

Chapter 2

The Potential of Creative Life Writing as a Liberatory Practice

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Renewal begins in the imagination
(Chandler, 1990, p. 70)

This chapter discusses a narrative study as a community-based participatory research method. It is a critical and creative investigation into the dialogic relationship between memory and imagination through creative life writing and its potential for personal freedom. It looks at what happens when people enter into a creative relationship with their life stories, focusing on the potential of creative life writing for loosening personal and collective narratives and self-conceptions that mould identity.

The starting point for my research topic was where I was born, a place that neither parents called “home”. I grew up in one of the largest migratory communities in England, also the proud home of the far-right National Front. Neighbours of Indian, Jamaican, Pakistani, Polish, Irish and Ugandan origins lived next to one another in tightly packed rows of pre-war terraced houses. It was from here that I inherited a residue of displacement and “otherness”, oscillating between conflicting positions of insider and outsider, but where I was also introduced to the necessity of story-making and how stories travelled through memory, generations and play.

My desire to explore story-making led me to become a documentary filmmaker and work across three continents, listening to people’s stories. However, it was in my last job in the USA that I began to take a further interest in the stories we told and how they impacted the lives we lived. I was working on a television series in New York with a team of experts: filmmakers, scholars, artists and community activists brought together to explore contemporary issues regarding racial politics in

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the twenty-first century, with the objective of offering a new insight into the existing dialogue. One of the concerns for the series was that the discussion of racial politics was still being discussed within a black and white paradigm and therefore failed to reflect the complex realities and voices of a contemporary multicultural nation. The filmmakers and production crew were racially diverse and highly qualified, but for the most part I felt the series did not challenge the racial discourse to the extent that had been premised. I felt that we had fallen into a familiar pit where new initiatives were drawn from old formulas and consequently little change was made. In my view this was because we as storytellers had not fully acknowledged and challenged our own internalisation of the racial paradigm and dominant discourses we were aiming to dismantle. It therefore proved difficult for new insights and questions to surface, and new possibilities to be unearthed.

I wanted to know if it was possible—if we needed to—could we distance ourselves from the stories we told, in order to ask: “What might this situation look like from a different angle” (Chandler, 1990, p. 41). Narratives are crucial to the way we see ourselves and relate to others. I wanted to see whether, if we changed the narratives we lived by, could we give new meaning to our past and current experiences? I was particularly interested in the notion of “living in the wrong story”, the implication being that the stories we tell may have little connection with the narratives that currently govern our lives.

I decided to use the genre of creative life writing because, unlike conventional autobiography or life writing where the writer “may not be aware of the extent, to which she is fictionalizing, in creative life writing—also known as fictional autobiography—she has given herself permission to fictionalize herself” (Hunt, 2000, p. 12). In creative life writing the writer takes a step further and is not so occupied with factual accounts of past or present but with expressing personal memories and experiences through feelings and emotions associated with them. For this purpose the writer makes a “pact” with herself that she will “allow [her] material to emerge as freely as possible” (Hunt, 2000, p. 163). Liz Stanley suggests that “fictions may actually hold more truths about the past than a factual account” (Stanley, 1992, p. 64).

Underlying the exploration of imaginative space(s) in my research is the understanding that memory is reconstructed: “the past is continuously modified by the experiences of the present and the “self” who is doing the remembering” (King, 2000, p. 32) and therefore memory is always using imagination. Author Toni Morrison states that “the act of imagination is bound up with memory” (Morrison, 1995, p. 98). The fictionalising of our life story allows us to excavate and explore conscious and unconscious material, memories that have been hidden or previously unavailable. My research explores how the imagination impacts the telling of memories; stories that “make sense of our lives”. I refer to memories that appear fixed and prevailing as life-held narratives, or “life narratives”, deemed to be critical as they become significant memories and a “way of defining ourselves” (Neisser & Fivush, 1994, p. 1). The problem is that life narratives are often presented as “if they were the chief or even the only ingredient of the self”, which are very difficult to change (Neisser & Fivush, 1994, p. 1).

