

Exploring the Aventine: An autoethnography on making sense of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma.

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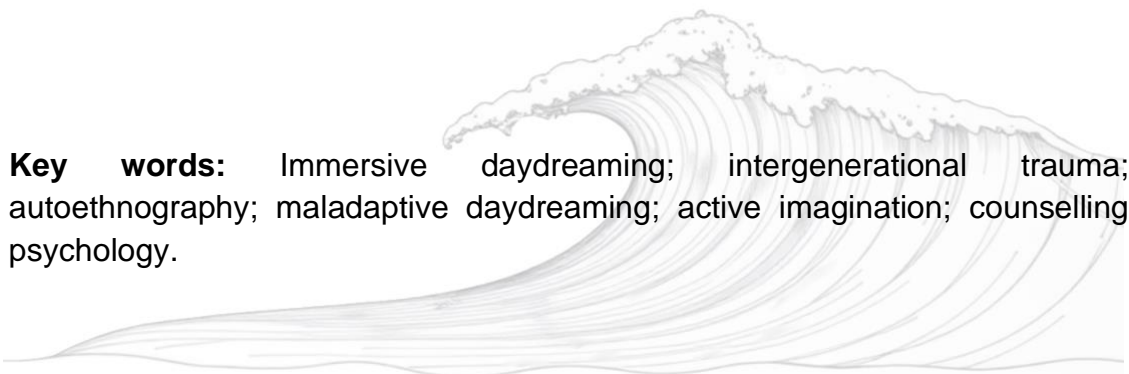
Abstract

Immersive daydreaming is fantasy activity that is vivid, intricate and highly absorptive. Akin to an ongoing 'movie-in-the-mind', it often has the quality of feeling real and can continue over a period of months or years. The term 'maladaptive' daydreaming (MD) was introduced (Somer, 2002) to describe immersive daydreaming before researchers investigated it as a distinct psychiatric condition (e.g. Somer, Soffer-Dudek, Ross & Halpern, 2017) related to developmental trauma.

This thesis presents an autoethnographic journey into the Aventine, a term I use to refer to an elusive, liminal space. I ask readers to adopt and experiment with various lenses I use in my attempts to navigate immersive daydreaming from a critical, post-qualitative perspective. Under the boughs of this autoethnographic forest, I dialogue with, and am challenged by, my inner editor and Leonora Carrington, a feminist surrealist artist. Inspired by the Venice Biennale art exhibition, 'Milk of Dreams', and Jung's ideas on active imagination, I summon my fantasy world characters and imagined others into dialogue and interaction. As we all converge at an intersection of immersive daydreaming and developmental trauma, ancestors whisper of intergenerational trauma and patriarchal psychiatric discourse. The pathologization of creative responses to trauma is then countered to reveal fantasy as a site of liberation.

This creative-relational research is situated, experience-near and dialogical. Attending to the social/political, I challenge traditional forms of trauma-related fantasy representation and claim a space where the intuitive, imaginative and numinous are welcomed into therapeutic practice and scholarship. This thesis highlights the importance of process-driven research: from intrapsychic wars to synchronicities, and ultimately to a sense of homeness, I invite you as reader to accompany me on what became a reclamation of artistic and spiritual freedom.

Key words: Immersive daydreaming; intergenerational trauma; autoethnography; maladaptive daydreaming; active imagination; counselling psychology.



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To all the incredible line managers, supervisors, colleagues and clients I was privileged to connect with whilst working with Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services in Exeter and Next Link Domestic Abuse Service in Bristol: I am so grateful to you all, I learned so much and remain in awe of all you do.

My deepest thanks to my Mum and Dad for your support and encouragement, for your love and for everything you have done to support me throughout this journey. Special thanks also to all my friends and family for your support, humour and wisdom. My loving thanks especially to my sister, brother-in-law and nieces, whose love is non-stop and for the hope that you provide.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

For a long time, I kept it all secret. I still remember the first time I encountered research on ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming¹ (MD) and online communities dedicated to discussing immersive daydreaming. Looking back, I often felt overwhelmed by my experiences of immersive daydreaming, my experiences of trauma, and their impact on my life. Since then, my engagement in these online communities, personal and professional experience and the present autoethnographic journey, have all left me feeling empowered and less isolated. The present autoethnographic research, conducted within the context of the UWE Critical Autoethnography Troupe and Counselling Psychology (CoP) doctoral training, provided me with opportunities to explore, learn, connect and share in ways I never imagined.

Before starting CoP training, I completed an MSc in Psychological Trauma and researched MD and developmental trauma using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. At the same time, like many people in MD-focused online communities, following the initial publication of MD research, I became hooked on nearly every paper published. I swung from one forum to another, from one paper to another, trying to process the overwhelm of someone seemingly naming something I had struggled to understand for much of my life. I had also just completed a draft outline of a manuscript documenting the decades-long plot based on my fantasy world. Not long after, inspired by epiphanies, insights and synchronicities related to my academic studies, fictional writing, the emergence of MD research, and a health scare, my partner and I left the United Kingdom to travel in Southeast Asia and live in Vietnam for several years. Gradually, throughout this tumultuous and transformative period, the intensity of my fantasy engagement somehow dissipated.

Several years later, I returned from Vietnam and applied for the doctorate in CoP where, during the first year of my training, my research supervisor, Miltos Hadjiosif, invited me to consider autoethnography for my proposed research on

¹ I alternate between using both the terms ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming and MD as relevant

developmental trauma and immersive daydreaming. As an 'insider' of online immersive daydreaming communities with lived experience, it seemed like a fitting - albeit scary - approach to research inquiry. With an academic and professional background working with individuals with histories of complex trauma and an interest in critical theory, Jungian, transpersonal and expressive arts-based therapeutic approaches, I began the autoethnographic journey. Yet I wasn't fully prepared for what the journey might bring.

As a bi-racial woman of colour, I already felt accustomed to unwittingly assimilating myself into the dominant culture. There had not been much room for my gendered and racialised experiences prior to CoP training. As a psychology student, there had also been a process of assimilation into mainstream psychology and research. I felt well-equipped, ready and prepared to showcase my best performance of the 'perfect' student/psychologist in training/researcher. But this autoethnographic journey, in the context of CoP training, challenged many of my preconceived ideas. In their place was an opportunity for connecting my personal experience to the cultural in a deeply transformative way. Consistent with post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2014) and autoethnographic research (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), the representation of others within psychological research is therefore challenged by the present study. Whilst the journey has been unavoidably embroiled with the experience of others, unlike in conventional qualitative research, I foreground researcher subjectivity and process and attempt to invite you as reader into this process.

The training, therapeutic practice, being part of UWE's Critical Autoethnography Troupe, and engaging with autoethnographic research, all offered a consistent challenge to the disenchantment that arises from interlocking systems of oppression. Consequently, the present inquiry implicates, challenges and revises varying sociocultural discourses relevant to the research topic and to the medicalisation of human distress and suffering. This includes discourses regarding the decontextualization of developmental trauma, the pathologization of immersive daydreaming, and a cultural over-reliance on reason and rationality as signature characteristics of patriarchal systems of power. The challenges -

and crises - I encountered throughout this journey were also opportunities - invitations. An invitation to stop, reflect, and make space. Space for a way of being, of doing research, of approaching psychotherapeutic practice, that was informed by care and concern for relationality, intersectionality, creativity, complexity, process, and a nourishing of the intuitive, imaginative and numinous. This in turn made way for a sense of re-enchantment (Cambray, 2023), embodiment, belonging and inter-connectedness.

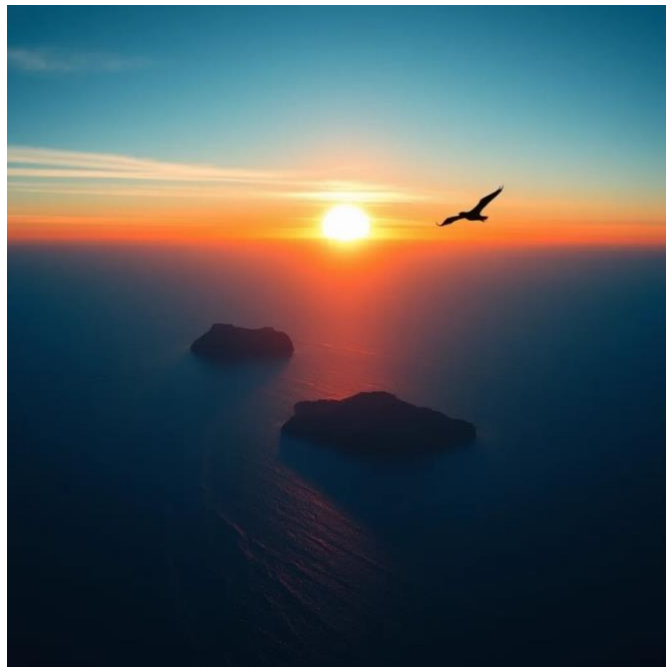
This is the journey which I now invite you as reader to explore with me. Whatever context/s you are reading this within, I invite you to attend to your own embodied process as you read. I invite you to share in listening to Agnes Obel throughout your reading, particularly her album '[Aventine](#)', as her music has accompanied me throughout this five-year journey. Alternatively, I invite you to choose a different playlist to accompany your reading, as you see fit! I also invite you to keep in mind your own dance/s with fantasy as you read. Finally, it is my hope that, by embracing and sharing my experiences, stories and epiphanies as researcher, I *show* rather than *tell*. Therefore, I invite you to come to your own conclusions about the research topic, with the hope that it may resonate and connect with you, and possibly inspire your own epiphanies and insights.

Orientation to the thesis

In line with tenets of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), creative-relational inquiry (Wyatt, 2018) and writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000), the present thesis presents various types of writing with the hope of evoking something in the reader and engaging others with the research. Chapter 2: Literature Review presents a literature review in the style of more traditional academic writing, tracking MD research. Chapter 3: Methodology explores methodological issues pertaining to autoethnographic scholarship as applied in this thesis. Chapter 4: Exploring the Aventine begins with creative writing in the form of a poem, before moving on to a narrative reflection and fictional dialogue with the surrealist artist and feminist, Leonora Carrington. The centrepiece of this chapter is a *Character Summons* which is inspired by surrealist ideas and Carl Jung's ideas on Active Imagination (Chodorow, 1997). This chapter ends with a final dialogue between Carrington and my inner editor. Chapter 5: Discussion layers evocative, analytic

and narrative writing styles which highlight implications of the current study prior to offering an evaluation of the research and conclusion in Chapter 6: Outro.

Note of care: Throughout the present study, I explore issues that some readers may find challenging, including occasional reference to suicidal thoughts, sexual violence and childhood abuse. I encourage you to prioritise your wellbeing as you read, listening to your feelings and reaching out for support if you need it. Please take good care of yourself.



Chapter 2: Literature Review

Maladaptive daydreaming (MD)

The term ‘maladaptive daydreaming’ (MD) was first coined by Eli Somer in 2002 to describe “extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002, p. 199). Following his initial qualitative paper, which outlined case examples of MD, Somer conducted a series of qualitative research studies exploring varying facets of specific immersive daydreaming experiences understood as a ‘maladaptive’ form of daydreaming associated with distress and social and occupational difficulties. Subsequently, MD has been proposed to be distinct from everyday daydreaming, as discerned, for example, by the development of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS; Somer, Lehrfeld, Bigelsen & Jopp, 2016). The MDS comprises five proposed core characteristics of MD, including daydreaming content/quality, compulsion/control, perceived benefits of daydreaming, distress and interference with life functioning. These characteristics are described within a three-factor model of yearning, kinesthesia and impairment - later amended in the MDS-16 to include daydreaming-related music use as a fourth factor (Soffer-Dudek, Somer, Abu-Rayya, Metin & Schimmenti, 2021). Whilst the efficacy of the MDS-16 has been explored in varying populations and countries (e.g. Schimmenti, Somer & Regis, 2019), there is still debate as to the usefulness of the MD construct, particularly regarding how MD might be effectively distinguished from similar experiences such as everyday daydreaming and fantasy, mind wandering and the trait of fantasy proneness, for example (Somer, 2018a).

Whilst reported daydreaming experiences vary widely, the immersive daydreaming component of MD has often been characterised as an ongoing ‘movie-in-the-mind’ that is vivid, intricate and highly absorptive, often with the quality of being and feeling real, whilst awareness of distinction between reality and fantasy remains (Somer, 2018a). As such, immersive daydreaming is reported within MD research to be comprised of complex plots and characters that age in real time, usually beginning in childhood or adolescence and sometimes spanning throughout the course of a lifetime (Somer, Somer & Jopp,

2016a). This immersive fantasy world is further reported to be associated with a host of complex relationships with imagined others and an alternative family life, all underpinned by a strong sense of presence and intense emotionality that might more commonly be associated with everyday relationships (Somer et al., 2016a). The experience of living with immersive daydreaming has been frequently reported in the research literature and popular media as akin to living a 'parallel life' with research suggesting that fantasy life potentially begins to feel more appealing and rewarding than everyday experiences in reality (e.g. Somer, 2018a). Somer (2013) therefore initially concluded that immersive daydreaming becomes problematic when the relationships within an individual's fantasy life begin to replace *real* human interactions and relationships; thus, when the appeal of and yearning for the fantasy world impedes an individual's social and occupational functioning. More recently, this has frequently been conceptualised as a form of fantasy addiction within psychological research (e.g. Pietkiewicz, Nęcki, Bańbura & Tomalski, 2018) and popular media publications (e.g. Kelly, 2017).

MD research

Early MD research emerged in tandem with a rapidly growing presence of online communities in which thousands of people worldwide self-identified as 'maladaptive daydreamers' and connected through cyber communities, forums and blogs, sharing their experiences and seeking peer and professional support for difficulties relating to immersive daydreaming (e.g. Wild Minds Network, n.d.). MD researchers also reported receiving countless emails from people volunteering for future research, seeking psychological support and expressing their frustration at a perceived lack of recognition and understanding regarding MD among mental health practitioners (e.g. Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011; Somer, 2013). Initial exploratory and phenomenological MD research then led some researchers to conclude that MD had previously been "misdiagnosed, mistreated or dismissed" (Somer et al., 2016a, p.4), with subsequent MD research suggesting that the MD construct is associated with high levels of psychiatric comorbidity and significant psychological distress and dysfunction (e.g. Bigelsen, Lehrfeld, Jopp & Somer, 2016; Somer et al., 2017). Argued to be a hallmark of DSM diagnoses (Somer, 2018a), this was used to further support

the idea of MD as a distinct psychiatric condition (Somer et al., 2017) and as a rationale for continuing MD research. Such research has, for example, attempted to discern the nature of MD and related distress and dysfunction (e.g. Somer, Somer & Jopp, 2016b; Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018), examined MD as a behavioural addiction (Pietkiewicz et al., 2018) and explored MD in relation to emotion regulation (Greene, West & Somer, 2020). A smaller number of studies have also considered the role of creativity and expressive arts in relation to MD (e.g. West & Somer, 2020). For example, Somer, Somer and Halpern (2019) reported that some people experienced benefits related to a “self-controlled means of emotion regulation...through an easily accessible internal entertainment mechanism” (p.102). The experience of immersive daydreaming was therefore also described as intensely rewarding, despite some reports of associated difficulties arising from a reported sense of duality in relation to everyday and fantasy life.

MD and developmental trauma

A smaller body of research also explored the possible childhood antecedents of MD (Somer et al., 2016b) including the role of developmental trauma in the development of MD (Abu-Rayya, Somer & Knane, 2020; Somer, Abu-Rayya & Brenner, 2020; Somer, Abu-Rayya & Simaan 2019). This furthered hypotheses about the role of MD in relation to dissociation (Somer, 2018b) and dissociative processes and disorders (Ross, 2018; Ross, Ridgway & George, 2020). For example, it has been argued that, in the context of significant childhood isolation or developmental trauma, MD may initially develop as a coping strategy that only later contributes to distress and functional difficulties (e.g. Somer et al., 2016b). Research suggesting a possible pivotal role of developmental trauma as an antecedent of MD (e.g. Ferrante, Marino, Guglielmucci & Schimmenti, 2022; Somer et al., 2020) therefore appears consistent with existing conceptualisations of peri- and post-traumatic dissociative processes, with daydreaming use possibly playing a defensive or compensatory role (e.g. Ferrante et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2020; Somer et al., 2020). However, MD has so far been conceptualised as a form of dissociative absorption which contradicts the traditional view of absorption as a ‘normative’ dissociative process, thought to be unrelated to psychological distress and functional difficulties (Butler, 2006; 2011). It is therefore unclear how MD might be

understood in relation to current psychological theory and research on post-traumatic dissociation. Whilst Soffer-Dudek and Somer (2022) present a view of MD as a distinct psychiatric condition that relates to dissociative absorption, this remains unclear. Further exploration of experiences of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma might therefore be useful in contributing additional insight and understanding to both existing conceptualisations of MD and also to current understanding of posttraumatic dissociative processes.

Perceived benefits of daydreaming

Research also suggests that MD may develop following an innate imaginative capacity that is associated with benefits (Schimmenti, Somer, et al., 2019). Whilst many people have adopted the term '*maladaptive*' daydreaming, the immersive daydreaming component of MD itself is often reported to be a highly rewarding and pleasurable activity (e.g. Somer, Somer et al., 2019), with distress usually reported in relation to daydreaming extent and functional difficulties (e.g. Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). This view appears to support broader research on daydreaming that suggests that everyday daydreaming may be associated with benefits such as increased creativity (e.g. McMillan, Kaufman & Singer, 2013; Zedelius & Schooler, 2016). Consistent with this, the MDS (Somer, Lehrfeld et al., 2016) originally identified 'perceived benefits' as one of five characteristics fundamental to the proposed MD construct. Descriptions of the rewarding nature and perceived benefits of daydreaming also appear to be a consistent theme within MD research with MD described as a source of companionship (e.g. Somer, 2002), compensatory emotional support (e.g. Somer et al., 2016a), daily pleasure (Somer, 2018a) and creativity (e.g. Somer, Somer et al., 2019). However, MD research has relied heavily on recruiting help-seeking research participants from online MD communities, which may have contributed to a focus on immersive daydreaming in relation to experiences of distress and functional difficulties at the expense of also considering experiences of immersive daydreaming more broadly. Existing MD research therefore lacks in-depth exploration of the potentially rewarding and beneficial factors related to immersive daydreaming. There is also little consideration of how people might make sense of any associated benefits of immersive daydreaming, particularly in the context of reported daydreaming-

related distress and functional difficulties. Moving beyond a focus on daydreaming-related distress and functional difficulties might therefore be a fruitful avenue of exploration that contributes a more nuanced understanding of these experiences.

Continuing research

Research suggests that individuals seeking help with immersive daydreaming may represent a hidden population who may sometimes experience obstacles and barriers to receiving professional help and support (e.g. Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011). Where help and support is actively sought, some appear to experience frustration and dissatisfaction with the support received. This has been associated with an absence of psychological research attention and social discourse regarding the notion of immersive daydreaming and immersive daydreaming-related difficulties and discernment of immersive daydreaming as distinct from everyday daydreaming (e.g. Somer, 2013; Somer et al., 2016a). Attempts by some practitioners to normalise daydreaming and fantasy use appears to therefore, at times, be perceived by some people seeking help as a barrier to disclosing daydreaming-related distress and difficulties (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011). Immersive daydreaming might therefore be more usefully described as distinct from more commonly understood experiences of *everyday daydreaming*. Consequently, a previous lack of relevant knowledge and research exploration, effective therapeutic approaches and conceptualisations of daydreaming-related difficulties - such as outlined within MD research - appears to be a significant factor in the surge of psychological research and social discourse surrounding MD (Somer, 2018a). More recently, research has therefore explored possible therapeutic approaches and interventions with individuals who seek help in relation to their daydreaming (e.g. Herscu, Somer, Federman & Soffer-Dudek, 2023). Such impetus for continuing MD research appears to have partially come from the rapidly growing presence of online MD communities, in which increasing numbers of people worldwide self-identify as 'maladaptive daydreamers' and seek support and help in relation to their daydreaming. It would therefore seem important to acknowledge and explore further any existing conceptualisations of immersive daydreaming, whilst also considering any possible therapeutic implications for working with people

seeking daydreaming-related help and support. It is also worth noting that therapeutic practitioners might encounter material resonant of immersive daydreaming experiences in their practice, without it being a 'presenting issue' of their clients.

Rationale

Despite this growing body of research, since the original published case studies describing MD, little research has explored in-depth how people with histories of developmental trauma might make sense of and understand both their years of engagement with immersive daydreaming and any perceived benefits alongside any associated distress and functional difficulties. A significant body of research on developmental trauma exists, with numerous studies describing the potentially significant and adverse economic, social, physical and mental health impact of developmental trauma and trauma-related dissociation (e.g. Byambaa, De, Butchart, Scott & Vos, 2012; van der Kolk, 2017). However, MD research appears to have emerged distinct from this body of research, whilst also similarly suggesting that some individuals with histories of developmental trauma report life-long daydreaming-related distress and functional difficulties (e.g. Somer et al., 2020). Whilst developmental trauma is not the only identified pre-requisite for MD, it is thought to play a significant role in later development of dissociative coping and mental health difficulties, therefore attending to how people might make sense of and understand immersive daydreaming, particularly in contexts of increasing psychological and social discourse surrounding MD, might provide further insights and understanding relevant to both the growing body of MD research and to existing research on dissociative experiences in the context of developmental trauma.

Whilst conceptualisations of daydreaming, fantasy and dissociative coping strategies have been explored extensively within psychological research over the last century, the term MD is relatively new, only coined in 2002 (Somer, 2002), and only apparent within social discourse and popular media from around 2011. As such, a significant proportion of people who have lived experience of immersive daydreaming may have witnessed and potentially been impacted upon by the introduction and development of the term 'maladaptive'

daydreaming into psychological research, social discourse and popular media, particularly considering the proposal that MD is a previously unrecognised psychiatric condition. This is apparent within online MD communities, for example, in which recent psychological research publications and associated conclusions are often shared, discussed and reflected upon by group members. It might therefore be useful to examine not only how people make sense of and understand immersive daydreaming engagement in the context of developmental trauma, but to also explore how such understanding(s) might have been impacted by participation within psychological research exploring MD, engagement with online MD communities and social discourse surrounding MD. This invites deconstruction of the sociocultural, political and historical contexts, and psychological discourses that MD has emerged from.

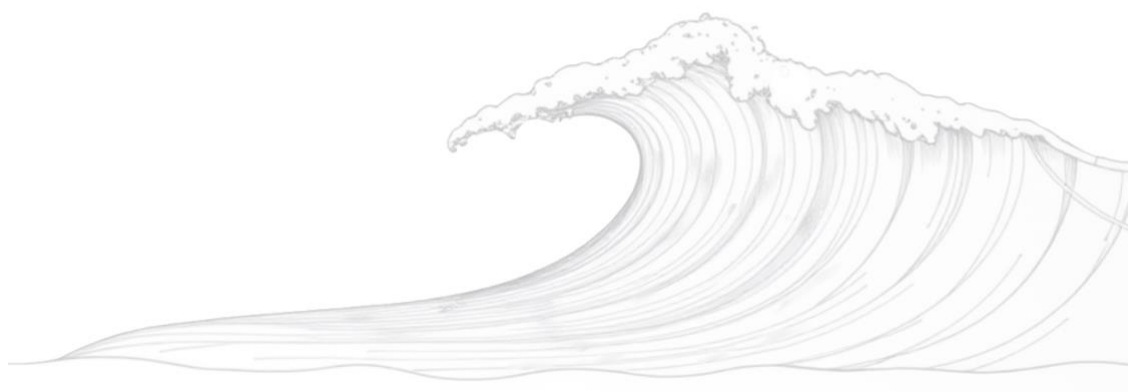
Research direction

As I have lived experience of developmental trauma and lifelong experience of immersive daydreaming, the present study adopts an autoethnographic approach in which I can explore and make sense of my experience of immersive daydreaming within the context of developmental trauma amid the prevailing context of MD discourse. By adopting an autoethnographic approach, I hope to explore immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma without reducing or decontextualising either but, rather, to offer an account that honours lived experience with all its depth, nuance and complexity whilst also exploring the types of subjectivities that conceptualisations of ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming might produce.

Consistent with an autoethnographic approach, the research process is expected to be complex and therefore may not occur in a linear fashion. This requires a stance of not-knowing regarding any possible research directions and research outcomes as these will emerge through my engagement with the research process, rather than being predetermined. Autoethnography has been likened to “being sent out into the woods without a compass” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.120), therefore it is expected that the research direction will likely evolve throughout the research process. Nonetheless, it can be useful to outline an

initial research direction to help begin the research process, providing a starting point that might guide and frame the topic of inquiry.

As I began the present study, I had initially hoped to explore how myself and others with histories of developmental trauma might make sense of immersive daydreaming, particularly in a context of increasing medicalised discourse around MD. I was particularly interested in how any perceived benefits and rewarding experiences related to immersive daydreaming might be understood. For example, I was keen to explore how immersive daydreaming might be understood in the context of creativity and expressive arts as this had been a theme within MD research that resonated with my own experience but was missing from studies that focused instead on distress and functional difficulties. I also had in mind the emergence of psychological research and increasing social discourse relating to MD and how this may have influenced my own sense-making. I was curious about the individual and social dynamics that may emerge in response to medicalisation of MD and any sociocultural, political and historical contexts that frame such psychological discourse.



Chapter 3: Methodology

This research began with the intention to explore my experiences of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma with a particular focus on any rewarding or beneficial experiences related to immersive daydreaming and attention to broader medicalisation and discourse relating to 'maladaptive' daydreaming (MD).

Post-qualitative inquiry

Focus on exploring and gaining insight and understanding into subjective experience is consistent with a qualitative paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Traditionally, the strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to facilitate the exploration of experience, subjectivities and meaning which allows for rich descriptions of phenomena whilst also highlighting the salient features of an experience rather than attempting to measure it. Qualitative inquiry is typically seen as particularly amenable to CoP scholarship as it is consistent with a humanistic-relational orientation to research and phenomenological philosophical stance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016). A focus on lived experience, subjectivity, meanings, and obtaining rich and in-depth descriptions of experience is also directly relevant to the work and research of counselling psychologists (Kasket, 2016).

However, consistent with post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2014; 2021), adopting a conventional qualitative approach to inquiry felt restrictive in relation to the research topic. Post-qualitative inquiry seeks to challenge established mainstream qualitative approaches that, with an emphasis on linearity and fixed categories, can restrict the inherent complexities of research (St. Pierre, 2014; 2021). Research under the umbrella of post-qualitative inquiry acknowledges how researchers are pivotal to the research process, deeply entangled with their research topics and intimately involved with the co-construction of meaning. This shifts research inquiry to an emphasis on process and becoming, problematising representation and resisting traditional qualitative approaches that constrain research exploration (St. Pierre, 2014). A post-qualitative paradigm is nevertheless well suited to CoP, with its consideration of the socio-political

dimensions of research and its use of creative methods of representation that speak to the complexity of relational and research processes (Joseph, 2017; St. Pierre, 2014).

