Different ways of descending into the crypt: methodologies and methods for researching creative writing

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Abstract

This article argues that we need to 'descend into the crypt' of creative writing, and use rigorous, academic research methods and methodologies to examine it. The communities that writing arises from, processes of writing, the unique psychologies of writers, the ways in which writing is used in different settings and eras all need to be researched using well-established modes of research. The article argues that while quantitative research – the use of numbers and statistics -- can offer insights into creative writing, it is qualitative research which affords the richest and most meaningful avenues. It shows that auto-ethnography with its focus upon the lived experiences of authors can provide illuminating insights. But it also demonstrates that Action Research, where writers use this research method to actively improve their writing and/or teaching of it, has many affordances. Multi-modal research with its perceptions into all the different modes – pictures, moving images, embodied learning – of writing provides the researcher with cutting edge research tools. Many writer-researchers also find using psycho-analytical frameworks can nurture therapeutic insights into writers' processes. This article is aimed at all creative writers who wish to explore writing processes further using established research.

Key words: creative writing   education   research   methodologies   methods

Introduction: the clash of cultures as creative writing meets academia

There are real tensions between creative writing and academic research. Framing creative writing practices in academic language could be viewed as a fundamental mismatch, a clash of cultures (Bailey & Bizarro 2017: 81, Hesse 2010: 32). The creative writer often needs to feel free to write without having to obsessively check their work for its factual accuracy, its rigour or even its coherence. However, accuracy, rigour and coherence are all hallmarks of effective research, which seeks to communicate its findings clearly and correctly (Cohen et al. 2007). So, in this sense, these two ways of writing can be at odds with one another: the tortoise trying to understand the hare.

This said, the rise of creative writing courses in universities has meant that a considerable amount of research into creative writing has been conducted over the last two decades, particularly by post-graduates conducting doctoral research in Creative Writing. It should be noted that the vast majority of these PhD students are primarily creative writers and not researchers (Harper 2008). Most of these Creative Writing PhDs have critical components which necessitated research. Furthermore, PhDs of this sort are growing in popularity.

The programme the authors of this paper teach, the MA in Creative Writing and Education, also has a module in which creative writers are educated in research methodologies and methods. Many of the authors' students find conducting research into their own writing – usually the focus of their assignments though not always – to be a deeply nurturing experience. For example, one student, Matilda Rostant, looked at how and why they loved to write fantasy fiction despite being ashamed of doing so, and concluded by saying:

> Conducting this autoethnography has taught me to not belittle genre fiction, and that the amount of work that is put in to create a fantasy novel requires, not only great imagination, but also a deep understanding of reality.

Postgraduate Tanya Royer used her research to look at the role of the unconscious in her writing life. She explained her rationale as:

> Using reflective enquiry and data-driven analysis, I made my descent into the crypt, to investigate these mysterious elements of my psyche, with the aim of finding the truest possible version of myself and, within it, my fiercest, most honest writing voice.

Keen to learn what strategies might inspire him to write, James Ward set up a series of experiments using 'free-writing' and he concluded by saying:

> Over the course of this study freewriting proved to be a highly effective means to mining personal experience and engaging with self-reflection in terms of the creative writing process. And while the emerging data caused me a degree of anxiety and psychological disconcertion, I was also like entering a space rich new creative possibilities. And with this achievement came a sense of empowerment and liberation.

Janel Pineda examined her work in the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, conducting ethnographic interviews with various participants in poetry workshops. She concluded by saying:

> Conducting this research, and particularly, the interviews with fellow Salvadoran community organizers in Los Angeles was ultimately a transformative process that in itself was a testament to the healing work of poetry-centered practice in activism. Broadly, this project revealed to me the importance of reflecting on how poetry has continued to play an instrumental role in Salvadoran community organizing. I was personally stunned by the depth at which each participant identified with the power of poetry, regardless of their own background and relationship to poetry.

What's important to perceive here is the sheer diversity of the assignments: the inspirations, processes and affordances of fantasy fiction, the investigation of the 'mysterious elements' of the psyche, the use of free writing to unlock creativity, and the power of poetry within the Salvadoran community in LA. Different ways of writing, different conceptions of our psychology, different communities, literary traditions and cultures were all explored in these assignments, and yet the research methods and methodologies which underpinned them were similar and offered a rigorous and meaningful lens through which they could view various writing processes and practices. Tanya Royer's metaphor of 'descending into the crypt' is an apt image for what often happens when creative writing is researched because, as the metaphor suggests, this can be done in different ways: you can take a torch to illuminate the darkness, you can choose to grope your way down the steps in the dark, you can ask people about their descents into the crypt, you could look at floor plan before hand and so on. There many ways of doing it. In this article we focus upon the ones that our students have found the most fruitful: auto-ethnography, action research, multi-modal research and the use of psycho-analytic

frameworks. The aim here is to give a general outline of the approach which should trigger further reading and research.