The work of creative life writing for personal development was mainly based in individual psychology and did not look at the wider sociopolitical perspective. Thus, by locating my study in a specific sociocultural location, a hair salon/barbershop in the UK catering for people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage, I opened the discussion of the practice and potential of creative life writing. The salon is a microcosm of a contemporary urban British society, a setting where boundaries such as gender, race, religion and other signifiers are crossed and intertwined. It is an English community that challenges the deeply held hegemonic claims of Englishness/Britishness, representing a new generation of Europeans. The salon is the “hub” of the community, a place of collective activities and a natural setting for the telling and sharing of stories.

It was also important for my study that I addressed what bell hooks refers to as “the gap between theory and practice” (hooks, 1994, p. 65). This ethos and engagement—mindfully placing theory at the centre of the lives of “ordinary people”, making genuine connections and critical analysis—served as salient founding blocks for my research.

The Salon: Creative Life Writing as a Method

I was involved in the hair salon/barbershop community as a client before I decided to locate my research in this location. I spoke with other clients from the salon about my idea of teaching a creative writing workshop and soon became aware that the exploration of personal memories and experiences were at the core of their interests. The idea of using fictional and poetic techniques to engage with personal memories offered a different approach for the clients to explore their life-stories. Locating the creative life writing workshops in a salon, a non-traditional learning space, allowed for a more collaborative design and development of the research inquiry with the salon community. I was invariably led to participatory action research (PAR), particularly community-based participatory research (CBPR), as it offered a flexible and sustainable framework for an alternative research inquiry that brought together practice, theory and experience. Using a participatory method was a way of engaging with the community, with creative life writing as a guide for allowing people to work both on their own and with each other. Also contrary to conventional research, in CBPR the researched are positioned as partners in the entire research process, which was critical in a study that was located in the community and committed to generating knowledge from collaborative and equitable partnerships.

All the participants were clients of the salon and were recruited to the project via flyers or word of mouth. For 2 h every Saturday morning over 10 weeks I ran a creative life writing workshop in the basement of the salon. The participants were women and men; from the African and Asian diaspora, their cultural heritage included Liberian, Jamaican, German, Barbadian, Indian, Nigerian, Scottish, English, Brazilian and Chinese. We sat around a table with snacks and drinks, introducing an element of informality to diminish negative classroom experiences of

writing which many of the participants referred to, and also to demystify the idea of “a writer”. My facilitation aimed to install the belief that everyone was equipped to participate fully in the workshop and to become authors of their own stories.

By introducing the participants to poetic and fictional exercises, oral storytelling techniques and a range of literary texts, I was offering the group ways of thinking about their own experience from different perspectives. Selected writers were chosen for discussion that crossed cultural and literary boundaries, including Sathnam Sanghera, John Agard, Ishle Parke, Rayda Jacobs, Ted Hughes and Prince Massingham. Using exercises and texts that were culturally diverse and a range of genres helped the writers to have a better understanding of the creative process and nurtured their willingness to engage. As Linda Christensen says:

The books we choose to bring into the classroom say a lot about what we think is important, whose stories get told, whose voices are heard, whose are marginalised (Christensen, 2009, p. 6).

The creative practice for many of the participants opened up an imaginative space for a story they “had not set out to write”,¹ which allowed them to see themselves from a different perspective. All were keen to explore a broader narrative that shaped their lives, as reflected in one of the list poems, where the writer begins each line with the same words.