Creative-relational inquiry

Within the present study, I employed tenets from creative-relational approaches to inquiry (Wyatt, 2018), engaging with writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Wyatt, 2018). Embracing tenets of creative-relational inquiry allowed for research that was process-oriented, situated, experience-near and dialogical, engaging with the social and political through the performative and attempting to connect with readers creatively and relationally (The University of Edinburgh, n.d.; Wyatt, 2018). Creative-relational inquiry further lends itself to a focus on process and becoming, making space for the “struggle of the uneasy, of not being able to find a way, of missing each other” (Wyatt, 2018, p. 50) that felt relevant to CoP’s original aim of offering “a more intuitive, artistic and humanistic basis to psychology than provided by clinical psychology” (Woolfe, 2016). Engaging with a post-qualitative and creative-relational approach to inquiry offered a way to explore the realm of the intersubjective and forefront the ‘messy’ spaces in between as a counselling psychologist in training attempting to “retain the philosophical value of non-pathologizing in an environment dominated by the medical model” (Woolfe, 2016).

Encountering autoethnography

I initially considered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a research methodology, given its focus on lived experience, applicability to psychological and psychotherapeutic research and clearly delineated philosophical and theoretical foundations (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). However, this changed when I began to learn more about autoethnographic approaches. My aim was to explore the contextually embedded nature of experience and consider alternative conceptualisations of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma. My research interests in the current topic emerged from my own lived experience, completion of postgraduate research on immersive daydreaming, engagement within online MD communities and professional experience working with people with histories of complex trauma. Therefore, my

personal, academic and professional background had not only shaped the initial research aims but also provided a range of varied, rich experiences to draw upon in navigating this topic. Upon hearing of and learning about autoethnographic research, I was surprised to encounter a methodology that might effectively contain my broad initial research queries whilst also providing space for an organic, in-depth and holistic exploration of the topic that would embrace my subjectivity and researcher positionality. I was also excited that autoethnographic research would provide an opportunity - and challenge - to include various forms of writing as a core feature of the approach.

Autoethnography

Ethnographic research nowadays often necessitates the visibility of the researcher; their stance towards and participation in the research, and their pivotal impact upon the research findings (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Mattis & Quizon, 2005). Within autoethnographic approaches, this becomes the predominant focus of the research with the researcher positioned as central to the research inquiry, utilising their subjectivity and attention to the researcher's context and social identities. This approach developed within the crisis of representation period of social science inquiry, when canonical ways of doing research, including their underlying ontological, epistemological and axiological limitations, were challenged, with an increasing commitment to decolonialist values and a valuing of stories and narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Early autoethnographers therefore emphasised the power and impact of the researcher upon the research process and considered different ways of knowing, doing research and representing others (Ellis et al., 2011). This felt in line with a social justice agenda that also spoke to many professional values consistent with CoP (Kasket, 2016).

Autoethnography is influenced by anthropology, ethnography and autobiography (Ellis et al., 2011) and has thus been described as an interdisciplinary "approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p.1). Emphasis is therefore usually placed on the exploration of researcher experience, particularly

in relation to critical moments, epiphanies or times of difficulty and crisis (Ellis et al., 2011). Consequently, autoethnographers may explore and analyse their own personal history through use of self-reflection, reflexivity, cultural artefacts, engagement with academic literature and using writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) that captures their meaning-making processes. The research journey can be viewed as framed within the ethnographic aim to bridge the personal with the cultural through 'participant observation' of the researcher's own socio-cultural and socio-political contexts (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography therefore appeared to offer an approach that would embrace both my personal experience and researcher positionality whilst leaving room for exploration of the relational, the intersubjective and broader socio-cultural contexts. This might be likened to holding fragments of life against the present light and making sense of their significance within the bigger context of life (Chang, 2007).

Autoethnography appeared consistent with my initial research aims as it would allow me to explore insights and understandings of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma, producing thick description and analysis intimately tied to broader sociocultural experience (Adams, Linn & Ellis, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016). As an autoethnographic approach entails engagement with a process of both research and writing that considers personal reflections, experiences and narrative, it also champions both subjectivity and reflexivity. This felt highly appropriate for psychotherapeutic research and relevant to CoP training. It would allow me to explore and represent personal experience in innovative and creative ways, offering an alternative to traditional research methods by facilitating the production of "meaningful, accessible and evocative research grounded in personal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). According to Ellis et al. (2011), the production of accessible autoethnographic stories has the potential to reach a wider audience, promoting the opportunity for personal and social change. From this perspective, storytelling can be viewed as how we make sense of our lives and attending to and reading such stories may in turn facilitate the co-creation of meaning (Sanders & Wilkins, 2010).

Autoethnography also felt well-suited to my initial research aims as it facilitates exploration of sensitive topics that might usually be “shrouded in silence” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.274). This felt relevant to both developmental trauma and immersive daydreaming, both of which have been associated with secrecy, stigma and shame within research literature (cf. Ferrante et al., 2022). Furthermore, in considering a primarily interview-based study, relying solely on the recruitment and interviewing of others, I was weary about inviting people to recount and share details surrounding possibly sensitive personal experiences if I, as the researcher, was not willing to also acknowledge the role of my own experience, values and beliefs as fundamental to the research aims and process (Tamas, 2009). I also reflected that solely relying on interview data might not provide the depth, nuance and thick description that I hoped to achieve. In contrast, autoethnography allows for representation of an ‘insider’s’ perspective including associated ‘insider’ interpretations, meanings and feelings that are considered alongside others’ experience of a particular phenomenon (Anderson, 2006, p.386). This value-driven approach, and deep concern and consideration for relational ethics and the power dynamics at play in a researcher’s representation of others, appealed to me as consistent with CoP’s professional value-base. There were also implications for self-development as a therapist; autoethnography can itself be therapeutic for researchers with personal experience of the topic of interest (McMillan & Ramirez, 2016). An autoethnographic approach could challenge the distinction between subject and object and facilitate representation of individuals from typically underrepresented groups (Ellis et al., 2011).

However, there is debate in the literature about the compatibility of post-qualitative inquiry and autoethnography. For example, Jackson and Mazzei (2008) challenge the way in which some authors approach experience and the narrating ‘I’ within autoethnographic work, arguing that some autoethnographic work may fail to fully problematise conventional humanistic qualitative research where it approaches experience as ‘out there’ to be reflected upon or privileges the positioning of ‘researcher as subject’ (Ellis & Bocher, 2000). Gale (2020) further argues that autoethnographic research may at times be inclined more towards *knowing* rather than *doing*, suggesting instead practices that more fully

embrace the “creative, speculative and experimental” (Gale, 2020, p. 306). Resting upon post-structuralist theory, such arguments are also echoed within a posthuman approach to inquiry that champions a “re-imagining of what method might *do*, rather than what it *is* or *how to do it*.” (St. Pierre, Jackson & Mazzei, 2016, p.105).

Relevance to counselling psychology (CoP)

Despite ethnographic research being more established within other social sciences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), ethnographic methodologies appear relevant to psychological and psychotherapeutic research (Hoshmand, 2005; Siddique, 2011). For example, Suzuki et al. (2005) argue that ethnographically informed research is of relevance to CoP research given the focus on exploring “stories that are embedded in multiple contexts” (p.206) and promoting more socio-cultural understandings of diverse groups. Furthermore, autoethnography may also be particularly pertinent to CoP research (Egeli, 2017; Kracen & Baird, 2017; Siddique, 2011), with recent publications of autoethnographic studies illustrating how autoethnography may be a promising future methodology within CoP (e.g. Kracen & Baird, 2017; Råbu, McLeod, Haavind, Bernhardt, Nissen-Lie & Moltu, 2021). For example, autoethnography is argued to be particularly useful for enabling CoP doctoral students to develop competence in applying theory to practice (Hayes & Fulton, 2014). Given that autoethnography also offered the opportunity to obtain more nuanced and in-depth, thick descriptions of cultural processes than can be achieved through interviews alone (Siddique, 2011), adopting an autoethnographic approach felt consistent with CoP’s philosophical underpinnings and professional values (Woolfe, 2016). The significant inclusion and transparency of my personal experience and subjectivity offered an authentic way to engage in research inquiry. This felt like an appropriate challenge for a CoP doctoral thesis with the potential of making an original contribution to existing psychological research on immersive daydreaming by utilising a novel methodological approach not yet adopted within existing research literature on immersive daydreaming. Finally, an autoethnographic approach offered opportunities to embrace CoP values within research by resisting technical-rational research approaches, instead leaning

more towards the ‘tacit dimension’ which favours “exploration of subjective experience and the interpretation of meanings” (Strawbridge, 2016).

Relevance of transpersonal approaches

Transpersonal autoethnographic approaches (e.g. Raab, 2013) enable in-depth exploration of spiritual experience in a way that abandons the out-dated role of researcher as detached observer (Braud & Anderson, 1998), “making space for the subjective and experiential dimension of human experience; allowing for deeper explorations of empathy, intuition, ultimate meaning and values” (Cohen, 2021, p. 131). Cohen (2021) argues that, when studying spiritual experience, “one should not, or perhaps cannot, simply remain a passive observer; rather one should sincerely pursue an emic perspective through immersion...without ignoring its historical and cultural context” (p.125). Epistemologically speaking, some of the ways of knowing, guiding principles and theoretical assumptions within the discipline of transpersonal psychology were thought to be directly relevant to the current research. For example, Rowan (2017) states that intuition is core to the way of knowing within transpersonal psychology, alongside acknowledging that there are numerous levels of consciousness, and various practices that enable us to go beyond the personal such as use of self-dialogue, creativity and imagery.

Theoretical lenses

I was aware that a variety of theoretical lenses had already been prominent in informing my sense-making around the research topic. Theory therefore not only informed my autoethnographic journey but was reflected upon with regards to how it had impacted my understanding of personal experience of fantasy and the imaginal more broadly. The theoretical lenses I initially identified as relevant belonged to broader schools of thought including psychoanalytic approaches (e.g. Jung on Active Imagination; Chodorow, 1997), critical psychology (e.g. deconstructive approaches, Parker, 2014, 2018), trauma theory (e.g. theoretical models of complex trauma and post-traumatic dissociation; van der Kolk, 2003; Fisher, 2017; Herman, 2015) and concepts and approaches within transpersonal psychology (e.g. transliminality; Thalbourne & Houran, 2000). My professional experience had also led me to an interest in arts-based

psychotherapeutic approaches which I relied on throughout the research to further inform my understanding of the topic (e.g. Guided Imagery and Music; Cadesky, 2006; Malchiodi, 2020, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the current study was granted by the University of the West of England Faculty Research Ethics committee (Appendix A; ref. HAS.21.10.019).

Emotional wellbeing. The importance of my wellbeing throughout the research was emphasised as ethically important, with steps identified to mitigate against any risks to my emotional wellbeing and safety. For example, I explored the research topic and process within personal therapy, prioritised self-care and connection with my social support network and used a reflexive diary and research supervision for ongoing support.

Anonymity. Steps were taken where feasible to ensure the anonymity of others from my personal life and who I interacted with in relation to the research topic. This process was tied to attention, concern, and reflection regarding relational ethics balanced with honouring an ethical stance towards the importance of recounting and sharing significant personal experiences.

Relational ethics. Attention to relational ethics relevant to reflexive inquiry was important throughout the research process (Etherington, 2004, 2007). Ethical challenges within autoethnographic research often relate to the risks of engaging in research that requires reflecting on and writing about self and others; personal reflection on my own relational experiences inevitably involves reflecting on and writing about others (Ellis, 2007). Many autoethnographic researchers have therefore explored such ethical challenges that arise when seeking to find a balance in exercising the right to have one's voice heard and not be silenced whilst also respecting the anonymity and potential impact of such work on others (Edwards, 2021). Possible harm to others resulting from the research was therefore considered in depth throughout the research inquiry.

Leaning on my CoP professional training, and an autoethnographic sensibility towards grappling with the complexities of relational ethics, balanced with concern for social justice, I navigated challenges relating to relational ethics throughout the entirety of the research journey, consulting widely with others, including my research supervisor and personal therapist. On reflection, this entailed significantly more thought and reflection than action. I further explored matters regarding relational ethics with those possibly impacted by the research, other autoethnographers and read relevant literature. Finally, I sought creative forms of representing experience and others in an ethically, socially just manner. Relational ethics and a commitment of care towards anyone implicated or reading this thesis were therefore a pivotal part of the entire research process.

Approaches to autoethnography

In embracing both the scientific and artistic, autoethnographers pay attention to storytelling and literary conventions, seeking to produce aesthetic research and writing (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is therefore both a process and a product; with the final research described as an “autoethnographic story” (e.g. Holman Jones, 2016, p. 228), consistent with a performative social science approach and acknowledgement of the impossibility of value free research (Ellis et al., 2011). However, autoethnography varies dependent upon the research inquiry and whether it leans towards the evocative or analytic (Anderson, 2006), critical (Holman Jones, 2016) or performative (Spry, 2001) with different approaches placing different emphasis on “auto”, “ethno” and “graphy” (Adams & Hermann, 2020). The present autoethnographic study leaned towards the evocative, performative and transpersonal (Raab, 2013), offering a layered account and personal narrative that focuses on researcher experience arising from engagement in self-reflection, encounters with others, cultural artefacts, abstract analysis and published literature (Ellis et al., 2011).

What informs autoethnographic inquiry?

As discussed, autoethnographic approaches rely heavily on the researcher’s experience, subjectivity and use of self. Adopting a broader socio-cultural lens than what is typically used within many qualitative approaches, this entailed

reflexive immersion in my personal histories and ethnographic observation of my surrounding contexts. The dual and overlapping autobiographical and ethnographic components therefore necessitate exploration of a range of methods, sources and materials for analytical engagement. This reflects autoethnography's tendency to consider broader sociocultural phenomena through analysis that is grounded in the researcher's experience. I have therefore primarily relied on use of self, encounters with others and cultural artefacts to inform the research inquiry, as discussed below.

Use of self

Consistent with creative-relational inquiry, exploration and analysis of the research topic was primarily grounded within my experience, reflections and use of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Wyatt, 2018). This included, for example, exploring sources relevant to my personal history such as photographs, journal entries, creative writing and other relevant personal items. The process of writing as inquiry and producing narratives of relevance to the research topic was also a primary mode of exploration and I therefore relied heavily upon use of a reflexive research journal throughout the research process (Denzin, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The journal enabled me to capture personal experiences, reflections, thoughts, feelings, dreams, fantasies that emerged throughout and from any relevant research-based activity and exploration. It also formed a foundation from which to engage further in writing as inquiry and was helpful to consult in later stages of the research, aiding recall, personal reflection and reflexivity.

Writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) was utilised in the form of narratives I produced throughout the research based upon my experiences, reflections, encounters with others, engagement with cultural artefacts, personal therapy, research supervision and my reflections upon relevant research literature and social discourse surrounding the research topic. Consequently, after years of engagement with the research topic, a shadow version of the final research product had been produced, that is, all the writing that did not make the final research thesis. Such writing served as a process of exploration and

analytic engagement with the topic and my experiences throughout, scaffolding my process.

Reflexive-dyadic interviews

It was initially my intention to use reflexive-dyadic interviews, as outlined by Ellis and Berger (2003). Given a focus on reflexive inquiry, the aim of interviews would have been to facilitate an exploration of my own process and experiences in further depth rather than using interviews as a primary source of 'data' and attempting to inform the reader of others' views or experiences regarding a specific subject matter (Ellis & Berger, 2003). According to Ellis and Berger (2003), within reflexive-dyadic interviews, researchers may share "their own personal experience of the topic at hand or reflect on the communicative process of the interview" (p.8), leading to more of a "conversation between equals than as a distinctly hierarchical, question-and-answer exchange" (p.8). As the research progressed, I made the decision not to adopt a formal approach towards interviewing others. This decision was made for several reasons borne from the research process itself. Firstly, as a counselling psychologist in training, I experienced significant personal, academic and professional development throughout my training and during the research, and the direction of the research gradually changed as I began to engage less with MD research and online communities dedicated to discussion of MD due to my concerns related to the pathologizing nature of MD discourse. I no longer felt it in line with my personal and professional values to approach others regarding MD and instigate anything that looked closer to a research interview than a naturalistic relational encounter. Of relevance to this decision was my developing understanding of how a majority of MD research was heavily relying on research samples from within online MD communities and I did not wish to repeat this pattern with the risk of reifying the construct of MD. Secondly, my increased learning of CoP, autoethnographic approaches to research, post-qualitative epistemologies and creative-relational inquiry, was illuminating the value of such approaches and their potential for representing self and others creatively.

Encounters with others

Autoethnographers may sometimes use informal and collaborative research interviews, inviting engagement from others as co-researchers rather than

participants and approaching such interactions as conversations as opposed to interviews (e.g. Ellis & Berger, 2003; Lapadat, 2017). This also allows for capturing relevant content and process from encounters with others that adopts a much broader scope than within traditional qualitative research: everyday conversations, dialogues and informal interactions with significant others of relevance might be used, in a much more naturalistic manner (Ellis et al., 2011). These may therefore include general everyday interactions and may include interactions that become more significant to the research process.

Consistent with analytic autoethnography's commitment to engaging in dialogue with significant and relevant others within a social context (Anderson, 2006), I relied upon reflections on encounters with others through the research journey, including encounters, communications and relationships with significant others in my personal life, people I engaged with within online immersive daydreaming communities, professional communities and ongoing reflection on the research developed through research supervision. My relationships and encounters with others within my personal and professional life were therefore a pivotal feature of the present study that enabled me to move beyond personal experience and reflect upon the experiences of others', personal memories and any epiphanies that arose (Ellis et al., 2011). Here, the process of exploring the collaborative meanings, the dynamics of encounters and communications with others and reflecting upon my own and others' experiences, anecdotes and personal stories significantly informed the research inquiry (Ellis & Berger, 2003), serving to provide a more layered and contextualised story that draws upon both the experience of self and other (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflections on these encounters with others were recorded within my research journal or emerged through the process of writing.

Professional and personal encounters

Being part of UWE's Critical Autoethnography Troupe, which included other CoP doctoral researchers adopting an autoethnographic methodological approach, offered a community from which to discuss issues relating to autoethnographic research and process and produce a collaborative publication (Hadjiosif, Thomson, Ince, Martin & McManus et al., 2023). Likewise, engaging with communities of practitioners, psychotherapists and researchers working within

the field of trauma was pivotal to my inquiry. For example, my research inquiry was informed by professional experience working at Next Link Domestic Abuse services in Bristol and Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Services in Exeter and attendance at the 33rd and 34th Annual Boston International Trauma Conferences. These communities, and the many knowledgeable professionals and clients I encountered within them, provided a sturdy backdrop to my learning and development that fuelled the present inquiry and left me feeling equipped and empowered to engage in the present inquiry.

Whilst my initial intention was to rely more heavily on my engagement with online immersive daydreaming communities, and they did also inform the research process, my encounters with family and friends, and engagement with ancestry research, gradually became more of a significant component of the research. For example, in closer encounters, I read my Mum's autobiography during the earlier stages of the research as we sought to reconnect with each other. Following ancestry research relating to the research, I also met my great grand aunt for the first time and met with a great grand uncle for the first and last time shortly before he sadly passed away. Frequent engagement in creative debate with my partner about the relationship between Surrealism and psychoanalytic thought, for example, or with my father around the challenges of writing as inquiry, were a regular feature that significantly contributed to my process. In more distant encounters, I was connecting with distant family (e.g. 3rd cousins once or twice removed) in Australia via ancestry research, discussing and exploring the lives of our ancestors with the aim of finalising our own family trees, engaged in email exchanges with local libraries, attempting to learn more of my maternal great grandmother. Encounters like these were pivotal to my ongoing exploration and informed my emerging understanding and stance towards the research topic.

Research supervision

Amidst various encounters with others and through the research, supervision became an incredibly important holding space where my research supervisor supported me to step back, reflect and recount. Supervision and reflexivity within autoethnographic work are also crucial to the analytic process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), enabling further recursive analysis and interpretation. Supervision felt

like an anchor for creative scholarly inquiry which supported meaning-making around the personally transformative components of CoP training and the research. For example, I recall an occasion where I expressed within supervision my sense of needing to confess to what felt like 'going off topic' in relation to my exploration of family history and ancestry, perhaps reflective of my entrenchment within a mainstream approach to research that draws stricter boundaries around the focus of research. My supervisor appeared unperturbed, and I felt reassured that at least he seemed to somehow have sight of my approximate location in the autoethnographic forest, even if my anxious desire for my exact geographical coordinates remained. The encouragement, support and challenge I experienced within my research supervision is, in part, captured by the following quote from Alice in Wonderland:

*"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to" said the
Cat.
"I don't care much where - " said Alice.
"Then it doesn't much matter which way you go." said the Cat.
(Carroll, 1865, p. 52).*



(Tenniel, 1865)

Cultural artefacts

Ethnographically speaking, as autoethnographers often provide a thick description of a culture (Ellis et al., 2011), cultural artefacts (e.g. photographs, art, audio-visual content) and/or a range of textual data (e.g. field notes, media publications, academic literature, works of fiction) are also explored throughout

the research process. Historical and cultural artefacts and personal artefacts from my life were therefore used, including photographs, extracts from historic personal journal entries or artistic and creative expressions such as poems and stories (Adams et al., 2015). I also engaged with relevant research and published literature, relevant fictional literature, media publications, historical records, official documents and letters and attended research conferences relevant to the research topic. Such sources are among those commonly utilised by autoethnographic researchers to aid personal recall (Ellis et al., 2011) and inspire broader reflection and reflexive process. This facilitated rich, analytic, in-depth, reflexive examination of my subjective experience and personal reflections as an insider of the social phenomena being explored (Anderson, 2006). At times, visual imagery in the form of artwork, photographs and music further added more depth than textual sources alone (Chang, 2007), so these were captured where relevant. Use of music or visual imagery, in the form of artwork or other expressive art forms, was also directly relevant to exploring the current research topic and is included throughout to invite the readers into the autoethnographic journey.

Analytic approach

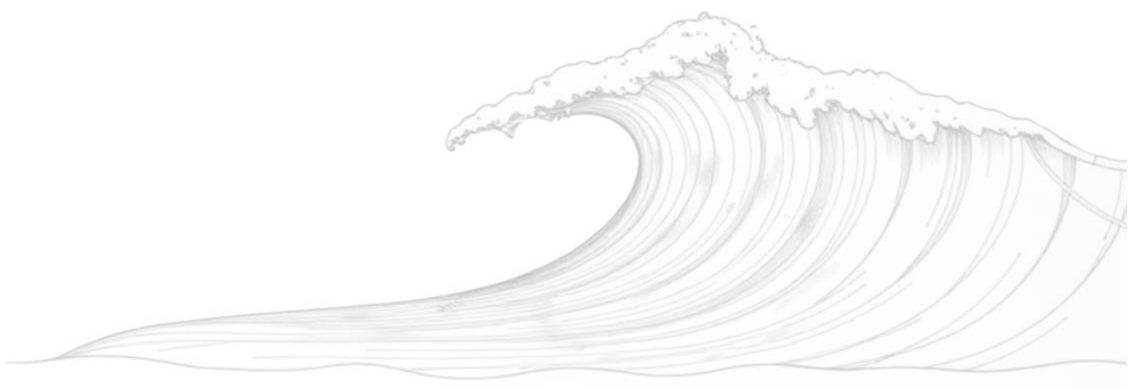
Autoethnography has been likened to being “sent into the woods without a compass” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.120). In practice, this allows for some theoretical and methodological flexibility, allowing for pragmatic approaches that might suit CoP researchers. As autoethnographic research does not proceed in a linear fashion, I was engaged in a circular process of engagement with the research topic through use of self, encounters with others and exploration of cultural artefacts throughout the research. As discussed, autoethnography seeks to produce a narrative or story which avoids decontextualization through reduction to themes, providing the reader with a thick description instead. Analysis therefore contributes to the creation of rich, complex and meaningful stories with the hope that this may be evocative or meaningful for readers. Consequently, rather than inform the reader of the research findings through *telling*, I attempt in places to *show* research findings by adopting varying storytelling conventions (Ellis et al., 2011). A focus on narrative and the power of stories is consistent with a creative-relational inquiry and CoP as personal

stories and narratives are deeply tied to ways of relating and connecting (Wyatt, 2018).

In addition, as researcher, my reflexivity, subjectivity and positionality are not confined to specific stages of the research or a segment or chapter within the final research product but are viewed as significant ongoing components of the research process. Whilst researcher reflexivity plays a pivotal role within qualitative research more broadly (Etherington, 2004), it is particularly crucial within autoethnographic research (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). As such, my analytic process and use of self is brought to the fore and become an explicit and fundamental part of how the resulting research narrative is formed (Chang, 2007). Maintaining a detailed reflexive journal and recording the process of exploration and engagement enabled me to provide an account that is both a description and a narrative relevant to the research topic and of how this description was developed throughout the course of the research. Whilst this provides flexibility, it is accompanied by the challenge of not knowing what the research process and steps might look like in advance. Therefore, part of the challenge I faced was engaging with this uncertainty throughout the journey and struggling to identify a fitting structure within which to present the resulting analytic narrative.

A central tenet of autoethnography is that researcher subjectivity, particularly within analysis, is embraced and made transparent for the reader's consideration. Whilst autoethnographic research acknowledges from the outset that the research product will be a constructed autoethnographic story produced rather than revealed by the researcher (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000), to distinguish autoethnographic work from autobiographical work does require analytic emphasis (Delamont, 2009). Such analytic process requires continual analytic and interpretative engagement throughout each stage of the research process (Adams et al. 2015). I therefore engaged with the research topic in an ongoing process of immersion, contributing towards a deep familiarity with the topic, my subjectivity and process in an iterative meaning-making process. Given that I interacted and engaged with both personal and cultural artefacts and experience in addition to academic research literature, the

research inquiry necessarily involved adopting both a psychological and artistic stance. This required balancing a view from an academically informed position with a subjective, intuitive approach inclusive of exploration of personal meanings, insights and epiphanies that arose through this process.



Chapter 4: Exploring the Aventine

Orientation to the chapter

The first piece of writing I completed as part of the present inquiry was a dialogue between myself and my inner editor (Appendix B; Hadjiosif et al., 2023). This piece delved into the tensions I experienced during the initial phases of the research and writing process. As I ventured into autoethnographic terrain, I found it challenging to determine where to begin and this piece allowed me to express and explore some of the anxieties I faced.

