and writing processes in front of my students, ensuring that any crossings out are not erased but remain present on the whiteboard; like Gilbert, I am identifying myself as a learner (Gilbert, 2016). To make the classroom feel more ‘democratic’ (Gilbert), I have also altered the geography of my classroom, taking advantage of the fact that there is a whiteboard at the back of the classroom where I teach most of my lessons. By starting lessons with a do now activity and a word of the day that are written onto the whiteboard at the back of the room, I allow the students to begin lessons as independent learners who engage with a task without me having to contextualise

it. As a teacher I am not leading from the front but am free to circulate and encourage individuals. Typically, my do now activities involve free writing (Cowan, 2011) that *can* lead to sharing but that will not be formally assessed. Students can thus see writing as a process that can exist outside of the examination framework.

Furthermore, I have allowed students to shape their learning. For example, I have led writing activities that require students to use an object from home as a stimulus, and I have recently encouraged students to teach me something by writing me a letter about a topic of their choosing. I have also attempted to inspire curiosity and enjoyment through the use of more varied classroom activities; I have engaged students using quizzes, board games, discussion, group work, drama and drawing activities, stimulating the curiosity and imagination of students and encouraging them to see themselves as independent writers and readers with a ‘learning orientation’ (Watkins, 2010, p. 3). Crucially, I have not approached writing and reading as discrete practices, as ‘language does not develop simply by instruction and practice in discrete skills’ (Fleming and Stevens, 2010, p. 116). Therefore, I have encouraged students to celebrate and critique each other’s work. This enables students to ‘understand themselves as creators’ (Myhill and Watson, 2011, p. 67) and critics rather than students preparing for an exam. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, I have developed activities that use pedagogical metaphors to help students discover success criteria for themselves. As metaphors use a ‘system of implications to construct a corresponding system of implications about the principal subject’ (Black, 1954, p. 288), they can enable students to discover and understand success criteria for themselves, and thus progress towards autonomy. For example, I have encouraged my students to see themselves as bladesmiths who are creating a sword out of language; discussion tasks have helped students to learn, for example, that their writing can be rendered shiny and sharp by using visually descriptive and emotive language.

ii) Imagination

As well as developing practices that allow students to use their own ‘funds of knowledge’ (Thompson and Hall, 2008) to create images of the world, I recognise that ‘planning for writing’ can ‘become dominated by written tasks’ and that as students may face ‘the blight of meaningless tasks’ in many of their lessons (Cremin, Goouch and Lambirth, 2005, pp. 23 & 190), I can promote the enjoyment of planning and writing by using a more varied range of activities. As such, alongside mind mapping tasks, I have used collaborative drama and drawing activities to help students form ideas for characters and plots. Furthermore, I have

started to use games and game construction as a means of facilitating the comprehension of texts with a view to building towards the generation of creative ideas and the crafting of pieces of writing.

My use of pedagogical metaphor has allowed my students to see ‘connections through time and space’ (Wenger, p. 173). For example, by encouraging my students to explain how a piece of creative writing is like a sword, students are encouraged to create connections in their own minds.

To encourage a ‘metacognitive awareness of writing’ (Myhill and Watson, 2011, p. 69), I have resisted using clear learning objectives and begun paying more attention to reflection activities.

While I find it important to know the skills I want my students to develop, I have found that learning objectives can cause students to decontextualise their learning. Therefore, I have developed plenary activities that ask students to construct images which represent their own learning. For example, a lesson might end with students being asked to draw a What-How-So train; once they have drawn a sketch of a three carriage train, I ask them to write *what* they think they have learned in the rear most carriage, *how* they learned in the middle carriage, and *why* this might be useful in the front carriage (answering the question ‘So what?’).

My assessment of creative writing has also developed. I now use feedback to encourage students to engage actively in evaluating their own imaginative writing. For example, I have developed my own ‘bladesmith’ marking code that encourages students to reflect upon their imaginative processes; when giving students written feedback, I have become less ‘focused and directive’ (Dann, 2014), offering instead a single word as an ‘Even Better If’ (for example ‘shine’) that corresponds to one of a selection of questions being projected onto the board. Instead of responding to an imperative command, students respond to a question that helps them develop their own writing.

Finally, I have started to run an after school creative writing club. I meet with a small community of students once a week and lead writing activities that are completely disassociated from the demands of mark schemes. I provide a space for students to enjoy imaginative writing in a less pressurised environment. As a part of this club, I have particularly enjoyed running poetry slams that enable students to see poetry and writing as a ‘process focused on relationships rather than a final product’ (Endsley, 2016, p. 38).

iii) Alignment

I have encouraged my students to see themselves as writers, critics and learners rather than test subjects. Therefore, I have avoided wherever possible using the tired ‘vocabularies of assessment’ (Dann, 2014) that can dehumanise the writing process. To some degree, my use of the bladesmith pedagogical metaphor has enabled me to do this. For example, by circulating and verbally asking my students how they could add sharpness and shine to their work, I am encouraging them to engage in the use of imagery and emotive language without resorting to the use of terminology that can feel dry and unappealing. Of course the bladesmith metaphor has its limits (it is difficult to correct spelling and grammar errors without using precise terminology), but I have found it to be very useful in that it can partly mask the influence of exam mark schemes upon teaching and learning, thus helping to lower the stakes and construct a more trusting creative community. It also helps students to see writing as a design process (Myhill and Watson, 2011); after all, ‘creativity is not an event, but a process’ (Cremin, Gooch and Lambirth, 2005, p. 16).

Furthermore, although the academy in which I work requires me to grade student work, I have avoided regularly sharing creative writing grades with students as I recognise that it can demotivate and distract them (Black et al., 2004). As Maeda and Bermont observe, data rarely evokes ‘the emotions needed to spur people into action’ (2011, p. 23), and its use in assessment for learning can become a tool that encourages students to look at their past achievements rather than engage in their present learning (Marshall and Drummond, 2006). Meta-learning activities, such as the What-How-So plenary described above, further encourage students to identify as learners rather than performers; by moving away from explicit learning goals, I encourage students to control their own learning and have also started to gain a more realistic impression of the learning that is taking place.

Looking Out To Sea

At the end of *Beyond The Gates* Jen is drawn back towards Academis, feeling its 'lure' despite having been excluded from its community. The reader is uncertain as to what Jen and her daughter will do next but understands that Jen feels drawn towards the half-blinds and The Seeing. As such the story ends on a figurative and almost literal cliff-hanger. My personal situation as a writer and English teacher holds a similar degree of ambiguity.

Having identified ways in which performativity can negatively impact creativity, I have conducted comparative research and developed pedagogical practice that aims to redress these issues. My practice is constantly developing, and I am excited to discover, for example, whether or not I can transform my bladesmith metaphor into an educational fable and to examine whether such a narrative would be of value in the classroom. This paper has, in part, been an experiment that explores how a metaphorical narrative can be used to frame academic inquiry.

However, although the practices I have developed may help me (as well as other teachers) to nurture student creativity and therefore render the teaching profession more personally satisfying (like Jen, I value the power of stories and creativity very highly), I have not established whether the pressures of teaching a year 11 class would result in me feeling obliged to abandon the practices I am developing. For example, it is worth noting that the Teacher whose practice is examined in the 'Comparing Communities' section of this paper has been heavily influenced by the fact that they predominantly teach year 11 classes; should I, when teaching a year 11 class next year, feel obliged to abandon the practices I have developed, the teaching profession may prove unsustainable for me.

Furthermore, I must decide whether or not I am resilient enough to continue working within a system that appears not to value creativity and autonomy as highly as commodified knowledge and data. Neoliberalism's influence upon education can result in the development of citizens who lack autonomy and creativity, two qualities that a capitalist society depends upon for the growth it requires; without creativity and autonomy, people cannot possess the skills or initiative necessary to create new economic opportunities and respond to the shifting

landscape of the future. If the government's aim is to transform schools into 'engines of social mobility' (DfE, 2010), a shift in policy and discourse may be required so that more students and teachers like myself are enabled to innovate. For example, Gorard and See would argue that a shift in emphasis away from performance and towards enjoyment could be an efficient way to improve attendance and inclusion in the education sector (2013).