I wish I could skate
I wish I could tell people what I really think
I wish I could live in a white skin for a day
I wish I could live as a man for a day ...
I wish I could not be so fearful at times
I wish I could wrap protective bubble round my daughter

In this exercise the aim for the writer is to not think about spelling or grammar, thereby transcending the inner critic and entering a place “where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it *thinks* it should see or feel” (Goldberg, 1986, p. 7). Manjusvara suggests the list poem is a good exercise to approach core beliefs. He claims that “the momentum to keep adding to the list is often enough to overrule what we consider to be a more acceptable voice” (Manjusvara, 2005, p. 26). The above poem also served as a catalyst for other writers in the group, as they responded saying that they wanted to explore the idea of living in someone else’s skin. The following week I devised a writing exercise called “Walking in Someone Else’s Moccasins”. The idea was to write from a completely opposite perspective, for example if they were female, to write from a male perspective, or if they were young, to write from an older voice, etc. By occupying “someone else’s skin”, the writers explored feelings and emotions outside their own autobiographical framework. The formulation of this exercise also demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between facilitator and writers in the group, a relationship that allowed all of us to feel engaged in the story-making process of the workshop.

¹ Unascribed quotations are drawn from the research participants’ interviews and creative writing, with their permission.

In the process of these seemingly simple writing exercises participants began to understand their own creative writing process and the impact that it had on the telling of their stories. One of the participants referred to the writing as a method for how “we can unseat our narratives because you have a narrative of yourself ... and it is about how you unlock yourself out of that narrative”.

The Liberatory Role of Creative Life Writing in the Workshop

It's on the page, you have truly liberated yourself and since then I never think of it again, and if I think of it, I feel very differently. I feel it's an old landscape; it's no longer in me (a workshop participant).

I was struck by the immediacy and willingness of the participants to “let go” into the creative process and embark on a journey across unknown territories. One of the reasons they were able to do this was because they felt safe and comfortable in the workshop space, but they also expressed a pressing need to tell their stories: “I let myself go”; “It was like a floodgate that was opened. It was all packed in there ready to go”; “There is something that is dying to emerge”. According to Marilyn Chandler, “making experience into story fulfils a variety of human needs” (Chandler, 1990, p. 3). She observes that we have a need to become the “authors of our own stories” (Chandler, 1990, p. 3) as a way of reclaiming control of our lives, and that we also need to assert our differences and similarities to one another. The group work exemplified such explorations and expressions. One of the participants wrote an autofictional piece called “Twenty Three Minutes” about a 15-year-old girl going to a party in a car with American GIs. When she wrote the story she felt she had acquired “the freedom to imagine being powerful”. She spoke of regaining control of her life by “taking it [memory] out of your head and bringing it to the page”:

Georgia was very clear in her head, crisp, cold, alert and awake You could say in the last seconds Georgia was never clearer and more in control.

Writing her story was an empowering process, as she was able to gain distance from a painful experience she had been carrying for a long time: “I wanted to explore fiction and that freedom, if the girl has that freedom to go all the way ... what would she do?” The story reveals a personal journey of moving from powerlessness to empowerment, which allows the protagonist to become an agent of change of her circumstances. Creative life writing is a “deeply personal, deeply connected with the writer’s self, but it also involves moving away from the self and becoming impersonal” (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 2). The writers at times engendered their characters to act and speak in circumstances that in real life they themselves may have found difficult; as a result, they entered terrain of the self they had not dared explore before.

Creative life writing provided an important opportunity for people to reflect on their sense of self and how dominant discourses and self-concepts construct them. As the participants began to pay attention to their feelings and emotions, they

explored stories that stretched far beyond implicit narratives. One participant felt a “release” when her stories revealed: “how funny she [her mother] was. I completely forgot. I’ve been angry with her for so long”; without warning her words gave light to a relationship darkened by sorrow and pain. Jill Kel Conway says of her experience of recollecting her memories: “I found that my memory was all the painful things. But in the process of telling that story I rediscovered so much that was beautiful about my childhood” (Conway, 1995, p. 172). Similarly to Conway, the writing process for the participants was also at times able to give “back the good things that [they] had forgotten” (Conway, 1995, p. 172).

