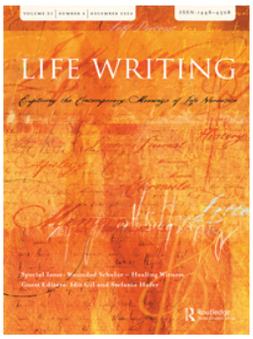

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Inventing Reality: An Integration of Autobiographical Fiction with Jungian Psychoanalysis to Negotiate a Personal Experience of Trauma

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer an après-coup of my transdisciplinary practice-based doctoral thesis, *Writing-As-Shadow-Work: An Aesthetics of Jungian Psychoanalysis* (2023), to show how the creative licence afforded by autobiographical fiction enabled me to give language to a personal experience of trauma and engage with a Jungian worldview of the psyche that constellates external reality with the inner realm of the unconscious. I share how I employed the invention allowed by autobiographical fiction as a creative strategy to access my personal unconscious and the cross-cultural intuitive knowledge of the collective unconscious as a means to facilitate my ongoing process of recovery from trauma via a sequence of autobiographical short stories. In addition, I reflect on how it was through this process that I was able to expand on the possibilities of autobiographical fiction by employing it as a literary and therapeutic device with the potential to not only represent reality but also *invent* it.

KEYWORDS

Autobiographical fiction; Jungian psychoanalysis; shadow work; trauma; recovery

Introduction

For many years, I experienced a recurring dream in which I was trapped in a house with my mother. In these nightmares, it was not the house but my mother I was desperate to escape. Wherever I ran, there she was, hurling insults, shouting commands and making demands. According to Jungian psychoanalysis, dreams are a transmission from the unconscious that compresses an otherwise unknowable emotional charge into the visual language of metaphor and symbol (Jung 1964). Although my nightmares occurred decades after I'd left home, they can be understood in these terms as an expression of how I was still emotionally stuck in the traumatic experience of having been abused as a child by my mother. At the time I was having these nightmares, however, this aspect of my psyche was so difficult to admit that I simply couldn't accept it.

It is these parts of ourselves that we disown because they are too painful to acknowledge which Carl Gustav Jung conceptualises as an expression of the shadow archetype.

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'A psychic phenomenon that transmits unconscious reactions or spontaneous impulses to consciousness' (Jung [1964] 1972, 67), archetypes are composed of the inherited instincts and universal characteristics that manifest as symbols and images in dream. One of the primary archetypes, (which also include the anima, the animus and the self) Jung suggests that, if left in the unconscious, the shadow and the pain it serves to obscure doesn't disappear but, on the contrary, takes on a life of its own that can manifest outwardly as a combination of frustration, aggression, depression, anxiety, addictive and self-sabotaging behaviours. He argues that psychological wholeness and, by extension, recovery from trauma, can only be achieved by bringing the shadow into conscious awareness through the strategies of dream analysis and active imagination.

It was a personal encounter with Jungian psychoanalysis in my late thirties that helped me to approach the shadow part of myself I had previously struggled to acknowledge through a restorative process that Jung calls individuation and which is commonly referred to in therapeutic settings as *shadow work*. It was this lived experience of acquiring self-knowledge about my traumatic experience through the process of shadow work in therapy that, in turn, became the starting point for a practice-based PhD in Creative Writing in which I set out to investigate how I could integrate aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis with autobiographical fiction to approach my shadow and negotiate my traumatic experience on the page.