Like Jen, standing in uncertainty carrying her daughter, I stand with the practices I have developed contemplating my future, trying to decide whether the environment within which I work is ultimately too hostile towards the creativity that I value so highly.

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Writing the cards by Katherine McMahon

Using tarot as a tool in supporting LGBTQ+ people to incorporate experience and identity into creative writing

Abstract

I have run several projects which supported LGBTQ+¹ people to write creatively about their experiences. This work, as well as my own experience as a queer poet, convinced me of the particular importance of writing for LGBTQ+ people. This is the driver for this research: I want to understand how best to support LGBTQ+ people to write about our identities, lives, and experiences.

Tarot, in a reclaimed and modern form, has recently seen a surge in popularity in some LGBTQ+ cultures, and is often articulated as an empowering practice of self-care and self-growth in the face of oppression. Tarot has also been used as a writing tool by a range of writers. I wanted to take tarot seriously as a part of LGBTQ+ culture and investigate how it could be incorporated into my practice as a creative writing educator.

Using Action Research, I developed and ran a tarot and creative writing workshop for LGBTQ+ people. This research investigates the potential of tarot as a creative writing tool for LGBTQ+ people, discussing emergent themes of working creatively with the subconscious, providing language for expressing thoughts and feelings, and community and relationship building.

Literature Review

In my work running creative writing projects with LGBTQ+ people, a theme which emerged strongly is the importance of writing in helping participants to retain control over their own identities in the context of discrimination and oppression (McMahon, 2014: pp11-13).

Reflective writing was proposed by Foucault as a ‘technology of the self’: “a way of working on the self in a deliberate, focused, and purposeful manner” (Ambrosio, 2008: pp263-4). This is explored with reference to LGBTQ+ identities in Baker’s (2013) conceptualisation of creative

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other related identities

writing as a tool for ‘queer becoming.’ Significantly, this process can open up the possibilities for creating selves outside of normative ideas of sexuality and gender (Baker, 2013: p362).

In self-making, we strive to create subjectivities which match with our values (Baker, 2013: p363). Of course, the values on which we base our self-making are formed by the discourses around us. According to Ambrosio, “the aim [of self-formation] is not to tell different stories about ourselves, or to tell the same stories differently, but to disassemble and reconstitute ourselves out of the collected discourse of others” (Ambrosio 2008: p251). Following Rabinow (1997), Baker uses the term ‘self-bricolage’ to describe this assembly/disassembly of the ‘already said’ in the process of queer self-creation (Baker, 2013: p363).

This suggests that there is a role for writing in supporting LGBTQ+ people to actively create our own (ongoing, unfixed) identities, and offers a liberatory practice for educators who are concerned with opening up possibilities for their students.

The use of tarot cards dovetails with the idea of self-bricolage. Tarot has become increasingly popular with some LGBTQ+ communities, often articulated as an empowering practice of self-care and self-growth against oppressive forces (e.g. Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Snow, 2018; Earthwork, 2018; Maiden, 2014).

In this context, tarot is used to imagine and construct one’s own future (rather than as a fortune-telling device), helping to process feelings and think through decisions (Wilson, 2013: 152). In Foucauldian ethics of the self, “the constitution of new identity practices is inspired and facilitated by engagement with discourse; with, among other things, textual artefacts” (Baker, 2013: 362). Tarot could be one kind of textual artefact to be used in self-bricolage: a deck of the ‘already-said’ which can be laid out and used to create something new in each reading, in each reader.

Tarot has also been used as a tool by many writers – from W. B. Yeats to Steven King (Kenner, 2009: pxv). Could combining tarot and creative writing as two ‘technologies of the self’ support LGBTQ+ people to write about our identities and experience, and thus support us in self-creation as an act of resistance to heteronormative discourses?

Gilbert argues that in education, learning through aesthetic responses (the thoughts and feelings that something produces) is democratising because it legitimises, and places value on, the student’s own reactions (Gilbert, 2016: p265). Tarot cards, when used in a modern,

intuitive way, place value on the reader's interpretation of the card, foregrounding their thoughts and feelings (Tea, 2017: pp4-5). For LGBTQ+ people, whose experience and identity is often devalued in the discourses around us, this could be an important factor in legitimising our experiences to be included in our writing.

However, while tarot has the potential to open up imaginative meaning, it also has the potential to shut down meaning if the interpretations of the cards are considered fixed.

For Bakhtin, monologue pulls towards fixed meanings and identities, while dialogue diversifies meaning and voices – and these forces are both necessary, creating a productive tension (Maybin, 2001: p66). In tarot, a monologic pull would be strict adherence to traditional interpretations of the cards, while a dialogic pull would be an intuitive approach based on the thoughts and feelings of each reader. For a liberatory creative writing practice, this directs towards opening up meanings through aesthetic interpretation, even when using deliberately queer decks, whilst valuing the ideas and structure that tarot offers.

Tarot has evolved in relation to a range of other discourses, necessarily including ones which have limited the creation of LGBTQ+ selves. There is a danger that tarot could replicate these: traditional decks such as the Rider Waite Smith deck (Waite & Smith, 1999) include heavily gendered and heteronormative symbolism. In response to this, a wide range of modern decks have been produced which draw from traditional symbolism while adapting it to be more reflective of the lives of marginalised people.

Methodology

I use a focussed ethnographic approach with Action Research.

An ethnographic approach allows me to consider LGBTQ+ people as a subculture based on their shared experience (Richards & Morse, 2007: 58), and to investigate and describe participants' experiences from their own perspectives (Richards & Morse, 2007: 53). This subculture is not homogenous or fixed, and includes intersecting identities such as race and disability.

My previous roles within LGBTQ+ communities as a development worker and an arts facilitator, and my desire to develop my practice, informed my decision to take an Action Research approach (Koshy, 2010: 1). The research took its initial direction from *in situ* observations in these professional contexts (Cohen et al., 2011: 227). It is a snapshot, which

can provide some evidence of the efficacy of tarot as a writing tool in this particular context (Koshy, 2010: 78).

My analysis is led by the interpretations of the participants, so that the theory emerges from the research (Koshy, 2010: 25), and so that the research is participatory and co-generated (Koshy, 2010: 21).

This research followed the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011).

Data collection

I ran the workshop in December 2017 in south London, with seven participants recruited through social media. The workshop included:

- A short mindfulness meditation to support participants to tune in to their responses.
- A focussed free write based on a random card (Kenner, 2009: p104), to get the group used to using the cards as open-ended prompts based on associations and feelings.
- A group storytelling game (adapted from Kenner, 2009: p107) using cards to add a collective story, intended to encourage quick associations.
- A writing exercise based on a chosen a card that represented something participants value about themselves (adapted from Kenner, 2009: p110). I asked them to think about what the image evokes, then made the guidebooks for the decks available. I emphasised that they could take key words or images that resonated with them and ignore the rest.
- Creation of a group oracle deck², including haikus based on their writing and a range of collage materials. With permission, I compiled these and sent them to all the participants a few days after the workshop.

We used three modern decks which engage with queer and feminist critiques whilst drawing on the symbolism of older tarot traditions (Krans, 2016; Graverson, 2016; Burrington, 2017). The choice of more than one deck to further opened up imaginative space for participants.

Following the workshop, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with participants. Morgan³ (they/them) is an experienced writer who uses tarot socially; Laura (she/her) has been learning

² Alongside tarot, many artists produce ‘oracle’ decks, which function in a similar way to tarot but have their own symbolic system – for instance, drawing on traditional plant symbolism (Rallis, 2016).

³ All names have been changed, and anything that could identify participants has been withheld.

tarot for a year, and has done some personal writing in the past. I also collected two responses from an online survey sent to participants after the workshop.

Analysis

Working creatively with the subconscious

Participants said that the exercises were “a useful way of channelling memories – to find a way to make them easier to think about” (Fieldnotes, 09/12/17). Both interviewees were surprised by the pieces that they produced because the exercise tapped into their thoughts and feelings in an unexpected way:

“I really really surprised myself with what came out... though in retrospect it makes a lot of sense with the thought that had been put in my brain by the card and also what I was thinking about more generally... It did feel like, my subconscious is writing this! [...] The tarot made it very immediate and very personal... the way the tarot deals with like big themes and with abstraction, and the way it encourages a certain kind of introspection, it meant that I was much more quickly in this space of talking about deep shit.” (Morgan)

Tarot’s effect of drawing out thoughts and feelings supported participants to draw on their experiences; a survey respondent said: “The writing I came away with was very personal and introspective, it was like helping me focus on writing a diary.” Talking about the exercises in the workshop, Laura said: “it brought out something for me that was a little bit unexpected... it did make me think about identity and who I am.”