It is not easy to determine the experience of change for the participants, but one of the changes that unquestionably did occur was that through the writing, group work and facilitation, a safe space was held for imaginative explorations, a space that allowed for engagement of the known and, even more, unknown material of the self. There was also something in this process that was fluid as well as focused, which allowed the participants to capture and convey stories that felt authentic to them.

Generating Psychic Space for Thinking Differently

What I found from the writers’ experience in the workshops was the invaluable process of being able, on the one hand, to gain closer access to their deeply felt memories and experiences and, on the other hand, to gain sufficient creative distance from them to transform them into creative writing. Hunt calls this “accessing and objectifying personal material” (Hunt, 2001, p. 30); writers are able to distance themselves from life-held narratives and open up psychic space for looking at themselves from different perspectives. As one participant said: “It’s like looking at the same thing but twisting it a bit in the light and being able to see it differently”. This allows new stories to emerge which can bring insight into the self.

Relevant here is Stuart Hall’s notion of the “gaze of the Other” (Hall, 2000, p. 202), as the starting self-perceptions for most of the participants were rooted in racial and cultural identities, which produced feelings of otherness and difference within mainstream society. Since W.E.B. Dubois and Simone de Beauvoir, attention has been given to how we come to experience ourselves through the eyes of others, the internalisation of racialised and gendered agendas from the outside world (Beauvoir, 1953; Dubois, 1903). Creative life writing enables writers to engage in a process that creates a fundamental shift in the relationship to the other; by fictionalising our memories we are able to be “both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly” (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4), and thus the writer is able to be the “eyes of another” for herself (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287). The writer actively becomes the gaze of the other; the story offers a new awareness from the point of view of the narrator. The work of creative life writing presents the possibility for the writer to create a shift from a gaze which *disparages* to one that is *deferential*. Seeing stories through the eyes of another was invaluable in the participants’ process of renewing stories that were embedded and unchang-

ing. The workshops created the possibility for them to suspend, if only temporarily, less helpful narratives, as they redirected their attention to stories that resonated deeply with them.

For one participant, writing about himself as a racing car driver became a catalyst in his writing practice and personal growth:

As I watch him approach his racing car I could see the beam, the happiness in his flow, the eagerness in his stride, the command in his movement ...

The participant had previously written in an impersonal first person, but this time he shifted to a point of view in which he was both the narrator and a third person character. This helped him to create a distance from more dominant narratives that shaped how he saw himself. He recognised the importance of his identity rooted in his heritage, but his story offered a new awareness, another side of himself that emerged in the objectified self-character: “It struck me, this man loves to be free to flow without boundaries”. Being able to objectify himself in this way enabled the writer to explore and release feelings and emotions that lay on the margins of his awareness. This was particularly relevant for a writer who oscillated between life narratives rooted in tradition and culture and his own individual aspirations. In his creative life writing he was able to bring together two worlds of himself that he did not think could coexist.

The idea of creating an internal distance from our personal memories and experiences fosters a position of outsideness to our stories, which enables us to develop a reflexive dialogue that offers greater understanding of the self and opens up the ability to step outside existing conceptual frameworks and view the self and the world through a broader lens. There was something undoubtedly empowering for the participants to bring what was going on inside them onto the page. The ability to objectify their felt experience was an essential step towards personal freedom.

Developing a Multiple and Embodied Sense of Self

Regardless of our many identities, whether engendered by family or society, there are elements of identity which tend to drive us towards fixity; this impacts our development of self-understanding and in the process we lose our fluidity and our ability to be multiple. The cultural identities of the participants were multiple, yet most experienced themselves in a way that Hall describes as comprised of the acknowledgment of self through *difference* (Hall, 1987). As one participant shared: “I don’t think that you ever get used to never being in the majority”. The idea that we have a self which is a fixed thing is experiential. The fact that we are now discovering that our sense of self is a process rather than a thing (e.g. Damasio, 2000) does not change the fact that most people experience it as a thing and will continue to do so. The participants in the workshop experienced a process of trying to understand how a self is not fixed, but fluid and constantly in process. One spoke candidly about the difficulties of being of dual-heritage growing up in a working class community in Scotland and living in a care home. She saw her writing practice as

allowing her to take ownership of her life: “I discovered that I was meant to be a bridge between all these different worlds that I was to inhabit”.

