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LIRIC

# The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

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## About the Journal

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

## Editorial Team



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# Editor's Foreword

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Hello and welcome to this issue of *LIRIC Journal*.

In May of this year, the entire editorial board and many associated reviewers resigned en masse from the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. The board of this journal then went on to found a new open access publication without the prohibitive fees which mark most academic journal publishers' open access arrangements. This is the latest in a long list of similar cases across publishers and disciplines. It seems change is perhaps coming to academic publishing. Reading of the steps these academics have taken to reclaim integrity in the sharing of knowledge in their community of practice is inspiring and heartening. For four years now, Lapidus International, the community for writing for wellbeing, has published an open access, peer-reviewed research journal which asks for no fees from authors.

Where *LIRIC* also differs somewhat from other journals is in the commitment to remain free of the disciplinary narrowness promoted and perpetuated by academic publishing culture. Authors publishing in LIRIC (and readers of our journal) come from many backgrounds, reflecting the intersecting influences and ideas which make up the broad range of understanding of what writing for wellbeing is and might be. Our reach is across the arts and therapeutic practice, as well as education and community work. As a consequence of this, *LIRIC* also promotes and celebrates creativity and diversity in approaches to research, bringing together arts-based, reflexive, co-produced, and more traditional elements. It is my belief that this is in large part possible due to the freedom from narrow disciplinary habits and tropes.

My own introduction to academic publishing was as an undergraduate mental health nurse. After much support and encouragement from my two prospective PhD supervisors, the paper was accepted with a few amendments. Most of these were suggestions on style or referencing, but one request struck me as very odd. I was to make mention of a particular paper by two authors I did not know, which had no direct reference to the content of my review. There was no clear logic in the reviewers' comments as to why this paper should be cited in mine. Being green (and desperate to get on) I included this amendment without question, and the review was published shortly after. The whole process was smooth and the infrastructure around the journal was supportive, but this detail niggled at me. It still does.

Some years later, with three colleagues from mental health nursing, I wrote a discussion paper on the experiences of our students whilst on placement. Issues raised related to cultural 'fit' and how this seemed to form an unspoken element of their practice assessment, which had no professional or formal grounding in the Nursing and Midwifery Council documentation but rather reflected the personal and group preferences and culture of local workplaces and teams. Despite some encouragement and support from a large publisher in developing and submitting this work, we could not get it published. A nursing journal turned this discussion paper down on grounds of lack of empirical evidence. A cross-disciplinary journal turned the paper down because of its focus on a specific aspect of nursing education. We were stuck in the middle.

My last published paper was with a major publisher and was published open access at a large cost to my then employer, who had a number of agreements with different publishers allowing a limited number of open access publications per year. My good fortune was to complete a paper at the beginning of the window for the annual funding for this publisher. Later in the year, this may have been used up, and I would have to wait months for the next opportunity or reformat the paper for another journal. This would mean a delay of years. As it was, it had been two years since the small piece of research reported in the paper had concluded. As with my first publication, there was a great deal of support and encouragement from reviewers and editors, all of whom are full-time academics, undertaking this work for little or no money.

During the period between my first and last publications, I had reviewed a paper or two each year, covering three of the major publishers. This work can be time consuming, but somewhere in the back of my mind I

held the belief that by reviewing I would see more clearly how to put a good paper together (some truth in that) and curry favour with the publisher (not the case).

No surprise, then, that when I was approached to get involved in *LIRIC*, I thought that this would be like my previous experience of journals, only with more responsibility (I would become assistant editor as well as reviewing papers from time to time). I took the post because of my respect and trust in the person who asked me, but also because at that point, still fearful of not achieving what needed to be done to 'progress' at work, this would look good in my performance reviews and on my CV. Unfortunately, the pervading culture of academic work is one of internalised self-centred competition, which in my case lead to frequent over-commitment to numerous projects and prospects, CPD opportunities, and initiatives in a desperate attempt to meet the never-quite-articulated status of 'excellent'.

Once I started to see the way that editors and reviewers at *LIRIC* nurtured and encouraged new authors to develop and shine, it became evident to me that this was a very different project with a very different ethos. This was about community. There were no fees for authors, no need for institutional backing, so anyone could submit their research paper for consideration. And the journal was connected the Lapidus Living Research Community (LLRC), where research is presented and discussed, sometimes as individual projects and sometimes particular aspects, approaches, and themes. Often, what is presented in one forum later appears in the other, after careful mentoring from editorial staff. As we develop, we have come to the conclusion that essays on research topics are also very valuable for inclusion in *LIRIC*, where readers can learn about new and innovative ways of investigating words and wellbeing in their many different contexts and uses.

My experience working with the editorial board at *LIRIC* and wider Lapidus community has shown me that whilst there can be career benefits to publishing, this needn't be the reason for doing so. Sharon Martinelli's words capture the essence of this, I think:

> [T]he journey I am writing about in this paper is marked by nonlinearity in thinking, writing, and being—a journey that remains in a constant state of evolution and dynamism.

This issue of LIRIC demonstrates the breadth of influences across disciplines and settings we are so proud to include. The papers presented here offer creative and reflexive representations of experience that

together describe and promote connection and resilience within an ethic of care.

Through a deep analysis of her PhD writing and research process, Sharon Martinelli offers personal insights into living with long-term conditions that expose wider cultural implications in her home country and in her professional domain of nursing, through her own life experience.

Jo Metcalfe and Chris Westoby bring us their findings and learnings from a project that encouraged prison officers to engage with creative writing, showing a group of people engaged in a highly stressful job who find connection, catharsis, and escape through writing.

Mark Smalley provides us with a meditation on the climate emergency as he offers re-engagement with deep time for participants in geologically based writing workshops. The engaging format of his paper offers as much as does the interesting content.

Jeannie Wright shares a deeply personal yet highly relatable account of how change can be navigated through the use of personal writing, and how we can rediscover and relearn from ourselves in our past writing. She brings together the professional and personal in this meditation on the role(s) of writing through a rich career full of challenges and transitions.

We hope you find connection and solidarity in these papers and would love to hear from you if you have reflections, responses, or papers of your own that you would like to share. We hope to bring you another edition of *LIRIC* in the first half of 2025 and look forward to connecting with you.

*Tim*

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*Article*

# The Inward Journey: Writing, Thinking, and Being Through the Illness Story

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## Abstract

This paper explores the cohesive and insightful narrative that emerges where research, thinking, writing, and being converge, emphasising the dynamic essence of academic inquiry in the journey of knowledge creation. It examines the interplay between my doctoral research journey titled *Women Living with Autoimmune Invisible Illnesses: An Autoethnographic Study and Narratives in Malta* and the writing process of this paper. Inspired by J. Campbell's insight that 'where you stumble, there lies your treasure,' my writing unfolded as a transformative exploration, revealing layers of self in tandem with the project's evolving layers. Kierkegaard's notion that life must be lived forward but can only be understood backward resonates throughout, guiding my oscillation between the past and present in the realms of writing and thinking. Navigating memories, events, and reflections enriched the narrative, highlighting that this process was not a straightforward one. While writing, I came to realise that although my focus evolved from my doctoral thesis, the narrative in this paper continued to expand—the story is never fully or exhaustively told. Beyond the material and patterns identified in my thesis, I reflect on the transformative process, acknowledging its ongoing impact on my unfolding life story.

***Keywords***: writing, thinking, autoethnography, illness narratives, transformation, knowledge creation

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## Introduction

When embarking on preparing a presentation for the Creative Bridges Conference 2023, my initial intention was to share with the audience some of the reflections I experienced when crafting my doctoral thesis titled *Women Living with Autoimmune Invisible Illnesses: An Autoethnographic Study and Narratives in Malta*. As I immersed myself once more in the words that shaped my thesis, I found myself revisiting different moments, revealing a spectrum of emotions, and once more uncovering intricate layers of self. Indeed, the journey I am writing about in this paper is marked by nonlinearity in thinking, writing, and being—a journey that remains in a constant state of evolution and dynamism.

Kierkegaard (1957, as cited in Muncey, 2005) famously suggested that life must be lived forward but can only be understood backward. This wisdom highlights the idea that we often gain a deeper understanding of our lives and experiences when we reflect on them in retrospect. This profound insight resonates deeply with my experience at different stages of my writing, for example, when it came to choosing my research topic for the doctoral thesis, when recalling and writing about illness experiences, when crafting the Creative Bridges presentation, and in writing this paper. As I delved into the realms of writing and thinking, I found myself, once again moving both backwards and forwards in time. I embarked on a journey informed by my experiences with illness, the act of writing and tacit knowledge (Etherington, 2004). This journey led me to delve into memories, events, reflections, and images, all of which enriched the narrative. Additionally, as time has elapsed since the completion of my doctoral thesis, I've noticed a shift in my focus and intention when writing this paper. My contemplation extended beyond the content of my research and its emergent material and patterns. I became particularly drawn to a profound exploration of the overarching impact of the process of becoming and transformation as my life story continues to unfold beyond the writing.

## Entering the Cave

In my doctoral thesis, I cited Campbell (Campbell & Osbon, 1995) who eloquently captured the essence of my journey by stating that 'where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for' (p. 24). Before embarking on my research project, I held the naïve belief that I had a clear understanding of what lay ahead—I thought I knew. However, what I did not realise was that I was venturing into the unknown, uncertain of what was yet to unfold in this uncharted path. As a nurse, a counsellor, educator, and a reflexive researcher, my interest in researching women living with chronic autoimmune invisible illnesses in Malta was multifaceted. This interest stemmed from my personal illness understanding of the intricate relationship between my own experience of illness (hereafter referred to as *my*story) and the illness experiences of close family members and individuals whom I have met in the therapeutic and medical field. In the prologue of my thesis, I shared my personal journey of illness, which included a misdiagnosis of myasthenia gravis followed by a diagnosis of post viral fatigue syndrome (PVFS), also referred to as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) or myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME)—a complex, chronic autoimmune medical condition characterized by fatigue and malaise that is worse after exertion, and cognitive and immune dysfunction (Bested & Marshall, 2015).

## Coming to Autoethnography

I came to understand autoethnography as 'a process and product [and how it uses] tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). By openly sharing my own experience in an embodied, existential, and reflexive manner, I intentionally placed myself at the heart of the research, while also implicitly situated the illness narrative within a broader context that goes beyond the boundaries of the page. Certainly, the contextualisation of my own perspective played a pivotal role in my choice to adopt evocative autoethnography as the methodology for my research. I was novice to autoethnography and found it quite revolutionary, both as an academic and on a personal level. In hindsight, I recall the excitement but also the hesitancy, knowing that '[w]riting both selves and others into a larger story goes against the grain of much academic discourse' (Denshire 2014, p. 832).

> I had not spoken about my illness story for a very long time, but once I was given the space and was being listened to attentively, it all came back, recalling both physical and emotional experiences: the pain, the fear, the anger, and the uncertainty. Emotions that were not visible but suppressed in what felt like a 'straitjacketed body'. Unconsciously, there was a great sense of relief through sharing my story. It was a powerful moment – on one hand appreciating how life experiences, cultural context, as well as beliefs affected me on a personal level, but on the other curious as to how I was going to use this experience to extend to the larger community. This is when I was introduced to autoethnography as an 'alternative method and form of writing'. Although I knew of it, I did not know about it. However, I was aware that I was embarking on a path that was less travelled at doctoral level across the Faculties of Social Wellbeing and Health Sciences respectively.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2019)

Employing an autoethnographic framework introduced several firsts for me. Among these firsts was the creative presentation of my work, incorporating the use of the first-person narrative ('I'), poetry, and images, and openly sharing my reflections on the page. This demanded a departure from traditional methods of research and presentation that I was accustomed to. I presented *my*story and the women's stories using different patterns, fonts, and formats, each representing a different voice: the academic writing (Times New Roman font size12) and my reflective writings (Calibri font size12, indented and italicised). The woman's illness stories were represented in poetry format (using Arial font size12, indented and italicised) to create an overall more visually aesthetic presentation.[1]

> Reflexivity of discomfort.
>
> Body speaks…unbeknown knowledge,
> writing body self[ves]
> remembering memories,
> recalling emotions,
> unless spoken or written,
> remain invisible, unofficial, untellable,
> unheard…Painful.
>
> (Martinelli, 2020)

Another first was presenting personal reflections alongside academic writing. Despite my familiarity with reflexive writing due to my nursing

[1] The quotations and poetry from the author's journals are formatted in *LIRIC Journal* style for this paper.

and counselling background, I still experienced writing myself onto the page as a participant in research and including excerpts of my reflections to be challenging at times. As opposed to other methodologies, the feminist research movement encouraged researchers to be visible, to use the first person and tacit knowledge. This required stepping out from the absence of the researcher, thus shifting the focus inward, to question the self, others, and the research process (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Additionally, in autoethnographic research, writing is characterized by its truthfulness, vulnerability, evocativeness, and therapeutic nature (Ellis, 2004). The reflections and first-person narratives often exposed a vulnerable self:

> [I]n using myself as subject, treating my own experiences as a primary source amongst other things, I explicitly exposed, and made visible – doubts, vulnerabilities, resilience, losses, emotions, and feelings.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2021)

However, it is important to note that, as Smith and Sparkes (2007, as cited in Defenbaugh, 2013) argued, personal stories are both personal and social at the same time:

> The 'I' and the 'we' intertwine, merging fact with fiction, rationality with emotionality, vulnerability with resilience, and visibility with invisibility…a platform for words and stories to be told and heard – a personal and collective space advocating compassion and (self)care.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2022)

In my endeavour, I aimed to empower women in the broader society, particularly those who may feel marginalised due to their invisible illness (as explained earlier) by integrating diverse perspectives, including women participants' narratives, personal stories (*my*story), and academic literature. By democratising academic knowledge as advocated by Wood, McAteer, and Whitehead (2019), I sought to make scholarly insights more accessible and relevant to those affected. This approach, also known as the *emancipatory* approach, aligns with feminist principles that guided my research. Through this lens, I hoped to promote empowerment, subjectivity, human rights, and equitable power dynamics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

## The Other Women Collaborators

In addition to the autoethnography of *my*story, I included the narratives of four other women whom I referred to collaborators rather than just participants in the study. These women were purposively selected to share

their narratives. The inclusion criteria for participation specified women aged 22 to 55 living with chronic invisible autoimmune illnesses for at least two years and residing in Malta. The exclusion criteria included children, older adults, and persons living with acute or chronic psychiatric or neurological illnesses and/or terminal illnesses. Coincidentally, the selected individuals were 20 to 30 years of age, mirroring my own demographic during my personal experience with illness.

The women shared their embodied experiences of living with invisible chronic autoimmune conditions, highlighting the psychological benefits of sharing and voicing their stories. They expressed vulnerability and occasional feelings of marginalisation stemming from their experiences of living with an invisible chronic illness. This entailed finding a balance between self-silencing and acknowledging the importance of asserting agency. Our conversations revealed similarities in our experiences such as societal expectations for women, the subjective nature of the invisible illnesses, and need to validate one's authenticity, all within the context of patriarchal dynamics in health systems. These exchanges fostered a sense of solidarity. Notable differences also emerged, particularly in how each of us asserted agency and reclaimed our voices. Ultimately, these conversations served as sensitising agents—they were a catalyst to the creation of new and collective narratives, enhancing our understanding of living with an invisible illness and the resilience required to navigate it.

Three consecutive meetings were planned for each participant—a model adopted by O'Shaughnessy, Dallos, and Gough (2013). In the first meeting, a single narrative-inducing question inspired by Wengraf (2001), was posed to elicit a life story narrative. The first meeting helped to establish a collaborative relationship and gain a preliminary understanding of the story being told. In the second meeting, the women were encouraged to elaborate, clarify, change, or add any detail that they had shared during the first conversation and/or discuss any reflections. For the third meeting, we could no longer meet in person due to COVID-19 restrictive measures, and the women were given the option to meet virtually and/or write, communicate, via email. They all opted for the latter. The third meeting was intended as a member validation process.

After transcribing the interviews, I used their own words and presented their stories in the form of found poetry (Prendergast, 2006; Reilly, 2013). Since some time had passed from the time of the meetings and I was sensitive to the possible disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic might have caused for the women, their families, and/or their health. I

remained mindful of the possibility that the women participating in this study might be reading their own stories without any support available to them. Thus, I adhered to the 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982; Christians, 2011; Noddings, 2013), which holds a central position within moral philosophy and feminist theory (Hankivsky, 2014, p. 252). In research, this required careful attention and responsibility in the way I related to the women collaborators at every stage (Etherington, 2020). Therefore, I once again conducted a 'process consent' (Etherington, 2004; Ellis, 2007) to ensure ongoing consent and confirm their willingness to continue participating. I reiterated their option to opt out if they wished to do so. My primary concern at this stage was to mitigate any potential harm to my participants. All the women reaffirmed their agreement to proceed with the study.

## Going Back, Giving Back

Going back, giving back to the women their own stories, was considered as being 'ethically and/or politically necessary' (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012 p. 223). My doctoral research endeavour aimed not only to present elicited material but also to empower the women by returning ownership over their words. Each poetic representation of their story was shared with the respective participant. This was achieved by crafting their words into found poetry and giving them the opportunity to revise and/or rewrite their own narratives. The women were invited to review the meaningfulness and accuracy of the poetic representations of their stories, ensuring that the translation from Maltese to English accurately reflected their original intentions. Furthermore, by presenting the women's stories in poetry format, I believed I was honouring the pain, doubts, uncertainties, and ambiguities of the experience (Bondi & Fewell, 2017) thereby giving a voice to the voiceless (Denzin, 2009). As mentioned earlier, it was a measure to advocate for social justice to those women who felt that their voices were being silenced.

Denzin (2014) with reference to poetic representation maintained that

> The poetic representation of lives is never just intended to be an end in itself. The goal is political, to change the way we think about people and their lives and to use the poetic-performative format to do this. The poet makes the world visible in new and different ways… The poet is accessible, visible, and present in the text, in ways that traditional writing forms discourage (p. 86).

The contrast between the narrative and the poeticised extracts invites the reader to listen carefully, whilst offering and impacting them far more than communication transcribed verbatim could allow (Reece & Speedy, 2014, p. 54). This participatory approach ensured that the woman had agency and control in shaping their own stories, accentuating the collaborative and empowering nature of the research process even further. I had encouraged them to communicate and write their respective comments and reflections once they had read their stories. The women chose to use email as their preferred mode of communication although they did not include any new information or insights.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, it was impossible to delve further into the writing process. Moreover, it was not feasible to convene as a group during the study period mainly because of ethical clearance and COVID-19 restrictions. Nevertheless, as a continuation of this research, I aim to follow up and bring all the women together. This would provide the opportunity to expand upon the elicited material as a group, co-creating new insights and knowledge.

Before embarking on my doctoral thesis, my perception of knowledge was fundamentally different. I was trained to do health research differently and viewed knowledge as being objective, something external to me as the researcher, and I was not accustomed to factoring in the internal processes, my own subjectivity, reflexivity, introspection, and emotional recall.

However, right from the outset of my doctoral journey, my goal was not to uncover explicit and scientific knowledge in its broadest sense (which is also important), but rather to immerse myself in the intricate micro stories through writing as inquiry and narrative exploration. I had yet to experience the transformative power of embodied writing (Ellingson, 2017) to generate new knowledge. To do this, I employed various forms of writing, understanding, and representation. Echoing Lather (2013), I now realise that through the writing, I was generating distinct knowledge and approaching the knowledge differently.

## Writing as Becoming

Laurel Richardson (1997) posed a fundamental question: ‘How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write, and how does what we write affect who we become?’ (p.1). To answer these questions, I engaged in a journey of critical self-reflection, employing

systematic introspection and emotional recall (Ellis, 1991) to illuminate fresh insights. My aim was to extend the relevance of my experiences beyond personal boundaries, echoing Carolyn Ellis's sentiments (2007). I blended narrative and pragmatic knowledge inspired by Bruner (1985), crafting an evocative narrative that transcended merely recounting, delving into practical aspects. As Grimshaw (1986) astutely noted, 'the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of the self' (p.164).

