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Fringe dwelling in autobiographical memory – Writers’ perspectives

Abstract:

This essay includes collated contributions from practising writers, participants in a Creative Writing|Neuroimaging Exploratory Study, *Ideasthetic Imagining – Mapping the Brain’s Microstates Using Magnetoencephalography (MEG)*, conducted at Swinburne University (2023, Melbourne, Australia). The study investigates neural activity in participants’ brains while undertaking a creative writing workshop. Participants write imaginatively from short and long-term memory. The research team utilises MEG neuroimaging technology to determine where and how the brain is processing information at distinct stages of the workshop. The creative writing workshop at the heart of the study involves imaginative approaches to life writing, transforming unresolved memories through creative practice. As participants engage in the workshop, the research team measures activity in target regions of the brain. The researchers then analyse the interaction between distinct regions of the brain at various stages. The following essay gathers the voices of the experimental group (practising writers), asking them to reflect upon their experience of writing a long-term memory, as they experienced it at the time and, subsequently, from a perspective other than their own. In this exercise, particular regions of the brain are activated (to a far greater extent) in the experimental group (practising writers) as opposed to the control group (non- writers).

Biographical note:

Julia Prendergast lives in Melbourne, Australia, on unceded Wurundjeri land. Julia’s novel, *The Earth Does Not Get Fat* (2018), was longlisted for the Indie Book Awards (debut fiction). Her short story collection, *Bloodrust and Other Stories*, was published in 2022. Julia is a practice-led researcher – an enthusiastic supporter of transdisciplinary, collaborative research practices, with a particular interest in neuro|psychoanalytic approaches to creative writing. She is President|Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak academic body representing the discipline of Creative Writing (Australasia). Julia is Associate Professor and Discipline Leader

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Gabriella Munoz is a Mexican-born writer and editor based in Naarm. Her work has been published in *Cordite*, *Meanjin*, *Kill Your Darlings* and *ACE IV: Arresting Contemporary Stories by Emerging Writers*, amongst others. She has performed at the Emerging Writers' Festival, A Voz Limpia and The Next Big Thing. In 2019, she received a Wheeler Centre Hot Desk Fellowship and has received development opportunities from Footscray Community Arts and Writers Victoria. Gabriella is a book reviewer for *Paradise Magazine* and is the editor of *Puentes Review*.

Julienne van Loon is the author of three novels, including the Australian/Vogel's Award winner *Road Story* (2005). Her novella *Instructions for a Steep Decline* won the Griffith Review Novella Project VII in 2019. Her literary essay collection on contemporary women thinkers, *The Thinking Woman* (2019), has been hailed as "a revelation" (*Australian Book Review*), "surprising and resonant" (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and "an invitation to a thoughtful life" (Feminist Writers' Festival). She is Associate Professor with the Creative Writing program at the University of Melbourne.

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra. Recent books include *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester University Press, 2016), *Gender and the Creative Labour Market* (Palgrave, 2022), and the poetry collections *Moving Targets* (2018), *Flight Mode* (with Shé Hawke, 2020) and *The Daily News* (2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus* and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. Her scholarly work focuses on the ethics of representation and the field of creative practice; her poetry focuses on material poetics and questions of seeing and being.

Keywords:

Creative writing, autobiographical memory, ideasthesia, unknown thought, neuro/psychoanalysis

Introduction by Julia Prendergast

This essay includes collated contributions from practising writers, participants in a Creative Writing|Neuroimaging Exploratory Study, *Ideasthetic imagining – Mapping the Brain’s Microstates Using Magnetoencephalography (MEG)*, conducted at Swinburne University (2023, Melbourne, Australia). The study investigates neural activity in participants’ brains while undertaking a creative writing workshop. Participants write imaginatively from short and long-term memory. We utilise MEG neuroimaging technology to determine where and how the brain is processing information at distinct stages of the workshop.

The creative writing workshop at the heart of the Exploratory Study focuses on creative writing as a process of identifying and resolving conundrum and contradiction, drawing attention to the way “story-work” brings to the surface experiential knowledge that did not otherwise seem known, let alone “fetchable”.

The workshop requires participants to write a response to an unresolved idea or experience, a long-term and short-term autobiographical memory that remains uncertain or is perplexing – something one doesn’t understand or would like to understand more fully. STAGE ONE of the writing workshop focuses on long-term autobiographical memory. STAGE TWO focuses on short-term memory. Each stage in the workshop involves three exercises:

- i. writing an autobiographical memory
- ii. writing an autobiographical memory from a perspective other than the participant’s perspective
- iii. writing a fictionalised version of an autobiographical memory (plotting alternate scenarios).

The aim of the study is to contrast brain activity during distinct stages of the workshop. Utilising advanced MEG neuroimaging methods, the research team tracks neural activity, time- stamped, during various stages of the workshop, at primary moments of narrative composition and beyond. Data analysis includes beamform analysis, focusing particular regions in the brain, as well as connectivity analysis, focusing the interactivity between networks of brain activity. Preliminary data analysis focuses contrast analysis of target regions of the brain. Data analysis of neural networks is ongoing.

As the research team (including Dr Benjamin Slade and Paris Lyons) conducts primary contrast analysis, we note stark differences between the experimental group (practising writers) and the control group (non-writers) when working from long-term memory. Specific regions of the brain are activated (to a far greater extent) in the experimental group (practising writers) as opposed to the control group (non-writers). This is the most divergent preliminary finding.