This article offers an après-coup of the resulting transdisciplinary thesis, *Writing-As-Shadow-Work: An Aesthetics of Jungian Psychoanalysis* (2023), to show how the creative licence afforded by autobiographical fiction (Gilmore 2001; Jensen 2014, 2016) enabled me to employ writing as a creative strategy to access my personal unconscious and the cross-cultural intuitive knowledge of the collective unconscious through a sequence of autobiographical short stories. It reflects on the operational knowledge acquired in a process that makes 'a place for a researcher's dreams, symptoms, synchronicities, and the function of intuition and feeling, alongside the functions of thinking and sensation' (Romanyshyn 2010, 275) to provide insights into how I employed my imagination to *represent* otherwise intangible aspects of reality in relation to my experience of childhood abuse through the mode of autobiographical fiction. It shows how I expanded on the possibilities of the form as a vehicle for writing on trauma to instigate a process of creative self-realisation and *invent* reality. Finally, it evaluates the effectiveness of this integration of autobiographical fiction with Jungian psychoanalysis in terms of my ongoing process of recovery.

'The real psychic facts': uses of autobiographical fiction to represent a Jungian worldview of the psyche

Literature and trauma theory scholar Cathy Caruth (1996, 4) suggests that any attempt to express the 'silent voice' which cries out from a traumatic wound as a result of having bypassed cognitive processing and directly entering the unconscious, is linguistically and ethically problematic since it points to 'a reality or truth that is not otherwise available'. In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001) Leigh Gilmore (2001, 24) claims it is no coincidence, therefore, that the writer who has experienced trauma should engage specifically with autobiographical fiction due to the form's creative use of 'invention and imagination … to make self-representation possible' and give this silent voice an expression

in language. Building on Gilmore, creative writing and trauma scholar Meg Jensen suggests that for the writer who has experienced childhood abuse, in particular, it 'must only be in the realm of the imagination that meaning can be ascribed to acts of violent emotional or physical incursion (2016, 444) with a view to narrating a traumatic experience.

Meanwhile, literature and trauma writing scholar Christa Schönfelder (2013, 257) suggests that such is the complexity of trauma that it invites the 'crossing of not only of generic but also disciplinary boundaries' as a means to effectively communicate the psychological and emotional aspects of the experience and engage with its ongoing aftermath. So, my thesis, likewise, crosses generic boundaries (between memoir and fiction) and disciplinary boundaries (between creative writing, trauma theory and Jungian psychoanalysis) to negotiate the ways the ghosts of my past have continued to haunt my present and engage with what Jung calls 'the real psychic facts' (Jung [1958] 1973, 7) of the psyche as a whole composed of a thinking mind, a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious, which is host to the archetypes.

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963), Jung likens the psyche to a rhizome. He observes 'life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible … what we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains' ([1963] 1985, 18). Where Gilmore and Jensen observe that the flexibility of autobiographical fiction lends the form particularly well to writing on trauma, this same flexibility allowed me to narrate a Jungian perspective of the self that views the psyche as a porous carrier of a collective unconscious responsible for producing the cross-cultural symbols that arise, pre-cognitively, in an individual's imagination and dreams (Jung 1958). Portraits of both 'the blossom which passes' and the rhizome that remains, the characters in the sequence of autobiographical short stories that constitute the creative element of my thesis shift between fictional realist representations of myself and my mother and a surreal cast of spectral figures, which, like the figures in my nightmares, are fictional impressions of 'the real psychic facts' of my shadow.

In a story titled 'Disappearing Act', I literalise the shadow aspect of both myself and my mother as phenomenological shadows as a way to represent the emotional force of my mother's fury and the fear I felt as a consequence, as I experienced them in real life. The story, which is based on the first memory I have of my mother's violent rage, opens with realist portraits of myself and my mother drawn from memory in a way that is suggestive of conventional memoirs. But as the narrative develops and the tension heightens, these realist representations morph into a pair of shadow figures that offer a fictionalised glimpse into unconscious aspects of myself and my mother. The daughter character who represents me witnesses her mother transmute into a giant shadow that grows and grows until 'then you saw. You *saw*. From out of the dark shape, four feet leaping towards you' (Newsome 2022, 58). Meanwhile, threatened by this dark shape, the fictional version of myself as a young girl disappears into thin air, leaving behind 'a phantom trace' (58), which is representative of the numinous charge of her terror.