> Looking back on my experience, I realise how subjectivity, introspection, reflexivity, emotional writing helped me to deeply examine my own feelings and experiences in relation to self and others. It's been a simultaneous process of looking inwards and outwards, forwards, and backwards. I often joked that it felt as if I was going to the therapist on a daily basis– but in truth, I was serious. It felt as if I was continuously peering through a mirrored looking glass.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2022)

Thus writing my doctoral thesis was not just an academic endeavour; it became a transformative journey, moulding my evolving identity. Through this process, I came to understand that the act of writing inherently reshapes the self and there exists no ultimate interpretation, for once written, there is a sense of 'isness' (Richardson, 2002) that defies conclusive understanding.

Similarly, in relation to the writing, Pelias (1999) aptly suggested that 'once written it will become a historical claim, a writing event, simultaneously embodying, making theory an experience visible to others' (p. xi). I deeply resonate with this notion, as revisiting my doctoral writing in crafting this paper feels like revisiting history. Yet it also embodies a great appreciation for the evolving knowledge and evolving self that feels constantly in motion—a continuous process of becoming, where the boundaries between the researcher and the researched seem to merge and blur.

## Transformative Writing: Journeying Beyond Boundaries

In all its forms, writing serves as a mode of knowing (Richardson, 2000), an avenue of inquiry, and a dynamic process. Like many traditionally mainstream researchers, I refrained from expressing emotions on the page, even when drawing from personal experiences, I kept them separate (Ellis,1997). However, throughout my project, writing played an integral role. Giorgio (2008) astutely observed that when we write and we write to

heal, we extend healing to others, making it a political and hopeful act (p. 165). In my exploration of autoethnographic storytelling, I started to appreciate its unique ability to understand better the complex relationships between personal and epistemological truths, culture, and the realm of politics. Within the political dimension of illness, I witnessed (in both my personal and professional capacity) the intricate processes of medicalisation and the societal expectations inherently woven into it. Beyond my own personal experiences, I delved into the potential connections, whether direct or indirect, with the experiences of other women and questioned how the illness experience impacted women's ordinary lives. These interconnections, as outlined by Holman Jones (2005), are integral components of a broader political context. Embracing this approach has afforded me a more holistic understanding of how individual narratives intertwine with larger socio-political forces and structures concerning illness and healthcare.

> Reflecting on my illness episode, I vividly recall the embodied feelings, the doubts, and ambiguity at the crossroads in decision making. …. Although the uncertainty and the hope may be similar with other women's experiences…the individuation of how we live the outcome, and what we do with the meaning, is a very personal journey, nonetheless, a collective one….
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2020)

In delving into autobiographical narratives and sharing personal experiences, I found myself occupying dual roles and/or multiple roles—as both the subject and object of the narrative, the researcher and the researched, the nurse, and the counsellor. This immersion went beyond being a participant in research; it transformed me into an embodiment of the field through my writing and interactions, thus echoing Mayan's insights (2009). The navigation through private, public, and therapeutic discourses transformed the act of reflection and written interactions into a profound journey of self-discovery. Drawing on the wisdom of Lapadat (2017) and Wright & Chung (2001), this process expanded my knowledge and positioned it as an effective catalyst for personal, and perhaps broader societal, change.

> I'm adamant that I do not want to pathologise or medicalise the illness experience, I'm very cautious in keeping the nurse's voice at bay. However, when looking at the geography of emotions, and compassionately listening to women's illness stories, I do not inhabit fully the counsellor role either – it is not the scope or the space to do so.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli, 2020)

In hindsight, I realise that I continued to project the same ambivalence in multiple roles. I did not inhabit fully any role; I refused to fit into binaries, the dichotomy of either/or, one/the other, negative/positive, amongst others. I once again found myself betwixt and between. I sounded different voices that were elicited from a multitude of experiences. These voices merged with other women's voices. Although I was writing *mys*tory alongside other women's stories, I realise that it is not always clear whose voice I was sounding, because it could have been a composite voice.

By now, writing had evolved beyond a mere act to a dynamic process of inquiry, therapy, healing, and self-exploration. Engaging with others in the study, exploring the spaces within and around us, this journey has translated into transformative processes. What I have come to realise, especially highlighted in the crafting of this paper, is that the transformative processes are not finite or conclusive; they're an ongoing, evolving journey that is always in motion. Drawing inspiration from Wright & Wyatt (2017, p. 83), this ongoing exploration aids in uncovering the depths of what we think we know while revealing and challenging unknown edges.

As the author, the participants, and readers become witnesses to this journey (in alignment to Ellis & Bochner, 2006), new meanings and subjectivities emerge, contributing to the ever-evolving narrative. Lather and St. Pierre (2013) further emphasize that it's not solely about the act of writing: it's about the act of *thinking*. They assert that 'thinking differently changes being' (p. 631) highlighting the transformative power inherent in the process of contemplating and expressing thoughts through writing.

> Thinking, writing, feeling,
> therapy, wounds, healing.
> Unspoken words
> Loosely flowing, merging into
> each other
> Fading into silence
> I sit down to write – words fail.
> Or I fail words.
> The silence fills the
> space…
> Patiently…
> Waiting,
> Longing,
> To write
> Paper, pen……

Scribbling
Flooding emotions
Gripping mind, body, and soul
Etching words
Gently caressing the wound…
…. to heal.

(Martinelli, 2021)

## Thinking with Stories

In my writing, I aspired to embody Richardson's (1990) and Bochner & Ellis' (2016) idea that storytelling is not just a method of knowing, but a social practice—a way of sharing our lives. Shifting from telling to vividly showing, I aspired to move beyond abstract theorising. My goal was to evoke emotions, foster intimate involvement, and truly engage with the stories being told, aligning with the principles of narrative inquiry. This transformed my approach to theorising, evolving from contemplation about the stories to an active and immersive process of thinking *with* stories.

Frank's (1995) perspective resonates deeply—thinking *about* a story is like dissecting its content and analysing it from a distance. However, thinking *with* a story is a more immersive experience, where the narrative becomes intertwined with one's own life, revealing profound truths (p. 23). As I delved into the stories, the material that emerged was rich and diverse. It touched on language use, contextualising the narratives of the traditional and modern women in Malta and the exploration of emotions and feelings, often highlighting the perception of the condition as 'being all in the head'.

Hoffmann and Tarzian (2001) emphasized how medicine's focus on objective factors alongside cultural stereotypes often results in inadequate pain relief for women. When no physical cause is found, women's pain may be dismissed as in the patient's mind rather than acknowledged as legitimate (Cleghorn, 2021). This bias, backed by studies (Jackson, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021), hampers effective pain management by medical professionals. Additionally, Ware (1992) observed that women who face disbelief, patronization, or trivialization of their symptoms often internalize these attitudes, leading to self-blame or a belief in imaginary illnesses. This internalization can foster feelings of alienation and shame, prompting individuals to keep their illness secret and doubt their own reality (Ware, 1992, p. 347). Hence, the phrase 'It's in the head' elicited

feelings of anger, powerlessness, and betrayal among women collaborators, questioning their coherence and agency, and contributing to their silencing and erasure of self. As one woman stated:

> Doctors told me…
> ‘It’s all in the head’.
> Was I conditioning myself?
> But
> ‘IT is not all in the head,’
> IT is felt all over the body.
> The mind (head) is part of the body

## The Use of Language

> [T]he experience of writing goes beyond the use of language, or the discursive story written on the page. Often times, words failed me, or I failed words for diverse reasons, which included difficulty to express myself ‘well enough’, fear that my writing did not satisfy academic expectations or that the writing was not literary and aesthetic enough, therefore not satisfying autoethnographic criteria and the constant of shifting between languages (in thinking and writing Maltese and English) to find the ‘correct’ translation of some words/phrases, e. g., ‘the self’ and ‘care’. These were only but a few of the challenges that I continued to experience in the use of language.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli 2021)

Sarah Wall (2008) posited that the essence of writing lies in conveying messages in a language accessible to the audience, ensuring effective comprehension and understanding. This implies that language surpasses the act of speaking in one’s native tongue. In the context of conversations, language played a pivotal role in the crafting of illness narrative. It served as a powerful tool in shaping a distinct perspective on both reality and self as highlighted by Richardson & St. Pierre (2005). Our choice of language and the narratives we weave can serve as catalysts, fostering inclusive and empowering dialogues around illness, particularly when the ailment remains unseen by others—most especially when it is invisible. Instead of succumbing to silence, we can let language transform into a potent instrument. Through it, we articulate our experiences, challenge societal stigmas, assert our agency, and advocate not only for ourselves but also for others. In the journey of crafting my thesis and listening to the stories of the women collaborators, a clear revelation emerged, namely how this same process empowered us to share our stories, voice our needs, and potentially play a role in driving positive change. It stands as a testament to the profound transformative power of language and storytelling. The act of

storytelling proved to be a potent tool for advocacy and creating awareness, facilitating connections, and ultimately making a meaningful impact on the discourse surrounding illness.

In our conversations, the women unconsciously and separately each used the same pronoun to personify their conditions, referring to 'IT' as if there were another presence in the room. This act of externalising 'IT' enabled them to create a tangible, emotional, and psychological distance from their illnesses. However, even though they employed explicit language to accentuate the separation between themselves and their conditions, it became apparent that the motivation extended beyond creating a divide. They were also driven by a desire to safeguard their identities from being overshadowed by the illness and to avoid being solely identified through the lens of their health challenges. As one of the women participating in this study expressed it,

> IT is NOT my identity, IT is not ME'
> I see IT as exterior. . . to me.
> Control . . . contain,
> restricting the space for
> IT to flourish.

## Navigating Identity: The Symbolic Significance of Chronic Illness

Navigating the labyrinth of personal experiences unveils concealed and elusive aspects of the self, transforming the unspoken into the public domain (Pelias, 2021). Yet, language often grapples with the daunting task of truly encapsulating these experiences, facing a chasm between living the experience and narrating it (Bochner, 2016). The challenge goes beyond the simple recollection of memories; it extends to the intricate process of attributing meaning to these experiences and comprehending their profound impact on one's sense of self (Maté, 2011).

> [I]n writing this project 'I' (a daughter, woman, nurse, counsellor, and person who had been diagnosed with CFS) together with the women collaborators represented in the stories, brought forth their 'own' self, multiple selves, and different identities (e.g., the illness identity, the relational identity, the public/private identity), including the subjective selves that continue to evolve. In questioning selves, we open to a multitude of questions.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli 2021)

The symbolic significance that each participant attributed to their individual circumstances had a profound impact on how they perceived themselves, their identity post diagnosis, and their outlook on others (Williams, 2000). This symbolic quest to mend the ruptures between their bodies, sense of self, and society seemed to bolster their resilience and offer fresh insights into the meaning and experience of chronic illness (Williams, 1984; Hydén 1997). For both the women participants and me, the pursuit of an authentic and cohesive sense of self unfolded as an ongoing and parallel journey alongside the trajectory of illness. As one women participant claimed,

> I voice IT, IT is there,
> IT is not ME.
> IT revealed the true ME.
> I live and appreciate life,
> through a different lens.
> I live the now.

This journey transcended challenges such as bodily alienation, medicalisation, the loss of the known self, biographical disruption (Charmaz,1983; Williams, 2000; Bury, 1982) and the disruption of the embodied self (Leder,1990).

Throughout the research process, the exploration of self in relation to illness proved far from straightforward. In my personal experience, being diagnosed with ME/CFS—an ailment shrouded in controversy—in the 1980s initially felt like a relief compared to a diagnosis of myasthenia gravis. The moderate nature of my symptoms led me to question my own authenticity in relation to illness, almost feeling ashamed as if I were to blame. For many, the pursuit of an authentic self within the context of chronic illness is a deeply personal and ongoing journey, an ever-evolving endeavour in face of adversity. This journey closely mirrors the unpredictability of the chronic illnesses. Ultimately, embracing one's authentic self in chronic illness involves accepting and embracing both the strengths and vulnerabilities that come with it, cultivating resilience, and finding ways to live a fulfilling and meaningful life despite the challenges.

> A note to self…and others…
> All things are possible…
> A question of perspective,
> It's a choice…. or not?
> The story could have been told differently,
> the story of

weaker or stronger women,
determined or less determined,
passive or defiant,
…. Yet, in every narrative resilience shines.

(Martinelli, 2022)

## Reflecting, Re-evaluating, and Moving Forward

Bruner (1985) emphasises that narratives are fluid and constantly evolving; all stories are partial, and meanings are never fixed. The past is not frozen but shaped by context, audience, and retelling (p. 153). In recounting life and illness stories, the focus of my thesis and the writing of this paper is not solely on describing past experiences, but on understanding the impact that making meaning continues to have on the individual's experience. Moreover, in sharing illness stories the aim is to engage readers in the emotional journey, inviting them to participate in the joint creation of meaning (Pollock, 1998, p. 8). Rather than romanticising outcomes, the intention is to reveal ambivalences and contradictions. Through sharing *my*story alongside others', the boundary between private and public life blurs, allowing readers to connect and 'experience the experience' (Ellis & Bochner, 1992, p. 98).

Reflecting on whether I could have approached things differently now that I've gained more awareness is challenging. Any potential changes could have altered my experience significantly. However, given ethical clearance and the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions during that period, one thing that I would have done differently is to bring the women collaborators together informally and as equals to discuss, write, and continue to expand on material elicited from their stories, further co-creating other stories. As mentioned earlier, I hope to have this opportunity in the very near future. Moreover, in every study there are limitations which once again can only be identified in retrospect. Some limitations in my study included the following:

1. Being a novice researcher using autoethnography and the first student to use such an approach at the University of Malta for a Ph.D. study. This novelty may have created some limitations in writing and when talking about my project with my colleagues. At times, it felt very overwhelming and limiting. I am thankful to my doctoral supervisors, advisors, and the international autoethnographic community.

2. At times, I felt *homeless,* a nomad trying to fit in, to belong to the two different disciplines that I come from; I felt that I was not totally immersed in either the counselling or the nursing department. Instead, I found myself hovering in the in-between.

3. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while working with the case management team in the Infectious Disease and Prevention Unit of the Public Health Department and with the Department of Nursing, I faced significant limitations in my doctoral journey. The high stress, anxiety, and long working hours led to physical and mental exhaustion. The emotional toll and uncertainty of COVID-19 were exacerbated by the parallel emotional processes involved in writing my thesis. There were moments when I felt lost for words, when everything seemed irrelevant, and giving up felt imminent. One of my final reflections of my thesis which I believe is still relevant today in the crafting this paper—I realise that the process continues to unfold as stories continue to be told. I had claimed that

> Like Alice (in wonderland), I felt totally immersed in the 'deep hole' of the unknown, even though it was my choice to walk this path, honestly speaking, I was oblivious to the process and the transformation of self in this journey. On recalling experiences, I relived and re-identified with my inner child's known experiences, feelings, and emotions during this journey, which were my known reality, whilst I continued to question and remained curious to search for meaning. I embraced the path and assigned 'meanings in motion' as I continued to delve deeper recalling memories, capturing specific moments and emotions of past experiences. As I relate *my*story, I embrace the child and the woman I am today, thus placing meaning within the context of my life, the whisper of silence echoed through the deep hole into open space, in the hope that it would be heard by the 'other'.
>
> Reflection excerpt (Martinelli 2022)

So, what now? What next? Where do we go from here? Does the writing stop here? In my oration during the graduation ceremony, I referred to Amanda Gorman's (Fox 11 Los Angeles, 2022) words from her poem 'What is the way forward?' which is still very relevant:

> Today we are writing our own path,
> not with wrath but with will.
>
> The way forward isn't the road we take,
> The way forward is the road we make.

So let us make our road a worthy one! I stand by what Virginia Woolf (1953) stated about Michel de Montaigne's essays, that I hope to 'continue to communicate a soul...to go down boldly and bring to light those hidden thoughts which are the most diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing' (p. 66).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the present moment serves as a culmination of an intricate dance between the research journey and the process of writing this paper. The ongoing exploration of scholarly works has not only informed the content but has been a continuous source of inspiration in shaping the narrative. Simultaneously, the act of translating these insights into written form has been a dynamic process of synthesis and reflection. In writing this paper it became more evident that the research journey and the writing process are intricately intertwined, each influencing and enriching the other. The iterative nature of this endeavour is manifested in the symbiotic relationship between recollection of memories, exploration of ideas and their articulation on paper. In the present moment, insights gained from the research journey resonate within the crafted narrative. Additionally, the act of writing acts as a driving force, prompting ongoing inquiry, refinement, and exploration of ideas.

The simultaneous engagement with both the research and writing highlights the dynamic nature of academic inquiry, emphasising the continuous interplay between understanding and articulation in the ongoing process of knowledge creation. Essentially, the present moment represents a critical juncture where the synthesis of the research journey and the writing process gives rise to a cohesive and insightful narrative, marking not just the end of a project but a point of transition into the broader conversation of scholarly discourse.

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LIRIC
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*Article*

# Words Behind Walls: A Creative Writing Project with Prison Staff

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## Abstract

Research from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge recognises that prison officers are productive role models for prisoners and that the pop-cultural stereotype of the officer beating the inmate into submission has diminished. Yet a report published by the Prison Officers Association in 2020 noted that staff members were at a greater risk of work-related stress and mental health problems than most other occupations, with little support in place. Staff wellbeing is in turn tantamount to the safety of those who serve custodial sentences.

In 2022, researchers at the University of Hull designed a bespoke eight-week creative writing course for prison staff at two HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) facilities supporting the mental health of their staff. This was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom.

This article explains the design and delivery of the course, the choice of texts as writing prompts, and the writing exercises used. The data reveal numerous benefits for individual participants, including an 'escape' from daily work, improved relationships, and a cathartic outlet for managing a stressful job. The article draws focus to the writing course stimulating confidence and prompting self-growth. The authors contend that the delivery and outcomes of the course positions prison as a unique site for writing to support employee wellbeing.

***Keywords***: prison staff, creative writing, wellbeing

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## Introduction

Research recognises that prison officers are productive role models for prisoners and that the pop-cultural stereotype of the officer beating the inmate into submission has diminished (Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011). Yet a report published by the Prison Officers Association (POA) in 2020 noted that members were at a greater risk of work-related stress and mental health problems than most other occupations, with little support in place to treat these issues (Kinman & Clements, 2020). Scholars have explored the 'organisational hazards' of working in a prison (for instance, high workloads, risk of suicide and self-harm) rather than addressing prison staff wellbeing in holistic ways (Kinman, Clements, & Hart, 2016). We do know that creative writing has been used to combat employee stress in other professions—an excellent example of this is an American project conducted with medics which concluded that creative writing could be a therapeutic tool to combat burnout (Cronin et al., 2020). For decades, creative writing has been offered to the incarcerated, and researchers have documented its tangible benefits including improved self-confidence and reduced emotional stress. Much of this research comes from the US (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004; Beasley, 2015; Littman & Sliva, 2020); to date there has been nothing bringing these overlapping fields into discussion and practice.

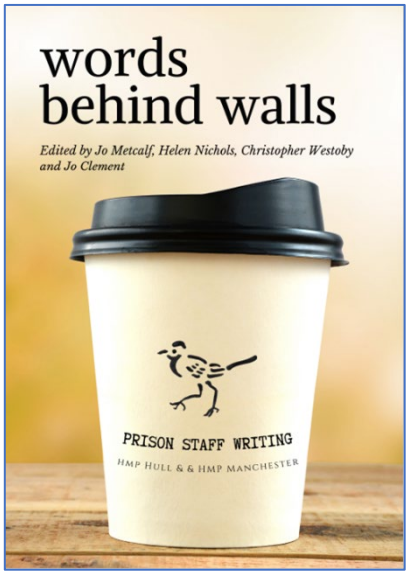
This project makes an original contribution to academic enquiry in terms of writing for wellbeing with prison staff. In late 2022, three researchers (or investigators) at the University of Hull (UoH) sourced funds to run a creative writing course for prison staff; this was the first of its kind in the UK. As we started to advertise the course and recruit participants, one individual emailed the lead investigator to comment on the opportunity: 'Thank you, it sounds a rich and lovely thing in this environment.'

This pitches the prison as a specific site of interest in creative writing. A number of factors make the prison an unusual place to work, not least the lack of mobile phones, the 'pressure cooker' atmosphere on the wings, and the need for confidentiality, thus not necessarily being able to share one's day with a partner. The nature of the working environment creates

risks to prison staff's personal wellbeing through exposure to violence, causing a high turnover (Liebling, Price, & Shefer, 2011).