Creative life writing provides a space for the imagination that enables writers to engage with the many sides of their personalities and identities that shape their lives. My study explored the idea that the self has multiple dimensions but there is nevertheless a possibility of feeling whole and grounded. That sense is also developed through the writing exercises, as it redirected participants’ attention towards the feelings and emotions attached to their memories. They began to pay attention to their bodies and to listen to how they were feeling.

Focusing more on their bodily feelings allowed the writers to open space for the imagination, creating generative space in the psyche where language could come together with both conscious and unconscious material. This allowed them as writers to increasingly trust bodily feeling as the core of who they are, and therefore identity becomes a fluid process as they become less reliant on identities embedded in social discourses. Eugene Gendlin (1996) refers to the bodily felt sense, a physical feeling that carries deep embodied knowledge and can bring personal meaning. He sees this felt sense as those feelings that are often not given much attention, a “gut feeling”, a sensation that “begins in the body and occurs in the zone between the conscious and the unconscious” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 1). He points out that at first the feeling can be “unclear, murky, puzzling, not fully recognizable” (Gendlin, 1996, p. 26), but in time it can reveal experiences and memories that would otherwise be missed. Gendlin’s (1996) notion of the bodily felt sense that precedes language supports the idea that we are not just discourse and that the body plays an important role in our search for identity and sense of self.

Honor Ford-Smith (2005) offers another way to think about the role of the body within emancipatory processes. She draws from a Caribbean legacy of passing on tales of freedom found in the lives of ordinary women. These stories themselves hold a creative power of rebel consciousness, a hidden power that can enable us to fight oppression and acquire freedom. She claims the body holds knowledge that has been suppressed and that this knowledge is essential for liberatory action. She draws from tales such as that of priestess Ni, which speaks of hidden powers within a woman’s body. For Ford-Smith (2005), bodily knowledge induces both thought and feeling, and as the stories are passed through generations, they release a power that can serve as a basis to reinvent possibilities and redefine liberatory action.

The Liberatory Role of Finding a Writing Voice

The salon represents a community of people, many of whom felt their voices were not heard or authorised in mainstream society. The workshops focused on helping people to find a voice on an individual level and engaging with discourses that shaped their identities and sense of self. The participants spoke about “the ability to talk about anything, there was freedom, it was liberating”; “I have found my voice ... own unique voice”; “I experienced freedom because of digging, I excavated what

I found so hard to express”; “when it is your voice on the page you have liberated yourself”.

I was particularly interested in the notion of voice in relationship to identity. Peter Elbow refers to having a voice, which is traditionally associated with “having the authority to speak” (Elbow, 2000, p. 204). Voice in relation to identity often refers to an identity which is officially not recognised, and therefore the process of finding a voice involves the recovery of hidden, suppressed or forgotten identities. Poet-activist Audre Lorde says: “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared” (Lorde, 1984, p. 41), confirming the notion that “there is something important and political at stake in being able to use a voice that you experience as yours” (Elbow, 2000, p. 192).

Zadie Smith explores the relationship between the singularity and plurality of voice and identity. She speaks of her experience of oscillating between different voices: her old voice which represented Willesden where she grew up, “a big colourful working class sea”, and her Cambridge voice, where she studied, which was a “smaller, posher pond and almost univocal” (Smith, 2009, p. 134). As time progressed Smith says regrettably she lost her double voice for a single one, the voice she picked up at college. She suggests that society requires that we sacrifice one voice for another; our voice like our identity is presented as fixed and singular, which is an “illusion” (Smith, 2009, p. 134).