Why research creative writing?

What happens when creative writing is linked with education and researchers start to focus on how people learn to write creatively? It is still contested, in some literary quarters, whether creative writing is a suitable process for the researcher to investigate. There are several arguments against this form of research including:

- The mystique of writers' processes is destroyed by analysis (Light 1996: 3)
- Creative writing is essentially a 'recreational' activity and of little importance in the 'real' world (Childress & Gerber 2015: Hesse 2010: 32)
- Creative writing processes resist research because they are ultimately different for every writer, and therefore no 'generalisable' knowledge can be drawn from examining them (Hesse 2010: 32)

In addressing these arguments, it is worth raising the question of how creative writing processes are defined. Creative writing has been researched in the form of literary criticism for centuries. However, analysing a piece of creative writing is, in some ways, quite different from investigating the creative writing process, which is the act of a person either preparing to write or writing something. Therefore, exploring creative writing involves first looking at a writer's processes and, then latterly, the finished product. The focus can be different from the literary critic who tends to look at the finished product of a writer or writers.

Research into creative writing processes involves looking in-depth at the experiences of writers and emerging writers and seeing creative writing itself as part of the research data. Creative writing researchers who are also creative writers 'are in the world and of the world that they research. They bring their own biographies and values to the research situation (Cohen et al. 2017: 304). Research into creative writing processes also involves developing a particular theoretical lens through which to frame the creative writing within culture and society. The

central argument is that researching creative writing processes can provide insights and new ideas into how creative writing can be approached and how creative writers can extend and develop their own writing and the writing of others.

For the purpose of this article, creative writing is viewed primarily as a social process, even when it is carried out alone; our language is a common language and our words only mean something because they are shared between people. Even the loneliest of writers is working with this shared language in their heads and their bodies (Vygotsky & Kozulin 2012). In this article, it is contended that creative writing involves authors becoming part of what Etienne Wenger terms a 'community of practice' (1999). He writes:

> Practice is a shared history of learning that requires some catching up for joining. It is not an object to be handed down from one generation to the next. Practice is an ongoing, social, interactional process, and the introduction of newcomers is merely a version of what practice already is. That members interact, do things together, negotiate new meanings, and learn from each other is already inherent in practice – that is how practice evolves. In other words, communities of practice reproduce their membership in the same way that they come about in the first place. They share their competence with new generations through a version of the same process by which they develop. (1999: 102)

Writers learn from each other, either by reading other writer's books, being part of a writing group or by seeking to write in the style or genre of other authors: they are writing to communicate either something to themselves or other people. They carry out their practice by writing, by speaking on the page. This is an important starting point for any researcher to consider because it has implications for how and why writing might be researched – as we will see. Having established this key concept, it is now worth considering the problems people have with the idea of researching creative writing practices.

The mystique of the writers' processes

Many Romantic writers wrote about the almost magical process of writing. Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' which 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (1800: xxxiii) still holds a powerful sway over

the popular imagination regarding the writing process. The argument goes: if writing is a 'sponetaneous' activity then clearly there's little craft involved; masterpieces are either born fully formed or not. The process is basically opaque, and simply not visible for analysis.

There are a number of arguments to counter this. First, we know that many writers complete many different drafts before arriving at their so-called 'works of genius': so we can look at this drafting process. Second, even if a piece of writing arrives fully formed in a first draft, it might be worth looking at the overall conditions which enabled this piece to be produced: the writer's psychological state, their biography, the time, location of their writing etc. The argument that creative writing cannot be taught comes from the same root as this argument; writers are either born or not. Again, much evidence suggests that this is not the case. Recently, Carol Dweck and a number of other researchers have shown that it is not so much a person's innate ability that contributes towards their success in the world, but their willingness to learn and grow, their 'Growth Mindset' as Dweck terms it (Dweck & Yeager 2019). Dweck's research has important implications for writers and for the research into writing processes.

Creative writing is a 'recreational' activity

Unlike the scientist, who is involved in devising important experiments which will impact potentially on people's health, their environment, new technology etc.; the creative writer produces nothing of worth to society. This is the utilitarian argument: what is the point of art? We intend to contest these arguments and, drawing on research in the field of aesthetics, will show how stories and the imagination are fundamental to the shaping of human culture: they bring people together, give them a shared sense of meaning, help bring purpose and hope to society (Harari 2015).