The following collated essay gathers the voices of the experimental group (practising writers). These contributions are bookended by contextual discussion from the Lead Chief Investigator,

referencing the Exploratory Study and otherwise uniting central tenets of co-authors' contributions with reference to Virginia Woolf's "The Moment". Participating writers reflect upon the experience of revisiting a long-term memory as a first-person participant, as they experienced the event at the time and, subsequently – in the exercise that most represents heightened activity in the experimental group – *from a perspective other than their own*. Through their collective contributions, these writers provide an interwoven account of the *experience* of engaging with moments-in-time, working from long-term memory from the perspective of an "other".

Regardless of whether we take an interest in neuro/psychoanalytic approaches to writing and creativity, does it make immediate and intuitive sense to us that particular regions of the brain are activated (to a far greater extent) in the experimental group (practising writers) when working with a long-term memory, in general, and from a perspective other than one's own, in particular? Writers appreciate that, alongside fictional modes of creative practice, even strict modes of non-fictional writing and poetic forms often involve the construction of a persona. Further, as practising writers and writer-academics, we pause in our practice, taking account of the nature and ramifications of the work we do – the impact of our mind's eye upon our practice, and vice versa – ruminating upon the impact of story-work on our writing and thinking, and our humanity. This collated essay reflects my desire to capture a polyvocal account of this dynamic aspect of practice through the combined reflections of practising writers, working with long-term memory as the primary stimulus. Through a focus on *experience*, these writers plot the dynamics of what it *feels like* to shift perspective in relation to long-term memory – the dynamic, ongoing, ruminative nature of our engagement with moments-in-time.

As these contributions arrived in my Inbox, I was reading (or more accurately, incessantly re-reading) Virginia Woolf's essay (1948) "The Moment". I read it upwards of fifty times across a number of days, walking a shoreline I LOVE. *Get a life, right?* Except I think this is a large part of my life – the quest to make sense of what-I-write, how-I-write, why-I write – a practice- led response to what I have coined the "the incompleteness theory" [1]. As an author of realist fiction, a writer who works from memory as a fertile repository, I'm aware of my conception of the self, as it is represented in writing, as a plurality. I reflect upon the ways I am immersed in territory that springboards from my lived experience and is, at the very same time, outside of it. As I have suggested, on many occasions, I feel that anything I have written that may be worthwhile arises from a dilemma of consciousness as the primary stimulus for writing:

At a primary moment of narrative composition, I'm on a quest to capture what I have described as the *haunting* incompleteness of human experience. My writing always begins from a state of conundrum and contradiction: something I'm troubled by; something that presents a problem of logic or a *riddle* of emotion and logic; something I feel compelled to understand more fully. To my mind, this quest is premised on the inner consciousness as a plurality of selves. (Prendergast, 2023, p. 5, emphasis added)

Recognising memory's inherent fraudulence, I take a deep interest in the processes and practices involved in acts-of-making that springboard from lived experience – from the sense in which seeing, being and knowing, and the presence-of-the-presence, is necessarily incomplete. These ideas are expanded in far greater detail elsewhere [2]. For the purposes of the current discussion, I note that I concur with Jonah Lehrer (2008, p. 85), who, following Proustian logic, suggests: “The memory is altered in the absence of the original stimulus, *becoming less about what you remember and more about you*. So the purely objective memory, the one ‘true’ original...is the one memory you will never know” (Lehrer, p. 85, emphasis added). As I reflect upon the processes involved in creative practice, I recognise that writing creatively reflects the very activity of remembering, simulating remembering as a search for lost time and a reconfiguration [3]. This reflection upon practice shapes the creative writing workshop at the heart of the Exploratory Study.

The following collated essay represents a polyvocal account of this dynamic aspect of practice, a wild attempt to track the brain's activity in the very moment of returning to a moment – necessarily reconstructing (as per memory) an “I” that was and then determinedly reconstructing – revisiting a scene originally known, if incompletely, by an earlier version of ourselves and reconfiguring that scene through the lens of another person present at the time. The latter exercise represents an act of “further-othering” (as per memory's time – the incessant evolution of our multiplicity of selves).

In his preface to Virginia Woolf's *The Moment and Other Essays*, Leonard Woolf notes that “The Moment” was considered unfinished at the time of Woolf's death: “exist[ing] only in a much earlier stage, a rather rough typescript heavily corrected in handwriting” (1948, p. viii). I wonder what may have happened to this essay if it had been edited by Woolf herself or by an editor. I can't bear to think about what may have been lost. This is precisely how I feel about memory-work as it relates to writing. In this case, it's not so much that I can't bear to think about what would be lost as I mourn what would not have become – recognising, as I do, the shadowy presence of lost time, real and imagined, in my creative work.

As Woolf suggests:

If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something, seeks out the different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it. To begin with: it is largely composed of visual and sense impressions...Then the sense of the light sinking back into darkness seems to be gently putting out with a damp sponge the colour in one's own eyes...

But this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth...they sink, weighted down...One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch. (1948, pp. 3–4)

Woolf captures the way I felt, reading the contributions of my co-authors, as adumbrations – outlines or sketches, shadows that foreshadow. This is the way I feel about the practice of writing, more broadly – a longing for the truth in the presence-of-the-present, knowing all the while that the present is contingent upon a past that distorts it. This realisation is omnipresent as I take up a pen or tap the keyboard – I’m a spectator, nothing more – seeking elements of order, which is to say meaning, despite the wavering distortions, the fading vision, the sense that I am sinking...