Elbow’s concept of resonant voice is particularly valuable for my study as it refers to the relationship between social discourse and the unconscious. He suggests that the voice that resonates is the voice that is closest to a whole person because it connects to the unconscious. He emphasises that resonant voice is connected to the body: “the body shows more of ourselves than the conscious mind does” (Elbow, 2000, p. 208). He claims that resonance occurs more in artistic discourse; there is more of the unconscious in discourse when “we make up things, tell stories, use metaphors and exploit the rhythm and sounds of language” (Elbow, 2000, p. 207). Fiction allows the conscious and unconscious voices to come together; as Bakhtin (1981) says of the heteroglossia of the novel, when the page serves as the space for the many voices of the writer.

Through the characters in her story one participant brought together different strands of her African-European identity that had previously felt disconnected. She is reminded of her Germanness when her character is asked if she speaks German, “Spreken Zi Deutsch?” This reminder connects her to a part of herself she had denied and kept hidden: “it came as a shock to feel it so deeply”. She realised at this point the importance of accepting the complexity of her identity and history. Writing about herself in third person she says: “she almost eradicated her German accent, almost fooled her to be what she wasn’t”.

The writers excavated their memories and by doing so discovered subtle voices and experiences that often lay in the shadows of implicit discourses.

Creative Playing in a Safe Environment

The environment of the salon and the facilitation of the workshops played a far more significant role in my research inquiry than I had anticipated, reinforcing Winnicott's view of the importance of creating a safe-enough holding space for creativity to take place (Winnicott, 1971). It was essential to enable participants to move with confidence into their own personal space and writing and therefore I built on the safe space that the salon had already established. There were strong ties and intimacy between the clients and the salon staff due to the longevity of the relationships, which for most had extended over several years. The writers discussed their familiarity and comfort with the salon and spoke of the workshop as a space that enabled them to "belong"; "feel heard"; "feel free to say anything and not be judged". This connection between the participants and the salon was a major influence on the group dynamics and the creative process and outcome of the workshop. There was interdependence, one could not happen without the other, as they nurtured and sustained each other.

I had intentionally wanted to create a playful environment for the workshops, with the aim of creating a space that helped people explore outside their comfort zone. The participants expressed their experience of the workshops as: "funny and silly, it took away my fear of anxiety"; "I just think we laughed a lot so the ego of people trying to impress was just not there, we were just enjoying being together"; "I had so much fun, I didn't feel embarrassed".

It is in the playing and only in the playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self (Winnicott, 1971, p. 73). I drew from Winnicott's idea that playing facilitates growth and is intrinsic to the creative process. He describes the preoccupation that typifies the playing as the moment when a person becomes absorbed in play (Winnicott, 1971). In the context of my research, I understand this as an experience that allows the participants to lose themselves, as they become immersed in the creative process. The writers spoke of their experience of their writing process as being: "immersed in what's going on rather than slightly holding back"; "feeling relaxed is what I feel certainly has led me to my breakthrough"; "it's a space that you occupy, fully". There was a shared experience between the participants of feeling absorbed into the creative process which allowed them to enter into unfamiliar memories: "a bit like going into a trance and going quite deep".

For Winnicott (1971) the notion of creative playing is established during the early stages of a child's life; the child is gradually able to be alone because the unconscious has become imbued with the presence of the mother; the child has gained a sense of benign inner presence. The mother's presence exists particularly in transitional objects, such as toys, blankets and teddy bears which have been important parts of the relationship between them. The holding environment is critical during this transitional stage: if the child does not feel safe, the experience of playing can be frightening and chaotic. This notion of creative play is located in a therapeutic context but is still pertinent to a group learning environment.