Philosophers since Plato have argued about the value of art; figures such as Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and de Beauvoir have all forcefully put the case that art is a fundamental human practice, and that without it, no person or culture can be fully formed (Nahm 1975).

Creative writing processes resist research

Every writer's way of working is different. This may be the case, but there are still commonalities between writers: similarities in what they read, their backgrounds, their drafting processes, and their engagement with society. In the last thirty years, technology has changed the way many writers work both in terms of how they write (using for example computers), how they engage with and respond to their readers (the internet, social media etc), and how they live. The researcher can offer valuable insights into these points. Increasingly, there is a debate about what exactly creative writing is, with writers from diverse communities using technologies such as video, audio, photographs, computer games to address new audiences and create new forms of creative writing. Media educator Mark Reid writes: 'All poetry is cinematic, and that all cinema should be poetic' (2005: 66).

Ethical issues in researching creative writing

All researchers are made aware of the ethical issues of conducting research with other people and acquiring consent from research participants regarding privacy, confidentiality, anonymity and their responsibility to the community (Cohen et al 2007: Chapter 5). However, researchers into creative writing may decide to make different decisions relating to anonymity. Research participants may choose to be named in the research and acknowledged for their creative writing and particular creative outputs. Hill (2017), in writing about community-based projects considers the 'politics of doing good' and the 'need for an ethical approach to story sharing' (ibid: 35). Researchers need to ask these questions around the notion of ownership and creative writing and whether the creative writing of others will be acknowledged and celebrated within their research study. Researchers need to think about the purpose of their research into creative writing processes and ask the question: who benefits from their research?

Methods and methodologies

This article seeks to address the challenges of finding suitable ways of studying creative writing. It explores what particular research methodologies, research methods and research questions

could be employed to investigate creative writing. It takes the view that a method is a series of actions which assist research, while a methodology is a conceptual framework within which the method is situated (Bell 2014: 101). As Cohen et al. note:

> By methods, we mean that range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction…If methods refer to techniques and procedures used in the process of data-gathering, the aim of methodology then is to describe approaches to, kinds and paradigms of research (2007: 27)

The article perceives therefore that methods and methodologies are inextricably intertwined; a particular way of looking at the world (the methodology) informs the way data is collected and the research conducted (the method). It seeks to answer key questions about methods and methodologies by asking:

- Are there particular research methodologies that are suited to researching creative writing?
- Which research methods open up opportunities for exploring creative writing?
- What sorts of research questions might particular research methodologies generate?

In the next part of the article we discuss both quantitative and qualitative research approaches.

Quantitative research methodology and research methods with creative writing

The idea of representing the research into creative writing processes as numbers, which quantitative research seeks to do, may enrage many creative writers. As we will see, there is very little quantitative research in this area and this is possibly the reason why: representing creative writing practices as statistics and percentages is not appealing to many practitioners. Furthermore, many researchers may not be conversant with quantitative research methods. One of the findings of this article though is that there is still plenty of scope for research into this area, not least whether quantitative methods are suitable for researching creative writing.

Surveys and questionnaires

Surveys and questionnaire often include a qualitative element, such as written responses to open-ended questions, but they are often used in quantitative research too to generate statistics. This approach involves 'gathering large scale data in order to make generalisations' (Cohen et al 2007: 128). Tymms (2017: 223-240) highlights four reasons why educational researchers might want to use questionnaires:

1. Exploratory work: finding out the best way to proceed with some research.
2. Describing a population. Looking for patterns across a large group of people.
3. Outcomes or controls in studies. Questionnaires can be used to measure the effect of a particular intervention.
4. Feedback about particular classes/courses etc.

Researchers into creative writing processes could theoretically use questionnaires for all of these reasons, but it could be argued that certain types of questions are antithetical to the spirit of the creative writer. So, for example, is it appropriate to research this subject using things like: like-type questions (e.g. strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree); multiple choice; ranking ordering; semantic differentials. E.g. how do you feel about free writing? Put a mark on this continuum: hate it … love it.

This said, these sorts of questions can be helpful if researchers are dealing with large classes and want to get a rough sense of how people are thinking or feeling about a particular way of writing. However, questionnaires can be used to ask more open-ended questions. There are common pitfalls to be aware of when designing questionnaires: leading questions which produce pre-determined answers; questions which are too general and produce no interesting specific data.

Possible research areas and question using surveys and questionnaires

A large group of writers could be surveyed about the technology they use to write with, or what motivates them to write based upon a set of criteria.

Possible research questions: What technologies do writers use: why, how?