The public are broadly fascinated with what happens behind prison walls and are arguably becoming ever more aware of those who operate the carceral machine. The popularity of recent television shows such as *Time* (2021) and *Screw* (2022) suggest that people are intrigued more than ever before by the lives of prison staff. Alex South's memoir *Behind These Doors: Stories of Strength, Survival and Suffering in Prison* (2023) that documents her ten years as a prison officer was named a BBC Radio 4 book of the week in 2023, drawing attention to the strains that prison staff are under. This was further highlighted by the coverage of an escaped Wandsworth prisoner in early September 2023—interviews with former governors and prison staff in the news discussed not just the logistics of the escape itself, but the issues facing our prisons, including staff shortages, a transient workforce, and enormous administrative challenges (Mason, 2023). The wellbeing of those who work in prison is in turn tantamount to the safety and security of those who are serving custodial sentences.

We offered a bespoke course in creative writing at HMP Hull and HMP Manchester; both sites were willing to support their staff in seeking an alternative approach to wellbeing provision within HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service). Both prisons have past histories of staff dissatisfaction; for example, prison officers went on strike at HMP Manchester over staff safety in 2018 while at HMP Hull the walkout was called off at the last minute (Grierson & Weaver, 2018). Two writing tutors—Stephen Wade and Jenny Berry at Hull and Manchester, respectively—led the groups, which ultimately produced an anthology of writings, *Words Behind Walls* (Metcalf et al., 2023). This article explains the design and delivery of the course, including our choice of texts as writing prompts, and the specific writing exercises that we used. For the purposes of this article, we are particularly interested in the ways in which the writing course stimulated confidence, prompting self-growth. And in all of this, we contend that the delivery and



outcomes of the course speak specifically to the uniqueness of the prison as a site for writing to support employee wellbeing.

## A Pilot Initiative: Methodology and Ethics

Our key research question asked, 'What are the benefits for attendees associated with their participation in a (custom-made) creative writing course?' The epistemological rationale for this question, and the project more broadly, are reflected in the decision to bring together seemingly disparate researchers: a cultural studies scholar, a criminologist, and a creative writing lecturer. All three brought their own rationalist, empirical, and existential epistemologies into the heart of the project design, as reflected in their previous publications exploring themed-reading and writing groups in prison, prison governor wellbeing, and autobiographical writings (Metcalf & Skinner, 2023; Nichols et al., 2024; Westoby, 2020).

While the wellbeing of prison officers remained a primary line of enquiry for our collaborative project, we were also interested in helping HMPPS staff members realise why prisoners themselves may benefit from creative writing or other such study groups. In enabling staff to appreciate the value of such a course, we hoped they might then encourage prisoners to engage with such opportunities.

Given its test status, we were unsure how the opportunity would be received by staff, even though both course tutors and investigators had previously had informal conversations with various prison personnel about creative writing. An explanatory email about the course was sent out via staff listservs at the two prisons some weeks before its planned commencement. One of the investigators also stood on the gate at HMP Manchester for several hours with some flyers about the course, though this was not necessarily productive given that staff coming through are either in a hurry to get to or to leave work. While many did accept the flyer, few stopped to talk. At HMP Hull, one of the researchers was invited to walk around with a member of staff who knew many on-site staff by name. Stopping to chat, especially with wing officers, provided an opportunity to counteract any 'macho' retorts about creative writing, which were frequent.

It soon became apparent that though the project was originally pitched specifically at prisoner-facing staff (namely wing officers), we were not going to recruit as many as planned. This speaks to the resistance to participation as well as to the practical difficulties of scheduling in prisons

when officers are already stretched to capacity. One officer who did attend the course inadvertently spoke to these recruitment challenges, noting 'every Thursday I've had crap off the lads' [about coming to a writing class] and 'I feel a bit guilty though I have to say […] because I know there's no cover on the wing for me.' As a result, our recruitment pitch shifted and we reissued a listserv email that offered all staff (including administrative and OSG [operational support grade]) the opportunity to enrol.

Thirty participants signed up at HMP Hull and 25 at HMP Manchester. In both instances, there were marginally more females than males, which is noteworthy given both sites have more male employees overall. The number enrolled dropped by the start of the course and dwindled further during the course, with email and verbal responses indicating that this was not unwillingness on the part of participants, but rather a result of work commitments and schedules. The final number to finish the course amounted to nine in Hull and 15 in Manchester. Those who completed were employed in variety of roles, including prison officers, OSGs, finance administrators, nurses, and other medical support staff, librarians, and chaplains. While non-operational staff 'may not be exposed to the same risks and challenges as their colleagues working on the wings, they nonetheless operate in a high-pressure environment where meeting targets is paramount and political turbulence has direct implications for their working lives' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.[1]).

We ran eight creative writing sessions, each lasting one hour, one session per week consecutively, facilitated by either Wade or Berry at each site. Initial recruitment numbers led us to arrange two cohorts at each site in any given week, though at Hull these were merged into one group part way through. The course content was designed by the investigators, and then the two tutors were approached for input on the draft curricula. Participants were provided three key texts (a short story, poetry, and a memoir) all connected to prison life to stimulate discussion and used to underpin writing exercises in class as well as homework. We sought to work with tutors who had prior experience of prison. The investigators were aware that both tutors had extensive experience of running writing workshops with people in prison (as well as publishing along these lines), though not with prison staff. Indeed, Berry took it in her stride that at the time of the course, HMP Manchester was a paperless prison and hence she could not take in her notes or take writings home. Wade faced ongoing issues with scheduling, and both tutors faced queries at various points with front gate security. However, their previous experiences told them this was

not personal but rather a regular occurrence due to the prioritisation of safety and security.

The investigators could have facilitated the course themselves due to their combined experience of working in prisons and conducting creative writing. However, we anticipated that participants might respond better to the tutors than to us as academics, not just because of the evidence of success of Berry and Wade as published authors (one of the investigators is themself a successful memoirist), but because of the suspicion that sometimes accompanies academic projects (Wade, 2021; Berry, 2020; Westoby, 2020). Scholars have acknowledged the 'public mistrust of scholarly work' that negatively affects research activity (Howe & Moses, 1999, p. 27). This is perhaps heightened in the creative writing classroom whereby participants with little prior experience of creative writing may be concerned about exposing vulnerabilities. Author Patrice Vecchione tells us that, 'to become a strong writer, you have to try things out and to dare' (2020, p. 13). We felt that tutors who breathe creative writing—as both practitioners and authors—would be better placed to generate meaningful responses. Employing independent tutors also enabled the project team to be separate from the delivery of the sessions, facilitating a more objective course evaluation process. This is not to say that we covered up the academic intentions of the project—all participants received a UoH certificate of completion (unaccredited) and had to sign consent forms at the outset with the University's logo clearly embossed. The perspective of the tutors themselves was a crucial component of our data collection, and we thus conducted a formal 'closing' interview with them at the end of the course.

We had to undergo a rigorous ethics application at the UoH before the project could commence. This ethics application received input and advice from those who sat on our working groups. As part of our methodology, we set up monthly working group meetings during the planning stages of the project, which lasted through the workshop delivery and beyond the end of classes. The working group consisted of two former wing officers with decades of experience and a fellow academic colleague with prison research interests, as well as the investigators and two psychologists from the Centre for Human Factors (CHF) at the UoH. We deliberately kept the two tutors removed from the working group to keep their work with participants and their interviews with us as unbiased data. Both the former prison officers and our colleague within the working group were instrumental in advising on ethical responsibilities in both our UoH ethics

application and that to the National Research Committee (NRC) which is required to conduct research in prisons in England and Wales.

The NRC exists to ensure that the research is robust and relevant. In initial feedback from the NRC on our application, they praised the project for being 'highly pertinent' though they asked us to clarify some of the administrative logistics of the course as well as the data collection. One of HMPPS's current priorities is improving efficiency and reducing costs, and in our NRC application we illustrated how this project could support that by reminding staff that they are valued and that their work during the difficult years of the pandemic was appreciated.

In a project of this kind, the ethics are an ongoing process. For example, once the workshops had been completed and we were collating writings for an anthology, we invited participants to inform us of their preference for pieces to be published (though we did also stress this might not always be possible because of editorial decisions to encourage a range of content). Such invitations were important in making participants feel in control of their own writings, especially in the prison setting where events are often uncontrollable.

## The Centre for Human Factors and a Summary of Results

The evaluation and analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data was led by the Centre for Human Factors (CHF) at the UoH. The two CHF psychologists who sat on the working group were approached for their expertise in measuring staff wellbeing in a range of workplaces. The CHF conceived pre- and post-course validation questionnaires that evaluated participants' job satisfaction, mental wellbeing, mental health conditions, and occupational self-efficacy. These two surveys were distributed to prison staff who joined the course at the launch of the sessions (T1) and at the end (T2). From the original 55 sign-ins, 24 responses were collected at T1 (participation rate = 43.7%) and 12 at T2 (constituting half of the sample at T1) (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 8). At T1, the questionnaires also asked participants about their previous experiences in creative writing, their motivations for joining, and their current mental health; at T2, they were asked about the perceived benefits of their participation.

The tutors recorded the workshops which were then transcribed and helped the investigators gain a better understanding of the organisational context and the challenges faced by prison staff as well as the advantages of these writing sessions. Participants were also invited via email at the

end of the course to be interviewed by one of the investigators or the CHF team. In total five interviews were conducted either face to face or via MS Teams with prison staff, and one further respondent emailed their answers to the questions. The contribution of the CHF was invaluable. Their questionnaires helped us understand the motivations of participants to engage with the course, citing curiosity, wellbeing, being advised by a therapist to enrol, thinking it would benefit relationships inside and outside of work, and wanting to learn a new skill. Table 1 shows the key themes that the CHF saw emerging from data that they analysed from transcripts, questionnaires, and interviews.

**Table 1: List of Themes and Subthemes Extracted from the Data**

| Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| 1. Individual benefits related to wellbeing | • Escape from work<br>• Processing of difficult experiences |
| 2. Other individual benefits | • Development of creative skill<br>• Development of confidence (self-confidence, interpersonal confidence)<br>• Development of the self |
| 3. Personal benefits regarding relationships with family and friends | • Closer relationships with family |
| 4. Professional benefits regarding relationships with colleagues | • Development of empathy within the work setting<br>• Connection building |
| 5. Professional benefits regarding relationships with prisoners | • Support resources for prisoners |

These themes point to the sensitivities that were at stake when conducting this research (relationships, confidence, the self, etc.) and provide a useful context as we now move to explore in detail what we did in the weekly workshops.

## Reading Prompts, Class Exercises, and Homework

The rationale behind this project is that reading and reflecting on topics presented in selected books, and subsequently writing about them, can help improve participants' wellbeing. The choice to engage with three specific books to fuel class discussion and lead into writing exercises was sparked by one of the investigator's previous projects, which revealed the

positive impact of using specific US (prison) culture texts as creative writing prompts in a series of workshops with (ex) prisoners (Litten & Metcalf, 2019, pp. v–vii). After all, as a person in prison recently told them, 'Everyone has something to say about America' (Metcalf & Skinner, 2023, p. 701). The choice of these texts was deliberate because of their themes of hope and hopelessness, humanity and citizenship, and desistance (stopping reoffending). The study of other authors' writing is highly beneficial not only in developing the skill to pinpoint what similarly works or does not work in one's own writing, thereby increasing its quality and clarity, but also in inspiring and catalysing ideas.

Three readings were distributed in the first class of term: *Rita Hayworth and The Shawshank Redemption*, the 1982 novella from bestselling author Stephen King which would be renamed *The Shawshank Redemption* when released as Hollywood movie in 1994; Shaun Attwood's *Prison Time*, a 2014 memoir about serving a sentence as an Englishman in a US jail; and *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*, a 2007 collection of poetry edited by human rights lawyer and professor Mark Falkoff. Hard copies of the first two books were supplied in the first class, and participants were clearly enamoured to receive something to keep; this arguably served to make the course more official, encouraging participants to take it seriously and attend all sessions. There were logistical queries with Manchester as a paperless prison: books could only be received if ordered directly from the supplier and sent to the Deputy Governor. Because the Guantanamo poetry collection was out of print, we could only copy excerpts, which had to be done in-house at HMP Manchester in their own print room.

While handing out hard copies of books and readings gave the course credence, it also provided a level playing field for everyone to start class discussions and writings. One interviewee explained that they did not think they would be comfortable joining in but did so when they realised that everyone was reading from scratch. While this was made possible by the American-themed content, it was also intentional that all these texts focused on prison. All of our participants had first-hand experience of prison and hence something worthwhile to say about the representation of prisons in these texts. Again, this served to boost confidence from the outset. Moreover, we intended for these readings to help participants think further about the people in prison whom they support on the wings, in the classroom, and in other spaces. This encourages staff to perhaps think differently about the people who have committed crimes. A simple

example of this is that *Shawshank* helps us understand not just the prison experience but also the challenges facing prisoners upon release.

Alongside the safe, shared creative space of the weekly sessions, homework afforded participants a supplementary private space to work on the themes or techniques explored together. The homework set each week was a form of journaling. Participants were made aware of the value of consistent journaling for both one's writing practice and mental health wellbeing. Although we were keen to have the staff explore their lives within the prison walls, these exercises were designed to have them think more holistically about how their working and private lives mutually influence one another. Prisons are a dangerous and taxing environment to work in; we wanted participants to consider the real-life impact this has, and to do that, their writing had to step outside of the walls.

Many staff members work twelve-hour shifts—a life almost perfectly divided between work and home. Spotlighting these contrasting facets of their lives gave writers autonomy to steer clear of revealing too much of their work/home experiences if they were not comfortable to explore (and subsequently share) one or the other, or to use their writing to bridge these two very different spheres. Life writing often explores the effects our experiences have on others. Several participants frequently reflected upon family and romantic partners, how the nature of their work affected this, and how difficult it can be to operate in this field when intense difficulties are happening in one's personal life: 'Throughout the day, I was full of anxiety and miserable. I felt bad for the officer who took my place supervising methadone, but no one seemed to understand that my world was falling apart... All I wanted to do was call home' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Creative writing is particularly concerned with such connections, effects, and influences, and in the sphere of nonfiction, it can help a writer to see, acknowledge, and engage in this, as noted by Bronwyn Williams among other scholars (2013).

Journaling was also a logical choice for homework, given that it can sustain productivity in writing, helping to avoid writer's block (Cameron, 2016, p. 24). Particularly in the early weeks, we were very mindful that 71% of the participants had joined with little-to-no experience of creative writing since school (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 9). Our tutors struck a balance between applying encouragement to keep up writing practise whilst avoiding the application of pressure, which would dissuade participants from returning. Too much freedom in writing can paradoxically be inhibiting: we can sometimes find ourselves overwhelmed

by choice. We therefore felt that participation would be improved if we provided gentle prompts for each journal entry. For example, 'I get out of bed in the morning because…'; 'The voice in my head tells me…'; 'Being a human at home means…'; and, 'I took it home…'. These prompts carefully corresponded with the week's discussion and reading, while leaving an element of freedom in their open-endedness for participants to engage in whatever was on their mind either in or outside of work.

Working within a prison can be profoundly detrimental to one's wellbeing, even compared to other emergency and security professionals; 37.5% of our respondents reported moderate to severe mental health difficulties at the launch of the course (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 3). Having participants complete weekly journaling homework was a notable asset to their wellbeing. As one person told us following the programme: 'I left the first week, moaning I had "homework", but by the end I am sad it's finished. The time has been really cathartic for me, I really feel I have benefitted emotionally from this. It almost feels like I have been given permission to write things down… I feel good for doing it.' Survey data showed that participants enjoyed the process of journaling in their own time, with another interviewee explaining, 'I enjoyed the homework, and it actually helped me with my mental health... this took my mind off thinking about going back to work the next day.'

Prison staff wrote about their own experiences in early journaling exercises, but in-class exercises that focused on the self were reserved until a few weeks into the course. This included brainstorming the opening of a memoir and a personal moment of epiphany. By the end of the course, participants were asked to write a fictional award nomination for a colleague before then writing about themselves, but from the point of view of a colleague. Similarly, we were careful with prompts that writers may have felt revealed too much about the workplace until a sense of trust was established. Participants expressed anxiety about honest writing potentially having professional repercussions: 'Remember what we say in here stays in here,' one remarked. The tutors had to persevere in establishing trust within the groups, with one of them explaining to the researchers that, 'The staff were very nervous of what they said and I assured them each week that no-one was listening to their personal opinions.' This speaks to the notion of psychological safety, which 'describes perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context such as a workplace' and how such risk may be reduced (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 27). Clearly, as the course progressed

staff placed more trust in the confidentiality of the sessions. They developed a sense of ownership over their writing in terms of what to share with peers, therefore giving themselves permission to write more candidly.

## The Writings as Anthology and as Data

Though the writings produced—whether in the class or at home—were certainly guided by our choice of writing prompts and texts for discussion, we deliberately encouraged a degree of independence to enable participants to take the production in their own direction. Thus, for example, though one exercise invited participants to consider hope and or hopelessness in the workplace, one author decided to do so through the eyes of the prisoner themselves attending their ACCT review and then subsequently feeling suicidal (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). When contributors were invited to submit a range of pieces from which the editors would pick a selection for publication, there were clearly a number of prominent topics: family, the (negative) prison, and prisoners. But each of these can be broken down into smaller themes. For example, those who wrote about families covered intimate relationships, divorce, bereavement, and childhood. As already noted, some of the participants worked shifts with literally half their lives at home and half a work. In interview, one officer spoke about 'masking up at home to hide what you saw at work,' implying the two are interlinked. And the work that was submitted for consideration in the anthology, while at first glance suggests that it is split both in and out of the prison itself, shows evidence of these worlds being entwined. As the prose piece 'Ramble' informs us, 'Sometimes I go home and worry about work […] it got me thinking. I tried writing some stuff down when I got home, with the hope of getting it out of my head. Hoping to switch off' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.).

In a discussion of the anthology's content, it is important to highlight our decision to include writings by both tutors, Jenny Berry and Stephen Wade. Each of them published an original poem about their experiences running this course as well as a previously published poem about prison. While Berry wrote 'I've seen something I can't unsee / It's a tip-top, top-notch, top-secret/living inside of me … an oasis in my brain,' Wade produced a piece titled 'The Ballad of the Words Behind Bars' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). The reasons for these inclusions were multifaceted. Unsurprisingly, the anthology's publishing editor felt these additions gave credence to a collection of writings by previously unpublished authors.

Doing so provided a sense of professionalism to the prison staff contributors who were 'honoured' to appear alongside Berry and Wade and reassured the practitioners on some level that they were not merely subjects for study. Moreover, embedding the tutors' own works in the anthology serves to remind us of the importance of practitioners in research projects such as this; the project commenced with the University investigators and ended with the participants' writings and book launch, but it all hinged on the two practitioners at the heart of proceedings.

Using the tutors to close this gap between the investigators on one hand and the publishers and outputs on the other is arguably important in light of ongoing discord between creativity and criminology. Creative research methods have long been used in the social sciences; for example, scholar Helen Kara notes that creative research methods can 'help contemporary researchers who may be facing research questions that cannot be answered—or at least, not fully—using traditional research methods' (2015, p. 1). And yet this does not translate to a clear understanding of how creative outputs can then be used as a data source. As a team of scholars from three different disciplines (though all situated within the same university faculty), we had some fascinating discussions along these lines. Of particular note to us was the justified hesitancy of the CHF psychologists to engage with the writings as a data set. As they explained to the project team:

> Although these writings could be considered as data, a couple of factors prevent us from treating them as such in our analysis. First, texts sent by participants may suffer from self-selection bias. Second, due to the fictional aspect involved in writing, it is difficult to distinguish between a genuine reflection of participants' true experiences and elements that do not originate from their personal experiences. One might argue that fiction still carries something about one's own experience, however attempting to embellish a story sets a limit to this connection. (Earle & Freour, 2023, p. 6).

Again, Kara with Richard Philips has explored the use of creative writings as a data set and dissemination (2021). But this is not to say that all social scientists are comfortable in such practice, and there is still work to be done to make the two data sets complement one another.