Alice does by Dominique Hecq

Shame requires
the eyes of others
unlike guilt—Anne Carson

There are no paper traces, only mnemonic traces. Alice is an autobiographical figure, a persona or a mask, a *mise en abyme*. Alice speaks, but whose voice is it?

Alice goes underground. This is where machines are at a university in the leafy suburbs of Melbourne. Grey walls, electric glare, something musty in the air.

Alice sits inside the machine. Her legs dangle along the seat. An orderly sticks electrodes to her skull, neck and face. She waits for the prompts, feels belittled.

The first cue reminds her of the writing exercises she used to subject her students to:

STAGE ONE Exercise 1: Write the scene of a long-term memory from your own perspective as fast as you can without worrying about grammar or spelling.

Alice has cold feet. Serves you right, she thinks. She waits for the instructor's signal. Begins to write as fast as she can in first person. She's three, punished. She's one, banished. Alice is in infinite regression: she writes in the voice of the ego. She loves it but wants to weep. Yippee! Alice is done.

STAGE ONE Exercise 2: Write the scene of a long-term memory from a perspective other than your own as fast as you can without worrying about grammar or spelling.

Alice's throat constricts. Her breathing is slow. At the instructor's signal, she begins in second person. She is cold. She's hot. Her breathing is fast. Her palms are sweaty. One electrode comes off her face. She sticks it back as well as she can, but it's a botched job. She writes as fast as she can. Stops. Starts again. Alice is in an infinite digression, repression, suppression: she writes in the voice of the super-ego. *Even though it is muffled by a mask, she can pick out her father's voice* [1]. She loses it, engulfed as she is by a massive wave of anguish. She resurfaces. Worries she has lost face. The instructor smiles – "id" is done.

Alice retraces her steps above ground. Hello darkness! This is no friend, but the witness of her shame. She wasn't supposed to, but she worried about grammar and spelling and syntax. Her writing is full of holes, slips of the tongue, traces of the unsaid. It exposes the nature of her jouissance as subject. The irony – she thought she'd enjoy being the object of an experiment extraneous to psychoanalysis. And passive voice. She should have avoided passive voice.

Neuroscience exposes all her flaws.

Alice walks briskly to Main Road. Her head is afloat. Nightfall pongs of dogshit, curry and French fries. She wants to puke. Her feet take her to the station.

Lacan began by reading Freud to the letter. In so doing, he re-exposed the failure with which psychoanalysis works. This failure is carried by what he actually called “the letter”, an inscription that is of the field of language but can’t itself be translated. What insists in the writing of the letter is the failure of language to be other than foreign to the one who speaks it yet by paying attention to this insistence, in analysis, the subject is able to be given effect. In Alice’s case, my interpretation is that the letter is “a”, as in *objet petit a*, object a, the function of a baby for a mother, but I err...

What I want to say is that the subject-effect can’t be provoked by drowning the signifiers of speech in meaning. It is aroused by entertaining the lively, but enigmatic, letter that insists in those signifiers. It is in this entertainment that the letter might articulate itself in the formality of writing, that is, as *discourse*.

As in the instructor’s invitation today, one year after the experiment “to contribute a 1000- word narrative-driven contribution about your experience of the workshop, at the heart of the study”.

The letter itself remains untranslatable. But its attempted translation, by a carrying across into discourse that the “id speaks” of Freud’s discovery, effects a translation of impossible enjoyment, this being one way to talk about what Lacan calls *jouissance*. As Lacan puts it at one point, “The transmission of the letter has a relationship with something essential, fundamental, in the organisation of discourse whatever it may be, namely, *jouissance*.”

This implies that, by the very act of writing, the impossible *jouissance* of the letter is encountered – here, for once, I insist on the use of the passive. But this is an encounter that is not there to be read off; it demands an active reading, one that attends to the word as far as the limit of the letter. To hell with Lacan.

Night isn’t a machine. Nor is Alice. She stops writing. Sighs.

The experiment confirms that, despite seven years of analysis, she is still the guilty child prone to anxiety and shame. *Plus ça change*, Alice remains Alice, aka object a.

A rises. Totters to the bookshelf. A feels reconciled with Jackass now. *Autres Ecrits*. Yes, yes. The hand seizes the book. Mouth blows the dust on its spine. Other hand opens... Yes! She will add a note to her narrative response to the experiment. *Rétablissement*. In the symbolic. The subject does [2].

Alice moves away from the psychoanalysts. On to the poets. French? Spanish? German? No. She picks Anne Carson’s boxed collection of chapbooks *Float*. This is poetry in English with forays into translation whose writing enacts the obscurity of language masquerading as clarity. It is poetry that, whether or not it’s translated, remains foreign. A mere *flotage*.

Wired by Rose Michael

The thing is, you felt the mental adjustment – imagined neurons firing, cells realigning – the instant the prompt landed. The second you heard the words. It was enough to renew your faith in writing! In creative writing. In *teaching* creative writing. That you could; how you did. Ah! This was IT. So clever, so fun...was this therapy? Hand racing over the page like you, like it, used to back in the beginning. Back on those endless afternoon detentions where, when, you wrote on and on and on about girls in detention writing themselves – out! – into fantasy worlds. Oh! You had forgotten, the way you so instantly saw yourself

re-saw, your writer-SELF:

other. No longer someone of indeterminate age, indeterminate gender – a writer: writer-*me* – running down a long garden to high back fence and friendly neighbour (vaguely remembered, vaguely re-imagined) on the other side. Suddenly saw, instead, your *self* as clear as only an outsider can. A small, small girl. Springy buffalo grass. An eastern suburbs “cal bung”. See see *see!* Me! Clear as anything. Now. Then. Damp sneakers – no sign of the sore ankle from a moment before. Had it ever even been? Grass-stained skirt. Scraped knee. Knees? No fence evident. Suddenly, so obvious: not what I was running towards but what I was running from. The house. My mother

– who is, now, *you*,

too!