These experiences suggest that tarot and writing, brought together, fit with Foucault’s idea of ‘technologies of the self.’ By offering the opportunity for introspection and exploration, participants could think – and write – about identity and experiences in a deeper way.

A language for thoughts and feelings

Participants talked about tarot (in general) as providing “a different way to express what they’re thinking or feeling and talk about things they might not be able to otherwise” (Fieldnotes, 09/12/17).

Morgan's writing, in the longer-form activities, expressed difficult aspects of their relationship with their father. As well providing a way to access their feelings about this, the exercises offered a different way to communicate them:

"My relationship with my parents is kind of strange at the moment... Looking at it now, it was very obviously coming out in the poem [...] I think it's going to end on something about trans stuff, and sort of wanting to acknowledge that my dad has actually been really good about my gender identity stuff." (Morgan)

Morgan and Laura both acknowledged the potential for the language of tarot to be heteronormative and exclusive. However, both interviewees felt that the workshop avoided this pitfall; Morgan linked this to the importance of foregrounding interpretation as opposed to being focussed on set meanings:

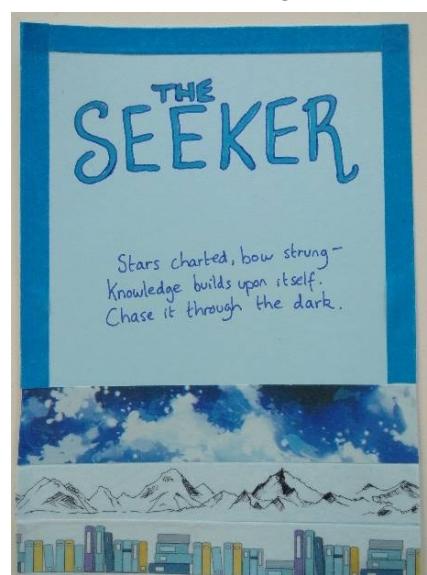
"I tend to focus on the physical reality of the card rather than like, oh let's look up what it means [...] Otherwise I think I would find it a lot harder to engage with, because... a lot of the magical tradition is super invested in gender binaries and heteronormativity." (Morgan)

Morgan's interpretation of their chosen card was very different from the guidebook; they were able to transform it into something meaningful to them. This process is related to the concept of self-bricolage, especially as Morgan's piece was very personal and part of a process of working through their feelings.

"I thought the whole process of making [the oracle card – fig. 1] was such an interesting way of transforming something. It was like – take existing cards and put them through all these processes and then end up with something that's your own card, and actually that really speaks to a lot of my practice as a writer." (Morgan)

This affirms the need for an aesthetic approach, emphasising the writer's associations and feelings about the card:

"I think there are some people who like certain rules [in tarot]... but there's no real rules, you can do whatever you want." (Laura)



Some participants did find the guidebooks useful, and some already had a working knowledge of the symbolism which they incorporated into their writing. This is a delicate balance: tarot's structure and symbolic system is a resource which can be utilised, but overreliance on it can become prescriptive, shutting down space to rearrange the already-said into a new story (Baker, 2013: p361). The way these exercises are facilitated is essential in getting this balance right.

Building relationships and community

While the previous two themes were predicted by the literature review, the theme of community-building was a more surprising finding.

Both Laura and Morgan have experience of tarot as a tool for connection with important people in their lives: tarot has helped Laura to connect with her brother, who is transgender, while Morgan does tarot with a group of friends. For both, tarot helps them to discuss feelings and problems and offer support to one another. The oracle cards activity was particularly appealing to Morgan in this context:

"It's actually an activity I might like to try and do with my tarot geek friends... that process of making a mini deck that's about us as a friendship group." (Morgan)

For LGBTQ+ people, who can be isolated by dominant discourses, creating community is important for both wellbeing and political action. One survey respondent made a strong link between tarot and queer communities:

"To me, both tarot and queerness have a sense of magic and a sense of Otherness. Both are about community and connection and understanding."

Laura's oracle card (fig.2) was explicitly about creating community. She said:

"I think it's definitely politically a time for people coming together and pooling their resources, so I think that would have played a part with [the oracle card]... I think that it's

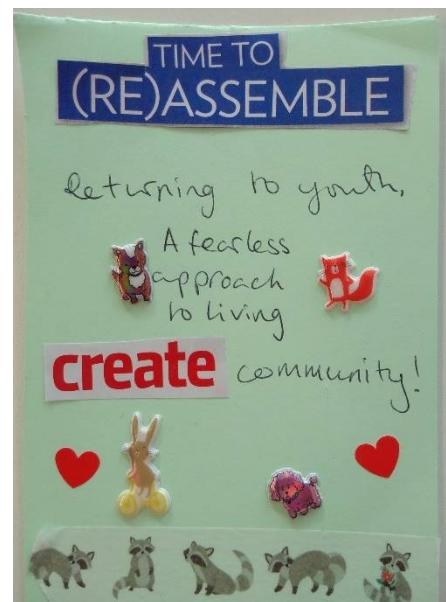


Fig. 2 (Oracle card by Laura)

like something to reassure me, and also to, you know, keep going – a reminder.” (Laura)

The oracle deck we created as a group drew on, and nurtured, this sense of community and support. Further research might explore how writing and tarot could be used to build communities of writers who can support and encourage each other in their writing.

Conclusion

Tarot, with its rich symbolism and big themes, can be a useful prompt to support participants in exploring their identities and experiences in their writing. Combining tarot with writing amplifies the possibilities for reflection and expression inherent in both. This kind of reflective practice is essential to the formation of identity as an active process which is empowering rather than limiting.

These benefits are particularly important for LGBTQ+ writers. Often LGBTQ+ people are told – implicitly or explicitly – that our experiences and feelings are not valid or important, and this can be difficult for LGBTQ+ writers who want to write from experience. By offering a space in which aesthetic interpretation is paramount, tarot can support LGBTQ+ people in accessing those experiences, and offer validation that our thoughts, feelings, and reactions are important to our writing.

The attitude of the educator is of utmost importance to creating the right atmosphere for this to happen. There is a danger that tarot could shut down possibilities for meaning and reproduce oppressive discourses. However, LGBTQ+ communities and culture have already begun this work, and as educators we would do well to follow their lead. Further research and practice could engage with LGBTQ+ communities who use tarot, to understand what kind of writing opportunities would be beneficial and how best to develop them collaboratively.

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Poems by Steve Roberts

Khakied Soldiers (1) - original

Isle of beauty isle of splendour
You don't look the same since Maria
Blew by
Knocking everything awry
Where noble mahogany once stood guard
A rabble of khakied soldiers
Stand limply at your gates

Khakied Soldiers (2)

My island beauty so full of splendour
You always been so green an' fair
You look so different after Maria
Blow by an' smash tings all aroun

Noble mahogany use to stand guard
Over you hills, rivers an' mountains
Now a rabble of khakied soldiers
Stand all limply at your gates

Not So Good For Me Brother -original

Trodding down Essex Road
On a cold wet autumn day
Me mind tussling its heavy load
When a lonely looking brother
Sheltering at the bus stop
Reaches out a hand
Enquiring if am good
So I give him five without breaking stride
Telling him I good
He remarks to my disappearing back
Ain't so good for me brother
To which my guilty and feeble reply was
hope it gets better soon bro
But as I look back
His eyes tell me that he didn't hear me
He needs more
And I ain't got no more to give him
Not even a minute of my time
Time I go to spend stranded
On a train that will not hustle me home
As I wonder down towards an alternative
I ponder on the brother
I ponder how relative is good
Because am heading towards
A weatherproofed home
Where food will be on the table