Put simply, the CHF team identified themes of 'escape from work' and 'processing of difficult experiences [at work]' from their bespoke questionnaires and interviews. But surely it is of immediate relevance to point towards the poem titled 'Burnout' ('I need help and support/I make no difference at all') or 'Masking' ('on a crappy Monday/ Putting on fake

smiles/masking our thoughts') or the piece of prose 'Hope and Hopelessness' about a prisoner withdrawing from drugs ('I was shocked when I walked into his room, into his despair') to give context to the environment that they were escaping from or processing (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Perhaps we need to reach more of an agreement in which each set of data can inform the other, reflecting the epistemological assumptions that informed the interdisciplinary project design in the first instance. Indeed, though exploring education (including writing) programmes for prisoners rather than prison staff, US scholar Anna Plemons makes a strong case for moving away from 'data-driven classrooms' and 'evidence-based program models' and thinking about alternative ways of to evidence the efficacy of creativity in prison (2018, p. 89).

The act of writing is beneficial for participants (as explicitly demonstrated by the CHF report), but the writings produced are also essential for the investigators and—even more importantly—the wider public to help them make sense of the prison as a complicated working environment and the ways in which these pressures may (in)advertently be carried home into the family sphere. Certainly, we know from group transcriptions and the tutors that many of the anthology's pieces were self-reflective, whether about peers and prisoners at work or life beyond work. In this context, the writings themselves are a different sort of data to our questionnaire and interviews, not least because they are more 'measured' in that people have taken their time to refine the 'data.' The writings arguably stand as a vital form of data in their own right given that they come from the same minds that speak in interview or complete the questionnaire.

## Cultivating Confidence

Our prison staff project suggested that writing about one's experiences from within an under-represented profession, condition, or context can provide a twofold asset: improvements to the wellbeing of the writer through the process of artistically engaging with their experiences whilst the dissemination of this writing can improve wider awareness and understanding of the context in question. These two facets of writing fed into the same positive outcome for the participant: confidence. Prison by its nature represents a place where control is taken away, and this is true of the staff who work there too. Although writing cannot change one's situation or past experiences, the act of writing (and certainly editing) gave participants a strong sense of ownership not only over the words but of the

experience they portrayed. Thus, from the outset of our course, it was important for participants to feel they were in control of their writing, from what it is they chose to write to whether, or how, they shared it.

Attending a creative writing group can be daunting, and the thought of sharing work may cause participants to leave, not attend in future, or significantly filter what they write as a form of defence. Our participants were reminded that with each exercise they were in control whether to a) participate in the exercise but then destroy their writing, finding value solely in the process of writing rather than retaining it or sharing it; b) partake in the exercise and keep their writing private; or c) share their work with the rest of the group and potentially in an anthology. This approach was planned to build a sense of confidence in the participants; cultivating trust not only with one another but with the motives of the course itself was key to get prison participants to engage in their stories. Amongst the numerous personal growth and wellbeing benefits we found this course delivered, a key finding was staff members' increase in confidence. As one of them told us, 'Before I'd think, "Oh I can't do that because you know I'm a wreck and I can't do that".'

At both prisons, we advertised no expectation for 'good' writing as a prerequisite nor as a learning outcome. Rather we prioritised the objective of participants becoming more proficient at navigating and expressing their memories via writing—accessing and engaging in their experiences and then translating it to clear prose. The prison staff arrived at this course with a range of different barriers, and tutors helped them navigate these as individuals. We did not want participants to think about their writing in terms of whether it is 'good' in terms of content or technique; this stance was important to maintain throughout the course. As one of the tutors explained to the researchers: 'Everyone's human and they're all worried about their writing and "oh gosh mine's not as good as so and so's down the table" and "my reading voice isn't nice" and "my handwriting's not nice," all kind of imposter syndrome type things.' The same tutor reflected on creative writing being intimidating both in terms of comparison between peers and whether one's work achieves on an academic level. Interestingly, they drew comparisons in the ways that the prison staff reacted similarly to prisoners along these lines. As Berry explains, 'What was funny, because I've obviously done this kind of thing with prisoners for so long also, the same things and the same fears and the same barriers came out from both: "oh I'm not good at writing" and "I'm not sure".' In interview, participants themselves flagged that tutors had repeatedly tried

to quell their fears as such, for instance stating '[the tutor] says to us you know like "just chill out, it doesn't have to be perfect first time, it doesn't even have to be good".'

The prison staff writing course allowed participants across varied roles within the prisons to connect and learn more about one another's responsibilities and points of view. Feedback comments at the end of the course flagged how productive it had been to meet people who they had never come across before (despite working at the same site for years) and to find out about other's job roles and what they entailed. As one participant explained in a post-programme interview:

> The understanding of each other's role I'd say was the biggest thing… that will really help… We had a librarian in and a prison officer and something always went wrong admin wise and then after one of the groups she took him in for a chat with their member about something that had happened, I don't get, it was nothing to do with me but… they'd opened up communication about a problem… So, [were it not for the programme] they wouldn't have come on that class together and that wouldn't have happened.

Participants were tasked with engaging in their own experiences, expressing them artistically, and then sharing them to a group they did not yet know very well. Even with the structure of our course allowing for a gradual process, it is still asking a lot of any attendee. Our tutors were integral to easing participants into this process, encouraging staff members but respecting different paces and not applying pressure to those who were not yet ready. As one participant noted in hindsight, 'What worked for me was there was no pressure from [the tutor] to speak up in front of everyone.' Staff appreciated the tutors' experience in addressing these barriers. As people progressed through the course, a significant reward for their investment was evident; one participant said, 'It's growth and development by stepping out of my comfort zone.' For many, confidence manifested in two separate journeys: confidence in engaging with the group and the writing, and confidence that transcended the writing into their professional development.

Our course demonstrated an improvement in interpersonal confidence, the ability to speak up amongst others and see enough value in their ideas to share them. As one participant noted, 'I was quieter to begin with but as I gained a bit more confidence about it, and I'm not normally one to speak up, it did encourage me to speak up a bit more and give my opinion and read bits and pieces out, not something I would normally ever consider doing.' The confidence gained through writing would transcend

the classroom, positively affecting their personal and professional lives; participants noted improvements in their relationships with colleagues, prisoners, and family members. The course showed instances of improving one's ability to express and articulate oneself, processing difficult experiences, and being able to subsequently share these with family members. As an interviewee explained, 'Actually discussing things with one sister who had similar experiences to me, I think it's made us even closer because of that shared understanding. Neither one of us had actually really talked about it.'

The course led several participants to report continuing to write in their own time and even consider whether their work might be the springboard into a larger project such as a novel. And importantly, our participants seemed to feel a positive sense of responsibility in their contribution to the upcoming anthology, in giving the wider public insight into their work and helping to improve awareness of this place of work and its importance. As one contributor noted, 'The staff I come across join the service with the sole purpose of helping people, to prevent victims. This type of work isn't celebrated by the public... If the public really wanted to hear about the great work my colleagues do day in, day out I would tell them... I alone can't give us that; it's not my gift. But I can go back tomorrow and do my bit.' Such thinking arguably instilled a sense of confidence—and pride—in their writing.

## In Closing

The involvement of CHF was crucial in documenting our findings in robust ways. The data collection flagged numerous benefits for individual participants, varying from an 'escape' from daily work ('it's like an oasis') to improved relationships (with family, colleagues and people in prison) and a cathartic outlet for managing a stressful job. One of CHF's notable highlights at the end of the project was the importance of this course as distinct from other HMPPS wellbeing provision. Existing support is considered to be for individuals who might be in distress and need immediate assistance, whereas this writing programme was praised by one interviewee for its more 'holistic… general approach.' As another participant informed a tutor, our writing course was 'a genius idea because certainly from my perspective to have an hour in the week at work where you're not having to deal with what you've got to deal with, it's just wonderful.' Of all the participants involved, only one reported perceiving no value for their wellbeing. Exploring their responses as a whole, the CHF

team identified that this interviewee expressed high satisfaction with their work and hence had less need to escape or to process difficult work-related matters. Furthermore, in interview this participant also stated a preference to not bring personal issues into their writing: '[the tutor] would say a lot of people write about the past and stuff like that, that doesn't interest me, I don't want to delve into that.' Nonetheless, the respondent confirmed they would engage with further creative writing opportunities if offered.

When we invited participants to offer input on refining the courses were we to run them again, several suggested that one hour each week did not suffice. Several also noted on feedback questionnaires and in interview that they would 'absolutely' do a course in creative writing again. One of the factors that arguably makes this project so distinctive (or 'successful') in light of the prison context, is its focus on 'it followed me home.' Here were staff members who worked in the same place, writing about how the intense nature of their work impacts upon their life at home and how home respectively impacts their work. This influence manifested in their writing and discussions. More importantly, as a group whose bonds grew with each session (despite often not knowing one another until undertaking our course), they could observe these patterns in their colleagues. As researchers we must always be wary of taking participants' stories away from them to write a paper they may never see, even if their data—and that of colleagues—remains anonymous. Nevertheless, we must also celebrate this project's ability to give voice to a previously 'hidden' workforce, allowing them to see and learn from one another while also educating the wider public.

In 2006, bestselling US author and former LA poet laureate, Luis J. Rodriguez was involved with a similar project working at juvenile halls in California. Despite his extensive experience of running writing workshops with people in prison, this was the first time that he had been invited to work with staff rather than the imprisoned. As part of this 'breaking the cycle with dignity' programme, he was asked to lead 'healing' writing workshops in light of staff 'hurting' because 'working with troubled kids often leads to trauma and troubles for the staff too' (Rodriguez, n. d.). One of our prison officer participants stated something analogous: 'Working with severely damaged people, severely traumatised people, it affects us.' In interview, Rodriguez contended that healing the staff can in turn assist the youth involved. We subsequently invited Rodriguez to read *Words Behind Walls* and to contribute a quote for the anthology's back cover (the

other quote was from Falkoff). Rodriguez wrote: '…those who oversee the incarcerated are also human; they also feel, and exhibit propensities and passions' (Metcalf et al., 2023, n. p.). Rodriguez is well placed to understand the staff writing course that we undertook. Nonetheless, our project is the first time that such creative work with prison staff has been documented and analysed in formal ways for its benefits, whether in the US or the UK.

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## Notes

1. The anthology, *Words Behind Walls* (Metcalf et al., 2023) does not have any page numbers. This editorial decision was taken by the publishers in line with the house style of their other anthologies.

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*Article*

# Touchstone
## Talking to the Planet in a Pebble – Using CWTP as a Regenerative Resource During the Anthrobscene

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*Climate News Tracker*

## Abstract

Touchstone investigates what happens when the man-made climate and nature polycrises—what I call the Anthrobscene—is approached through the lens of geological deep time using established creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) techniques to enable a conversation between us and rocks. Does such an encounter have any distinctly regenerative, therapeutic benefits? Feedback from my two co-researchers and seven workshop participants confirms that it does. This paper explores how and why this may be.

The Touchstone approach is underpinned by Joanna Macy's influential The Work That Reconnects (TWTR) for activists and an action research methodology. This is combined with creative writing and the growing evidence-based insights that confirm the health benefits of people reconnecting with nature together outdoors. Touchstone confirms that participants can feel consoled and inspired when given the opportunity to develop a close, inquiring relationship with stone while engaging with, writing about, and reflecting on rocks. The process, I suggest, enables us to glimpse over the vertiginous cliff edge of these bewildering times while regrounding ourselves in pre- and post-human timescales that enable us to continue the fight for all life and for sanity.

***Keywords***: deep time, geology, creative writing for therapeutic purposes, Anthropocene, climate and nature crisis, rocks

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# Touchstone

Oolooks and oolites
light the stony path to
knowing my not knowing,
a riddle composed of warm
touchstone, cold headstone
and, in between, a hearthstone
whose gritty bits
rattle down
through
my
rainstick
life

(Smalley, 2023)

Written during and after my first Touchstone workshop. ‘Oolooks’ was the name the grandmother of a participant gave to attractive stones that her grandchildren brought her, some of which she displayed in a special glass jar in her home. Figure 1 below shows my favourite stones.

**Figure 1**

My stash of choice, storied Touchstones that I share with workshop participants comes alive in the rain. These deep time messengers include ammonites, anthropomorphic flints, ironstone eggs, slates, serpentine, fossilised coral, and a small, hollow geode.

## Touchstone – Moving from Palm to Planetary Crises and Back

In my pocket I finger a warm pebble, my touchstone. Be they worry beads, malas, or komboloi, many cultures and faiths have long used stones to ground us. Mine is dark, veined with red, a smooth piece of serpentine that once arose from 5 km below the Earth's surface, the place where the crust meets the mantle below. I remember picking it up, glistening wet on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall, a special place of sea caves and stacks. One result of my Touchstone research with my workshop participants is that I am surprised to learn just how many people have a special relationship with a chosen pebble, helping us cement contact with a memory of a loved one in a particular time and place.

I was born when there were 318 ppm of $CO_2$ in the atmosphere, one-third less than today's 422 ppm and counting (Lindsey, 2024). The $CO_2$

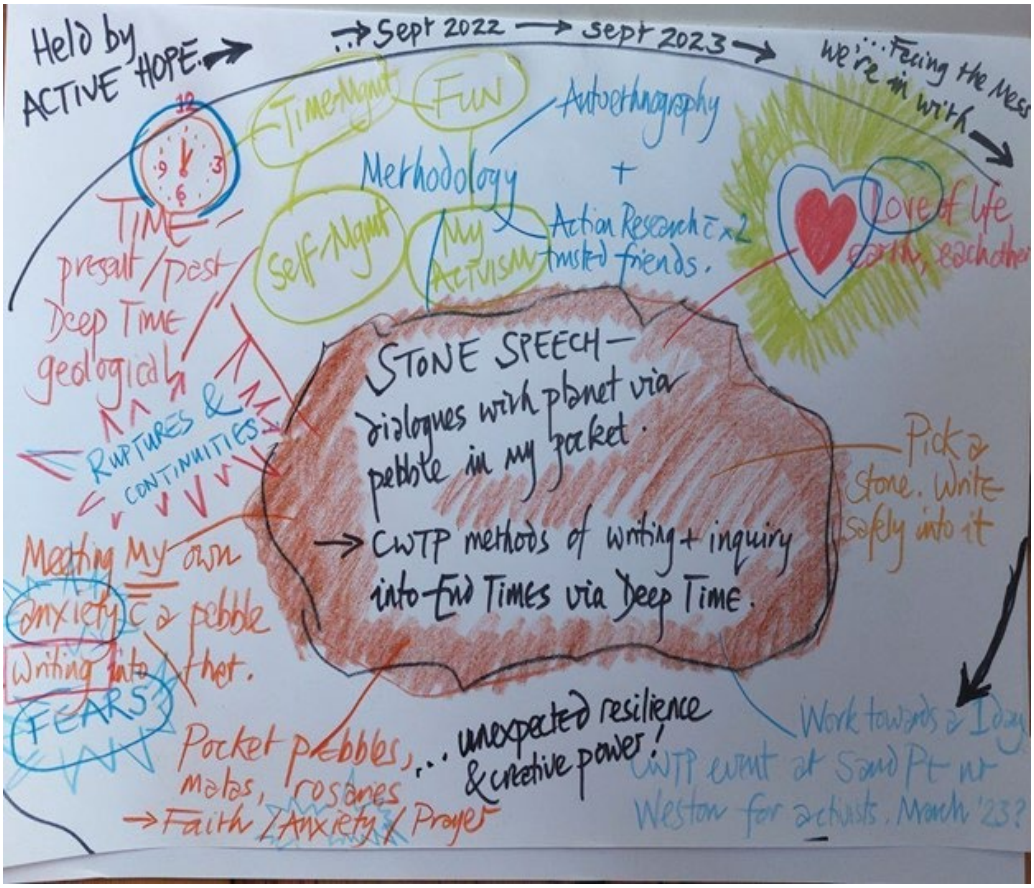
will persist for thousands of years, meaning the warming we have already caused since the industrial revolution is irreversible, even if emissions were stopped *now*, as is required (Matthews & Solomon, 2013). This is not happening because of a lack of political will, due to the capture of democratic process and civic discourse by Big Oil lobbyists (Brulle, Hall, Loy, & Schell-Smith, 2021; Lucas, 2021). Meanwhile, we are still fuelling the highest ever recorded global temperatures (WMO, 2024). Hence the *Anthrobscene*, a moral judgment on the climate crisis which points to the obscenity of the Anthropocene precisely because it is avoidable (Parikka, 2014). The Anthrobscene is my chosen alternative designation, although many others are available, such as the Capitalocence, the Necrocene, the Pyrocene and the Corporatocene.

Which brings us to one overriding question: How on earth do we hold the man-made crisis of the now? For me one small, perfectly weighted, and curiously reassuring answer is nestled in my palm—a smooth serpentine pebble that morphs through time and place. Is there something here that can speak to others too? I wanted to know. Touchstone has emerged in response to enquiring whether engagement with the deep time dimensions of rocks through creative writing can help equip us deal with the climate crisis. Data and feedback resulting from my Touchstone research confirms that it can and does.

Stone might seem elementally different to us, hard to our softness, slower to decompose, yet composed of it we most certainly are. Our bodies depend on earth-derived minerals such as calcium, iron, potassium, sodium, and magnesium. Touchstone asks, What happens when we encounter our stonier, elemental selves? During the current planetary polycrises, why is the element of earth as expressed by rocks and deep time receiving ever-increasing attention (Bjornerud, 2018, 2024; Cohen, 2015; Macfarlane, 2019; Allen, 2024; Jamie, 2024)? Some publishers are even referring to this as being the new Stone Age. What, if anything, changes in us when we tune into rock and try to think and feel through the medium of stone, questing its muteness? Is there indeed a lithic deep time wisdom that we can access?

**Figure 2**

Mindmap drawn at the outset of what became the Touchstone project, when it was still called 'Stone Speech'. Revisiting this swift, wishful drawing, I can see what a useful guide it has proved, pregnant with active hope and the tick tock of time, both cyclical and linear.




The veined red stone in my palm is not any old pebble, it is a storied stone, a silent witness to inordinate change, a talisman that I hold close and confer with. The Touchstone project combines geological knowledge with proven regenerative approaches that can support us, harnessing the practices of creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP). There are indeed benefits to bringing people outdoors to collaborate with others, writing into rock during troubling times.

Much-in-Little

It all began with a stone
during my Precambrian,
swallowed deep and settling,
dropping down and down again
to hammer flint, struck sparks
promising fire and fossils,
the tell-tale tang of cordite in the air.

Peel back the skin, the place where
ribs are revealed, where the land
runs out, where stones, our bones and sea
surely meet for conversations
with substrate, the place where the land
runs out of rock, quarrying wonder,
tall tales and wide horizons from the edge.
(Smalley, 2023)

'Much-in-little' is the term the geologist Richard Fortey gives to the variety of rocks found in the British Isles (2010, p. 10). The poem was inspired by a re-reading of my introduction to my *Cornerstones* collection of BBC Radio 3 essays that I produced (Smalley, 2018, pp. 7–13). It comprises 20 essays by contemporary writers and poets, each one exploring a chosen rock type.

## Stone as Home

> *Once one becomes attuned to the language of rocks, it is obvious that Earth is vibrantly alive – and speaking to us all the time.* (Bjornerud, 2024)

As a result of my Touchstone research year, I recognise that I harbour a deep, abiding, slow burn passion for rock that I carry close. It goes way back into my bedrock past, which must in part have paved the way for my later Touchstone interests, as conveyed in my poem 'Much-in-Little' and the book of essays I edited, *Cornerstones* (Smalley, 2018) through my work as a BBC radio producer. For that BBC Radio 3 project, I commissioned 20 contemporary poets and writers to riff with rock, and it was a joy to make all of them, each one recorded on location, in proximity to the stone in question. Alan Garner's essay on flint captures the arc of human civilisation in 2200 words.

**Figure 3.**
Adding a stone to existing cairns is a recognised way of route-finding when on the Camino, a symbol of life's journey. This was me in Aveyron in central southern France at the outset of my Touchstone voyage in the summer of 2022. Photo by my son, Ben, who I was stomping with.