Statistical techniques: testing and assessment

The aim here is to measure 'achievement and potential' (Cohen et al 2007: 129). A set of materials need to be drawn up to provide scores that can be added up, and then groups/individuals can be compared. Gorard (2017) writes:

> Generally, researchers using numeric data want to know how strong their finding is, where that finding could be expressed as a difference, trend or pattern. This estimate of the strength of finding is computed as an 'effect' size. (2017: 139)

He adds this important caveat:

> …the approach is very limited in only being concerned with generalisability to a population. It does not help analysts decide the really important point, which is whether the result is substantively important (138)

At the time of writing, little statistical research has been carried out into creative writing 'interventions': for example, Cremin and Oliver could only find 4 quantitative studies into teachers' attitudes towards creative writing (2017: 5). However, this may be a growing field. Research organisations such as the Educational Endowment Foundation, focused upon helping pupils from poor backgrounds, appear to fund only statistic research into educational interventions and may decide to sponsor research into issues such as whether creative writing can raise the achievement of children on free school meals, a key indicator of poverty. Gorard's warning that this whole approach is 'unrealistic' is worth heeding. Such research often relies on what is known as 'randomised controlled trials' (RCTs) where a strategy such as say, free writing, is compared with a class that uses it (the intervention group) and a class that is very similar in make-up but isn't subjected to the intervention (the control group). Test scores are compared before and after the intervention and an 'effect' size is produced to see whether the intervention is statistically significant. Such research often is presented very confidently as a statistic, e.g X% of students improved their creative writing by using free writing. However, Gorard and other statisticians would contest the validity and reliability of results like these. In the

field of health, Pennebaker (2000) and other researchers have used RCTs to look at the health benefits of getting patients to write expressively about their traumas. Pennebaker writes:

> Writing or talking about emotional experiences relative to writing about superficial control topics has been found to be associated with significant drops in physician visits from before to after writing among relatively healthy samples (Pennebaker et al. 2000: 7)

However, it's important to note that Pennebaker's research is often very modest in its statistical claims, and it tends to favour an interview-based, qualitative approach to a statistical one.

Possible research areas and questions using statistical techniques

There are many ways in which creative writing is scored and assessed in schools and universities. Research could focus upon who is achieving highly/poorly and why.

Possible research questions: How is creative writing assessed formally in UK schools? Who performs well and who does not?

Qualitative research methodology and research methods with creative writing

Researching creative writing tends to fit more closely with qualitative research methodology with its focus on interpreting experience and understanding the voices and stories of participants. Researchers are able to focus on creative writing processes as well as the creative writing itself and this research approach is seen as being guided by, quite often, messy and unstructured data that researchers need to make sense of to answer probing research questions. Qualitative research methodology tends to emphasise 'the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of approach. (Hamersley 2013: 12). In the next sections we will consider qualitative research methodologies and research methods that have proven particularly useful to students researching creative writing.

Autoethnography methodology and methods

Creative writing researchers have become increasingly interested in using autoethnography as a methodological approach to asking questions about their own creative writing processes and looking at ways to learn new ways of doing things. Writers can profitably explore their own writing processes and products by using the tools of ethnography: 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities' (Brewer 2000: 6). Researchers argue that carrying out an ethnography allows deep insights into the meanings and patterns of everyday life (Hymes 1996) and ethnographies 'allow us to tell a story; not someone else's story exactly, but our own story of some slice of experience, a story which illuminates social processes and generates explanations for why people do and think the things they do' (Heller 2008: 250). Autoethnography is about making sense of individual experience and connecting the personal to the cultural.

An auto-ethnography requires the researcher to examine themselves as creative writers in their 'naturally occurring settings', looking at the 'social meanings' of their writing practices.

> Auto-ethnography is a research approach that privileges the individual. It is an artistically constructed piece of prose, poetry, music or piece of artwork that attempts to portray an individual experience in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader, viewer or listener (Freshwater et al. 2010: 504)

Freshwater et al. are at pains to distinguish auto-ethnography from a description of an individual's experiences; while auto-ethnography focuses upon the lived experiences of an individual, it aims to situate the self within a wider social, historical, geographical and psychological context. Freshwater et al. note: 'Auto-ethnography privileges the self in the research nexus between art and science'. Auto-ethnographers are nearly always seeking to illustrate wider social points within their narratives:

> An individual story presents as a fiction in a world that reveres facts. It appears to sidetrack the serious world of research rather than supplement it. However, if we are really intent on understanding the blighted lives of people who are excluded from the hegemonic control of the dominant voice we have to listen carefully to how well the stories of individuals resonate with us no matter how uncomfortable this might be. (p. 505).

The form is particularly suited to creative writers because it is a form of creative writing. Here the boundaries between research and creative writing begin to blur.