But how good is it for my scrambled head

Tussling with this and that

Unsure of where my life is heading

Wondering what my next gaffe will be

How much longer my fingertips can hold

I don't know your pain

But my good ain't so good brother

Parallels

De autumn breeze rattle me trousers leg

As ah was troddin down Essex Road

Ma mind tussling it heavy load

Me eyes ketch this lonely lookin brother

Scrunched under de bus shelter

His confuse mind must have sense a fellow struggler

As him reach out a han enquiring if I 'good'

Ah give him a high five widout breaking stride

'Yea man' my feeble reply

His achin voice remark to my disappearing back

'Ain't so good for me brother'

All I could muster in reply

'Hope it get better soon Bro'

Ah look back and his eyes lock wid mine

Telling me he need much more

More than just a glib response

Maybe a minute for a chat but ah cant give him dat

Not even a minute of my time

Time ah den spend stuck on a train

Dat will not whisk me home from platform eight

As ah wonder down to de undergroun

Ah ponder on de brother
Ah ponder how relative is good
Am I good because ah bolting towards
A weatherproof home wid food upon de table
How good is good eh
When me scramble head tusslin with dis an dat
Not sure where life heading
Not sure what de next calamity will be
Not sure how much longer me fingertips can hold on

My good ain't so good brother

Commentary

I shared these two poems in a seminar in the MA Creative Writing and Education course and then re-worked them based on some of the feedback I got. Creative Writing allows me to express my thoughts and feelings, it can be therapeutic as I reflect on life. Creative Writing can also be an effective tool for education and personal development.

I wrote Khakied Soldiers when I first saw the videos of the destruction Hurricane Maria unleashed on my home island, Dominica in Sept 2017. I was struck by how the few trees left standing had even their bark stripped away by the winds and I felt for my green and pleasant land.

Parallels I wrote after a chance meeting with a young Blackman huddled in a bus stop on Essex Road. He seemed to be reaching out for a chat but I was wrapped up in my push to get home and my own trials in my life. I later felt guilty that I didn't even spare him a minute because I was 'good', but then I wondered how relative was good and how good was my good against another.

When, is an unedited poem that I constructed in a Peter Hobbs' First Story seminar (March 2019), in a writing exercise with set limitations.

When

When did you decide
That this would be the place?
Was it that time

We all shared lunch in the sun
Remembering good times past?
Was it the time you sneaked out
To draw on a late night ciggy
In the light of a silvery moon
Washed out
By the city's Christmas lights?
Or was it the day
You stormed out of
The argument with her
To seek solace
Among the potted tomatoes
Guarded by creaking bamboo?
I wish we could meet
Just one more time
So you could tell me why?
For you to tell me when?
When did you decide
That this was to be the place
You would
Take
Your
Last
Breath
Here
On
Earth?

Creative Writing as reflective practice for educators by Jasmine Simms

School Trip to Windsor Castle

Tommy hasn't brought a packed lunch. The Teaching Assistant has to run to the school kitchens, to quickly make him a cheese sandwich. On the coach, he's the only child to feel sick. She tells him to look out the window; to find a fixed point in the distance. He wants to know where they are now. *Are we going a long way?*

Quite a long way, yes.

Near Mallorca?

No, that's in Spain.

Near Luton Airport?

Erm, not really.

Near Thorpe Park?

Actually, yes.

YAY, WE'RE GOING TO THORPE PARK!!

The coach erupts. The Teaching Assistant wants to cry. This is not her first school trip. Last term they went to the zoo.

She tours the castle with her little group of six. But first, they have to go through full airport security. Too late, the Teaching Assistant remembers about the scissors in her first aid kit. In the queue, a group of Japanese tourists start to crowd around Rosie, the only black child in the group. *She is so beautiful. Can we take her photograph?*

For some of the children, everything is a new experience. *Why do the police have guns?*

In caaase aneebody triez to steel thee queen's 'at, little Gabe answers, wisely.

Will they shoot them?

The Teaching Assistant doesn't know how to answer that. She doubts anyone has ever tried to steal the queen's hat.

They go from room to room in the castle. Gabe is winning hearts by narrating everything he sees in excited Frenglish. Tommy is silent, contemplative. She asks them to find a shield which could be their family shield. Tommy tells her his family already have one.

When they meet the palace guards in the courtyard, most of the children are afraid. *Will they shoot us?*

No. Definitely not.

Only Tommy seems excited by the prospect. He practices marching.

On the way to the exit, they stop to stare at Meghan Markle's wedding dress. Rosie wants to know why wedding dresses are always white. Then Tommy interrupts. *There are lots of people here speaking different languages.* The Teaching Assistant smiles. She thinks she sees excitement in Tommy's eyes - a curious interest. *That's right, Tommy. What do you think about that?*

Bad. He frowns. They're in England. They should speak English.

School Trip to Windsor Castle is part of a series of flash fictions collectively titled The Teaching Assistant. They are based on my experiences working as a Year 1 Teaching Assistant in a mainstream Primary School. When I began writing them, it was compulsive. I wasn't sure why I was doing it. Somehow the practice felt almost confessional. Except instead of a priest there was only me coming home from work, sitting down, confessing the day's inexplicable moments.

Life Writing is ordinarily a past tense activity. But these confessions came out in present tense, as though still happening. The one thing they all have in common is that they end unresolved. I'm primarily a poet, and at first I wondered if they could be prose poems. But a poem comes back to itself in the end, and these fictions don't do that. They go out into the forest and stay there. As a reader, I can only retrace my steps. So I find myself asking, who am I in all of this? The Teaching Assistant. I'd never written about myself in third person so decisively before. I couldn't believe how lacking in compassion I seemed.

It made me realise, firstly, that it's hard to empathise with children. Harder perhaps than we give it credit for. I remember very little from being five years old. Perhaps this is why the Teaching Assistant seems so overwhelmed by every question, so incapable of answering. Yevgeny Zamyatin (1923) once said that 'children are the boldest philosophers' and 'this is why every question they ask is so absurdly naive and so frighteningly complex'. A beautiful sentiment. But it is also both perplexing and exhausting, to spend your days with philosophers. Which leads me to the other thing I noticed: that the Teaching Assistant sounds very tired, doesn't she? This observation, at least, I could act on.

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Why I Write: Using Writing to Push Back Against Oppression by Ioney Smallhorne

This essay will take an investigative look into my own writing history, the circumstances that lead me to become a writer, and how I have used writing throughout my life to push back against oppression. I will examine my relationship with literacy and education to discover how they have informed my creative writing identity. I will argue how a dialogical approach to education has helped to develop my writing and aided me in coping with oppression in the classroom.

Finding My Feet

I arrived at Gatwick from Jamaica on 2nd February 2010 with 24p, wearing flip flops in heavy snow. I had lost my lap top, I had no evidence of the TV programmes that I had produced over the last two years in my role as a junior TV producer and had no chance of receiving a professional reference from the boss I had worked for. I had nothing to show, apart from me. Two weeks prior to my return to England, I was hitchhiking 40 miles from Bull Bay to Spanish Town, at 3:30am in the solid darkness of the Jamaican night. I had no phone, no money and was bare foot, fleeing from an abusive relationship. I had made significant progress in two weeks. I was alive, but more importantly I had fought to be alive, which again was great progress as a month prior, I was considering death as a way out.

My dramatic exit from the relationship may not have been the safest route, but for me, it was vital I left in this manner; navigating my way bare foot through the night using the moonlight, feeling my way over sharp rocky ground, using the curve of the coast to judge my location and cross an island. I was stripped to a primitive visceral existence relying alone on instinct. Internationally recognized scholar, writer and Jungian psychoanalyst, Professor Clarissa Pinkola Estés characterises a woman's instinct as "the Wild Woman", in *Women Who Run With The Wolves; Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, "...Without her, women's inner eyes are closed by some shadowy hand, and large parts of their days are spent in a semi-paralyzing ennui...Without her, women lose the sureness of their soul footing. Without her, they forget why they are here...Without her, they are silent when they are in fact on fire." (Estés, 1992) This reconnecting with my 'Wild Woman' was imperative, it is what I believe helped to shape the woman, the writer and spoken word artist I am today. If I had been 'rescued', if the police or a friend or family member came to collect me from the house I

'shared' with my ex-partner, and drove me comfortably to safety, I truly believe that I would have a very different outlook on myself and my writing. Estés continues, "The archetype of the Wild Woman...is patroness to all painters, writers, sculptors, dancers, thinkers, prayer makers, seekers, finder- for they are all busy with the work of invention, and that is the instinctive nature's main occupation." (Estés, 1992, p. 8)

On 2nd February 2010 along with my life and a reconnection with the 'Wild Woman' within, I also had an outpouring of questions. How am I going to get myself to Nottingham from Gatwick Airport with only 24p? How have I managed to get myself in this mess? And why? Were the first few, but more questions came.