Stones and rocks peopled my childhood as objects of sheer wonder, containing the promise of fire, ocean beds, devils' toenails, and dinosaur eggs. Such improbable creatures extracted from the clay pits behind my Northamptonshire primary school, a forbidden zone, beckoned from the shelves in the old Victorian assembly room.

Metaphor is a rich resource to draw on when engaging in creative writing, but for me, geological fact alone can evoke a rewarding space for imagination and creativity to populate, like slow crystals in a geode. Stone talks to me, with all the paradox that its mute silence implies. But how can stone convey anything other than stubborn obduracy? The Touchstone project has confirmed that I am not alone in my affinity with the world of rock. For me, and indeed as I have seen for my workshop participants, this sense of kinship can offer an important tool in the face of the Anthrobscene. The quality of stone's vitalism, drawing on Abrams, Harding, Ghosh, Reason, Allen and others, opens up a sense of reverence for the multispecies, more-than-human world, which includes the mineral life of rocks. The testimony of my workshop participants affirms the robustness of Touchstone's underpinnings, confirming its therapeutic, regenerative qualities as a new and viable expression of CWTP.

Since completing the year-long study for my CWTP MSc with Metanoia Institute in autumn 2023, I have developed my practice. I have gone on to offer Touchstone workshops in different settings, honing the offering with a class of 8-year-olds, a writing group composed of experienced secondary school English teachers, 40 festival goers at Buddhafield, and 35 creative writing practitioners, members of the Lapidus Living Research Community. I am also using Touchstone reflective writing techniques while co-running Deep Time Walks with geology educator, Mathilde Braddock. Such walks, developed by the late Stephan Harding of Schumacher College, shrink 4.6 billion years of Earth's unfolding story into a 4.6-km walk, when each metre represents one  million years. They offer an embodied way of clocking our relationship with deep time and the Earth beneath our feet. Including the opportunity for reflective writing on the walks helps participants incorporate the vast scales of deep geological time underfoot.

## Time and the Crisis of Now

Grasping deep time is bewildering: it has perplexed people since the emerging science of geology unseated the biblical myth of the Earth's creation within a single week (Lyle, 2016, pp. 40–45). Yet given the scale of today's climate and nature polycrises, time is clearly of the essence. Why then do corporations and governments continue with business as usual, as if we have all the time in the world? Contradictory responses to the urgency of our Anthrobscene times are nothing new in human culture: such dichotomies might instead be simultaneously held and understood rather than rejecting one in favour of another (Gould, 1988, pp. 191–200).

Time itself is paradoxical, quicksilver slipping through our fingers. It can be understood as a unilinear, Newtonian arrow, and/or indeed as being cyclical, its recurrent patterns revealing deep natural structures (Gould, 1988, pp. 199–200). The future geological record may well point back to the Anthrobscene as marking the Sixth Extinction, indicated by the pervasive presence of nuclear fallout, microplastics, and chicken bones. Unlike the meteor strike that abruptly ended the dinosaurs' Cretaceous–Paleogene era 66 million years ago, Anthrobscene changes are by definition of humanity's making. The dinosaurs were blameless; neoliberal extractive capitalism is not.

## Disavowal, Denial and Anxiety

The rate of current global heating is so rapid that it can be hard to grasp. That is not a reason for not trying. Climate scientists focus on an event some 56 million years ago when there was a rapid injection of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. It is called the Paleocene–Eocene thermal maximum, and it is studied because it is the most recent example of rapid global warming, which occurred over some 15,000–20,000 years. Scales and estimates vary, but some scientists suggest that the current rate of carbon release is ten times greater than then because it is happening over decades and centuries rather than millennia (Mann, 2023). Yet the UK parliament that declared a climate emergency in 2019 was contradicted by a government that reneged on its net zero commitments while licensing new oil, coal, and gas extraction. This is the living, breathing definition of disavowal, seeing the climate and nature crisis but 'with one eye only' (Weintrobe, 2012, 2021, pp. 137–138).

We negate or minimise reality at enormous cost to ourselves and the more-than-human world, cocooned from it by our white-knuckled sense of exceptionalism (Weintrobe, 2012, p. 15, 2021). It is not surprising that living in this current moment, straddling its screeching dissonances, causes me considerable and permanent stress. For me as a BBC radio producer, I also experienced moral distress. That is because it was not until 2019 that BBC News dropped its requirement that when covering climate stories scientists were 'balanced' with deniers. I am reassured that my symptoms of eco-anxiety represent a very reasonable physiological and emotional response to the situation we are in (Hickman et al., 2021).

It is an understandable response to turn away from our escalating climate crises and bury our heads in the sand. By contrast, however,

Touchstone encourages us to acknowledge these considerable psychic forces while digging deep into the earth and our imaginations for a different purpose. Not to seek denial or distraction, but to quarry uncomfortable truths 'in tension and fruitful interaction' (Gould, 1988, p. 200) while using CWTP techniques to engage our imaginations with compassion, curiosity, and insight.

## Why Deep Time's Time Has Come

> *When viewed in deep time, things come alive that seemed inert. New responsibilities declare themselves. A conviviality of being leaps to mind and eye. The world becomes eerily various and vibrant again. Ice breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains ebb and flow. Stone pulses. We live on a restless Earth* (Macfarlane, 2019).

The most productive pointers for the Touchstone project have emerged from strains of deep ecological writing (Macy & Johnstone, 2022; Reason, 2023), aspects of Gaia theory (Lovelock, 2006; Harding, 2009) together with the flourishing discipline of the environmental humanities (Haraway, 2016, Harris, 2021), and, curiously, medieval studies (Cohen, 2015; Power, 2022). Deep ecology faces several ways at once—back towards a pre-Cartesian world in which the Earth itself was recognised to have sentience or a vital spirit and forwards to an understanding that humanity is only one of many equal components represented by Gaia's global ecosystem. Some of these approaches (Reason, 2023; Harding, 2009; Allen, 2024) share an engagement with the material world of stone, challenging presumptions that rock is merely a blank, inert substrate. This aligns with the recognition of one's 'ecological self' (Naess, 1987), the part of us that exists within a wider natural world in which all species and the more-than-human world can flourish. It follows that a wider sense of ecological responsibility beyond one's narrow self-interest can flow when we allow for conventional selfhood to extend beyond the ego. This is what the Touchstone project is rooted in.

A necessary and long overdue paradigmatic shift is well under way, which has knock-on effects way beyond the earth and life sciences. Gaia and deep ecological approaches have encouraged thinkers in other disciplines to see the elemental earth, particularly its rocks and waters, as vibrant (Ghosh, 2022; Haraway, 2016; Allen, 2024; Harding, 2009; Reason, 2023). Ancient Chinese culture recognises this life force as *chi*, the energy that links animal, vegetable and mineral states (Armstrong, 2022, p. 32). Earth-focused therapeutic approaches (Richardson, 2023; Allen, 2024)

inform the Touchstone approach, which I combine with Macy's regenerative concept of active hope and CWTP's practices that enable a reflective space where play, observation, creativity, and wonder are actively encouraged in service of Gaia (Ghosh, 2016).

**Figure 4**

CWTP and play. Caught here mid-mineralisation, Rocky Stein, aka Lithoman, is inducted to the Marvel pantheon of Superheroes. His chakras are stony-hearted, pebble-tongued, and wall-eyed.

Stone has conventionally marked what can appear to be a firm, intractable boundary between 'humanity' and 'nonhumanity'. But the *haecceity*, the it-ness of rock, is rather more fluid than the old Victorian parlour game of 'animal, vegetable, mineral' might once have once presumed (Cohen, 2012). Medieval Christian theology allowed for a world view in which rocks were permitted mineral souls with almost lifelike attributes. Sometimes they were allegorically endowed with human emotions and drives (Cohen, 2012, pp. 92–93). Some current deep ecological thinking promotes a contemporary version of that medieval world view, arguing that ancient rocks possess a consciousness which has something resembling a consciousness deeper than ours (Harding, 2009).

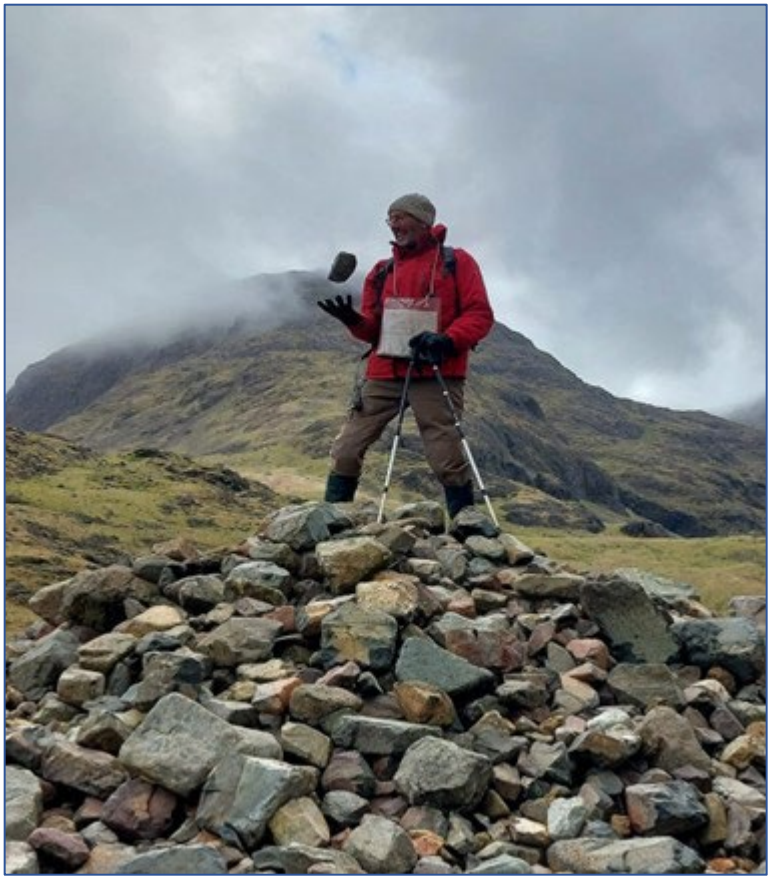
Welcome to the world in which 'rocks are not nouns but verbs—visible evidence of processes' (Bjornerud, 2018, p. 8), distinctly active, and rather more than just present tense. Rock is an emblematic remembrancer of

deep times past which, in the face of the Anthrobscene, confounds our sense of time in the present.

The wider project that Touchstone allies with is considerable, to resource ourselves in order to stand with all life for a different, post-hydrocarbon way of being in the world, thus relating more healthily to nature, our environment, and the Global South. But in doing so we have to grasp a world in which, seen through a deep time lens, we 'have hardly yet to exist,' but also one in which humanity may not exist at all (Cohen, 2018, p. 23). The Touchstone challenge is to work fruitfully with perceptions of deep time and the recognition of our hapless insignificance to encourage us into action rather than apathy.

**Figure 5**

Learning to juggle deep time, one stone at a time. Below Great Gable, Lake District.



## Nature, Rocks and Wellbeing

The Touchstone series of workshops are underpinned by a set of established evidence-based principles that confirm the significant health benefits that derive from people spending time together outdoors in nature, evidence that supports, for example, the rapidly developing field of green social prescribing (Richardson, 2023), the rollout of which is supported by the UK National Health Service (NHS). At the time of writing (summer 2024) the University of Exeter's *Nature on Prescription Handbook* along with ongoing research undertaken by the University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group (Richardson & Butler, 2022) represent the best practices available in UK today, laying out the proven benefits of people reconnecting with nature outdoors.

Of particular relevance to my Touchstone research, the intersection of engaging with the arts in nature in the company of others is shown to have a powerful effect on us, particularly when the five pathways to nature connection are engaged (Richardson & Butler, 2022, pp. 10–13). These pathways identify the benefits of being in nature when all our senses are involved, beauty is observed, our emotions are engaged, meaning is found, and our compassion is frequently evoked. I grounded my Touchstone workshops in this growing body of evidence, in particular encouraging participants' sensory experience of rock during the workshops.

## CWTP in the Context of Nature and Wellbeing

> *The beautifully shaped stone, washed up by the sea, is a symbol of continuity, a silent image of our desire for survival, peace and security.*
>
> —Barbara Hepworth

Accompanying the growing evidence-base supporting how spending time in nature improves our wellbeing, there is also increasing interest in the arts' contribution to health, one tributary of which focuses on writing for wellbeing. The act of writing produces beneficial effects when we express thoughts on the page, it helps us understand the world around us, promoting self-understanding (Pennebaker, 1990, pp. 91–93). CWTP's emphasis on play, experiment, and discovery is important for Touchstone, given the enormity of the issues at stake, encouraging one's Natural Child to engage in the writing with a focus on the here and now (Williamson, 2014, p. 10). Given the chance of upset and overwhelm when engaging in a creative and emotional way with the climate and nature crises while writing into rock, it is all the more important that participants feel they are in a safe enough, well-held workshop setting.

CWTP can help us process trauma by translating emotional experiences into language (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 101). Touchstone harnesses these techniques to support participants to address the overwhelming existential trauma of the climate crisis, but safely sidelong, not head on. Participants are invited to converse with rock, as it were, to give it voice, and to see what emerges during the exchange. As the poet Emily Dickinson puts it: 'Tell all the truth, but tell it slant./ Success in circuit lies.'

**Figure 6**

Close observation of the lichened niches and recesses of the Stanton Drew standing stones in Somerset can be rewarding. They're full of micro-refuges, sites for the imagination to populate.

## Joanna Macy's Work That Reconnects

My Touchstone workshop design was richly informed by Joanna Macy's empowerment strategy for environmental activists known as *the work that reconnects* (TWTR). She and colleagues have been developing it since 1978, and it is most recently laid out in her book, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power* (Macy & Johnson, 2022). The technique draws on many life-sustaining traditions—including deep time and deep ecology—which encourage activist groups to resource themselves with solidarity and courage. Active hope can be understood as setting a muscular intention in support of the abundance of life on Earth.

TWTR offers a four-step spiral process (Macy & Johnson, 2022) that amounts to inner resourcing for outer action. The active hope cycle (Figure 7)

- invokes gratitude;
- acknowledges the grief and other powerful feelings we can hold regarding our experiences of the planetary crisis. By means of honouring these feelings the spiral enables participants to then
    - 'see anew with ancient eyes' (which includes a deep time dimension) before
    - 'going forth'.

The intention of Macy's work is to enable activists to mitigate the risk of burnout and overwhelm in order to undertake outer action in the world. The cyclical nature of TWTR—similar in that sense to the action research model of planning, doing and reviewing that I used—profoundly informs Extinction Rebellion's concept of *Regen*, a model of wellbeing that encourages self-care (Extinction Rebellion, 2019). Feedback from Touchstone participants confirms that they found their involvement in the process to have been rewarding, enabling them to go forth with renewed vigour, affirming and completing the cycle of Macy's TWTR.

**Figure 7**

Representation of the spiral flow of Joanna Macy's Work that Reconnects.
Artist: Dori Midnight (Open Commons)


## Touchstone Workshop Structure and Content

I have learned that plenty of time outdoors is required to engage with rock and then to write and share about the encounter, because for many this is a new and unfamiliar but rewarding activity. Appendix 1 offers a model Touchstone CWTP workshop, with information and resources compiled from the different prompts and techniques that I offered the seven participants across my series of three research workshops. I will briefly sketch them out here.

After an initial online Zoom-based gathering to lay out the project's ground rules, the seven participants and I met at Clevedon foreshore on the North Somerset coast for a three-hour workshop. It was March and cold, so I provided a lunch of soup beforehand, which was appreciated. I was accompanied by one of my two co-researchers who were on hand to help out if necessary. Otherwise, they were acting as observers.

I invited people to recall happy times in the past which they might have spent on beaches discovering pebbles and rock pools. With Macy's TWTR in mind, this was a way of invoking gratitude for our being together on the North Somerset foreshore. People were then encouraged to find a rock and to sensorily engage with it, whether to look at it or lie on it, without doing anything else. Then to note what came up, and to write out of those observations. Passers-by were intrigued. We then came back together when participants were invited to share their insights and their work if they wanted to.

**Figure 8**

Participants 'writing into rock' at the first outdoor Touchstone workshop on Clevedon beach, March 2023. Photo taken and included with their permission.

I went on to explain that rising sea levels threaten the coastline, which is likely to look very different in 50 years' time, given the likely reclamation of the nearby Somerset Levels by the sea. This was to invoke the second step on Macy's TWTR spiral, honouring the pain we feel for the world.

In terms of offering writing prompts and a means of engaging with rock itself, I have learnt that Charles Simic's poem 'Stone' offers a remarkably useful window that opens onto core Touchstone territory. Inviting wonder, imagination, and conjecture about the vitalist nature of stone, I cannot recommend it enough. I was so impressed with what a class of 8-year-olds came up with in response to it during a Touchstone workshop with them. Likewise, offering prompts from works by the doyen of rock poetry, Alyson Hallett (2019, 2020), is enormously fruitful.

**Figure 9**

Participants at Middle Hope workshop, Sand Point, North Somerset, in March 2023. Photo taken and included with the subjects' permission.

Inviting participants to spend time lying on the foreshore rocks before writing about it offers an opportunity to 'see anew with ancient eyes', the third aspect of Macy's TWTR. Doing so can enable us to see ourselves as part of a larger whole, moving beyond any narrow sense of the here and now. It is a way of entering not only geological deep time but also achieving

an affinity with rock, an almost cross-species practice of 'becoming with one another' (Donna Haraway, 2016, p. 80). People's responses, writing, and feedback all confirmed that these steps were helpful. Other useful prompts included inviting participants to dialogue with their chosen rock by asking it some who? what? when? where? why? questions and noting what came back.

Anticipating people's potential resistance to writing creatively together, I had shared in advance my tutor Nigel Gibbons' helpful acrostic 'Writing Well' (2012). It proposes a way of approaching CWTP by acknowledging and working with one's inner critic. In addition, the one-liner prompts and quotes about rocks in Appendix 2 stimulated much thought and discussion, particularly when giving people the opportunity to respond to them with some short warm-up writing exercises, which is how we began the third workshop.

A weakness of the study is that I only offered the three workshops. This was because I was working not just on my own material and observations in an autoethnography but including those of my two co-researchers and seven workshop participants. This produced a wealth of data for me to assess, which I had to restrict to keep the whole thing manageable. I struggled to marshal all this input, feeling a weight of responsibility to include their voices as co-participants alongside mine. Now that I am beyond the research phase, I can see clear benefits for participants in offering a longer series of Touchstone workshops. This would enable people new to CWTP techniques to gain greater familiarity and confidence with, for example, undertaking short writes in dialogue with rocks in outdoor locations and sharing the results.

## Action Research Methodology

As a methodology, the cyclical iterative process of action research (AR) enabled me to develop the Touchstone technique through framing a research question, trialling it during a writing/research session and then evaluating the participatory work that emerged in response to it. Furthermore, AR has enabled me to phrase open, permissive questions such as

- *I wonder what would happen if...* we spend time focusing on our relationships with the Earth via rocks.... and
- *How do I...? / How do we*... find ways of sharing our experiences?

Such questions enabled me to use AR as a practice-based form of research while developing my provisional ideas first with my co-researchers and then, having honed them, with my workshop participants.

The collaborative inquiry aspect of AR (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008) offered me and my two co-researchers, Alan and Paul, a democratic means of recognising our joint and equal participation, primarily because the approach advocates working *with* others, not *on* them. This sense of being peer led was already familiar to us because it is how we have long related to each other in the men's group that we are part of. It has been helpful that Alan has experience of AR, having studied it with Peter Reason, a leading exponent of the technique. Alan had tried to bring it into his work as an NHS consultant psychiatrist, which must have been no small undertaking. Together the three of us negotiated the simultaneous roles of being co-researchers and subjects, testing Reason's proposal that researcher and subject are not separate, because these functions can coexist in the same person. For example, in terms of being collaborative and peer led, it was not always me setting the theme of our monthly outdoor Touchstone creative writing sessions.

## Ethics

My Touchstone workshops were designed and run on the basis of respecting the confidentiality of participants, a key ingredient in the trusting relationship that counselling is intended to foster (Metanoia, 2015). I offered the workshops as a resource for activists who agreed to offer me feedback and share their creative writing. Their quotes are not attributed to individuals. Participants gave their permission for photos to be taken at the foreshore creative writing workshops and for them to be included in this paper. My co-researchers have given their permission to be named.