In this chapter, I first present an *Autoethnographic Process Poem* written during the earlier stages of my research. Following this, I share a narrative entitled *An Encounter with Surrealism and Leonora Carrington* in which I explore my encounters with Surrealism and surrealist artist and feminist, Leonora Carrington, at the 59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale: '*The Milk of Dreams*' (Alemani, 2022a) in relation to my training in CoP and the demands of autoethnographic research. The main body of the chapter offers a *Character Summons*, where I invite characters from my 'real' and fantasy life into an imaginal dialogue, attempting to further explore the research topic and offering a flavour of engagement with fantasy world characters based on ideas from Surrealism and Jung's concept of Active Imagination (Chodorow, 1997). The chapter concludes with a dialogue entitled *Inner Editor Meets Leonora Carrington* - which revisits some of the challenges I encountered in engaging with the present autoethnographic inquiry.

Autoethnographic process poem

Whilst attempting to make some bullet point notes that capture and speak to my autoethnographic journey so far, my notes develop into a poem:

I began the expedition to explore specifics
despite the music illuminating
alternative uncharted territory
I pretended not to see
Manipulating the compass
Longing for clarity rather than chaos
I tried different theoretical lenses
It felt easy
Safe
Gave me tools to understand

Then I adopted the biographer's role
Therapy and writing became a means of exploring
Stories about myself
Stories I was also trying to leave behind
I heard myself tell stories I didn't want to hear
Parts of me obsessively documenting everything
Could collecting words lead to truths?
My biographer typed until my fingers refused
Could a document contain a lifetime?
I admired fonts when it became too challenging
Delighted in the power
of amending the colour and size of text that felt
too painful to write
Attempting acts of mastery

My body took me to sites of trauma
Without conscious approval
I sit in my car outside ruins
of childhood homes that do not recognise me
But as momentum builds, a showcase of words
undo one another
Thousands of words that once represented
effort, desire, ambition
Threaten to turn to dust
evaporate into a haze of despair
Anxiously, I try to maintain the structure I've created
Demanding that my orchestrated artificial
Order remains
Fixed in place

Wrestling with mountains
of memories, of reflections
that refuse to be held still
transforming themselves if
I look too long

I sink so deep that my structure paralyses me
Attempts to claim ownership over my creations
are futile
I'm caught up within the impossibility of the task
Within a gravitational wave
I resist, protest, scream,
shout, cry and moan in pain so loud
That I nearly entirely miss
a tiny sound

I hold still and breathe quietly
to catch the words it says to itself
It seems content, muttering to itself
some nonsense about play
I tell myself it is singing
haunting lullabies
To lure me into its cryptic lair

But part of me is curious and follows,
tiptoeing cautiously behind
I glance back to the exit behind me,
for fear it will disappear
In this place, all my efforts,
my words, my reflections, theories and constructs
Are torn apart! For fun, it seems
Rearranged into chaotic nonsense
Maybe only to infuriate me? I protest

As I follow her stride through my own remains
Patterns within the debris
sing new tales
Spirits whisper secrets to me
Purge my feelings into mirages
Escort me through new terrains
My fingers reach to touch
residue that coats the walls
The sound of excavation is in the distance
And ancestral sculptors
invite my gaze.

An encounter with Surrealism and Leonora Carrington

When I first heard mention of '*The Milk of Dreams*' on BBC Radio Four in July 2022, I had no idea of the context the presenter had introduced it in. Whilst my attention is often evoked by talk of dreams, given that my recent research had led me to think about the notion of 'fuel for fantasy', I pondered how the phrase 'milk of dreams' resonated with this. Did the person that coined this term have anything to say about fantasy? I wondered. I continued washing the dishes while listening to the radio presenter describe the 59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale: '*The Milk of Dreams*' (Alemani, 2022a), which was set to begin in a few months – the summer of 2022.

It doesn't usually take much for me to find an excuse to travel somewhere, and Italy had become one of my favourite places to go. I remembered how I'd recently quizzed my aunt for ideas on places to travel, having not made any summer travel plans, and Venice had been her recommendation. I'd never been, but heard it was very touristy. I remembered reading somewhere that some Venetians were sick of tourists. With empathy, I'd previously decided not to add to the humdrum and pain them any further. But now, pondering summer travel and dealing with ongoing anxiety about my research, maybe an art exhibition in Venice was a good idea: a holiday, but I also might learn something of relevance to my research. Travel had always felt like an invitation to explore and play. This felt like an invitation to connect in some way that maybe had an association with my research. Whilst autoethnography had left me excited and curious to learn more, I was at a loss for where or how to start. Maybe this could be 'the start'?

I later read an introduction to the exhibition:

*"The Milk of Dreams takes its title from a book by Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) – Cecilia Alemani stated – in which the Surrealist artist describes a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination. It is a world where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else. The Exhibition *The Milk of Dreams* takes Leonora Carrington's otherworldly creatures, along with other figures of*

transformation, as companions on an imaginary journey through the metamorphoses of bodies and definitions of the human.... These are some of the guiding questions for this edition of the Biennale Arte, which focuses on three thematic areas in particular: the representation of bodies and their metamorphoses; the relationship between individuals and technologies; the connection between bodies and the Earth” (Biennale Arte, 2022a).

I hadn't really known what to expect at the exhibition. My previous experience of art exhibitions was not overly positive. I suppose I had concluded at some point that a lot of art I usually saw at exhibitions wasn't really my kind of thing. Despite the theme for the exhibition being '*The Milk of Dreams*', I had a sinking feeling that, reflecting on previous experiences, it could still be made boring and dry. In fact, I was very surprised that this had not been my impression at all. On the contrary, having just completed the third year of the CoP doctorate, I realised that the exhibition themes were relevant to what I was learning during my training. The themes also spoke to my interest and experience with fantasy engagement and my current difficulties and inner conflicts arising in relation to the research. I wondered if the exhibition themes spoke to unconscious processes that were already at play for me. I was struck by the fact that my attendance had been based upon intuition. I really had not known much about '*The Milk of Dreams*' prior to attending. This was the first time I had ever attended an art exhibition because I'd heard about it on the radio. It was the first time I'd ever travelled to a country with the sole purpose of attending an art exhibition that I knew relatively little about. In hindsight, making decisions based on associations between the external world and my inner processes in relation to fantasy was something not uncommon to me, but also something I had always struggled to articulate and make sense of.

The Venice Biennale showcased “213 artists from 58 countries; 180 of these are participating for the first time” (Biennale Arte, 2022a). Below, I offer you a glimpse into the experience by presenting some artwork, and information about the artists, showcased at '*The Milk of Dreams*'. I selected these pieces as I found them, and learning of the artists, particularly evocative and moving.

This image is redacted

Untitled (Evans, 1968)²

“Born in a log cabin in North Carolina at the end of the 19th century, Minnie Evans became an artist late in life – and far outside the academic mainstream. A descendent of a Trinidadian slave, with no formal education beyond the sixth grade, Evans grew up a devout Baptist, long fascinated with the cosmology of her faith. Throughout her childhood, she was troubled by overpowering dreams and waking visions” (Weisburg, 2022).

*

“I have no imagination. I never plan a drawing, they just happen. In a dream it was shown to me what I have to do, of paintings. The whole entire horizon all the way across the whole earth was out together like this with pictures. All over my yard, up all the sides of trees and everywhere were pictures - Minnie Evans” (Starr, 1969).

*

“The paintings and drawings of Minnie Evans depict scenes from the artist's private dream world. But even to the artist herself, this dream world was not entirely comprehensible” (American Art, 2024).

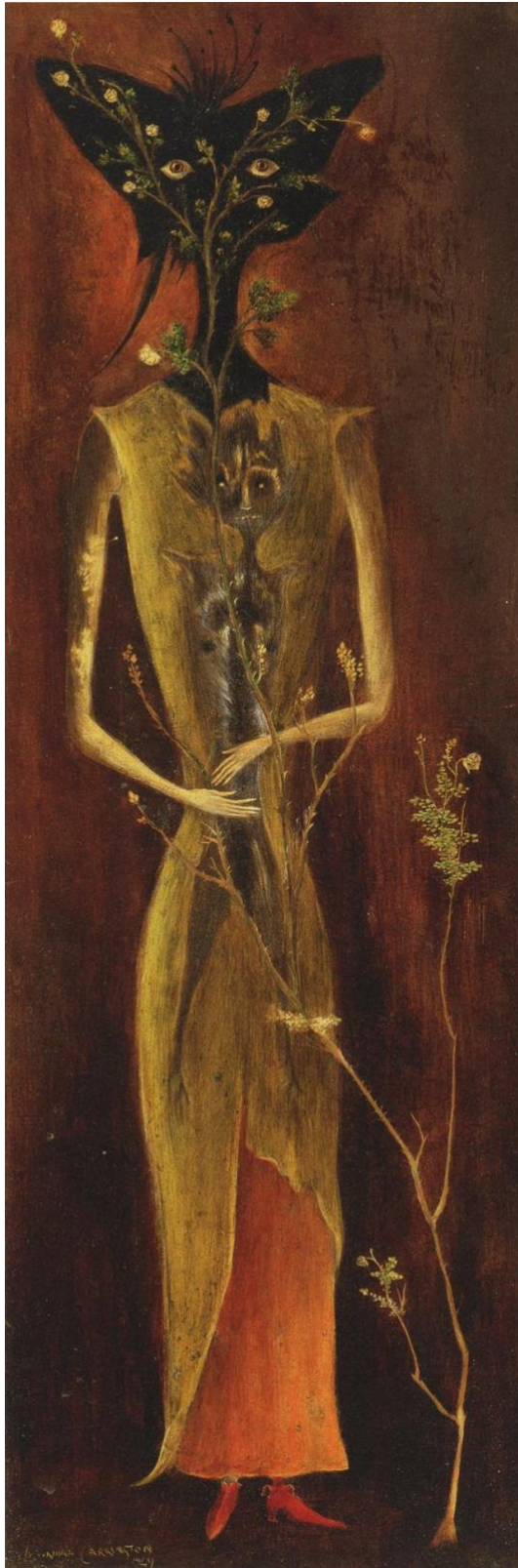
² <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/corps-orbite/minnie-evans>

The exhibition was also the beginning of my newfound love affair with surrealist artist, writer and feminist Leonora Carrington (1917 - 2011). Yet much deeper processes were at play here, instigated in part by the autoethnographic journey I had begun in relation to my experience of fantasy and trauma. I didn't know it at the time, but over the following year, reiterations of my encounter with Surrealism, and Carrington, were going to speak in a direct and bold way to difficulties I'd noticed regarding my inner editor.

Leonora Carrington was an English/Mexican surrealist artist, writer and eco-feminist activist who became widely respected and developed a sizeable following for rebelling against convention through her surrealist art (McAra, 2022). As McAra (2022) describes, Carrington is referred to as an "expert in liminal space" (e.g. Smith, 2012, p.111), providing an "astonishing archaeology of the imagination" (p.2) wherein:

...such ambiguous thresholds are a useful way of approaching Carrington; a shapeshifter for the imagination, reawakening our values. It seems fitting that one recurrent motif from Carrington's oeuvre positions gravity-defying vehicles as complex metaphors for exodus or the departure lounge of the psyche (McAra, 2022, p. 2).

I was struck by Carrington and her work. Her art and writing spoke to something I was reaching for within the research but struggling to articulate or grasp. The painting below is one of the pieces that I encountered that I found particularly evocative:



Portrait of Madam Dupin (Carrington, 1947)
© Estate of Leonora Carrington / ARS, NY and
DACs, London 2024.

“In her teens, Leonora Carrington began constructing her own mythological universe influenced by Celtic legends told by her Irish mother. After moving to Paris in 1936, Carrington honed this imagery and began exploring magical, alchemical, astrological, and cabalistic literature, channelling its essence into her early paintings and drawings. In 1942, after the outbreak of World War II, she moved to Mexico City and joined a famous community of women artists who had fled Europe. This is where her artistic language reached its dramatic maturity; drawing on local myths, it became crowded with monstrous female figures in thrall to spiritual forces” (Mudo, 2022)³.

³ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/witchs-cradle/leonora-carrington>

Seeing Carrington's paintings, I experienced a sense of familiarity and longing. My developing interest in Carrington and her work during my explorations of fantasy, like many before me, soon led me to channel her for guidance and inspiration. Whilst it was a couple of months following my attendance at '*The Milk of Dreams*' that I became more acquainted with Carrington, I now invite her into dialogue, attempting to describe further what I took from my encounter with Surrealism and Carrington.

Leonora: So, you want to summarise what you've learned? I'm looking forward to hearing this!

Charlene: Yes Leonora, I thought you might enjoy this. I'm a bit anxious that the current narrative is out of sync with the order of events though. It's so ironic that this just came up for me.

Leonora: And why would that be so ironic?

Charlene: Well, a lot of what I learned at '*The Milk of Dreams*' exhibition, reading about Surrealism and connecting with your writing, highlighted just that: my need for structure, linearity and order. It feels like it provides a sense of safety, even though I also feel nourished by intuition and the complexity fantasy provides me with.

Leonora: And...

Charlene: And... well, I guess '*The Milk of Dreams*' made me realise how immersed I was in values associated with the Age of Reason and Rationality, and how that is tied to patriarchal and oppressive dominant discourses. I mean, it has its place but...

Leonora: But was that working for you?

Charlene: Well, no I don't suppose it was. The first conversation with my inner editor was a kind of crisis point for me – my 'research aims' were initially about 'making sense' and I suppose I assumed I would come out of this with a rational, logical and tangible conclusion. Something that would be accepted as 'legitimate'. I knew that wasn't the goal, but it was always in the background I suppose.

Leonora: Legitimate. Legitimate. Legitimate. Legitimate. Le-gi-ti-ma-te. It sounds like some kind of painful procedure...like trying to squeeze a rainbow into a test-tube!

Charlene: Yes, I realise this dilemma now. My sense of imposter syndrome, my need to avoid any sense of perceived illegitimacy, the sense of inadequacy that binary evokes in me. I suppose that was also a theme at *'The Milk of Dreams'*: they were showcasing artists whose art had been marginalised historically. This resonated quite strongly with my own experience of marginalisation and oppression. I mean, some of the work I just found, well, shocking, I suppose! It certainly changed any preconceived ideas I had about what art is, for sure. I had a strong sense I was somehow reclaiming my right to self- and creative expression.

Leonora: Some of the artwork you saw at *'The Milk of Dreams'* had been deemed 'illegitimate' in one way or another. I've personally always felt nourished and free only in those spaces that resist oppressive discourses that try to marginalise my creative expression.

Charlene: That's part of what inspired me. You seemed to trust yourself, the artistic process, you seemed to do your own thing: follow your intuition, listen and trust your unconscious process. Suddenly I felt more confident, empowered to do similar myself.

Leonora: Ha! I was harnessing the power of the divine feminine! As you saw from my bookshelf, I do quite enjoy some alchemical exploration.

Charlene: Yes, and you read a lot of Jung too, which I found intriguing. I guess it all started to....

Leonora: Make sense?! [Chuckles] Maybe you could take some time out from 'making sense' for a while, you know - follow your intuition and feelings?

Charlene: Yes, it's tricky... [nervous laugh]

Leonora: I know. So - I'm still curious about your encounter with Surrealism...

Charlene: Well, it was the first time I've really seen art that spoke to me in an embodied way. I was incredibly moved by your work and the other artists' work too. Also, when I saw your art, it reminded me of my fantasy world – the visceral feel of it. It felt like surrealist ideas gave me permission to freely create, to abandon dominant intellectual pursuits regarding my research. I felt a resonance with the artists' marginalisation, I felt empowered to act, to create, to revisit my creative self, unchain myself...

Leonora: And your inner editor? Do they help you here?

Charlene: Uh, it's complex! Right now, I want to say no, they hinder me. I acknowledge that my inner editor has gotten me so far. I am grateful. It was needed in a way, if not a matter of survival. But I also see my inner editor as my internalised sense of rationality, of reason. Of oppression? In some ways, it feels my inner editor was kind of keeping me in line – protecting me yes, but restrictively so.

Leonora: How on earth did you create any art?

Charlene: Well, it was painful! I just kept it to myself mostly.

Leonora: So - your encounter with Surrealism offered permission, perhaps an inspired act of self-rebellion?

Charlene: Yes, but unlike when I've had a sense of rebellion before, there was comfort this time, a sense of belonging, it didn't feel like I was alone. The exhibition spoke to my experience and values in a way I'm not sure I was getting elsewhere: it seemed playful, creative, artistic and fantasy-based. It challenged the fantasy/reality binary, challenged the marginalisation of art produced by artists of marginalised social identities. It championed the feminine, spoke to relationality and systemic thinking...

Leonora: And your explorations into my biography...

Charlene: Um, well I suppose I became enamoured with you after I attended the exhibition and had written the Character Summons. One outcome of that was that I spent a long time searching for my great-grandmother via Ancestry research. I couldn't 'find' her, but then I started dialoguing with you... it's kind of strange really.

Leonora: Okay, well maybe that's for picking up later. Then there's the Chris complex that you named...

Charlene: Yes, that's probably important. And I really wouldn't have had this breakthrough without help from my fiancé and research supervisor. Maybe it was easier to hear and digest coming from you?

Leonora: Sounds magical! Well don't tell me we can't leave it here as the end of this won't 'make sense'. Instead, let's just end so we can begin again.

Charlene: Right! [Nervous] Hm but readers are going to think...

Leonora: Readers are going to think so many things. But it sounds like you've got more interesting avenues to explore right now...

Charlene: Indeed! I suppose that my take home learning is that my encounter with Surrealism and you, and the autoethnographic journey I've been on, has awoken my sense of exploration, play, creativity and self-expression.

Leonora: Sounds magical!

With some of the initial challenges posed by my inner editor acknowledged and addressed, I was now armed with a sense of safety, belonging and rationale for a more creative and experimental adventure with my research. Very soon after returning from the Venice Biennale, I had all the 'fantasy fuel' I needed to dialogue with myself again – this time through a *Character Summons* in which I invite both fantasy world characters and significant others in my life into dialogue. Initially, I was naïve to the impact this might have. I suppose I have sat down to journal and write so many times that I felt reassured and confident that what might come up would be manageable and known to me. In hindsight, I hadn't utilised the dialogical form with fantasy characters before, nor had people I knew been invited to the page. Sure, I had written creative pieces where characters spoke to each other – but they were within the plot, within the fantasy world, and what I was doing or feeling, Charlene, she was just not part of it. She/I was in the background, observing, not foregrounded. I wonder if I needed that boundary between my fantasy world and everyday life for a long time or else it would have failed to serve one of its primary functions - to provide me with an escape.

Character summons: Introduction

... magic became a metaphor for the elusive realm of the surreal where reality and dream merged into a new absolute lived experience which they called surreality...⁴

*

Since adolescence, I've spent a significant proportion of my time writing or immersive daydreaming. Yet, not once do I remember attempting a conscious dialogue between myself and fantasy world characters - on the page or within fantasy. Within the fantasy world and plot, I do not appear as any character but as more of an omniscient, active presence, often experiencing the fantasy world via Selina, the protagonist. Within this *Character Summons*, the process I use was initially inspired by ideas around automatic writing⁵ and Jung's writings on Active Imagination (Chodorow, 1997). Jung distinguished between the production of art and exploration of fantasy, suggesting that viewing the products that emerge from explorations of fantasy as art alone might neglect other readings (Chodorow, 1997). The present *Character Summons* was undertaken from a similar stance. My initial aim was not to write, and produce content for the purposes of art, but to take an autoethnographic field trip into fantasy and attempt to actively engage with what came up. The following pages provide a brief introduction and background to some of my fantasy world plot and characters as relevant to the *Character Summons* that follows.

⁴ Quote from 59th International Art Exhibition (Alemani, 2022a)

⁵ This is advocated by Surrealist artists, among others.

Summons

Calling all fantasy world characters, I summon you to this in-between space that is neither demarcated as reality nor fantasy. A space not defined solely by plot, but between worlds. The aim is to step away from the binary distinction of reality/fantasy. I summon the following core group of fantasy world characters: Selina. Chris. Brad. Maryann. Claire. Natalie. Mac. Tommy. Val. XS. Bob. Anu. Collin. Samantha⁶. Anyone I've missed out here is welcome too.

*

Summary background to fantasy world plot and characters⁷. Chris, Selina, Brad, Val, Tommy are siblings (Chris the youngest, Tommy the eldest). Their parents are Collin and Samantha. Collin killed Samantha when Selina was approximately age seven. Collin was a military man most of his life, until he went rogue. Val, Tommy, XS and Mac are in the military too, though they are working as part of a task force to defeat Collin and subvert his hostile takeover of two pacific islands. Selina works as a security advisor for the government as part of this operation too. Bob and Anu are from the islands. Maryann, Claire and Natalie are Selina's lifelong friends. Most characters have been part of my fantasy world since late adolescence, some since early adolescence – over thirty years.

Basic character information.

Below is some basic character information relevant to the fantasy world characters and plot.

Parents.

Collin. White American, male, mid-sixties. Ruthless, cunning, and unscrupulous. He was a military man most of his life, growing up within a military family and later establishing a black ops training base during the peak of his service. Collin killed Samantha when Selina was aged seven. He then subjected Selina to military and espionage training from a young age as part of a training operation he established,

⁶ Fantasy world characters are indicated by purple text in dialogue.

⁷ I use the terms 'plot' and 'characters' in relation to the fantasy world.

initially at a military base in the United States. He then went rogue, invaded a pacific island, took hostage hundreds of islanders and set up a military base on another island that conducted unorthodox training of non-military citizens with the aim of recruiting them to work as clandestine operatives – Collin’s initial intention for Selina. Collin was covertly working with others within the government and military to achieve these objectives as it advanced their broader geopolitical aims.

Samantha. White American, female, murdered by Collin in her thirties. Empathic, strong-willed and an idealist. Samantha grew up in an educated, military family. Her dream had always been to start a family and become self-employed. She was passionate about early years education and worked within this sector and within her local community.

Younger siblings

Selina Jones (Protagonist). White American, female, mid-thirties. Resilient, resourceful, disciplined, brave and strategic. Following her military training in adolescence, Selina fled Collin’s control and became involved in a prominent gang. This afforded her protection and anonymity for a while. She was sought out by the government who recruited her as a contractor and security advisor to provide intelligence on Collin and his operation. She then launched a hunt for Collin, aiming to end his regime and see him brought to justice. Recognising that some members of the government were also involved in Collin’s operation, she later began to work covertly against the government.

Chris. White American, male, early-thirties. Rebellious, reckless, impulsive and outspoken. Chris also became involved with criminal gangs. With no military training background, he was more heavily involved in this backdrop, and, unlike all other siblings, was somewhat of an outsider to the military prominence within the family.

Brad. White American, male, mid-thirties. Introverted, thoughtful and patient. Brad is probably the quietest member of the Jones’ family. Like Chris, he was not trained in the military and sought to dissociate himself from this family backdrop. He loves music, playing guitar and meeting with friends. He longs for a quiet life in the country – not something he has been able to achieve within his family context. He often caretakes Chris and is supportive towards Selina.

Older siblings

Val. White American, male, early-forties. Easy-going, light-hearted, and disciplined. Joined the military from a young age. Trained and worked at US Base established by Collin – ‘the base’.

Tommy. White American, male, mid-forties. Oldest brother. Traditionalist, cool-headed and strategic. Joined the military from a young age. Trained and worked at US Base established by Collin.

Base team

Covert special operations task force working to defeat Collin and subvert his hostile takeover of two pacific islands. The Base was initially established by Collin.

XS. White American, male, late thirties. Navy seal. Head of security at the base. Trained with Mac.

Mac. White American, male, early-forties. Hard-working, loyal, reliable, empathic, dedicated. Black ops commander. In an on/off relationship with Selina. Trained with Val and Tommy.

Islanders

Bob. Pacific islander, male, late sixties. Wise, gentle, fierce, compassionate, humanitarian, empathic and humble. Viewed as an elder on the islands as he knows the most about the cultural heritage of the islands.

Anu. Pacific islander, male, mid-thirties. Disciplined, strong willed, patient, dedicated, committed and confident. Island leader. Fights to protect islanders and the islands’ invasion by Collin and the US military.

Selina and Chris’ friends

Selina and Chris’ lifelong friends. They often support Selina in her attempts to bring Collin to justice.

Maryann. White American, female, mid-thirties. Feminist, outgoing, energetic, outspoken and adventurous. Experiences difficulties with substance use.

Claire. White American, female, mid-thirties. Feminist, shy, thoughtful, loyal, honest and untrusting. Nightclub manager. Association with gangs.

Natalie. White American, female, mid-thirties. Feminist, gregarious, attentive, sensitive and pensive. Nightclub manager. Association with gangs.

Personal relationships.

I'm also going to summon the following specific people from my everyday life to this dialogue⁸.

Family

Charlene (Me/researcher). Female, early forties, biracial (Black Caribbean, White British), writer, immersive daydreamer, digital nomad and counselling psychologist in training. Pacifist.

Mum. White British, female, from a working-class family. Crime fiction extraordinaire. Lover of sparkly things.

Jess. Younger sister. Female. Avid reader, big-hearted, dedicated mum and my best friend.

Dad. White British, male, from a middle-class family. My father from age one/two. Accomplished music writer. Expert air guitar player.

Gran (Paternal). White British, female. Very involved in my childhood and often took me to see musicals during childhood. Spent her life working as a nurse and dedicated homemaker, among other things.

Nan (Maternal). White British, female. In her early eighties. Devout Jehovah's Witness.

Ben (Fiancé). White British, male. Musician. Music Therapist. Digital nomad. Fiction lover.

Friends

Sara. Female, early 40s. Talented artist, spiritually minded, interest in astral realms.

Todd. Male, early 40s. Musician, film lover.

⁸ This is not something I have done previously. Within the fantasy world, there are no explicit or conscious efforts to represent or include people in my daily life. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.

Gemma. Late 40s, female, psychologist.

Viv. Mid 40s, female, passionate clubber.

Facilitators

Supervisor. Based loosely on my research supervisor and personal therapist to help facilitate.

Agnes Obel (Musician)⁹ - Helps to remind me what music is playing and when.

Jim Morrison (Musician)¹⁰ – 60's poet, singer and musician, lead singer of the band The Doors.

Ground rules

This will probably feel like a busy space. All voices are welcome and will be treated with respect and compassion. Any dissenting and/or dissident voices are welcome too. There are no specific rules, but remember - this is an exploratory, experimental and safe, in-between space where the binaries of fantasy and reality are collapsed. The process I will use is inspired by ideas on automatic writing¹¹ and Jung's writings on Active Imagination¹².

Playlist

On powdered ground (Obel, 2010a)

Parliament of Owls (Obel, 2010b)

You're lost little girl (Obel, 2017)

Aventine (Obel, 2013b)

The curse (Obel, 2013c)

Under giant trees (Obel, 2013d)

Trojan horses (Obel, 2016)

Beast (Obel, 2010c)

⁹ Musician that I've felt deeply connected to since I stopped immersive daydreaming.