The ex-partner whom I was fleeing, continued to have a grip on my life as he stalked me virally for the following three years or so, sending threats via the post, text messages and emails. He also used social media platforms to 'slut-shame' and generally humiliate me. Any attempt to reply would lead to a crescendo of abuse, so I wouldn't respond, just delete, block, and apologise to friends and family for being dragged into my mess. I had no idea where my ex-partner was, which in itself was frightening, but he still had the power to silence me. Feeling helpless, I wrote a letter to him, one that I had no intention of sending, it consisted mainly of 52 questions. Both the Kingston and Nottinghamshire Police couldn't help me, but I felt that I was worth investigating. My questions became a safe way to fight back, I was not accepting his abuse, I was developing confidence, building myself, finding and listening to my voice, I was pushing back.

"Problem posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality..." (Freire, 2017, p. 57) Recognising that I had 'internalized' (Freire, 2017, p. 21) my ex-partners opinion of me and realising the abuse as a 'problem' was my first step to freedom, to an autonomous future and eventually pushed me to take those first bare-footed steps to a tangible freedom. Freire continues, "Problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality.' (Freire, 2017, p. 56) The letter I wrote was my attempt at a dialogue, all be it a dialogue with myself, I acknowledged that I had the right to question my situation and the world, which in turn unveiled my reality.

Although I had written sporadically throughout my life, I regard this letter as the birth of loney the performance poet, when I began to take writing seriously. A couple of months after that, I joined a poetry collective, the Mouthy Poets, that met weekly at Nottingham Playhouse, to

write, edit, share and perform. It took two years before I shared or ‘performed’ any of my poetry I had written about the relationship that nearly killed me.

Mary Beard reminds us that, “classical traditions have provided us with a powerful template for thinking about public speech...and whose speech is to be given space to be heard. And gender is obviously an important part of that mix.’ (Beard, 2017, p. 18)

I would add race and class to that too; for a black woman of working-class background to stand and speak her truths, to name her oppression, is a political act. bell hooks, affirms my standpoint, “...the experience of white women was universalized to stand for all female experience and that when “black people” were talked about, the experience of black men was the point of reference... It was clear that these biases had created a circumstance where there was little or no information about the distinct experiences of black women.” (hooks, 1994, p. 120)

Finding Solace in Nature

When reflecting on why I write and how I have used writing to push back against oppression, I have to journey back to when I first became acquainted with writing and reading.

My parents had their own business, a small newsagent in Hyson Green, Nottingham, an area in the 80s known for housing immigrants, the unemployed, prostitution, alcoholics in the park, dog poo and needles on pavements and council estates. Starting primary school was traumatic. Each morning I would cry and protest that I didn’t want to attend school, so the teachers bribed me. They created a fictitious role- The Plant Monitor. My primary school had a large collection of indoor plants and it was my job to check on them, water them, remove any dead leaves, re-pot when necessary. It was a role that gave me access to the ordinarily ‘out of bounds’ areas such as the Secretaries Office and the Staff Room, (which was always warm, with the curtains drawn and thick with nicotine clouds, as it was the 1980s, pre smoking in public ban). Unfortunately, I was a little over zealous with the watering and many of the plants died, adding to this, the role didn’t improve my outlook on school- I just wanted to go home after I’d completed my ‘job’, but I did learn how to ‘read’ different environments, I learnt how the teachers behaved differently in the staff room than in the class room, how their language also changed when speaking to staff compared to students. I was learning about plants, how they all grew individually, which ones preferred direct sunlight light, that the cheese plant needed more space compared to the fern.

Margaret Mackey notes the similarities when young children are learning to read and learning to map their environment, 'Children learn to read at approximately the same stage in life as they start to master their physical environment...some of the same mapping and schema-building strategies inform each activity'. (Mackey, 2010, p. 323)

On warm days, as a child my mum would collect my brother and I from school and we would walk 2 miles home, across minor roads, a rather large recreational ground that had a wooded area, a park with swings and slides and a wild flower patch. I would pick up and examine stones, twigs, disregarded pigeon feathers and flowers on the walk home. I couldn't resist picking at least one flower, placing it in a glass of water and studying it as it wilted. I would agree with Mackey when she argues that learning to map an environment and its inhabitants as a child informs your ability to decode literacy. 'Many children learn to read just at the same time they are beginning to move through their own world more significantly...they interpret some of their world through the action of their own feet.' (Mackey, 2010, p. 325)

My environment, wider community and love of the natural world definitely helped my literacy skills. In fact, nature helped me to form my very first simile, aged around 6. When set the task to design a Mother's Day card, I wrote inside 'Mummy you are pretty like flowers', all the words were spelt incorrectly and the grammar askew but it was clearly my first attempt of a poem.

Nature has always been a comfort and a place where I draw inspiration for my writing. All of my poems that confront my experience in Jamaica have a reference to the natural world.

Yamaye - Finding my Tongue

My loathing of school stemmed from my inability to read as well as the other children in my class. Whilst my peers were advancing onto the *Griffin Pirate Stories* by Shelia MacCullah I was lagging behind on the *B1 Pirate Stories*, (of said author), like *Rodger Red Beard* or *Greg and the Black Pirates*. Reading made me feel stupid and inadequate. Speaking wasn't much better, I had a stammer that trampled on any confidence remaining after reading. I felt alienated at 'read-on-your-own-time' I would usually pretend to read but really be looking at the pictures and colours or be drawing and/or daydreaming.

I would have to take the Pirate books home for extra homework. My parents would spend around 20 minutes after dinner reading with me. My Dad is Jamaican (and my Mum is of Jamaican heritage) so would often tell me his version of pirate stories, edited for a young child- how they were bad people, who stole land and did horrible things to the Taino, Arawaks and

other indigenous peoples of the Caribbean as well as African and Indian people. This time, with my parents, set the foundations for a discerning reader who later would investigate and oppose oppression using writing for mobilisation. It was through these sessions that I learned that books didn't always tell the truth or at least didn't tell the whole story. That the truth and stories of black and brown people had to be excavated from the memory of elders, sieved through the words that appeared on 'their' page, and translated from 'their' dominant culture and language into ours, Jamaican Patois. My instinct also advised me not to repeat my Dads version of pirate stories in class; they were private, but I, and my parents were aware that I still had to learn the class room stories, to prove to the dominate culture that I could read and to progress in life.

Paulo Freire pairs with Donald Macedo discuss how literacy is not only a technical skill but is also political, that literacy can both be empowering and disempowering. Macedo states, 'On the one hand, students have to become literate about their histories, experiences, and cultures of their immediate environments. On the other hand, they must also appropriate the codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environments. There is often an enormous tension between these two dimensions of literacy.' (Freire, P. Macedo, D., 2001, p. 47)

In class I felt disempowered and uninspired by the task of reading books that were filled with words I couldn't decode, with characters of whom I had no connection. At home, the same books, read with my parents, annotated with Jamaican patois, a language I consider to be apart of my cultural make up, had a profoundly empowering and positive impact on me. These reading sessions enabled me to have a world view, to place myself in the wider context of history and culture.

bell hooks, raises some poignant issues regarding the link between 'languages and domination', specifically how the standard English language is a symbol of colonisation. 'It is the language of conquest and domination; in the United States, it is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues.' (hooks, 1994, p. 168)

That mask spans many nations colonised by England. It's widely believed that during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, in Jamaica (and the wider Caribbean) if an enslaved African was heard speaking in their native language they risked having their tongue cut out.