Throughout the whole Touchstone process, I continued with my therapy as a form of self-care. It has provided a robust container for the strong feelings of overwhelm and confusion I can experience in the face of the climate and nature crises. It also helped me address habitual feelings of self-sabotage and procrastination that I can experience. The sense of open and shared inquiry with my co-researchers helped create a sense of jointly owned purpose and accountability. However, meeting the academic

criteria and writing up was my responsibility, though I felt supported and upheld by my co-researchers.

Given the climate focus of the workshops and anticipating the difficult feelings some participants might feel, I invited them to keep themselves emotionally safe. I also explained that I and one of my co-researchers were on hand should someone become upset. I was confident in my co-researchers' ability to help in this way because they both have mental health backgrounds. This required proper consideration in advance, not least because Joanna Macy's spiral, which I was following as an underpinning methodology, expressly offers an opportunity to feel and share one's pain for the world. Metanoia's Ethics Committee rightly asked me to confirm that my co-researchers would respect the confidentiality of the group, which they both agreed to.

Given that two of the workshops were held outdoors in early spring down on the foreshore of the Bristol Channel, the ethics process helped me risk assess my responsibilities to the participants, e. g.:

- What I would do if it was raining or too windy.
- Making sure I knew what time high tide was on the days I was running the workshops.
- Because of holding the workshops at a cold time of year on windswept foreshores, I decided to provide soup, drinks, and flapjacks for participants, which was welcomed.

## Working with My Co-Researchers

> *Take a stone in your hand and close your fist around it—until it starts to beat, live, speak and move.*
>
> —Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

I invited two old friends from my longstanding men's group, Alan Kellas and Paul Welcomme, to join me on my Touchstone journey as co-researchers. We have a longstanding history of working together outdoors in nature, marking the seasons and life's turning points, using ritual, close observation, and sharing. Why not throw in some creative writing too?, I thought. We met for one afternoon per month over a year-long period from May 2022 at rocky sites in the West of England, devising a varied cycle of Touchstone writing activities which informed my series of three workshops. We came to call ourselves the Palchemical Poets because of a Tom Gauld cartoon in *New Scientist* (2023) in which the depicted

alchemists recognise that 'the real gold was the friendships made along the way.' That's been our experience, that our friendships have deepened as a result of giving our focused attention to rock and stone, and sharing our writings about our experiences.

We learned that Clevedon foreshore is a geologically fascinating location. The ground under the pier is jewelled with rare semi-precious stones and minerals which resulted from past volcanic activity. It was also on Clevedon foreshore where my co-researcher Paul led us in a grief exercise. He invited us to find a stone to represent a particular grief. Thus named, the grief and the stone could then be laid down before one moved onto the next one. From my own writing during that exercise emerged a poem about my grandfather who survived his time in Flanders during the First World War.

Over the course of the year collaborating together, the three of us worked towards a visit to Stanton Drew's stone circle in North Somerset. A place of ancient, intentionally placed stones, it is second only in size to Avebury in Wiltshire. We chose to delay the visit because between us we realised that there was so much to go at in terms of working with naturally occurring raw bedrock and pebbles, that engaging with worked rock imbued with social and quite possibly religious significance felt like a step change that needed careful preparation.

The Grief Stones

Low tide reveals drifts of buttery cream pebbles
bookended by low rocky ribs
which point skywards towards their past trajectories.

This stone is for you, Grandpa,
William Ralph Cox, a good man undone by war.
For you, I select the one clean stone
found in a slippery trench of seaweed,
as suits the Flanders you say you survived.

I lay you down, old man.
I release you, with oak leaves,
while releasing myself
from the obligations

you laid on me.
No more bayonetting Germans

a full 50 years after you're gone.
Stand down, Private, your duty is done.

In laying down this stone I free myself
of the shadow of your war, though
written full well entrenched
in the climate crises.

My regrets people this shore,
a graveyard waiting to be washed clean
by the next tide and the next,
resolved perhaps one grain at a time.
(Smalley, 2023, p. 114).

This poem was written during an exercise examining our regrets with co-researchers Paul and Alan on Clevedon foreshore. It's been edited to a point where I feel comfortable to share it.

**Figure 10**

Co-researcher Alan mid-scribble at Stanton Drew stone circle in North Somerset.

## Findings Resulting from My Workshops and Participants

This is the first time I have ever seen geology as a living source of comfort and perspective. Rocks have started to come out of the landscape for me in a new way which I find both energising and peaceful. (Touchstone workshop participant)

I am reassured that this respondent found unexpected value in the workshops, confirming that they found their encounter with rocks to have been therapeutic. Another expressed surprise that they had 'the ability to commune with a pebble.'

> Writing into stone has been a useful way to engage with the element of Earth....I think that I have something to say/write/maybe even paint that makes sense of my experience as an ex-mineral's planner and continuing climate activist. [Touchstone] has shifted me to include the ecological crisis more firmly in my climate activism. (Touchstone participant)

**Figure 11**

Touchstone participant writing among a drift of pale limestone pebbles, Middle Hope, Sand Point, North Somerset, March 2023. Photo taken and included with the sitter's permission.

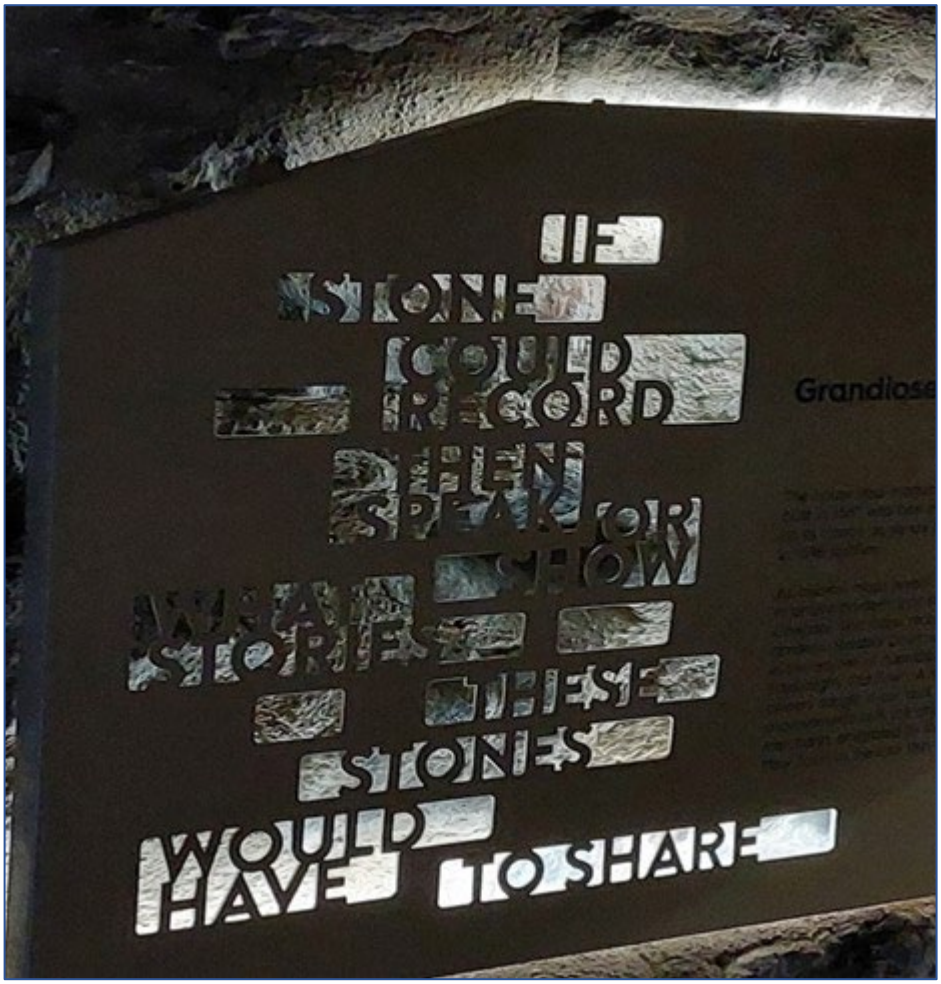
This feedback suggests a strong link between the creative activity of writing outdoors alongside others engaging with the climate crisis in the context of deep time as an inner activity, while also feeling resourced for outer action in the world. They go on:

> The thin green life-layer, the vulnerable brown living soil layer, crushed and killed by privileged, mobile, sentient, conscious humans who are temporary custodians of a batch of 'mineral molecules' that came to us from the stars and will settle into geological layers eventually... This has given me a clearer passion and potentially a clearer voice. (Feedback from Touchstone participant)

Feedback such as above indicates a thoughtful engagement with many aspects of what I was trying to enable during the Touchstone workshops. The participant describes feeling a sense of renewal and being re-energised. Through the workshops this person potentially found 'a clearer voice' as an activist, corroborating my use of Macy's TWTR approach. Significantly, the person's engagement with deep time through reflecting on the nature of rock and its movement through time and space as elemental matter also implies a shift in their temporal perspective. Perhaps it is this component that better enables them to access a renewed sense of agency in the face of the present Anthrobscene polycrises. That for me counts as success.

**Figure 12**

'If stone could record then speak or show, what stories these stones would have to share.' Panel in a ginnel off Edinburgh's Royal Mile.



Participants were grateful for the way I hosted this novel opportunity for activists to work together in unexpected ways and in such settings.

> Just lots of thanks Mark. This was good because you brought yourself, with all that life, energy and intelligence, into the space. (Touchstone participant.)

## Personal Findings

Shaping and delivering the Touchstone project across a whole year proved to be a novel, uncharacteristically structured (for me), ultimately rewarding opportunity. That said, it was also a frequently emotionally difficult learning experience. It was a mighty long time since I had done any studying, and the social science academic framing of CWTP was new and unfamiliar to me. There was the challenge of working out how much time and attention to devote to the research, moving through my own frequent heavy stuckness and procrastination—something I habitually struggle with—so that to have pulled these words out of my innards at all feels like no small achievement. Then there is the subject matter, the content: the heart of the Touchstone project addresses my deepest concerns about the Earth that I love like nothing else, and the bewildering dissonance I feel about what we, humanity, are doing to it. Knowingly exterminating other species while damaging ourselves (but pretending otherwise) is beyond words, beyond folly. For me it is truly maddening heartbreak.

I both welcomed and struggled with aspects of my chosen Action Research methodology. I felt tied in knots sometimes trying to accommodate not just my own views and insights, but also those of my co-researchers and workshop participants. I felt responsible for the enormous amount of data this level of collaboration produced, wanting to weigh and represent everyone's contributions fairly. Would an autoethnography have been easier? Possibly, but the point is that with hindsight I can see that I have trialled my ideas with a wide range of people and continue to do so, enabling an active and ongoing refinement of the Touchstone offering.

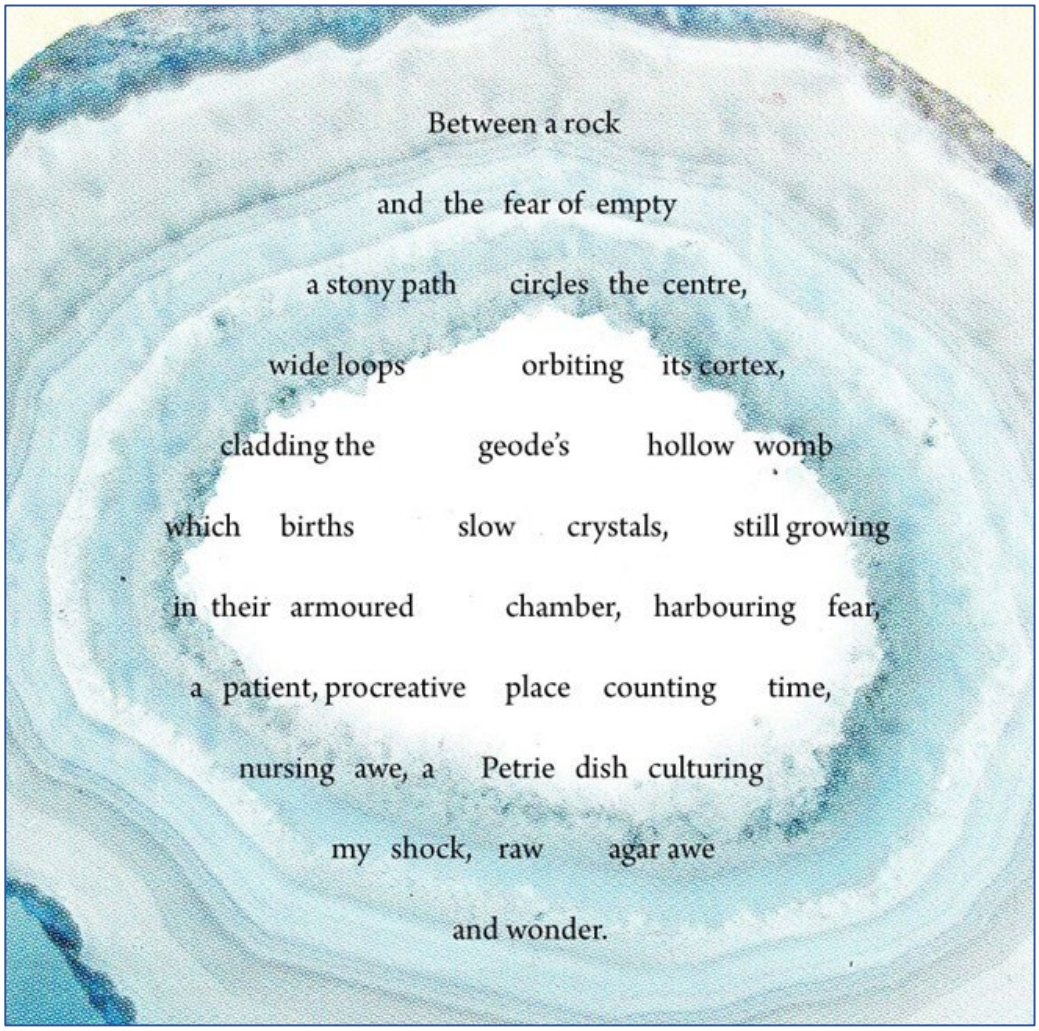
## Reflections on My Own Creative Writing

The creative writing I have produced alongside the research acts as a diary or record for me. I have learnt that my creativity is best enabled and expressed in collaboration with others. Nearly all the Touchstone poems I have written were either at my invaluable weekly Tuesday CWTP peer group Zoom meeting (meaning I at least wrote one poem per week) or

indeed during the monthly Touchstone gatherings with my co-researchers, Paul and Alan, the Palchemical Poets. Altogether, this amounts to a substantial body of work that I have amassed, about 40 poems of my own work with a rock-based focus, the best of which I am preparing as a pamphlet. The whole creative journey has been a game-changer for me for reasons that I explore below.

**Figure 13**

My poem 'Geode Home', written after a ritual in my garden with my co-researchers, Alan Kellas and Paul Welcomme. Artwork by my son, Ben Smalley.



## Stone Stuckness

My stuckness is personal and particular to me, but it is something that may well resonate with that of others. I experience it as a heavy mass in my gut, indissoluble like a stone, rooted in inertia, with a low, grounded centre of gravity. Rather like a midstream granite boulder, my life and other emotions have long had to flow around this stuckness. It might be depression or overwhelm that I am describing. I finger this legacy of trauma tenderly, like a ripe bruise. During my Touchstone year I was invited to explore this visceral sense of stuckness by my co-researchers during several powerful writing sessions. This resulted in poems that have a particular meaning for me, e. g., 'Geode Home' which arose out of a ritual in my own garden. I trusted Alan and Paul's urging me to undertake my own embodied Touchstone work rather than just offering exercises for them and my workshop participants. What resulted were grief-filled movement-based rituals to explore my stuckness, which some of my poems try to explore. Some of the poems are edited to a point where I feel safe enough to share them. But nonetheless the process of being held gently to account by my co-researchers was a growth area.

'Geode Home' resulted from me making a spiral labyrinth of my storied stones in my garden, treading my silent way to the hollow geode at the centre, approaching my stuckness. Witnessed by my co-researchers, it was a rich and revelatory experience. I am proud that my son Ben has illustrated the poem. Indeed, I recognise that a proportion of my poems explore aspects of imprisonment and release, combining qualities of considerable pressure, awe, insight, and privation. These, I realise, are some of my perennial personal themes which my fascination with rocks helps me explore and then articulate. Writing into these themes via rock has helped me find a sense of flow with this painful stuckness. That is not to say that it has been overcome, but through the Touchstone process I have learnt that I can sometimes dance with it, ponderously. This confirms one of CWTP's acknowledged goals, acting as a tool of insight and self-discovery with an emphasis on play while connecting with one's own creativity (Williamson, 2014, p. 9).

**Figure 14**

Setting out my storied stones in a spiral with a geode at its centre, for my garden ritual, witnessed by my co-researchers Paul and Alan, March 2023. See my poem 'Geode Home' (Figure 13).

## Touchstone and My Activism

Engaging in Touchstone during my MSc research year not only helped me engage more creatively in my activism, but my activism, I realise with hindsight, also helped me extend my creative endeavours. I am sure this in part expresses the self-reflexive nature of the Touchstone research process (Etherington, 2004). Attempting to name and own my own experience in relation to the contributions of my co-researchers and my workshop participants did not come naturally because I was schooled in more conventional, less transparent methodologies. Nonetheless, by combining Macy's TWTR with AR's emphasis on working openly and collaboratively with others, I am proud that, besides developing my Touchstone work, that I have also co-founded a new, independent body called Climate News Tracker. This is an independent body that uses media monitoring technology to encourage improved reporting of the climate and nature emergency on the part of the UK's public service broadcasters. This constructive process helps me deal with some of the fury and moral

distress I carry regarding the failure of my former employer, the BBC, to better inform us, the public, about the truly galloping dimensions of the Anthropocene polycrises unfolding before our eyes. Bringing together creative writing and my passion for rocks on the one hand, and my concerns about the climate and nature crisis on the other, has felt like a fruitful interplay, as if bridging the different hemispheres of my brain. One result is that I feel more grounded and empowered and a little less stuck and self-critical, as if laying down new and unfamiliar neural pathways.

I recognise that there was considerable creativity in my work as a BBC radio producer, but I felt stymied by structural and management pressures which narrowly patrolled the margins of the sayable and the unsayable. I felt considerable conflict and moral distress around the Corporation's heavily policed notions of 'impartiality' and 'balance' that governed the coverage of Brexit and climate issues. I was subject to these editorial pressures on a daily basis, and that was a heavy load of dissonance for anyone to carry. My experience is that this results in self-censorship. We as listeners and viewers are ill-served and misled by these codes. We deserve better. Bringing together my activism, my creativity, and my fury is bearing fruit, but it has not been an easy path to walk.

Leaving the BBC in 2018 proved to be a release for me. Engaging in Touchstone and my ongoing journey through CWTP has helped me find a way beyond my radio career, one that permits me a voice that felt forbidden whilst a member of staff. I am grateful for this unfolding process of recovery, decompression, and self-reclamation. I have experienced the satisfaction of sharing my insights with others, for example in workshop settings, whilst also enabling people to engage with their own creativity. In some cases, participants were returning to creative writing for the first time in decades. Facilitating that feels like a mighty privilege.

## Stones and Feeling States

The Touchstone process has helped me recognise that I find it deeply satisfying to physically connect and 'think with stone.' Stone has evidently been abidingly good for humans and pre-hominids to think-feel-do with for time out of mind. Archaeologists have evidenced the development of the earliest hominids through their shaping of stone, whether as tool, decorative artefact or memorial, a symbolic remembrancer that long outlives a single lifetime (Cohen, 2015, p. 23).

It is not just a case of speaking or thinking about the material qualities of heft, weight, and texture of stone (which I of course find attractive) but about the symbolic meanings, associations, and feeling states that they offer, too. This has been the case throughout human cultures, resulting in a paradox deftly captured by the poet Kenneth Koch in 'Aesthetics of Stone':

> The gods take stone
> And turn it into men and women;
> Men and women take gods
> And turn them into stone.
> (Koch, 1994)

I am fascinated that stone operates simultaneously as both metaphor and metonym, at one and the same time fulfilling a wide range of functions. The Touchstone project offers pebbles as both self-soothing transitional object and synecdoche, linking the part to the whole. The red-flecked serpentine pebble in my pocket links me with the Earth and grounds me. I am reassured to discover that this is the case for others too—talking to the planet with a pebble.