¹⁰ Musician I developed a strong connection with during my twenties.

¹¹ This is advocated by Surrealist artists, among others.

¹² Chodorow (1997).

Character summons

Part one: Introductions

Agnes: To begin: “On powdered ground” [song].

Charlene: Hi everyone. Apologies for the summons. I feel this is very strange, but I had a sense and inclination that it might be fruitful. Anyone there...?

Agnes: This is it!

[Awkward glances around at each other]

Chris: Deep! [Sarcastic]

[Selina eye rolls Chris, looks at Charlene]

Mum: What the hell are you doing now?!

Supervisor: Great. Hi everyone!

Ben: Yes, this should be fun!

Todd: This is some crazy psych shit!

Sara: Wow, an astral realm with invites for all!

Brad: Not all are welcome here though...

Maryann: Agreed.

Chris: Hey, not true – we’re the perfect happy family alright!

Val: Is this all just a joke to you Chris? This girl’s trying to do something important here.

Charlene: Hmmm... I’m not sure what to say... I feel a bit lost actually - now you’re all here, what do I say?

Agnes: Maybe I can help with that – lets change the music to something I will choose: “Parliament of Owls” [song].

Charlene: I can’t say I’m sure why you chose that...

Agnes: But you know you don’t know.

Charlene: Yeh... um... anyone got anything to say?

Chris: Let me guess – you wanna sit back and enjoy the ride, leave this all to us to work out? You summoned us, you take the lead!

Selina: Chris maybe if you can step back for a moment, things will happen naturally...

Charlene: Hi Selina.

Selina: Hi.

Agnes: Ooh okay, maybe I'm going to join forces with someone you forgot to invite but who I can sense is here...changing to "You're lost little girl" [song] and welcoming Jim here!

Jim: Wondered when someone would say hi.

Ben: YES to this. And I'd say hello Jim, but it wouldn't quite cover what I need to, um say...

Jim: I get the vibe.

Charlene: Last time I met you Jim was at your grave in Paris.

Chris: No shit! Hanging out at graveyards – hey Selina, you've both got that morbid fascination in common!

Todd: Who is this guy?

Ben: Yeh, watch out for him.

Chris: Shut up guys, I don't even see how you're part of this?

Jim: Feels tense since I arrived...

Supervisor: Graveyards might evoke some emotions...is this the first time Charlene and Selina have said hi like this?

[Awkward glances between **Charlene/Selina**]

Sara: Can they speak apart? Aren't they one entity? Each one different side of a coin?

Chris - you're from the underworld clearly, did you get lost there?

Chris: And who on earth are you?! [Defensively]

Maryann: Just ignore him everyone.

Brad/Val: Great plan!

Charlene: All voices are welcome remember.

Jim: Underworld sounds about right, but ain't no problem with that, he's no doubt got a reason to be there.

Sara: Like to hold the one who transitions between the two?

Charlene: Agnes - I think I need more help.

Agnes: Close your eyes, let me play "Aventine" [song]. And I would suggest to you all – take a breath, close your eyes, sense where you are, where you are not...

Bob: Yes. Find the ground before you sail away. This needs more groundwork, sensitivity and strength. Bulldozing through it won't help.

Sara: Call on the angels!

[Ben/Todd/Chris eye rolls]

Jim: Fear won't help either, friends.

Agnes: Carry yourselves and hear the music.

Chris: Carry wha...

Samantha: I'm not sure how I can participate when I'm bridging realms – I'm not even alive am I?

Collin: Not now.

Chris: Why the hell is this bastard invited, C?

Charlene: Everyone is welcome here.

Selina: No need to look for him anymore then.

Mum: Yes, got the bastard finally – now's the chance!

Sara: Chance for what?! Seriously, this is dark side.

Chris: Not a room full of angels honey.

Natalie: Chris it gets really boring you know.

Supervisor: Can I ask that there's no violence here?

Jim: This summoning was a violent act in itself! Also Samantha, I'm dead too.

Samantha: You're dead in reality. I'm dead in fantasy.

Jim: Dead is dead.

Bob: Binaries have collapsed here remember. This space is different, if you can hear it, sense it.

Agnes: I can hear something – can you all hear it too? Can you feel it, sense it? There's someone who wants to speak. I'm going to play "The curse" [song] for them...

[Everyone waits, glancing around]

Anu: I'll say something. It feels like this is just a joke to you all. Lives are at stake you know?

XS: Isn't that plot-based?

Selina: Oh, is it all 'just plot' to you XS?

Bob: But what is plot?

Sara: Maybe here it's more of an intergenerational pattern stemming from earth's history, cutting through dimensions... something archetypal?

Charlene: Yeh, so probably not plot so much as...

Ben: Something manifesting...

Jim: Eternal forms manifesting...

Charlene: Emerging as plot via 'characters'?

Sara: 'Beings'?

Chris: What did you call me?

Selina: So not 'just plot'.

Gemma: Like a junction where different interconnections meet?

Supervisor: Boundaries collapse...

Collin: And here you found me... I wonder how that came to be? Like the boy said, lives are at stake.

Selina: Yours is.

Chris: As I already said.

Charlene: No violence here.

Sara: Hey isn't it symbolic?

Todd: Death by imaginary slaughter.

Ben: Samurai of the mind.

Agnes: The curse transcends death you know?

Charlene: Um... I am so confused, plus, my tea is ready. I'll be back. Thanks all! PS thanks Agnes, "The curse" [song] helped more with flow I think?

Part two: Pep talk

Agnes: I'm going to just go right ahead and play "On powdered ground" [song] on repeat until we need a change. Ever since I played it as the final song in Barcelona and referred to it being about the future, it seems to have stuck with you Charlene as somehow relevant to what's going on for you now with the research.

Charlene: Thank Agnes. Hey all. I'm back... are you still here/there?

Chris: And where else would we be?

Charlene: Right, yes... so, um... so, I'm just struggling to know how to start this!

Chris: I'm pretty confident I could spell this out for you in a way that's crystal clear for all.

Charlene: Um... okay, I suppose, yeh... I guess you are... you know...

Chris: IN YOUR HEAD?!

Charlene: You always have a way with words Chris.

Chris: I'll take that as a compliment – shall I begin?

Charlene: [nervous look]

Selina: You don't need to answer that, Charlene. We all know that if there's a momentary silence, Chris will fill it with some intense, loud ranting.

[**Charlene/Selina** exchange knowing glances]

Chris: Thanks for the intro sis' [clears throat]. Okay y'all... we're going to have a bit of a team pep talk right now. Anyone who isn't interested in listening... well, I'd say you know where the door is but, given we're all in some in-between space right now, in C's head, or whatever floats your fancy as an explanation for this crazy experiment... I guess the point is – if you don't want to hear, or you wanna leave, say now and we can see if anyone here can manifest a door, a portal, or something else appropriately non-sensical. Any takers?

[Everyone looks nervously around, undecided]

Mum: I'm not sure this is for me...

Chris: No surprises there, anyone else?

Mum: I didn't say I wanted to leave!

Chris: Okay...

Mum: I'm just saying, it might be handy for us all if we had some idea about where the exit might be.

Todd: Defo!

Samantha: Agreed, though given I'm dead... I'm not sure about the mechanics of that.

Selina: There's always a way out, Mum.

Supervisor: Interesting that we've just started and we're all talking about an exit.

XS: Security first here.

Maz: So you must have some idea then, right, XS?

XS: I mean, C said this is outside fantasy world and plot, right? So my usual expertise doesn't necessarily apply? I mean, I would suggest...

Bob: Without a tangible entrance, does the exit cease to exist too? Perhaps one of the musicians can help with this?

Ben/Todd/Agnes/Jim [exchange glances]

Ben: Okay, like a symbolic exit via song?

Jim: Right there with you!

Agnes: Of course, music as the portal - I did begin this after all.

Jim: Okay, so you're the flavour of the day Agnes, how are you with exit songs?

Agnes: Charlene?

Charlene: Um, yes, this is exactly what I was thinking - how about playing The Aventine as an exit song if we need one?

Agnes: Done.

Bob: Let's move on.

Chris: Okay, are we done now? So for all you of a nervous disposition who need clarity on an exit from a place you never came to and have never even left, there it is. Moving on.

Charlene: Oh, by the way Chris: "HI!"

Chris: [Laughs] Yeh. "Hi. Hi stranger" [mockingly]. You know how ironic that is, right?

Charlene: Of course. But I will suggest that meeting like this is very different to other meetings we've had. I've never actually spoken to you like this!

Chris: Just for me, through me, to me, with me...

Charlene: Shall we get back to it then?

Chris: Sure! Where was I? Ah...Okay folks, gather round [laughs] Oh apologies, you're all disembodied - figuratively gather round then!

Selina: Chris, you could take this more seriously you know, leave out the jokes and leave out your judgements on what is and what is not true or real about this space – I mean, you don't actually know either way, and you certainly aren't a psychoanalyst, astrophysicist, medium or anyone with any decent theory about all this, are you?

Chris: Uh...well I don't know if I'd need to be? Why don't you tell me, what qualification or profession is appropriate for traversing these realms and moderating conversations with fantasy world characters?!

Sara: A medium might help though, someone who can channel different entities.

Natalie/Maryann: Yeh!

Gemma: I mean, C is a trainee counselling psychologist, maybe that might help too?

Sara: But you need someone used to journeying through varying realms, maybe a shaman?

Dad: I mean, I'd go for an artist rather than an astro-physicist any day.

Gran: A priest?

Samantha: Don't spiritualists do this kind of thing all the time?

Viv: Oh c'mon, really? The only person we need is here – Charlene. So let's get on with this!

Chris: Exactly! Who is this C? I like her.

Charlene: Makes sense you would.

Chris: Okay, okay, okay. Let's get into it. Everyone who needs to be here, is here. The point is this - not only is this some weird, crazy, funky, mad, bullshit, fantastical, disastrous attempt to resolve endless existential crises and questions about trauma and fantasy that refuse and evade resolution. This is also more tangible than that. And C needs our help. As we know, this time, she has a specific purpose – she's doing her doctorate in counselling psychology, as you'll all know. She's doing her research on trauma and fantasy – which we're obviously all very surprised about! Anyway, where am I going... oh yeh – right, so this is how it is – she needs our help to figure some stuff out and she's called us here with some very specific questions and, as

she has so many times before, she's turning to us in desperation to speak to some of her more deeply rooted existential fears and so on...

Charlene: Thanks Chris, but it's not exactly how I'd put it.

Chris: Maybe – but that's why you let me speak isn't it?

Charlene: [unsure silence]

Chris: SO, all of you are here for a reason – many of you are - how do they call it again C? REAL? That's it: REAL! Many of you are REAL humans living in your REAL words [claps] which is great...

Ben: Um...binaries?!

Chris: Yes, but that's how you see yourself isn't it?

Ben: Well, mostly, I suppose... but I guess I was just noticing the binaries – C wanted to avoid the binary real/fantasy.

Charlene: Ben! You called me “C”?

Ben: Oh yeh, sorry... but that's what he calls you?

Charlene: Yeh, I know, but you don't!

Gemma: Actually, I'm the only 'real' one who calls you that, Me and Alice...

Charlene: Oh yeh, interesting...

Chris: ...REAL humans from the real world are here, summoned by C...welcome y'all! And I suppose you're only representations or something but, you catch my meaning. On the other hand, most of the rest of us are... C – maybe I should ask your preferred term here?

Charlene: Oh gosh, I don't know, I mean, I've always called you characters but...

Selina: But that was only for others' benefit...

Charlene: Yeh, because you're so much more than that!

Sara: Are they other beings then?

Charlene: You see, I don't really see them as other 'beings' – after many years of struggling with that conceptualisation.

Gemma: Okay, so parts of yourself?

Charlene: If we went with a psychologically-based understanding, I suppose you could say that.

Supervisor: Do we need to name this now?

Chris: Okay, okay – fantasy beings, characters, otherworldly creatures, constructs of mind that defy definition – whatever you’re called or want to be called, we know you ain’t ‘REAL’ by conventional definitions, most of you have taken the form of some actor or movie star and inhabited their form in C’s mind...

Bob: We think...

Chris: Yes, yes, we think and we don’t know and we’re not sure, and could be and who knows... but I digress... There’s others here who were once REAL and died in their REAL lives. There are some here who were once, you know ‘alive’ in the ‘fantasy world’ and then ‘died’ in the fantasy world - Mum (Samantha), I’m thinking of you here - and a few more that C didn’t invite by name. Actually, maybe someone can make a note about that – I’m thinking about the baby, Tony, and the islanders. But anyway, the point is this: C has brought you all here, we’re all different but we can all help C with what she needs right now. Anyone who wants an exit can...

Agnes: Just say “Aventine” I suppose.

Todd: Is that like a safe word then?

Supervisor: It’s probably a good idea here.

Chris: Okay! [Shouting] You know the exit, you know the aim...

Ben: Chris – do you speak for Charlene? Can she not introduce all this?

Chris: Hang on a minute mate will you, let me finish this bit...

Ben: Okay...

Chris: I’m going to finish my introduction – I just had to get this final point across: Despite what many of you may think – I don’t think this is a game, in fantasy world, would I ever try to do this helpful, facilitating-thing or whatever it is I’m doing here?

Majority of fantasy characters: No!

Charlene: Interesting!

Chris: Okay, so you know this is different right. This is me saying – sit up, pay attention, look lively, stop slouching, WAKE UP [shouting], get ready and look sharp – we don’t have time for long unending conversations about philosophy, physics, psychology, art – this ain’t a meet up group folks – this is real shit and C has some dilemmas she needs to resolve. She needs your input now. If you have knowledge or something to say – don’t hold back – SAY IT (shouting). Don’t mince your words!

Charlene: Yes, I really don't want to edit this for ages and my supervisor will need to read it too.

Chris: It's now or never really! Oh and, don't piss me off, haha okay, I just mean – I'm like invigilating – behave!

[Eye rolls, grunts]

Supervisor: So Chris is the invigilator?

Chris: No, no, that was a joke.

Selina: It's always now or never with you Chris.

Charlene: Yeh, I'm not sure about the intensity of that statement, or the invigilation.

Chris: Really C? If you want me out of here, I can leave right now.

Charlene: Okay, okay, stay. I just mean, maybe you can moderate rather than invigilate or something?

Chris: You need me!

Ben: Do you control her?

Chris: Dude, you got it the wrong way around...

Maryann: Just accept Chris for who he is okay.

Ben: You asked for honesty. Charlene always used to say that if something needed to happen in the plot, and Chris was there, he disrupted everything.

Charlene: Yeh, it's kind of a thing.

Selina/XS: Kind of?!

Todd: Who is this Chris guy based on Charlene?

Charlene: Um, originally? Christian Slater in Robin Hood Prince of Thieves which I saw when I was thirteen.

Chris: Wow. I literally feel stripped naked – and reduced to a minor character in a minor and mediocre film. That hurt.

Sara: I haven't seen the film.

Selina: He's my younger brother in the fantasy world.

Mum: I had a younger son once. He died.

Selina: This one is very much alive.

Ben: I'm sure there was a link once where Charlene linked Jon and Chris.

Charlene: I think I was eight, right Mum, when Jon died?

Mum: [no response]

Sara: Oh, I never knew that..?

Charlene: I know that's around about the time I can first remember Selina, I found a letter I'd written: "Dear Selina, I want to kill myself".

Chris: I suppose I said don't mess around.

Bob: Still, let's be gentle about this.

Charlene: I feel like it's mainly processed for me.

Bob: "Processed" is a neat, tidy and convenient word. But you know very well it doesn't always work like that...

Agnes: I'm playing "The curse" [song] again.

Sara: Oh, wow, age eight is so young to be talking about suicide.

Selina: I know the letters you mean, C. You were quite alarmed when you found them, and you saw the writing of a child's hand, you wondered what must have happened, what must that eight-year-old have been experiencing? It was through synchronicity that you later linked it to around that time.

Supervisor: That must have been confusing for an eight-year-old. One minute your Mum is pregnant, you're expecting a sibling, then suddenly, they're not there anymore.

Dad: And your mother is experiencing tremendous distress...

Charlene: I feel like I need someone specific to speak about this actually.

Chris: Is it me?

[Short pause]

Charlene: Actually, I remember I used to wonder if you were my younger brother in spirit... like Jon's spirit maybe?

Chris: Well, I always protect Selina!

Selina: Wow, really – I'm thinking that works the other way around too!

Charlene: But beyond those separations, Chris helped me out of the fantasy world. By disrupting your plans, Selina, by going against everyone in the fantasy world, he helped me 'escape'. It was Chris's contribution that, in part, led me to leave and go travelling, and it seemed to start with remembering about Jon, amongst other things.

Mum: Oh, so it was Chris's fault!

Charlene: Yeh mum, if you like.

Mum: Glad I can meet the man who took my daughter away!

Chris: Hey – she made her own choice.

Mum: She followed you!

Chris: Yeh but she chose to follow me, she wasn't happy!

Sara: She did seem to come to life when she went travelling.

Dad: I agree. Sometimes you have to get away from the ghosts of the past.

Samantha: Sometimes the ghosts follow you though.

Collin: You can never banish them really.

Selina: You must have learned that through your years of trying, killing innocents and all that.

Chris: Wow. Don't hold back folks will you – but that is plot based, Selina!

Jim: What does it mean 'Selina' – if you meditate on your Mum talking to Chris. Your Dad talking to Samantha. Collin talking to Samantha. Selina to Collin?

Charlene: I see what you're saying. It's kind of unprecedented, I mean, I don't think I have any words...

Jim: Who can help you to speak louder here? I feel like your voice is being drowned out by the whispers of ghosts. I see you as a small child trying to talk amongst adults who are ignoring you. Who here can help you to speak?

Charlene: Well, I mean, Chris is pretty helpful...

Chris: [Shrugs] It's very true.

Jim: Okay. Okay. Chris. Chris. Anyone else?

Charlene: Um...

Agnes: I've put on "Under giant trees" [song] just for you.

Charlene: Thanks, I think! Wait – Agnes, why have you put this song on now?

Agnes: [Stares deep into C's eyes] Do you know? Can you say?

Charlene: Yes, yes...this is the music that relates to the childhood themes in the book. Hmm...and we just discussed me at age eight, and Jim called for me to speak more...I did notice he called me Selina. So, yes, this song seems relevant to, I suppose to...where I feel my voice might be?

Agnes: Oh, you'll want to share and record what's coming up now.

Charlene: Oh wow, really? It just gets so tiring!

Part three: The prologue

[continued] **Selina:** It's the prologue.

Chris: Ah ha! Bullseye right there! I'm impressed with you all, that really didn't take long.

Selina: The beginning.

Ben: The beginning is the end is the beginning.

Charlene: Yes, this is prologue music and I am sensing the prologue now.

Ben: The prologue starts with a girl escaping a prison on an island [looks to Selina and Collin] - that's you right Selina?

Selina: [Looks to Charlene]

Charlene: It's you Selina...

Selina: I suppose you could say that... [questioning look to Bob]

Bob: And in the prologue, the bird emerges from a storm above the sea, flies inland towards an old run-down, apparently disused building...

Jim: You had the visions of the prologue not long ago.

Ben: Those prologue visions were the most recent book content that occurred to you, Charlene. And it was the only book content that you said you experienced as visions - in a distinctly different way from before. You actually wrote what you saw, the vivid imagery. You said it was so vivid that you were a bit alarmed.

Sara: Vivid visions?!

Charlene: [sighs] Yes, it's... I don't know! I had stopped the daydreaming for the first time in decades a few years before. I don't know what it was... it was very different. I'd never experienced anything like that before.

Agnes: Was that after you met me?

Charlene: Yes.

Todd: After our chats?

Charlene: Yes.

Supervisor: After me?

Charlene: Yes.

Brad: Was it after you left us all here?

Charlene: Years after...

Bob: What is the difference between a fantasy and a vision?

Charlene: I have been thinking about that actually...

Mum: It's just that you're a writer. I've always told you that!

Selina: And the prologue is whose story then?

[**Charlene** and **Selina** exchange stares]

Bob: And in the prologue, a bird helps a young eight-year-old girl escape a cruel and violent prison on a remote and desolate island...

Jim: She narrowly slips out of the basement door, which is ajar, thrusting herself up the spiral staircase, running frantically along the corridor towards the nearest window...

Ben: The she jumps out the window, through the glass...

Mum: [looks at Charlene] Out the window, hmm... reminds me of someone.

Bob: The girl follows the bird who leads the way...

Jim: Back to the sea.

Todd: Hmm... the sea.

Sara: A bird in a dream...

Charlene: But without the dream.

Sara: Like a waking vision?

Charlene: Um, yeh, to music...

Jim: Like in trance?

Charlene: I really don't know... kind of... I've never experienced anything like that before.

Bob: You never realised you had experienced something like that before.

Selina: I remember the bird, I remember smashing against the ground when I landed from the fall. When I looked up, the bird was still there.

Bob: So you followed it.

Jim: Running frantically, this time towards the sea.

Bob: Away from the prison.

Chris: Towards something else, right C?

Charlene: Well, yes...um... the girl... Selina... you run into the sea... following the bird... the child - she starts swimming in the stormy sea...

Bob: She swims and swims against the current to follow the bird.

Jim: She doesn't realise the bird has already returned her home.

Charlene: I'm amazed and unsure about your narratives here.

Sara: And the girl?

[**Charlene** and **Selina** exchange long stares]

Charlene/Selina: She...

Charlene: She drowns.

Selina: She escapes.

Jim: She dies?

[Long pause]

[**Charlene** and **Selina** exchange long stares]

Selina: She escapes.

Charlene: She drowns.

Bob: As her body sinks deeper and deeper, she can see the shape of the bird through the water...

Jim: She can see that it flies away...

Bob: Her eyes close finally as she drowns and sinks to the bottom of the ocean.

Jim: She has a kind of peace here now.

Bob: She can rest.

Agnes: I'm playing "Trojan horses" [song] now.

Charlene: I don't know where I am now.

Jim: So return to the girl...

Bob: It is the girl who is returning to her.

Sara: And the girl?

Bob: She awakes.

Ben: She awakes on a beach, washed up by the sea...

Selina: I saw only dense forest ahead of me. It was forward through it or back into the water.

Chris: You usually take the water.

Selina: Not this time. I was young, only eight. I ran to the forest. I still thought they might be behind me [glances to Collin].

Sara: So the girl survived...

Todd: But she died!

Charlene: Yeh, she died there.

Chris: Is that the price she had to pay?

Selina: Then I survived.

Jim: A young child alone in the forest with only a bird for a friend.

Bob: But not for long.

Selina: I don't think the word 'friend' quite captures...

Ben: Selina, didn't you live in the forest for over a year?

[**Selina** looks at **Ben** and nods]: Hm mm.

Charlene: I could see it all so much more vividly and clearly than I ever had before. It didn't take long before I realised – IT'S THE PROLOGUE!

Supervisor: And this was exciting because...?

Charlene: Before, fantasy had often seemed non-productive... I was in the fantasy world via other characters, almost omnipresent. This time, I was in my room, grounded in reality, not fantasy, and perceiving the images, if that makes sense?

Chris: NONE of this makes sense!

Bob: You always sought out the fantasy world. This time, the fantasy world sought you out?

Charlene: That's a helpful way of understanding it. Yes, there were very few characters, no dialogue, it was very different.

Bob: You hadn't fantasised for years in the same way as before, you'd had a long break.

Jim: And then the visions of the prologue came?

Charlene: I'd always known about the prologue, but that was the very beginning part that I hadn't known. It had always started with Selina in the forest before that...

Selina: Maybe you didn't want to see the part where I was imprisoned, trapped, tied up, tortured, had to cut myself apart to escape, drowned, died and basically clawed my way out of death's bed!

Charlene: Yeh, maybe I couldn't see it before.

Supervisor: Has anyone here who hasn't spoken got anything to add about the prologue?

XS: Explains the continuous focus on the sea as a theme within the plot!

Supervisor: Who are you?

XS: I'm a US Navy Seal.

Supervisor: Right...

Ben: Ha, yeh, I know about you! You do have an obsession with the sea, Chazz. And you used to have recurring nightmares about tsunamis.

Todd: I've seen it too - the sea focus.

Agnes: And me...

Supervisor: And those who haven't yet spoken?

Chris: I took you back to the sea.

Charlene/Selina: Who?

Chris: Charlene – when she first went travelling, it was the only way to get her away.

Sara: Are you the bird?

Charlene: I can't say I'm following all this...

Bob: You don't need to.

Chris: Bird, bat... whatever you like!

Sara: I said it before, when I hear you, I think underworld.

Ben: And he's the 'basement guy'.

Todd: What was that quote, Chazz, about Bane? "I was born in the dark..."

Supervisor: And those who haven't yet spoken?

Gran: I was happy to hear you went travelling. I had always wanted you to get away and live freely.

Jess: What about the people that stayed behind?

Charlene: When I went travelling?

Jess: Yes then. And when you went to your fantasy world when you were younger.

Mum: Yes, what about us?

Val/Tommy: The same to you Selina – we were going out of our minds when you were gone.

Todd: Some of us are left behind.

Chris: Maybe some of you were too happy in your own prisons.

Jim: We're all prisoners in some way.

Bob: And we are also all free in some way too.

Selina: Mac hasn't spoken yet.

[Silence – All look to **Mac**]

Part four: Beast

[Continued] **Mac:** The prologue? Actually, I was remembering how XS and I rescued Selina from that other island, later in her life... [looks pointedly to Collin]

XS: We did.

Collin: You messed up the entire plan.

Chris: This sounds entirely plot-based guys! I'm warning you that you're diving into plot right now.

Selina: I'm alive to destroy your plans and I won't stop until I have.

Collin: I made you.

Selina: You tried. But I escaped. Twice. You failed to impose your narrative on me.

Collin: Yet I define your existence?

Selina: You define nothing about me, I am everything you are not!

Collin: This whole fantasy world plot is held up by your fight against ME!

[SILENCE]

Todd: Who's this guy Ben?

Ben: Simply? The bad guy. Villain. Monster. All that stuff...

Supervisor: Collin - could you speak to Charlene at all?

Collin: I'm here. She can speak to me if she wishes, though she has never tried. I barely even appear in the plot/fantasy world. I rarely appear in any scenes, yet each scene is in some way focused on me! I suppose you'd think she might have something to say to me!

Selina: You don't have to speak to him.

Chris: Who? He doesn't really even exist to me, even in fantasy.

Charlene: But he has some points about his prominence which maybe means something integral. Well, um... hi Collin... what are your thoughts on the prologue, I wonder?

Collin: [Smirks] You seem to think you're the only one who had a vision – what about my vision for that young girl? I put everything into her. She was going to be everything I wasn't.