Once you pulled back, once you pull out, you realise you could should would pull further and further away – from girl, passed mother, to writer wired-up in a white machine. A slightly futuristic, slightly retro chair. Where I sit, *sat*, shut in. Strung with wires which hung off small stickers that unpeeled as time did its detention thing.

Tick tick unstick.

“Is it real research?” someone high up from a different discipline asked me once. Was it? Is this? I think, then and then and now, again, of Sue Woolf’s book on science and creativity. *The madman and the cleaning lady? The cleaning lady and the professor?* A cleaner, anyway. A cleaning woman. My hand writing, wiping, the plastic. I think of how she said, or what I read as: the neurotypical mind sees – is shown – an image of an ocean and a table and, after its (our) initial interest, gets bored. The artist’s mind sees the same pictures and gets more and more interested. An ocean... a table!

What is this thing we call creative practice? Is this it? *Is it this?* A colleague said, when I told them this anecdote: ‘Stack the room with friends.’ I imagine this strange space-chair stacked. Her, in here, with me. All of us, squeezed together. Brains performing: the same; not the same.

I think of: ocean and table. All the infinite connections. Disconnections. Unconnections. Missed connections. My imagined ocean laps and lolls. The table in my mind's eye – not the white plastic tray in front of me but the cartoon pine upgraded to Narnia-dark – returns to its original parts.
Drift

wood.

What if my, *the*, mind was making up the ocean and table it was thinking about. No pictures shown. Would this – that – be more or less interesting? To whom? What would the chair record? The making up? Or looking at?

The fact that: I am not at all claustrophobic. (Not even slightly agoraphobic.) The fact that: I may be obsessive, ordered, but not compulsive. (Nor, usually, mute.) I am not in her book. This is research.

I think and don't think about Woolf's neurodivergent character. I don't think, and think, about the neurodiverse minds I know. I look back to my hand that has been and still is All. This. While. writing writing writing. Fast. Furious. If fingers could pant! Like...like?...like in detention. I remember. Picture it! Girl-me, Penelope-wise, weaving or unweaving some way out of there. Here. Woman-me. Is it time? Could I conjure the *this* scene before me, cramping the page, quite so clearly if I don't – didn't – rush? Was the pace set by the girl's, my, running? Was this urgency hers? I think of octopus limbs. Actions that don't (have to) be signed-off by the brain. On and on and on we write remember research. All in the chair together. Connect and disconnect. Re and miss and un and *ummmm*...

Lap. LOL.

Under my mother's hands – which are now mine: which mine now are – is wood. The of the verandah rail. It pushes up into her palms. Not ragged like the fence top teeth. Not splintered. Paint peels. Her knuckles are white. Cross it out *cross it out* ~~cross it out~~ – not because it isn't true but because it is a cliché. That is how I thought it, not how I would write it. (What does the brain show? Is crossing out recorded not as letting go but going over?)

I – willing participant in this experiment (not claustrophobic, not neurodivergent, not my own mother) – note how this second exercise compares and contrasts and complements the one before. Claustrophobic, neurodivergent, my own mother...I wonder what comes next. I ask my octopus hand which, writing the long-ago memory from *my* perspective, had me zooming in on a child's eye view of the world. Such rich sensory input. The inside of fence slates that were high for me to hoist feet up on to. Wet wood. Dark green or black between the gaps. It had a smell and a taste. Life? Death. Tricky to navigate – the going up, the going over. That moment on top when you had to risk raising one leg and decide whether to shift hands to side and sit a moment or just jump down into

the other garden. Remembered. Imagined.

They used to have a ladder, didn't they? But here – there, then – there was none.

Was I growing up? Or (and?) was I not as welcome as I used to think?

Re-writing the scene from my mother's perspective shifted the emphasis to vision. Added... analysis. Shame. What would the machine record? How could it separate this over-thinking from my under-writing concern that I was... braless! because I had forgotten the instruction to be

wire

free.

Enter sandman by Gabriella Munoz

Effect of colours: blue boosts creativity while red enhances attention to detail. Sleep strengthens your memories and helps with creativity. Let me sleep on it: creativity, problem solving. Does music enhance creativity?

Brain. Memory. Creativity. Sleep. I spent my mornings from 2009 to 2016 reading scientific press releases and research papers, mostly on neuroscience, sleep, and creativity. I would then interview the researchers or write news stories for a popular science magazine and website – and I often wondered what it was like to be part of one of those studies.

I was particularly in awe of a study at McGill University. In 2014, neuroscientists scanned the brains of professional cello players to visualise how music shapes the brain. They designed a non-metallic cello that could be played inside an MRI machine to see the areas in the brain that fire up when musicians interpret a melody. The information collected had the potential to help in the development of music therapies for stroke patients (McGill University, 2014).