## My Findings with My Co-Researchers

I am struck that my two co-researchers took Touchstone in their own very different directions. Alan developed a meditative practice in relation to his touchstones, while Paul used it as a means of reckoning his mortality, 'exploring pebbles to pay the ferryman whilst navigating the steppingstones to the River Styx' as he puts it. Alan writes:

> What I have particularly valued is sharing my curiosity about the emergence of inner truths, not yet the fully formed version… we have explored widely the link between the solidity of earth, stone and rock, and the apparent (if relative) permanence of geological processes compared to psychological processes... I remember too and now appreciate more deeply the bones in my body, which come from and will soon return to the mineral earthy reality that is our place on ancient common ground. (Smalley, 2023, p. 136)

The patience and investment of my co-researchers in this project has helped it grow as it became important to each of us in our respective ways.

We concluded our participative enquiry in May 2023 by spending five days together on the Lizard in Cornwall (the source of my treasured serpentine touchstone). Among varied writing and stone-based activities on cliffs and in coves, we carved our own pieces of serpentine with a sculptor, Don Taylor (Figure 15). Smoothing and shaping it by hand felt

like a fitting culmination to our lithic journey together. It was a deeply satisfying experience to polish stone, joining hand, heart, and eye. It is an activity that I still delight in.

**Figure 15**

Serpentine brooch I made during our Palchemical workshop with sculptor Don Taylor as a 21st birthday present for my daughter Ella.

Together the three of us co-researchers very much developed an ongoing practice around writing into stone. We have since spent a year flowing with the element of water and are about to engage with the element of air and then fire. We are changed as a result, and our friendships have deepened because of the ways we have helped each other along the elemental Touchstone camino.

**Figure 16**

Co-researchers Alan and Paul (kneeling) address the Dragon's Egg, a satisfyingly spherical cobble of particularly large-grained granite that we found laid on a beach on Lizard, waiting to hatch.

## Discussion

> There will always be change, there will also be continuity—the secular is sacred, and the ephemeral is eternal. (Bjornerud, 2024)

Engaging playfully with the lithic world combining CWTP with deep time activities enables a recognition that other worlds and other ways of being are possible. I believe this confirms that a gentle radicalism lies at the heart of CWTP as being something that is fundamentally regenerative. It can stimulate our active hope and imagination in ways that are beneficial for us (Williamson, 2014, p. 10). The deep time evidence written in the rocks confirms that other worlds have existed long before us. Change is a given, and our present moment will sure enough soon be replaced by other worlds still to come, whether or not it is witnessed by humans.

For myself, I have experienced working with and being upheld by my co-researchers and on occasion being rightly brought back to task by them. I could not and would not have achieved this on my own. The result is

broader and richer than were it composed of my words and insights alone. This is a strength of the open, collaborative Action Research methodology I used, and it is evidenced by the insights of workshop participants.

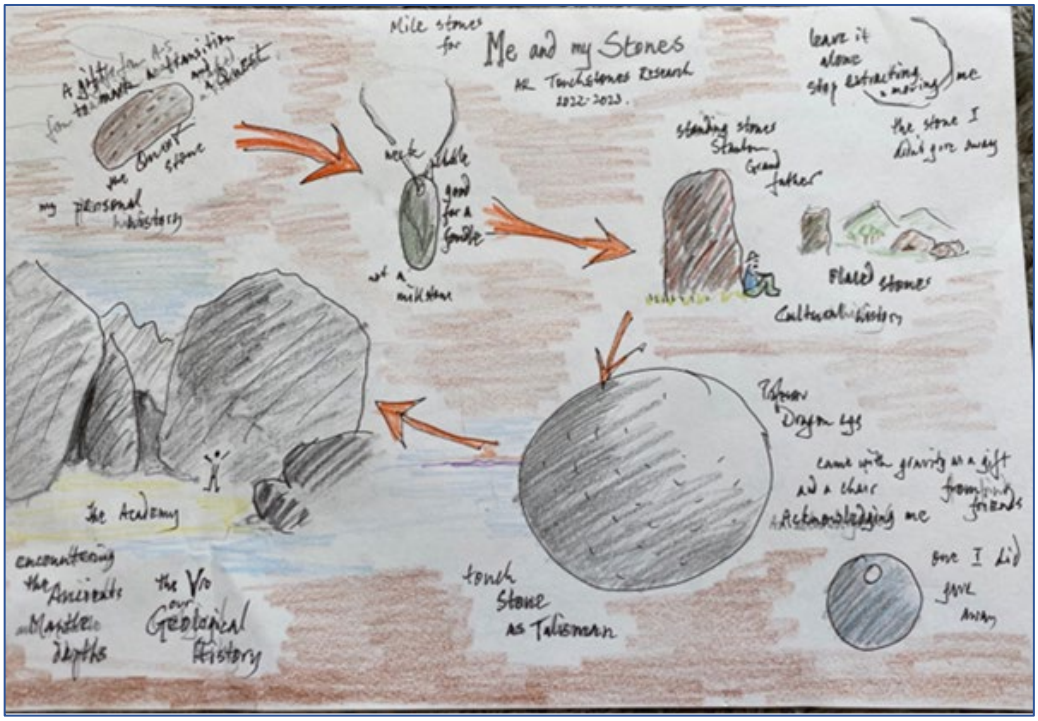
**Figure 17**

The Palchemical Poets bid farewell to the magical kingdom of Lizard, May 2023. We are so named because of a Tom Gauld cartoon in *New Scientist* in which the depicted alchemists recognise that 'the real gold was the friendships made along the way.'

Lithic journeys are so much longer and slower than ours, but they are journeys nonetheless (Bjornerud, 2024, p. 8). In a sense, when engaging with rock we are touching not just the infinite and the infinitely variable, but also a testament to our own mortality. I take the feedback from Touchstone participants to confirm that there is a self-protective dimension to looking slantwise at the climate crisis through deep time as enshrined in rock. The safely held setting of the workshops and seeing our brief lives in the light of deep time offers a foil by which we can approach this Anthrobscene moment. Writing into this bewildering territory with a degree of lightness and playful inquiry is recognised by CWTP practitioners as having a healing function (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006, pp. 124–128).

**Figure 18**

Touchstone mindmap by Alan Kellas conveying aspects of our Touchstone journey.




The creative writing component of Touchstone enables us to give form to our thoughts, fears, and observations by getting them down on the page, where we can look at them as something external to us (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 91). It is something that can then be moved around, altered, played with. There is—to use a geological analogy—a metamorphic power to writing poetry: doing so is transformative.

## Conclusion

> Be humble, for you are made of dung,
> Be noble, for you are made of stars.
> (Serbian saying)

By means of conducting my Touchstone research I have learnt that, modest though its contribution may be, the use of CWTP in the context of the climate and nature crises offers an imaginative, regenerative space in which we can feel supported to think–feel our ways towards dealing with the shocking crisis of the now. It is no small thing to render the Anthrobscene somehow workable because it is the most intransigent outer circumstance that I can think of. Yet this, I believe, is what has occurred for

me, my co-researchers and participants during the Touchstone process. The softening of grief and overwhelm is achieved in part, I suggest, because focusing on rocks and writing about the encounter with curiosity, sometimes accessing wonder and awe, enables us to safely deepen our experience of our ecological selves (Naess, 1987).

**Figure 19**

A right pair of Touchstones.

As the climate and nature crisis deepens and unfolds, so too must our engagement with the more-than-human aspects of our humanity (Ghosh, 2016; Haraway, 2016). It takes enormous strength to step beyond society's powerful structures that enforce the widespread disavowal of what is unfolding in real time before us, but nonetheless Touchstone offers one modest means. The possibility of other futures besides neoliberalism's 'business as usual' growth mantra can be entertained when we permit ourselves creative, regenerative playtime as offered by CWTP in a safely held Touchstone context. Recognising our kinship with the more-than-human world, which includes the vitality of rocks, appears to have touched all the study's participants.

Touchstone can be adopted as a practice, like a meditation, as my co-researcher Alan has shown, routinely checking in with the earth's hard

parts that exist within us. Crucially, other, more circular ways of experiencing time can be invited to come into play in our lives, hence in part my co-researcher Paul felt enabled to lean into and own his mortality whilst accompanying each other on our Touchstone journey together.

Carving out time for ourselves to conjure and imagine is a gently radical, regenerative act. By these means the Touchstone process allows for the creative imagining of a just transition to zero carbon societies, recognising, for example, the need for climate justice for all, particularly for the inhabitants of the Global South, who are already bearing the brunt of global heating. It is increasingly being felt across Europe too.

Touchstone invokes a geology that encourages grounded, earth-based wonder, close observation and appreciation of our time and place, witnessing this Anthrobscene moment of a self-inflicted boiling, burning earth. Touchstone invites us to draw upon an intentional sense of active hope, resourcing ourselves by going to an elemental rocky place, lying back on the rocks, feeling the Earth beneath our bodies, and writing creatively from that place. Being curious about rock and stone while feeling into its dense obduracy offers us a means of healing the softest, most wounded parts of ourselves and therefore the Earth itself.

**Figure 20**

The Monteneuf Menhirs, southern Brittany, some of which are 5 m tall, rediscovered only in 1976.

I finish writing this paper at the Monteneuf menhirs in southern Brittany. Less well known than Carnac, their abiding presence was only revealed by a forest fire in 1976. Vast fallen monoliths of schist were revealed, having been intentionally brought here, fashioned, and raised some 6500 years ago.

**Figure 21**

Hand on rock, Monteneuf menhir, southern Brittany.

I do what I have invited my workshop participants to do, and connect sensorily, sensually with the rock. I take my shoes and socks off and lie on a long-fallen stone, two and a half times longer than I am tall. I stop and breathe deeply, feeling supported by it. A charm of finches flits overhead. The oak leaves stir in the wind below a blue sky. A woodpecker is tapping. I'm hungry, it's lunchtime.

It is well worth asking the big questions in these places: 260 generations have come and gone since these stones were erected. What might a community's intention have been in positioning them here so long ago, a special site that was in active use for some 1500 years, tended to by 60 generations? Also, and no less unanswerable, what will these lands and our descendants be like in 6, 60, or 260 generations hence? In terms of our own brief stewardship of this matrimony, what will the consequences of our own brief hydrocarbon-fuelled contribution have been?

The questions posed in Mary Oliver's poem 'The Summer Day' (1992) come to mind: 'Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'

**Figure 22**

Old granite has seen it all before. Ile de Batz, northern Brittany.

For me the struggle and the allure of human deep time is placing my own mortal fears in the context of ancestors long past, and indeed hopefully those who are still to come. Deep time pitches forwards as well as backwards. How on earth can we deal, Cassandra-like, with the knowledge that our blinkered avarice has so tipped the scales that entire

species are being wiped out now during the Sixth Extinction, with the climate irrevocably changed by our behaviours?

Before me stands a 5-m tall rectangle of dark schist, utterly monumental, like the megalith in 2001 A Space Odyssey, I hear someone say. Like a person, it is broader front-on, a narrowing pinnacle from the side. Two small bright lichen discs look out from the top. What do they see? And if this rock could speak, rain streaks like tresses falling over its shoulders, what would it say?

I am haunted and consoled by the paradoxical wisdom of Goethe's aphorism about rocks—that it is precisely their silence that makes them the greatest teachers.

In my pocket I finger my Touchstone, a rounded piece of red serpentine. It grounds me on this earth, my home.

> Being Rock
> *After 'Being Water' by Tamzin Pinkerton*
>
> Being rock has bottom, grounded
> ballast rounded in slow flowform downhill, finding
> my level, our belonging in mystery, boulder fields
> of conversant beings.
>
> Being rock is slow flowform,
> to all time flings, is knowing all these flows
> within, crystals reposing, recomposing,
> is boulder meeting deep bedrock being.
> (Smalley, 2023)

## Acknowledgements

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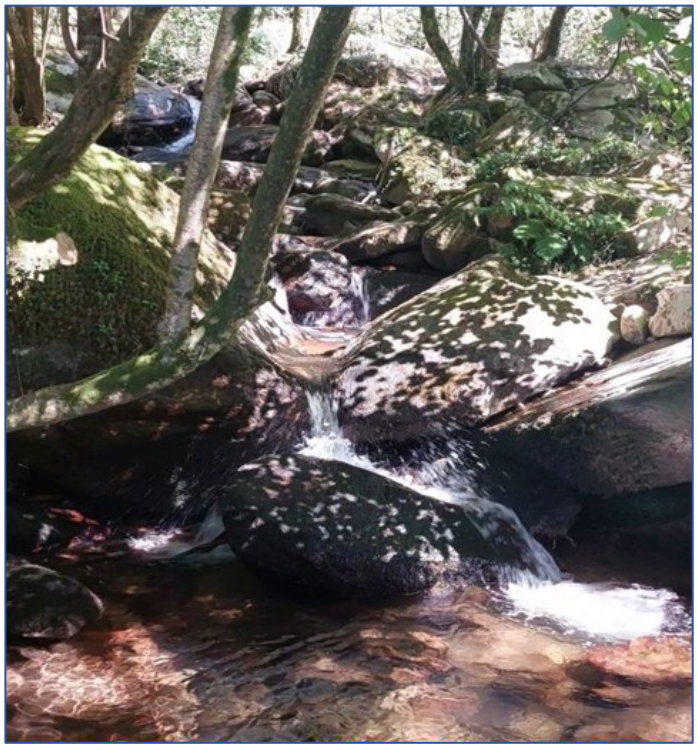
**Figure 23**

Camino waterfall en route to Santiago de Compostela, northern Spain, hiking with my daughter, Ella. July 2023.



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## Appendix 1: Suggested CWTP Workshop Modelled on My Touchstone Experiences

1. Pre-preparation: invite participants to listen to this excellent BBC Radio 4 documentary, *The Pebble in Your Pocket*, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000j21w
2. Meet in a rocky outdoor place.
3. Agree ground rules for the session's Working Alliance (e.g., confidentiality and closing time). Share Nigel Gibbons' acrostic 'Writing Well', encouraging participants to park their inner critics.
4. Share some specific geological information about the location. (Is it sedimentary, igneous or metamorphic? Was it once a desert or under a sea?)
5. Share some 'Pebbly Quotes and Prompts' (below) as a warm-up writing exercise, then come back together and share the results.
6. Invite participants to spend at least 10 minutes finding a pebble, stone, or rock of choice—not writing, but just looking at it, being with it. Why not go and lie on the rocks and notice what one is experiencing / hearing / feeling. People enjoy this time and want longer. Write sentence stems 'What I notice is...'
7. Ask one's rock, stone, or pebble some 'who? what? when? where? why?' questions and note what comes back. E. g.:
    - Where are you from?
    - Where are you going?
    - Tell me about all the time in the world.
    - What is your name?
    - What languages do you speak?
    - What are you scared of?
    - What's your earliest memory?
    - Tell me a home truth.
    - What do you dream of?
8. Opportunity for a free write to capture some aspects of that experience, writing into answering some of those questions.

9. Share Charles Simic's poem 'Stone' (https://www.mindfulnessassociation.net/words-of-wonder/stone-charles-simic/), inviting participants to pick a line or image they like and to run with it for a 20-minute write.
10. Come back into a circle and share.
11. Close. Hopefully go forth reinvigorated as per Joanna Macy's Active Hope spiral.

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## Appendix 2: Choice Pebbly Quotes & Prompts for Touchstone Workshops

- 'Take a stone in your hand and close your fist around it—until it starts to beat, live, speak, and move.' Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää
- 'A stone is a thought that the earth develops over inhuman time.' 'The Stone' by Louise Erdrich is a short story published in *The New Yorker*.
- 'I wish that I might be a thinking stone' Wallace Stevens, a line from 'Le Monocle de mon Oncle' (1918).
- 'Cores:5' by Alyson Hallett (2020, p. 33):

  stone
  nest

  stone
  egg

  stone
  hatch

- 'Rocks are not nouns but verbs—visible evidence of processes: a volcanic eruption,... the growth of a mountain belt.' Marcia Bjornerud (2018)
- Kenneth Koch (1994), 'Aesthetics of Stone'

  The gods take stone
  And turn it into men and women;
  Men and women take gods
  And turn them into stone.

- 'Stones are mute teachers; they silence the observer, and the most valuable lesson we learn from them we cannot communicate.'—Goethe

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LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Essay*

# Answering to Myself in Writing

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## Abstract

What is the value, therapeutic or otherwise, of expressive self-writing? What happens when some of those private written thoughts and feelings become material for publication?

I was recently reminded of an article I wrote, published in 2009, about dialogical journal writing and compassion-focused therapy. Later, in clearing out cupboards, I found a paper copy of that article (!) and realised that I have a collection of my publications, dating back to 1999 and relevant to the field in which *LIRIC* has developed. Some of them I'd completely forgotten about writing; some were published in local or obscure journals; some were published in non open access journals and are, frustratingly, now behind a pay wall—even for their author. My intention in this article is to bring together those publications. For anyone who needs or wants a copy, I can supply paper copies but rarely digital ones.

Creative therapeutic writing has been a habit I've maintained almost since I was old enough to write. Re-reading the thoughts and feelings I catch on the back of flyers, on screens, and occasionally in notebooks helps anchor me, especially at times of transition; helps me to express feelings, make meaning, and clarify my thinking.

In a professional life, where talking therapy and then teaching counselling and psychotherapy paid the bills, publishing something became a 'requirement' as well as part of an evangelical drive to let other practitioners know about the therapeutic power of writing. This essay aims to capture the ways and various contexts in which the publications about 'writing for wellbeing'—or whatever we call it—developed.

***Keywords***: autoethnography, creative expressive writing, feminist self writing, therapy, writing for wellbeing

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## Introduction

This article asks: What was and is the value of the expressive, self-writing/ life-writing I have carried with me over several migrations? Writing has been a place and a way of becoming for me (Williamson, 2015), a space to work towards critical and reflective practices. That writing has also anchored me. Some of it re-emerged in publications.

There is no traditional ' literature review' in this piece. I fantasise that the latest artificial intelligence tool has searched and reviewed systematically all of the published and grey literature, in all of the major world languages (more systematically than any human could of course). The keywords and search terms accumulate from that literature. The results of that review are then circulated across disciplines, arts and humanities, health and social sciences. 'Write it out'—or whatever we call it—becomes widely recognised for its therapeutic potential and is practised in schools, libraries, hospitals, and community centres amongst other places—as well as online.

The focus of this article then is to review and reflect on some of the private 'write it out' writing I've carried around with me for years and to consider how some of it turned into published pieces. What was the context of that private writing, and how did the various 'migrations' impact on it?

In that private writing, to paraphrase Pennebaker and Evans (2014), I have 'openly acknowledged emotions', 'worked to construct a coherent story,' 'switched perspectives', and 'found my voice' (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014, pp. 17–18). Sometimes the research voice has turned from private to public, and the value of that published writing is more difficult to speculate about, best for others to assess. The ethics of publishing 'self-writing' is not the focus here and could be a whole other article.

Meanwhile, very helpfully, in the related research and practice field of autoethnography, Andrew Sparkes has provided a rich and systematic review of the ethics of self-study and self-writing, using his own intelligence and decades of experience as an autoethnographer (Sparkes, 2024).

## July 2011

*After six years of working the dream, I'm moving back from Aotearoa NZ to the UK. Gary from the NZ removal company rings. He'll need an accurate list of what's in the boxes in order to give me an estimate. Several years of life writing, paper copies of articles and other publications translated into cubic feet. No furniture to go in the shipping container apart from one chair. The house contents and the garden furniture all stay behind, along with the friends, the house, the garden, the job.*

*What is most important to have with me in a new home, a new job, in a country that I've left too often? There are 6 cartons full by volume, as Gary says*. (Notes, 2011.)