Like 'Disappearing Act', a story titled 'A Birthday Lunch', which is based on a real-life encounter with my mother in the recent past, also begins in a realist mode. In this story, the mother character is 'the only person (in the restaurant) wearing a floor-length oxblood gown and lime green bolero jacket, dressed as if for a ball a century too late,

a bulging supermarket bag in each hand like a pair of lifebuoys keeping her afloat' (Newsome 2023, 167). Meanwhile, the realist figure of the daughter who represents me finds she must increasingly tread on eggshells to avoid provoking her mother's temper – only to find this strategy spectacularly backfire. In a narrative echo of 'Disappearing Act', 'A Birthday Lunch' similarly climaxes with both these characters changing form. In this story, the all-consuming intensity with which the mother figure pulls her daughter into her dramas becomes manifest as the force of the suction with which she inhales air to blow out the candles on her cake. The story ends with the daughter disappearing, not into thin air, but into the black hole of the mother figure's now vast throat, which operates as a metaphor to symbolise the catastrophic loss of self I experienced as a child as a result of being 'consumed' by my mother's needs.

A story titled 'There's Enough Evil In This World' features a shape-shifting house that operates as a fictionalised version of my real-life nightmare. In this story the character who represents myself as a young girl has a favourite doll, Alice. Although, in reality, I never had a doll called Alice, this fictional doll symbolises the psychological reality of the childlike part of myself that lives inside me as that part of my psyche which is innately playful and curious and which can be understood in Jungian terms as representative of the *golden* shadow that constitutes positive attributes we might also bury. Just as I had learned to bury my personal shadow in real life, so the girl in 'Evil' buries Alice. A creative strategy to approach my shadow through the distancing device of fictionalisation, this girl later unexpectedly vomits up this same doll in a way that not only forces the character inside the story, but also me as the writer standing outside the story, to confront everything that she (and by extension, I) finds painful and grotesque about herself.

If these stories give voice, by way of autobiographical fiction, to the traumatic suffering I experienced as a child which I had no language to express at the time, they also embed what Jungian analyst Robert A. Johnson (1986, 26) terms the 'realer than 'real'' truths of my self-experience as I am connected in Jungian terms to 'a world of forces that are suprapersonal and transcendent' (26) produced by the collective unconscious. As such, my stories function in a liminal space between the physical and metaphysical to conceptualise the shadow as that which is both part of me and outside of me. In the exampled stories, as in my dreams, the characters are simultaneously representative of *both* my personal shadow *and* the universal shadow archetype that belongs to the collective unconscious. Products of both memory and imagination, realism and surrealism, these shape-shifting characters are deliberately ambiguous and are meant to point to a level of complexity in relation to the nature of both my traumatic experience, specifically, and reality, in general, which Jung argues cannot be accurately conveyed through precise definition and which I found to be true in my experience.

Going down below: synthesising autobiographical fiction with Jungian active imagination to access the unconscious

On the significance of the unconscious in relation to psychological growth, Jung ([1974] 2002, 199) claims it is 'only down below (that we can) find the fiery source of life'. Not only did I employ autobiographical fiction as a creative device to represent aspects of my personal unconscious as it intersects with the collective unconscious. I also synthesised it with the Jungian strategy of active imagination as a therapeutic device to 'go down below'

and enter into the inner life of my unconscious as a means to engage with it. What Jungian analyst James Hillman terms 'biography gone into the imaginative act' ([1983] 1994, 80), active imagination is a creative strategy that involves dialoguing with the symbolic figures that show up in fantasies and dreams in order to enter their world as if it were real. The aim of this 'wilful suspension of disbelief in them and belief in oneself as their author' (59) is to better understand how the values and beliefs of these inner aspects of the psyche might be informing our values, beliefs and behaviours in ways we may not have previously been conscious of. Echoing Hillman, Johnson claims that active imagination is far more than wishful thinking and argues, instead, that it has the power 'to realign our attitudes, teach us and change us at deep levels, (in a way that) is much greater than that of external events that we may pass through without noticing' (1986, 25).