Another study conducted at the University of Greifswald in Germany compared the brains of emerging and established writers to determine if there were any differences in the areas that fire up when they were working on a story. They used fMRI machines to detect brain activity and saw differences in both groups: during brainstorming sessions, emerging or novice writers showed more activation of the brain's visual centre, while more experienced writers showed more activity in regions involved in speech. When both groups wrote, the caudate nucleus (a part of the brain key in skills that develop with practice) became active in established writers only. I often wondered what would happen in this study if the researchers added background music to one of the tasks (Erhard et al., 2014).

Do you imagine songs while you write? Is there a music background to writing? Does listening to music make you a better writer? What was the name of the app that makes your writing more organised?

The ability to interpret music fascinates me. How do you play an instrument and at the same time create something new every time you play the same tune? Where do emotions come from when you play music? How do you translate this to writing, especially when you have been working on the same text for a few months?

Perhaps this is why I listen to music when I write – Metallica, Apocalyptica and Finnish metal bands are on my go-to list for writing. My partner, however, prefers to listen to hip hop and reggaeton when he writes. I've tried using his playlist only to find it doesn't work for me – it is too distracting.

At Durham University in 2016, two researchers analysed thousands of songs to try to figure out why “earworms” are so catchy. For them, earworms are sticky songs, the melodies you can’t get out of your head, no matter what you do.

They found sticky songs are faster, somewhat generic and easy to remember. Some examples are Lady Gaga’s Bad Romance, Kylie Minogue’s Can’t Get You Out of My Head and Journey’s Don’t Stop Believin’ (Jakubowski et al., 2015).

When I write, the first chords of Metallica’s Enter Sandman play in my head like a sticky prelude.

What does it feel like to be inside the MRI machine? Can you see creativity working? Can neuroscientists see if there is a sticky song in your brain when you write?

When neurologists first scanned my brain, they weren’t looking for the fireworks that ignite my writing or that sticky Metallica song I play in my head every time I write (even now as I write this). They were looking for a tumour, a mistake, a synapsis gone astray.

I had five brain scans, from CT-scans to MRIs, to check if I was having or had had a stroke. Sticky songs. COVID-19. It was the only moment I was alone during the lockdowns. In that sterile room at Monash Hospital, where the light in the MRI room was more greyish than yellow, I listened to the radiologist’s Eighties Spotify playlist while I was still inside the MRI machine.

Six days in hospital writing bad poems and short stories by hand. Metallica’s Enter Sandman in my head.

Years later there were electrodes attached to my head, again. It felt oddly familiar, but this time instead of fear and worry, there was excitement. A comfortable chair – at least more than my non-ergonomic writing chair at home. The room, I remember, perhaps incorrectly, with that yellowish hue most radiology centres have. The voices of the researchers asking if I was comfortable and then the voice of writer and researcher Julia Prendergast giving me instructions to write. Enter Sandman in my head.

I tend to write in first person as it helps me feel closer to characters and allows me to inhabit the world the way they would – even if that means a world full of ghosts and blue butterflies. It didn’t take long to choose the narrator of the scene I would write for the study. My aunt’s colleague. The dialogue flows. I didn’t want to stop writing because it was one of the few times I had worked on a childhood memory from someone else’s perspective. The key to unlocking a project I have been working on in which I reflect on secrecy, grief and family trauma.

Can you unconsciously forget an experience? The neurons that re-write traumatic memories. How the brain gives special resonance to emotional memories. The complex relationship between memory and silence.

I write in English, but my mother tongue is Spanish. Only when I write creative non-fiction or poetry I code-switch (mix languages). The code-switching is always intentional in the final version, but not in my first draft. When I start a project, it feels almost as if my areas of Broca and Wernicke (parts of the brain involved in language production) know exactly when to switch, making my writing flow and adding musicality. Most of the time, this “unconscious language switch” ignites when I write dialogue, and perhaps this happens because some of these memories are stored in one language but remembered or retold in another. I ponder if this is a way in which the brain protects us from some of our memories of grief and trauma – or perhaps it is a way to negotiate liminal spaces and grief.

During my editing process I remove code-switching or add more, depending on what the piece needs and the way I want the languages to work with each other, particularly in poetry.

At one point in this exercise, I stopped to ask Julia if I could mix languages. I was writing dialogue from someone else’s perspective and that someone spoke Spanish. If I had the opportunity to edit this scene, I don’t think the character would speak Spanish at all. The text wouldn’t need it.

I have been working on a scene for a while. In it a young woman performs an autopsy and when her scalpel cuts the purplish flesh, blue butterflies emerge. I must stop every time because I fear butterflies. First person narratives from a different perspective. Enter Sandman still plays in my head.

Transportation by Julienne van Loon

Transporting myself into the perspective of the other feels curious and also full, sort of right, the right kind of daydream, and I'm completely at home in or absorbed by this sort of imaginative work. In doing this, writing and imaginative inventing (at the same time), I am sort of distanced from me and I am an extension of me – both simultaneously – and I take comfort in this, but I am also closer to the imagined other and closer to a lived experience of *us*, closer to the experience of living collectively, witnessing collectively, that broader category of human. In this way my focus is not exclusively on the “I” of the other perspective I have been asked to imagine as a witness to a real-life experience of my own. Rather, I am immersed in a familiar (as a fiction writer) and curious feeling of being or *being inhabited* by another consciousness and whether or not the instructions tell me it's permissible, I will invent.

Significant details are different from here. Noticing is different. The perspective, of course, is different, but also my fundamental interests in the episode that is unfolding before me are different because I want and know life differently.