Autoethnographic research methods are suited to creative writers as researchers. However, using autoethnography does mean the researcher needs to write well:

> Most social scientists don't write well enough to carry it off. Or they're not sufficiently introspective about their feelings or motives or the contradictions they experience. Ironically, many aren't observant enough of the world around them. The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts – and emotional pain. (Muncey 2010: Chapter 3 10-11)

Creative writers use autoethnographic research methods to confront obstacles. They also open up new opportunities in their own creative writing processes. Researchers explore why and how they write creatively. Their creative writing becomes their most important data source and they also use research journals to chart changes and new ways of working (Bolton 2010: 130).

Possible research areas and questions using autoethnography

Writers can look at their habitual writing practices, gathering together data from all of their ordinary activities, taking field notes about what they have noticed about their writing over a specified period of time. They can retrospectively examine writing practices at a particular time of their life for which they have suitable data. On the MA in Creative Writing and Education, students have explored a huge diversity of topics using auto-ethnography. Nearly all of them have involved delving into challenging lived experiences. For example, in *Holding Difficulty Lightly* (2019) Eve Ellis re-imagined her experiences as a mother and poet using auto-ethnography sharpened by a feminist lens to situate herself. She delved deeply into her writing practices when her child was very young. Using note-books, diaries, and poetry written at the time, she was able to reimagine that period of her life when writing felt a transgressive act, something that mothers of babies were not encouraged or possibly permitted to do. She writes here about dreaming of signing up for a poetry evening course:

> 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 (42)

The auto-ethnographic research enabled her to perceive that a 'trickster' archetype, that of a creative risk-taker, shaped her impulse to write, freeing her from the shackles of stereotypical motherhood; she perceived that 'mother and trickster may be more closely related than one might think' (p. 46).

Ioney Smallhorne in *Why I Write: Using Writing to Push Back Against Oppression* (2019) used auto-ethnography to explore her lived experiences of poverty, racism, trauma and dyslexia, investigating how she found a voice as a writer in a society which was both overtly and covertly oppressive. She loathed primary school because she struggled to read and had a stammer. However, she found a form of liberation when reading with and listening to her father. She writes:

> 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 (95-96)

This extract illustrates the power of auto-ethnographic research. We can see that it is more than autobiography; it is the researcher situating themselves in the field, looking at relevant wider social, psychological and cultural issues such as Smallhorne does here: cultural heritage, colonialization, oral cultures and storytelling. By 'zooming in' on this moment, Smallhorne is able to draw out the richness of her lived experiences.

Topics of successful research in this area have included mothers exploring their writing practices while looking after a baby; writers examining their formative teenage years; and the literary, psychological, social and geographical factors that nurture creative writing.

Possibly research questions: what factors and practices caused me to write creatively?

Action Research methodology and methods

Here a writer 'plans, implements, reviews and evaluates an intervention designed to improve' (Cohen et al 2007: 129) some aspect of their writing or possibly the creative writing practices of their students. If participants are involved, then they contribute to the research process; this is sometimes known as participatory action research.

> The premise underlying action research in education is that practitioners are in the best position to engage in inquiry about their practice. Action research is typically conducted in natural settings (schools, communities, and organisations) where a researcher is concerned about a particular issue of practice. (Klein 2012: 3)
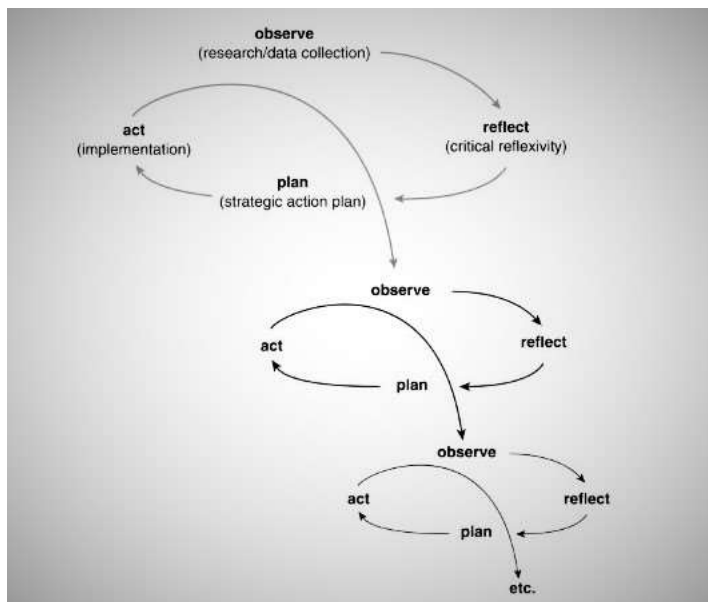

Figure 1. O'Leary's cycles of research as cited in Koshy (2012: 7)

The cycles of Action Research shown above are possibly the simplest and clearest representation of how it can be conducted; the idea is that the researcher is on a cycle of improvement continuously. Koshy notes on several occasions that Action Research is a methodology in that it has embedded within it a clear theoretical framework; it is a collaborative form of research which is all about improving real-life situations, and provides 'rigour' in terms of collecting,

analysing and interpreting data (15). It could be particularly useful for writer/researchers seeking to improve their own practice either as writers or teachers.