It was through my synthesis of active imagination with autobiographical fiction that I was able to engage with the flexibility of the form as a means to gain new knowledge about myself by entering the world of my shadow via writing. To facilitate this process, I chose to write the stories that comprise the creative element of my thesis in the present tense as a way to amplify the out-of-time sensibility of my dreams and translate Jung's conceptualisation of a cosmological reality that conflates past, present and future into a unified field that is always and infinite. This use of the present tense allowed me to not only engage with the part of my psyche that had remained stuck in my childhood home, as if I had never left. It also enabled me to enact a form of narrative negotiation to creatively realise on the page a future self who has escaped the hold of the mother in her nightmares and who is free to live life on her own terms. In 'There's Enough Evil', I not only use autobiographical fiction as a distancing device to approach my shadow but as a vehicle to bring it into conscious awareness in order to know it more intimately. As the writer of this story, I was able to attune to the voice of my shadow through the words of the doll that symbolises it. It was through entering the world of this doll's suffering via the mode of autobiographical fiction that I was able to listen to what she had to say and connect with that part of me in the present who remains terrified of rejection and going unheard.

A story titled 'Crow Wood', which is set in a similar shape-shifting house, involves a realist protagonist who represents me as an adult during a period of time when I was trying and failing to write in real life. In this story, a mother figure who appears real to the protagonist, but whom the reader has witnessed as a spectral shadow emerging from a hole in the ground, appears at the protagonist's door one night after a storm. A fictional symbolisation of that part of me who is a highly critical inner mother, it was through the narrative container of the story that I was able to put the struggling writer and critical mother aspects of myself in dialogue with each other via their fictional avatars. As a result of this process, I was able to access the voice behind my repressed anger not only towards my mother, but also myself.

In addition, the narrative vehicle of 'Crow Wood' also enabled the frustrated writer in me to answer this mother back and so speculatively perform vocalising my needs and overcoming my fear of conflict. The self-knowledge that I acquired in this way allowed me to better understand my experience of writing block as partially being the product of my own inner critic and related lack of self-belief. I learned that through recognising and naming this voice in the story that this mother is not always right and

that I can politely ask her to leave – as the struggling writer in 'Crow Wood' eventually realises.

In the same story, I further amplified this process of acquiring operational knowledge through writing via re-introducing the doll character from the story 'Evil'. In 'Crow Wood' she takes the form of a young girl making dens in the woods whom the struggling writer enters into conversation with as follows:

> "Where do you live?" Holding you in her curious gaze, the girl tilted her head.
>
> 'In that house down there. Can you see through the trees?'
>
> "Oh, yes," The girl nodded sagely. "I know that house. A bad person lives there . . . it's not you." The girl squashed the purple bell of a foxglove between her fingers. "You're not the bad person. They're in there now. (2023, 208)

As their dialogue unfolds, it becomes clear to the writer that this young girl has a privilege to information which she does not. In this way, the story functions as a form of active imagination that not only gives voice to my buried pain but to the buried intuitive knowledge from which I had become split due to the over-thinking produced by my post-traumatic experience of chronic anxiety.

In a story titled 'Mother Bear', I fictionalise that aspect of myself which is my internal loving mother which, like my inquisitive inner child, I have also experienced feeling disconnected from as a consequence of trauma. In 'Mother Bear' I externalise this part of myself as a fictional mother figure who has returned to the beach where her daughter, who is symbolic of my lost inner child, was drowned many years earlier. In this narrative, the mother character addresses her lost child, as if she were still alive. As the writer of the story, meanwhile, I was able to put these aspects of myself in dialogue with each other in order to gain a greater degree of awareness not only of my previously buried feelings of grief and loss but also of my capacity to soothe these feelings through the tender expression of self-love.