Six cartons of diaries, notebooks, journals, and some published articles. If I hadn't saved those paper copies of publications, this project could not have happened. Too many computers and storage systems have come and gone since 2011, never mind 1999. It would be impossible to find a digital copy of some of this material. Packing involves some reading, skimming and scanning—I note how clear my written observations are, how insightful compared to several experiences of personal therapy. What is it that makes this private life-writing so valuable? After six years, why ship it all back again? But I did, with paper copies of published articles added.

Eventually the shipping boxes arrived and there they were, back in the UK, those articles, notebooks, diaries and journals. Since I was paying for the shipping by square metre, it made sense to give away my pictures, books, the beds, my rocking chair, to give away all of the other furniture and SO many other books to the NZ Red Cross. But I kept those papers, diaries, and journals—boxes and bags full of them, plus some poems.

For that first year back in the English Midlands in 2011, we moved seven times, with all those boxes heaved in and out of cars, in and out of rented places.

A stranger in a new 'home'. The focus of the chosen extracts in Italics is the writing during 'migrations' and indicates (as do the publications in much more detail) how that writing helped me stay sane enough to go to work, make sure kids got to school, and keep a record of the experience.

If in doubt, leave the country. In turbulent times, I tend to look for a way out. A year on a Fulbright exchange to Virginia is the first time I find a way, followed by full-time work in Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand, and most recently Malta. I'm not listing these destinations for

I used to have…

I used to have …
A sofa – dark blue, soft and very comfortable,
The only one I've ever bought new,
Sent to the Red Cross when I left,
(rather than bought from it)
Along with a garage full of stuff.

I used to have…
A garage – with three tier extension ladder,
Aluminium with paint splotches,
Where my dad had spilt the Magnolia;
Aunty Anne's art deco cups, no saucers,
Christmas decorations and an artificial tree,
A round table and chairs, to sit with friends under the smoke tree in the garden.

I used to have…
A garden – seed boxes, secateurs, redcurrant bushes a pear tree,
Compost in two heaps, a Mexican hammock under the mock orange,
Wisteria bursting through a wrought-iron balcony,
A brick shed with my children's chalked and faded paintings on the walls,
and red curtains I'd run up on the Singer.

I used to have…
A Singer, a sewing machine – dark mahogany with a heavy metal treadle
Another Aunty's who used all the different feet,
Overlocking, zig zag tacking
and the drawers still full of her needles,
cotton reels and crochet hooks.
What's it doing there now at the far end of the earth?

I used to have …
Aunties: Anne, Celia, Imelda, Joan and May,
Agnes, Marjorie, Margaret
I like to say the names I can remember,
And I took some plants to the cemetery when I got back.
I used to have …

Plants – a riotous spider plant left carelessly on a table.
It starred out like a firework with green jet trails.
And everybody said, 'wow it likes it here'.
As they sat on my blue sofa in the sun.

I used to have …

some kind of nostalgic exoticism. I admit I don't like the climate in Britain, neither political nor meteorological. My diaries/journals are truly boring about how much I hate the cold in England, and not just in winter: '*Grey and wet again*' May, 2021. The 'making a better life' experiences were painful, sometimes frightening and often 'fractured' migrations—as are most—as well as warmer, joyful, and life-changing (Wright, Lang, & Cornforth, 2011).

In each section, I have included references to articles and chapters I wrote (and some influences) that deepen the sense of living and working in other places, being Other, using creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) as anchor.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has defined a migrant as 'a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons'. (https://www.iom.int/about-migration)

I contest that IOM definition, with irony. No migration has been bigger for me than the migration from one British social class to another, via education. This is the one where you aspire to move from cheese and onion crisps to olives, from salad cream to vinaigrette. You even move from one voice to another and never feel quite right in any of them.

So, here are extracts from several migrations from one country to another, and back again, with a common strand of working in English, in universities in the UK, Fiji, Malta, and Aotearoa New Zealand. There is also a clear colonial and post-colonial thread here, but that is a story for a different article. The published articles, chapters, and books accompanying each section also trace how the itineraries sent out new shoots with new collaborators, new ways of researching, and different theories about the practice of writing for wellbeing.

## July 1997 Fiji

**Job: University of the South Pacific – USP (Student and staff counsellor plus teaching on Counsellor Education diploma for teachers). Volunteer counsellor at the Women's Centre in Suva.**

*I had typed the application for the job in Fiji in fingerless gloves in January in Northern England. Walking to work every day through the University of the South Pacific's Botanical Gardens, blue skies, frangipani*

*flowers, heat, and a breeze ruffling the palm trees. I have no regrets about accepting the job. I've got to know some of the gardeners well enough to greet them: 'Bula'.*

*'I think the root of my problem is…'*

*A mature student, Sia, is explaining how her husband's drunkenness and violence impact on her ability to concentrate on her studies. There are seven children at home in Samoa and because of financial problems, water bills have been ignored resulting in their water supply being cut off. Sia is in the final year of a B.Ed. and hopes to become a head teacher on her return. She is on academic probation because of poor exam results and wants a letter to support her application for suspension of studies.*

*We meet three times. In between, following a suggestion that she writes an unsent letter to her husband, in her first language and then writes a reply from him, an unsent letter becomes a wave of writing which then informs our remaining sessions. We look at options. Sia asks if we can continue working by email. Her husband has been told about her coming into the Counselling Service. 'There is little he doesn't find out about,' she says, 'he might kill me.'* (Notes, 1998)

I knew this fear was not just a manner of speaking. The statistics about domestic violence and 'femicide' at that time in Fiji were horrifying. Also, the technological equipment and systems available to me at USP were, ironically, far superior to those I'd left in the UK. USP benefited from Japanese IT aid, amongst other forms of assistance. Working on computers and using email was commonplace at the University. Sia and I agreed to work online. I worried about ethics and talked about this shift with my supervisor in the UK—by email.

## The Interview

In retrospect, agreeing to an interview by a Fijian post-graduate journalism student, Raj, was unwise. I was unprepared.

*R: At the Counselling Service at the University of the South Pacific, you've mentioned that domestic violence features. Also at the Women's Centre in Suva where you volunteer.*

*JW: Yes, the situation was familiar from working in Women's Centres in the UK. Misogynistic violence happens worldwide. Also, it seems, across classes, religions…*

The University is multilingual, multi-ethnic, 'Unique in its diversity' as the logo says, and yes domestic violence seems to be universal. English as the official language of the University is, of course, a colonial leftover. White privilege and colonial history is Raj's story here. He could be the son of the gardener I met walking to work, he could be the son of the Vice Chancellor. His shift from smiles to rage; his disgusted, angry expression should not have surprised me. He stops recording the interview.

*'What do you know about life here?'* he asks.

One of the things I learned in the two years in Fiji was cultural humility. I admit to not knowing in the first article accepted for publication in an academic journal, 'Uses of Writing to Counter the Silence of Oppression: Counselling Women at USP' (Wright, 1999). *Pacific Health Dialog* may or may not be available online now, but in that article, written in the last century, I was urging practitioners to use writing as an adjunct to helping women—and men—tell their hitherto untold stories, to find a voice. I quoted from the African American poet, Lucille Clifton, from feminist researchers such as Carol Gilligan, and from psychologist James Pennebaker who had published on writing about trauma and health (in very respectable 'scientific' journals.)

In the next move back to the UK following a military coup in Fiji, I started a PhD by publication and moved jobs again in order to finish it.

## March 1999, Sheffield

**Staff Counsellor, part-time (and PhD candidate) at the University of Sheffield.**

The staff counselling post was new. Soon all appointment slots were full, and each client was limited to six sessions, unlike some students using the same service. Most clients were women, in jobs ranging from part-time cleaner to professor and research manager. The model imposed, although time-limited, lent itself to using CWTP as an adjunct to face-to-face sessions. Evaluative surveys quickly demonstrated the worth of CWTP within the counselling contract and provided the interview participants for 'Five Women Talk About Work-Related Brief Therapy and Therapeutic Writing' (Wright, 2003a). The 'Happy women do not write' opening quotation for that article came from a late nineteenth-century calendar. It made me smile, and I decided to shape the 'findings'—Happy women do not get angry, Happy women care for others…etc. The phenomenological 'thematic analysis', supported by long extracts from the five women's

written responses in the interviews, then led to a more collaborative, narrative inquiry, 'Writing Therapy in Brief Workplace Counselling' (Wright, 2005). Most influential in that shift of research approach was Kim Etherington's ground-breaking collaboration with two brothers, adult male survivors, who had approached her for therapeutic help. They had found her published research on sexual abuse in a then very sparse literature (Etherington, 2000).

The confidence to submit a literature review for publication came from my then research adviser, who suggested that 'Mystery or Mastery: Therapeutic Writing: A Review of the Literature' would be useful to other practitioner researchers (Wright & Chung, 2001).

Those three years in Sheffield were also where serendipity played a part. Gillie Bolton, based in Sheffield, had just written and published her foundational work on creative writing and therapy (Bolton, 1999). The Counselling Service organised a conference in May 2001, with Gillie as keynote, which became the edited book, *Writing Cures* with contributions from now well-known CWTP pioneer practitioners such as Claire Williamson, Celia Hunt, and Kate Thompson (Bolton, Howlett, Lago, & Wright, 2004).

The sent and unsent letter writing as part of the therapeutic process was rapidly developing into email counselling.

From a broadly humanistic foundation, creative and expressive writing combined well with my pluralistic counselling approach (Cooper & McLeod, 2010; Rogers, 1993/2000). It was a wrench to move to working with a different theoretical tribe, but the pragmatic reasons to change jobs and reduce commuting tipped the decision.

## January 2002

**Job: Lecturer, Counselling, practice and research: A University in the English Midlands. A counselling programme dominated by CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy).**

Haiku:

*What makes CBT*
*Populist? Industrial?*
*Spot the fault. Fix it.*

The courses at this University are run in various places, including Portakabins in the car park overlooking the playing fields. We share the toilet block with visiting sports teams. Dodging clods of mud and grass on the toilet floors is necessary in wet weather. There is also a clinic offering low-cost therapy to the local community and in workplace contracts. Some students do placement hours in the clinic. In many ways this programme is ahead of its time.

*At the job interview I see a group of women huddled outside on the steps, smoking. The CBT students are in, mostly women, but some men on secondment from working as psychiatric nurses. The toilet is wet and muddy underfoot – a visiting hockey team was in earlier. One of the women I'd seen on the steps, older than me and, as I later learn is a nurse in West Yorkshire, says:*

*' I wouldn't use those hand dryers if I was you – all they do is spread faecal matter.'*

*She's got a smoker's laugh.*

(Notes, 2002)

For the first time, on the 'integrative' programme, I'm working alongside therapists from the National Health Services. CBT 'scientist practitioners.' This colleague, I'll call him Rob, (rare still to find young, male lecturers/therapists in a female and overall middle-class dominated occupation) trained first as a psychiatric nurse. He has no interest in the person-centred approach I teach and its anti-psychiatry views on 'labelling' and diagnosis. He teaches CBT, with a particular specialism in mental health, from a 'medicalised' point of view. What this colleague, Rob, does ask me about is the therapeutic relationship, reflective practice, and writing. The CBT students have to keep a reflective journal, and he's not sure how they can learn about that. Writing, expressive and reflective, is the topic for the PhD I'm working on at this time (Wright, 2018).

*'It's not right, why have we got to keep a journal and why do we have to write about empathy?' says the woman whose comment about electric hand dryers has stayed with me. 'We don't have a lot of time for empathy on the wards.'*

*It's Wednesday afternoon, and this class goes on until 7 pm. The shaved-head man who used to work in a car factory in Coventry (closed) joins in: 'It's this congruence bit gets me.' I have seen and heard him walking a 'patient'*

*from the 'psychotherapy clinic' to the toilet block with immense care and genuineness.*

*I ask them to write for 10 minutes about a time when they couldn't shake off some patient (their word) who'd got right under their skin. Then I ask them to write the response from that patient.* (Notes, 2003)

I'm back by the rivers Derwent and Trent. These colleagues, students, are people I could have gone to school with—but, as in school, I'm wary here. All that I've learned in other cities in the UK, the USA, and in Fiji counts for nowt here. Narrative approaches? Arts-based representations of research findings? They laugh. Cultural humility is useful.

The publications continue with one focus on how writing therapy informs online counselling (Wright, 2002, 2003b) and how the future might be text-based or not (Wright, 2003c). Happily, I had the sense to mention voice-activated systems:

> The future of technological applications in counselling and psychotherapy is hard to predict. Given the pace of change in the 'information revolution'. Could txt-messaging become a new way to offer therapeutic help to adolescents? Maybe this is already happening. Once voice-activated online communication is more widely available, perhaps the text-based premise of the work described here will no longer hold. (p. 31)

In what I now see as an exposing and ethically risky decision, I include some poetry I wrote at the time of my father's death in an article about reflective practice as a counsellor. Some of my work at the University of Sheffield and the experience of writing for personal and professional growth is here, under the heading 'writing for protection' (Wright, 2003c). Perhaps I fantasised that publishing in an American journal, and one with the word *poetry* in the title, would guarantee a lack of readership? Naïve. Andrew Sparkes might smile and suggest I think about it, providing, 20 years later, his six thinking points (Sparkes, 2024).

More traditionally conceptualised, ethically for certain, there were also collaborations about personal journal writing in professional development for CBT practitioners which used a very different, and more 'scientific' research approach (Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007).

I had finished the PhD and moved universities in order to save myself (and my kids) the stresses of a commuting parent. But within a short time, the temptation to return to the Pacific was strong.

## July 2006

**Job: Associate Professor, Department of Counselling, University, North Island, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Volunteer counsellor at the Women's Centre.**

*Questions about biculturalism come up at the online job interview. The video conference room on a dark November evening in the UK turns full of sun on the other end of the link. The New Zealanders I see are all white; the technician wears shorts. Then the connection breaks and we're limited to sound only. I'm relieved. I could not answer their questions about biculturalism and could only talk earnestly about reading the Treaty of Waitangi and being willing to learn. I talk about the two years in Fiji and of having some idea of how painful, growthful, wonderful, and frustrating that learning might be. Notes, 2006.*

The article written about that particular shift, from Aotearoa New Zealand begins in the airport in Hong Kong when I think, briefly, that I've lost my laptop. The pre-digital age was now over. This is the first publication to claim autoethnography in the title and quotes from bell hooks, Cixous, with citations including Bochner, Ellis, Etherington and of course Pennebaker and Cavarero (Wright, 2009a). As before, writing out that experience on paper gave me some sense of agency when I was in a particular state of powerlessness, rootlessness, and stress. I knew nobody in the town (or country) I was moving to.

Meeting another UK migrant academic, 'Jane' at a party, who had used her personal writing to manage that transition and other life challenges, resulted in another publication aimed at the counselling and psychotherapy field (Wright, 2009b). Jane compared her journal writing with other ways of maintaining wellbeing, such as meditation, but came back to her journals as 'an absolute must':

> I feel, I feel quite unhappy. I would have to say at a deep level if I don't do it. I actually feel I'm back to that kind of – um – where I don't really matter. I'm there to make other people OK inside. (p. 5)

Profound new learning developed over the six years working in Aotearoa New Zealand. Most importantly, I was challenged to think about colonialism, about the ethics of any research including (or excluding?) indigenous people and the Maori experience of mental health. For Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, greetings when meeting a group of new people are always about place and ancestors, naming the mountain, the river, the ocean, and

ultimately the tribe and family born into. I am the river; the river is me. This is the country where the River Whanganui has human rights, a personhood. Its status as a living being was written into law in 2017.

It's not until I've got to introduce myself, formally, in the new job in Aotearoa New Zealand, to a bicultural group of students and staff, that the River Trent, and other natural landmarks near where I was born come back into focus. Again, I'm working in the English language, with all the privilege that confers. I study Maori language and culture at evening classes. But the massive barriers to overcoming my white settler identity and the ethical complexities of research my entitlement to include, or not exclude, Maori and Pasifika people, have only just begun to dawn on me. Like 'colour blindness' it was too easy to assume I could work across cultures.

Linda Tuiwai Smith was a crucial influence (Smith, 2012).

At the Women's Centre where I volunteer, literature on where to get help, the posters on the walls are similar to those in Nottingham or in Fiji. Gender-based violence has been, eventually, recognised by the United Nations, with changing terminology, such as from 'homicide' to 'femicide' (UNODC, 2022).

Collaboration in several articles proved to be the way out of this feeling of cultural and ethical stuckness. In '"Composing Myself on Paper": Personal Journal Writing and Feminist Influences' I learned from my co-author how journal writing was clearly an act of resistance rather than self-improvement (Wright & Ranby, 2009). By learning about third-wave feminism, I made connections with social constructionism and narrative therapy—all together a different way of looking at the world than through humanistic and cognitive behavioural lenses.

Migrations and sojourns outside of the UK have helped me learn some critical acuity, aided by writers and activists from other disciplines. I have also learned some cultural humility. Writing during those periods of transition helped anchor me. The page doesn't judge, what's more it can be re-read.

## January 2015 – January 2017 Resident in Malta

### 2017 – present, Visiting Professor, Dept of Counselling, University of Malta

> [T]he breakdown of communities is one factor that exacerbates our sensitivity to social evaluative threat. Finding ourselves surrounded by strangers, with no links to our childhood and family histories, we become overly concerned about how people see us. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018)

This is as true of living here in Sheffield (since 2018) as in any of the other migrations. It was, perhaps, especially true in Malta, where I was older, more anxious about new environment, colleagues, starting a new job, finding a new place to live, new roads – new construction sites. The life writing notes are still fresh; some have been distilled into poems.

Elderly serial migrant, Gzira , Malta 2017

It occurs to her that this is a dangerous place
This new 'home'.
Every indoor tile a potential slip, a shiny fall.
Every marble pavement, uneven, meant to trip and slide.
Outside in the building boom
No pavement left at all,
She has never been so up close to cranes
Wobbling on propped up feet
at 17 stories high,
She has never been so close to the giant, yellowing teeth of monster diggers.
How did they get them down into that vast limestone pit?
She has never seen a place with no trees
Never lived amongst this kind of destruction.

There are no rivers in Malta. There is the same incidence of gender-based violence as elsewhere in the migrations outlined here.

Once again I'm teaching in the former colonial language, English. Maltese feels too difficult, and I give up on evening classes. Some of the experiences seem familiar.

International Women's Day, March 8th 2016,
Valletta, Malta.

Each pair of red shoes, count them,
A woman killed this year in Malta
by a partner, or someone known to her.

> Does it matter that I don't speak Maltese?
> The poems, the words, the feelings
> are known to me:
> *Violenza domestica*
> *Oppressione*
> *Femicide*.

Feminism and feminist pedagogy have informed some publications not included here. The collective activism has counterbalanced what for me is a very private way of writing:

> I want to suggest that feminist pedagogy can be taught in terms of the affective opening up of the world … not as a private act, but as an opening up of what is possible through working together. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 181).

Shame has been said to be the most silencing of emotions. The article about shame and sexual abuse, using poetic inquiry, was finished in Malta, but had begun in a community agency in Warwickshire, as the only funded research project I'd ever managed (Wright & Thiara, 2019). Ironically, I thought the University of Warwick would be my last job and wrote about retirement with glee (J. K. Wright, 2018). In fact continuing to work with students continues to bring joyful and often inspiring connection with current thinking, writing, and research.

The impulse for this project was being reminded of a publication I'd forgotten about by one of those students. Writing it out has also given me some perspective on the personal and private writing those articles and chapters are based on. One thread of continuity has been membership of Lapidus International, its conferences, and research community. Lapidus international has debated new names for itself as an organisation and for this kind of writing for decades: from writing for wellbeing to words for wellbeing and a lot in between. It would be very useful for some energetic collaborators to capture the history of Lapidus International and what it does.

Have we got an agreed name for the kind of 'writing cures' we do? If you can't name it, you can't sell it, as the more business and marketing minded say. Creative writing for therapeutic purposes is one label, self or life writing another, expressive writing or 'write it out' is another. A dialogue with Claire Williamson on the practice and research of writing to recover and survive raised new questions (Williamson & Wright, 2018).

I continue to write—notebooks and now digital files of personal, private writing accumulate. The 'notes' for this article have been dug out from paper notebooks, journals, letters to myself, poems, and notes written on the back of any paper I can find at the time. Some of these bags and boxes of paper have travelled with me for decades. In another article I hope to write about what to do with all that paper—Bonfires? Drowning? Recycling?

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