How privileged I am to be able to transport like this, to notice again, to notice differently. I am floating, unencumbered by my body, and I am seeing that fluidity is a kind of suspension of matter, a deeply joyful one. It is as if *this* is where things were really at all along. Not “me”, not “mine”, not anchored in the body at all, but not fully “other” either, for I cannot fully inhabit the other's body-mind. The other I am inventing is mutable, unfolding, not “correct” (and it doesn't matter), imperfect, always already incomplete, unfinished, told tangentially.

There are practical considerations. The writing, which is material or mechanical in some way, slows things down and involves some kind of translation. Because it is a rules-based exercise, I am tethered, but this isn't new, I am always tethered in creative writing by something – language rules, genre, form. And I am also thinking/doing syntax, punctuation, paragraphing in the same way an experienced driver in a familiar vehicle thinks (but does not dwell on) the turning on of the indicators, the changing down gears, changing lanes.

But I am also travelling beyond, immersed, transported (that word again) and because this is one of my favourite practices, a familiar practice, I am free of critical voices, free of impracticalities, and in some way, at home.

Writing, thinking, being by Jen Webb

I am alone in a darkened room, writing pad on my knee, electrodes attached to various parts of my head. I am alone, but observed: first by the electrodes, which are reading the impulses from my brain; again by the researchers, who are sitting in another room, watching the machine feeds, watching me.

Write a story from your childhood... I follow the instructions, and find myself awash in humiliation and rage – just as I was at eight or nine when the event happened. What the electrodes observe, I can't tell. But the churn in my body and the flush of memory makes it clear that one of the boxes in my brain has opened and released something I wish had stayed quiescent.

I know little or nothing about brains. But when I was four or five, and beginning to learn about the processes of learning, I had a vivid dream that has stayed vivid over the many decades since. In that dream, my brain was comprised of a series of jack-in-the-box boxes. Inside each was a dense scroll of paper; and each scroll presented a register of a particular block of knowledge. How to read. How to write. How to add. How to talk to difficult grandmothers. How to tend flowers. How to manage my dog. And later, how to think about philosophy. What to do with a poem. How to care for children, balance a budget, chair a meeting.

A scroll of paper that is accessed by flipping a lid and unrolling the contents is a clumsy filing system. But writing that small narrative from my childhood reminds me that creative thinking and practice can be an effective, if not reliably accurate, search engine. That the angry child is part of me, whether (readily) accessible or not.

A new prompt from another room: to write the story again, from a different perspective. I obey the prompt and flip focalisation from small-child-me to the person who caused my distress, and scrawl down her view of me, her account of the event. Imagining myself – *from the child perspective* – into an adult, that adult, the substitute teacher I barely knew, and who didn't know any of us, and who seemed to view her role as keeping order in the class. How annoying I must have been; how recalcitrant, how noisy in my romping around when I should have been sitting quietly with my hands in my lap. I laugh out loud as I embody her, whom I despised then, and who now I (perhaps) understand a little better. I laugh out loud as I take on her identity, performing a she who is neither herself nor me, but a character I wrote, many years ago, to embody a role in the theatre of my mind.

And the rage and shame and sense of helplessness have completely vanished from my body, flushed away by mirth. My body, responding to my brain. Which of course it must. Brain is body; body is brain. I am a being constituted according to what Antonio Damasio called the "body-minded brain" (1995, p. 243).

René Descartes' famous insistence "I think, therefore I am" (2003 [1641], p. 23) may still have traction in contemporary discourse, but has been (for me, convincingly) debunked by many philosophers, in the almost-four centuries since he constructed his method. To name just two such critics: Anne Finch, who rebutted the limitations the *cogito* imposes, insisting: "The distinction between spirit [mind] and body is only modal and incremental, not essential and substantial" (2017 [1692], p. 25); and Friedrich Nietzsche, who tore Descartes' argument to bits:

When I analyse the event expressed in the sentence "I think," I acquire a series of rash assertions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove – for example, that it is *I* who think, that it has to be something at all which thinks, that thinking is an activity and operation on the part of an entity thought of as a cause, that an "I" exists... (1990, p. 470)

The "I" that I imagine myself to be is still in that chair, in that darkened room, under benign surveillance. I don't know if my observers can see the churn in my brain/body/being. And, having signed a consent form, I am not concerned what they can see – I've given myself over, for this short period, this experiment.

The third prompt comes; I write; but I'm surprisingly tired now – drained of energy and interest; so both the writing and (I imagine) the firing in my brain are pretty flat.

If I'm not fully engaged, and yet I am writing, is it me who writes? It doesn't feel *like me*, whatever "like me" means. And I should know better than to seek a discrete *me*, in any event. I think of Michel Foucault, who wrote about writing:

do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture...in which I can lose myself? (1972, p. 17)

We are never simply ourselves; we are beings in process.

The researchers lead me from the room and peel the electrodes off me. They lead me to another room and slide me into an MRI, and I lie back, catching my breath, watching the soothing images that appear on the ceiling above me, taking me away from language and story and character and focalisation into the material world, into a phenomenological state of being. Though this is simply ego: the material world I view is no more than a matter of pixels on a screen, and even while I tell myself I'm immersed in materiality, philosophy intrudes – now, in the form of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela who remind me that "Living systems are cognitive systems, and living as a process is a process of cognition" (1980, p. 13). I think, therefore I am? No: I am, therefore I think [1]. And the 'am' that I am is a writer, and the embodied brain in which I file and sort and stack and scroll my thoughts is a writing mind: erratic, unreliable, (almost) ceaselessly inquisitive.