Charlene: Right. You tortured her and tormented her, kept her prisoner and tried to train her to be something of your own desire rather than a person in her own right, is that what you're referring to?

Collin: You wouldn't exist without me – yet you seem intent on destroying me, you all are!

Charlene: Well, all of us in the fantasy world... hmm, yes, that's fair. But to be honest, if you take hostage hundreds of innocent children, subject them to torture and abuse, submit them to your will – what do you expect?

Selina: Expect something because we're always right there ready!

Collin: Yet try as you might – you have never caught me – not once. In hours and hours of fantasy world involvement, years and years, decades and decades – not once have you come close to catching me! The closest you ever came was in that teen book you wrote where Chris shot me. Since then, you've never come even close!

Charlene/Selina [Glance at one another nervously]: Until now.

Charlene: Um... can anyone help?

Anu: We always knew what would happen if we came face to face with him. What are we waiting for?

XS: Roger that!

Chris: I'm happy to slay the demon right now!

Collin: [laughs] Don't you all see the dilemma here? [laughs some more]

Charlene/Selina: [speechless]

Collin: You/they/any of you – you can't kill me, hurt me, harm me, you can't touch me! Like I said, it's been decades and this is the first time we've even been on the same page, in the same space! Only Charlene/Selina decide my fate – you all act on their behalf. And they cannot touch me because they will have no meaning to their pathetic, ridiculous existence without me. Who will they chase, who will they be preoccupied with hating? What would happen to the plot? What would happen to Charlene's research – anyway, what would you do with your life really, without the delusion of chasing me, hunting me... It is me who shaped your existence like no other. It is me who dominates your daily purpose. It is ME who can appear in many forms – your great grandfather perhaps C? Do you not see me in yourself when you look in the mirror too? I am the phantom that you seek every day! Without me, you and your life are meaningless. Worthless.

Bob: On the other hand, decades have been spent contemplating the very nature of this pursuit. They will not live in your shadow forever, Collin. Nor will we.

Collin: [laughs]

Bob: There's someone you forgot to invite Charlene.

Charlene: I know, it's Nan.

Nan: Well, I know I wasn't invited but I have been here anyway, listening, not that anyone noticed!

Agnes: I'm going to play "Beast" [song] now.

Nan: For me?

Agnes: No, it doesn't really work like that...

Nan: And how does it work?!

Agnes: Well I...I play the music to underlying themes rather than the explicit content.

Nan: Oh, I see. So "Beast" would no doubt be related to this demon Collin?

Agnes: Um...actually, it's not necessarily... I would say it speaks more to the young girl in the forest, when she feels at home with nature and the creatures of the forest that she befriends, it's lighter...

Nan: Ah, and light shall prevail over darkness... the darkness of Collin!

Agnes: Well, um, it's hard to verbalise, not really... it's....

Charlene: Nan, it's nice you're here. I really miss you, I promise I will be in touch again soon!

Nan: That's fine, no-one contacts me, I'm used to that. I see you found the evil I told you about in your character Collin here – you see what I told you? How Jehovah God can protect us from these demons?

Charlene: Can that be rhetorical?

Sara: Hi Chazz's Nan! You're the Nan who's a Jehovah's Witness right?

Nan: I am. Are you the spiritual witch-type one?

Sara: Um, I don't know... maybe? [Looks to Charlene]

Nan: Be careful of the dark spirits that follow you to bed!

Sara: Um. Okay, um... Aventine please!

Charlene: Bye Sara!

Ben: Hi Joan. Chazz is interested in exploring your side of the family tree.

Nan: Hmm I told her before, she won't find much. My mother was orphaned. No-one knows anything about her.

Charlene: Nan, I did find a record that suggested she was married at a young age in the US to a military man sixteen years older than her. Did you know that?

Nan: To my Dad?

Charlene: Maybe, I'm not sure...

Nan: I can't say I knew. I don't think of him, as I said, I have no memories of my childhood.

Charlene: I know. I know. You also told me you remembered that your sister died when she was age eight.

Nan: I did...um...what does this have to do with this monster Collin? Aren't I here to speak to him?

Charlene: Well, it's up to you, I feel like I kind of know what you might say about him...

Nan: Good! You've finally learned then – this, my dear, is the devil's work – a murderer, torturer, demon... destroying the lives of innocents and leading us astray from our purpose here to serve Jehovah!

Charlene: And I can't help thinking Nan, how the only military man I've ever known or heard about was your Dad.

Nan: I might have told you about him when you were young.

Charlene: I don't have clear memories, it just occurs to me as an adult... I've always wondered where my idea of a military man like Collin came from, I suppose it felt helpful to have a tangible link I suppose? I often seem to be looking for one. Of course, he could be anyone, it's only fantasy I suppose?

Nan: Did you read about my Dad yet? In the papers?

Charlene: No?

Nan: You should try.

Charlene: I will!



Inner editor meets Leonora Carrington

Following the *Character Summons*, I spend months reflecting and writing around what it evoked in relation to my journey with the research topic. Below I provide a dialogue which offers a flavour of some of this process.

*

Security first here (XS, Character Summons, p.57)

Intruders for me reflect the unwanted elements of experience, of contact with others, and within contexts I find myself in. Here, I have a sense that not only is something, someone, some interaction or context unwanted and undesirable, but I notice I will tend to move away from it, seek to avoid it consciously and unconsciously, and the quality of my relationship with it feels as though I have little control over something else which that I view as somewhat autonomous from me. As such, I might attribute it with power at times. In doing so, I am also embroiled in a sense of being in conflict with *it*, whether *it* be a person, interaction, or context. There is a sense that I am entangled in conflict with intruders, wrestling, struggling and refusing to accept the intrusion they bring...

Leonora: Speaking of intruders, I can see you there, you are intruding upon her smooth process of writing with those types of comments!

Editor: Who? Me?

Leonora: Yes, you – I see you and I know who and what you are.

Editor: Actually, like many others in the UK, I've also been on strike! I thought I'd take a back seat for a while and let her do her thing.

Leonora: Or maybe you wanted to give that impression? But she can still hear you and so can I! Instead of whispering and muttering about 'craziness' and 'madness', please feel free to bring to the page what it is you have to say – out in the open. You're welcome here, but let's not pretend this isn't happening.

Editor: Well maybe I couldn't help myself from helping just a little...I was just wondering if this was all a huge mistake?

Leonora: What's the mistake?

Editor: The direction of the analysis! I see no theory, research literature – no references. All I see is plenty of pontificating and sharing of out-there theories that quite frankly, well, they are crazy.

Leonora: Charlene has been absorbing theory and reading for a long time. Now she is expressing what has come from that. She can link it back to theory again soon, but right now she needs some time to express her understanding and the meaning of things for her in her own way, intuitively.

Editor: If this is read by others, it could destroy her career! What will others think? Maybe she needs a disclaimer that reads: “written under the influence of a surrealist artist who was actually institutionalised and deemed crazy”...or did you slip her a hallucinogenic drug? I have legitimate reasons for being concerned here – if she wants to write freely, she should join a writing group or something, write a blog! The only outcome I can see of talking about all this nonsense is humiliation, shame and social rejection. She doesn’t want that, regardless of how enamoured with you she is.

Leonora: Well, thank you for your willingness to be open with your thoughts. For your information, I was sectioned after my partner was taken by the Nazis and I had to flee to Spain to escape Nazi persecution. I was raped in Spain and then others colluded against me to kidnap me and have me sectioned, where I was physically abused with their chemicals, and traumatised some more. If you want to call my disorientated response to all of that ‘crazy’, feel free. But I would be interested in what a ‘sane’ response to that situation would look like for you? C has also suffered traumas which are not conveniently boxed up in some linear past, and she is writing her way through and with them, despite your internalised championing of oppression, and I certainly do support her! At the intersection of trauma and madness and that long history, can you perhaps say why are you so terrified by her sitting here with a pen, expressing herself?

Editor: (Ahem) Firstly, she is typing and not holding a pen...

Leonora: Hmmm

Editor: Secondly, you may wish to position yourself as her liberator, but I’m not the enemy you know. I’m trying to keep her safe. She has a strong sense of inadequacy

around her evaluation of her writing, particularly outside of traditional academic work. Like now!

Leonora: Maybe she is bored of what you call ‘safe’? You’ve held her prisoner for too long. She is craving freedom and wants to take risks. She can work with her sense of disgust and thoughts and feelings about her own writing by having more space to write freely and work on her writer’s voice. Too many years have gone by keeping her writing stored away safe in Scrivener, it’s time write for an audience now: she wants to share her writing with others – not just with you. Can you help her do that?

Editor: Did you share your own writing and art openly with others?

Leonora: Well, yes with some people, sure.

Editor: Weren’t you relatively unknown as a surrealist artist and writer until your death?

Leonora: Many of us were. There’s wasn’t much room for surrealist artists who were women, but we were there.

Editor: But did you actively try to share you work and put it out there in the world for others to see, judge...

Leonora: Maybe not as much as I would have liked to, no. I wrote books though, and they were published.

Editor: So why are you encouraging Charlene to do it? Are you trying to prompt her to do what you didn’t just to meet your own needs?

Leonora: I get your point, perhaps that’s a factor. I had to rebel just to leave my toxic situation in the UK.

Editor: And if there is a negative response to Charlene’s writing, her ‘Art’, as you say – what will your solution be then, that she can leave, leave the country too?

Leonora: Well, she can choose her own destiny as she desires and sees fit. I know she loves travel, and maybe she will choose to leave if she wishes. Maybe we need to leave if we feel we don’t belong somewhere.

Editor: And sometimes it is about the rebel who stays. If she is going to stay, she cannot afford to completely rebel in the hope of a magical disappearing act. She’s been leaving all her life. She left for fantasy, she left for Vietnam. I’m just saying – if she wants to stay in some way or another, you could both do with listening to me

and resting upon some of my expertise about how to work in and with the structures you both find yourselves in. Oppressive or not.

Leonora: Someone has to challenge those structures. And I'm not talking about leaving – you are.

Editor: Thirdly, all you say may be true – but is this really the time and place for her to be doing these things? This is a doctoral thesis, research – she needs to pass and then can do whatever she likes creatively, she can write all her mad theories endlessly if she wishes. Right now, she just needs to finish this to an acceptable standard and pass this doctorate!

Leonora: And why would that be?

Editor: (Dumbfounded) Why? Well so she can achieve her goal, work as a counselling psychologist and live her life...

Leonora: Meet society's expectations so she can be a productive citizen?

Editor: Meet her own goals and needs, focus on her own priorities.

Leonora: This methodology is not a tick-box exercise. Art is about process, not merely a method to achieve some pre-determined goal. We're in need of some creative collaboration here, not a dictatorship.

Editor: I don't know who made you the spokesperson for art, but this isn't art – it is psychological research.

Leonora: The methodology bridges art and science does it not?

Editor: Look around Leonora – do you see trainee psychologists around the country, or even the world, producing 'art' for their psychology dissertations?

Leonora: Exactly my point – that needs to change!

Editor: And why should Charlene be one of the few who takes that risk?

Leonora: Because she has chosen to!

Editor: She has been led astray.

Leonora: By you, for too long.

Editor: Freedom costs lives you know!

Leonora: Now you sound like that fantasy world character – who are you really?

Editor: Who am I? Who are you?!

Charlene: Hey guys! Okay, thank you, this has been helpful and insightful. You've both got valid points, I think it's okay. Editor – my plan is to write freely so I have a

foundational structure for the analysis and then interweave the theory I've been reading afterwards. I know some of what I'm saying is on the fringes of mainstream psychological discourse, but my topic is about fantasy, and I've been exploring psychoanalytic and transpersonal ways of approaching that, so I get that it seems a bit scary. But we have references, we're leaning on the arguments of others too here, we're not alone in thinking this way about the research topic...

Editor: [Interrupts] I can't see the references.

Charlene: I haven't added them yet. Don't you see them on the separate document then?

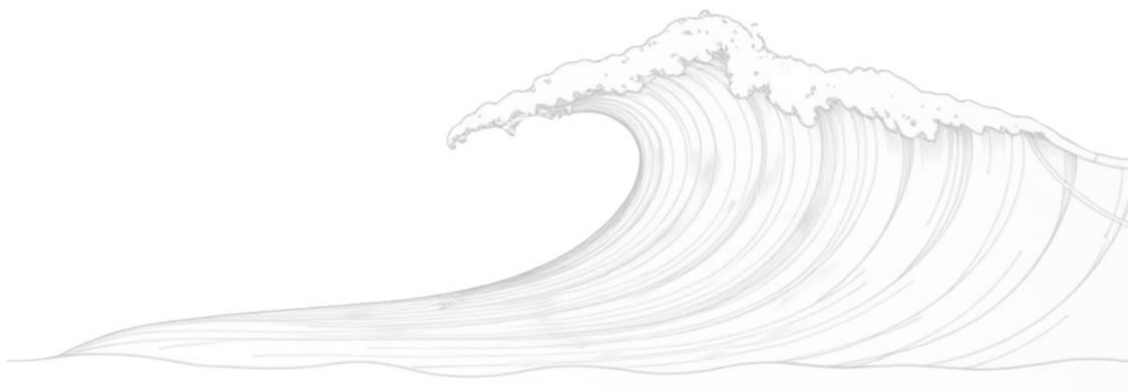
Editor: Yes, I suppose I do, can you just add some in then please?

Charlene: Hmm...

Editor: Thanks. Just be careful, make sure we look at this together before you send it out there into the world.

Charlene: Yes, thanks, I'm sure we're going to be fine. Leonora – thanks for your input, I totally get where you're coming from, I feel like I've developed so much and I'm applying what I've learned. I'm using my voice here; I'm writing freely without the usual obstacles and difficulties, I sense it is coming together in a way that might speak to the artistic, creative and liberatory qualities you value. I get that this methodology speaks to the arts, but I am also going to have to balance that by bringing in psychological theory too.

Leonora: Of course, do what you will. But next time please don't believe your Editor when they whisper that you or your ideas are crazy!



Chapter 5: Discussion

Orientation to the chapter

In this section I explore and discuss the journey I have taken within the present autoethnographic inquiry. This will include a discussion of my engagement with creative, automatic and expressive writing co-produced with my inner editor and imagined others – fantasy world characters, people from my everyday life and historical figures. As the autoethnographic research process necessitates a journeying, recursive, relational and creative process that does not proceed in a linear fashion, I also reflect upon significant moments, encounters, insights and learning that help make sense of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma.

The discussion uses three lenses to frame and evaluate the autoethnographic journey. These lenses provide a foundation to discuss a particular story of the research journey relevant to exploring immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma without reducing or decontextualising either but, rather, via an account that honours lived experience with all its depth, nuance and complexity. My hope is that each of the three lenses prompts exploration of the intersection of developmental trauma and immersive daydreaming; rather than attempting to speak to either in isolation, I explore the dance *between* dichotomies of fantasy and reality, unconscious and conscious processes, between personal and social. In doing so, I do not attempt to depict an ‘accurate’ account. I focus instead on autoethnographic values of authenticity, vulnerability, storytelling and the freedom to roam (Hadjiosif et al., 2023). I also draw upon theoretical literature including trauma theory, depth psychology, Internal Family Systems (IFS), arts-based psychotherapy, critical theory and transpersonal psychology. Consistent with an autoethnographic sensibility, the narratives I present draw upon my subjectivity, cultural artefacts and connection and engagement with others who have significantly informed the research, including excerpts from my reflective journal where relevant. Throughout the discussion, I refer to fantasy world characters by name for ease, however I consider them as intimately tied to my own conscious and unconscious processes.

The three lenses that frame the discussion are named: *Intruders*, *Moving Between* and *Invitations*. Following presentation of these lenses, I offer an evaluation of the research before ending with a summary discussing contributions of the thesis. I invite you, as the reader, to adopt and experiment with these lenses and see how they fit, exploring how they may evoke your own ideas and reactions to the topics discussed. I also invite you to explore these overlapping narratives with me and consider how they may speak to, within and between the varying facets of personal and social experience regarding the present exploration of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma.

Lens 1 - Intruders: There is a war

I suppose it is to be expected that, in embarking on autoethnographic research exploring trauma and fantasy, the journey circles back to my own unconscious defences, avoidance strategies and blind spots. In my explorations of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma, I begin to conceptualise such experiences, communications and encounters as *Intruders*: they feel unwanted. This includes both general intrusions of unconscious content into consciousness and traumatic intrusions of unintegrated memories through nightmares and flashbacks (van der Kolk, 2003). I notice my sense of aversion to intruders, seeking to avoid them consciously or unconsciously, and feel embroiled in conflict with them, wrestling and struggling to keep them out. In this section, I reflect upon and discuss how these intruders become personally significant and transformational in relation to intergenerational trauma and sociocultural discourses relating to intersecting systems of oppression. This highlights an implication regarding the significance of context in shifting individualistic discourse relating to the research topic.

My family and ancestors' experiences, traumas, stories and socio-cultural contexts wait within fantasy. Historical and multi-generational trauma, and its impact, often feels like an intruder: uninvited. Being unaware of the significance of its presence, it feels unwanted, but there it is, fused with my experiences, traumas, stories, socio-cultural contexts, and those of my immediate and extended family. It soon feels too challenging to cling to any ideas of separateness from what I feel is *theirs* rather than *mine*: it all feels interconnected. Family and ancestral traumas and conflicts are embroiled with my own personal traumas and conflicts. When I meet *my* conscious and unconscious conflicts within fantasy, I meet *theirs* too. Within a context of intergenerational trauma, the fantasy world offers a sense of protection and connection. Fantasy not only provides a contextual backdrop, it acts as a shield. Yet the armour of fantasy regularly fractalizes, later manifesting and re-manifesting as my own unconscious conflicts. I sense that fantasy is telling me at every turn: there is a war!

Fantasy world content was sometimes comprised of imagery and themes relating to war, armed conflict and the military. I had always assumed: this is nothing to do with me! Despite searching for years for any experiences or exposure that might have contributed to these themes, I found nothing. I am privileged enough to have had no direct experience of war, armed conflict or the military. No memories of family experiences or stories I can recall. There is no war! I exclaim to myself, throwing my hands up in the air in defeat, brushing off what feels like my obscure and irrational fantasy-related interests. Of course, I know there are many wars and conflicts around the world, but I struggle to make sense of them within the fantasy world given *my* lack of exposure. Eventually, I return to the view that these themes are mainly symbolic and comprised of material relating to media exposure, fiction and broader social contexts. I do not believe that fantasy world content always has some literal connection to my daily life and experience. I often concluded, in line with current research, that during immersive daydreaming experiences, I was compensating for unmet needs (Brenner, Somer & Abu-Rayya, 2021), processing current conflicts or simply finding parts of the fantasy world plot evocative akin to a movie or novel.

In considering developmental trauma, it feels unavoidable not to ask: does Collin, my fantasy world antagonist character, a violent military man who is physically, emotionally and sexually violent, remind me of anyone I know, or have known? No! Comes my certain response. Confident I am already aware of the perpetrators of the abuse in my life, I instead assume it is the sheer complexity of fantasy, memory and consciousness generating such material. My certainty protects me from regular intrusions inviting me to reconsider this stance. For a significant proportion of my life, I felt that the fantasy world plot was irrelevant: just fantasy, just fiction. Children come up with such imaginative stories, don't they? I hear the adults exclaim in response to my fictional, fantasy world-based writing during childhood. Yet I begin to recognise that, even where fantasy was 'just fiction':

Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over **and over** (Gaiman, cited in Popova, n.d.)

Collin's comments within the character summons therefore feel significant:

This whole fantasy world plot is held up by your fight
against ME!

(Collin, *Character Summons*, p.69).

*

Who will they [Charlene and Selina] chase, who will they be
preoccupied with hating? What would happen to the plot? What
would happen to Charlene's research – anyway, what would
you do with your life really, without the delusion of chasing
me, hunting me...It is me who shaped your existence like no
other. It is me who dominates your daily purpose. It is ME
who can appear in many forms – your great grandfather
perhaps C? Do you not see me in yourself when you look in the
mirror too? I am the phantom that you seek every day!
Without me, you and your life are meaningless. Worthless.
(Collin, *Character summons*, p. 70).

I also notice my curiosity about my Nan's comments:

Nan: Did you read about my Dad yet? In the papers?

Charlene: No?

Nan: You should try...

Charlene: I will!

(*Character Summons*, p. 72).

I later wonder about Collin's alignment with my White British, maternal great-grandfather. This is an intrusion, an unwanted alignment. Fantasy appears to disregard time and location, but at the edge of my awareness, I know that he served in the military, although I only later find out that he grew up in a military family. I had never met him. Part of me also knew that I grew up hearing graphic stories about his sexually abusive behaviour. I wonder what it was like for the child-me to hear those stories. Reflecting on the *Character Summons* and journeying through my maternal ancestry becomes a tectonic shift in both

the autoethnographic journey and my personal and family life. At times, it feels as though my experiences in fantasy relating to the military, war, conflict, and their devastating impacts, begin to take centre stage in my daily life as I begin to re-explore my family history. This shift occurs as I connect with older generations of my family and learn about factors that influenced our family history and ancestry (e.g. Olusoga, 2016).

Ancestral explorations lead me to think: there is a war! Of course, there were and are many wars, both literal and symbolic. As for many people, literal wars and conflict impacted my family throughout the generations. Yet, despite having grandparents and great-grandparents who lived through or served during the Second World War, it previously felt distant from my own experience. I've had opportunities to hear family stories throughout my life, but have I truly heard, seen and grasped the impact war and conflict on multiple generations of our family? I begin to explore the intergenerational transmission of trauma through, for example, attachment relationships and neurobiological and epigenetic mechanisms (e.g. Yehuda et al., 1998; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). But these explanations feel discrete and reductionist at a time when I am moving in the opposite direction. I begin to wonder if my previous thinking was impacted by society's dismissive stance towards fantasy, assuming that military, war and conflict within my fantasy world were merely 'the stuff of pure fantasy', or, in mainstream psychology terms, 'intrapsychic factors'. I wonder: Does this reflect my internalisation of individualistic, atomised western culture (Cohen, 2021)? Does it reflect my sense of isolation and disconnection from broader contexts relating to war and conflict: a privilege perhaps afforded to me through my British upbringing and identity? It becomes clearer that fantasy world content does not exist in a vacuum; it is intimately tied to the society, culture and history that surround it. As Volkan (2012) argues, the historical events our ancestors lived through can be factors that "structure our psychic lives" (p.88) and "intertwine with our internal development issues, wishes, defences, conflicts, and fantasies" (p.94). Research into ancestral and family history transformed and deepened my understanding of fantasy world content, providing context and an antidote to an individualistic, intrapsychic

focus, accompanied by incredible personal and family transformation. The photographs below were given to me by a relative during my ancestral research. They represent a meaningful reminder of my learning around the importance of family and ancestral history in considering the intersection of trauma and fantasy.



Photograph 1 above shows my maternal great grandaunt and her husband in military uniform.



Photograph 2 above shows my maternal second great grandmother and second great grandfather - wearing his military uniform - and their children.

Overcoming the patriarchal monster

Over the years, I reflected on how Collin perhaps served as a representation of patriarchal oppression, the classic ‘monster’ in an ‘Overcoming the Monster’ plot (Booker, 2004). Collin’s comments within the *Character Summons* seem to suggest that, maybe it is me, and Selina, in our parallel attempts within reality and fantasy to resist and overcome patriarchal oppression and its impact, who occupy the role of ‘villain’. That’s clearly ludicrous! I think. When does a villain calling a heroine a villain resolve a war? I wonder why I find his comment so provocative. Clearly, the perpetuation of violence and abuse is

abhorrent, yet my interests here related specifically to the representation of this within fantasy.

In (re-)considering the perpetuation of trauma through patriarchy, or what Atkinson (2018) refers to as “traumarchy” (p.6) to denote the intersection between trauma and patriarchy, I consider how violence against women and girls continues to be a devastating global problem (UN Women, 2024). Yet women and girls’ exposure to patriarchal violence and oppression, and its impact, still goes unacknowledged at times, with women still more likely to receive a psychiatric diagnosis and corresponding ‘treatment’ (Ussher, 2017). Ussher (2017) describes how “patriarchal psychiatric discourse” is “irrevocably tied to what it means to be a ‘woman’ at a particular point in history” (2017, p. 76). This is inevitably bound up with broader debates and historic and current dialogues relating to how practitioners within the psy-professions, and related fields, might consider and move beyond discourses of difference to engage with an analytic and intersectional understanding of power relations (e.g. Burman, 2003) and social injustices, particularly relating to the medicalisation of women’s distress (e.g. Herman, 2015; Lorde, 2017). It is therefore important to engage with intersectionality, not as a “buzzword by managers with no understanding of intersectionality’s theoretical ground or intellectual framework” (p.1), but to “shed light on the intersectional failures of institutions” (Crenshaw, Andrews & Wilson, 2024, p.15), acknowledging also the pivotal role of Blackness to the original context of its emergence into discourse. Medicalising discourses as they relate to ‘mental health problems’ limit such broader consideration, neglecting systematic inequalities and racism that exist in relation to coercive ‘mental health’ practices (Kinouani, 2021) and correspondingly, how these “systems of inequality damage the mental wellbeing of Black females” (Wilson & Wilson, 2024, p.23).

In the present social context, I reflect on how MD discourse also suggests a potential for being labelled and stigmatised for not conforming. In my case, at the peak of my engagement with immersive daydreaming, it would have been for dreaming of a world in which systems of patriarchal oppression felt less imprisoning, leaving me free: free to explore and free to imagine a figure of

female strength, power and resistance, like Selina. I wonder how many others engage in fantasy worlds where they imagine overthrowing and fighting back against systems of oppression. As well as escape from, fantasy is also a threat to patriarchal systems. As Le Guin (2004) argues:

The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary (p. 183).

I recall perceiving my maternal great-grandfather as a 'villain' too, years ago. Encountering the above photo of him as a child has a significant impact: my inner representation of him is at odds with the child in the photo. Maybe Collin has a point? Maybe it is easier to imagine holding one individual to account rather than manage the overwhelm of interconnected systemic factors that lead to war, atrocities and social despair. Deeper reflection also leads me to explore more repressed aspects of my identity in relation to Jungian ideas of the personal and collective aspects of the Shadow (Brewster, 2019). Considering Collin in relation to aspects of my shadow self and my own projections is, unexpectedly, personally transformative.