In the context of my research the salon could be seen as a maternal presence for the participants' learning process and the workshop space as a holding environment. When I presented the exercise of "introducing yourself through a favourite item of clothes", participants included their favourite boots, necklaces and a charm bracelet, most of them were wearing their chosen item in the workshop, and some of the items continued to be worn throughout the series. The reasons offered included: "it's my favourite"; "it makes me feel good"; "I wear it for good luck". It was here that I began to see Winnicott's transitional objects in a different context. The participants had brought into the workshop their own transitional objects, which enabled them to feel safe enough to explore their inner worlds and outer realities. From there I began to see the collective identity also like a transitional object, something that members of the group brought into the workshop; the racial and cultural identity, as well as their "client" identity installed a collective sense of safety and belonging. In the early stages of the workshop the shared narrative between the participants provided a key component in their ability to let go in the creative process.

Conclusion: Creative Writing as a Liberatory Method in a Community Setting

The most important factor in the success of the project was establishing an environment where participants felt safe enough to engage with the creative writing process. However, at the beginning I had no idea of the difficulties of establishing and maintaining a secure space. I had focused on the workshop but I had not paid attention to the introductory meeting which took place a week before. I soon began to realise that this meeting was the starting point for establishing the group dynamics between the facilitator, participants and environment. The introductory meeting offered structure, information and clarity to the clients, all of which reinforced a feeling of safety within the group. During the meeting prospective participants spoke of the work of artists they liked. One referred to Bob Marley, which was greeted with an enthusiastic approval from other people, including myself. But after the meeting one client spoke to me of a specific moment when she felt estranged from the group. This was the discussion of Marley; she did not like his music and therefore felt at odds when the rest of the group, including me the facilitator. She felt marginalised.

The participants spoke of their challenge of being the only black person in other writers' groups, but locating a creative life writing workshop in a space where black people are the majority has its own challenges. I thought of Zadie Smith when she wrote about the concept of blackness being "too narrow ... It made the blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing" (Smith, 2009, p. 143). When the client raised the issues of Bob with me, it was a reminder of the tenuousness of our identity, particularly where the issue of identity is heavily woven into a collective narrative which offers a sense of belonging to a group.

It also reminded me of my role as facilitator and to be cautious of revealing my own preferences and choices which may inhibit or distance participants' involvement in the group. It was an invaluable lesson for forthcoming workshops.

Within the creative life writing process difficult emotions and experiences can emerge, such as grief, loss, pain, regret, beating oneself up for not having achieved this or that, or for not being a good person. The space is important, but the space is difficult and that is why it was important for me as the facilitator that the writers trusted my ability to hold the group, to contain and navigate emotional tensions within individuals and the group, as they chose the uncertain path of self-exploration: "It was the trust you had with the tutor; the way you [facilitator] were in the group, I felt I could write anything".

It is important that the holding framework is not solely dependent on the facilitator and that group members also participate in this process. Each participant had to assume responsibility for how much of their personal material they felt comfortable to share. The group dynamic created an atmosphere in which participants felt accepted and not judged: "Whatever you came in with and whatever was going on for you, you would be accepted", enabling them to explore differences, contradictions, ambiguities and uncertainties that existed within themselves individually, within the group and outside the group.

The strength of my research is found in its practice, which demonstrates that having a voice is critical to an empowering process. Participants' writing practice and the group discussions revealed complex, multidimensional lives, challenging single identities and hegemonic agendas, offering a new "consciousness of expansiveness" from a "cross cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspective [that] redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality" (Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 4). I contend that creative life writing that engages with a sociopolitical context is a valuable tool of renewal, reconstruction and transformation. The research from which this chapter draws shows how creative life writing presents the possibilities of enabling us to become agentic in our own emancipatory processes; introducing the understanding and necessity for "new analyses, new questions and new understandings [as we] unlock some of the narrow terms of the discourses in which we are inscribed" (Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 5).

One of the most liberating aspects of the participants' learning was the very simple recognition and acceptance that our lives did not fit into a tidy box. Such workshops allow us to unlock the creative power of rebel consciousness buried deep within our own stories (Ford-Smith, 2005). As we learn to express our silences, feelings and emotions on the page, we begin to take those personal tiny and titanic steps towards freedom:

You're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside of you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside (Lorde, 1984, p. 42).

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