Conclusion by Julia Prendergast

For context, regarding the Creative Writing|Neuroimaging Exploratory Study, I note my ongoing pairing of two theories, one from neuroscience and the other from psychoanalysis: ideasthesia or “sensing concepts” from neuroscience (Nikolić, 2016, p. 2), and the “unthought known” from psychoanalysis (Bollas, 2014, 2017), paying attention to the way I employ sensory imagining (informed by pre-conscious memories and mental processes), when writing and reading.

The theory of ideasthesia arises from the “Ancient Greek words *idea* (for concept) and *aesthesia* (for sensation). Hence...the term ideasthesia [or] *sensing concepts*” (Nikolić, 2016, p. 2). Ideasthesia was developed from the concept of synaesthesia. As Nikolić explains: “Synesthetes are people who have additional sensory-like experiences to a stimulus that otherwise would not induce such experiences” (2016, p. 2). While the concept of ideasthesia had been explored from the perspective of a subject’s experience of visual art – theorised from the perspective of a viewer’s engagement with the artwork, in particular – in recent years, I’ve taken this concept to practice-led thinking: considering the theory of ideasthesia as it relates to creative writing processes and practices, in general, and “sensing ideas” as it relates to memory and consciousness, as the impetus for practice, in particular.

I recognise that some forms of writing are informed, fundamentally and necessarily, by the subjective aspect of knowledge. Theorising about the twin processes of stimulus-*for* and stimulus-*in*, as paired activities of meta-cognition, further develops my understanding of Bollas’ concept of the “unthought known” (2014, p. 19) [4]. The theory of the unthought known refers to the primary repressed unconscious as a repository of experiential knowledge. Bollas postulates the concept of “the immaterial intelligence of form” whereby “the analyst (like the artist) breaks the figure; not to find out what is inside but to realise the immaterial intelligence of form” (Bollas, 2014, p. 19, brackets in original). I consider the characters in my stories as phantom-selves that “go there” but-for-the-grace, so to speak. This plurality of selves incorporates my experiential self (mind and body) as the vessel of the unthought known – incorporating the complex interrelationship between memory and consciousness.

In this way, the practice-led research that underpins the Exploratory Study is premised upon neuro|psychoanalytic approaches to writing and creativity. This leads me to conjure the original concept of “ideasthetic imagining”, devised in order to explicate the entwined nature of idea and senses, in acts of narrative making. My fixation upon what this term means in practice is evidenced by several articles focusing that topic [5]. The most recent articles, focusing ideasthetic imagining as it relates to stimulus, in general, and ideasthetic imagining as a trigger for acts of dream-membering (dreaming and remembering), in particular, represents a culmination point [6]. While the term ideasthetic imagining reflects my understanding of the motivational processes and practices that inform realist modes of creative writing, the Exploratory Study aims to examine brain activity, while participants are actively engaged in these activities, with a particular focus on memory as the primary stimulus. The structure of

the creative writing workshop is premised upon the perceived relationship between stimulus-*for* and stimulus-*in* creative writing in affect-driven processes.

For a broader discussion of preliminary findings and the potential trajectory of future research, please see a forthcoming article in *New Writing* titled Ideasthetic Imagining – Mapping the Brain’s Microstates Using Magnetoencephalography (MEG). For the purposes of the current discussion, the contrast in preliminary findings between the control group (non-writers) and the experimental group (practising writers) provides us with the opportunity to hypothesise about the extent to which deep, sensory imagining is a practice that can be learned and one in which practitioners might become increasingly proficient. The creative writing workshop, at the heart of the Exploratory Study, facilitates a re-envisioning of our engagement with the past, opening pathways to future-mindedness – a core component of emotional wellbeing. Through an examination of the brain’s microstates during precisely defined subprocesses, the Exploratory Study affords an opportunity to consider applications of our findings beyond creative practice – posing the possibility for broader applications of the creative writing workshop in the health/wellbeing and education spheres.

In reflecting on the contributions of my co-authors, thinkers whose contributions bear witness to the act of writing creatively from unresolved memory as deep acts of contemplation, I draw on the spirit of Oliver Sacks in *The River of Consciousness* (2018). In particular, I draw attention to Sacks’ conception of apprehension as a bringing to consciousness of an encounter, further considering Sacks’ thinking as it relates to Woolf’s apprehension of “the moment”. In this way, I contemplate wild acts of making in word-art as intricately woven connections that are at once retrospective, prospective and slant. Sacks (2018, p. 205, emphasis added) suggests:

It is not enough to apprehend something, to “get” something in a flash. The mind must be able to accommodate it, to retain it. The first barrier lies in allowing oneself to encounter new ideas, to create mental-space, a category with potential connection – and then to bring these ideas into full and stable consciousness, to give them conceptual form, holding them in the mind even if they contradict one’s existing concepts, beliefs, or categories. This process of accommodation, *of spaciousness of mind*, is crucial in determining whether an idea or discover will take hold and bear fruit or whether it will be forgotten, fade, and die without issue.

To my mind, the contributors to this essay are contemplating the experience of writing *hard- up* against immolation. As these writers relay their experience of deep sensory imagining – responding to long-term memory as an encounter through acts of narrative making – they transcribe creative process as a practice that facilitates spaciousness-of-mind, allowing for ideas and discoveries.