Skiping generations

Little searching or therapeutic exploration is required to recall some of the beliefs and basic assumptions about the world and others I encountered during childhood and adolescence. I recall being unequivocally told:

the world is a dangerous place

and:

men are dangerous

Countless graphic examples demonstrated what I perceived as a desire to protect - I had come to understand that safety was a rare commodity, and I would probably have to fight for it. Views of men and the world as dangerous were

intertwined with beliefs stemming from my maternal family's faith as Jehovah's Witnesses. I recall being exposed to *'Awake!'* and *'Watchtower'* magazines which contained graphic depictions of archaic mythological scenes of violence, often depicting terror and Armageddon. This was the backdrop to my memories of my maternal grandmother's repetitive narratives about how:

Satan is always trying to deceive us

and recollections of how:

Satan had visited her in bed

It took a long time to work out why I was so terrified during my twenties. Terrified of nearly everything, nearly all the time. Entering early adulthood as a survivor of interpersonal violence, I was already scared and angry at patriarchal systems of power. This conflict appeared to be held within my fantasy world as I tried to just get on with my life. I recall first encountering the shattered assumptions theory of trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), wherein "trauma symptoms are caused by a shattering of worldviews" (p.2). I wonder how this applies to people who cannot recall a time they had felt the world was safe and predictable but had grown up with family narratives to the contrary.

I stop. I need a break. A break from the burden of carrying weighty family traumas and secrets. The responsibility feels crushing. Carrying family and social secrecy around family trauma. Carrying what I envisage others want me to say, and to not say. There are women in my family who I view as real survivors, incredibly resourceful and strong women who I love dearly. Yet the present research poses numerous ethical challenges in relation to speaking about family trauma: how can we say that which is too challenging to speak? Too problematic ethically? Too traumatising for others to 'selfishly' vocalise for my own purposes? As the binary roles of hero and villain collapse, I realise the power of skipping generations.

I have learned, unlearned, and learned again, how to sit in a most uncomfortable, vulnerable space besides my Nan for the past few decades, despite her being estranged from the rest of our family. I know my heart yearns to bring healing, to cultivate compassion. My efforts seem just as arduous, but maybe more fruitful, when I skip generations and attempt to divert the ripple effects of intergenerational trauma away from her great grandchildren.

Like some other survivors of familial abuse and intergenerational trauma I have met, I somehow usually manage to cycle back to the original pain of trying to master the dilemma of how to love those who we also feel have contributed to trauma in our lives. How do the grandchildren love the grandparents that their parents refuse to acknowledge exist? The gap in generations always did feel helpful. Skipping generations (and their wars) feels more tolerable for all. Perhaps proximity makes memory and narrative acts of war.

During the present research, I learn that my maternal grandmother was born into a working-class family in London just before she, and her immediate family, fled London due to The Blitz. I reflect on my childhood experiences of her. I recall how she received psychiatric diagnosis after diagnosis throughout the years: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, clinical depression. She tells me she was sectioned more times than she remembers, subjected to ‘treatments’ such as electro-convulsive ‘treatment’ and anti-psychotic medication that, as she sometimes recalls, were simply further evidence of the devil’s work. She regularly shared with me how psychiatry professionals paid little attention throughout the years to the significance of a fall down the stairs she experienced during early childhood, and the impact of this. I often felt that psychiatry services and others appeared seemingly united in their lack of willingness to consider the significant impact of her trauma history or the context of her upbringing on her distress. Instead, her distress and suffering were individualised, psychologised, pathologized, taken completely out of a context in which her experience of, for example, voice-hearing, made a lot of sense. I am grateful for some of the progress in our understanding of voice-hearing from a non-pathologizing perspective, including the work of The Hearing Voices Network¹³, and

¹³ <https://www.hearing-voices.org/#content>

researchers who write of lived experience such as Eleanor Longden. Longden (2013) speaks in her Ted Talk 'The Voices in my Head' about her sense of feeling she was "diagnosed, drugged and discarded" by the psychiatric system, but ultimately managing to "emerge as a survivor". Longden's words spoke to the pain I felt in relation to my grandmother's experiences.

Belnap (2012) suggests that "some remembrances of trauma are passed down from ancestors in the form of *life lessons*" (p. 116). I began to consider whether fantasy serves to carry lessons of survival in the face of trauma and adversity through the generations. In exploring fantasy world content, I am invited back to family. When I wrote the *Character Summons*, I hadn't seen my maternal grandmother for a long time. Seeing her and re-exploring our family ancestry together, hearing her recount stories from her childhood and upbringing, I notice subtle, yet visceral whispers of recognition stir within me: she has been repeating these stories most of my life. She often makes clear that she holds The Devil accountable for much of her suffering. I have a different theory that highlights patriarchal oppression and historical and intergenerational trauma and adversity. Either way, we both share the sense of there being a war. The context for my research exploration following the *Character Summons* becomes intergenerational, prompting exploration of the legacy of intergenerational trauma within fantasy, and within my family. Attempting to untangle myself, separate myself from family ancestry. From family narratives. From the "unspoken demand" to "survive *it*", the "trauma" (Belnap, p.116). The following quote captures this journey:

The child speaks what their parent could not. He or she recognizes how their own experience has been authored, how one has been authorized, if unconsciously, to carry their parents' injury into the future. In rising above the remnants of one's ancestors' trauma, one helps to heal future generations (Castelloe, 2012).

Security first here

*Shall I continue editing as normal then? And are you
actually going to let someone read this?
(Inner editor, Conversation with my inner editor).*

Intruders invite me to old stories and reminders of trauma from which I yearn for protection. My initial steps towards an autoethnographic exploration of the research topic therefore evoked defences, intrapsychic wars and unconscious conflicts. Understandably, such an endeavour represented a disturbance to my psychic equilibrium that elicited a protective defensive response. Initially, I perceived a conflict between myself and my inner editor which resulted in one of my first pieces of autoethnographic writing (Hadjiosif et al., 2023). However, the version I submitted was cut abruptly, with only the first third of the written piece making it to my supervisor's email inbox. I was later shocked at how violent this act was: why has part of me ruthlessly cut part of the conversation? Part of me apparently already knew that I was venturing along what would be a tumultuous path. I recalled a vague memory that the part I cut was related to my bi-racial identity and experiences of racial discrimination.

I have the sense of needing to report myself and my behaviour. I tell my research supervisor about the silencing, not the content. I find my supervisor's response reassuring. Can I listen to his encouragement to respect the work of parts of myself to protect me?

It turns out this would be a challenge. I thought I knew better than my 'protector parts' (Schwartz, 2023), making frequent self-demands that nothing remain outside my awareness. Of course, for anyone else, I'd have suggested a gentler path, but self-compassion was an attitude I was still learning how to cultivate. I was still learning how "going to war against protector parts only makes them stronger" whereas "...listening to them and loving them...helps them heal and transform" (Schwartz, 2023, p72). At times, it felt like a clandestine inner war had re-surfaced. My inner editor certainly shared XS's stance when he said:

Security first here
(XS, Character Summons, p. 57).

Given the context of my exploration of intergenerational trauma, this felt apt. I view my previous engagement with immersive daydreaming as a creative survival strategy that promoted a sense of protection, of safety. The inner editor attempted to warn me of what would be several years of having to confront challenges relating to my experiences of being othered in relation to my intersectional identity, a possible resurfacing of my inner protection from full awareness of painful experiences of marginalisation, discrimination and the impact of social inequalities on my life. This began to feel like a primary ethical dilemma and was something I began to explore further in personal therapy. Gaining a sense of safety was important here. Not only personal safety through self-care and self-compassion, but relational connection and safety. This had implications for therapeutic practice and risk assessment: whilst personal and concrete self-care strategies are incredibly helpful, they suffer if they miss a crucial aspect of safety: the relational.

Cultural racial complexes

While the inner editor and my protector parts appear to be protecting me from the full extent of such remembering and awareness, I further consider what Turner (2021) refers to as “intersecting layering of privilege” (p. 20), which brings into focus my privilege alongside my otherness. I also begin to make sense of intruders through Jungian theory, exploring how “unresolved parental complexes” are “passed via the intergenerational level” (Brewster, 2019, p.15). Exploring Jungian ideas around racial complexes, Brewster (2019) notes how:

Complexes – actual traumatised aspects of our psyche – reinforce a disconnection with the archetype of the Self. It is only through conscious affirmative working of an alienated ego burdened with psychological complex issues that the aspect of the psyche that seeks balance, through compensatory activity, can become more energised... (p. 17).

Brewster (2019) critiques some of Jung's original writings on unconscious processes in relation to racial differences and describes instead a cultural racial

complex that “embodies all I have inherited due to this life – personal associations, the lives of my ancestors and archetypal patterns of all that has come before” (p. 19), further elucidating how “our complexes hide behind and within Shadow and whatever archetypal core energy encompasses them until they choose to no longer remain hidden” (p. 18).

As much as I tried to make sense of my fantasy world in the context of my own personal experience and psychological factors, this autoethnographic journey highlighted and problematised reduction of fantasy world engagement to solely intrapsychic processes. I begin to make more room for my family and ancestral background, and sociocultural discourses and contexts my family and I had been exposed to and regulated by. I begin to perceive of intruders less as getting in the way and more as showing me a way. This manifests through the intricate interplay between personal experiences, ancestral legacies and symbolic/fantasy representations. Therefore, one major implication of the present research is that context is crucial for understanding experiences at the intersection of developmental trauma and immersive daydreaming. Fantasy world content divorced from the sociocultural and historical forces from which it emerges can only partly illuminate subjectivity, which is the locus of autoethnographic scholarship.

Lens 2 - Moving between: Echoes of displacement

The lens of *Moving Between* captures a willingness to explore, engage with and develop awareness of the dynamic dance between fantasy and reality. It explores the intersections of collapse, a blurring between the construction of fantasy and reality as separate and distinct. Throughout the research, I notice how I sometimes succumb to a binary distinction of internal and external, reality and fantasy, a theme echoed within the research literature in ideas of living a “parallel life” (Somer et al., 2016a, p.563) – an everyday life and an inner, fantasy life. My relational experiences and exposure to art and stories fuelled my fantasy world. I often observed the dynamic interplay between relational experiences, interpersonal trauma, art, fiction, music, stories and immersive daydreaming. *Moving Between* therefore reflects processes of bringing curiosity to what emerges at junctions where reality and fantasy meet and dance together, where boundaries between them become flexible and fluid. Exploring *Moving Between* leads to an awareness of processes of personal significance and potential cultural significance as I became curious about broader contexts impacting my relationship/s with immersive daydreaming and developmental trauma. It becomes clear that the binary distinction of fantasy and reality delimits the complexity of human experience and consciousness. Thus, whilst I still employ these distinctions at times, I seek to explore and speak to the intersection of my everyday life and fantasy life: the intricate relationships and connections between my daily, external reality and my inner fantasy world.

In this section, I discuss *Moving Between* in relation to the implications identified within the present research regarding creativity and the value and irreducibility of immersive daydreaming, arguing that some current conceptualisations, including literature on MD (e.g. Somer et al., 2017), pathologize what may be creative responses to social isolation, trauma and adversity. This raises implications relating to how psychotherapists and counselling psychologists may best support clients seeking support with immersive daydreaming and the impact of trauma.

The pathologization of immersive daydreaming

Through my engagement with online communities dedicated to discussion of 'maladaptive' daydreaming (MD), I often encounter ideas such as:

Maladaptive daydreaming is a CURSE!

Maladaptive daydreaming has destroyed my life!

The strength of these convictions evokes a visceral response in me. At times, my general unhappiness with my life and my self is hurled full force at the fantasy world: I blame it for everything. Other times, in despair, I feel like my fantasy world is a prison, I feel displaced. But is it a curse? I really have to ask myself if I feel this way about something that is also so precious to me, that has been part of my life for decades. I wrestle with this for some time. Fantasy engagement might have felt like an 'addiction' (Pietkiewicz et al., 2018, p. 838) at times. Maybe I was trying to "escape painful reality" (Pietkiewicz et al., 2018, p. 841). But my fantasy world, and relationship with it, is too complex to be understood solely in relation to the relationship one might have with alcohol or substances. Whilst I understand that some people describe distress and difficulties associated with immersive daydreaming, I do not believe that psychiatric discourse characterised by reductionist approaches that medicalise human suffering are helpful in making sense of my own experiences.

Current research argues that immersive daydreaming can be viewed as distinct from so-called 'maladaptive' daydreaming in relation to the associated 'distress and dysfunction' experienced, thus it is not immersive daydreaming and fantasy world engagement itself that is being proposed as a "mental health disorder" (e.g. Bigelsen et al., 2016, p.254) or dissociative 'disorder' (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2022). But there are still many problematic factors to this conceptualisation, not least the broader systemic patterns within mainstream western psychiatric and psychological discourse of individualising, medicalising and pathologizing ordinary human distress and suffering (Parker, 2018). With its language of "disorder and deficit" (Joseph, 2017, p.24), psychiatry and clinical psychology's alignment with medical model ideology, framing immersive

daydreaming as 'maladaptive' had a deeply scarring impact on my relationship with my fantasy world, with my Self and with my sense of artistic freedom and creativity. If I ever thought immersive daydreaming were a prison, identifying with narratives within MD research felt like I'd entered another prison, but one without any of the soul, vitality or heart of my fantasy world. Engaging with MD research left me feeling displaced from my own intuitive sense of knowing and being.

Prior to the emergence of MD research, having never met anyone with similar experiences, I had sadly come to the (incorrect) conclusion that maybe something is wrong with me, maybe I'm not normal. I often wondered, would I, like my maternal grandmother, receive the stamp of dis-approval, of difference, from psychiatry and the institutions upholding its power to define and control? I had already internalised medicalised discourses of distress, with their false claims of using a scientific approach to identifying 'abnormal' and 'maladaptive' behaviour that is consequently deemed to be inappropriate (Parker, Georgaca, Harper, McLaughlin & Stowell-Smith, 1995). It dawned on me that my sense of internalised pathologization through the psy-disciplines, was multi-generational:

My grandmother suddenly leaves during my early adolescence, I have no idea where she has gone. I feel so worried. They tell me they have taken her to hospital because they think she is 'mentally ill'. The child me wonders where they have taken her. Will they take me too one day?

Wrestling with my history of complex trauma but empowered by Wiccan philosophy and countless other people I met along the way, I made it through my twenties on a journey of self-acceptance, self-development, healing and recovery. This journey somewhat came to a halt when I encountered research literature on MD. I trawl through MD research and online communities, my heart sinking as I feel that my worst fears are being realised: fantasy-engagement, my fantasy world that I have grown to accept, despite it being a love - hate relationship, has a name. It has a name! But most of what I read within the research confirm my fears that something is 'wrong' with me and I'm not 'normal':

narratives that positioned my fantasy world engagement within language such as ‘psychopathology’, ‘maladaptive’, ‘disorder’, ‘psychiatric condition’ (e.g. Somer et al., 2017). My sense of defectiveness and shame entrench. Along with it, an internalised sense of difference, of being othered. I spend a long time ruminating over these fears and my sense of difference. Part of me still asks: But aren’t we all different? Who and what is ‘normal’ anyway? Is there even such a thing? I find the work of Gabor Maté (2022) refreshing in addressing the problematic nature of constructions of normality and linking this to the inherent problems of western healthcare systems and medicalised culture. According to Maté (2022):

... what passes for normal in our society is neither healthy nor natural, and that to meet modern society’s criteria for normality is, in many ways, to conform to requirements that are profoundly abnormal in regard to our Nature-given needs - which is to say, unhealthy and harmful on the physiological, mental and even spiritual levels (p.8).

I feel privileged and thankful to have learned how problematic some of my previous interpretations were and to locate them, in part, to dominant social discourses around the medicalisation and pathologization of human experience and suffering (e.g. Parker, 2018; Parker et al., 1995). My fear that something was ‘wrong’ with me, or that I was not ‘normal’, was a common response to pathologizing discourses. I do however identify as a trauma survivor and have experienced significant difficulties in my life relating to trauma I’ve experienced. But psychiatric discourse may label elements of such experience as ‘mental health difficulties’ and historically has focused on the question: what is wrong with you? I find it refreshing that, after over a century of pathologizing human experience and suffering, the psy-disciplines are, albeit slowly and problematically, recognising that more relevant questions are:

What happened to you?
(Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p. 8).

and:

Who was there for you when that happened?
(Maté, 2023).

Parker (2007) argues that medicalised and pathologizing discourses of human suffering and distress may contribute to a sense of alienation and disconnection, therefore compounding rather than alleviating distress. Acknowledging some of what happened to me was an important first step prior to leaning further into sources of support and resources I found helpful rather than pathologizing. Such a journey is clearly different for everyone. For me, psychotherapy can offer a space to acknowledge and explore *what happened*, and any embodied emotional impact of this, within a therapeutic relationship that offers relational safety, connection, hopefully facilitating (re-)learning. But psychotherapy is only one way, and many people find validation through artistic expressions of the kind of traumas they carry. Rather than advocating psychotherapy for all, it felt relevant just to find *something therapeutic*.

The irreducibility of immersive daydreaming

I begin to lose interest in, and wander away from, MD discourse. I walk away from models of psychology as a science that produce paper after paper on 'maladaptive' daydreaming. I stop reading them. I clumsily stumble instead towards art, and artists who appeared to know much more about fantasy engagement. Walking away feels liberating. So, I keep walking. I become empowered by other women who have also experienced the power of art to facilitate transformation in the face of adversity (e.g. Abramovic, 2018; Chadwick, 1986; Chin, 2019). Below I discuss reflections, questions and broader considerations that have emerged and left me with a sense of the irreducibility of immersive daydreaming. This is discussed within five sub-sections entitled: *The value of immersive daydreaming*, *"I call myself an escape-artist"* (Hersey, 2022), *Music as a portal*, *Fantasy as a dance* and *Fantasy as a site of liberation*. These sub-sections represent a journeying process of Moving Between. Moving between reflections, insights and conundrums. Moving between personal insights and cultural implications. Moving between sitting with

a sense of alienation and displacement whilst also noticing the seedlings of a sense of home.

The value of immersive daydreaming

By exploring immersive daydreaming beyond a framework of distress and dysfunction, I initially hoped to explore any associated benefits or rewarding aspects of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma. I considered how I could make sense of my experiences of immersive daydreaming as highly rewarding, transformative and profoundly healing.

It is commonly agreed upon that an optimal level of arousal is important to our ability to engage in creativity and play (van der Kolk, 2023; Winnicott, 1971). Spontaneous, creative engagement and expression are capacities that appear to shrink and hide away in the face of relational trauma, hence why safety and stabilisation are often important when working therapeutically with trauma (e.g. van der Kolk, 2023). Playfulness can be associated with risk-taking, which can be challenging when there is an actual or perceived sense of threat or danger. Theories of developmental trauma and fantasy spoke, unsurprisingly, to the possible development of immersive daydreaming as a response to trauma that facilitated a sense of coping and survival (Somer & Herscu, 2017). However, many of these theories fail to capture my personal lived experience of immersive daydreaming. Whilst I partially agree with theories that assert that a fantasy world provides an escape in response to trauma that may also promote emotion regulation (e.g. Somer 2002), I struggle with feeling that the complexity of my inner fantasy world is being reduced and diminished to an “effective coping strategy” pathologized as “maladaptive” (Somer, 2002, p. 197). As Jung argues:

Not the artist alone, but every creative individual owes all that is greatest in his life to fantasy....without the play of fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable (cited in Wood, 2022, p.89).

Utilising active imagination within the *Character Summons* highlighted the pivotal role of my fantasy world and fantasy world characters in providing me with a wealth of insight, validation and support. Consistent with Jung’s (cited in

Chodorow, 1997) assertion, fantasy world characters appear to provide a resource whereby I can “gain access to the contents of the unconscious” (p. 10). This subsequently led to personal insights, development, growth and transformation. In the *Character Summons*, I engaged in two of the stages of active imagination as suggested by Jung (cited in Chodorow, 1997): firstly “letting the unconscious come up” and secondly, “coming to terms with the unconscious” (p.10). On reflection, my struggles with my inner editor may represent moving between rational, critical attention buoyed by years of mainstream academic psychology training and making way for or “giv[ing] free rein to fantasy” (Chodorow, 1997, p.10). The latter involved taking steps towards trusting in my own inner compass, a stance that autoethnographic research invokes (Hadjiosif et al., 2023).

“I call myself an escape artist”

I often found that ‘escape’ was constructed as a villain within psychological discourse. But I did not experience immersive daydreaming as a means to an end. Fiction is frequently honoured for its power to provide us with an escape, though it is generally not considered solely through the lens of escape. In thinking about discourses of escape within MD research, I wonder: When did escape become the villain? Does this reflect broader dialogues and discourse between and within the disciplines of science and art? I encounter the following quote by Neil Gaiman who speaks, in part, to the dilemma I perceive:

As JRR Tolkien reminded us, the only people who inveigh against escape are jailers (Gaiman, 2013).

Views of MD as solely a means of escape feel restrictive. Strawbridge (2016) highlights how a “natural science vision has inspired psychology, particularly in Britain and America” (p.25). In line with a natural science inspired psychology, emphasis is placed on a reductionist, causal, asocial approach to human experience, suffering and distress. Within research literature adhering to such an approach, immersive daydreaming as a form of ‘escape’ is framed as a serious problem, possibly on a ‘spectrum’, but at the ‘severe’ end, it is suggested that ‘escape into fantasy’ is a disorder requiring psychiatric diagnosis (Soffer-

Dudek & Somer, 2022; Somer et al., 2017). Alternatively, when I look elsewhere, to the world of art and artists, for example, escape is often framed as a kind of solution, a kind of freedom. For example, I find some of Tricia Hersey's (2022) arguments liberating:

I call myself an escape artist as an ode to those before me who found a way to subvert systems to gain autonomy, agency and justice (p. 125).

A pivotal shift occurs when I let go of ideas of my previous engagement with immersive daydreaming as 'merely escape' that is only a problem. Isn't fantasy, like fiction, an evolutionary, historical achievement that enables humans to travel light years, emotionally and psychologically, from our current context, enabling us to explore, learn, understand and transcend individual and cultural experiences? Fiction also enables us to imagine worlds and ways of living free from oppression (Le Guin, 2004), which is particularly helpful to those that belong to marginalised and/or 'imprisoned' groups. I explore engagement with fantasy as a human achievement that is a necessary precondition to social change (Ormrod, 2014). I wonder about the ways in which engagement with immersive daydreaming is different to engagement with other works of fiction. For many people who consume fiction every day, each night before bed, fiction is a favourite past-time, but who would write this fiction if 'extensive fantasy activity' becomes medicalised and labelled as a psychiatric condition?

I ponder if any differences really relate to reported 'distress and dysfunction'. So long as the activity is socially sanctioned in some way, be it art, science or fantasy engagement, it seems to be considered acceptable. It occurs to me: Is it about production - do we need to produce something for fantasy-engagement to be granted legitimacy? My reflections are echoed by Ramon (1986, cited in Parker et al., 1995) who, speaking of the emerging relationship between 'psychopathy' and production in mainstream English psychiatry, argues that "a need for cohesion and productivity during the war led to the expansion of the 'psy-complex', and to the psychologization of several types of socially undesirable, non-productive behaviours" (p.83). Parker et al. (1995) further

argue how this reflected a strengthened relationship between psychology and productivity in which subjectivity is increasingly related to productivity.

Music as a portal

Reflecting on the *Character Summons*, I am intrigued by several comments made regarding *portals*. This stance toward movement in and out of fantasy feels neutral, it feels playful; a non-pathologizing way of describing elements of a fundamentally creative capacity:

*Of course, music as the portal
(Agnes Obel, Character Summons, p. 57).*

Agnes' comment sparks my curiosity around how imagination facilitates the transformation of trauma through the construction of a fantasy world that promotes safety. This had often left me with a sense of healing and recovery. The idea of portals resonates with themes within psychological literature around the concept of dissociation (e.g. Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2022). I had experienced the power of the fantasy world to transport me elsewhere when encountering intruders or traumatic material emerging into consciousness. In spending five years on this autoethnographic journey, exploring some deeply challenging content, I appreciated the emergence of this reference to a *portal* within the summons. The use of this word felt like a small act of resistance, supporting Parker's (2007) encouragement of "no agreed correct terminology for psychological phenomena" (p. 204) which he argues may entail a "reclaiming and reworking of psychological terms" (p. 204) that may be "part of the struggle to put our individual psychology in social context so that we can reflect on it and change it ourselves" (Parker, 2007, p. 205). Whilst fantasy sometimes felt like an escape from aversive circumstances, a way to regulate my emotions, cope and survive, it also served as a past-time or hobby, related to my creative writing, and a means of inner exploration and way to process my experiences. After decades of fantasy engagement, it felt tied to my identity and experience of living in the world.

Therapeutic approaches that champion the healing power of the arts may be particularly relevant to exploring experiences at the intersection of immersive

daydreaming and trauma. For example, Carolyn Kenny spoke to my own views in relation to music and provided a sense of validation in my journey away from more mainstream and medicalised approaches. Carolyn Kenny was “a music therapist, professor, musician, researcher and Native American scholar” (Swamy, 2018, p.1946) who explored and connected to her Indigenous heritage, became actively involved in Indigenous communities and used these experiences to inform her professional work (Swamy, 2018). Swamy (2018) describes how Carolyn Kenny:

...saw the role of sound and music as the link between the everyday world and the spirit world, the human and the cosmic. Through its language of myth, symbolism and metaphor, she considered music a bridge between the inner and outer, past and present, the natural and supernatural world (Swamy, 2018).

Swamy (2018) further discusses how Carolyn Kenny spoke to and challenged the danger of positivistic and oppressive research designs and the marginalisation of intersectional identities and transpersonal approaches. Encountering her writing prompted me to re-consider autoethnography as providing an opportunity for freedom of expression and creativity that allowed me to venture further into exploring the role of imagination, music and the arts than I might have done with a traditional research methodology. I reflect on the pivotal and powerful role of music and its capacity for healing in relation to my immersive daydreaming experiences and my exasperation at the reductionist inclusion of music as a ‘factor’ within the MDS-16 (Soffer-Dudek et al., 2021).

Fantasy as a dance

Fantasy feels like a dance that is a safe, creative, active choice, fuelled by but seemingly apart from trauma and conflict. Exploring a broad range of literature, my interests around storytelling, myth, archetypes, creativity and expressive arts all coalesced around Jungian Psychology. Jung contributed to the birth of the arts therapies and his ideas around active imagination are found within many arts-based psychotherapeutic approaches (Swan-Foster, 2020). I come to view

this as particularly pertinent to fantasy engagement and immersive daydreaming.

For example, Malchiodi (2020) offers a comprehensive model that speaks to the healing capacity of the arts and imagination whilst not neglecting current interdisciplinary understanding of psychological and neurobiological issues relevant to traumatic stress. In line with some other approaches to working with trauma, Malchiodi (2020) stresses the value of “bottom-up approaches that capitalise on the sensory-based qualities of movement, music and sound, visual arts, dramatic re-enactment, and other forms of creative communication” (p. xi). Expressive arts methods including, for example, movement, music, creative writing, improvisation and play, offer an approach to working with trauma that speaks to the importance of implicit and visceral experiences of trauma that may be difficult to access solely through verbal means. The strength of this framework is the integration an expressive-arts based approach with current thinking around trauma-informed practice and current neurobiological, psychological and psychotherapeutic research and literature. This is unlike some other therapeutic approaches utilising the arts that rely primarily on the therapeutic qualities of arts-based activities without a holistic understanding of the impact of traumatic stress.