A number of our students use Action Research because it affords a rigorous and relatively straight-forward methodology for improving one's own practice and reflecting upon it. Its focus upon the learners' 'attitudes and values' (Cohen et al. 2007) offers particularly rich ways of looking at the processes of creative writing. Katherine McMahon used Action Research, to help them develop and run a tarot and creative writing workshop for LGBTQ+ people. One of the conclusions of her research was this:

> 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. (2019: 74)

In other words, there was a strong realisation that the methodology of Action Research which offers 'possibilities for reflection', 'reflective practice' and collaboration between workshop leader and participants was liberating for the everyone. McMahon's research involved utilising the Action Research cycle of listening to herself and her participants' responses in order to bring out the full potential of using Tarot to get LGBTQ+ people to think about their 'identities and experiences in their writing'. Action Research particularly lends itself to these sorts of projects where issues connected with social justice and personal growth are central. As Pike perceives the power of Action Research lies in the fact that it is 'fundamentally ethical' because it seeks to have:

> a transformative social role, not simply because it facilitates the development and implementation of appropriate pedagogy, but because it has the potential to transform the professional culture (2002: 36)

Action Research has played a vital role in other students' research already cited. Tanya Royer deployed 'a Buddhist-informed action research process' which involved 'a structured mix of mindfulness practice, free writing and an investigation of my spatial identity' (14). Here we can see how Action Research provided her with both structure and flexibility: she was able to infuse it with elements of Buddhism and mindfulness. This happened because both her practice of meditating in order to generate writing, and her reflective practice, where she evaluated her work and learning, involved being mindful and compassionate to herself.

Possible research areas and questions using Action Research

Looking back at many other students' research we can perceive that the Action Research cycle was unconsciously at play in much of what they did, and a major point of learning for us as tutors is that it could be utilised more often and more explicitly. Its value is that it brings clarity, honesty and a strong ethical dimension to the research because its key questions are:

- Can I improve my practice so that it is more effective on the terms laid out by myself and my participants?
- Can I improve my understanding of this practice so as to make it more just?
- Can I use my knowledge and influence to improve the situation? (Lomax quoted in Bell 2014: 17)

Action Research is particularly useful for teachers of creative writing because its central purpose is to generate a positive feedback loop whereby practice is being continually reflected upon and developed. In this sense, it is generally highly motivating, and if it isn't, then reflecting upon why the research is demoralising becomes part of the cycle of reflection. It's very helpful for any researchers who may want to explore how certain approaches can lead to better results in educational settings. The Action Research approach shares much in common with the 'Teachers as Writers' movement (Cremin & Oliver 2017: Wrigley & Smith 2012) in that it encourages teacher and pupils to work together on jointly planning a creative project. The Teachers as Writer movement encourages teachers to write alongside their students, and to dialogue with students about what is working for them.

Possible research questions: How can I improve my own creative writing and/or my teaching of creative writing?

Multimodal research methodology and methods

Researchers into creative writing have also begun to recognise the importance of multimodal research approaches to understand and make sense of experience. Theories of literacy research have shifted after the 'digital turn' (Mills, 2016) with a particular focus on multimodal theory. This research approach allows creative writers to explore creative writing processes across different design modes: linguistic, visual, spatial, audio and gestural. Researchers using a

multimodal research approach to interrogate creative writing processes can look at the possibilities given 'by a mode of representation to make [my] meaning' (Kress 2003: 2).

Researching creative writing processes using multimodal research methods allows creative writers to explore different design modes and, for instance, how music or visual art are part of their creative writing. It also enables researchers to look at how we learn to acquire different types of literacies depending upon the unique ecologies we grow up in (Barton 2007). This concept of ecology embraces the whole world we live in – nature, home, school, air, water, diet etc. – and these all, in different ways influence what we say, read and write. Creative writers can collect research data to interrogate how we learn across modes and in a range of settings.