This marriage of writing with psychoanalysis, via the mode of autobiographical fiction, enabled me to acquire new self-knowledge through a deeply transformative therapeutic process that I could not have accessed through critical thinking alone. The complex process of fictionalisation and symbolisation entailed in the writing of these stories demonstrates how I was able to 'go down below' in order to know my shadow better, along with the uncomfortable emotions with which it is charged.

Getting above: gaining an expanded perspective of the traumatic experience through the lens of the Jungian self-archetype

This intense process of accessing my shadow, however, was not without risks. The danger was that I might over-identify with this part of myself to the exclusion of all else. Contemporary British Literature scholar Jean-Michel Ganteau (2020, 130) frames this risk of over-identification with suffering in terms of a writer's degree of vulnerability. He suggests that a writer's vulnerability can overshadow the nuances of the traumatic experience 'as if such vulnerability defined the essence of what it is to be human'. He also points out that a false sense of *in*vulnerablity can result in a 'problematical closure' (139) where 'euphoric notations (give) pride of place to success and healing' (134) in a way that equally over-simplifies the complexity of trauma.

Jungian psychoanalysis, however, offers a framework for the negotiation of this dilemma through the basic premise of the individuation process, or shadow work, which is the creative instrumentalization of the tension between opposites as a strategy to achieve healing. Likening the psyche to a cast of actors and active imagination to a form of theatre, Hillman argues that it is through performing these different aspects of the self and speaking in their voices that we can learn to both step into their shoes and step out of them again as a means to test out and integrate multiple perspectives. He suggests healing takes place through the expanded sense of self that occurs:

> When we move out of the audience and onto the stage of the psyche, become characters in a fiction (even the God-like voice of Truth, a fiction) and as the drama intensifies, the catharsis occurs, we are purged from attachments to literal destinies, find freedom in playing parts … never *being* the whole but *participating in* the whole. ([1983] 1994, 38)

This 'God-like voice of Truth', which Hillman problematises by labelling it fiction, correlates with that part of the psyche which Jung refers to as the self-archetype. While Jung associates the ego, or thinking mind, with the part of the personality that falsely believes itself to represent the whole, he views the self as 'that larger and greater personality maturing within us, whom we have already met as the inner friend of the soul' ([1979] 2010, 65). The non-egoic part of our psychological make-up that integrates our individual biological person with a trans-personal unitive whole which Jung calls 'the collective unconscious', we can understand the self-archetype as being responsible for the aspect of our psyche that produces imagination and dreams. It is this flexible, creative part of ourselves that can extend our capacity to integrate multiple dimensions, perspectives and forms of knowing, allowing for a greater degree of self-awareness and psychological flexibility.

While the characters in the stories I produced as part of the creative element of my thesis for the most part represent and perform fictionalised versions of my shadow, the first-person narrator of these stories is a fictionalised version of the self-archetype who introduces herself thus:

> I live in the dark with your shadows but I'm not one of them. My origins are more primordial, more ancient. Just as the sun is stored inside trees in the form of carbon, I am the fire inside you. I am the depths of your best unknown self, the darkness you most fear. I see everything who you are, past, present and future. I see all your crying girls, all your hysterical mothers and everything you are yet to become. (Newsome 2023, 166)

It was by fictionalising this 'inner friend of the soul' that I was able to invoke what Jungian analyst Jeffrey Miller calls 'a metaphorical third presence' (2004, 127) in the form of a narrator who is able to view the self-experience of the character who is me in the stories from both within and above. A synergistic correlation with what Gilmore terms the 'knowing subject' in autobiographical fiction who 'works with dissonant materials, fragmented by trauma and organises them into a form of knowledge' (2001, 147), this presence has access to the intuitive knowledge that Jung argues offers a higher form of knowledge and understanding than intellectual reasoning.

The fictionalisation of this 'inner soul friend' who addresses the weeping girls and wounded women in the stories as 'you' operated as a therapeutic strategy that allowed me to redress rather than heighten the risk of over-identification with the suffering behind my shadow. It was through the self-reflexive process of narrative negotiation

entailed in the speculative process of imagining the part of me that is akin to a 'greater part of (my) personality' that I was able to develop a flexible sense of identity which allowed me to view my shadow as part of me but not all of me.