“...It is difficult not to hear in standard English always the sound of slaughter and conquest.” (hooks, 1994, p. 169) Jamaican patois is a patchwork of English, Spanish, Arawak/Taino, various African languages and traces of many Indian languages threaded together by oppressed people fighting for survival and a safe space to communicate.

Returning to hooks, “By transforming the oppressor’s language, making a culture of resistance, black people created an intimate speech that could say far more than was permissible within the boundaries of standard English”. (hooks, 1994, p. 171)

As a child hearing my Dad translate the pirate books using our tongue empowered me, and gave me courage to confront the ‘read-on-your-own’ time in class. Today, I occasionally write and perform using Jamaican patois, when I want to say more than English will allow. I am aware by doing so, that I am continuing a resistance that my ancestors initiated, that by using their tongue, I am pushing back against oppression.

Naming Our World; In Dialogue With My Community

During weekends and school holidays I would sometimes sit in the newsagent with my Dad and he would read the newspapers to me, all of them. He would read the journalist version and after give me the ‘real’ version, which was his anti colonialist-anti-white supremacist-Jamaican patois version. I thought newspapers were great, but my favourite was the National Geographic. We would spend hours flicking pages, each page took us to a new enchanting and vibrant world. I was captivated by the photographs of rivers, of rain forests, of people from far away places and animals (I have issues now with how these people were exoticised and classed with flora and fauna, viewed through a white lens, but I was 6 or 7 years old then). My Dad would often have my globe and ask me to find the country that the article featured. Occasionally other shop keepers like Melvin the Butcher, Tony the Dry Cleaner, Jerome the Electrician or regular customers like Oscar would come in and join the conversation and we were all transported to these places together. *The National Geographic* was a spring board that inspired Dad and the other shop keepers to reflect and share stories of their country of origin (Ireland, St Kitts and Jamaica), Hyson Green, and the political issues that impacted on them.

Returning to *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*, Freire stresses the empowering effects that a dialogical education can have. “The important thing, from the point of view of the libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the

thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades.' (Freire, 2017, p. 97)

Literature, in this case *The National Geographic*, coupled with dialogue with my Dad, and community members enabled me to question, name the world around me, form opinions on it and to become a critical thinker. These 'talking' sessions sparked interest and wonder, something I very really felt in class, labelled as a 'weak' reader.

I also had violin lesson at the Irish Centre, where a few of the Irish children who attended my primary school went with their parents to socialise. This was at a time when IRA attacks and politics frequented newspapers, radio and television news bulletins. My first-hand experience with Irish people; being in earshot of their conversations and debates on the then current affairs, even though I didn't understand the complexities of their politics, assisted me to form an alternative view of what the headlines and news bulletins offered.

"Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world... this movement from word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world." (Freire, P. Macedo, D., 2001, p. 35)

So as far as my 5-7-year-old self was concerned, the *National Geographic* reading and talking sessions in my parents newsagent and the violin classes at the Irish Centre were more fun than school, this is where I would feel safe and this is where I believe my love of words, stories and books were nurtured. Today, as a performance poet I've shared my poetry nation-wide, usually at small intimate venues. Often, after finishing my set, audience members approach me, they share their experiences, we discuss current affairs, my poems act an invitation for conversation and I find this deeply rewarding. These conversations often enable me to take a fresh perspective on my writing.

"If it is in speaking their word that people...transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity." (Freire, 2017, p. 61)

Seeing Where I Belong

Luckily, we had a library five minutes from our shop/home where mum took my brother and myself to borrow books frequently. A family friend, Lorna, was a librarian for the Derbyshire

library service, she would ensure that the library where she was stationed was stocked with books by non-white authors with non-white characters and occasionally she would bring some books for me too.

Both my Mum and Lorna thought it imperative for me to be able to see black and brown people in books, they understood that this would inform how I imagined myself and other people of colour in the world.

Professor Mary Beard, in *Women and Power*, raises the importance of representation of women in power, discusses how a lack of representation led to an inability to visualise herself as a professor and how cultural stereotypes animates our imagination. “If we close our eyes and try to conjure up the image of a president or...a professor, what most of us see is not a woman. And that is just as true even if you are a woman professor: the cultural stereotype is so strong that, at the level of those close-your-eyes fantasies, it is still hard for me to imagine me, or someone like me, in my role.” (Beard, 2017)

I would argue that ‘those-close-your-eyes fantasies’, that lead us to make assumptions, would need to be stretched beyond their limits to imagine a black working-class female as a professor, published author, prime minister; that mainstream media hasn’t offered enough examples for our imaginations to make that leap.

I feel that my writing, that places black and brown women’s experiences at the centre, are directly pushing against a white supremacist mainstream that often fails to include non-white experiences, or that often writes their stories.

Learning About Class, in Class...

When it was time for my elder brother to commence secondary school, my parents took the decision to send us to a private school in a middle-class area. For our progressions in life, they believed it vital that my brother and I be able to communicate and interact with different types of people, as well as the inhabitants of Hyson Green. I’m not sure how my parents afforded the school fees, I know that we were able to pay the school fees in instalments, and had vouchers for the uniform. It was here I learnt about class; how other families have annual holidays nationwide and abroad, have more than one pair of shoes, more than one car, cars that didn’t break down or make load chugging noises whilst moving. I learned that some people lived in areas with gardens, detached homes that had rooms for studying and guests and washing machines.

I was the only black girl not only in my class but in the juniors and infants. I became embarrassed to tell my new class mates where I lived; my kitchen was the dinning room, front room and play area for mice which my Dad often set traps for. I felt new levels of humiliation; before I felt comfortable to cry at lunch time with children that wet their pants, or had holes in their t-shirts and/or food smeared across their face, but this humiliation felt different. In the new school the children spoke differently, each word was crisp, they didn't sound like they came from the Nottingham I knew, they sounded posh. Hoggart describes the life of a working-class boy who has been awarded a scholarship to attend a grammar school. "Once at the grammar school, he quickly learns to make use of a pair of different accents, perhaps even two different characters and differing standards of value." (Hoggart, 2009, p. 267)

In my other school, there had been a constant presence of chatter, giggles and sometimes singing too. My new classes were held in a thick silence, when other students did talk in class it was often in whispers. hooks confronts the subject of class, "...Silence and obedience to authority were most rewarded, students learned that this was the appropriate demeanor in the classroom. Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of the classroom social order. These traits were also associated with being a member of the lower classes." (hooks, 1994, p. 178)

My class were set a project about holidays, we had to design a poster from a country we had visited. The year before, my family travelled to Jamaica. It took my parents a couple of years to save up for a three-week holiday, we stayed with relatives, my brother shared beds with cousins. This was what I was basing my poster on. We were to present our posters to the rest of the class, other students had to guess the country. I knew where a lot of the countries were, thanks to the newspaper and National Geographic sessions with my Dad and my globe. One student held up her poster, it had snow-capped mountains with people skiing, the question was put to the class- 'where would you go skiing'? I proudly stated the Antarctic. The class erupted in laughter (one of the few times I remember loud laughter) and I knew that I had made a fool of myself. I felt even more embarrassed when it was time to present my poster, many of the other children had visited Jamaica, stayed in hotels along the north coast. It sounded very distant from my Dad's humble fishing village, it felt as if they knew more about Jamaica, than I did. I felt as if my experience was wrong, inferior and invalid.

"It was the constant evocation of materially privileged class experience (usually that of the middle class) as a universal norm that not only set those of us from working-class backgrounds

apart but effectively excluded those who were not privileged from discussions..." (hooks, 1994, p. 181)

Today, I often intertwine my working-class background into middle classes spaces, I no longer feel embarrassed but still feel that I'm expected to adhere to middle-class standards. hooks comments on working-class people, '...they must believe they can inhibit comfortably two different worlds...They must believe in their capacity to alter the bourgeois settings they enter.' (hooks, 1994, p. 183)

A Silence That Listened

The 1992 recession gripped England and my parents' newsagent could not withstand its reach. They went bankrupt, our shop and flat were reprocessed and for the following three years we stayed with relatives or temporary rented accommodation. My parents had no money to pay the school fees and after two years I left to find my third school to complete my primary years.

The new school was middle-class area and predominantly white. I joined in year 6, I had no friends, I was lonely and isolated. My mum thought it would be comforting for me to continue with violin lessons as it was something familiar.