Researching and working with objects (Pahl & Rowsell 2010) has also become a significant research method for investigating creative writing processes. This approach builds on Pahl and Rowsell's theory of artifactual literacies (2010) and their notion of 'felt connections' where every object tells a story and objects remain powerful in our memories.

Possible research areas and questions using multimodality

Sara Hirsch, a poet on the Spoken Word Education and MA Creative Writing and Education programmes at Goldsmiths, researched what happened when poetry was combined with multimodal research and filmmaking. Sara's research was part of a larger multilingual digital storytelling project (Anderson & Macleroy 2016) and a pre-production stage of the filmmaking process was working with personal and cultural objects. Sara researched what happened to the students' poetry when they started working multimodally to create images and metaphors of belonging:

> Another turning point in the process was a session involving personal and cultural objects. The students were asked to bring in an item that mattered to them, particularly something that represented their culture. The students brought in flags, photos, scarves, jewellery and other items of significance, and the majority of the final poem was written in response to these objects. The prompts that the students were given ranged from free writes that were sparked by a memory of the object to exercises with more specific parameters. An example of a successful exercise was using the objects and photographs as physical metaphors for the students' sense of identity (My country

is an artist, it paints the turquoise of my blood). Here the students were invited to use visual elements of the objects to represent their own emotions. By breaking down the object or photograph into a list of "what we see" or "what we feel", they became less like precious belongings and more like artefacts, with physical features to offer a piece of writing. (Macleroy & Hirsch 2019: 11)

This research project enabled Sara to examine some of the challenges and issues of bringing together different art forms in creative work. Her research is useful to other creative writers as it shows how these projects often take time (a school year) to set up and implement and it takes time for students to understand how they can belong to the process. The students reflected that when they understood the purpose of the project they felt connected to each other and to poetry. Their film can be seen here: *Belonging – A Spoken Word Poetry Film*:

https://vimeo.com/219976715/

Possible research question: What multimodal ways of working nurture meaningful creative writing practices?

Psycho-analytic frameworks as research methodology

Psycho-analysis and creative writing are increasingly explored together. In his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908) Freud posited the idea that creative writing itself was a form of therapy, an extension of childhood day-dreaming, wish-fulfilment and fantasising. Since then many other psycho-analysts and others working in the field of mental health have investigated the ways in which creative writing can be used to improve well-being. Some key concepts appear to be common in much of this work. These include:

- Catharsis and repression
- Identification and imitation
- Projection
- Dream imagery and archetypes

Catharsis and repression

These two concepts are intertwined. The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, argued in contradiction of his teacher Plato that stories could have positive effects because the best of them allowed their audience to chance to 'purge' their extreme or dangerous emotions (2013). He put the case that a kind of purification process happens: audiences feel moments of sadness, grief, anger, depression which enables them to rid themselves of these feelings after experiencing these stories. This is what Aristotle calls 'catharsis' (2013). Subsequent theorising about the benefits of art, stories and creative writing builds upon the concept of catharsis in multiple ways. For example, Rainer argues in *The New Diary* (2004: 38-41) that diary writers should write down all their difficult feelings in their diaries in order to find a form of cathartic healing. Rainer uses Freud's psycho-analytical concept of repression to explain why this form of writing can be cathartic: feelings which have been unconsciously ignored, blocked, forbidden come to the fore and then can be 'let go' of. Much theorisation about creative writing takes these ideas as starting points. One of our students, Anna Degenaar, used a series of scheduled free writing sessions to explore challenging feelings about being female. Her research, entitled *Writing Myself Better: How Can Focused Freewriting Unlock the Female Character?*, was simultaneously socio-cultural and therapeutic: she perceived how patriarchal, capitalist society nurtures strong feelings of self-hatred in women. The free writing and the research appeared to be healing for her. She wrote in her conclusion:

> 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. (2019: 35)

Possible research questions: To what extent are our emotions socially constructed and how can creative writing explore these social constructions? To what extent are creative writing practices cathartic?

Identification and imitation

The idea that both readers and writers strongly identify with certain characters and situations has its origins with Plato (Smith 2018), but again has been subsequently developed by many other thinkers, particularly psycho-analytic theorists such as Freud. Plato argued that art is dangerous precisely because people strongly identify with fictional, immoral characters and then imitate their actions (Smith 2018). Much research by our students examines the constricting fictions of everyday life. For example, Ioney Smallhorne (cited previously) examined the suffocating narratives which many people foisted upon her as a young girl at primary school, writing her story for her because she was of colour, female and dyslexic. Her research showed how she managed to re-write this narrative for herself.

Possible research questions: To what extent does the world write your story and to what extent can you write your own? To what extent do creative writers identify with the characters they are writing about?