Epilogue

As I have previously stated, Jung argues that because the process of shadow work requires an engagement with an intuitive, pre-cognitive form of knowledge that arises from the collective unconscious and which is responsible for generating the images and symbols we encounter in the imagination and in dreams, it cannot be achieved solely by reason and rational thought processes. Drawing on the Latin root of invention, *invinere*, meaning 'to find', he stresses that truths are not only the preserve of intellectual knowledge but that the creative impulses of the imagination and intuition are vital to their unlocking.

The sequence of stories that make up the creative element of my thesis demonstrates how I employed imagination to access my unconscious and undertake a dynamic process of creative self-realisation. It was this engagement with the transformational faculties of the imagination that helped free me from the burden of the debilitating anxiety I had been experiencing as a result of unprocessed trauma. Meanwhile, it was through this approach that I found myself better able to view reality as something mutable and fluid that I could participate in creating through a synthesis of active imagination and autobiographical fiction. My experience of writing the exampled stories demonstrate a creative engagement with what Jungian analyst Marion Woodman terms 'a world of opposites … in which the observer creates his or her own reality … a world in which all things are possible and all things coexist' ([1996] 1997, 211). Where autobiographical fiction uses the imagination to fictionalise reality, my story sequence constitutes *a reverse-engineering of autobiographical fiction* through the use of imagination to *invent* a reality in which self-knowledge is acquired and truths are arrived at from what Miller calls an 'archetypal place of pure possibility' (2004, 105).

It was through this intra-psychic dialogue between multiple aspects of myself that I was able to integrate the opposites of my conscious thinking mind with the intuitive realm of the unconscious to gain a new more expansive perspective of myself and my circumstances. The story 'Mother Bear' narratively performs this integration of opposites through the shape-shifting transformation of the maternal figure from a melancholic mother into the fierce and courageous 'mother bear' of the title. It is via the process of falling apart with grief that this mother figure reformulates as a wild animal which offers a fictional correspondence with a wild animal nature that Jung associates with instinct and intuition. The story ends with this mother-bear creature believing she can see her lost daughter about to drown all over again. Having taken on the form of a bear the mother figure now possesses the determination, courage and strength to 'leap on all fours into the rush of white water. Voluptuous, animal, ursine. On (her) way to save (her) daughter' (2023, 220). So this story both illustrates and performs my use of what Miller terms the 'transcendent function' of metaphor (2004) as a device by which I could speculatively imagine myself as this courageous mother figure in order to actively participate, through writing, in recovering from my experience of trauma.

This process of integrating Jungian psychoanalysis with autobiographical operated for me as a *literary* device to communicate the porous nature of my shadow and as a

therapeutic device to facilitate the individuation process. Although I still carry the internal wounds resulting from my experience of childhood trauma, it was through this creative, literary and therapeutic process that I was able to bear witness to my pain without being over-attached to my wounds in a healing way that has allowed me to develop a more expansive sense of self, liberated from the limiting narratives that were imposed on me by mother. As in my external reality, so in my inner reality. Having gone through the extensive process of writing-as-shadow-work via the creative output of my thesis, the nightmares where I am trapped in a house with my mother are no more.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Rachel Newsome is a Jungian-based writer and teacher with a PhD in applying Jungian psychoanalysis to creative writing. She has a background both in media and academia, as a journalist and former editor of arts and culture magazine, *Dazed & Confused* and a lecturer with 20 years' experience, respectively. She serves on the Editorial Board at the London Arts-Based Research Centre and is a co-editor of forthcoming Routledge publication, *The Creative Psyche: Between Spirit and Matter*. Recently, she founded Depth Writing with Dr Rachel – a holistic creative learning programme underpinned by Jungian psychoanalysis that uses writing and imagination to support transformative growth.

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