The lessons were held in the narrow stationary room, the teacher was a pervert who would stand too close to girls while his hands rested on their bodies. I was too shy to tell anyone in this new school where no one knew my name. My parents couldn't afford to keep up the violin lessons so they ended after eight months or so, I didn't tell my parents about the pervert teacher, I was fearful of making our situation worse.

Secondary school was a comprehensive five minutes away that sat on a hill surrounded by woods. It was the mid-90s, by now I had become comfortable with being an outsider. One day during year 9 my Mum left the family home, I followed shortly after and we lived together in a number of women's refuges for a few years- my remaining time at school. I was a safe pair of ears, and I listened to many of the stories of the women whom we shared various refuges with. They seemed comfortable talking to me and I felt as if someone should be listening to them.

The pervert violin teachers must have been investigated, some of his ex-students, were once called into a room to talk with teachers and the police. I was never invited to participate in any

conversation. I learnt again that white people's opinions and voices had higher currency than mine, their words carried authority, importance, were worth investigating.

I rebelled, quietly, returning to my unconditional friend, nature. I would often take books from the school library, skip classes, sit secluded in the woods, read, write or draw at my own pace. I would write the things I wanted to say but didn't have the confidence or platform to verbalise. The woods offered a silence that listened and safety. At this stage of my life I didn't imagine being a writer. It was something that I did naturally to release all the voices, questions and emotions. It happened sporadically, always unstructured, never edited or re-read, but it was vital. I didn't realise then, but I was using writing to heal. Returning to Estes, " (a) women's flagging vitality can be restored by extensive "psychic-archeological" digs into ruins of the female underworld." (Estés, 1992, p. 1)

As an adult, I have returned to each experience; the conversations with the abused women, the violin lessons, the humiliation in classes, the bullies, the poverty, the abusive relationships, and I have confronted each of them through writing.

Orbital Learning

Each new season a peony bulb rises above ground, it has more leaves, the bloom is greater, its branches stretch further than the previous season, but it again, will wilt and die- this is crucial, this is life. Life depends on an orbital motion and a "synchronisation with the ancient pattern of all nature". (Estés, 1992, p. 137) The Earth orbits the Sun, the moon around the Earth, etc. Estés explains further, 'Life-Death-Life, nature is a cycle of animation, development, decline and death that is always followed by re-animation. This cycle affects all physical life and all facets of psychological life.' (Estés, 1992, p. 137)

A victim may conclude that my life has gone around in circles; abuse, healing, fighting back, abuse, but I don't feel or write like a victim. Using writing and the skills gained from reading the world, I prefer to conclude that my life has been shaped by orbital learning. I have used writing to name my pain, my oppressors, and pushed back against the oppression; each time using the lessons learned previously to tackle the new situation.

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Rong, a short story, by Shaohong Zhi

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The golden full moon has already climbed to the middle of the night sky. With her left temple against the cold glass, Rong is sitting cross-legged, in front of the window. Her puffed eyes are dry and itchy. She hasn't eaten the whole day. She is hungry and exhausted. Her little sisters breathe gently, head to head, under the same quilt. How she wishes she could lie down and rest like them, without all the sadness and anger punching inside her head. But her packed old school bag reminds her the harsh reality. She has to escape from her mother and the man.

Rong waits another hour or so. Then she hears the family rooster crowing the first time. She knows she has another two hours before it is time to leave. Maybe she can just close her eyes for a minute. She wakes up feeling the cold on her shoulders. Just then, the rooster crows again. She looks out of the window. The eastern sky has started turning fish-belly grey. Rong quietly crawls out of the large bed. She turns around and looks at her sisters' innocent faces under the moonlight. Rong tucks Ling's bare arm under the quilt, then grabs her packed bag and shoes. There is no door between their room and the outer room, but a thin blue cotton curtain. She walks on her tiptoes, so as not to wake up her mother who sleeps next door. When she is about open the front door, her mother's snoring stops. Rong stands there, holding her breath, until she can hear her mother tossing and the snoring starts again. Opening and closing the door behind her, she takes a deep breath of cold autumn air. Under the bright moonlight, four large wooden round tables and dozens of stools lay scattered in the yard. There, people were eating, drinking and laughing in the day. Rong still can't believe that was her engagement party; that was only yesterday.

Seated around the tables were her uncles, aunties and neighbours. They talked, laughed, ate and got drunk. Rong sat next to her fiancé the whole time, feeling shy and nervous, couldn't eat anything. She was only 16, had just finished her secondary school that summer. She felt the urge to get up and run. Run like when she was only a little girl, bare feet, up the hill, on the grass, among the pine trees, chasing rabbits or squirrels, with wild flowers pinned in her hair. She got up and went to the toilet. The toilet was located behind the house. Just before she turned the corner, she heard someone whisper:

'Did you see her?'

'Of course! She thinks everyone is fool. No-one can see through her clever plan!'

'Get her daughter engaged with the man so she can continue sleeping with him.'

'Rong is only 16. There will be another two years before they can marry. She is so cunning.'

'How about him? Have the mother first, then the daughter.'

For a moment, Rong couldn't fully understand what the two women were talking about. She kept walking towards the toilet. The other two exchanged a look when they saw Rong coming and quickly went away. Afterwards, she thought about their conversation and realised they were talking about her and her mother.

Rong walks across the yard to the front gate, carefully not to knock any chairs. The women's whispers still echo in her ears. She silently opens the front gate, like every morning when she used to go to school. It is very quiet. Even the dogs, birds, trees and mountains seem to be sleeping. After the harvest, the corn field looks vast and empty. She can even see the railway bridge now. She walks past her friend Yan's house. Rong envies Yan. Yan doesn't like to go to school. She thinks studying boring, but her parents force her to continue. Rong knows Yan will follow her big brother's example and go to college one day. She never considers herself clever, because her mother reminds her of this often enough. She has been told that no matter how hard she studies, she will never make it to high school. Rong doesn't think Yan is clever either. She really enjoyed going to school every day with Yan, to be away from home. She knows she is destined to work in the corn field like her mother. But she never imagined she would be engaged this autumn.

Her fiancé's house is the last one in the village. It is the only mud house left. Although he is the village cashier, considered a profitable job by the villagers, his family is very poor. The food ration seems never enough for his widower father and his four younger brothers. Rong remembers the day he came to her house when she was alone; how he tried to put his hand under her blouse. She was terrified, but managed to wriggle away. She can still see those long dirty finger nails and hear his laugh. When she told her mother what he tried to do, she was very angry. Rong thought her mother was cross with the man. Now Rong isn't sure.

She walks further down the narrow path, passes the army's vegetable plot, comes to the river side. She avoids the main road. At this early hour, someone like old Liu could be on his way to the town to collect manure from public toilet. She continues along the river. Her shoes quickly become wet from the morning dew. Rong bends down to the river, scoops some

water to wash her face. The cold water relieves the itchiness of her puffy eyes. Where are the fish? Must be sleeping among the waterbeds. What are they dreaming? Dreaming to swim all the way to the Eastern Sea? She pulls her thin cardigan sleeves to cover her hands. It is only early October, but it is very cold. She should have brought some warm clothes. Under the old willow tree, Rong notices some mushrooms. If she cooks them with green chilli, they will be very tasty. She almost goes to pick them, then she remembers what she is doing. After about ten minutes, Rong reaches the railway bridge. She has already planned to follow the rail track to the station. There, she would catch the train to Beijing.

Her father works in Beijing. Rong saw her father once a year during Chinese New Year. Rong doesn't understand why her father can't come home more often. Beijing isn't really far, like Tibet, especially after the railway was built. Her sisters were always very excited when he was home. He brought home those fancy sweets and biscuits from Beijing, orange flavour candy, sesame crisp candy, cookies shaped like lively animals. But her mother never looked happy to see him. She always started quarrelling with him after he arrived, blaming him for buying the wrong size shoes, or the wrong colour. He never argued, simply sat there, staring at the burning cigarette between his fingers, frowning. In the night, Rong would still hear her mother's complains and her father's sighs.