Therefore, I close with Woolf, with a cut-up version of “The Moment”, representing my immersive engagement in the contributions of my co-authors, as well as the experience of working creatively with long-term memory. In so doing, I pay gratitude to those writers who gave up their time to participate in the study and to contribute to this collated essay.

Yet what composed the present moment?...
everybody believes that the present is something, seeks out the different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it...
it is largely composed of visual and sense impressions...
But that is the wider circumference of the moment. Here in the centre is a knot of consciousness...
Thus then the moment is laced about with these weavings to and fro, these inevitable downsinkings, flights, lamplightings...
All this shoots through the moment, makes it quiver...
She, the observant, the discriminating, who keeps in mind always other instances, so that there is nothing singular, in any special case...
yet if she isolates cases from the mists of hugeness, sees what is there all the more definitely; refuses to be bamboozled; yet in this discrimination shows some amplitude...
Now the moment becomes shot with the extraordinary arrow which people let fly from their mouths – when they speak...
no order is perceptible; there is no sequence in these cries, these movements; they come from no bodies...
We can only see ourselves as outlines, cadaverous, sculpturesque...
That is why the moment becomes harder, is intensified, diminished, begins to be stained by some expressed personal juice; with the desire to be loved, to be held close to the other shape; to put off the veil of darkness and see burning eyes.
(Woolf, 1948, pp. 3, 3, 3, 4, 4, 5, 6, 6, 4, 7, 7, 6)

Notes for Prendergast

[1] For broader discussion, see Prendergast, J. (2023). What are you doing it for? Realist writing – the riddled boundary that divides fiction and reality. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 19(1), 1–18.

[2] For broader discussion, see Prendergast, J. (2024). Writing the mire – ‘for we are loom’. *New Writing* (in press).

[3] For broader discussion, please see Prendergast, J. (2022). Ideasthetic imagining – Writing as dream- membering. In A. Pont, E. Herbert-Goodall & S. Jatschka (Eds.), *TEXT Journal Special Issue Number 68: Writing Dreams*, pp. 1–20. In particular, I engage at length with way Veronica O’Keane (2021, p. vii), who addresses a discrepancy in the translation of Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, “initially translated in 1954 as *Remembrance of Things Past*” and later, in 1992 “to the more accurate *In Search of Lost Time*”:

The original translation’s “remembrance of” suggests a passive recall of memories from a hidden and fixed repository, while the later translation’s “in search of” suggests an active pursuit of a past that is not lost. Neuroscience has almost caught up with Proust in the interval between the translations. (O’Keane, 2021, p. vii)

O’Keane’s analysis of memory is consistent with my experience of ideasthetic imagining and, that is, with my experience of remembering and writing as generative, iterative processes of narrative making.

[4] For broader discussion, please see Prendergast, J. (2021). ‘Stimulus in creative writing – Wrangling the experiential unresolved’. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 19(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2021.1925304>

[5] For related publications please see:

Prendergast, J. (2015). Giving solidity to pure wind: Temporising as transformation. *TEXT Journal*, 19(1).

<https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/25339-giving-solidity-to-pure-wind-temporising-as-transformation>

Prendergast, J. (2018). Grinding the moor – Ideasthesia and narrative. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 15(4), 416–432. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14790726.2018.1436567>

Prendergast, J. (2019). Narrative and the unthought known – The immaterial intelligence of form. *TEXT Journal*, 23(1). <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/23539>

Prendergast, J. (2021). Ideasthetic imagining – Patterns and deviations in affective immersion. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 18(1), 47–65. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14790726.2019.1709508>

[6] For recent publications representing a culmination point in the research please see:

Prendergast, J. (2022). Ideasthetic imagining – Writing as dream-membering. In A. Pont, E. Herbert- Goodall, & S. Jatschka (Eds.), *TEXT Journal Special Issue Number 68: Writing Dreams* (pp. 1–20). <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/57576-ideasthetic-imagining-writing-as-dream-membering>

Prendergast, J. (2022). Stimulus in creative writing – Wrangling the experiential unresolved. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 19(1), 105–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2021.1925304>

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Notes for Hecq

[1] The phrase “Even though it is muffled by a mask, she can pick out her father’s voice” is a transposition of Ben Lerner’s sentence “Even though it is muffled by a mask, I could pick out my father’s voice” (Lerner, 2024, p. 62).

[2] The title of one of Lacan’s later papers on psychoanalysis and writing with psychoanalysis bordering on poetry “Lituraterre” is a construction of a neologism, combined from litura-erasure and terre-land, which affects a play of the letter. The practice of the letter is articulated here in terms of an enactment of the “erasure of no trace that is before” (Lacan, 1971, p.15), an idea Jackass finds already in evidence in avant-garde literature, the literature that “does not sustain itself by the semblance...that does not prove anything than the caesura” (1971, p. 18). Working with a writer’s autography, for instance, would occlude, rather than elucidate, the elision produced by the letter, i.e., truth (1971, p. 4), the less of “a less psycho biographic idea” resonates with a lack. The letter is evoked en souffrance, in the wings, in suffering, leaving a trace of the fundamental discordance between knowledge and being.

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Note for Munoz

The lines “Effect of colours: blue boosts creativity while red enhances attention to detail, Sleep strengthens your memories and helps with creativity, Let me sleep on it: creativity, problem solving, the neurons that rewrite traumatic memories, how the brain gives special resonance to emotional memories and the complex relationship between memory and silence” are titles of press releases published on the website Science Daily.

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Notes for Webb

[1] An inversion articulated by Nietzsche, Heidegger and others.

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