I notice parallels between some of my transformative experiences of immersive daydreaming and Malchiodi’s (2020) integrative framework. For example, immersive daydreaming may often entail accessing and engaging with visual imagery, music, dance, creative writing and storied and artistic expression. This is a significant factor regarding some of the more challenging remnants of trauma being held within the body. Additionally, the storied expression, processing, insight and transformation gained through years of creative writing in relation to my own fantasy world had allowed me to grapple with trauma narratives and provided reparation when I didn’t have the words to describe my experience, or I was too overwhelmed to speak about my traumas. Challenging, traumatic content that initially remained hard to acknowledge, integrate and vocalise, was held within fantasy, as my unconscious attempted acts of mastery and transformation of unconscious and somatic experience into verbal

narratives. Finally, there was the imagined relationships and connections with fantasy world characters and all the many relational experiences, particularly those related to remnants of relational trauma and their manifestation within current relationships. Malchiodi's (2020; 2023) critique of dominant talking therapy approaches is a reminder of the potential pitfalls of working with trauma without an integrative approach that, on the one hand, acknowledges inherent capacity and strengths to recover from traumatic experience and, on the other hand, taps into one of our oldest and most fundamental resources for recovering from traumatic experience: human imagination.

Therapeutic relationships are often seen as a dance (e.g. Cozolino, 2021). Similarly, I came to view the intersections of trauma and immersive daydreaming in a similar way: as a dance. Winnicott famously argued "playing is itself a therapy" (cited in Lenormand, 2018, p.82), wherein we can discover the self through creative experience (Winnicott, 1971). Whilst Lenormand (2018) cautions us to observe the function of play within context before assuming play or playing is universally therapeutic, perhaps the same can be considered in terms of immersive daydreaming, rather than fetishizing or adopting an overly pessimistic attitude towards it, we must consider its function in context. Malchiodi's work (2020, 2023) also raises questions relevant to the potential undervaluing of expressive arts-based approaches within, for example, settings where Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approaches are the norm. A further implication of the present inquiry therefore relates to the benefits of non-pathologizing, strengths-based and expressive arts-based approaches to working therapeutically with clients presenting with difficulties relating to trauma and immersive daydreaming. Given CoP's original attempt to distinguish itself from an over-reliance on medical model approaches, CoP, with its non-pathologizing framework, and emphasis on creativity and professional artistry, might be well-suited to contributing to and advocating for approaches that are theoretically consistent in terms of integration whilst also informed by current understandings of trauma and its impact. Furthermore, there is perhaps scope for collaborating with expressive arts-based practitioners who may also seek alternatives to the "McDonaldisation of psychotherapy", characterised by values of "predictability, control, calculability and efficiency" (Goodman, 2015, p.89).

Fantasy as a site of liberation

Zooming out again, I wonder: But what of the intergenerational work ethic I observed within my ancestry research? Within multiple family lines, so many relatives and family stories I encounter revolve around work: from ideas of working to get ahead, working for family pride to working in harsh conditions and even 'work' as enforced labour and slavery (Foster 2017; Olusoga, 2016). That ancestral records themselves only prioritise specific information feels telling. Birth, baptism, census, marriage and death certificates and records often privilege certain information about a person's life: name, date of birth, geographical location, marriage, occupation and death date, as shown below.

This image is redacted

Image showing Baptism record of one of my ancestors¹⁴

¹⁴ Sourced from www.ancestry.com

I imagine how richer my searches might be if there was information about a person's leisure interests or hobbies. I begin to understand periods of fantasy engagement as times of active rest. Without periods of fantasy engagement throughout my life, I might have struggled to access such deep states of rest through alternative means. Years of fantasy-engagement, alongside interest in the arts, whether it be music, dance, creative writing, had supported me to cultivate an attitude to my fantasy life where I was accessing the more playful, curious, exploratory parts of myself. Sometimes this had felt vital, for example, when my days were dominated by my 'protective' and 'drive' modes (Irons & Beaumont, 2017) and the impact of traumatic stress (van der Kolk, 2003). Immersive daydreaming offered a deeper level of physical rest with reduced external stimulation offering me opportunity to play, rest, explore parts of myself, learn to connect with my body and feel my feelings.

Tricia Hersey's work feels relevant here. Hersey describes herself as a performance artist, writer, theatre maker, activist, theologian and daydreamer (Hersey, n.d.). According to her website, she "created the 'rest is resistance' and the 'rest as reparations' frameworks, founded The Nap Ministry and is a global pioneer and originator of the movement to understand the liberatory power of rest" (Hersey, n.d.). Hersey asks us to:

...study the ways in which our divinity, higher purpose and ability to resist violent and oppressive systems are intertwined with how we access our rest, imagination and DreamSpace (Hersey, n.d.).

Whilst fantasy time is not productive in terms of the broader neo-liberal socio-cultural context, without fantasy-based rest, I doubt I'd have been able to sustain my years of employment, particularly in the years where I was struggling with the impact of trauma. Why do I feel I need to defend time spent engaged with fantasy? To defend the right to fantasise? To play? To rest? Hersey (2022) argues that 'rest is resistance', part of her work towards political and social justice movement, describing how this work came from her everyday

experience of the “machine-level pace of our culture and surviving the trauma of the terror of poverty, exhaustion, White supremacy, and capitalism” (p. 3). I think back to my ancestors, the intergenerational work ethic, and systems of oppressions that construct a focus on labour, on productivity. I recall reading of how my maternal grandfather’s ancestors had worked hard through multiple generations to save a sum of money to pass to their children once they died (Foster, 2017). I wonder, on my biological father’s side, of the intergenerational impact of slavery. From a broader ancestral perspective, time spent engaged in fantasy feels like an intergenerational achievement. Encountering Hersey’s (2022) ideas felt liberating. Maybe part of me was seeking permission to rest all along? Hersey (2022) describes rest as:

...somatic work – connecting you to your body and mind. Rest is anything that slows you down enough to connect with your body and your mind. It is an ethos that holds firm to the body as a site of liberation. Active rest is also valuable rest. In active rest your body can move, swim, walk, dance, and tap into a portal (p.120).

Increasing pathologization towards fantasy engagement reflects broader patterns of the marginalisation of the arts, and therefore leisure, within modern life. On the other hand, fantasy-activity can be an act of resistance against systems of oppression and narratives that define and control. I move from pathologizing discourses to viewing fantasy as a site of liberation. A site of liberation where conscious and unconscious dynamics and processes can be explored and new worlds imagined, enabling resistance towards intersecting axes of oppression and a kind of freedom; freedom to sense-make and take stock of self in context. Fantasy has a sense of autonomy from human systems, despite being inextricably connected to them. There is something within and beyond fantasy that feels expansive, nourishing and containing. Despite the challenges, the autoethnographic forest enables me to develop a depth of appreciation for immersive daydreaming engagement, to cultivate love and respect for fantasy. I wonder: Do I owe it to my ancestors to rest, to feel the privilege of having time and space and an environment in which I

can rest, fantasise and dream, explore my sense of being in the world? I come to view my fantasy world as a gift from my ancestors based upon generations of hard work.

Pathologizing discourses around MD left me feeling displaced from my own intuitive sense of knowing and being. They appeared to mask some of the broader sociocultural and systemic factors that were at play such as an emphasis on productivity at the expense of a prioritising of rest, art and leisure. Binary distinctions between fantasy and reality further reinforce an individualistic, reductionist view of fantasy, delimiting the complexity of human experience and relationships and their embeddedness within broader contexts. This serves to create echoes of displacement from fundamental human needs and capacities, to play, to rest, to explore and imagine, to create. Moving between supported a more fluid exploration of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma that privileged creativity, music, play and the arts. Moving between also allowed me to arrive at the personally and culturally significant insight that fantasy, like rest (Hersey, 2022), can be a site of liberation. Interestingly, this link between movement and liberation, namely whether one permits the other, is something that future research might want to explore further. This raises implications relating to how psychotherapists and counselling psychologists might support clients seeking support with immersive daydreaming and the impact of trauma. Relational, trauma informed, non-pathologizing, strengths-based approaches that make space for expressive arts and consideration of broader systemic factors and social-justice informed principles, seem promising.

Lens 3 - Invitations: The black bird

The *Character Summons* leaves me concluding that my fantasy world has once again aided my survival through navigating unconscious processes that lead to personal growth and transformation. The lens of Invitations reflects opportunities within the expanse of fantasy to explore something outside of awareness, sometimes of great personal significance. Invitations feel bound to personal and collective unconscious processes, offering a potential transformative power through uncanny or numinous invitations: synchronicities, epiphanies, personal insights and increased self-awareness. They are imbued with a particular sense of being more than the thing itself, triggering a visceral sense of curiosity and numinosity. Decades of fantasy world engagement taught me that such invitations were generally meaningful if I listened carefully to their whispers. Akin to psychotherapeutic process, I did not always understand their relevance, nor were they always desirable. However, if they were helpful, expansive, facilitating my self-awareness and personal development. Given the many parallels I noticed between invitations and psychotherapeutic process, implications for psychotherapeutic work appear numerous. Therefore, in this section, I explore invitations in relation to the dialogical unconscious and the role of the intuitive and imaginative. I illustrate this by sharing a personally profound synchronicity I experienced during the present autoethnographic research, relating this to the healing power of imagery and symbolism and my subsequent insight and awareness relating to my bi-racial identity and sense of “homeness” (Kinouani, 2021, p.62).

Jung’s writings (Chodorow, 1997) on active imagination and unconscious processes are particularly helpful in my understanding of invitations. Jung (1960/1981) describes the unconscious as:

... not simply the unknown, it is rather the unknown psychic ...
the unconscious depicts an extremely fluid state of affairs:
everything of which I know, but of which I am not at the
moment thinking; everything perceived by my senses, but not
noted by my conscious mind; everything which, involuntarily
and without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember,
want, and do; all the future things that are taking shape in me

and will sometimes come to consciousness: all this is the content of the unconscious (as cited in Brewster, 2019, p. 60).

However, as Swan-Foster (2020) argues:

Jungian psychology is not just a theory but also an attitude they hold toward their inner life, a realm that is greatly felt through personal story and images so it can be embodied and eventually carried back into daily life (p.69).

It is this latter point and attitude toward inner life, that I would like to expand upon, in a sense answering the invitation of depth psychology.

The dialogical unconscious

The *Character Summons* was unplanned, emerging following comments by my supervisor and others about using dialogues within autoethnographic research. My encounter with Surrealism at ‘*The Milk of Dreams*’ exhibition greatly expanded my interpretation of the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ artistic exploration, inspiring and empowering me to lean further into the creative space autoethnography provides. Though I felt I had full awareness of my process whilst writing the *Character Summons*, I reflected that my levels of consciousness had fluctuated throughout. Within ‘*Part three: The prologue*’ (p.65), I experienced a kind of ego dissolution that Aldrich Chan (2019) refers to as a possible regression to and identification with ‘anoetic consciousness’, reflective of “implicit, procedural, affective and sensory memory” (Vandekerckhove & Panksepp, 2009, p. 1018). My knowing self (or “autonoetic consciousness”; *ibid.*) knew what was coming up regarding the prologue story, meanwhile my fantasy world characters had apparently taken seriously my request for help and commenced the task of providing me with relevant insights. I often perceive my fantasy world characters as conduits of unconscious material and this sometimes manifests as invitations. Such invitations, at times, lead to profoundly positive healing processes arising from active engagement with fantasy. Answering invitations mirrors therapeutic process, navigating conscious and unconscious material in a holding environment, gaining personal insight, meaning making and, at times, results in personal transformation (Finlay, 2015). I recall many such experiences relating to fantasy world engagement, but their

meaning had previously felt elusive. I consider my fantasy world as akin to a holding environment in which “such an environment, it is assumed, will address and heal past deprivations, enhance the patient’s ability to eventually experience his or her true self, and aid in integrating a fragmented sense of self” (Ginot, 2001, p. 419).

Whilst ideas of a holding environment are consistent with my experiences with immersive daydreaming, I ask myself: There is no therapist here, so who or what is doing the holding? Considering the ideas of ‘the dialogical self’ provides some insight. Smythe (2013) describes how ‘the dialogical self’ has gained attention in psychology since the 1990s due to the limitations associated with ideas of a “monological, encapsulated consciousness” (p.635). Rather than view the self as a discrete, separate entity, modern dialogical self-theory “construes the self as irrevocably embedded in a matrix of real and imagined dialogues with others” (p. 635). Within this context, Jung’s practice of active imagination and other work can be viewed as a dialogical approach which speaks to the idea of otherness within the self:

We all find ourselves inescapably embedded in a world of others, whose actual and virtual presence continually shapes our self-understanding in ways we cannot fail to notice. Even our most personal and private reflections are invariably saturated with the voices and perspectives of others urging us on, cajoling, criticizing, praising and pleading with us, seemingly at every turn (Smythe, 2013, p.635).

Dialogical self theory (Smythe, 2013) shares with Internal Family Systems (Schwartz, 2023) the idea of a non-unitary self - the multiplicity of the self. This becomes an ‘aha!’ moment and I further conceptualise ideas around encountering a sense of otherness within fantasy. These ideas also speak to the relevance of that which goes *beyond* the narrative, beyond, for example, the content expressed within the *Character Summons*. As Smythe (2013) argues:

...“dialogues” within the self can take place wholly unconsciously and non-discursively through non-conceptual modes of expression that reflect the deep archetypal

background of embodied life, which opens the way to an undifferentiated otherness that goes beyond relationship to a specific other (p. 643).

Smythe (2013) therefore highlights how “imaginative constructions” (p. 644), whilst not representing discursive knowledge, do facilitate “our ongoing self-understanding in endlessly creative ways” (p.644). This is echoed within depth psychology wherein transpersonal experiences within fantasy might be conceptualised as encountering archetypal forms relating to a broader field of experience and consciousness (Vaughan, 2015). Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious is: “a kind of psychological legacy shared among human beings which is composed of pre-existing patterns in the psyche” (Hamel, 2021, p. 21), formed of the instincts and archetypes (Vaughan, 2015). The emergence of such archetypes from the collective unconscious has also often been associated with dreams of a transpersonal nature which can contribute to personal transformation (Hamel, 2021).

Fantasy world engagement sometimes resembles swimming in the ocean at varying depths with my eyes closed. Akin to reports in current literature (Somer et al., 2016a), at certain times, and seemingly unpredictably, there is a strong sense of presence, which is what I experienced within *‘Part three: The prologue’* (p. 65) of the *Character Summons* - the mode of engagement felt different. My interest here is in the ocean currents I encounter wherein I venture beyond the personal into a more archetypal or transpersonal terrain. Invitations from fantasy appear to manifest within this terrain, willing me to see and explore, to feel, relate and understand, leading me to explore hitherto unknown parts of myself in connection to others. Yet it was ineffable: how was I to articulate or express such content in a meaningful way?

Creative modes of expression and art could provide a means. Jung explained that creative pieces he produced during his experiments with active imagination were “not art”, but “nature” (Jung, 1961, p. 186). However, his aversion to “honouring the artistic value of his patients’ expressions” (p.32) and wish to distinguish himself from the identity of ‘artist’ may have reflected his broader

concerns in relation to his identity as a scientist (Wojtkowski, 2009, p.26). Jung further cautioned us to distinguish between fantasy and active imagination:

Fantasy is mere nonsense, a phantasm, a fleeting impression; but imagination is an active, purposeful creation... A fantasy is more or less your own invention and remains on the surface of personal things and conscious expectations. But active imagination, as the term denotes, means that the images have a life of their own and that the symbolic events develop according to their own logic – that is, of course, if your conscious reason does not interfere (Jung, 1968, p.192).

My experiences of immersive daydreaming are more consistent with Jung's idea of active imagination rather than fantasy per se. Unfortunately, this is complicated by the fact that I, and others, sometimes use the terms 'fantasy' and 'active imagination' interchangeably. Exploring and appreciating the nature of the unconscious as dialogical and the self as non-unitary has been of enormous help when approaching material generated through immersive daydreaming and within the *Character Summons*. However, the interference of "conscious reason" (Jung, 1968, p.192) feels like a significant obstacle, as I discuss below.

The intuitive and the imaginative

I begin to explore a tension between my rational, logical self and my intuitive, imaginative self. I come to understand this tension in relation to my exposure to discourses I encountered at '*The Milk of Dreams*' exhibition (Alemani, 2022a) which "challenged the White male human as the seat of rationality and celebrated artists whose work was previously marginalised, seeking also to celebrate and highlight instead indigenous forms of knowledge and how everyone can change, transform and become something else" (Alemani, 2022b). Like an ethnographic field trip, the exhibition - an invitation I encountered whilst listening to the BBC Radio 4 and answered as my partner and I went there - offered the re-nourishment and re-enchantment that fuelled the *Character Summons*. By evoking the "tacit dimension" that Strawbridge (2016) highlights, involving "...skilled, imaginative integration rather than formal reasoning....the value of dialogue within an open community in fostering creativity" (p.28), '*The Milk of Dreams*' offered something I hadn't realised I'd

been looking for: a multi-cultural celebration of the creativity of female artists whose art had previously been marginalised.

Despite my aim to “venture out into the woods without a compass” (Ellis, 2004, p.120), I often arrive at a place of knowing, a kind of certainty accompanied by rational, logical thinking, obscuring my awareness and more intuitive, imaginative attitude. At times, this relates to the activity of my inner editor. My inner editor fits with the idea of ‘protector parts’ within IFS (Schwartz, 2023). It encourages my dependence on logic and rationality, but this often feels restrictive, obscuring potentially transformative material. Becoming more inquisitive and curious around this process encourages me to see familiar content again, as if for the first time. This resembled elements of my psychotherapeutic training in relation to fostering a sense of not-knowing, reflecting perhaps a common initial challenge among trainee psychotherapists (Cozolino, 2021). Whilst challenging at times, cultivating an attitude of not-knowing became essential to the process. There were clear barriers to letting go, to cultivating an intuitive and imaginative attitude, and this reflected broader events surrounding my research such as the Covid-19 pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis and the demands of CoP training. As Hersey (2002) suggests:

When you are exhausted, you lack clarity and the ability to see deeply. Your intuition and imagination are stifled by a culture of overworking and disconnection. You must be open to go deep into the cracks to examine and to understand (p. 121).

I begin to view my effortful, logical, rational work as just that: work. Autoethnography also requires a kind of letting go. I try to find ways in which I can let go of my sense of needing to try hard, to work hard, to make sense, to get it ‘right’. My fantasy world characters did not seem as caught up with defensively rationalising and intellectualizing. The intuitive and imaginative appeared natural for some of them. For example, I did not ‘remember’ to explicitly invite my maternal grandmother to the *Character Summons*. But how was I to make sense of a fantasy world character (Bob) inviting her into imaginal dialogue at a moment I felt stuck in response to Collin’s

comments? Was it an unconscious attempt to provide order to the stirrings of physical sensations, memories, thoughts and feelings coming up whilst writing? Within the *Character Summons*, Bob ‘steps in’, apparently responding to my call for help:

*There’s someone you forgot to invite
(Bob, Character Summons, p. 71).*

My maternal grandmother then enters the *Character Summons* dialogue, and this later becomes highly significant. Over the coming years, I experience a meaningful re-connection with her after years of no contact. Our journeys intertwine more than ever before as we both explore our ancestral lineage together. This was the first stepping stone to a much broader re-connection and connection I experienced with family. Much of this occurred when, (re-)prompted by the *Character Summons*, I fell down an ancestry rabbit hole wherein family ancestry research and connecting with extended, distant and very distant family, and other ancestry researchers, became my primary focus. The *Character Summons*, in which I asked my fantasy world characters for help, leads to an unconscious confrontation that offered transformation and also hinted, in part, at a possible solution: archaeology.

My own personal transformation seems to in turn create systemic ripples within my family systems. The invitation here was clear: a reconnection to and with family. I only became conscious of how the seedlings of this transformation were present within the *Character Summons* and unconsciously a significant time later. Overwhelmed by a mass of communications from immediate, extended and distant family in relation to ancestry research, focused on the now shared task of identifying the family of my maternal great grandmother who was an orphan, I have an embodied sense of meaningful connection, of belonging. I stop and ask myself: How did I get here again? Was this what I had unconsciously been yearning for all along? The lesson I took from this was clear: listening carefully and compassionately, trusting and attending to my fantasy world characters and material was a springboard for significant healing and transformation. My experiences here led me to reflect on and dig into

fantasy-based experiences as dynamic, embodied and dialogical: transformational. A pivotal point was encountering a painting by Leonora Carrington, shown below, which, for me, closely resembles a photograph depicting the orphanage where my great-grandmother grew up:



Darvault (Carrington, 1950) © Estate of Leonora Carrington / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2024.

This invitation highlights my own sense of identification with the idea of *orphan* as I struggle to grapple with my disconnection from my biological father's family and Black Caribbean heritage. An unintended consequence of this is deeper (re-)connection to my known family and heritage. This reconnection seems to directly related to the *Character Summons* and engagement with fantasy world characters. Within a broader context of literature suggesting that some people who self-identify with MD report struggling with balancing 'real' and 'imagined' relationships, the reconnection I experienced with family might be an important consideration for future research.

The Black Bird

The idea that I had forgotten to invite, or avoided invitations to re-consider aspects of myself and my experience within the *Character Summons* also relates to a deeper conflict I experienced in relation to my identity. Re-reading and reflecting on the *Character Summons*, I tiptoe further into the labyrinth of issues relating to my Black Caribbean and White British bi-racial identity. I have the sense of being guided by characters to explore this challenging, maze-like material. Fantasy world characters pose unexpected and spontaneous questions:

And the prologue is whose story then?
[Charlene and Selina exchange stares]
(Selina, *Character Summons*, p. 65).

I wonder: how does it make sense for Selina to pose this question within my writing? Of course, the prologue is her story: I wrote it! When I was younger, I would sometimes wonder, fearfully, if I'd ever been imprisoned on an island, like Selina. I hadn't. There are ways I might feel imprisoned, but I assure myself I have already explored this. At the peak of this interaction within the *Character Summons*, I experienced a bewildering sense of detachment, disconnection and emotional haziness, and what felt like ego dissolution. But I have a strong sense of connection to and trust of my characters who I felt were leading the way, offering safety and challenge. Bob continues the narrative:

And in the prologue, a bird helps a young eight-year-old girl
escape a cruel and violent prison on a remote and desolate
island...
(Bob, *Character Summons*, p. 65).

The characters do not 'reveal' anything particularly new in terms of the prologue content and plot but, akin to therapeutic process, I sense that my gaze is being directed back to it, from a different vantage point (Finlay, 2015). The characters feel most autonomous from me during '*Part three: The prologue*' (p. 65), as pre-existing plot-based content is reframed. On completing the *Character Summons*, it had not fully occurred to me what I'd done - engaged with fantasy world characters in a different way for the first time in decades, in a process of active

imagination (Chodorow, 1997) and asked my fantasy characters for help. Part of me did not really comprehend the significance of insights and meanings that were emerging, but another part of me knew all too well, as reflected in Jim's comment:

*She doesn't realise the bird has already returned her home
(Jim, Character Summons, p. 65).*

Several years later, I look back at this communication in awe and contemplate the weight the meaning of the word *home* now carries. The word *home* elicits an embodied emotional experience as the extent of the emotional, spiritual and physical impact of the journey sinks in. Was part of me looking for a sense of home all along? Bob points the way to the start of the journey I will embark upon over the coming years:

*The girl follows the bird who leads the way...
(Bob, Character Summons, p. 65).*

Looking back, this reads more like an invitation serving as a prelude to a synchronicity I was yet to experience. None of it made sense to me at the time. I believed I was writing for an audience and that my characters were coming to life on the page, akin to creative writing. I know the plot. I know the prologue. But I am curious and try to cultivate a beginner's mind. Maybe I need a much clearer message from my unconscious. What happens next feels like a deeply meaningful and transpersonal experience, as I describe within my reflective journal below.



The Black bird synchronicity

I finish re-reading the *Character Summons*. My partner reads it briefly too. It feels very different to what I'd thought I'd written, leaving me with a mixed sensation of bewilderment, numinosity, intrigue and trepidation. I shut my laptop, clear my desk and go to the living room. My partner tells me: "I've found a TV show for us to watch! You might like it as it's based on a book". I'm glad. I tell myself I don't need to think about the research anymore, I can just switch off. I feel emotionally exhausted from writing and ready for a break.

Fade from black

A black bird is flying over a stormy ocean...

The camera closely follows the black bird as it flies over the sea...

My partner and I look at each other simultaneously and knowingly regarding how the description of the black bird and the sea echo the prologue and what came up within the *Character Summons*. I smile gently, still tired and not in the mood for making too much out of a coincidence. Sure, it's a coincidence: black birds, the sea, these are commonly depicted on television. I'd rather not think about the research. But the scene pulls me in, juxtaposing my internal visual imagery of the bird within the prologue and *Character Summons*.

...the black bird lands...the camera zooms in...

The narrator explains "The black bird travels between the waking realm and the dreaming realm"...

The introduction ends with the name of the black bird.

I am temporarily stunned, stupefied. Frozen. Ben does not know – he has not realised the link and the connection. But he notices the change in me. He pauses the TV show. "What? What is it? Because of the black bird, the sea and the *Character Summons*?"

"It's the name. That name – that's the name of my biological father's family".

I recall how 'bird' was also slang for a girl or young woman where I grew up. I don't speak for a while; I am speechless. I've experienced many synchronicities before, usually finding them insightful, transformative. But this feels direct, potent; unmistakably powerful. Unavoidable. It speaks to something from which I was consciously trying to maintain distance. It feels like it is undoubtedly speaking directly to my disconnection to my biological father's family who this name belonged to, and with it, my Black British identity and heritage.

Synchronicity and meaning making

The black bird flies off the page of the *Character Summons* and into my life. It brings a deeply important message with it. The meaning of the black bird synchronicity in relation to my intersectional identity, biological paternal family name, and experiences of being othered throughout childhood and adolescence, felt undeniable. I did not realise how much trauma an exiled part of myself had been holding. I did not hear the cries to meet its needs, to be heard. I feel that this synchronicity has the potential for significant change. Unlike before, I listen closely to the cries of this part of me. I answer the invitation. I attend to this call to witness, explore and connect with this part of my identity. Growing up within a White household and in a predominantly White neighbourhood, within a family who did not share my bi-racial identity, I had often felt completely disconnected from my Black British heritage and identity. Yet my fantasy world characters, through the dance of unconscious processes within fantasy, were the most likely route for me to have really heard and understood this message. I decide to follow the black bird. My departure from the rational and the logical leads me here. This marked the first footstep toward a period of deeper exploration of my engagement with immersive daydreaming in relation to trauma. Reconnection with my maternal family and connecting with others cushion this turbulent journey. Trust in my fantasy world, in unconscious and transpersonal processes, and in the nourishing inner leadership of my Self (Schwartz, 2023), was crucial.