The river runs past under the railway bridge, day and night; never rests; sometimes it throws tantrums and whimpers; sometimes it sings joyfully. Rong sits on one of the railway track. The station is about twenty minutes' walk to the South. The two shining tracks compete with each other as they run towards it. The only passenger train stops at this station at 7:45 daily. It is going to carry her away from her mother, the man and her village. Rong has never been to Beijing. Actually, she never travelled beyond her local town. On the other side of the bridge, the town nestles at the foot of the mountains, asleep like a baby in the mother's arms. Rong can't imagine what her life would be outside this place. What her father will say when he sees her. She guesses he doesn't know what happened in the family. Will he send her back to the village, or allow her to live with him in Beijing? Then her mother's words stab her heart like a dagger.

'You want to leave? Go, go now! I won't stop you! Ling can take your place in two years' time.'

Her mother was standing against the door frame, with sunflower seeds in her left hand. She held one seed between her front teeth, cracked it, kept the core in her mouth, and spat

the shells on the ground. Rong noticed her newly permed hair, blood red lips and a pink blouse, and didn't know what to say. Ling is a clever girl, unlike her. Ling has been at the top of the class since year one. She has a good chance of getting into high school, even college. Rong thinks of the cashier, his laugh, his dirty nails. He must be very old now. His youngest brother is Ling's age. She must start walking to station. By evening, she will be in Beijing, 300 miles away. But there she sits, holding her bag close to her chest, listening the running river, looking at the village waking up slowly. Very soon, it will be under the blanket of smoke from the chimneys; old Liu will be coming back from the town, contented; aunty Zhao will be coming to the river with her goats, then to the mountain; children will be walking to school. Rong can almost feel the vibration of the track, her train is coming.

Author's note

Rong was my neighbour before my family moved away from the village long ago. I still remember the whispers among women in the neighbourhood. Although I was too young to understand it at the time, her story had a profound impact on me. I was determined to take control of my own destiny.

It took place in the 1980s, in a small village not far from Beijing, at a time of without TV, telephone. The Culture Revolution was just over a few years ago. Children grew up without any sexual knowledge. That's why Rong couldn't understand the women's conversation in the story.

Rong has been in my mind all these years. With the skill learned from the Creative Writing Workshops, I was able to retell her ordinary story. Someone asked me what happened to Rong? I haven't yet decided whether to continue her story.

Biographies

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Maritsa Baksh is a student on the MA in Creative Writing and Education programme at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Curmiah Lisette

Curmiah Lisette is a St Lucian-born, London raised poet, performer and educator. She is a double recipient of St Lucia's Outstanding Youth in Literary and Performing Arts awards and a former student on the MA Creative Writing and Education programme at Goldsmiths. Curmiah has had her poetic short films screened in film festivals across Europe, the US and the Caribbean. Much of her work merges art forms to draw on giving voice to the Caribbean and British-Caribbean black female narrative. Her debut collection of poems and short stories entitled *Chronicles of a Caribbean Bad Gyal inna London* is set for release in Jan 2020 while she is currently gearing up to perform at St Lucia's Roots and Soul Festival in August.

Anna Degenaar

Anna Degenaar is a short story writer from Cape Town, South Africa. She is a student on the MA in Creative Writing and Education programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her short story, *The Layover*, will appear in the Short Story Day Africa collection *Hotel Africa* later this year.

Eve Ellis

Eve Ellis is a poet and educator currently studying on the MA in Creative Writing and Education programme at Goldsmiths. Her poems have appeared in *Magma* and *Bare Fiction*, and she won the Winchester Poetry Prize in 2016.

Francis Gilbert

Francis Gilbert is a Senior Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is currently Head of the MA in Creative Writing and Education and course leader for PGCE English. He has published many books, including 'I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out of Here', 'Yob Nation' and most recently 'Snow on the Danube' (Blue Door Press, 2019). His research interests include: collaborative methods of reading, mindfulness and creativity, and the enactment of policy upon UK schools.

Sam Holdstock

Sam is a poet and a secondary school English teacher based in London. His first published poem recently appeared in *The Moth*, and he will soon begin his PhD in Education at Goldsmiths. Sam is interested in the overlap between writing, teaching and learning processes, and he has enjoyed exploring the pedagogical uses of metaphor and fiction in the classroom.

Ioney Smallhorne

When performing she's occasionally funny, at times vulnerable, tends to blend the political with the personal- she's always Ioney. When not writing poems she's failing her motorbike test, growing vegetables, travelling and trying to learn Italian. Longlisted by the Jerwood Fellowship 2017 short listed by Caribbean Small-Axe prize 2016. A member of the Peepal Tree Press Inscribe writing programme, studying a MA in Creative Writing & Education at Goldsmiths University, London. As a Spoken Word Educator she encourages young people to harness the power of poetry to realise their own greatness, currently a First Story workshop facilitator. A film maker and enjoys translating her poems to the screen. Ioney's work was recently published in the Peepal Tree Press poetry anthology, *Filigree*.

Jasmine Simmons

Jasmine is a poet and arts educator from West Yorkshire, UK. Her debut pamphlet, *Like Horses*, is forthcoming with Smith/Doorstep. She has received awards including the 2014 New North Poets Prize (Northern Writers Awards) and was a commended FOYLE Young Poet of the Year in 2012. Her poems have appeared in magazines such as *Magma* and *The North*, and in anthologies by *Bloodaxe*, *Smith/Doorstep*, *Tower Poetry* and *The Poetry School*. As an arts educator she has worked for organisations including Grimm and Co., *The Globe Theatre*, and *The Poetry School*. She is co-director of the Dead (Women) Poets Society.

Formerly Vice Chancellor's Scholar for the Arts at Durham University, since September 2018 Jasmine has been studying for an MA in Children's Literature at Goldsmiths College, University of London, whilst working as a Teaching Assistant in a mainstream London primary school. She will be Writer in Residence (Stadtschreiberin) at the University of Tübingen (Germany) from May-July 2019. In August she be a student at the University of Helsinki on a scholarship from Goldsmiths, studying the Finnish education system through social justice perspectives. The Teaching Assistant was first performed at the University of East London as part of the Borderlines project with Joelle Taylor.

Katherine McMahon

Katherine McMahon is a performance poet and educator. She completed her MA in Creative Writing & Education at Goldsmiths in 2018. She has performed across the UK, and has been published in magazines and anthologies; her pamphlet and album were published in 2012 by Stewed Rhubarb. She debuted her spoken word show, *Fat Kid Running*, in 2017. She has run participatory projects for organisations including LGBT Health and Wellbeing, The Albany, Kew Gardens, and the Royal Edinburgh Hospital Patients' Council, and has produced four collaborative anthologies. She's interested in using spoken word to build a more just, more sustainable, kinder world through community and solidarity. You can find her at <http://katherinemcmahon.org>

Steve Roberts

Steve was born in the South of the Windward Island of Dominica and grew up on its North-Eastern coast. He is currently on the MA in Creative Writing and Education course at Goldsmiths. His poetry was first published in *Rampart* - a collection he edited for the Frontline Co-operative in Dominica. He has performed at the Domfesta Poetry Against Violence Festival in Dominica. He is currently developing his debut production *Black Reflections* which he premiered at the Woodford Festival in October 2018.

Black Reflections is a choreo-poem that explores human experiences of love, laughter, reminiscence, inertia and the struggle to manage difference and change. The poetic imagery is heightened by emotive and engaging music and video woven into a captivating theatrical experience. "Mama", one of the poems from "*Black Reflections*", is included in "A River of Stories" vol 4, Alice Curry's compilation of tales and poems from across the Commonwealth, published January 2016 <http://www.ariverofstories.com/the-books/a-river-of-stories-4>.

Shaohong Zhi

Shaohong Zhi was born in Hebei, China. She had studied English at Chengde Teacher's College to become a qualified English teacher and worked at a secondary school for 3 years before she went to live and work in Dubai as a Business Travel Consultant. She travelled to London to join her husband in 2005. Now she lives with her daughter in Bromley, Greater London. She is studying Comparative English and Creative writing at Goldsmith University.

Besides reading and writing, Shaohong enjoys walking and cooking. *Rong* will be her first published story. Her aim is to write a collection of short stories about women in her life in the near future; her dream is to write a novel about her life journey from Chengde to London.