Projection

Initially proposed by Freud, 'projection refers to protecting oneself from anxiety by repressing a feeling and misperceiving another person as having that feeling' (Kahn 2002: 128). A person might be described as horrible or disgusting when in actual fact it is the subject's projection of their own feelings and insecurities; a representation of how they are feeling. Much creative writing can be understood as forms of projection. A writer's description of a dystopian landscape could be a projection of their own feelings of disgust at themselves; a romantic story is a form of project or wish-fulfilment on behalf of the writer and so on. Anna Degenaar's research (2019) examined this issue when investigating the ways in which she had internalised feelings of shame about her body: she perceived this deeply by writing about her first period, first sexual encounter, feelings of discomfort, body hair, shame, initiating sex, and a one-night stand. Her analysis of her free writing showed how much projection was involved. Her research and writing enabled her to see through the patriarchal assumptions she had internalised and projected outwards into the world.

Possible research questions: To what extent do we project our fantasies and nightmares onto other people and situations? How can researching creative writing help us see through the projections? To what extent are creative writing practices a form of wish-fulfilment?

Dream imagery and archetypes

The process of writing stories could be linked to a form of conscious dreaming, with the writer using archetypes drawn from their unconscious to people their stories. Both Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung argued this process happens (Kahn 2002). Freud believed that many of the images that we produce in dreams and stories is a representation of repressed sexual desire, while Jung believed that many images are drawn from a collective unconscious that is shared by all of humankind (Kahn 2002: 169). Jungian archetypes have been of particular interest for our students because they are both creatively suggestive and also offer an imaginative lens through which to perceive creative practice. Eve Ellis (2019) was particularly drawn to Jung's analysis of the trickster archetype, a figure that is inherently playful, mischievous and transgressive, and wanted to claim it for her own. Making it part of her identity gave her the psychic space and time to be a writer. She wrote:

> 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 (2019: 45-46).

Here we can see the power of the archetype: it appears to set Ellis free to write for herself. Tanya Royer used the archetype of the 'shadow self' in order to explicate her repressed unconscious desires. She wrote:

> Guided by the insights of Carl Jung, and by philosophers, essayists and novelists who had themselves explored the psyche's darker corners, I set out to engage this presence, what Jung termed the "shadow self"

In a similar way to Ellis, she set out on a psychic quest to discover this archetype. Again we can perceive the immense pull of these psycho-analytic concepts. These writers/researchers may not be using them in a strictly orthodox psycho-analytical fashion, but they are utilising them to

explore socially taboo and difficult topics, which are connected with identity and the lived experiences of being a writer.

Possible research questions: What are the archetypes which are liberating or empowering for you as a writer? How might you research these archetypes and their emancipatory powers? To what extent are a writer's dreams and writing connected?

Conclusion and future implications for researching creative writing

There are a number of important findings in this article.

First, it mounts a strong case for 'descending into the crypt'. Creative writing is a worthy subject of rigorous, academic research. It debunks the idea that writing processes are opaque, utterly unique and/or irrelevant, and therefore either impossible to research or not worthy of research.

Second, it shows how there is a place for quantitative research, but that it can only go so far: analysing test data of creative writing pieces written in high-stakes examinations, getting people to numerically rate certain creative writing teaching strategies and so on has a value, but it is just a beginning. It scratches the surface.

Third, qualitative research offers the richest and most meaningful research avenue into creative writing. Its possibilities are almost infinite but we suggest that there are three main forms which have worked with our students time and again.

Fourth, auto-ethnography is possibly the most natural research method for research into creative writing because it utilises so many of the tools, values, ideas and concepts of the creative writer. It does so by situating creative writing within a more rigorous, socially contextual framework than much autobiography. This is its power: the researcher views creative writing within the relevant ethnographic 'field'.

Fifth, Action Research has many affordances for researchers because it is inherently ethical and motivational, providing many creative writers with a clear framework for improving their practice and reflecting deeply upon it.

Sixth, multi-modal research offers huge attractions for researchers because it pulls them into the richness of the worlds they inhabit, engaging them with new technologies, artefacts, pictures, photographs, videos, and perceiving the complex inter-connections between creative writing and other modes, as well as making them see how the writing on the page can be transformed and enriched in other modes.

Seventh, psycho-analytical frameworks can illuminate the creative process in unexpected and emancipatory ways. Well-worn tropes and archetypes such as the 'trickster' and the 'shadow self' can have new life breathed into them when used to investigate the lived experiences of creative writing.

We strongly believe that researching creative writing in these ways opens up profound and probing questions about why and how we write. These methods and methodologies offer many ways for writers to 'descend into the crypt' of creativity.

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