According to IFS, though sometimes obscured by protector parts, we can all access 'the Self' which is usually curious, calm, confident, creative, courageous, compassionate and connected (Schwartz, 2023). I hold on to this idea as I move forwards. It is when I encounter the image below, a depiction of a black bird within a painting by Carrington, that I really feel confronted with a sense of having gained personal insight and deep, archetypal understanding beyond my grasp that "can never be fully articulated" (Smythe, 2013).



The Saints of Hampstead Heath (Carrington, 1997) © Estate of Leonora Carrington / ARS, NY and DACS, London 2024.

As Bachelard describes: “an image may seize us and hold us as it “infuses us with its being” (Bachelard, cited in Wood, 2022; p.88). The *Character Summons* and its connection to the black bird synchronicity stay with me for some time, imbued with meaning. Smythe (2013) also explains:

Symbolic expression thus opens up possibilities for the dialogical self beyond the domain of discursive and conceptual practices, to realms of the non-discursive and non-conceptual (p. 643).

The symbolic imagery arising within the *Character Summons* speaks to a Jungian view of how “images and symbols heal the psyche” (Swan-Foster, 2020, p. 67). I begin to understand such imagery in relation to Jung’s view of the transcendent function in terms of the “unconscious autonomous nature of

psychic energy and complexes with their archetypal core” (Swan-Foster, 2020, p. 71). I feel I have encountered a visible form that enables me to know elements of my experience that may have previously been consistent with the idea of the “unthought known” (Bollas, 1989). There is a sense of stepping back from the journey as I explore literature on individuation (e.g. Stein, 2019) and how this concept resonates with some of my experiences.

Cambray’s (2009) writings on synchronicity and the interconnectedness of culture and biology further illuminate my view of the black bird. Cambray (2009) suggests that: “when realized concretely, archetypes manifest through affect-laden images of a transpersonal nature, often with a numinous quality” (p. 80). The black bird becomes a bookmark in my life, a book whose themes so far have included a sense of disconnection, a sense of homelessness and feelings of not belonging. I reflect how it is the chapters following the black bird that reveal these previous themes. Later chapters entail a connection to family and family history, connection to ancestry, connection to identity, a sense of belonging and glimpses of what a sense of home might look like. Through the *Character Summons* and subsequent reflections, a process of “confronting previously unconscious dimensions of the personality” (Cambray, 2009, p.33) ensued. The black bird synchronicity also spoke to my experience of repressing aspects of my authentic self and my identity to feel accepted. As Turner (2021) argues, with an intersectional approach to identity:

...the idea of death becomes more obvious, and especially more universal. Given that we hold multiple aspects of identity at any point of time, we also simultaneously die every day, multiple times a day, in a variety of ways....in order to manage in a world that struggles with our authentic otherness (p. 95).

Each time the black bird visited me, the power and beauty of her message always felt clear. She brought wisdom that pulsed through me and along with it incredible, powerful healing. Traversing the waking realm and dreaming realm, the black bird transcends the self, bringing wisdom not only meant for me, but for others too. The black bird brought with her an invitation to embrace the

numinous in our lives, scholarship and practice. An invitation to playfully explore and dance with fantasy.

My protector parts are hard at work here to obscure my deeper transformation from articulation (Schwartz, 2023) as I flit from theory to theory to make sense of my experience and the meaning of the black bird synchronicity. *Had I suppressed my authentic self and sense of difference to fit in with the dominant White, male culture (Turner, 2021)? Had I met an exiled part (Schwartz, 2023)? Experienced my vulnerable child mode (Arntz & Jacob, 2017)? Had I discovered my true self through creative experience (Winnicott, 1971)? Maybe it represented an encounter with the collective unconscious (Brewster, 2019)?* My protector parts are keen to rationalise, even keener to dissect and categorise everything. When that doesn't work, they flood me with painful emotions. In the end, I receive the message of the black bird synchronicity whilst residing within my Self, unblended by protector parts (Schwartz, 2023), embracing meaning through music and reclaiming my own sense of artistic and spiritual freedom. As Jung says:

That is why I say to any beginner: learn your theories as well as you can but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your creative individuality alone must decide (Jung, 1999, p.22).

Kinouani's (2021) writing also becomes helpful in exploring my encounter with the black bird in relation to my intersectional identity, trauma and immersive daydreaming. I find Kinouani's (2021) writing on "epistemic homelessness" powerful, where she argues that:

...our capacity to know is dependent on our capacity to have a home (p. 60).

Kinouani's (2021) argues that "homeness, homelessness and belonging are central themes in Black groups' experiences of psychological distress" (p. 62), explaining how:

Through our history of displacement and immigration homelessness has huge significance. As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, many of us have been born away from our ultimate ancestral lands. This disconnection already renders home-making complex. In addition, our sense of homeness is rendered precarious by immigration and associated racism and xenophobia....How can your home be truly your home if entry into it and your right of abode is conditional? When this right can so easily be denied under the racist fantasy that some other home will always be yours for you to claim and return to. Even when that connection barely exists. Even if that presumed home is in fact much more unfamiliar than your usual place of dwelling (p. 62).

Kinouani's (2021) writing evokes in me memories from childhood and adolescence. Why did people seem confused when they asked me where I was from, and I replied with the name of a UK city? I soon learned the question was more about my skin colour than genuine curiosity in where I came from. Whether I belong within fantasy is never in question. Immersive daydreaming provides a sense of homeness and belonging that I envisage as deeply connected to my experience of being, spirituality and interconnectedness to others and the world around me. My fantasy world has always provided this kind of "homeness" (Kinouani's, 2021, p.62).

Evaluation of the study

The present autoethnographic journey invited vulnerability as I navigated and brought parts of myself to the page whilst grappling with mainstream mental health systems and discourses relating to ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming. Prior to the present research, I did not have the opportunity to read many autoethnographies. It was therefore, in part, thanks to UWE’s Critical Autoethnography Troupe, including my research supervisor, and the invitation to supervise undergraduate autoethnographic research, that I was able to learn ways of navigating what felt like new terrain in terms of psychological research. Embracing autoethnography as a research methodology presents the opportunity for a refreshingly expansive, playful and creative approach that goes beyond academic literature, toward an attitude of attending to the closer-to-home realms of the embodied and the relational. Whilst this clearly speaks to my training as a counselling psychologist, amidst the demands of the training, having the ‘freedom to roam’ also feels incredibly challenging (Hadjiosif et al., 2023). Yet, being a part of UWE’s Critical Autoethnography Troupe means I do not feel alone on my journey through the autoethnographic forest. Whilst we each venture on our own paths, at times our compasses align and the roaming and wandering is more manageable.

I have shaped this troupe as much as it has shaped me and inevitably, we will have stumbled upon some collective blind-spots. For example, we are not overly concerned with claiming a specific epistemology (realist, critical realist, social constructionist) as is custom in mainstream qualitative research and instead draw on post-qualitative literature and sensibilities to proceed with our intellectual and research pursuits. As a result, readers might spot inconsistencies in how I use terms like ‘discourse’ and ‘experience’, traditionally associated with discourse analysis and phenomenology respectively. Another limitation of this study is that it assumes therapeutic training as a pre-condition of following the journey. It is important to state that not all autoethnographers write from this assumption and therefore parts of the thesis would necessitate further explanation of key concepts that I take for granted. Therefore, when I use the term ‘therapeutic processes’, I refer broadly and somewhat generically to the

various components of psychotherapeutic approaches that facilitate relational connection, self-exploration, healing and personal growth.

The study unfolded throughout my four years' CoP training, within the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. During this socially tumultuous time, my personal and professional life underwent a significant transformation. Engaging in such deeply personal and vulnerable autoethnographic writing brought both challenges and opportunities that no doubt significantly impacted the research process and resulting thesis. However, by engaging with research under the umbrella of post-qualitative inquiry, which allows for the unpredictable nature of research inquiry (St Pierre, 2014) and making space for creatively representing self and others (Ellis et al., 2011), I had ample scope for fluidity relating to the research process and presenting the depth of dynamic engagement with the research topic. Looking back, encountering autoethnography presented a significant challenge to my previous learning regarding psychological research. Whilst I initially had a research direction in mind, this developed into a more expansive exploration as I came to learn firsthand how binary distinctions within conventional research methodologies, such as between participant/researcher and observer/subject, restricted and hindered the fluidity of the research process. This process paralleled my learning within CoP training wherein I came to embrace the inevitable nuances and complexities of relational exploration and practice. Creativity and professional artistry therefore became an important component of the research and an antidote to previous learning about what psychological research 'should' look like.

A strength of autoethnography is that it provides a platform for researchers to counter pre-existing dominant research culture which may perpetuate stereotypes of identities that are marginalised due to the over-use of generalisable, reductive research methodologies (Elhinnawy, 2022). The present research, under the umbrella of post-qualitative inquiry, has therefore offered the opportunity to disrupt such power dynamics and speak back to mainstream research that reduces and defines experiences of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma. I have delved deep into the experience and attempted to show rather than tell, presenting my process

as openly as possible. I prioritise producing accessible stories, inviting readers in and asking you as reader to observe and make up your own mind. This may reflect a strength of the current study - relying on my use of self as researcher and presenting autoethnographic stories through “writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) and hopefully connects with readers in a meaningful way.

However, such personal, lengthy prose also brings with it the risk of not connecting with readers and placing great demands on the reader’s attention and resources. Whilst every autoethnography is unique, and there is no one way to conduct autoethnographic research, particularly where more esoteric avenues are the subject of exploration, there is the danger that the aim of producing accessible autoethnographic research, is not met. Similarly, with a focus on process, self-awareness and self-discovery common to both autoethnography and transpersonal psychology (Raab, 2013), this study may have doubled this risk of not connecting and could be open to critiques of solipsism in relation to transpersonal psychology (e.g. Carrette & King, 2005) and autoethnography (e.g. Freeman, 2011; Panta & Luitel, 2022). Such critiques at times appear to be based on a premise that there is an isolated ‘self’ that can be explored in isolation from socio-cultural context. This may at times speak more to a contextual backdrop that has attempted to exclude ‘self’ exploration, recounting and relating that would possibly demonstrate the difficulty, if not impossibility, of locating where self ends and the other begins, where self ends, and culture begins. Thus, throughout the present thesis, I have attempted where possible to wrestle with and problematise the constraints of language, research discourse and cultural norms regarding ideas of the ‘self’ and of ‘personal’ experience that at times constrain rather than reflect interconnection and fluidity.

On the other hand, critiques that speak to how autoethnographic research has explored and represented the interplay between the personal in relation to the cultural are helpful to consider. I utilised autoethnography to engage with topics – ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming and developmental trauma, that are at times associated with secrecy, shame and stigma (cf. Ferrante et al., 2022). This presented significant challenges relating to the representation of others and, as

researcher, I often became stuck with the weight of ethical dilemmas, personal responsibility and my own values regarding relational ethics and the representation of my selves and others. One outcome of this was that, as a novice auto-ethnographer, I was perhaps overly tentative in terms of embracing more fully the inclusion and representation of others within the research, which may have enhanced the research and leaned more on the 'ethno' rather than 'auto' components of autoethnographic inquiry.

Bridging the transpersonal and the critical

At times, I encountered tensions between post-qualitative inquiry and transpersonal autoethnographic approaches. Rowan (2017) discusses the ways in which transpersonal CoP might entail supporting clients to access "one's very own Wise person" (p.119) and the "subtle realm" (p.119) and work with transformations of consciousness in which the answer to a problem "may lie outside rather than inside a person" (p. 119), beyond the personal. However, Rowan (2017) appears to have a more positive view than others. Elsewhere, it is argued that transpersonal approaches more generally may perpetuate psychological individualism by failing to tap into collective experience or acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural and historical contexts and the structural inequalities within them (e.g. Carrette & King, 2005). This was relevant in relation to evaluating the current study, particularly where I leaned more towards transpersonal autoethnography and an emphasis on experiences recounting and representing personal awareness, transformation and discovery (Raab, 2013). I therefore considered how to hold the apparent contradictions of a transpersonal autoethnographic approach with my critical stance as a counselling psychologist in training, attempting to think with theory, umbrellaing the vein of post-qualitative inquiry (St Pierre, 2014).

Cohen (2021) suggests that such critiques (e.g. Carrette & King, 2005) may mis-characterise and ignore the socio-cultural context and counterculture within which transpersonal psychology emerged during the 1960s, in a context of revolutionary social and cultural change. Referring to transpersonal psychology's "outsider status", Cohen (2021) makes an argument for the potential of transpersonal psychology as a legitimate approach within

psychological inquiry that may have the opportunity to embrace its otherness rather than assimilate itself into mainstream psychology, allowing opportunities for inter-disciplinary inquiry and a possible “reawakening of the discipline of transpersonal psychology; one that is critically-informed, interdisciplinary, constantly pursuing innovative research methods and practices that actively encourage transformative research – both individually and socially” (p.133). Walach (2015) also suggests there is common ground wherein academic study of transpersonal experience may be met with challenge within psychology where transpersonal psychology may be viewed as having failed as an academic scientific discipline (Walach, 2015, p.63). However, Walach (2015) considers the historical context of psychology as a discipline in relation to critiques and advocates for a future transpersonal psychology that integrates such critiques and moves towards defining itself as the “study and culture of consciousness” (p.82). These concerns informed the present inquiry but may still be apparent despite my attempts to embrace tensions between post-qualitative inquiry and a transpersonal autoethnographic approach. However, it did raise issues that may be relevant to future research.

Considering Psychology’s broader context and history, Cohen (2021) also argues:

...what all the forces, the experimental, psychoanalytic, behaviourist and humanistic psychologists seemed to share was their exclusion of spirit, the numinous and transcendent realms of human experience. Perhaps, for Psychology to be perceived as sufficiently scientific it perceived a need to disassociate itself from the spiritual...(p. 118).

Recent renewed interest in non-ordinary states of consciousness and transpersonal psychology may therefore be reflective of the ‘return of the repressed’ (Cohen, 2021, p.120) in relation to the marginalisation of exploring religious and spiritual experience within mainstream psychology. Such a stance is buoyed by what some have named the ‘psychedelic renaissance’ (Hadar, Shalit, Roseman, Gross, Sessa et al., 2022) in psychology and supports moves towards the “re-enchantment of psychology’ (Grof, 2015, p.91). This may move away from a disenchanted worldview that emerged in the context of rational

science and towards an envisioning of a re-enchanted world in which depth psychology may present ample scope for contributing to a re-spiritualisation of the world (Cambray, 2023). In this context, the flexibility of autoethnographic research provided a platform from which those parts of my experience and socio-cultural context that may have been previous excluded or marginalised, be it my family and ancestral history, connection to the spiritual, or parts of me I felt were othered, were emancipated and provided with the freedom to roam. Emancipation and re-enchancement have implications for future research as they bring into focus possible benefits for both the research process and research outputs, particularly within the domain of psychotherapy. Autoethnography may therefore continue to offer a flexible approach to research inquiry of particular value to trainee and qualified psychotherapists as it makes space for the depth, complexity and nuance of the relational and creative articulation or expression of this, which feels relevant to ideas of an age of 're-enchancement' (Cambray, 2023).

The role of theory

One implication relevant to such re-enchancement may be that psychology students and trainee therapists may find it challenging to move away from the model of researcher as detached observer, struggling to write themselves in and foreground or highlight their pivotal role in research. Throughout the research, I struggled in relation to writing about my experiences using a more vulnerable, personal voice rather than adopting a formal academic writing style focused on theory that I'd been accustomed to. At times, this was also echoed around my conflict concerning use of theory. Prior academic experience had not prepared me for the opportunity to bring my subjectivity to the fore in the way the present inquiry invited me to. In discussing the book *More Examples, Less Theory* (Billig, 2019), Cohen (2021) argues that:

The consistent emphasis on theory, and the need for theory is critiqued for limiting our capacity to fully encounter our world and ourselves in a more raw, naturalistic and unfiltered manner. The dominant, hegemonic qualities of psychological theory may inform us, but they also subtly conform us – somewhat insidiously enforcing shared lenses and filters

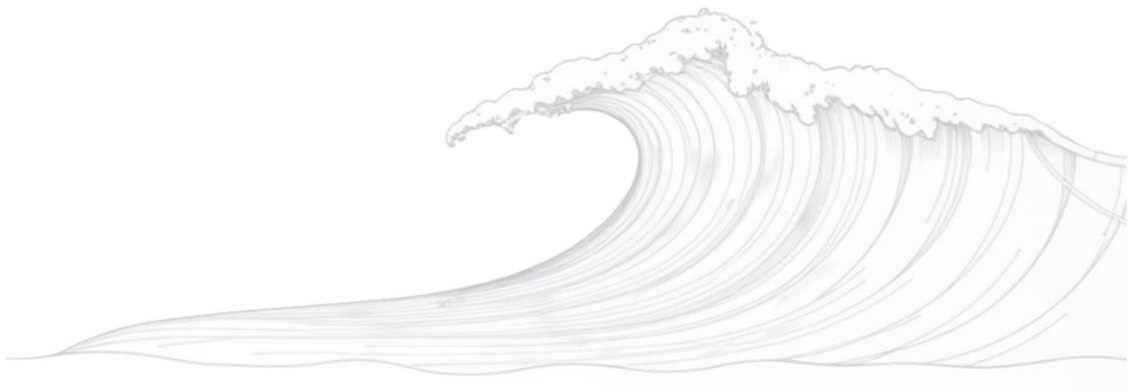
through which we may, unreflexively, claim the comprehensive clarity of a shared vision (p. 123).

Likewise, the initial research direction gradually, yet unapologetically, moved away from my previous engagement with mainstream research on 'maladaptive' daydreaming. Within traditional qualitative methodologies, this gradual move away from research introduced within the literature review may have been forbidden by research conventions. However, under post-qualitative inquiry, which rejects "conventional humanistic qualitative methodology" (St Pierre, 2021, p. 163) and its restrictive structures and processes, moving away from mainstream MD research felt like an organic process that signalled the quality of my engagement with the research topic. Throughout the research, I also connected with other literature that directly speaks to such processes in a way that neither reduces nor pathologizes experience. This is consistent with a post-qualitative approach where theory is viewed as intimately tied to the whole research process (St Pierre, 2014).

Autoethnography and the call to create

Utilising an autoethnographic approach provided me with the freedom to roam (Hadjiosif et al., 2023) which, alongside use of creative experiments with active imagination (Chodorow, 1997) and use of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000), enabled a reconnection with family, family history and ancestry and rekindling of my artistic self and sense of creative expression. This resembles what Wood (2022) describes as "the call to create" (p. 8) and scaffolded a process that felt "deeply meaningful, soulful, healing and transformative (Wood, 2022, p. 5). During the later stages of research, I began to more readily resonate with the idea of a "heightened sense of devotion to a creative potential, and service to what Jung called the creative spirit" (cited in Wood, 2022, p. 3). At the same time, autoethnographic research was providing me with the opportunity to reflect on my bi-racial Black British identity and "write myself in" (Kinouani, 2021, p. 14), taking up space on the page. Reading Kinouani (2021) helped me reflect on how engaging with autoethnography was also an invitation to resist some of the silencing I had experienced within academic psychology through, for example, requests for impersonal writing. Part of the autoethnographic journey appeared to involve a becoming conscious, and what van Löben Sels (2019, p.140) refers

to as bringing the “shaman complex into consciousness” wherein we “give up one’s innocence (i.e. unconsciousness)” and “gaining psychological wisdom (i.e. emotional maturity)”. The resulting thesis therefore also presents an autoethnography in line with transpersonal autoethnography “fostering self-awareness and self-discovery, which may lead to transformation” (Raab, 2013, p.14). This in turn has greatly informed my practice as a psychotherapist and counselling psychologist in training.



Summary and contributions of the thesis

Within the present thesis, I offer an autoethnographic exploration of immersive daydreaming in the context of developmental trauma. In doing so, I contribute to and challenge a body of research on ‘maladaptive’ daydreaming, and within the broader field of trauma and dissociation. From a position of championing subjectivity with all its depth, nuance and complexity, I speak back to such research. I challenge traditional forms of trauma-related fantasy representation, emphasising the significance of context in shifting individualistic discourse. This emphasises the importance of considering intergenerational trauma and sociocultural discourses relating to intersecting systems of oppression. By exploring the intricate interplay between personal experiences, ancestral legacies and symbolic/fantasy representations, I problematise the reduction of fantasy world engagement to solely intrapsychic processes. This leads me to conclude that fantasy world content divorced from the sociocultural and historical forces from which it emerges can only partly illuminate subjectivity.

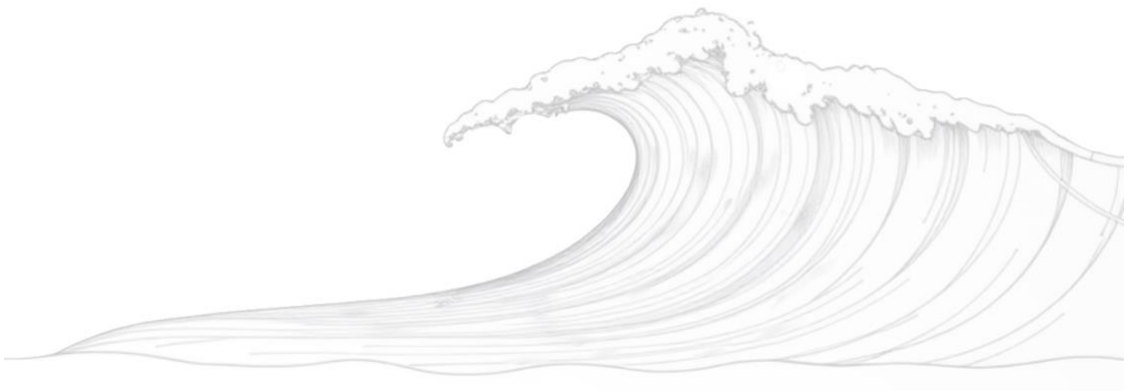
The present inquiry also contributes to research relevant to critical psychology and research inquiry under the umbrella of post-qualitative inquiry. Throughout, I grapple with and problematise dominant social discourses located within a broader neo-liberalist context relating to the medicalisation and pathologization of human experience and suffering. Such conceptualisations may contribute to a sense of alienation, disconnection and focus on productivity which may give rise to a sense of displacement, therefore compounding rather than alleviating distress. Binary distinctions between fantasy and reality further reinforce an individualistic, reductionist view of fantasy, delimiting the complexity of human experience and relationships and their embeddedness within broader contexts. This serves to create echoes of displacement from fundamental human needs and capacities, to play, to rest, to explore and imagine, to create. Instead, I have attempted to make space for the value and irreducibility of immersive daydreaming and develop understanding of immersive daydreaming as tied to identity and creativity, exploring immersive daydreaming as one of many possible creative responses to social isolation, trauma and adversity that cannot be understood solely as a coping strategy.

Autoethnography provides an opportunity for freedom of expression and creativity that allows me to venture further into exploring the role of imagination, music and the arts than I might have done with a traditional research methodology. This paves the way for exploration of the possible benefits of relational, trauma informed, non-pathologizing, strengths-based approaches that make space for expressive arts and consideration of broader systemic factors and social-justice informed principles. Here, I contribute ideas to the field of counselling and psychotherapy, and counselling psychology, of different ways of working therapeutically with clients presenting with difficulties relating to trauma and immersive daydreaming.

As I move away from pathologizing discourses, I come to the personally and culturally significant insight that fantasy, like rest (Hersey, 2022), can be a site of liberation. A site of liberation where conscious and unconscious dynamics and processes can be explored and new worlds imagined, enabling resistance towards intersecting axes of oppression and a kind of freedom; freedom to sense-make and take stock of self in context. In answering the invitation of depth psychology, by using various forms of autoethnographic writing, by inviting readers to make up their own minds regarding the research topic, I invite readers to playfully explore and dance with fantasy, extending an invitation to embrace the intuitive, imaginative and numinous in our lives, scholarship and practice.

Finally, this research contributes an autoethnographic exploration that aims to *show* rather than *tell*; I “write myself in” (Kinouani, 2021, p. 14), taking up space on the page, embracing autoethnographic values of vulnerability and authenticity. I explore some of my gendered and racialised experiences, which contributes to my personal and professional development as a counselling psychologist in training. This may also contribute to future researchers hoping to adopt an autoethnographic approach to research inquiry, particularly within the discipline of counselling psychology where critical autoethnographic approaches may be a valuable alternative to conventional humanistic research methodologies. Above all, it is my hope that the present autoethnographic inquiry ignites further meaningful dialogue, contributing a sense of re-enchantment to relevant pre-existing research and to readers.

My final words are for anyone reading this and hurting, or maybe you are on your own journey with trauma. I hope that this writing has reached you in some meaningful way and possibly inspired your own reflections and epiphanies. I trust that you have found, and will continue to find, your own creative ways to cope and to grow.



Chapter 6: Outro

Charlene: Is it over yet? Now I need some new headphones again.

Tim: Well now you *really* do need an exit song!

Charlene: What about one from ‘Hamilton: The Musical’¹⁵? It was such a huge help to me throughout.

Tim: I really feel like the timing of Beyonce’s release of [‘Blackbird’](#)¹⁶ is synchronistic.

Miltos: Charlene, I hope this isn’t the part where you get back at me for all those Mariah songs! Maybe you could use Mariah Carey [‘Through the Rain’](#)¹⁷?

Charlene: Haha this seems to be the part where you somehow get a Mariah Carey song on the page!

Tim: Oh, hi Miltos! I can’t believe we still haven’t met.

Miltos: Yeh, though I suppose we met in the *Character Summons*...

Charlene: Yes, and your teamwork since has been exquisite! I am so grateful.

Sara: I thought we already chose ‘Aventine’ as the exit song? And I didn’t know that psychology had Covens, can I join too please?

Tim: I am still wondering where the *Character Summons* took place.

Miltos: We all need to talk about the interzone some more.

Sara: About the [‘Aventine’](#)?

Charlene: I think we should stop now so I can finally submit this thesis!

Miltos: Yes, good idea – stop then?

Charlene: I am trying. But I keep thinking back to the start of the research - Do you remember when I asked if I should forget what I’d learned about mainstream psychology?

Miltos: Yes! I said that would be a brilliant first line to your thesis.

Tim: The end is the beginning is the end...

¹⁵ Miranda (2015)

¹⁶ Knowles (2024)

¹⁷ Carey (2002)

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